

Struggle and the Politics of Self Care: A Curatorial Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

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“Take Care of Your Self” is a research-creation project that explores the potential for transcultural dialogue and engagement through the concept of “Care-full curation.” To explore these ideas through research-creation I organized a week-long exhibition and series of events held during the summer of 2017 in Montreal titled “Take Care of Your Self: A Transcultural Art Event”. The exhibit, in which I was both participating artist and curator, featured work by 27 artists of colour, or “othered” artists from diverse communities. The exhibit sought to explore how notions of self-care, self-determination and healing have conceptually informed artists from a wide range of cultural orientations who are dealing with complex issues of personal, social and political struggle.

Through care-full curation, my intention was to foster counter-narratives to the existing structures perpetrated by mainstream media that keep our diverse struggles separated, and to create a safe space illustrated by artworks and conversations on the subject of self-care and struggle. In this paper, I draw on the concept of self-care as it is articulated and practiced in Black feminist thought and contemporary social movements. I explore how empowerment can be integrated into an approach of critical curation and intersectionality. I also locate the exhibit and series of events in the larger framework of self-care and art as a method of transformative transcultural convening. I position my own practice as an artist-curator through both theory and method by highlighting the process, goals and outcomes of the exhibition “Take Care of Your Self”.

Keywords: trauma / healing / empowerment / counter-narrative / social justice / transcultural / convening / intersectionality / safe space / ruptures / marginality

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INTRODUCTION

“So verily, with the hardship, there is relief,
Verily, with the hardship, there is relief”¹

-The Holy Qur’an (94:5-6)

“Take Care of Your Self” is a research-creation project that is rooted in lived experiences of struggle and self-care. As an artist-curator of Iraqi origin, I explore the potential for transcultural dialogue and engagement through the concept of “Care-full curation”. I draw on the concept of self-care as it is articulated and practiced in Black feminist thought and contemporary social movements. Self-care is a necessary practice for many of us who struggle with trauma and mental illness resulting from structural oppression, racism, loss and displacement. A politicized notion of self-care implies that taking care of one’s self makes us more capable of continuing the radical work of organizing, creating, and resisting within our own communities, societies and global existence. In this research-creation project I explore how self-care can be integrated into an approach of critical curation and transcultural convening.

The project is guided by several key research questions. How does being an artist and a curator impact the act of curation? How are (safe) spaces of self-care and healing cultivated through care-full curation? Can care-full curation as a method instigate new (counter) narratives of cultural understanding related to social justice? Finally, how can we strengthen intersectional movements through individual art practice, transcultural convening and the practice of curation?

To explore these ideas through research-creation I organized a week-long exhibition and series of events held during the summer of 2017 in Montreal titled “Take Care of

¹ -Verses 94:5 and 94:6 from The Holy Qur’an (Surat Al Sharh)

Your Self: A Transcultural Art Event”. In this paper I will refer to the show as TCOYS. The exhibit, in which I was both participating artist and curator, featured work by twenty-seven artists of colour, or “othered”² artists from diverse communities, whose work deals with the intersections of struggle and self-care. By creating a space for numerous artists of diverse communities to coexist through their artworks and performances my intention was to foster counter-narratives in contrast to those perpetrated by mainstream media that keep our diverse struggles separated. The exhibit sought to explore how notions of self-care, self-determination and healing have conceptually informed artists from a wide range of cultural orientations who are dealing with complex issues of personal, social and political struggle. The exhibit was accompanied by four events that took place within the gallery space over the course of the week: a vernissage, artist talks, a workshop and a panel discussion. The gallery was open throughout the week of July 7-14, 2017 and welcomed visitors between 12-7pm.

In “Methodology and Curatorial Vision”, I describe my own attempts at creating a safe, unconventional art space that was accessible to all, illustrated by art, stories and experiences of people of colour, with the goal of a responsive, healing and transformative experience for all involved. My theory and method for this project as artist-curator was care-full curation, on the subjects of self-care and struggle, illustrated by artworks and events that took place within the temporary gallery space. The exhibit is revisited in the methodology subsection “The Whole is Greater than the Sum of its Parts”, followed by sections on how self-care, safe space, ceremony, transcultural solidarity and interventions were integrated into the exhibit and series of events.

In the section “Literature Review and Theoretical Framework”, I locate the exhibit and series of events in the larger framework of self-care and art as a method of transformative transcultural convening. I draw on the work of Black Feminist theorists,

² By “othered”, I am referring to those with hyphenated identities, third culture and third space beings who don’t fit into existing definitions of race or identity.

who reflect on the current (and past) struggles facing diverse communities of colour, within the framework of intersectionality (Lourde, Collins, Crenshaw, Davis). I position my own practice as a curator within the framework of intersectionality as an in-progress theory. Women of colour make up the majority of the artists involved in TCOYS, myself included, occupying an intersectional space “where race, class and gender meet”³, as described by Yasmin Jiwani. In this section, I also explore other attempts at curating as a practice of fostering counter narratives.

I was drawn to curation as a practice to illustrate my ideas for its communicative and collaborative process. Paul O’Neill, in *The Culture of Curating and The Curating of Culture(s)*, describes the curatorial as “a durational, transformative, and speculative activity, a way of keeping things in flow, mobile, in between, indeterminate, crossing over and between people, identities, and things, encouraging certain ideas to come to the fore in an emergent communicative process.”⁴ In addition to O’Neill’s description of curating, I consider curating as an act of care-taking, both for the artists and audience involved. Within this framework of care-full curation, my hope was that a collective convening might lead to insights or transformation, particularly when complex issues of struggle are invoked. This is especially important when issues of structural violence, trauma or displacement are explored. I explore how a safe mediated space of self-care narrated by transcultural media-makers can play a critical role in remedying the collective grief manifesting in the margins. By collective grief, I mean both grief experienced by individuals dealing with personal loss or trauma, as well as grief experienced by community members in an event that impacts their community or sense of identity. The consequent politicization of self-care is a practice that many artists are consciously cultivating, giving the audience and/or participants a sense of empowerment in light of traumatic personal or global events.

³ Yasmin Jiwani. “In Visible Colours: A Critical Perspective.” *In Visible Colours: International Women’s Film/Video Festival Brochure*, Vancouver Women in Focus Society and National Film Board, 1989. 10

⁴ Paul O’Neill. *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*. Cambridge: MIT, 2012. 89

METHODOLOGY AND CURATORIAL VISION

Take Care of Your Self. How many times a week do we hear or say these words in passing? If we all took the time to care for our selves, how much stronger will we be? More importantly, how much stronger will our communities be?

Opening words of the curatorial statement for “Take Care of Your Self”

INTRODUCTION

“Take Care of Your Self” opened to the public on July 7, 2017, after six months of intense planning, development and coordination. The exhibit featured 34 artworks, with media ranging from photography, poetry, painting, drawing, digital art, scent, printmaking, literary works, audio and installation. The artists spanned diverse communities, from Arab, Black, Indigenous, Brown, Muslim and “Other”, living mostly in Canada and the United States. The location was a storefront, accessible, pop-up gallery in a central location on St. Laurent Boulevard in Montreal. Six months prior, I had put out a call for submissions for the exhibit calling for artists of colour from the Arab, Black, Indigenous and “othered” communities to submit work engaged in the concepts of struggle and self-care.⁵ By the deadline date, I had received over 60 submissions from Baghdad to Brooklyn, from diverse artists in Diaspora to Indigenous artists from various Nations. I was overwhelmed by the response. I learnt that my network was wider than I had initially conceived, and was completely inspired by the quality of the artwork submitted. The common thread was powerfully present: artists of various backgrounds have been engaging with the concepts of self-care and empowerment in the context of struggle on a deeply sophisticated level. After the submissions closed, I set upon the task of carefully selecting the work to craft the narrative of the exhibit, and defined my own role as artist-curator.

In selecting the works for the exhibit, my curatorial approach was rooted in how the works can be interpreted in the context of self-care, struggle, intersectionality, the

⁵ The call for submissions is included in the appendix

creation of counter-narratives and ultimately, the works' potential to heal and to empower. To be responsible for the works and voices of all participating artists was a privilege I did not take lightly. As a practicing artist for the past ten years, I have had numerous experiences in the industry that have left me feeling disrespected, misrepresented and undervalued as an artist. My approach to curation had everything to do with how I felt I wanted to be treated as an artist participating in a group show. Curating this project on my own terms contributed to personal empowerment and self-determination throughout my process. It was empowering to shed myself of structural limitations set by cultural or funding institutions that often use our stories to enhance their pre-existing status as cultural institutions and to fill quotas and agendas. However, while I had complete institutional independence I also encountered challenges that I will address later in the paper.

THE ARTIST-CURATOR

As an “othered” artist practicing for over a decade, I have come to know and collaborate with a most welcoming, beautiful and diverse community of likeminded artists with similar yet different experiences of otherness. In 2012, I co-founded the multidisciplinary global artist collective “We Are The Medium” alongside my partner Nancy (Yassin Alsalman). Believing that *the minority is really the majority*, we are a team of independent artists and practitioners working with various media with similar theoretical and conceptual goals. I had curated a number of exhibitions involving our collective's work, so for TCOYS, I knew I had to look beyond my existing community in order to illustrate my ideas more sufficiently.⁶

My research-creation project is a creative exploration of the definition, purpose, process and method of curation as an artist-curator. I had once considered that being involved in this project as both an artist and curator was a tension or a conflict. Research led me to understand that the concept of artist-curator, which is when a practicing artist uses his

⁶ “Arab Winter” in 2012, and “Ink Tank: Prints from the Arab World” in 2014.

or her own work as part of a curated show, has been in use since the 1990's, possibly even earlier. According to O'Neill, "the emergence of the figure of the artist-curator can be seen as an attempt to move beyond the dominant roles within the normal divisions of the art world- a refusal that has contributed towards emergent forms of collective agency."⁷ The idea to curate a collection of works around the concepts of struggle and self-care stems from my most recent creative project: "Shams", an illustrated book of about 30 pages. It is illustrated in a fantastical style using black ink on paper, with some elements of colour and digital collage. Three screen-printed pages from the book were exhibited at "Take Care of Your Self" as my artistic contribution to the show. The book follows the main character, Shams, a girl made of glass, as she experiences an event that breaks her both physically and metaphorically. We follow Shams as she puts herself back together again, and as she searches for answers and strength. It is a coming of age story dealing with an undefined trauma. I wrote and illustrated the short story following a personal traumatic experience and my journey of healing from it.

I know that my experience is not unique; trauma, loss, and displacement are as common as catching a cold in today's political climate. Through "Take Care of Your Self", I was able to reach artists who are doing similar work, who use their respective art forms to intellectually and emotionally engage with these complex issues. By opening up submissions to the public for the first time, TCOYS asserted my role as curator, and also expanded my network beyond my usual reach. However, the most empowering result of the call for submissions was its role in connecting the artists to one another, creating a quasi-community of artists engaged with similar concepts of self-care and struggle. This "community-creation" manifested itself over the course of the week-long exhibition, as the artists who were able to be present in Montreal got to know each other, connected and made future plans for collaboration. In Suhad Khatib's own words written out in the TCOYS guest book, "shokran (Arabic for 'thank you') Sundus for connecting me to the artistic network that heals."

⁷ O'Neill. 110

CARE-FULL CURATION

Curation is a method of selecting works of art for presentation. It can also be defined as the act of choosing, and organizing. According to O’Neill, it is “through the process of researching, selecting, planning, organizing, structuring, framing, and curating group exhibitions as an artist or curator, one begins to understand how the curatorial constructs ideas about art.”⁸ *Care-full* curation implies an approach where complex issues are invoked with a goal that a collective convening might also lead to an empowering or transformative experience. This is particularly important when issues of personal or structural violence are explored. How can care-full curation provide narratives of social justice and cultural understanding? How can traumatic world events translate into cultural moments that spur dialogue and change? What guided my method was an interest in the potential of curated spaces transforming into interventions of self-care: politicized acts of creating spaces and conversations of healing and justice in the continued struggle for rights and freedoms. I wanted to explore how, through care-full curation, the heavy subjects of trauma, loss and displacement might transform into opportunities for healing and empowerment for both artist and audience.

Care-full curation, in the context of curating “Take Care of Your Self”, also implies the care that went into the project through both the interactions with the artists involved, whose work is intimately tied to their individual and community struggles, as well as the care embedded in the creation of a safe space for these stories to exist. Due to the sensitive nature of the show, many of the artists involved had submitted work that was intimately connected to their experiences of struggle, trauma and systematic oppression. Creating a safe space of sharing between myself and the artists was an intentional element in my communications with the artists. The process of working with the artists was, in some cases, part of their healing. In Jiji Kikhia’s case, her submission became a part of her grieving process, honouring the life of her father Mansur, who had gone missing 19 years ago. Three of the artists had shared that they had almost “quit”

⁸ O’Neill. 7

making art before finding out that their submission was accepted as part of TCOYS. This support helped revive a sense of purpose for some of the artists. For some, TCOYS was their first time exhibiting publicly, an opportunity that defined their roles as artists in their own right. The direct relationship of giving, receiving and sharing with other artists truly strengthened the bond between artist and curator, with the most important factor involved being genuine care.

Maintaining the artists authentic voice was extremely important to me and I avoided editing their statements to ensure that their original message remained intact. I was also conscious of using the artists' cultural backgrounds as a labeling device that could potentially tokenize the artists and their work. Due to the history of colonialism, systematic oppression and misrepresentation of marginalized groups, tokenization is a real issue when it comes to how curators choose to represent artists, often sensationalizing traumatic histories and personal struggles. I chose to avoid direct labels of nationhood and identity, and this was also in reference to the theoretical foundation of intersectionality that was implicit throughout the exhibition. This approach was informed by my own experiences as an Iraqi artist creating work about the war in Iraq over the past decade, my hyperconsciousness of being pigeonholed as an Iraqi artist, and my work only fitting under the curatorial umbrella of the war/trauma/refugee discourse rather than be considered a contemporary artist *sans* label.

THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

“Communities can create powerful shared narratives, which allow all of their members to look in the same direction, to share intentionality, and to experience the belongingness of coherence with other people.”⁹

-Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona

⁹ Lewis Mehl-Madrona. *Healing the Mind through the Power of Story: the Promise of Narrative Psychiatry*. Bear & Company, 2010. 255

Weaving the narrative of the show into a physical space was one of the most important creative undertakings as curator. I approached the curatorial task as an invitation for the works to illustrate the theoretical framework of TCOYS by creating a cohesive narrative around the works rather than through them. The metaphorical space between the works impacted how the viewer would experience the exhibit, as many of the artworks were in conversation with one another. The order of the works in the “walk-through” of the gallery space takes the viewer on a “journey” into the diverse struggles and stories embedded in the works, regardless of where the viewer begins. In the following paragraphs, I describe the walk-through of the gallery and illustrate how I translated the theoretical framework of my research-creation into the selection of works. Due to the limits of this research I cannot fully describe all of the works that I chose, but the catalogue and gallery photos included in the appendix documents the space and the entire body of work, along with their descriptions.

The only works that I preselected for TCOYS were the screenprint of Emory Douglas’s iconic work “Paperboy Remix”, Leila Abdelrazaq’s work “Arabs4BlackPower”, and the screenprinted pages from my book, “Shams”. Building the exhibit around those three works created a tree-like curatorial process, with Douglas’s work serving as the roots, Abdelrazaq and my work representing the trunk, and the rest of the works the branches; the sum of the parts that make the whole great. However, as the curatorial process developed, each artwork selected proved to be a standalone and impactful piece, capable of inspiring reflection in the viewer in the context of struggle and self-care.

Renting a storefront gallery space on street level in a busy commercial neighbourhood, I wanted the exhibit’s conceptual ideas to reach passersby, whether the gallery was open or after-hours, and whether they chose to enter the space or not. The public nature of the gallery meant that my audience would be as diverse as the city we live in, and could potentially attract both the right and wrong kind of visitor. The window displays were central to the exhibit. First, they take the art to a public space by having the artwork face outwards, and second, they make an intervention into the daily movements of the passersby by presenting them with text-based art to literally, stop and read. The works

served as markers for a safe space, inviting into the gallery space those passersby with similar experiences or individuals who express solidarity with the messages in the works. At best, the public window displays serve to peak the public's curiosity enough to come inside and take a look around before returning to their daily movements.

Joseph Cuillier's silk posters from the "Black Abstractions" series were suspended in each window display, with one reading *"Empires crumble like papier maché pillars wet by rain because they are irrational"* and the other *"I woke up early this morning to bring a slow genocide to a screeching halt"*. Both of those silk posters, plus one more from the same series, were printed on paper in mass and stacked inside the window display, inviting visitors to take one home for free. The same paper posters were also wheatpasted around the city to continue Cuillier's project of taking the work to Black neighborhoods in different cities in the United States and elsewhere.

The left side of the gallery started with visual works that spoke about personal loss, trauma and healing, featuring works by Jiji Kikhia, Susu Attar, myself, and Tara Jaffar, all Arab women. Located in the middle of the left wall was Emory Douglas's screenprint "Paperboy Remix" with the accompanying audio of my interview with Douglas, acting as a centerpiece that split the wall into two narratives. Following Douglas's piece were works that spoke of empowerment, resilience and community, featuring artworks by Jessica Powless, Shanna Strauss/Kevin Calixte, and Samira Idroos. Further down the wall were works that spoke directly to the experiences of women of colour and self-care, illustrated by Narmeen Hashim and Sadaf Rassoul Cameron's works. Nestled inside a cubicle at the far end of the gallery was the installation "Shim El Yasmine (Smell the Jasmynes)" by perfumer Dana El Masri, a healing space featuring live jasmine plants and scent. Behind the cubicle, partitioned off from the main gallery space, was the tattoo performance and installation "Al Alam" by The Peoples Ink and Allos Abis.

The right side of the gallery started with politicized works that touched on transcultural struggle and self-determination. Leila Abdelrazaq's print "Arabs4BlackPower" was followed by Monique Bedard (Aura's) work "Protect the Children", works that both

feature the black power fist and resistance against white supremacy. Beside them was Lebanese photographer Roi Saade's "Untitled", a silhouette of two young divers in Dalieh, from a series about the coastal community's resistance to real-estate tycoons and the universal right of access to the sea. The wall ends with Ahmad Naser-Eldein's diptych "Ana Mish Ana", about the representation of Palestinian resistance and identity. The second part of the right side wall continued with works that referenced images of empowerment, women, and diverse communities. This wall housed the "In Visible Colours" poster, more poster based artworks by various artists and the vitrine "Take Care of Your Shelf" featuring literary works and books.¹⁰ In the centre of the gallery was the installation "Clouds are for Dreamers: Attempting Balance" by Aliya Orr, a rotating collection of objects suspended from the ceiling, balanced by a prism interacting with a light beam and a mirror. The installation was an exercise in self-reflection rooted in the present moment.

SELF-CARE = COMMUNITY CARE: METHOD

Self-care as a concept, in the context of TCOYS, was multilayered. First, it implied that taking care of one's self makes you more capable of continuing the radical work of organizing, creating, and resisting within our own communities, societies and global existence. Secondly, it implied that self-care is a reality for many of us who struggle with trauma and mental illness. Third, self-care also implied empowerment, self-determination and freedom. The challenge of this research-creation was to apply this term as a method – as a work in progress and to explore its potential as well as its limitations.

As inspiration for my own method I studied the work of Simone Leigh, an African-American artist. Simone Leigh transformed the New Museum, a contemporary art gallery in Manhattan, into a space of self-care through her 2016 exhibit "The Waiting Room". The project was inspired by the death of Esmin Elizabeth Green, a 49-year old

¹⁰ The vitrine included many of the references I used as part of the research for this project.

African-American woman who died in a Brooklyn hospital center after spending 24 hours in the waiting room in 2008. The project is both a commentary on the American medical industry as well as a project that aims to “heal black women’s pain” with a series of workshops, lectures and closed, free events that promote self-care. Although the most recent manifestation of Leigh’s project happened in a major art institution, she managed to create community spaces by doing “underground” events that were free of charge outside of the opening hours of the museum. The “Care Sessions” included a guided meditation for Black Lives Matter, Afrocentering, massage, community acupuncture and herbalism workshops. The curatorial statement suggests that “creating a space for wellness may require both the making of a sanctuary and an act of disobedience against the systemic enactment and repudiation of black pain.”¹¹ In this instance she transformed a traditional space, the formal museum space, into a more open and caring place. A critical difference between my work and Leigh’s was the use of an established art space, but the range of events that she hosted and the actual methods of fostering safe spaces inspired the development of TCOYS.

(SAFE) SPACE AND RECEPTION

*“Baby, it’s war outside these walls
Baby, it’s war outside these doors, yeah
A safe place tonight
Let’s play it safe tonight”¹²*

-Solange, “An Ode to Self-Care”

One of my key research questions was, what are effective ways of creating care and a safe space within a curated show? Choosing to headquarter TCOYS in a pop-up gallery was an empowering and liberating experience that allowed me to work on my own terms, explore and set my own standard of curation and storytelling through art and narrative. It also allowed me to create a space for people of colour where we can be

¹¹ <http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/simone-leigh-the-waiting-room>

¹² Lyrics for the song “An Ode to Self-Care” by Solange, off the album “A Seat at the Table”

surrounded by our radical ideas and celebrate our marginalized experiences, for us and also for a wider public. Not wanting to only “preach to the choir”, and in turn also ruffling a few feathers, the impact of the exhibition went to unexpected places in audience reception due to the central location and the accessibility of the space (ie. free).

With TCOYS, one of the most important values was for the exhibit and all the events to be free of charge and open to individuals of all ages. I could enact this most readily in an informal space. I wanted to value the presence of mothers and their children because often childcare is simply not an option. Secondly, accessibility was an important motive in choosing the right space. Wheelchair accessibility was a must, as was a location that was inviting for visitors who otherwise would not be the average gallery or museum-goer. The site therefore becomes accessible to community, neighbourhood folk, passersby and other potential audiences that a conventional, formal gallery space would not necessarily attract. Thirdly, the transformation of a pop-up gallery into a safe space was the most significant and challenging aspect to curating TCOYS, especially due to its public nature and location. Encounters with racism happened throughout TCOYS, both inside and outside the gallery space, some even related to the work exhibited and I will discuss that in further depth in my reflections. However, I do believe that I partially succeeded in creating a temporary safe space for the artists and communities of colour that inhabited the space for that week in July.

Over the course of the week, the storefront gallery became a safe space of reflection, healing and community for many of the artists, visitors and participants. Due to the public location of the gallery, we had many passersby enter the gallery and spend a minimum of 20-30 minutes discovering the work and being in the space. Our many intentional visitors would often spend close to an hour connecting deeply with the works and sharing feedback and testimony. Both the artist talks and closing panel had audiences that filled the seated capacity (40+). Several out-of-town artists made their way to Montreal specifically to be present at the vernissage and the artist talks, because of the nature of the event and the power of cultural convening in the context of struggle

and self-care. Local artists were often present at the gallery space as well, which really felt like a headquarters of sort for our small yet strong community of artists of colour.

As part of the process of creating a “safe” space in the gallery, I turned to my own experiences and expectations of how I can feel safe in the context of an art show. In learning to cope with my own trauma, I initially thought that sharing personal experiences through my art practice and in artist talks might help me to heal. However, I learnt (the hard way) that talking about it and sharing it alone didn’t help. In fact, it made me feel depleted and exposed. This autoethnographic reflection on the creation of a safe space for myself led me to take the approach I took with both the artists and the audience. Rather than encourage anyone to testify or share their traumas, I encouraged the artists to share different ways of coping, self-care strategies, mental health resources, or to simply relate and hold space.

Due to the concepts of loss, trauma and struggle that many artists explored in their works, I was conscious of potentially triggering anxiety or difficult emotions in the audience. For this reason, I printed pamphlets of mental health resources in Montreal and placed them discreetly near the entrance/exit of the gallery, as well as on the merchandise table at the back of the gallery. This list was originally compiled by Monster Academy, an online mental health skill training project for youth, who gave me permission me to adapt it into a pamphlet for free distribution at TCOYS. The pamphlets were an invitation for visitors to seek out the support they need should they be suffering from mental health issues. Similarly, the breathing exercise during the vernissage was also a coping strategy I was hoping to share with the audience. Also, I believe that experiencing art itself can become a coping strategy and a powerful way to channel emotions, as each artwork carried with it the potential to inspire and impact the viewer. Finally, the act of convening amongst people with shared experiences in itself can be healing.

THE POWER OF CEREMONY

“Healing arises from collaborative conversations that exchange information that was not previously available, resulting in transformation. By information, I mean what story carries that is impossibly more complex than our usual declarative knowledge structures. When a new flow of information passes from one to the other through dialogue, it changes people.”¹³

- Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona

In his book *Conversation Pieces*, Grant H. Kester studies the work of numerous artists and collectives that have created works of dialogic art. He argues that art that takes the form of conversation reframes dialogue and helps artists and the respective communities challenge fixed identities, categories and discourses.¹⁴ Building on the notion of dialogic art, I explored the potential of dialogic art through the specific practice of curation. I approached the dialogic elements of TCOYS with Kester’s framework in mind, treating the panel and artist talks as conversational art pieces in their own right. The medium of storytelling therefore took center stage, paying tribute to a long tradition of ceremony and healing.

The support for my ideas on the power of ceremony and storytelling as medicine to heal has been addressed in depth by Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona in his book “Healing the Mind Through the Power of Story: The Promise of Narrative Psychiatry”. In the book, he blends his experience as a Western educated physician and his experience and knowledge in the field with traditional Indigenous wisdom and story. The book serves as a tool and reminder that “(t)hrough the appreciation of the power of story, we can build bridges between the Indigenous and the modern worlds to create an integration that allows for more people to be healed.”¹⁵

¹³ Mehl-Madrona. 230-31

¹⁴ Kester. 8

¹⁵ Mehl-Madrona. 10

It is important to remember that historically, Indigenous ceremony was prohibited by Canadian and U.S. governments and that sites of ceremony often became sites of massacre, as with the Massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890.¹⁶ Through government policy, cultural genocide took place over centuries, in addition to actual genocide through which the population of Indigenous people significantly diminished. The forceful and violent prohibition of Indigenous dance and ceremony speaks to the power of ceremonial convening. The effects of the cultural genocide of the First Nations people of Turtle Island has heightened the importance of indigenous resistance to colonial narratives by focusing on cultural empowerment and ceremony. The significance of Wounded Knee as a site of resistance for the Sioux Nation and other First Nations of Turtle Island was referenced in TCOYS. Monique Bedard (Aura)'s work "Protect the Children" exhibited a collaged portrait of "Sasha Lee Brown's niece and nephew at the 43rd annual anniversary of the occupation of Wounded Knee."¹⁷ The image shows two young siblings holding up the black power fist with their faces covered with bandanas, a beautiful show of intersectionality and empowerment in the context of anti-colonial resistance.

Mehl-Madrona's emphasis on community, ceremony and storytelling as key ingredients in both cultural and personal wellbeing and also, in my opinion, empowerment, were instrumental to the curatorial development of the TCOYS events. As a result I decided to incorporate performances during the vernissage, the artist talks, workshop and panel as a form of ceremony. In the context of an art exhibition, I questioned how ceremony can be meaningfully integrated into an art space, without culturally appropriating or imposing specific religious rites on the audience. Rather, I chose to focus on the act of convening as ceremony's less formal counterpart. Convening is an act of curation as well, bringing people together in order to reflect, participate, and engage in dialogue that could be potentially transformative and enlightening. In the context of the exhibition, the stories

¹⁶ Mehl-Madrona. 11

¹⁷ Bedard, Monique (Aura). Description, TCOYS catalogue.

embedded within the artworks or poems exhibited served as silent storytellers with the potential to heal the viewer, if they were open to receive their messages.

On the opening night of TCOYS, a performative ceremony was taking place in the back of the gallery, partitioned off from the main space. Julay of “The Peoples Ink”, a Philippine tribal tattoo artist, was tattooing Allos Abis, a trans Filipinx in the performance and installation “Al-alam”. The hand-poke tattoo ceremony was intended “to mark Allos’ healing journey as a trans Filipinx in a space where POC masculinity is invisible, and unhealthy white masculinity is perpetuated.” and “served as an intentional public display of one of the material attempts of decolonization work as a diasporic race.” Julay’s work as a tattoo artist is deeply influenced by the concept of struggle and self-care, with collective healing from colonial trauma imbued in the intentions behind her practice, and driven by the historically spiritual practice of tattooing in her Filipinx ancestry. The experience of Queer Trans People of Colour (QTPOC) is marginalized from the queer narrative, and in society, triply marginalized and a serious site of violence and hate. Allos’s willingness to share this part of himself in this particular juncture of his journey of self-care and healing is empowering to the community of QTPOC, and brings forth an important narrative of struggle that many people have no exposure to. A few visitors were allowed to the back at a time, to maintain the spirit of ceremony, and created an atmosphere of support and sacredness. The performance was opened and closed by a sage-burning ritual for setting intentions, and honouring the land and the ancestors.

TRANSCULTURAL SOLIDARITY

“Packed in the plane were white, black, brown, red, and yellow people, blue eyes and blonde hair and my kinky red hair, all together, brothers! All honouring the same God Allah, all in turn giving equal honour to each other.”¹⁸

- Malcolm X

¹⁸ Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. p330
Malcolm wrote this in reference to his experience of Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Entering the conversation on intersectionality through the work of Black Feminist theorists, I became more aware of my positionality as a light-skinned Arab woman. Moreover, as an immigrant to Montreal, a place that is considered unceded Mohawk territory, I have tried to foster within myself an awareness of the struggles that First Nations people have gone through to make my life here possible. This positionality gives me the chance to reflect on how I identify within all these intersections. I have chosen to identify as a person of colour, but I also observe that many Arab people in North America don't. Within my own community, I am faced with the reality of Arab participation in the slave-trade, anti-blackness and discrimination. My "otherness" is not as visible as people I consider sisters and brothers, however, my personal experiences with racism, discrimination and sexism in white dominated spaces have greatly influenced how I navigate society, the spaces I choose to inhabit and the values I uphold. In this context, I am coming into the conversation on race, identity politics, and intersectionality as an ally as well as a subject of it.

In researching intersectionality, I was trying to find a way for my own experience to neatly fit into the narrative, without feeling like I was co-opting a space that was not reserved for me. It was only when I read Angela Davis' take on the in-progress nature of the theory in "Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement" that I felt at home. In a statement that sums up the intersectional and transcultural approach of TCOYS, she explains embodied intersectionality,

"I actually think what is the most interesting today, given the long history both of activism and all of the articles and books that have been written [about intersectionality] since then, what I think is most interesting is the conceptualization of the intersectionality of struggles. Initially intersectionality was about bodies and experiences. But now, how do we talk about bringing various social justice struggles together, across national borders?"¹⁹

¹⁹ Davis. 19

In the following paragraphs I describe a few examples of work that I curated for the show that illustrate how I translated the theory of transcultural solidarity into the selection of works.

The illustrated image of a young black boy holding up a newspaper that reads “All Power to the People” by Emory Douglas was the anchoring artwork in the exhibit “Take Care of Your Self”. The screen-print was accompanied by an interview I had conducted with Douglas in December 2016 about his experiences as the Former Minister of Culture for the Black Panther party and his ongoing practice.²⁰ Our conversation spanned his collaborations across cultures, the impact that art can have on socio-political issues, the intricacies of being a politically engaged artist in today’s world and collective empowerment through art. In focusing my questions to Douglas on his lived experiences connecting him to the Middle East and North Africa, I was hoping to bring forth the historical alliances between the Arab and Black Struggles. Moreover, I was hoping to reference the collectivity of struggle and empowerment through art. Emory Douglas’s artwork is iconic of the struggle for self-determination, freedom and resistance during the civil rights era in America. However, his work is also significant on a global level. His multiple collaborations across borders from the Zapatistas in Mexico to the Maoris in New Zealand have been monumental in forging alliances in solidarity across cultures, and in the development of international liberation art. In particular, the alliance between the Black Panther Party and the Arab Struggles, from Palestine to Algeria, were of particular interest for me. From my position as an Arab artist who relates strongly with the Black struggle, my conversation with Emory Douglas illustrates the connections between the different struggles, showing how interconnected and intersectional the relationships between the Arab and Black struggles have been.

Leila Abdelrazaq’s artwork “Arabs4BlackPower” and “Justice for Rasmaa” were central to the exhibit, and echo the spirit of Angela Davis’ work. Abdelrazaq is a Palestinian author, activist and artist who has been deeply involved in social justice organizing in

²⁰ I have included the interview in the appendix

her home city of Chicago. Most of her artwork illustrates the struggles she supports, and many of the proceeds of her projects go to fund various grassroots organizations related to the subjects she portrays. The image “Arabs4BlackPower” is a linocut print of a group of women of various cultural backgrounds holding up the black power fist, with text beneath them reading, “*RESIST TOGETHER*”. It was created as the campaign image for “Arabs for Black Power”, which was initiated by a group of artists, academics, mothers, fathers, students, refugees, and community organizers with ties to Arabic-speaking regions to “declare our unwavering solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL).”²¹ The statement was translated to Arabic, French and Spanish in order to reach Arabs in the Diaspora as well as those living in the Arabic speaking world. One of the organizers behind the initiative, Suhad Khatib, also exhibited a work that she had created as part of her self-care process, a black and white ink drawing of mature roots and the germination of a tiny leaf. The work came out of the complex identity struggles she faced as a Palestinian visiting her homeland for the first time and the efforts of activism in the Palestine contingent to Ferguson of which she was a part.

Palestine solidarity and the representation of the struggle for Palestinian human rights was a significant narrative thread to the exhibition. Ahmad Naser El-Dein’s work “Ana Mish Ana”, is a diptych showing Palestinian filmmaker Mahasen in two photographs, the first a close-up of her face concealed in the Kuffiyeh (the iconic Palestinian scarf) and the other of her seated for a regal photograph holding her young son at home. The contrasting images aim at “decolonizing the representations of Palestinians and to underline the empowering uniqueness of every human, by enabling the viewer to see individuals underneath the stereotypical image of the freedom fighters.”²² The underlying concepts of feminism, motherhood and public/private space create a complexity of identity that echoes the theoretical narrative of the exhibit, particularly in its creation of a

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https://www.facebook.com/pg/Arabs4BlackPower/about/?entry_point=page_nav_about_item&tab=page_info

²² Ahmad Naser-Eldein, statement from the TCOYS catalogue.

counter-narrative to the Palestinian struggle. Moving beyond the categories of intersectionality I have already covered, this work represents what Angela Davis describes as “interrelationships of ideas and processes that seem to be unrelated”. Drawing feminism into narrative, Davis continues, “Insisting on the connections between struggles and racism in the US and struggles against the Israeli repression of Palestinians, in this sense, is a feminist process.”²³

INTERVENTIONS AND RUPTURES BY WOMEN OF COLOUR

“Regaining lost instinct and healing injured instinct is truly within reach, for it returns when a woman pays close attention through listening, looking, and sensing the world around herself, and then by acting as one sees others act, efficiently, effectively and soulfully.”²⁴

- Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes

Interventions, in the context of art, can take multiple forms. Rupturing the daily lives of people convening in community contexts has the potential to transform negative emotions and effect real change. By rupturing I mean an unexpected break from the usual routine, which presents an opportunity to transform that broken, fleeting moment into a productive, reflective and poetic encounter. Convening and staging interventions in each other’s lives has always been part of the fabric of the lives and communities of women of colour. These encounters take place in the home, on the phone, or are organized into workshops or artistic projects. As Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Black women's actions in the struggle or group survival suggest a vision of community that stands in opposition to that extant in the dominant culture. (...) Afrocentric models of community stress connections, caring, and personal accountability.”²⁵ In this section, I will describe the interventions that took place within TCOYS involving women of colour

²³ Davis. 4

²⁴ Clarissa Pinkola Estes. *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. Ballantine Books, 2003. 253

²⁵ Collins.

that bring the narrative of self-care into the forefront of the discourse on intersectional struggles.

“TAKING CARE OF US”: THE WORKSHOP

On the 5th day of TCOYS, the workshop “Taking Care of Us” took place in the gallery. The facilitators of the workshop were writer and producer Jess Glavina; storyteller, poet and educator Teeanna Munro; and mother, masters student and creative maker Annick Maugille Flavien (MF). The three women created an intimate atmosphere of communal introspection on self-care via movement and gesture, free writing and discussion. During the workshop, excerpts of poetry and monologues were performed by the facilitators, in conversation with the “Changemakers” series by Shanna Strauss and Kevin Calixte that was on view at the gallery. “Changemakers” is an ongoing mixed media series that features Black women in Montreal who contribute to positive change in their communities, and the artwork exhibited at TCOYS is a portrait of Annick MF. The quote alongside the work describes her positionally in society and the spirit of her contribution to the workshop:

“As a black girl, I'm used to my mere existence being a revolutionary act; but in preparation for the arrival of my son, I had to actively engage in the revolutionary acts of loving and trusting myself - because the politics that surround my skin, gender and civil status would have made me believe that we are not worthy of love and life.”

This excerpt was also a part of Annick MF’s powerful monologue performed during the workshop, expanding on the intersections of race and self-determination in her own journey of mothering her child. In Glavina’s words, “this co-facilitated session honoured invisibilized labour in community and the small acts of love, work and memory that make revolution.” The workshop created a very moving, intimate experience where the participants were all equally impacted by the works in the exhibition and the environment they (we) created of reflection, safety and healing. All 11 of the participants were women.

Through the energy of women, old and young, mothers and not, friends and strangers, TCOYS transformed into an “actual” safe space, a true reflection on our healing and our struggles. Calm introspection, communal trust, and a feeling of warmth and joy permeated the room. Reflections on our daily struggles were met with support and validation, often through gesture rather than words. One of the exercises had us mimic the physical motions of our every day labour of “caring for others” into an abstracted gesture. We were then invited to re-sculpt the body of another participant as an invitation to make an intervention into what it is that they’re sharing. Within my own movement, I held my arms out in what I was trying to express as a balancing act. My partner (whom I had only met during the workshop), slowly re-sculpted my arms from a rigid cross into a gentle gliding motion, until they were down by my sides. The movement transformed the balancing act into an opportunity to imagine my arms as wings, and the freedom that comes with flight. Trusting the other participants in the room, and being open to both share and receive were the foundational elements of safe space creation. Two of the participants, young women of colour, had simply walked in to the space out of interest while the workshop was setting up, and decided to stay for the entirety, contributing their presence and participation openly. I believe that was only possible because of the environment of safety that was nurtured in the space and from what was visible of it from outside, making it a safe space for women of colour. For those two women in particular, yet also for the rest of the participants, this workshop represented a rupture in our daily lives, and presented an opportunity for reflection and transformation.

The workshop was one of the most impactful events during TCOYS. Perhaps this was due to the limited number of participants, and/or because I actively participated rather than facilitated it, which was a freeing experience that allowed me to be fully present. Handing the torch to the facilitators, I was therefore able to participate in something that I spent so much labour creating, and from that perspective, I was able to see TCOYS carry its own light and illuminate others.

In focusing on the invisibilized labour of women in the community, the workshop allowed us, as participants, to reflect on our own roles as well as those of the women that make up our daily existence (mothers, sisters, teachers, and friends). The exercises effectively gave us tools to transform the often exhaustive work of caring for others into a supported self-care process, equivalent to community care. This process was reinforced in another artwork by TCOYS artist Narmeen Hashim, whose series “Hands that Heal” was exhibited in the gallery. The diptych, made up of two watercolour and ink portraits of women's hands was described by Hashim as an acknowledgment for the need for self and community care to be incorporated into our collective duties as women of colour. In her statement alongside the work, Hashim writes:

“In a world plagued by destructive forces, how often women use their hands for mending. Hands that paint protest & send letter to organize demonstrations of resistance, hands that cook & apply the medicine, massage bruised bodies with touch, hands that five times daily pray & beg & pray for peace. From the field to frontline, the corner-store to the kitchen these same hands work tirelessly to accomplish the often invisible and still never-ending list to keep bodies sheltered, clothed, and comforted.”

The art on the walls were critically connected to the workshops goals, creating a synergy between the gallery space and the workshop exercises. The act of reflecting on the experiences of women of colour was a significant narrative thread throughout the exhibition. In celebration of their strengths in face of unfathomable struggle, perhaps Joseph Cuillier’s print from the Black Abstractions series sums it up the best: *“Raised by Black women in the company of Queens, I learned the wisdom of all man.”*

SHIM EL YASMINE (SMELL THE JASMINE)

Dana El Masri’s installation “Shim El Yasmine (Smell the Jasmine)” created a space of its own in the exhibit, which brought visitors coming specifically to TCOYS to experience it. In this site-specific installation, El Masri, a perfumer, used scent as her primary medium, motivated by the healing power of jasmines and their symbolism of renewal and self-acceptance. In a cabin-sized enclosure in the gallery, she suspended jasmine

vines from a fencing above, with three different jasmine plants at the foot of the cabin, and on the walls were delicately sewn silk tufts infused with jasmine absolute oil. The opening of the space was then curtained with a light white mesh drapery, creating a jasmine sanctuary of sorts. Visitors were welcome to enter the space and spend time there. In her statement, she writes:

“Jasmines contain 2.5% ‘Indol’ – an ingredient with an unpleasant odour found in fecal matter. Yet when highly diluted, ‘Indol’ has floral notes. Jasmines thus represent paradoxical juxtapositions in life: the unpleasant within the attractive, the pain within beauty, the darkness within light. As human beings, accepting the ‘darker’ or ‘undesirable’ aspects of ourselves is one of the most important steps to recovery and self-care.”

During the workshop “Taking Care of Us”, one of the exercises included choosing one artwork to connect to and reflect on. I chose to enter El Masri’s jasmine sanctuary and spent 15 minutes in the space, experiencing it in a completely different way than I had in the days leading up to the workshop. Although I had seen El Masri working tirelessly sewing, hanging, draping, and installing, the energy of care and love that went into this artwork was still present in that small enclosure housing it. The scent of jasmines tapped into a raw emotion within me that I had suppressed for a long time: nostalgia. This emotion had me reflecting on the scents of my childhood, of my displacement from my homeland, on the child within me, the beautiful contrasts of motherhood. Partly due to the tension and exhaustion I was under after long weeks of intense work, finally having a moment to myself, in quasi-privacy I was able to cry it out and stick my nose as close as possible to those little tufts of jasmine for the emotion to resurge, safely and ritually. I was open to receive the lessons and truly be present in that space.

POETRY AND BREATH

In the spirit of interventions by women of colour, facing the street in the gallery window display was a poem by artist and poet Jessica Powless, who is Wolf clan from the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, titled “Women”. The poem is about the historical and

ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women. I felt it was imperative to present this work to a public readership by bringing the narrative of the missing and murdered Indigenous women to the street, in the words of a woman from that community. This is a direct counter-narrative to what we often experience - non-Indigenous people making statements about the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, often divorced from the circumstances of colonialism, residential schools and other traumas faced by First Peoples in Canada and the U.S., or completely disregarding it by not talking about it. Powless wrote the following about her work in her project description in the submission call:

“As indigenous people we have multiple layers of memories and thoughts that intertwine with today's western influence on society. I try to stimulate thoughts that come from our identities as indigenous people, to inspire people to think outside of their comfort zones, to attempt to get others to see life through the people who have survived tragedy both historic and present. My people are dynamic and creative; I hope that I capture the essence of my people to the best of my ability.”²⁶

Powless was humbly present for the artist talks, and brought with her the spirit of her nation through language, story and of course, art and poetry. Her presence and perspective were very important to the narrative of the show as a whole, along with that of Monique Bedard (Aura) who is also from the Oneida nation, living in Ontario. Their participation in TCOYS allowed me to take a step back from speaking about the Indigenous experience, which I often find difficult and complicated due to my limited knowledge and experience as an immigrant settler to these lands. As artist-curator, to have their experience represented in their own words and work, as Indigenous women, was more important to me than sharing my own perspective on it.

The other work of poetry that was on exhibit was by Moroccan artist and writer Soukayna, titled “Ode to Myself”. The poem was also performed during the vernissage in a “flash” performance- no microphone, no stage, just the poet and her voice,

²⁶ Jessica Powless. Project description in the submission call for TCOYS.

projecting to a full gallery. The poem is about self-love, self-acceptance, and brought many visitors to tears. Her mother, who was standing by her during the performance, was in tears throughout. It was Soukayna's first time performing it in front of an audience. In it, she writes from the perspective of a mother to a child, or from an adult speaking to her childhood self.

Also during the vernissage was a breathing intervention performed and initiated by Marwa Mubarak, a local Iraqi-Canadian yoga and pilates instructor. Mubarak had the audience close their eyes and practice deep and conscious breathing for a few minutes, rooting themselves in the moment, in the space, and in their selves. The significance of bringing Mubarak to perform the breathing intervention during the vernissage was manifold. First, as Mubarak suggested in her introduction, "breath is healing". I always wondered if I had learnt how to breathe properly when I was going through the most difficult times in my life, how much better I would have been able to cope with the struggles I was facing. Breath is a tool, a skill, and it can and should be a conscious and intentional act when needed. In the book "Breathe, You are Alive!: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing" by Thich Nhat Hanh, he writes, "(w)hen you're able to stop and breathe and enjoy each moment, you are doing it for all your ancestors. (...) Your practice is not for yourself alone, it benefits the whole world."²⁷ In this sense, collectively breathing is also collectively healing. In the context of TCOYS where there is an opening for deep reflection on struggle and suffering, I wanted to give the audience the gift of breath, as a coping skill to take home with them, a reminder of our innate ability to heal ourselves from so much of the collective grief and suffering we experience.

²⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh . "Breathe, You are Alive!: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing". Parallax Press, 2008. 8

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

“Revolution begins with the self, in the self.”

-Toni Cade Bambara²⁸

Positioning myself as an Iraqi woman and artist engaged in the concepts of intersectionality, social justice and empowerment, the work of Black feminist theorists resonated the most in my quest to articulate my ideas theoretically. Black feminist thought as articulated by Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins offer a framework of intersectionality that is grounded in individuals, communities and social movements. I was interested in hooks’ writing on marginality, Lorde’s references of self-care, Davis’ work on transcultural solidarity, and the development of the theory of intersectionality and empowerment by Crenshaw and Hill Collins. Moreover, the work of Yasmin Jiwani in “Pedagogies of Hope: Counter Narratives and Anti-Disciplinary Tactics” and her involvement in the groundbreaking film festival and symposium of Third World Women filmmakers “In Visible Colours” rooted my research in a field of curating counter-narratives that has been thoughtfully developed decades before my contribution to it. Jiwani explains how “From the margins, tactical interventions work to destabilize, dislodge, and, at times, neutralize dominant mythologies and disciplinary strategies.”²⁹

In the milieu of visual and performing arts, the work of Emory Douglas during his time as the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party was foundational to the conceptual development of “Take Care of Your Self”. Since the 1960’s until today, Douglas makes critical connections between individuals, communities and social change through culture

²⁸ Toni Cade Bambara (1970a, 109) - As quoted in Collins’ “Black Feminist Thought”

²⁹ Yasmin Jiwani. “Pedagogies of Hope: Counter Narratives and Anti-Disciplinary Tactics.” Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies, vol. 33, no. 4, 2011. 350

and art. Douglas's work on the self-determination of Black people in America and of oppressed groups worldwide, along with Simone Leigh's project "The Waiting Room" were primary examples of art that link struggle to empowerment, and self-care. Moreover, my research included studying instances of self-care in artworks by women of colour artists. Throughout the process of developing the exhibit, I was invested in piloting diverse forms of dialogue and convening that were rooted in the context of safe spaces. Moreover, I began to consider the critiques of self-care as individualistic and privileged, and chose to engage with the discourse on community-care as equivalent to self-care.

I was inspired by Muhammad Ali's memorial service in June 2016, which created a powerful model of intersectionality by involving speeches by spiritual leaders from diverse cultural orientations. Most significantly, however, spiritual texts and tools from the supernatural world also deeply influenced the conceptual development of "Take Care of Your Self". Verses from The Holy Qur'an, Buddhist teachings, and various books about self-care, spirituality, and healing have been my greatest allies in developing my own skills of articulation and intention setting throughout this project. The alignment of my spiritual path with my academic journey has allowed me to continue my work of personal healing and maintain wellbeing as a human, mother and academic.

INTERSECTIONALITY: COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE, COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT

"Someone once said that behind every conscious man is a tired Black feminist. This is a letter to my ride or die sisters, an ode or a love poem, a thank you note towards the women who have lit themselves on fire so that we might find our way."³⁰

- Teeanna Munro

Historically, Black women in the United States have faced incredible struggles in both public and private sectors of their experiences. In the context of the ongoing oppression

³⁰ Teeanna Munro. Opening lines from the workshop "Taking Care of Us", held July 12, 2017

along racial, gender, and class lines, American Black women “have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression.”³¹ Intersectionality is one of these developed *thoughts* that has evolved and is still a theory *in progress*³², as Carbado, Crenshaw et al note in the article “Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory”. The theory of intersectionality has been used by African American women and other marginalized groups to tackle the complexities of identity politics caught in the web of racial, gender, class, and ability injustice. Work consciously produced with intersectionality in mind is not limited to academic writing, in fact, the media span is endless, including art, music, film, poetry, and in this case, the practice of curation. As the authors describe “(a)n alternative approach to knowing what intersectionality *is* is to assess what intersectionality *does*”, which in this project, is curation. To curate intersectionality is precisely one of the aspects of the theory that invites it’s description as a work-in-progress, as I am employing the theory in a discipline that imagines a different approach for intersectionality to be performed.³³

A curatorial vision with an intersectional approach looks something like this: works by artists from diverse communities that speak on the complexities of struggles related to issues of racial, gender, and class inequalities, in conversation with one another yet equally powerful in monologue. An intersectional approach to curation, as with TCOYS, led me to appreciate identity politics in a new light. It didn’t feel so important to note all of our specific identities rather than shine the light on *how* each artist identifies. That, I believe, was the most sophisticated expression of intersectionality: the assertion that our identities are complex, in flux, moving within this dynamic force of belonging that lives outside of the categories assigned to us by society. It minimizes the ability for those functioning in the dominant sphere of society to essentialize or contain our identities or our collectivity. With the belief that there is no hierarchy in struggle, internal

³¹ Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2009. 11

³² Devon W. Carbado et al. “Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory.” *Du Bois Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013. 304

³³ Carbado et al. 304-305

“struggle olympics” amongst communities of colour are put to the side, and the margins become rich with our complex, intersectional diversity. Therefore, a care-full curation of intersectionality becomes a radical approach, shifting the power dynamics of oppression and domination to one of empowerment and liberation.

In thinking about how to infuse a positive approach to intersectionality, I was drawn to the concept of the “matrix of liberation”.³⁴ The “matrix of domination” refers to the organizational structure of the oppressive elements within intersectionality - be it white supremacist thought and action, patriarchy, or hegemony. In the words of Patricia Hill Collins, “(r)egardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression.”³⁵ This invited a new realm of questioning in my process - What is the potential of the organizational structure of empowerment within intersectionality?

Roberts and Jesudason develop the idea that “(a)n intersectional framework can be used in a positive way to reveal and create commonalities among people who are affected by the same matrix of domination.”³⁶ Through their work with *Generations Ahead*, a social justice organization involved in the debates on genetic technologies, they “used an analysis of the interlocking systems of race, gender, and disability in conjunction with a radical practice of coalition building between reproductive rights and justice, anti-racist, and disability rights activists to demonstrate the use of an intersectional paradigm as a positive tool for social change.”³⁷ By focusing on building alliances and expressing solidarity with other “struggles”, I was drawn to the idea of creating a collective vision, decorated by celebrated differences, that pushes for social change on many levels. The spirit of intersectionality in this, and my case, is not in highlighting our similarities, but rather, celebrating our differences. The Analysis of

³⁴ This was suggested by Yasmin Jiwani during the reading of my proposal defense for my research-creation project

³⁵ Collins. 21

³⁶ Dorothy Roberts and Sujatha Jesudason. “Movement Intersectionality.” *Du Bois Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013, 323

³⁷ Roberts and Jesudason. 314

Generations Ahead led the group to the conclusion that an intersectional approach, when it comes to their own experiences of social justice organizing, “can force us into a risky place of radical self-reflection, willingness to relinquish privilege, engagement with others, and movement toward change.”³⁸ Achieving this kind of “radical self-reflection” through the creation of a safe space infused with the idea of intersectionality might open up possibilities for a matrix of liberation, a main goal in the curation of TCOYS.

SELF-CARE = COMMUNITY-CARE: THEORY

“When an entire society is desecrated, demonized, invaded or imprisoned, it reshapes the cultural gene pool of that entire generation. What is trauma then, but a collective and a cumulative phenomenon.”³⁹

- Mark Gonzales

I never felt like I could relate to the term “self-care”. It felt too distant, too white, too privileged, too selfish or self-involved. Similarly, “people of colour” was a term that I couldn’t always relate to. As a fair-skinned Arab, my otherness is not as visible as people I consider sisters and brothers. In my own parenting of two small children, I try to avoid all references to race, and in my way, I hope to create a race-free future through them. Difference is beautiful, and classification is not. However, to step away from my own comfort zone and convictions, I have chosen to move into a space where using the term “people of colour” becomes an expression of radical belonging and an affirmation of the politicization of our identities as “other”. So, I use these words in an act of reclamation and hope to join the masses in redefining what it means to be a person of colour and why self-care belongs to us as well.

Self-care in our capitalist societies often comes with a big price-tag, making access to the services and spaces necessary for a practice of wellbeing inaccessible and

³⁸ Roberts and Jesudason, 314

³⁹ Mark Gonzales. *In Times of Terror, Wage Beauty*. Think Disrupt, 2014. 88

unwelcoming for those who can't afford it. Whether it is membership to a yoga studio, massage sessions, traditional or holistic therapy, energy healing or reiki, the realities of access comes only to the privileged few, because ultimately, the practitioners have to get paid for their services in order to continue to offer them. It's a vicious cycle that only some practitioners are willing to break through offering sliding scale or community rates in order to be more inclusive to patients or clients with low-income or other difficulties. One of the biggest critiques of self-care is that the ones who need to practice self-care the most, ie. those struggling with class and economy based injustices and oppressions, which are usually connected to race and gender based injustices, cannot afford the services of self care.

The collective witnessing of racialized violence has re-awakened the concept of “self-care”. One of the most heavily quoted statements on self-care within radical, racialized, and othered communities happens to be by Black queer feminist poet Audre Lorde. Battling cancer in 1988, she wrote: “*Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.*”⁴⁰ My approach to self-care in this project was an intervention in the form of coping with the difficult situations people find themselves in during these trying times. Yashna Maya Padamsee discusses how critiques of self-care should be reframed as an invitation to talk about community care, in the article “Communities of Care”. She writes: “it is our responsibility not as individuals, but as communities to create structures in which self-care changes to community care. In which we are cared-for and able to care for others.”⁴¹ In today's ultra-connected world, the collective witnessing of racialized violence is amplified in our social media feeds, often creating a sense of overwhelming grief and confusion for many people. Spaces of self-care that are connected to the consciousness of peoples every day realities have become a necessary tool in remedying the oppression and

⁴⁰ Audre Lorde. *A Burst of Light: Essays*. London: Sheba Feminist, 1988.

⁴¹ Yashna Maya Padamsee. “Communities of Care.” Organizing Upgrade, 1 July 2011, www.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/modules-menu/community-care/item/88-yashna-communities-of-care?tmpl. Accessed 5 August, 2017.

sense of loss, particularly for people of colour and those communities directly affected by race, class and gender-based injustice. The consequent politicization of self-care and wellbeing has become part of a conversation that many artists are consciously cultivating, giving the audience and/or participants a sense of empowerment in light of traumatic personal or global events. The spaces of self-care are not confined to their intended contexts, either. Funerals can become sites of cross-cultural conversations on resistance, while museums or galleries can become sites of healing.

“WHO CURATED THIS FUNERAL?” : GRIEVE TOGETHER, HEAL TOGETHER

“I shook up the world, I shook up the world.” - Muhammad Ali

Using a space of grieving for transcultural convening and solidarity was an important element in the careful planning of Muhammad Ali’s memorial service in Louisville, Kentucky. A decade before his death on June 3, 2016, Muhammad Ali planned his funeral. The details of his funeral were thoughtfully designed and deliberately outlined by The Greatest himself, along with the guidance of his lawyer, spiritual advisor and loved ones, and recorded in a document so thorough it was dubbed “The Book”. Muhammad Ali’s death marked a major cultural moment that was felt across the world, empowering millions of fans, admirers and viewers through his loss. However, the cultural moment was not the passing of a legendary boxer, but rather the careful selection of individuals who spoke at his memorial service. The speakers echoed Ali’s life-long message of inclusiveness, love, co-existence, religious, political and social consciousness, cross-cultural understanding and the intersections of different struggles, in the USA and worldwide. This cultural moment pushed my research-creation away from being an Arab-centric project, which is what it had originally been conceived as, and focused instead on intersectionality, as a political statement in transcultural solidarity.

I argue that the organizing of Muhammad Ali's funeral was a politicized act of creating an unconventional space of justice and positive change in the struggle for rights and freedoms. I came of age in a post-September 11 mediascape, and to hear verses from the Holy Qur'an, recited in Arabic with English translations, across mainstream TV-networks was a groundbreaking experience. At a time of rampant Islamophobia, the presence of an Imam on mainstream television reading from the Qur'an was hugely empowering to the marginalized Muslim experience in North America. In a stadium seating 22,000 people, including numerous dignitaries and heads of state, the speakers had a unique opportunity to have their voices heard by an audience of influencers. Every decision of the event was well thought through, from the order of the speakers to the translators.

The most inspiring message behind the funeral was one of co-existence amongst the different religions and communities across the world. Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and First Nations, all shared the same stage and their expressions of mourning and admiration for Muhammad Ali and all that he stood for in his struggles for civil rights and freedom.

Witnessing Muhammad Ali's carefully planned memorial service inspired the very essence of TCOYS, particularly through the concepts of intersectionality, transcultural convening and public grieving. Moreover, it was a testament to the potential of transforming struggle (and loss) into opportunities to heal and empower, a challenge I was willing to take on through the care-full curation of "Take Care of Your Self".

CURATING AS A PRACTICE OF FOSTERING COUNTER NARRATIVES

Creating a shared space for twenty-seven artists of diverse communities to connect through their artworks was meant to produce a counter-narrative to the existing structures that keep our diverse struggles at odds with one another. The various struggles that were present in the space of the gallery were all connected through their resistance to the hegemonic order of white privilege and systematic oppression. By

celebrating and acknowledging our different experiences of struggle and survival, TCOYS therefore acts as a tactical response to the strategies of erasure, interchangeability, and homogeneity of our identities as Black, Arab, Muslim, Indigenous, “Other”. Yasmin Jiwani articulates this in “Pedagogies of Hope: Counter Narratives and Anti-Disciplinary Tactics”:

“Tactics, unlike strategies, have to make use of the “master’s tools” but they do so in creative ways, and in the terrain of media production; such tactics range from anti-colonial archeologies of knowledge, bringing to the fore the subjugated and subordinated knowledges of colonized Others.”⁴²

The politicization of self-care has emerged from the collective witnessing of structural racism and oppression on both social and global levels. Between police shootings of Black men in the United States without legal justice, the ongoing refugee crisis in the Middle East (due in large part to Western interference in the region), and the acceptability of Islamophobic and racist perspectives by political leaders and in the media, the margins are as confining as ever for people of colour. Moreover, there is a lack of fair and responsible mainstream media coverage on significant protest movements such as the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock (#NoDAPL), Black Lives Matter (#BLM), and the Muslim Ban (#NoBanNoWallNoRaids), all of which deeply affect the Indigenous, Black, Arab and Muslim communities in North America. Feelings of isolation, trauma, and grief can trigger anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses that can be debilitating for many. It therefore becomes imperative to remedy the repercussions of this dominant, oppressive narrative through the creation of counter-narratives. Self-care becomes an intervention, as well as a rupture in the ongoing struggles for rights, freedoms and wellbeing. It is in those ruptures that interesting things manifest, just as in the margins. bell hooks reminds us of the significance of the margins in the article “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness”:

⁴² Jiwani, “Pedagogies of Hope”. 350

“This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.”⁴³

In “Pedagogies of Hope: Counter Narratives and Anti-Disciplinary Tactics”, Jiwani notes the importance of the presence of a multiplicity of tactical interventions coming from the margins in order to create a viable counter-narrative that “contests dominant regimes of truth”.⁴⁴ Reflecting on the years leading up to Trump America, where we now find ourselves, a growing consciousness has been unraveling via movements against systematic racism and violence against people of colour. The Movement for Black Lives, the umbrella organization behind Black Lives Matter, has expanded beyond America’s borders, reaching from Ferguson to Palestine, and to different communities in North America. The initiatives Arabs for Black Power, Letters for Black Lives, and BUFU (By Us For Us) have been shows of support for the incessant police violence against black men and women in America from Arab, Asian, and Canadian identified communities. Angela Davis’ reflections on the growing movements reminds us of the challenges facing organizers and activists against structural violence:

“It is a mistake to assume that all we have to do is guarantee the prosecution of the cop who killed Michael Brown. The major challenge of this period is to infuse a consciousness of the structural character of state violence into the movements that spontaneously arise... I don’t know whether we can say yet that there is a movement, because movements are organized. But these spontaneous responses, which we know happen over and over again, will soon lead to organizations and a continual movement.”⁴⁵

The organizing being done to combat racism against people of colour in North America has been growing and expanding, but is complex and highly politicized. However, what I

⁴³ bell hooks. “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990. 152

⁴⁴ Jiwani, “Pedagogies of Hope”. 351

⁴⁵ Angela Y. Davis. *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*. Haymarket Books, 2016.15-16

would like to focus on are the creative projects stemming from this movement from the margins. Such projects, influenced by curatorial practice, have been simultaneously growing and effectively changing the cultural fabric of our times.

TRANSCULTURAL AND CARE-FULL CURATION IN ACTION

ICONIC BLACK PANTHER

The exhibit “ICONIC Black Panther”, curated by Susu Attar for the Sepia Collective in Los Angeles in April 2017, was an intervention that strengthened the methodological development of TCOYS. The curator Susu Attar states that the exhibit pays homage to the Black Panther Party by drawing references to contemporary movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and the protests at Standing Rock. A critical aspect of the show was to make connections between the past and the present. Attar reminds us how “today’s issues of safety from police brutality, access to basic survival items such as food and clean water, and community building echo those that the BPP (Black Panther Party) tackled five decades ago.”⁴⁶ Especially in the context of Trump America, ICONIC’s contribution as a counter-narrative to mainstream news representations of police brutality and structural injustices against people of colour comes at a very significant time. It offers an opportunity for the Black community, and other communities of colour, to feel empowered and reflect on a history of self-determination, against all odds.

The opening night of “ICONIC Black Panther”, was hugely attended, with over 2,000 people representing the diversity of communities in Los Angeles convening for the purpose of the exhibit. I invited Susu Attar to be a part of TCOYS and initiated a public conversation with her as part of my own curatorial practice through our panel discussion, titled “Counterparts in Conversation.” In our conversation, Attar spoke in detail about the experience of curating ICONIC Black Panther and its significance on a number of communities including the art industry and the Black community in Los

⁴⁶ Susu Attar. ICONIC Black Panther Art Exhibition. <https://medium.com/@susu.attar/iconic-black-panther-art-exhibition-ae11ace38943>

Angeles. She spoke about the importance of creating alliances with other communities that inhabit shared spaces along the margins. Attar explains,

“...these fully articulated art spaces tend to push us to the side, and the us in this sense was a combination of Black American artists but also people who identify with that struggle from other communities, and people who take from those lessons into their own communities and their own lives. (...) We, in our self-constructed communities, understand that but never see [it] reflected, because when you enter into a gallery or when you are approached by more established art industry folks, its like ‘who are you, what is the category you fit into, how can we capitalize on that? OK, here’s the corner we set up for you.”⁴⁷

This quote engages the idea that we, as artist-curators, have to take it upon ourselves to bring forth marginalized, intersectional narratives into existing art spaces. At the same time there are often limitations in these settings such as institutional time-frames. Because it often takes up to two years to program a show at an established gallery, it is difficult if not impossible to curate urgent cultural responses to current events. Similarly, the creation of temporary pop up spaces like my project TCOYS present its own set of limitations due to its location outside of the sphere of the formal art world. This can result in a form of marginalization, as a pop-up space may not receive coverage in major art publications, or capture the attention of the global contemporary art world. The physical place of curation takes on important significance in care-full curation and a need to grapple with competing tensions: wide-exposure for the issues, timeliness of the event and an ability to reach the target audiences.

IN VISIBLE COLOURS

Almost two decades prior, the film festival and symposium “In Visible Colours”, held in Vancouver in 1989, created its own rupture in the dominant narrative of the experiences of women of colour through filmmaking. The event was revisited through TCOYS by exhibiting the poster of the festival, of a painting by Argentinian artist Nora Patrich. In

⁴⁷ Susu Attar. Panel discussion audio recording at TCOYS.

the program of the festival, Jiwani describes the how the festival is in and of itself an intervention and tactic in creating a counter-narrative:

“By showcasing the works of women of colour and women from the Third World, we are reclaiming this pivotal notion of difference and redefining it to reflect our inner realities and concerns. We are expressing the unique nature and profound beauty of this difference. In so doing, we are actively celebrating and reaffirming realities and definitions of our own making which have survived until now, albeit in a sometimes muted and marginal fashion. Finally, the works featured in this festival pay tribute to the unceasing struggles and triumphant victories of women of colour and Third World women who are at the frontlines of the battle against race, class and gender-based discrimination.”⁴⁸

This statement by Jiwani echoes the curatorial vision behind “Take Care of Your Self”. The contributions of ICONIC: Black Panther, In Visible Colours and TCOYS create a counter-canon to the existing canon in the art and filmmaking worlds, championing the work and voices of people of colour, curated by people of colour. They also present opportunities for further dialogue on issues that affect our communities, and provide temporary (safe) spaces of transcultural convening. Moreover, the multiplicity of these events, with their intergenerational and transcultural curatorial visions, is a testament that the strategies that have been developed by individuals over time have made an impact in the collective experience of marginality and culture. In this sense, the margin becomes a powerful space of care-full curation of art and media for empowerment in the context of struggle, to the point of rendering the margin a wide and limitless space in and of itself.

REFLECTIONS

CHALLENGES

As this was the first iteration of TCOYS, I am conscious of the challenges I faced and will hopefully learn from them as the project grows and evolves. I intend to take the

⁴⁸ Jiwani, “In Visible Colours”. 9

exhibit and series of events to different cities, or make it a reoccurring event in Montreal, and I will try to secure its place in art institutions in the future. In reflecting on the independent nature of TCOYS, I faced many challenges that would have otherwise been avoided or lessened had it taken place in an established gallery or institution. Securing funding, scouting locations, finding sponsors, catering, creating and distributing promotional materials and other logistical elements of the show were all my responsibility, which can be an exhausting endeavour on its own. However, I am acutely aware of the tensions between independent curation and affiliation with a formal institution like a museum or gallery. The pros and cons involved are many. I am not yet certain that a care-full approach to curation with the ultimate goal of creating a safe space for people of colour can exist outside of the margins.

Moreover, since I had no set quotas to fill in terms of representation, the pressures of finding artists for the sake of their cultural background was lifted, despite the unfortunate possibility that certain groups such as the queer community, the spectrum of Asian communities, and the Latinx communities would feel underrepresented in the exhibit. The submission call not reaching those communities was a reflection of the limitations of my network and those who shared it. In retrospect, I question whether I should have sought out artists from those underrepresented communities in order to have covered all bases of transcultural experience, and how genuine such an act would be. Would I then be guilty of “filling quotas” for the sake of representation?

In terms of the speaking events, as important as the theoretical practice of ceremony and storytelling were in the development of TCOYS, I felt that this aspect of the exhibit and series of events did not reach its potential. Although it was my intention to imbue the dialogic events with the notions of storytelling and ceremony, I experienced certain limitations due to the public nature of the events. I believe that a more controlled environment may have been a better context for such convening, as expectations vary among audiences and comfort levels for the sharing of stories are also varied among participants. Despite my best efforts, I was not able to truly create the impact I was

hoping for in the artist talks. For example, I asked both artists and the audience to participate in the introductions that I facilitated. We were seated in a circle setting, and the introductions took up most of the time as we went around the room. In retrospect while this was inclusive it also limited the depth and cohesiveness of dialogue we were able to engage in. What I realized is that dialogue develops over time and requires dialogic strategies.

CREATING A SAFE SPACE WITHIN STRUCTURAL RACISM

Creating a safe space within the gallery was one of my main goals behind TCOYS and how exactly to do this was a question I grappled with throughout the research. Offering tea to the visitors, inviting passersby inside, and engaging in meaningful conversation in the space privately were small gestures that made big impacts. However, I am still questioning whether I succeeded in creating a safe space. Ironically, two doors down from the pop-up space was a bakery owned and run by a woman who was known to the neighbourhood to be a racist, with many people of colour experiencing racial slurs, aggressive behaviour and threats by her both inside her shop and outside of it. My impression of her was that her racism stemmed from a place within her that was deeply unwell, perhaps traumatized or abused. However, that does not excuse her racist actions towards me and the community of people of colour who came and spent time at TCOYS. Threats of calling the police, filming us with her cellphone camera, dirty looks and calling out racial slurs made the space outside the gallery doors unsafe. This feeling made me realize the mere act of claiming our own space for our ideas and work to live in was as radical and important as the work that was on the walls.

Most of the time, the gallery became a community space of sorts, with many of the exhibiting artists passing by and spending time there, as well as other community members visiting multiple times. There were often children, my own and others, who came with their parents. The gallery was a lively, animated space, a reflection of community and empowerment, where as people of colour, we could gather and be together, meet others and convene. On the sixth day of TCOYS, we hosted Bissan Eid,

the Palestinian-Canadian Masters student who had just endured the difficult experience as a subject of Israeli oppression and Canadian complicity in that oppression. She had gone to Gaza to visit family while pregnant with her first child, and when her time to return to Montreal had come, the Israeli government refused to issue her an exit permit. She found herself stuck in Gaza, and was forced to give birth to her child Sarah there, under strenuous circumstances. The Canadian government was refusing to intervene in her case, although she was a Canadian citizen and had her entire life as a student and resident on pause in Montreal. Her experience represented so much of the struggle that women of colour face in light of systematic oppression and how it can interfere with our very movements and freedoms. While we were speaking to Bissan, a woman came in and spoke to my friend Stefan Christoff, who had brought Bissan and her father Hadi to visit the gallery. The woman, who was white, said: *“So this is a trans (inter)cultural art exhibition?” How can you have an intercultural exhibition in Quebec without French and without Quebecois artists? Where are the white artists?”* She was visibly upset, and stormed out before we could engage her in conversation. I was left feeling a sense of shock, however, I was not surprised that the narrative of language and inclusion had entered the gallery, especially in the context of Quebec’s language and reasonable accommodation politics.

About an hour later, two white men came in with screwed up faces and stormed out quickly after being “confronted” by Ahmad Naser-Eldein and Aura’s work, which were representations of the Palestinian and Indigenous struggles, respectively. The men were visibly angry and the only word I managed to pick up in their hurry exiting the gallery was “autochtone”.

I journaled the experience when I returned home that evening. This is my journal entry:

“When those men came in (and left), I was alone in the gallery, and I immediately felt unsafe. It was a feeling like no other, just being exposed and unsupported. None of my friends and community members were nearby. What if they come back and get aggressive? I remember this feeling from working in the service industry, really being at the whim of all kinds of people, unstable, racist, potentially dangerous, and here I am, in all my othered glory, with all my radical ideas and proud marginal existence. Alone.

So now I understand the value of community. We are power in numbers. We are stronger together. We protect each other. We hold each other down. We lift each other up. We support each other, we defend each other. We keep each other safe. THAT has been the most prevalent feeling when I am in the space, and many of the people who have come in have remarked on that energy and picked up on that atmosphere.

I now acknowledge the public nature of this exhibit. Being a storefront, street level, central location, will not only bring in the people you want to attract - AKA community, all classes of people, people who would not necessarily visit an art exhibit, it will also bring in the people who you do not want to attract - AKA racists, bigots, and closed-minded people.

I closed the gallery early today because I did not feel safe.”

These direct experiences with racism and discrimination was in total contrast to most of the feedback I had received over the course of the week from visitors and artists of all backgrounds about the creation of a safe space. One visitor described her visit as a sort of “pilgrimage”, and out of 66 entries in the gallery guest book, 14 of them directly reference the creation of a safe space. This means that these kinds of spaces are badly needed, and are few and far between. One visitor wrote: “A healing space is not always easy to find or even create. Thank you for bringing all the voices together here (...) Much needed!” Likewise, other visitors wrote: “The space created here is warm and comforting and needed. It’s the first step to healing our communities. Thank you for creating this space.”; “Thank you for creating a space resistant to fear, open to learn, to heal, to love, and to grow in our mutual deserved and earned dignity and humanity.”; “Thank you for creating a safe cotton cloud of love and serenity.”; “I wish more spaces like these existed, my heart would have been lighter to bear.” Reading these comments and others in the guest book reaffirmed the need for safe spaces like TCOYS to exist in both community and the art industry, effectively bridging a void in both milieus.

The closing of TCOYS on the eighth day was bittersweet. I, along with my family, friends, fellow artists and community members who were invested in TCOYS, were sad to see it go. We knew that the end of TCOYS also meant the end of a community space

where we convened and felt safe together, accessing the reserves of self-care and healing filling the space and decorating the walls. The presence of art spaces that are sites of community and empowerment are temporary, unfortunately. There has yet to be a permanent site for such convening, in the context of art, at least in Montreal. We all realized the continuing work involved in building and creating more safe spaces for our work and narratives to exist lay ahead of us.

CONCLUSION

Through the care-full curation of TCOYS, I learnt that there is much to discover about community-building, the contrasts of public and private spaces and stories, and the complexities of creating safe spaces. I also learnt that being invested in such a large-scale project on self-care meant that my own self-care process would be compromised, as it was. More than anything, however, I learnt that it takes a village to put on an art show about struggle and self-care by people of colour. The tireless efforts of my friends, fellow artists and community were extraordinarily grand, that despite my exhaustion, I felt utterly joyful and supported. It was truly a collective effort, a collective experience, a collective healing. As I mention in the curatorial statement:

“Arab, Black, Indigenous, Brown, Muslim, ‘Other’: We hold this space by grieving and healing together. We celebrate struggle and otherness, because oftentimes, those two experiences are synonymous. We empower our traumas by our healing, because that’s the only way we know how to.”

I learnt that without community, the effort of creating safe spaces is futile. The risks involved are many, especially when such interventions take place in the public sphere. Moving within cultural institutions that are often homogenous, finding spaces for the art, stories and experiences of society’s most marginalized groups is a difficult and daunting task. Taking the risks necessary to create (temporary) cultural spaces that champion the experiences of people of colour is a tactical response to the hegemonic and rigid representations of those experiences. With the limited space available for people of colour in major (and minor) art institutions, independent projects such as “Take Care of

Your Self” and its curatorial counterparts become counter narratives to the existing canons authored about the experiences of marginalized groups by those outside of its sphere. Choosing to focus on the intersectionality of struggles within diverse communities of colour, TCOYS was an exercise in the healing potential of transcultural convening. The politicization of self-care, in the context of such convening, was an opportunity to transform struggle into empowerment.

After the fact, TCOYS carries with it a sense of nostalgia, a reference point for the kinds of spaces and projects we need as transcultural beings caught in the web of institutional cultural sites and sanitized spaces of self-care. TCOYS was by no means a perfect project, as I know that there are things that I will do differently in the next iteration, however, it is a starting point for the exploration of the intersections of self-care and struggle, narrated by artworks, interventions and conversations. As the project closes, I am overcome by the feeling that this first iteration of Take Care of Your Self was just the beginning, and will continue to transform through time and space.

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APPENDIX

DROPBOX LINK:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/fe3mesb5c8bpiq5/AADr7XRH4JHllyRqQg0PikKoa?dl=0>

1. "TAKE CARE OF YOUR SELF" EXHIBITION CATALOGUE (PDF)
2. TCOYS CURATORIAL STATEMENT (PDF)
3. CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS
4. TCOYS GALLERY PHOTOS AND VIDEO
5. TCOYS GUEST BOOK (PDF)
6. MEDIA COVERAGE (PDF)
7. PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS (PDF)
8. EMORY DOUGLAS INTERVIEW (MP3)