

APPROACHING

REPARATIONS

The Center for
the Humanities

“Approaching Reparations”, a series of five commissioned essays engaging the topic of reparations as it intersects with the arts and lived experience, is published by the blog of the Center for the Humanities at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

The Center for the Humanities blog seeks to extend the work of public humanities at CUNY to new conversations, perspectives, and audiences. Publishing undergraduate and graduate student writers alongside established poets, scholars, and artists, this digital platform provides a space for critical work stemming from projects, programming, and working groups supported by the Center for the Humanities.

“Approaching Reparations” is published in tandem with JACK’s Reparations365, a two-year series of performances, workshops and discussions around the topic of distributive justice for Black Americans. Launched in February 2017, the series consists of at least 20 public offerings featuring a convergence of scholars, artists and activists. Through the series, participants are discovering multiple ways to engage with the topic, all with an intention of offering tangible take-ways for participants and a concrete movement forward.

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“Approaching Reparations” is edited by Jaime Shearn Coan, Digital Publics Fellow in the Mellon Seminar on Public Engagement and Collaborative Research.

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Editor's Introduction



I love going to performances at JACK¹, the small performing arts space in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn with aluminum foil walls. The risers in which the audience sit are so close to the bodies on stage that it always feels a little more intimate, involved, implicated, to be watching. At almost every show I've attended, Alec Duffy, the Artistic Director, has been there, with a warm smile and greeting. After I wrote a review for the *Brooklyn Rail* of Antonio Ramos' show in June 2016, I felt even more like part of the family. As a dance writer, I've always considered the position of an artist and venue in relation to precarity—a large part of which has to do with proximity to whiteness. Within the realm of experimental dance

[ABOVE]
The People's Think Tank.
Photo courtesy of JACK.
Pictured, L to R: DeeArah
Wright, Gail Rivers,
Jamara Wakefield, Jaime
Shearn Coan, Deborah
Perry, Alec Duffy.



[1] JACK logo. jackny.org

Jaime Shearn Coan
September 10, 2018

and performance, JACK's programming has stuck out as being more inclined towards artists of color and politically engaged performance.

So—I admired JACK. Once they began their Reparations365 Project, I admired them even more. While many performing arts institutions have taken an initial step of diversifying their programming, JACK has opened itself up to structural shifts—in leadership as well as programming. DeeArah Wright became the Co-director of JACK in 2016 (and served through August 2018). The Reparations365 series, developed by Alec and DeeArah, dedicated a whole year (which grew into two years) to not just performances (often curated by other artists and cultural workers) but also community conversations, workshops, film showings, and a working group, The People's Think Tank.

After attending the first performance, *to make ready again*, by choreographer Marguerite Hemmings, and the community conversation “Why Reparations?”, both of which took place in February 2017, I reached out to Alec and DeeArah about the possibility of collaborating with them on Reparations365. In April 2017, we started discussing how I could contribute the resources of time and money that came with my fellowship at the Center for the Humanities. DeeArah became my point person, and we eventually decided that I would be a participant in The People's Think Tank, serve as the editor for a series of commissioned writings, and organize a public event at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

We also decided that the money would go towards paying writer and speaker honorariums.

The People's Think Tank met for a series of Action Labs from October to December 2017. There was a core group, most of whom are pictured on p. 3, others who came for a particular session, as well as invited guests. At the Action Labs, we hoped to carry forward the impact of the Reparations365 events through concrete and viable means. We learned together, shared experiences, strategized, and we shared food—West Indian patties, Chana Masala, pizza. Once, Alec even cooked for us. What emerged out of those meetings, other than an eventual decision to focus our attention on solidarity economy, was the importance of spending time together, the slow work of building trust and relationships, especially across racial and economic difference. Because we were in Brooklyn, and the majority of us lived in Clinton Hill, or nearby in Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights, the impacts of gentrification were always part of the conversation. We engaged in the process of visioning how an arts organization might function as a community hub, one that truly reflected and responded to the needs of the community it was geographically located within. As these neighborhoods are historically Black, and Black residents have been increasingly pushed out or invisibilized, reparative work was needed to push back against the economic and political strongholds that prioritize capital over all else.

This process of visioning—of imagining other ways forward, of small acts of solidarity and self-determination, is one that the four writers in this volume have taken up as well. As with *The People's Think Tank*, in these writings, reparations becomes a lens more than a topic. Addressing gentrification, immigration, debt, cross-racial solidarity, non-profit arts organizations, and funding structures, these writers also investigate their own positions in relation to power and white supremacy in rigorous and vulnerable ways. Lived experience, which includes the negotiation of these structures, is the place from which these writers make their critiques and recommendations.

When first proposing the idea of introducing a writing component to *Reparations365*, I was also coming from a place of wanting to expand the role of performance writing from being merely descriptive or evaluative, to something that exists alongside performance, in dialogue with it—a project I am engaged with as a writer, editor, and educator. So, we issued a call that was fairly open, for writers (or non-writers) to pitch an idea that approached reparations from some particular angle of their choosing. We wanted to amplify voices that might not otherwise reach wider audiences, and to pay those writers fairly for their work. We set the initial stipend at \$100, but once I realized how labor intensive the writing and editing process was, we changed it to \$150. After receiving feedback from one of the writers that the stipend felt a little low for the amount of labor performed, we raised it to \$300. I don't disclose this to be self-congratulatory,

but to show both the learning curve involved in this process as well as the possibilities inherent in building relationship and listening to writers/artists.

Many of the pieces developed over the course of months of back and forth, with the writers trying to squeeze in time between full-time jobs, freelance gigs, artistic projects, and family responsibilities. The initial call set a 1,000-3,000 word count. All of the pieces ended up somewhere around 3,000 words. I asked for an initial face-to-face meeting before the writing process began and offered my ongoing editorial feedback throughout the process. I wanted to meet because sometimes editing can feel very transactional and disembodied—I wanted the writers to get a sense of who I was, and vice versa, and I wanted to get a sense of where they wanted to go, so I could help them get there.

I was aware of the racial dynamics at play among our other points of identity intersections and divergences, and I was cautious about how the particular dynamic of having a white editor in the context of writing through reparations might restrict or affect the writing. This came up explicitly in some of the relationships, implicitly in others. One writer, realizing I had glossed over some references specific to Black culture, brought on two Black-identified writer friends to give them additional feedback. This slowed the process down and was integral to it. I had another conversation with that same writer who shared that they had worried that I might not edit harshly or thoroughly because of our racial

dynamics. In both cases, I was grateful for the honest feedback and for our consequent dialogue, and I was reminded of the level of attentiveness needed to hear the ever-present metronome of white supremacy sounding inside of me.

I'm so excited that these essays are arriving into your hands as an object to hold onto and perhaps circulate. Thank you to Benedict, Meropi, Aisha, and Jamara for your vision, dedication, and generosity. Thank you to the staff of the Center for the Humanities for your support, especially Jordan Lord for proofreading and assisting with the financial and logistical matters, and to the Mellon Foundation for providing the funds to pay these writers. Thank you to Devika Sen and everyone at Partner & Partners for designing this book and to Christian Capelli at the Graduate Center's Graphic Arts Production department for printing each one. Finally, thank you to DeeArah Wright and Alec Duffy for working towards the transformation of this hopeless and miraculous place called performance.

Putting Us Back Together Again: Home & Reparations

Originally published by 651 Arts*

DeeArah Wright

Current Board Member and
Former Co-Director of JACK

May 15, 2018



Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze....
I'm not sure when I first heard this line as child in my Tennessee home, or whether it was Nina Simone or Billie Holiday whose voice I first heard utter this memory, this brutal, poetic witnessing, this steady warning. I do know that it stuck to me... stuck to my skin. Any time I hear this line or replay it in my mind, I feel that she, the courageous black woman singing—Nina, Billie, or my inside self—is daring me to feel the complicated truth of who I am and where I Be. My ancestors and I, we the people of the sun, the people who could fly...our beauty and power inspire awe. And, the broken people have worked to aggressively and passively silence us in their inability to see and heal themselves.

It is therefore paramount and a perpetual act of liberation for me to be at home in my Black female body, in my family, and in whatever places and



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[ABOVE]
Dancers Italy B. Welton and Courtney J. Cookie in “to make ready again” by Marguerite Hemmings as part of Reparations365, February 2, 2017.
Photo By Ed Forti.

spaces I choose to be and thrive. My lifework is rooted in Black self-determination, vision, objectives, and practice. Yet, I also move with faith in collaboration and cooperation. For the good of all peoples, it's up to a critical mass of us to look at ourselves and the strange fruit that is born of broken people as a call to individual and collective action. This call to action requires us to be willing to embark on wholeness. Reparations, or atonement and amends for the past and current atrocities toward peoples of African descent, is one of many endeavors that, in process alone, can model healthier ways we can co-create wholeness and home.

Since 2016, Alec Duffy and I, as Co-Directors of JACK, have been collaboratively shaping and developing Reparations365—a year-long immersive series that launched in February 2017.¹ Through the series, we explore how we, a small and mighty group of people who show up, can work together to decide what reparations means to us, what our next steps involve, and how we plan to move through those steps with attention to creativity, accountability, and healing. The series includes performances, interactive arts experiences, community conversations, residencies, workshops, and a People's Think Tank—a pop-up research initiative that will gather, assess, and synthesize through the course of the year in order to creatively offer insight and tangible next steps. Reparations365 is a guided unfolding—a risky collaboration of the willing to see what happens when we create, dialogue, be



[1] Reparations365 logo

honest, challenge, vision, and move forward in “mixed company” in the direction of reparations.

The terrorism against black and brown bodies, minds, spirits, homes, families, communities, cultures, and civilizations has been fueled by a toxic standard of perceived rightness as Whiteness, and it permeates many ways we all seek to define home. JACK, and therefore, Reparations365, is based in Brooklyn, where the reality of being and feeling at home is a daily trial for many folks facing displacement or cultural erasure due to gentrification. For Black folks particularly, staying in Brooklyn has required a plethora of survival tactics not so unfamiliar to earlier generations, such as: space re-negotiations, stealth responses to prohibitive costs, outsmarting deed thieves, and resilience in the face of discriminatory housing practices. Many are implicated in the both intentional and neglectful disregard for black people and Black culture in Brooklyn. Reparations365 public offerings have so far yielded visioning and prospective steps that usher in as well as affirm the development of new, yet ancient, examples of exchange and cultural agreements. I am encouraged by these prospects and other aligned works that open up the possibilities for reparations on multiple levels and within various scopes, such as person-to-person or place matters. Further, given that most of the participants so far are Brooklyn-based, there is great possibility that these works will contribute to sustaining a Brooklyn that is rich with Blackness. Even so, I am also encouraged by what may lie within and

beyond our relationships to place as we stay open to this experimental process of reparations.

So, what do you cling to? Whiteness? Capitalism? Distrust? Brokenness? Clinging ferociously to that which plagues us ties up our hands and compromises our ability to do the good work. Reparations365 is an invitation to release something in the service of planting whole seeds and bearing fruit that is no longer of a *strange and bitter crop*. It is an opportunity to face personal truths and examine collective beliefs, all while engaging in a process that honors who we are as individuals, what we need to release, and what we need to learn to be better together.

As a proud Black American woman of African and indigenous descent, born and raised in the American South and currently creating home in Brooklyn, New York, I will continue to define home for myself and with my kindred people by any means necessary. And, as a spirit here on this earth that is unbridled by body, place, and time, I’m also invested in the liberation of all peoples, our wholeness, and our right to be truly at home—in our bodies and in whatever places and spaces we choose to be.

Giving back by giving it up: on gentrification, reparations, dance, and probably too many other things [Part 1]

Benedict Nguyen
May 3, 2018



A semi-concrete abstract:

I try to write about a lot of things: gentrification and space, the power and capacity to choose where to be (in dance and in the world), reparations and who's owed what, and how to reorganize institutions and non-profit boards, workers cooperatives, and more. In Part I, I start by throwing myself under the bus to connect the evolving gentrification in the South Bronx and dialogues on equity and changing institutions in dance. In Part II, I try to imagine some specific-ish solutions to these questions to reconsider institutional structures more democratically. There are specific examples and ideas and some pop culture references and more. Thanks for reading this super-maximalist thought experiment.

[ABOVE]
The Hub at Third, Willis and Montrose Avenues and 149th Street, the main shopping district of the South Bronx.
Credit: Futurebird at English Wikipedia.
Original upload date: September 20, 2007.
From Wikimedia Commons.

PART I: Transforming space - Gentrifying the South Bronx and redistribution in NYC dance

I gotta say before I get into it that I'm a hypocrite. That if I'm saying individuals could do better, I also remember that the system is shattered, and people are just trying to clean up the mess as it keeps crumbling. But also, certain people in power could do much better. Gentrifiers could do better. Maybe by not doing what we did in the first place. Arts institutions could do better. Maybe by not being so institution-y. (More later). I think it's easier said than done to give back the power that someone's accumulated—in spite of obstacles, maybe, but definitely thanks to circumstance. Because to remove the glamor of having arrived (as an artist, maybe in



[BELOW]
Screenshot of Performance Space New York's Instagram post from January 9, 2018, taken by Benedict Nguyen. Used with permission.

a big city) is to recognize history charging through every space in New York City that people think they can just take up innocently. To remove the glamor of exposed brick walls and exclusive performance gigs is to understand that our art may not be enough to justify us being here. It really isn't. What specific actions can we/I take to give it up?

(Here's an elaboration of one of my dilemmas): I'm a gentrifier. I live in NYC (South Bronx, specifically) but I didn't grow up here. I moved here reluctantly (really) after graduating from college to pursue the Dream of Being an Artist. Sort of. I live in a predominantly low-income, Latinx and Black neighborhood that's feeling the relentless creep¹ of gentrification reaching up from Mott Haven. (And beyond).² I have no familial ties to my neighborhood. Being of color or queer or marginalized in some way isn't enough to be entitled to this place.

Of course, being "from here," doesn't earn everyone a free pass either. In a recent *Village Voice* feature³ "South Bronx Saviors or Sellouts?" DJ Cashmere spoke to Bronx natives, entrepreneurs, and activists who grappled with what it means to be a part of the neighborhood their enterprises are complicit in transforming. Sulma Arzu-Brown, co-owner of the Boogie Down Grind Café in Hunts Point, said, "gentrification is coming. The goal is to get some of our community members to get a piece of the pie. To hold some stake in something that they sacrificed for. It's only fair, it's only right." Even if some people get some pieces

Further reading:

[1] "When Gentrification Knocks on the Wrong Door."

[2] "The Jerome Avenue Rezoning's Spoken and Unspoken Policies."

[3] "South Bronx Saviors or Sellouts?"

of the pie, still more get shut out or kicked out completely. Is there more than this fatalist view?

Because let's be real, the real winner is developer Keith Rubenstein⁴ of Somerset Partners (and that horrific "Bronx is Burning" party in 2015). Real talk: I've been a customer at one of his ventures, Filtered Coffee. I've also gone to events at organizations he supports: BronxArtSpace and the Bronx Museum. Who do these spaces benefit? Rubenstein suggests that Filtered has "no purpose other than providing great service, great food and great beverages." I suggest that, like the presence of bodies on a stage, the small gestures people make every day, the fact of existing is never not loaded with meaning and history. A boutique coffee shop can't be removed from the dollars that installed it in Mott Haven, from the people whose dollars this enterprise is trying to entice to keep it going. Can we interrogate the meaning of these dollars, these buildings, these actions to try and think still more deeply about belonging in space?

The institutions now known as Performance Space New York⁵ and Gibney Dance⁶ recently grappled with an evolving sense of identity as the spaces they took up and carved out for artists in NYC transformed and expanded. What does it say for Performance Space New York to respond to the deep history of P.S. 122 in the renovation of its space and rebranding of its name and image? What does it say for Gibney, who picked up the pieces⁷ of the bankrupt Dance New Amsterdam, to implement such a thorough menu of programming

Further reading:

[4] "Keith Rubenstein Talks South Bronx Megaproject, His \$85M Townhouse and kidzania."

Further reading:

[5] "When PS122 Became Performance Space New York."

[6] "Gibney Dance Unveils New Space, and a New Name."

[7] "Making Space for Creativity."

and services for dancers and artists in this city? How might an institution or an artist's service organization give reparations to a history, a community, a field that has multiple ideas of what they need? Danspace Project's programs "acknowledge that this work is situated on the Lenape Island of Manhahtaan (Mannahatta) in Lenapehoking, the Lenape homeland." A physical sign outside of Abrons Art Center makes a similar acknowledgement. Is more possible?

(This is the part someone could call defensive): Had the US not done what it had to my ancestors' home, my family wouldn't have moved to the US after the war, spreading across states coast to coast. Had my parents not met in the middle, I wouldn't have been born the person I am. When I remember all the difficulties we experienced just trying to get by, I also remember that my ancestors didn't ask for their lineage to end up here. They begged no one for the chance to "adapt" their culture to the rushing tides they were dropped into. Did anyone ask for that coffee shop?

With the history of being bunted from place to place pumping in my blood, is there anywhere I can live and not take up space or encroach on another's history that's not mine? Those expectations that immigrants be grateful⁸ are more than a racist and xenophobic fear of the Other. They're a menacing reminder of dripping with scarcity that whispers in our other ear: There's no room—You'll never be home here and you'll never get to go home again.

Further reading:

[8] "The ungrateful refugee: 'We have no debt to repay.'"

Someone could say to me: *But you didn't have to choose New York.*

I didn't but I did. I chose somewhere I felt my politics and queer ideas reflected, where my art could find a home, a community. New York isn't the only such place in the US but at the time, it felt like the most accessible one to me. Now, I sometimes tell myself it feels like a more dangerous choice to leave—to invite more disruption into the neighborhood with another vacant spot. Could I also take on the challenge of forging yet a new place to try and call home?

This is about power and the possibility of making choice. I'm making choices with the information I've absorbed and am trying to ask how I, and institutions, can do better. There's a history that gets erased under nicer-sounding words like "development" and "expansion." But really, the traumas of gentrification and war/diaspora share roots in displacement via colonization.

So couldn't I choose to leave? Slow the climb up the class ladder I'm supposed to care about and try and find somewhere I'm not encroaching on someone's neighborhood or indigenous land? Somewhere someone like me could be somewhat safer looking the way I look and being the way I am? Does this place exist?

Couldn't Rubinstein choose to spend his dollars differently? What if he just handed his extra dollars to the Bronx and asked its inhabitants what

to do with them? Reparations! Fix that hole in the sidewalk that's been there since Alexandra Maruri was a kid or help folks own their homes. (Not that private property is the Answer here.) Or, if he really couldn't keep his ego out of it, he could maybe bring people from the community he's so interested in and ask, "Hey! What do you think should we do with all these dollars?" What if he could view his dollars as something that the system gave him and not things that he earned on pulling up his bootstraps alone? I'm wandering into science fiction here but as Walidah Imarisha wrote for *Bitch Media*, science fiction⁹ "offers social justice movements a process to explore creating those new worlds." So if this feels absurd, maybe that's a good thing.

Zooming back over to the dance world: While the non-profit industrial complex¹⁰ bleeds from the knife of its self-perpetuated scarcity narrative,¹¹ there are deeper issues of shared community and recognition and space that I'll talk about first. ICYMI¹², dance has an Equity Problem. The conversations about this have been happening¹³ and happening.¹⁴ A publication from "Configurations in Motion: Performance Curation and Communities of Color" (hosted by SLIPPAGE: Performance|Culture|Technology at Duke University in June 2015)¹⁵ offers particularly useful insight into these conversations. In it, the participants—largely artists, curators, scholars, and administrators of color—reflect on curatorial practices and institutional possibility for centering artists of color.

Further reading:

[9] "Rewriting The Future Using Science Fiction To Re-Envision Justice."

[10] "Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex."

[11] "Nonprofits: We must break out of the Scrappiness Cycle."

[12] "In Case You Missed It"

[13] "Who Can Afford To Be A Starving Artist?"

[14] "Leading Racial Justice Nonprofit Race Forward Launches Racial Equity in the Arts Innovation Lab in New York City."

[15] "Configurations In Motion: Performance Curation and Communities of Color"

Paloma McGregor and Aaron Greenwald, among others, discuss the tensions of bringing black artists into traditionally white spaces. McGregor states, “No one event can hold all of us, and the ways in which our work shifts over time and does so in relationship to cultural shifts. I wanted to create ongoing opportunities for us to gather—not just to perform but to build community, across practice, and particularly among artists interested in pushing the form.”

Ishmael Houston-Jones and Rasu Jilani in particular consider how to expand audiences in a time when Netflix is easier to access than live performance. María Wethers and Levi Gonzalez reflect on navigating institutional structures and imagine ways to make more room at the table. With a couple decades of experience as an arts advocate in NYC, Wethers remarks: “It seems to me that the field talks about diversity of programming but rarely about the reflection of those principles within their own organizations. I see this as a real problem, especially in the funding and presenting sectors, which only further increases the skewed power dynamics inherent in those relationships.”

From the texts from SLIPPAGE to the much publicized and written about debate¹⁶ between Cornel West and Ta-Nehisi Coates on reparations, a clear link emerges that holds a certain anxiety about relevance, about limited space, and about how, if you’re doing something radical (as a thinker or artist in general, and especially as a member of

Further reading:

[16] “Ta-Nehisi Coates v Cornel West: black academics and activists give their verdict.”

an underrepresented group), the powers that be don’t offer much room for you to exist and matter to them at the same time. Do we care about their valuation of us or the space they offer us?

The complexity of West and Coates’ back-and-forth speaks to how the mainstreaming of the Reparations Debate has allowed it to develop a deeper complexity that we need. These aren’t new conversations in society at large or in the arts. The SLIPPAGE texts in particular offer a reminder of how far we have to come. What could equity, reparations, and dance look like in the now and in the future?

Some action items for institutions I’ve thought about in navigating these questions IRL:

- Curate more historically underrepresented artists. Check. Ish.
- Connect audiences to the art that they’re about to see. Work in progress.
- Relinquish power: Quit jobs. Maybe don’t even apply in the first place. Huh?

Quit the power that allows to you choose which, how much, when, who, and where. But then, where would you go? At Abrons Art Center, Gibney, and NYU Skirball Center, Craig Peterson, Ben Pryor, and Jay Wegman appear to have played musical chairs¹⁷ with their jobs in 2016-17. How exciting! At the time of his hiring, Peterson stated, “It would be great if some new voices popped into some of these institutions, some non-white-male voices,

Further reading:

[17] “For ‘Downtown Dance,’ a Changing of Many Guards.”

frankly. It'll be interesting to see what the Joyce and BAM and other major institutions do." He did hire Ali Rosa-Salas as Director of Performance Programs for Abrons but still, he accepted his new job.

We now have an answer to Peterson's question: the Joyce chose Aaron Mattocks, someone from "deep in the dance world"¹⁸ but still, a white male. BAM chose David Binder, following in a pattern of external hires that, as Conrad W. Chavez for the Clyde Fitch Report suggests,¹⁹ have stifled growth from within. He also noted that at Lincoln Center, veteran artistic director of 25 years Jane Moss will lose her summer festival but gain control of all other programming, a change The New York Times responded to with awe.²⁰

I could continue the snark but really, the structuring of jobs and the economy isn't fit to make room for people like Peterson (or anyone who's put a lot of work in the field) to make an easy step sideways for someone else. In the myth of meritocracy, once you've put in your time, how can someone do anything but continue climbing up the ladder of power?

Artists are creative so let's try and imagine. I'm not giving anyone an easy out.

Further reading:

[18] "The Joyce Theater's Latest Hire Comes From Deep in the Dance World."

[19] "Why Did BAM Hire David Binder?"

[20] "Lincoln Center to End Its Namesake Summer Festival."

[1] "When Gentrification Knocks on the Wrong Door." By David Gonzalez. *New York Times*, Sept. 3, 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/09/03/nyregion/when-gentrification-knocks-on-the-wrong-door.html

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[3] "South Bronx Saviors or Sellouts?" By DJ Cashmere. *Village Voice*, January 26, 2018. www.villagevoice.com/2018/01/26/the-south-bronx-dilemma-gentrification-or-empowerment/

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[5] "When PS122 Became Performance Space New York." By Siobhan Burke. *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 2018. www.nytimes.com/2018/02/13/arts/dance/ps122-performance-space-new-york-jenny-schlenzka.html

[6] "Gibney Dance Unveils New Space, and a New Name." By Joshua Barone. *New York Times*, March 7, 2018. www.nytimes.com/2018/03/07/arts/dance/gibney-dance-unveils-new-space-and-a-new-name.html

[7] "Making Space for Creativity." By Brian Seibert. *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2014. www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/arts/dance/gibney-dance-expands-in-lower-manhattan.html

[8] "The ungrateful refugee: 'We have no debt to repay.'" By Dina Nayeri. *The Guardian*, April 4, 2017. www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/04/dina-nayeri-ungrateful-refugee

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[10] "Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex." *INCITE!* 2004. incite-national.org/beyond-the-non-profit-industrial-complex/

[11] "Nonprofits: We must break out of the Scrappiness Cycle." *Nonprofit AF*, 2014. nonprofitaf.com/2014/03/nonprofits-we-must-break-out-of-the-scrappiness-cycle/

[12] "In Case You Missed It." *Urban Dictionary*.

[13] "Who Can Afford To Be A Starving Artist?" By Shawn Lent, Louise Geraghty, Michael Feldman, Talia Gibas and Ian David Moss. *createquity*, June 14, 2016. www.createquity.com/2016/06/who-can-afford-to-be-a-starving-artist/

[14] “Leading Racial Justice Nonprofit Race Forward Launches Racial Equity in the Arts Innovation Lab in New York City.” *Race Forward*, April 4, 2017. www.raceforward.org/press/releases/leading-racial-justice-nonprofit-race-forward-launches-racial-equity-arts-innovation

[15] “Configurations in Motion: Performance Curation and Communities of Color.” Hosted by SLIPPAGE: Performance|Culture|Technology at Duke University. June 27-28, 2015. sites.duke.edu/configurationsinmotion/files/2015/12/Duke-Configurations-Final-Booklet.pdf

[16] “Ta-Nehisi Coates v Cornel West: black academics and activists give their verdict.” By Melvin Rogers, Patrisse Cullors, Carol Anderson, Shailja Patel. *The Guardian*, December 22, 2017. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/22/-ta-nehisi-coates-cornel-west-black-academic-activists-debate-equality

[17] “For ‘Downtown Dance,’ a Changing of Many Guards.” By Siobhan Burke. *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/arts/dance/leadership-change-skirball-ps122-abrons-gibney-nyla.html

[18] “The Joyce Theater’s Latest Hire Comes From Deep in the Dance World.” By Joshua Barone. *New York Times*, Jan. 11, 2018. www.nytimes.com/2018/01/11/arts/dance/joyce-theater-aaron-mattocks-programming.html

[19] “Why Did BAM Hire David Binder?” By Conrad W. Chavez. *The Clyde Fitch Report*, February 23, 2018. www.clydefitchreport.com/2018/02/david-binder-bam-melillo/

[20] “Lincoln Center to End Its Namesake Summer Festival.” By Michael Cooper. *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/11/14/arts/music/lincoln-center-festival-jane-moss.html

Giving back by giving it up: on gentrification, reparations, dance, and probably too many other things [Part 2]



PART II: *Tearing down the board and building up worker cooperatives*

I am recognizing that the United States' funding structures and culture around the arts aren't fit to fully make room for the abundance of talent and creativity and experience wielded by artists not in powerful positions at institutions. The system of grant giving is a ruthless endgame that even stars like Raja Feather Kelly don't win.¹ With so many artists trying to carve space in the field and so few institutions with the resources to support and showcase them, these folks in power wield disproportionate influence² in deeming who is "worthy" and who is just a "hobbyist" wiggling around in their living room.

[ABOVE]
Ganache Coffee: A large storefront "coming soon" to a five-block stretch of Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Harlem that already features four coffee shops. Photo by the author, taken on May 4, 2018.

Further reading:
[1] "Op-Ed: The Grant Cycle Is A Biased, Oppressive Lottery—But I'm Still Playing To Win."

So, what could an alternative look like? This could look like more explicitly intentioned curatorial practices from presenters, this could look like a marketing vision that goes beyond SEO-friendly and funder-approved buzzwords to incorporate the depths of content, rather than what simply sounds trendy or meaningful. This could look like more cross-community partnerships, as suggested and already put in practice by artists from the SLIPPAGE convening. Another example: Jaamil Olawale Kosoko has stated that institutions need to be in touch with the technocratic instruments people use to curate their individual lives. Black intellectual and creative ideas have broken the internet time and time again to little recognition³ or compensation.

Maybe we can draw inspiration from that dance media that so successfully draws clicks, dollars,

[BELOW]
SYTYCD on tour in Buffalo, NY, 2006. Dancers performing the popular "zombie dance" by Wade Robson. There's a projection of the moon in the background. Make what you will of the costumes and theatrics but look at the almost unison—the togetherness and the individuality. Photo by Noelle from Toronto, Ontario, Canada (Flickr) via Wikimedia Commons.

Further reading:

[2] "Supply Is Not Going To Decrease (So It's Time To Think About Curating)."



and more in an obvious way. While much has already been written about *So You Think You Can Dance*'s problematic ideas on aesthetics⁴ and pedagogy,⁵ there's something to consider in what made this reality competition popular. Artists shouldn't have to tie their work in a pretty box with a pretty bow. Narrative-driven, 90-second works don't need to be the only form of pedagogy and engagement. But the show has figured a way to make dance palatable for audiences. Could institutions borrow from these tactics?

The show's broader format presents a strangely appealing way to consider an audience's role in re-inscribing dance and performance in our time. *SYTYCD* encapsulates an idyllically democratic American dream, where everyone with TV, internet, and/or a phone connection can have a say in deciding a winner, who and which ideas are relevant, and which bodies get to be the dancing beacons of this ideal. What if dance institutions cut the TV magic and the focus on pretty faces and virtuosic tricks but structured their work with that same ethic? What if they asked the audiences and artists that keep them going: "Who are our winners? Plural? Why do they resonate?"

Instead, my cynicism asks: Why is the "board of directors" a thing? Is it more than a mechanism for an elite to sway influence and shape the direction of an organization? Yes, many members may have a deep history of work in the field, but is that enough to say what happens in our future? Who gets to be on the board of directors? For too many organi-

Further reading:

[3] "Black Teens Are Breaking The Internet And Seeing None Of The Profits."

[4] "So You Think You Can Dance Does Dance Studies."

[5] "Dance Dance Revelation: On 'So You Think You Can Dance.'"

zations in non-profit land, like being an artist in the first place, it's still a pay to play⁶ game. (Yep, I just cited myself). Everyone is given the chance to be an individual donor; it's a fundraising tactic disguised as community-building and engagement that's threaded into every performance program, looped into annual galas, and flooded during End-of-Year campaigns. Yet, this too is made hierarchical by how much and how often one can transfer cash. All without the same access to power as being on the Board.

What if the people in charge didn't have a give-get requirement⁷ to have a say? What if the floodgates to power fell open? What might an artist-owned and artist-led worker cooperative look like? I'm getting there, I promise.

Curation has been an increasingly pluralistic practice, with people sharing in the creation, articulation, and execution of a vision. I'm into it. What if the artistic vision of an organization, presenter, festival, or any curatorial project were expanded even further? As a limited funding environment has resulted in leaner-staffed organizations in many cases, 501c3s often emulate the hierarchical business model from senior leadership down to the eager (and often, privileged) interns.

What if instead of a rigorous application to show your work, all you had to do was show up (IRL or virtually) and care? Instead of a quarterly board meeting, what if more folks could engage with

Further reading:

[6] "Pay to play: the costs of carving new space for dance."

[7] "Putting the cards on the table."

proposals and resolutions or whatever on their own time? Maybe the debate would last longer but also, maybe the vision that emerges would have more nuance, more voices, and more representation?

What if the chance to be a star wasn't boxed in by the gatekeepers you're supposed to know or the influencers who have made you someone worth knowing? Rather than the scarcity of selecting one artist out of many for an exclusive grant, residency, or fellowship, what if people could pool resources and shift from a scarcity framework to an abundant one?

What if, instead of closed-door meetings where a few try and figure out what the many want, there was a virtual room where the many could hash out a season of programming and performance together? Worker cooperatives have long-established traditions and stories that could help bring this science fiction to reality. In Jackson, Mississippi, Cooperative Jackson⁸ has been creating an alternative "economy of co-ops working together, and running independently from the dominant economy—co-op farms selling to co-op restaurants, co-op dry cleaners taking out loans from co-op banks." And since we have to care about money—studies have shown that co-ops not only have the potential to run more efficiently but also, are more prepared to handle financial hurdles⁹ thanks to the shared stake in an organization's sustainability. Isn't that one definition of equity? These alternative economies are happening below the radar of big investments in the South Bronx

Further reading:

[8] "Meet the Radical Workers' Cooperative Growing in the Heart of the Deep South."

[9] "Worker Cooperatives Are More Productive Than Normal Companies."

and communities everywhere. What could this look like in the arts?

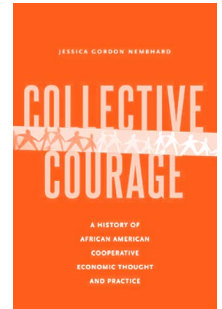
Some coop advocates suggest this structure can make for a slower¹⁰ moving process, but surely we can dream up ways to keep the boat moving and have more people at the wheel. Jessica Gordon-Nembhard's *Collective Courage: A History of African-American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*¹¹ traces¹² the fraught connections between co-ops and civil rights and shows that, even when they have failed, participants moved on with better organized communities. With better organization and communication, could the communities serviced by arts institutions (and those existing outside) move forward together, more purposefully?

All of this is nice and grand and somewhat sidestepping a big question at hand: But who's going to pay for everything? People like knowing how their money is being spent. They want to know that the money they donate to survivors of Hurricanes Harvey and Maria will actually go to help them recover. (It doesn't always).¹³ Foundations want to make sure competitively awarded grants get used to make good things. And it's in everyone's best interest that artists are able to follow through. What better way to make sure artists and grantmakers both hold up their end of the bargain by holding each other accountable? Because of course, people are messy. Artists who

Further reading:

[10] "Getting Rid of Bosses."

[11]



[12] "How Co-ops Helped Produce Foot Soldiers for Civil Rights: Interview with Jessica Gordon-Nembhard."

[13] "People are urging donations for Harvey relief efforts — just not to the Red Cross."

care about their communities also have jobs¹⁴ (ha) and accidentally fail to show up to their friends' shows or community meetings. The representatives of institutions can't always see everything there is to see either. Panels have to consider three-minute video samples in lieu of live performances.

And somehow, organizations make decisions. The arts keep moving and it all keeps happening, but, the way the world is now, so many artists get left out or left behind. In an alternate universe, maybe in a cooperative that was collectively funded and operated, wouldn't we at least be able to know if people weren't engaged? And then we could provide the support needed to make sure everyone gets heard. If this sounds slightly utopic, I'm not sorry.

Another hole I've thought about: Is there a way to prevent the politicization and scheming in this supposed democratization of an organization or community? How will artists with more resources or more access to resources not have more say in what gets made and shown?

My brain can't answer all these questions. *The Harvard Business Review* (cause surely, they know something about making money and capital flow advantageously) suggests¹⁵ that non-hierarchical organization structures are more adaptable and more innovative. *Forbes* offers a series¹⁶ of five organizational structures (with fun diagrams) that try to address accountability as hierarchies gets flatter. *The New York Times* suggests funders and

Further reading:

[14] "Does Having a Day Job Mean Making Better Art?"

[15] "Hierarchy Is Overrated."

investors reprioritize¹⁷ where their money is going. This recent coverage suggests that for-profit businesses have already been exploring what equity can look like. Dance and performance can lead this conversation still further.

I could write an epic love letter to what dance does and can do. Here's a digest: it shows bodies, sometimes in motion, sometimes as figures but always so much more. The dynamics of people in space, moving through time in just a selection of moments can suggest as many possibilities as it dares to say exist. More broadly, the arts provoke the imagination in non-linear ways that might generate ideas and solutions. They ask us to consider our humanity, our places in the world. Having a relationship to one's body and the things it can do and create just by being is a magical science fiction that is everywhere all the time.

There are so many folks in the Bronx already living lives and sustaining communities. So why would anyone feel compelled to Make the Bronx Great Again?¹⁸ In dance and the arts, people create their own platforms all the time—starting new zines (see *Slant'd*),¹⁹ becoming drag sensations outside of RuPaul's Drag Race (see Vizin),²⁰ and creating cross-coalition groups (like the BUFU).²¹ And so many others that didn't make this mostly random list of examples. So why do we care about the old institutions?

Because we're back to relevance and resources. Bronx natives, including the founder of the blog

Further reading:

[16] "The 5 Types of Organizational Structures: Part 1, The Hierarchy."

[17] "Who Needs a Boss?"

[18] "New South Bronx Condo Declares They're 'Making The Bronx Great Again'—Via Gentrification."

[19] slantd.media

[20] Watch video: [youtube.com/watch?v=57XkaYnzDSU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57XkaYnzDSU)

[21] bufubusforus.com



Welcome2TheBronx²² Ed García Conde, pushed back on the *NYTimes*' urge to recognize and the South Bronx as place that's "Worthy."²³ When resources are hoarded, it's inevitable that the folks holding them will have a disproportionate sway in what gets made and seen. When people are trying to carve new spaces and paint new visions, society's least represented (or most misrepresented) also bear the burden of representation to shine brightly. The departure²⁴ of Laura Raicovich at the Queens Museum suggests that at least some institutions aren't quite ready to expand the vision for what their resources can do.

I alluded earlier to the re-making of the internet

[ABOVE]
At a café in South Harlem - who's the clientele? What else is on display/on sale? Photo by the author, taken on May 4, 2018.

thanks to black folks. One of the many things the cultural moment of the film *Black Panther* has shown is that, when representation happens at this scale, people will show up and put up dollars²⁵ that Society didn't think they had. When there's an abundance of interest, could there be room built into the system to accommodate it, to let it be explored and flourished?

The erasure of black folks is central to the story of gentrification and reparations. When considering the intermingled dismissal of immigrants, non-black people of color, disabled people, queer people, trans and non-binary folks more broadly, it obviously gets messy. Ugh, people. Without putting a universalizing "we" around these groups, can people imagine a future where our communities galvanize around more cultural moments at multiple scales all the time? Institutions, can you help?

TLDR,²⁶ here are some ideas for those arts institutions out there:

- Restructure your board. Longevity and institutional memory are important. But please, make room.
- Restructure your hiring practices/your job search. For over-represented folks, maybe don't take that job. Actually, just don't apply to begin with.
- Re-structure your organization. How can members and artists and everyone be "invested" in a different way?

Further reading:

[22] [welcome2thebronx.com](#)

[23] "Strong Reactions in the South Bronx After It's Called a 'Place to Go.'"

[24] "Queens Museum Director's Departure Prompts Call for More Politically Engaged Art Institutions."

[25] "Why Is 'Black Panther' Selling Out? Activists, Churches, Schools Buy Thousands of Tickets."

[26] "Too long, didn't read" via [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Too_long;_didn%27t_read](#)

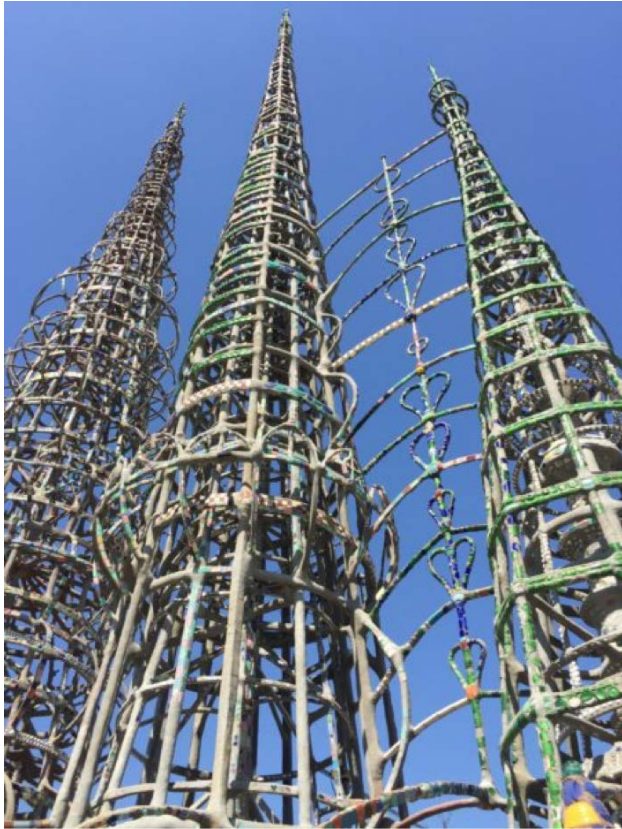
[19] “Strong Reactions in the South Bronx After It’s Called a ‘Place to Go.’” By Sandra E. Garcia, *New York Times*, Feb. 8, 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/travel/strong-reactions-in-the-south-bronx-after-its-called-a-place-to-go.html

[20] “Queens Museum Director’s Departure Prompts Call for More Politically Engaged Art Institutions.” By Benjamin Sutton. *Hyperallergic*, January 31, 2018. hyperallergic.com/424364/curators-letter-support-laura-raicovich-queens-museum/

[21] “Why Is ‘Black Panther’ Selling Out? Activists, Churches, Schools Buy Thousands of Tickets.” By Adrienne Gibbs. *Forbes*, February 15, 2018. www.forbes.com/sites/adriennegibbs/2018/02/15/why-is-black-panther-selling-out-activists-churches-schools-buy-1000s-of-tickets/#18e635bfdbb0

[22] “An Artists’ Guide to Not Being Complicit with Gentrification.” By Heather M. O’Brien, Christina Sanchez Juarez, Betty Marin. *Hyperallergic*, June 19, 2017. hyperallergic.com/385176/an-artists-guide-to-not-being-complicit-with-gentrification/

The In-Between Space: Grappling with Reparations as a Model Minority



As a young kid with two college-educated immigrant parents, I bought into the model minority myth, hard. I implicitly understood that I had to work the hardest, be the best, ace the tests, read the most books, play a musical instrument (or two), have the most extra-curricular activities—basically succeed by every metric put in front of me, and then I could feel good about myself. My sense of achievement was directly tied into my sense of self-worth. And it worked. I played the game, and I was

pretty good at it. I liked competing with other kids in my classes because I liked landing at or near the top. Was it to justify my being there? To allow myself to ignore all the comments (as a young kid) about why I talked with a funny accent? (I learned English from my Indian mother and my Cypriot father, so despite being born here, I *sounded* like an immigrant when I got to public school). To allow myself to ignore all the comments (as a teenager and young adult) about how exotic I looked and answering the question of “what are you” wherever I went? Who knows. I never “fit in” throughout my childhood in the predominantly white San Diego suburbs, but at least with the model minority myth I could “fit above.” At least that’s how I saw it until much later on.

I have also always believed deeply in fairness and, by extension, in the importance of justice. I guess it was my relative privilege growing up that allowed me to buy into the existence of these concepts so wholeheartedly. In my late teens, as I began to understand structural inequality and its resounding effects on people’s lives, I became drawn to things I could participate in to attempt to correct for these structural inequalities which, I had come to understand, were making the world so unfair.

Simultaneously, I was falling in love with the performing arts—an incredibly unfair line of work! From the casting process that implicitly privileges white standards of beauty and absurdly expensive training programs, to the proliferation of unpaid internships taking the place of junior level staff

[LEFT]
The Towers of Simon Rodia, also known as the Watts Towers, or Nuestro Pueblo (“our town”) in the Simon Rodia State Historic Park in the Watts community of Los Angeles. By Moe.217-Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

positions in nonprofit performing arts organizations, to unconscious biases against women and people of color in technical positions, this world I have grown to love so much is rife with structural injustices—and it was going to take more than fulfilling my model minority status to begin to tackle these issues.

It took me years to begin to understand the flipside of buying into the model minority myth, but even as I've started unpacking this for myself, I catch myself slipping into old habits and thought patterns. I still beat myself up pretty badly about the smallest mistakes. I still feel the need to constantly justify my “usefulness” and “value” at work by staying late, obsessing over details, and always checking myself to be sure I'm being the best “team player” I can be—which in my mind means the team player who works the hardest. And I should mention that this is in a quite positive and functional work environment!

From the start of my career in the performing arts, and specifically theatre, I've had the good fortune to have mentors who were people of color. The first theatre company I worked with on a long-term basis was based in Watts (Watts Village Theatre Company) and had been led by Black and Latinx folks for its entire history. Working with this small nonprofit in this community quickly opened my eyes to the vast injustices that I had had the good fortune to not fall prey to as I grew up—and got me focused on doing all I could to lift up the work of this Black and Brown-led company.



It should also be noted that this company's Black and Latinx leadership (especially the artistic and managing directors at the time: Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez and Damian Teeko Parran) quickly welcomed me with open arms, recognized that I had a capacity for leadership, and gave me my first job as a theatre producer, a path I have now continued on for 13 years. That is to say, my work with this company was not out of a sense of charitable obligation on my part (the model minority “helping the underserved” Black and Brown community), but out of mutual learning and artistic affinity. Looking back, it feels bittersweet that this start to my career in the arts, this cross-racial and cross-cultural solidarity, seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

[ABOVE]
Radical Evolution's
production of *The
Golden Drum Year: a
story in poetry and
prose* (2015). Photo
credit: Beto O'Byrne.

Soon after moving to New York to further pursue theatre, I found myself hungry for the type of cross-cultural affinity I experienced working with Watts Village. I also began to find my way into the world of Off Broadway theatre and its deeply entrenched structural biases and gained a newfound appreciation for the fact that I had been recognized as a leader and given so much agency early in my career, especially as a young woman of color. I seriously doubt I would have pursued a similar path, and likely would have left the field entirely, if it hadn't been for this early positive example of what was possible in the world of theatre-making. This inspired my partner and I to create our own company in 2011, called **Radical Evolution**, which has since come to focus on the complexity of the mixed identity experience. As theatre makers who both identify as bicultural, we assemble people from a variety of cultural backgrounds to explore the cultural complexity of what it means to be “American” in the context of the 21st century, and to highlight the experiences of folks who identify as more than one race/ethnicity—the fastest growing demographic in the US.¹

For more information
visit radicalevolution.org

[1] “Multiracial in America: Proud, Diverse and Growing in Numbers.” *Pew Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends*. June 11, 2015.

Last year, in the midst of the trashcan fire that was the early days of the Trump administration, I was excited and inspired by the Reparations365 series at JACK. While I was connected with a few different groups organized around undoing structural racism in the arts and culture sector, I was intrigued by the potential intersection of a conversation around the economic aspects of systemic racism housed in an arts and community space. Furthermore, I

had understood the idea of reparations to be an inherently radical idea—something that folks fighting for incremental change couldn't even quite wrap their heads around. Just as I'm excited by and drawn to seemingly impossible artistic ideas, I was drawn to the idea of reparations—consistently dismissed by politicians, anathema to conservatives, perceived as too complicated and out of our collective reach for liberals. Just my cup of tea.

At the first community conversation I attended at JACK, I was the only person of color who did not outwardly identify as Black. There were also a good amount of white folks there, and some spoke candidly and passionately about their want to discuss reparations. And, as so often happens in so many situations, a binary was established. White and Black. Oppressor and oppressed. As has happened countless times in my life, I found myself in the uncomfortable space in between, wondering if others were wondering why I was even there to begin with.

Luckily, the conversation was engaging and rigorous, and I left inspired to think further about my own history and its relationship to systemic inequities. That's when I started questioning how my family, even as 20th century immigrants to this country, may have benefited from social structures that were set up long before we arrived. The notion of reparations as something that I didn't need to worry about or participate in because I did not fit directly into this binary didn't feel right to me, but I was struggling to understand my place in the

conversation. I'm excited and grateful that this spurred me to look into South Asian and Black solidarity movements, and South Asian scholars and activists who are working against anti-Black racism from their own personal perspective. I also began to scratch the surface of the historical underpinnings of the role of South Asians (and most Asians, once they come to this country), as the model minority, and the ways in which this stereotype has upheld and continues to uphold structures of white supremacy.

The **1965 Hart-Celler Act** removed overtly racist immigration quotas shortly after the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed. While there were likely many strategic reasons for this act, including America's military intervention in Southeast Asia at the time, politicians were able to link the two pieces of legislation to show the United States' steady march toward equality. "We have removed all elements of second-class citizenship from our laws by the [1964] Civil Rights Act," declared Vice President Hubert Humphrey. "We must in 1965 remove all elements in our immigration law which suggest there are second-class people."²

While on its surface this law removed the previously harsh restrictions on immigration from Asian countries, it also put a cap on the number of immigrants from Mexico and Latin America that were allowed to enter the country each year, creating a structure that separated Brown communities from each other, and set Asian and Latinx immigrants down divergent paths.³ This

For more information visit [gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-Pg911.pdf](https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-Pg911.pdf)

[2] "The Immigration Act That Inadvertently Changed America."

[3] "The law that created illegal immigration."

continues to this day, with the large number of South Asians who immigrate using H1B Visas, allowing themselves to be categorized as "skilled workers" and thereby separated from other, much less valued, immigrant labor.

South Asians are often overtly pitted against Black communities, and viewed in opposition to other Asian groups. This can happen without much awareness of who is making these distinctions, and without explicitly acknowledging the lens of capitalist productivity. In his 2001 book *The Karma of Brown Folk*, author and historian Vijay Prashad describes a visit that Bill Gates made to India in 1997. Gates announced on this trip that "South Asians are the second-smartest people on the planet." He then goes on to rate the Chinese as the smartest. Prashad then notes that "white people, like Gates, do not get classified, since it is the white gaze, in this incarnation, that is transcendental and able to do the classifying!"⁴

Prashad then connects this commodification of immigrant labor directly to the white supremacist strategy of continuing to oppress African Americans in the post-Civil War era:

"Capital relishes immigrant workers from zones of exploitation, since many of them work for lower wages and their immigrant status renders them less able to be critical than enfranchised workers. The migrant workers can be controlled by the discipline of tenuousness: If you are feisty you are fired, and not just into the labor market to seek alternative employment but out of the country...The U.S. state

[4] Prashad, Vijay. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. p. 70.

adopted the policy of using foreign workers in its Contract Labor Law (1864), which legalized an earlier arrangement by which contractors went to Europe and Asia to recruit workers on what were virtually indenture contracts. In the 1860's there was even a suggestion made to flood the U.S. South with South and East Asian workers to shift the blacks from the land and to undermine their power as newly freed peoples.”⁵

So how does the South Asian community participate in Reparations – particularly those of us who were born here and who enjoy the privileges of citizenship, middle class to upper middle class upbringing, and access to higher education? How can we be better co-conspirators with other Brown and Black communities?

Here are a few thoughts and ideas, inspired by some of the things I've read about South Asian and Black solidarity movements, and from various conversations in organizing spaces I've had the good fortune to become a part of. Shoutout to **Artists Co-Creating Real Equity (ACRE)**, a multiracial cohort of artists and cultural workers undoing racism in the arts and culture sector, and the Asian affinity group, both of which are under the umbrella of the **People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB)**. The analysis offered by PISAB and the conversations I've had at these meetings have been instrumental to my path of learning.

[5] Prashad, Vijay. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. p. 71.

For more information visit their Facebook page at [facebook.com/people/Acre-Pisab/100009536072335](https://www.facebook.com/people/Acre-Pisab/100009536072335)

For more information visit [antiracistalliance.com](https://www.antiracistalliance.com)

A Working List of Strategies:

Interrupt anti-Black racism when it happens in your own circles. As the daughter of a Brown immigrant woman, one of the things I still have the hardest time with is disagreeing, arguing my point, and sticking to it when I know I'm right in principle. I want to get better at calling folks in, explaining my logic, and convincing people to see my point of view, especially when I'm trying to interrupt prejudiced beliefs that are harmful and dehumanizing to people I care about. Plus, by standing up for my ideals and refusing to be a quiet and compliant model minority, I am also disrupting widely held stereotypes about South Asians and immigrants in general.

Recognize your proximity to Whiteness—especially if you are lighter-skinned (more on colorism [here](#))—and use that to leverage resources. As a very light skinned, bicultural South Asian woman, I read as ethnically ambiguous to most White folks, and also not that foreign or threatening. I want to use my access to the White world, specifically the world of the performing arts, where I do hold gatekeeper status, to open up space, leverage resources and create a platform for Black and Brown folks to tell their own stories on their own terms. And in an attempt to address the economic aspects of reparations, I want to be sure that these opportunities involve compensation and that I do what I can to interrupt the often dehumanizing structures that devalue artists, and particularly artists of color.

Further reading: [huffingtonpost.com/entry/daring-to-be-dark-fighting-against-colorism-in-south-us_58d98c5fe4b0e6062d923024](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/daring-to-be-dark-fighting-against-colorism-in-south-us_58d98c5fe4b0e6062d923024)

Highlight injustices in education, business and anywhere else. South Asians are perceived to be “succeeding” as the model minority community. Point out that if systems like public education and higher education aren’t working for all of us, then they aren’t working for any of us. We are expected to take what we’re given and shut up, but I want to make sure not to take advantage of systemic inequities that will privilege me over other Black and Brown communities and instead ask strategic questions about why these resources aren’t accessible to all. If I am getting something more because of my model minority status, then I have to be ready to give it up.

Lift up South Asian public and historical figures that have agitated for justice before us, and those who are doing it now, whether through politics, arts and media or public service. There are too many high profile examples of South Asian politicians (Bobby Jindal and Nikki Haley to name just a few), who unabashedly buy into the myth of White supremacy, and unsurprisingly, are rewarded for it by the political and media establishment, resulting in increased public visibility. Let’s highlight and put our resources behind the public figures, community leaders and artists who advocate for racial and social equity like US Congresswoman **Pramila Jaypal**, author and historian **Vijay Prashad** (quoted above!) and comedian and documentary filmmaker **Hari Kondabolu**.

For more information
visit the following sites:
jayapal.house.gov
vijayprashad.org/
harikondabolu.com

Organize cross-cultural affinity spaces for those who work in the same field. This is built into the DNA of Radical Evolution as a company, but the basic principles of this can also be applied elsewhere and in organizing contexts. Radical Evolution builds affinities between artists of different cultural backgrounds (and often different artistic specializations) by bringing people together to work on an artistic project and collaborate toward the common goal of making a piece of performance together. What if we applied the same creative thinking and solidarity-building to organizing movements? What if we built something beautiful together that was more ongoing and ever-evolving than the ephemerality of a few days or weeks of performances? Lately, we have been inspired to re-focus Radical Evolution’s process around these more long-term ideas and strategies, in an effort to create relationships that resonate during the artistic process, but also radiate out into the world beyond. Process is product. Art is life. And the inverse. And so on and so forth as we struggle together to make a more just world to live in. What does a cross-cultural affinity space look like in your workplace, or even amongst others who work in your field? And to return again to the economic question of reparations, how can resources in your field be refocused and reallocated more equitably? The Reparations365 series at JACK showed a few inspiring examples of these efforts, including **Wildseed Collective** and **reparations.me**.

For more information
visit wildseedcommunity.org and reparations.me

As I continue to dismantle the expectations of the model minority myth for myself, I'm beginning to formulate what my place could be in the conversation around reparations. I think it involves disrupting the easily established binary of Black/White in the conversation and highlighting positive examples of Black and South Asian solidarity. Then of course it is following those examples in my own actions. All these years later, I want to re-commit to my youthful belief in fairness and justice and struggle to bring reality closer to these ideals. I am also excited to build with other South Asians (and all Asian-identified folks) who have similar politics, to establish a collective and meaningful voice in the reparations conversation. Where y'all at? Hit me up!

Most of all, I want to use my artistic work to create proposals for what a more just world would look like, and act out my vision for that more just world whenever and wherever I hold space. I want to continue to forge cross-cultural connections in my art making and organizing, because as someone who identifies as bicultural, I need these spaces to exist as my full self. I firmly believe that out of these spaces will spring visions of new systems and new ways of being. And through these systems, we will discover that reparations is a project for us all.

[1] "The Immigration Act That Inadvertently Changed America." By Tom Gjelten, *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/immigration-act-1965/408409/>

[2] "The law that created illegal immigration." By Jane Hong, *LA Times*, Oct. 2, 2015. <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-1002-hong-1965-immigration-act-20151002-story.html>

[3] "Daring To Be Dark: Fighting Against Colorism In South Asian Cultures." By Simra Mariam, *Huffpost*, May 17, 2017. huffingtonpost.com/entry/daring-to-be-dark-fighting-against-colorism-in-south-us_58d98c5fe4b0e6062d923024

Good Morning Whiteness

*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won.*

—Lift Every Voice and Sing
(The Black National Anthem)¹

*Good morning heartache,
You old gloomy sight.
Good morning heartache.
Thought we said goodbye last night.
I turned and tossed until it seemed you had gone,
But here you are with the dawn.*

—Good Morning Heartache²

Aisha "Li" Cousins
September 4, 2018



It's morning. She can tell because the pale blue light of just-past-dawn has seeped into the corner of her room reserved for sleeping. She is up despite her desire not to be. There is a heavy ache in her skull. Why was she up so late last night? Oh right, job hunting. She has been job hunting for over a year. It's not that she hasn't gotten offers. She just hasn't found one she can stomach. As the purple post-it on her bedroom wall reminds her: "I am tired of working for well-meaning liberal white folks who act like they are doing me a favor by sticking me in segregated spaces. 10 years is way more than enough."

"Well, guess what," she grumbles at the post-it, "Job hunting for over a year is more than enough. Being broke sucks."

[ABOVE]
This image is used under
Creative Commons CC0.

[1] Written by
James Weldon
Johnson in 1900.

[2] First recorded by
Billie Holiday in 1946.
[youtube.com/watch?
v=L4XUDvFwdlc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4XUDvFwdlc)

She can afford to be picky. Sort of. Her mother had graciously offered to let her share her apartment for the low low contribution of only \$400 a month while she got her shit together. It had been a calculated gamble. She'd taken a part-time non-profit job, so she could have 20 hours a week free to focus on building her art career. It had seemed like the quickest road to becoming a full-time self-employed black artist.

For a while, it had looked like that gamble/ investment was paying off. Until she realized she couldn't handle the career boost she'd worked so hard to get. She just wanted the money and the resources. She didn't want the art world culture—not even the social justice non-profit art world culture. It wasn't until she was face-to-face with a person who could single-handedly finance a whole year's worth of her precious pro-black art projects, but wouldn't do it because it "didn't quite line up with their vision" that she realized she was wasting her time. Actually, it took one, two, three, four... *four* meetings with well-meaning liberal white people and a few disturbing after-work conversations with well-meaning liberal brown ones for her to realize she was fighting a losing battle. We're talking about the art world after all—an industry that **paid Andres Serrano \$250,000 to photograph a sculpture of Christ in a vat of urine and Chris Ofili \$4,600,000 to make Madonna paintings out of elephant dung.** \$10,000 here and there for a few pro-black art projects seemed like an easy win. Until it wasn't.

Further reading:
[christies.com/
lotfinder/photographs/
andres-serrano-piss-
christ-5070403-
details.aspx](https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/photographs/andres-serrano-piss-christ-5070403-details.aspx)

[culturetype.com/
2015/07/01/chrisofiis-
holy-virgin-mary-make-
news-again-this-time-
setting-auction-record/](https://culturetype.com/2015/07/01/chrisofiis-holy-virgin-mary-make-news-again-this-time-setting-auction-record/)

Non-profit work had been equally disappointing in its own way. So had academia. Colleges and universities were where artists went to get a stable paycheck when the freelance hustle got to be too much. But the culture had a way of seeping in so deep that you could never fully shake it off no matter how you tried. She, for instance, used to write in straightforward clear simple English. Toni Morrison and Nikki Giovanni were her heroes. Four years of stretching sentences to meet her college professors’ 10 page minimum requirements beat that out of her. She couldn't even think in simple sentences by the time they were done with her. Even her post-it affirmations were loaded with compound sentences. She had gone to school to learn to be of service to the people who had raised her. But after college, when she spoke, her tongue built walls instead of bridges. It wasn't something she was proud of.

In her senior year of high school, she had come across this statistic: Black men who get a college degree make more money on average than those who don't. But black men who don't go to college have higher self-esteem.

She hadn't known what to do with this info.

She should have followed her gut.

Instead, she went to college and learned the hard way that that statistic was equally true for black women—at least the self-esteem part. She is still learning it. Still trying to rewire her instincts back to

what she imagines they might have been if she had chosen the other route.

The morning train ride in to work is her last breath of fresh air before she enters the office. Then she closes her lips, shuts her eyes, and sticks her full self in her pocket. There will be no singing here. No jovial laughter. No scent of curry, collard greens, or okra. No Harlem shaking in her step. No renaissance continued. It dead ends here. Here she waits for something that will never happen. Counts down to desegregation that will never come. Nods her head in meetings about staff diversity and drifts away to daydreams of her real life. Her real life is the opposite of this. In it, her colleagues look at her and know that she is smart. Know she is an asset to be used and not a problem to be solved—a peculiar foreigner they will never fully understand. She remembers the day she realized her job was never going to hire any other black people. It's a curious thing to realize an organization that prides itself on making the world a better place has internalized its own racism so deeply that it can't see how to weed it out. Whiteness is like that.

[BELOW]

Front of the U.S. \$100
Federal Reserve note.
Via Wikimedia Commons.



*Good morning Whiteness,
You old gloomy sight.
Good morning heartache.
Thought we said goodbye last night.
I tossed and turned until it seemed you had gone,
But here
You are
With the dawn.*

*Stop haunting me now.
Can't shake you no how.
Just leave me alone.
I've got those Monday blues
Straight through Sunday blues...*

It is Wednesday. She needs to walk faster. She can hear her mother's daily warning from her childhood whistling in her ears: "You don't have as much time as you think you have." She had already missed the first call for writers. No \$100 writing job for her. She was early for the next one. Quick to rearrange her schedule for a chance to earn rent money. Date night can wait. Friends can meet her at the bar tomorrow. Tonight, she is on her way to JACK to see an event called "**Cyclone Musings: Blackness, Citizenship & Reparations in the Afro-Atlantic.**" The gig feels like it'll be easy. She has already gone to one other event in JACK's **Reparations365** series. It was called "Community Conversation: What Would Reparations Look Like?"³ One of the guest speakers, Natasha Marin, was a lighthearted black woman who had started a website for micro-reparations. Black folks posted needs. White folks

For more information visit jackny.org/cyclone-musings.html and jackny.org/reparations365

replied with money or gifts. The most common gift was airline miles. She had taken notes. She could use a free flight to see friends now and then. The other speakers weren't as lighthearted or funny. It's important to be funny when talking about a dead-end subject. There were people in the conversation older than her mother and others young enough to be her children. The only thing they seemed to have in common was that they were all still talking. Debating. Theorizing. Trying to draw a line around a hypothetical situation that would probably never come. How do you calculate the value of a human life? Is there a number that makes Rekia Boyd's brother feel better about the holidays they'll never get to share? A dollar amount that makes Eric Garner's mother cease to mourn the too-soon passing of her son? A settlement that makes a child forget its longing for its absent mother? She may not have lived through slavery, but she had seen enough to know you can't repay a people for certain kinds of wrongs. There is no dollar amount, no apology, no prison sentence, no **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** big enough, or strong enough to fix it.

Shrug.

If life was fair, regrets would roll back time and we could let our hindsight sculpt our future.

Life isn't fair.

Sometimes you get screwed over.

And sometimes, you luck out.

[3] This event took place on March 20, 2017 and featured guests Adaku Utah (Harriet's Apothecary), Naima Penniman (Wildseed Collective) and Natasha Marin (www.reparations.me).

For more information visit justice.gov.za/trc/

As she crosses the street toward JACK's now familiar space, it strikes her that tonight she is in luck. Because even though reparations will probably never come, this writing assignment is still putting money in her broke-ass pockets. So that is something.

The ticket line is short. As promised, her name is on the guest list. Inside, the theater's trademark walls glisten like a sea of dusty mirrors. They are covered in crumpled tinfoil—just like the last time she was here. She recalls suddenly that she had felt hopeful last time. Why was that? Oh yes! One person at that Community Conversation event had shared an idea that seemed like a real solution—not just a band-aid. Much to her surprise, the idea had come from an unassuming looking white woman. It hadn't been a specific number. Instead, it was this ritual: every year at tax time, this white woman would calculate her income. Then, she would subtract the average income for black Americans in the same demographic—same age, same education level, etc. And then, she would donate a set percentage of the difference to organizations doing work to bring the black folks' income up to match the white ones'. It was very specific. And practical. It didn't require petitioning lawmakers or convincing die-hard racists to change their minds. Just individual people making a personal promise. No walls of hate to bulldoze through except the ones inside. It was doable. Very doable.

Most importantly, she'd liked that it required white people to track the numbers. To try to find the cause behind the gap and track the country's progress. To chug along, generation after generation, just like black folks until the problem actually dwindled down to zero. She'd made a point of seconding the woman's suggestion, just in case people were tuning her out because she was white. But it hadn't seemed to stick. The conversation had drifted back to hypotheticals. People like to talk in hypotheticals. She'd said hi to the woman afterwards to make sure she didn't feel discouraged. She'd told her she thought it was a good family tradition to start. That she hoped the woman would make it a tradition in her family. That she hoped other white folks would make it a tradition in their families too.

As the lights dim, she settles into her seat and pulls out a pen. She flips through the program scanning it for quotes. She likes quotes. One of her favorites is “A mind once stretched by a new idea can never return to its original shape.” She wonders if the woman's comments had stretched someone's mind that night a few months ago. She wonders if something will reshape her own mind tonight.

The performance begins with singing, then shifts to talking and poetry. The part that strikes her most is the two black women onstage who have a love-hate relationship with academia. They have been to college and graduate school. It has traumatized them. They have taken time to heal. They are thinking about going back. The opportunities, they

say, are worth it. To hold at bay the never ending daily grind of work, sleep, eat, pay bills, work, sleep, eat, pay bills. To carve out time to travel to other countries. Time to talk and build with their black counterparts in distant places. It is worth the agitation, the stooping low, the gnawing at their self-esteem.

She thinks the women onstage are traumatized by all that stooping and by no means is it worth it. She tries to find a non-confrontational way to say it. “How much does a plane ticket to Lagos cost?” she asks. “Compare that to a year of Ivy League education.” Do the math and you begin to wonder why you think you need these white folks here to help you. Help you by hurting you. These people who after 50 years of federally mandated school desegregation, still can’t solve the puzzle of how to find black folks to fill their schools proportionately. These people who re-segregate and smile. Bring us black coffee at their oh-so-barely-integrated lunch counter. Smiling because they spat in it at the sink. Joke’s on us. We pay the bill. Proud now because we’ve made them take our money. How will these people teach us blackness? How will they validate our education? What can they do for you except to suck the water from your leaves and drain the life blood from your roots? Claim your accomplishments as theirs and start the vicious cycle over. Trim one more generation of black intellects into now bonsaied trees.

As black mothers are quick to tell their children, we don't have as much time as we think we have.

They know how much gets wasted.

They count the hours.

The days.

The years.

They know all too well, life isn't fair

and no one's coming to help us.

They know it's up to us find the answers.

It strikes her while listening to the people onstage that, more than anything, reparations could be time together. Time for black folks to be together—from all our scattered corners of the slave trade route. Time to learn each other. Time to pass on to each other all the seeds that we've been growing. To be more when we are together than we can be when we are apart.

It also strikes her that she cannot picture what this looks like. She has never seen it before. Never. It strikes her, that this is what slavery has done. That this is what racism continues to do. It robs the interest out from your investment every time it starts to grow. Eats your would-be redwood sprouts for dinner. Then fakes condolences by telling you that they were never going to grow much taller anyways.

Stoop knee-high now please.

The subject of the conversation at JACK wanders back to songs and readings, questions, and more questions. It's hard to draw a line around a hypothetical. The evening's host remarks the event is running past its allotted time, but that it is important to take time, make time, because the subject is important.

She agrees with the host.

She wants to stay longer, but it is late and she has work tomorrow. She is out of time.

She waits for a point in the conversation when all eyes turn away from her, then slips her pen into her pocket, and steps out silently into the autumn night. The trees outside are bare and frail. Their fallen, once-green leaves litter the sidewalk. She shuffles through, careful not to crush them. Above the soft whisper of shifting leaves, she hears the telltale sound of screeching brakes that signals the arrival of buses. Three buses pull up at the corner half a block ahead. She squints to see their numbers. One of them is hers. She sprints towards it, leaves crunching now beneath her feet, bag clutched tight so that her papers will not fall. The bus driver is patient. He waits for her. She thanks him with a nod, too out of breath to utter "Thank you." He waves as if he understands.

She finds a seat where she can write and pulls the evening's program out. On the ride home, she scribbles notes onto it so she can remember what to cover in her article. Quote number one: "I give myself reparations because nobody else is going to

give it to us. We have to give it to ourselves." Quote number two: "To live in America is to live in the shadow of whiteness. Privacy is a form of freedom." And this quote from the poet who was speaking as she left: "That is the paradox of being black: I will always belong where I do not belong."

In other words, it is our duty as black people to insert ourselves in whiteness. To be the spots of ink in the milk that turn it gray.

She likes the last quote. Runs her finger over it as if this will commit the words to memory. "We owe the ones who came before us," she mumbles audibly.

But inside she is tired of fighting.

She just wants to grow.

She puts away the evening's program and pulls out her binder of job application letters. There is one at the top that is her favorite. It has two brown women bosses. When she went in for the interview, the office smelled of redwood trees.

She fingers it and hopes.

Debt is Exhausting

Debt is Exhausting



It's 4pm on a Saturday afternoon. I check my mailbox and see an unfamiliar envelope. I open it. I stop and stare at the document, attempting to piece together the words in front of me. My name. Taxes. State of New York. Civil Warrant. Time freezes. The word *warrant* flashes over and over. My son, who is in my arms, stares at me, a witness to the swift change in my body energy—from joyful to stunned.

Feeling dizzy, I enter my Bed-Stuy apartment. My housemate asks me what is wrong. I say, “Nothing,” and cram the warrant into my bag before continuing to recall my favorite moments from the Adrian Piper exhibit at MoMA that I'd visited

[ABOVE]
Adrian Piper,
“Everything # 5.2,” 2004.
Plexiglas wall corner
insert engraved with
gold leaf text, 24 " x
48" (61 cm x 121.9 cm).
#08037.2. Photo credit:
Andrej Glusgold. Image
via Wikimedia Commons.

Jamara Wakefield
September 5, 2018

earlier in the day. Piper's *A Synthesis of Institutions, 1965–2016*¹ is a four-decade survey of Blackness as a daily experience / as it interacts with the violence of white supremacy. Out loud I begin to unpack the chilling and beautiful elements of the exhibit. Behind the casual conversation I am asking myself a litany of questions: *Why did I cram the warrant in my purse? Why did I hush it away? Why do I feel ashamed? How does debt operate in our daily lives?* I thought about the ephemera in the exhibit. Piper uses journals, video, recordings and documents as interventions, to trace the lineage of her Blackness as well as the white violence she encounters. For a brief moment, I imagine the warrant blown up wall size in the MoMA. I want it visible. I want people to stare at it and talk about it. This fantasy leads me to the question: **How do we get people to talk about the oppressive nature of debt when there is so much stigma and shame attached to owing?**

For those of us who belong to marginalized groups, debt and systems of owing are one of the many ways we constantly navigate our survival. Being in debt is exhausting. It robs people of their energy, their joy, and their ability to sleep at night. For many, debt has led to divorce. For others, it has led to death, as is the case of the string of taxi medallion drivers who killed themselves in NYC.² Therefore, I believe we should talk about it, expose it, create art about it, and organize against aggressive collection practices and policies in our communities as often as possible. Maybe these actions will change the system. At minimum, perhaps we will release

[1] "Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Institutions, 1965–2016," March 31–July 22, 2018, The Museum of Modern Art.

Further reading:

[2] "Another Taxi Driver in Debt Takes His Life. That's 5 in 5 Months." By Nikita Stewart and Luis Ferré-Sadurní, *The New York Times*, May 27, 2018.

the stress we hold in our bodies because of the debts we are constantly managing. Liberation from debt begins in the body because that is the place capitalism seeks to separate us from ourselves and each other, hoping that we will reconnect with ourselves and each other by way of consumerism instead.

I am a queer Black woman. I am politically interested in the topic of debt on all scales—from personal to political debt. I define debt specifically in terms of economics. I also define debt more broadly. It is a liminal space of owing between two parties where one wields a tremendous amount of colonial power over the other. Therefore, to me, debt is profoundly personal and inherently political. I am a first-generation college graduate who received a formal education at private, predominantly white institutions. I carry a tremendous amount of educational debt: \$260,284.33 in federal student loans in addition to an ever-accruing high interest loan in the amount of \$14,000 to Sallie Mae. These financial burdens are a part of my daily life and impact every decision I make. As a result, I am constantly thinking about how systems of owing impact the lives of the most marginalized. As a writer, I utilize my craft as a tool to make the invisible nature of oppressive networks of power visible. My education, my interests, my experiences have yet to shield me from the economic vulnerabilities and disparities that continue to exist in the daily lives of Black Americans. How I ended up with a warrant is similar to the way thousands of people³ across the United States also end up

Further reading:

[3] "Some U.S. borrowers jailed over civil debts, ACLU report shows." By Kevin McCoy. *USA Today*. Feb 21, 2018.

with warrants. I have a bill. I don't pay it. Then the government gets involved by escalating the matter and criminalizing the person who owes as a collection tactic. Since I think about and am constantly researching debt as a system of oppression, I intellectually know that the warrant I received was a scare tactic—but that knowledge doesn't make it any less scary.

In my case, I filed my taxes on time. I received a refund. Ninety days later, I received a letter stating that the federal government had overpaid me, in terms of my refund. This was fancy language for them making a mistake—as a result, they requested a portion of the refund back. It was laughable that they made the mistake and infuriating that it was my responsibility to get it back to them via a notice ninety days later. Of course, the money had already been spent. What happens next is what happens to so many marginalized people: the bill gets lost in the day-to-day chaos of our lives. Between the high cost of rent, food, and transportation in an increasingly gentrified Brooklyn, attending grad school, working part time as an adjunct professor in New Jersey, getting pregnant, and having a baby, this bill got lost in the shuffle and eventually I forgot about it.

Ironically, I received the warrant two years after the original notice, just as I was returning to work from my (unpaid) maternity leave. Luckily, I was able to pay it off with my first postpartum paycheck. Being the mother of an infant, it was better to sacrifice a full check of pay than to deal with courts and

penalties, and I wasn't certain if a civil warrant would show up on my driver's record. I delayed paying smaller bills and went without a few basic needs during that period until my next paycheck. I live in a predominantly Black working class and poor neighborhood. I couldn't help but look out my window at my street and at my neighbors and think: I will survive this moment, but what happens when people don't have resources to pay off debt in one lump sum? The reality is that most do not.

When the court systems get involved with debt collection, it escalates quickly. The collection process starts by sending a letter demanding payment and assessing additional penalties and interest. Normally, after multiple letters and taxpayer inaction, harsh collection tactics begin. Below are a few of the methods that may be used by the taxing authorities to collect unpaid taxes.

- **Tax Lien:** A tax lien is the government's claim on the taxpayer's property. The existence of the lien ensures that they get first rights to your property over other creditors.
- **Wage Garnishment:** The taxing authority will contact your employer and demand they withhold a certain percentage of your pay to cover unpaid taxes.
- **Bank Levy:** The tax authorities will contact your bank and demand a hold be put on the funds that are in the account and then seize the funds to cover the unpaid tax liability.
- **Property Seizure:** The tax authorities may seize assets such as your car, boat, house or

other asset of value that can be sold to cover the unpaid tax liability.

- **Jail time:** Incarceration is possible through loopholes in the criminal justice system. Depending on the circumstances, taxing authorities can have a taxpayer arrested and put in jail.

While according to most court systems the process of clearing these debts is straightforward and fair, the truth is that once people get locked into these court judgements, it takes years to free themselves from it. When you are already stretched thin economically, a debt judgement becomes a full-blown crisis.

In the United States of America, no one goes to jail for owing taxes, technically. Debtors' prisons were abolished by Congress in 1833. And yet we know that the poor and marginalized can go to jail because the penalization of the debt will overflow into their already vulnerable lives. It's estimated that more than one million consumers each year receive such letters threatening criminal prosecution and jail time if they do not pay up. But a review of company practices has documented that letters often falsely misrepresent the threat of prosecution as a means of coercing payments from unknowing consumer.⁴ While there are no debtor's prisons, there are still prisons. For those of us whose debt does not pull us into the criminal justice system, our cultural norms of individualism certainly guarantee that our debt will imprison us in our minds with thoughts of shame and personal failure.

Further reading:

[4] "Debtors' Prison in 21st-Century America." By Whitney Bennis and Blake Strode. *The Atlantic*. February 23, 2016.

I am not alone in the anxiety I experienced. In 2009, a spokesperson for the U.S. Internal Revenue Service estimated that 8.2 million Americans owed over \$83 billion in back taxes,⁵ penalties and interest (approximately \$10,000 per person). For Black and poor people already struggling to eat and pay rent or mortgages, back taxes are just one of the many government debts that drive them into financial crisis. In addition to the low-hanging fruit of government-specific debts (think traffic tickets, bail bonds, court fees and the like), the court system is often leveraged by aggressive debt collectors to encourage repayment of consumer

Further reading:
[5] "Back Taxes." Investopedia. www.investopedia.com/terms/b/back-taxes.asp



[LEFT] Collection of three images related to Jennings, MO by LittleT889. Sources (clockwise): Photo by Henry Mizuki, Photo by Flickr user, Paul Sableman, Photo by User:LittleT889. Accessed on Wikimedia Commons.

debt such as credit card debts, medical debts, and student loan debts.⁶ Then there are other debts, such as personal loans, cell phone bills, utility bills, bank overdraft charges, auto loans, payday loans. This is the short list.

In 2015, ProPublica released a startling report titled “The Color Of Debt.”⁷ The report was the product of an ongoing investigation into several debt collections agencies that were aggressively using the court systems to sue almost every resident in the predominantly Black city of Jennings, Missouri. Not only are residents in Jennings feeling the squeeze of low wages, along with often predatory loan agreements, but Black families are living out the impact of “generations of discrimination [which] have left [them] with grossly fewer resources to draw on when they come under financial pressure.” In Jennings, which is a small community, no one talked about the lawsuits. Even the mayor at the time, also a resident of Jennings, was being sued. The shame of debt and the generational inequality that many of these families face silenced them. Creditors also seized at least \$34 million from residents of St. Louis’ mostly Black neighborhoods through suits filed between 2008 and 2012, ProPublica’s analysis found.

In addition to adhering to federal laws, New York State has its own debt collection regulations. Court judgements are served with civil warrants and subpoenas requiring attendance at depositions. Failure to comply with a subpoena is punishable by contempt of court, and the court may issue a

Further reading:

[6] “Debt Collection Laws.” SmithMarco, P.C., 2014.

[7] “The Color of Debt: How Collection Suits Squeeze Black Neighborhoods.” By Paul Kiel and Annie Waldman, ProPublica, October 8, 2015.

warrant directing the sheriff to bring the individual to court.⁸ While New York has recently amended its debt collection regulations to offer more consumer protection, the allowed collection strategies still often escalate to court systems, which has profound impact on the daily lives of individuals, many of whom are already being squeezed by high rents, gentrification, and displacement in an increasingly expensive city like New York.

Think about the neighborhood of Bed-Stuy and communities with similar profiles. According to the “Economic Snapshot of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Neighborhood” report, Bedford-Stuyvesant has been a center of Black and African-American culture since the 1930s, when it emerged as the second-largest Black community in New York City.⁹ With the neighborhood rapidly changing due to gentrification, the long-time residents are not benefitting from the boom of real estate development in the neighborhood. Bed-Stuy, along with its bordering neighborhoods, Canarsie, Flatlands, and East New York, have the most one-to four-family homes in the borough with unpaid debt, including property taxes, water bills and other charges, according to the Center for NYC Neighborhoods.¹⁰ When you begin to trace the history of inequality and systemic discrimination in these neighborhoods, it becomes increasingly clear that “a history of redlining, blockbusting and predatory lending have created conditions where the homeowners [within these neighborhoods] have fewer assets and more expensive mortgages than white families in New York City’s other

Further reading:

[8] “A Pound of Flesh: The Criminalization of Private Debt.” American Civil Liberties Union, 2018.

[9] “An Economic Snapshot of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Neighborhood.” Office of the New York State Comptroller, September 2018.

[10] “Compounding Debt Race, Affordability, and NYC’s Tax Lien Sale.” Center for NYC Neighborhoods, November 1, 2016.



major homeowner areas like South Brooklyn and Staten Island.”¹¹ The numbers show that some neighborhoods are more likely to be targets for predatory practices, aggressive collection policies and subprime lending. It is no accident that some neighborhoods are more vulnerable than others—it is the direct result of poverty and systemic racism that has plagued these communities for decades.

Debt is more than an individual burden, it is a generational cycle that reveals the inequalities families face over time. It is also often the predictor of the inequalities families will face in the future. So what can we do about it? What decolonial practices should we dive into? What hope is there, if any?

[ABOVE]
Bed-Stuy. Photo by
Eli Duke. Accessed via
Wikimedia Commons,
originally posted to
Flickr.

Further reading:
[11] “Compounding
Debt: Race, Affordability,
and NYC’s Tax Lien Sale.”
Coalition for Affordable
Homes, 2014.

Can we abolish debt and its oppressiveness? It is important for community members, artists, writers, and organizers to gather around this topic. It is universal. It impacts all of our lives intersectionally. The power of Adrian Piper’s exhibit is not only that it creates space for dialogue, but that it creates space to call out complicity and oppression. Piper’s work operates as a witness and a warning—this itself creates much-needed resistance. The phrase “everything will be taken away” repeats itself throughout the exhibit. While this phrase is ominous and open to multiple interpretations, it is clear that Piper is addressing viewers with and without privilege to challenge ideas of permanence—or, as many older Black church saints utter, “This too shall pass.” According to Piper, “[The] Everything series¹² evolved from [her] need to cope with the loss of [her] illusions about the United States.” For Piper, seeing the illusions of race and equality in our daily lives allows us to see the forces operating behind the cultural practices we hold on to.

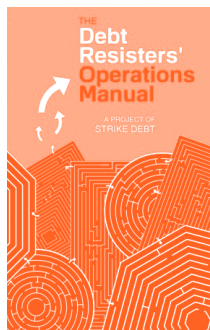
If we organize around debt we can create opportunities to see beyond illusions as well. Coming together and speaking out is one of the most important aspects of debt resistance. This is not a new practice. Many state and local communities offer debt clinics. These spaces focus on how individuals can be better debtors. They explain the legal entity of debt. They often connect individuals and families with financial advisors, along with other community resources

[12] “Adrian Piper.”
From “The Wall in
Our Heads: American
Artists and the Berlin
Wall,” curated by Paul
M. Farber. Haverford
College, 2015.

and programs. This is helpful and necessary, but it is only the beginning of organizing against debt oppression.

Guides like the *The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual*¹³ are critical reading for anyone in debt who needs not only personal strategies but a systemic view of how debt operates in our lives. This is information you will not find at a community debt clinic that is run by your local city or town office of finance. It covers, in detail, strategies, resources, and insider tips for dealing with some of the most common kinds of debt, including credit card debt, medical debt, student debt, and housing debt. It also contains tactics for navigating the pitfalls of personal bankruptcy, as well as information on how to be protected from credit reporting agencies, debt collectors, payday lenders, check-cashing outlets, rent-to-own stores, and more. Additional chapters cover tax debt, sovereign debt, the relationship between debt and climate, and an expanded vision for a movement of mass debt resistance.

Strike Debt¹⁴ is building a debt resistance movement. Strike Debt is an offshoot of the Occupy movement, and follows many of the principles that were adopted by Occupy participants from other non-hierarchical movements. In my survey of the landscape of organizing around debt, I believe Strike Debt has created a great foundation, and that there is room to expand the work. The work is universal but must also be intersectional. Engaging people of color, queer people, those who



[13] *The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual*. A Project of Strike Debt / Occupy Wall Street, September 2012.

[14] Strike Debt website: <http://strikedebt.org/>

are differently abled, those who are immigrants, those who are poor or working class, those who are undocumented and so on requires different strategies. This means we need diverse groups of organizers with innovative approaches to reach those who are all too often forgotten. Groups like *Decolonize This Place*,¹⁵ *New Economy Coalition*,¹⁶ *Ni Una Menos*,¹⁷ and *Chinatown Art Brigade*¹⁸ are all helpful examples on the possibilities of decolonial coalition work. Debt organizers can learn from these groups to reach for intersectional ways of operating in communities. The goal of organizing around debt is to first create a decolonial space—meaning that when talking about money, debt and race, human experience is the center of the conversation, not capitalism.

When I tell people I am interested in debt—in talking about it, writing about it, creating art about it, reading about it, etcetera, they often assume I am continually stressed in dealing with such a dense topic all the time. My experience is quite the opposite and this is why: capitalism seeks to disconnect us from our bodies through a violent process of dehumanization. According to capitalism, we are not people, we are numbers. We are laborers. We are cogs in an economic machine. Debt similarly creates ambiguous networks of relating. Debt, which begins between two parties, often explodes to include a multitude of third party entities, which displaces accountability and dehumanizes all parties involved. Therefore, it feels good to have conversations where we map the chain of interactions. This helps to remind us that

Decolonize This Place

[15] *Decolonize This Place* is a space that is action-oriented around indigenous struggle, black liberation, Free Palestine, global wage workers and degentrification. Facilitated by MTL+. Located at 55 Walker Street, New York. #decolonizethisplace
Decolonize This Place website: decolonizethisplace.org; “Land of the Lost: MTL Collective Talks with Jasbir Puar about decolonization.” *Artforum*, Summer 2018.

[16] *New Economy Coalition* website: neweconomy.net

[17] “Ni Una Menos.” [Wikipedia. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ni_una_menos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ni_una_menos)

[18] *Chinatown Art Brigade* website: chinatownartbrigade.org

we are human and often caught within economic systems that have already calculated the role we will play in the economy.

Whether you have \$100 dollars in debt or \$1 million dollars in debt, there are third parties who benefit from viewing us as accounts because they earn money from our late payments, interest, credit ratings, and the supposed moral failures of our inability to pay. The problem is that debt is not a moral issue—it is an economic one at best and a colonial one at worst. The process of dehumanization where you and I become credit report numbers to be tallied is the same market dehumanization that carried Africans to the Americas as enslaved property; that justified the genocide of Indigenous people who already lived in America. When people become tallied within a market place, ethnic cleansing, genocide and crimes against humanity are not far behind.

We are humans, not robots, numbers, or simply laborers. Our bodies want freedom. We become a part of the economy we live under whether we choose to or not. Liberation is at the root of our deepest desires. The act of talking about debt constantly allows me to feel my emotions about the matter, express those feelings, engage with community, and reconnect with myself and others. Talking about it removes me from the silos of isolation and shame that debt creates through its vastly displaced networks.

Talking about debt is cathartic. Organizing against debt is cathartic. Coming together and speaking out is pleasurable. While I can't promise that we will burn down all the systems of oppression, I can assure you that a guided conversation with a skilled facilitator or organizer or artist can be life-changing—even, dare I say, liberating. We must seek out decolonial practices in organizing around debt. We must dream beyond what other organizers have dreamt of. We must leverage existing resources and tap into new economies. We must recognize that the policies and practices that support debt must be organized against. All of this begins by coming together and speaking out. This will save our lives.

Aisha “Li” Cousins is a gender fluid, black, atheist of Antiguan and Afro-American descent. Cousins' writing credits include this article, the play for *Brer Rabbit the Opera: a Funky Meditation on Gentrification* written in collaboration with Greg Tate, and a blog called *Dear MLK*. S/he is currently reading *Barracoon* by Zora Neale Hurston.



Photo credit: Tiffany Smith for 2017 Black Love Fest. blacklovest.org/portraits

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Photo credit: Ian Douglas

Benedict Nguyen is a writer, dancer, and arts advocate currently based in the South Bronx, NY. They currently serve as an administrator for Donna Uchizono and Jennifer Monson. A member of the National Center for Choreography's year-long laboratory on dance writing, Benedict has written for the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Critical Correspondence*, and *In Dance*. They've performed with Monstah Black in *Hyperbolic! (The Last Spectacle)*, among other projects. Their fiction writing has been supported by an AWP Writer to Writer Mentorship. @bennybooboo_



Meropi Peponides is a theater maker, artistic producer/dramaturg, podcast producer and co-founder of Radical Evolution. She most recently co-created *Songs About Trains*, *The Corrido of the San Patricios* and *Loving and Loving* with Radical Evolution, and produced *Fairview* and *Is God Is at Soho Rep*. Her work explores cross-cultural affinity and the mixed race experience in the 21st Century. BA, UCLA, MFA, Columbia University (Dean's Fellow). She also organizes with Artists Co-Creating Real Equity (ACRE).



Jamara Wakefield is a Black queer writer and creative who writes for publication and stage. She is the author of *The Black Student's Guide to College Resistance Volume 1: Student Loan Debt*. It is a manual that addresses the colonial history of the American Higher Education system and proposes resistance strategies for students regarding debt and institutional power. Her performance work is cross genre, combining music, poetry, theater, music and improvisation to create public performance. Her play *The Great Dismal Swamp* was a semifinalist for the Leslie Scalapino Award for Innovative Women writers. She currently has art and culture bylines for *Shondaland*, *Playboy*, *Broadway Black*, *The Independent*, *Bitch Magazine* and *Broadway World*. Her poems appear in *The Felt and Deluge*. She graduated from The New School for Public Engagement with a Bachelors of Arts from the Riggio Writing and Democracy Honors program. She earned a Master's of Arts degree in Performance Studies from NYU's Tisch School. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from the Pratt Institute Writing & Activism program.



DeeArah Wright is an artist, educator, strategist, and mover based in Brooklyn, NY. She has facilitated opportunities for people of all ages to self-empower and to work together for collaborative greatness. DeeArah is the former Co-Director of JACK—an Obie-winning space with a mission to fuel experiments in art and activism. In 2010, she founded Gather Brooklyn, which has powered community engagement through: marketplaces, partnerships, community-space management, youth arts programming, and strategic consultation. In 2014, she was the Community Liaison for Creative Time and Weeksville Heritage Center's *funkgodjazz&medicine: Black Radical Brooklyn*. She has further supported artists' development and community engagement practice through organizations such as The Laundromat Project, The Field, and Urban Bush Women. DeeArah's current adventures include cooperative initiatives, revolutionary educational framework, and writing. DeeArah holds a BA from University of Maryland at College Park in Cultural Anthropology and Literature of the African Diaspora, and she completed graduate-level coursework in Dance and Community Development at NYU's Gallatin School for Individualized Study. Her continuing professional development reflects investment in practices such as active listening, experiential learning, and truth-telling.



Essays by **DeeArah Wright**
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