



Material Resistance: Social Justice and Empowerment Narratives Told Through Cloth

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In *Material Resistance: Social Justice and Empowerment Narratives Told Through Cloth*, a fashion and textile art exhibition mounted physically at an academic institution in November 2022 and made digitally available to the public shortly thereafter, we invited visitors to explore a multiplicity of cultures, lived experiences, ways of making, and artistry through a critical lens that directly challenges the surplus of injustices that continually have a stronghold on our society. Some of the injustices confronted through the art in the show included gun violence, women's rights, hate crimes, LGBTQIA+ rights, dispossession, community erasure, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Five artists and three community-focused organizations were featured in the exhibition, all of which contributed in unique, yet related ways that prioritize the centering of identities and lived experiences that have historically been marginalized, especially within the museum space (Lonetree, 2012; Matthews & Reddy-Best, 2022).

We were guided by the following questions in our curatorial approach: (1) How might textile art and fashion invoke social change by bringing awareness to social justice issues, specifically within the museum gallery space? (2) What critical dialogues concerning social justice can the collaboration between textile and clothing artists, curators, and community organizations implore? (3) In what ways can exhibit curation aim to be executed in the most socially responsible ways that prioritize the voices of artists, the community, and those who are marginalized?

In efforts to center social justice within our overall curatorial practice, we drew upon several approaches including post-critical museology, intersectionality, and self-determination. We implemented tenants of these approaches while considering thematic inclusion, artist collaboration and object selection, in-gallery displays, community engagement initiatives, and all label writing. Post-critical museology as an approach embraces "visitor-centered and socially responsive" ways of curation that "respond to important community issues through public participation and dialogue with art museum collections...and the local community" (Kletchka, 2018, p. 300). We drew upon this approach through our curatorial selection and multiple community engagement initiatives. People who engage with intersectionality theory argue that identities should be reflected upon as interactive of one other rather than isolated (Crenshaw, 1991). That is, for one to comprehend their lived experience more copiously, they must consider the ways in which their many identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, age) intersect and interact with one another (Crenshaw, 1991). We considered this when exploring how the many stories of injustice being told throughout the exhibition were both individualistic and highly related in

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nature. Finally, self-determination is an Indigenous-centered, decolonial approach which we adopt within our museum practice that requires curators to work collaboratively with the communities they are representing to take on a facilitatory role to center the communities' voice, needs, and representation (Lonetree, 2012).

The five artists and three community organizations that we collaborated with were as follows: Agnes Yellow Bear, Dr. Tameka Ellington, Kate Sekules, Sylvia Hernandez, Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi, LGBTQ+ Rights Ghana, Drama Queens Ghana, and the Social Justice Sewing Academy (SJSA). Some of the fashions and textile art in the show included a jingle dress, custom garments/art, upcycled patchwork, a ribbon skirt, art quilts, community quilts, and videography.¹ An essential initiative within our curatorial approach was to center the decolonization and emptying of the museum by keeping the objects included within the exhibition outside of museum storage spaces (Lonetree, 2012). In *Material Resistance*, we made sure to not request any acquisitions of the art on display due to knowing that the art already lives outside of the museum and inside the community. We did honor one request from an artist featured in the show to acquire their work as a decision to support the artist. All other objects have already been or will soon be repatriated to the artist and/or community organization in which they were created.

As curators, we stayed in constant communication with the artists as to develop a genuine collaborative and transparent relationship (Lonetree, 2012; Hollows, 2019; Vänskä, 2017). One of the main and most apparent ways that we collaborated with the artists was through all of the label copy for the exhibition, which was developed by drawing upon a revised version of member checks (Birt et al., 2016). That is, instead of initially writing the label copy ourselves as the curators (which is common practice in the museum) and then sending it to the artists for their review, edits, and approval, we gave the artist full autonomy to write their own label copy in the form of artist statements. Then, we made sure to not make edits to the statements in efforts to keep them as authentic as possible when read by visitors and to assure that the voices of the artists were prioritized (Kletchka, 2018; Kletchka et al., 2020; Lonetree, 2012). The artists' statements were also included in the physical exhibition catalogs, which were free upon entry into the gallery space. Label text is vital to any exhibition as it contributes to "the viewer's experience and understanding of the subject" and "influence[s] the ways such creative work is perceived and used to teach...these factors contribute to the ways in which a story is told through fashion curation and display" (Green et al., 2021, p. 11). The conscious decision to abandon traditional approaches to label text where the curators are the interpreters of the objects on display and to instead feature the voices of the artists themselves is self-determination actualized (Lonetree, 2012).

Additionally, we invited all artists and organizations to create and send us an audio recording of them speaking about their artwork featured in the exhibition. In efforts to introduce the exhibition to audiences beyond the walls of the museum (Jenss, 2019) we created a [digital](#)

¹ A digital version of the exhibition, which includes images of the installation inside the gallery, artist bios, and all label text can be found at the following link: <https://sway.office.com/SJIOw0JbWkfSRtU3?ref=Link>

[version](#) using the largely accessible and easy-to-use platform Microsoft Sway. In addition to detail images of the installation, the digital platform also features [a 3-D, interactive experience of the exhibition space via Matterport technology](#), a video recording of the opening reception, videos and photos of the SJSA community engaged workshop, and some behind the scenes photos and videos of the curatorial process.

The nexus of this exhibition was to engage with community in critical dialogue about social justice issues. Considering this, we included multiple community outreach programs as part of the exhibition—three being facilitated workshops held in Accra, Ghana, and then a fourth workshop that was held on campus, all free and open to the public. In Accra, one curator from our team facilitated a community art project where LGBTQ+ people and allies created art that focused on humanity, citizenship, and celebration of personhood on 32 white handkerchiefs. The art was featured in the exhibition. The on-campus workshop was facilitated the by SJSA and included an opening discussion on social inequities, self-reflection, and art-ivism. Then, 24 community members participated in the first steps of the making of a university-specific quilt by making quilt blocks of social injustices that they feel strongly about. The quilt it set to be completed in 2024 and it will be put on display on campus, and then returned back to SJSA to be included in their other quilts that are displayed across the U.S.

As facilitator-curators of this exhibition, all of the ways in which we made space for self-determination of the artist and communities allowed for their voices to be heard in the ways that they wanted and needed. This form of collaboration mitigates the possible misinterpretations and bias structures inherent in typical museum practice. We invite curators, museums, and scholars alike who aim to center the essential need of social justice in their work to put emphasis on collaboration and prioritization of the voices of the artists and designers that they work with. We believe that this approach allows for more personal engagement between community, artist, curator, and museum visitor. As facilitator-curators of the community events organized around the exhibit, we encouraged the local community to participate in the action of social justice and to think critically about art and stories of social justice work. In addition to the workshops, we facilitated critical dialogue via educational gallery tours and inviting the artists to give talks about their artistic methodologies and lived experience. Our intersectional and critical-museology approach sparks a range of dire dialogues that arguably a simple gallery exhibit excluding these elements would not. Additionally, as temporary caretakers (conservators) of the works in the exhibit, we focused on the continuing life of each piece through our respect and reciprocity to the communities and artists gracious enough to loan us their work. We emphasize the importance of art and other objects on display within museums and galleries to be repatriated to or remain within the communities in which they were created. This generates life and the potential for further critical discussion to reach beyond museum galleries and storage spaces. We hope to serve as an example and an inspiration for these approaches as we aim to support those who are too often disenfranchised, especially within the museum.

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