The Complexities of Blackness in the Museum

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THESIS

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Kudiratu Amoke Yusuff, and all the women who continue to push me.

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SUMMARY

This thesis seeks to discuss Blackness and its social complexities in the art museums in the United States. It looks closely at the changing dynamics following the demands for equity and inclusion in the museum. It opens a dialogue on Blackness in the social imaginary, towards exposing and contextualizing current ideologies about Blackness in the history of the United States and the museum. Consequently, making a case to destabilize ideologies about Blackness, to then re-theorize and create new meanings for Blackness in the social imaginary and consequentially in the museum. It makes central the desire to shift museums from their representational practice into the exploration of Blackness through radical visibility.

This paper also seeks to hold art museums accountable to their roles as purveyors of cultural production and educators. It is urging them to be proactive in shifting the socialized perception of Blackness through the art in their exhibition spaces. It argues that visibility is not enough to reclaim and reimagine Blackness in the museum. Instead, it proposes the uses of counter storytelling to create new meaning and dialogue surrounding Blackness— to reimagining and reshape institutional practice to see Blackness and its complexities in visual media radically.

Utilizing two exhibitions, *Harlem on My Mind* (1969) exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Kevin Beasley's *A View of a Landscape* (2019) exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art as a case study. As both exhibitions are timely and distinct as they present an opportunity to excavate the role of exhibition practice that employs counter storytelling and radical visibility in the presentation of the intersections of Blackness and history.

I. INTRODUCTION

"You have to get them while they are young!" an older white woman said to me as she walked into the booth that I was overseeing at the Chicago Art Expo in 2019. She was noticeably excited from being able to purchase a Jordan Casteel print (Figure1), which sold out in the first two hours of online release. I, however, was instantly propelled into a space of deep thought and panic. While feigning interest in her excitement, I contemplated why this woman felt so comfortable uttering this statement to me.

At this moment, I wondered if Casteel, who works exclusively in Black figuration and is very adamant about making work to help people radically see Blackness, would approve of her purchase. I wondered about the exhibitions this woman might have seen where works by Casteel were on view. I wondered about the institutions and the kind of messages that were being projected about Casteel's work. I continue to question the abnormalities and nuances of her statement because of its layered meaning. Like microaggressions, this statement was loaded with meanings that cannot be read on the surface.

I am very aware of the normalcy this statement carries at an art fair where everything on view is for sale, but regardless, I felt distressed by it as a Black person who is keenly aware of the implications of words. The reality is that although this moment might be insignificant to this woman and many others, it signifies to me that this woman could commodify Blackness while simultaneously rendering it invisible. The issue here is not with the fact that this woman is a collector of Black art but with the mechanisms and systems that have also allowed Black bodies to continue to be commodified and sold.

Imagine for a moment if this woman declared her statement at a slave auction. The parallel is not lost, as there is a want to buy artwork to yield significant monetary value later. Her

statement is troublesome because it suggests that this woman was not participating as an art collector for the sake of supporting a Black artist, sharing in dialogue about Blackness, or understanding the significance of the work. Instead, the purchase was to serve as an investment, something to yield dividends later. While this is not unfamiliar to the collecting practices inherent to the art world, I wonder about the implications of commodifying Blackness- specifically Black art—in this manner.

It would seem that the rules that once applied to the Atlantic slave trade for capitalistic ventures continue to exist in the art world. Price tags mark an object's value, which in turn signifies the value of the creator. Objects, and thus their creator, also remain open to negotiation, where they can be exploited in the resale market, which remains borderless. It would seem as though nothing has changed in the social imaginary when it comes to Blackness. Though the viewing and learning process in the galleries making sales at art fairs differ from the museum, there is a direct linkage in their collecting practices. In practice, the art museum— through their collecting and display practices— creates and generates intrigue upon what people should buy and collect from galleries at art fairs. What then does this mean for Blackness and the growing demands to collect and visualize it in the art museum? What does this mean for Blackness, and the way it can and has been imagined in the art museum?

Blackness — specifically, the Blackness that I seek to address in this paper is rooted in the Black experience in the United States. Blackness is indicative of every day lived experiences of Black people in this country. Blackness delineates systems of oppression, conditioning, and ongoing survival in the aftermath of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is an active form of survival despite economic and political violence and corporeal degradation. Nevertheless, Blackness is rooted in the preservation of identity, culture, and tradition. It has many

intersections that are continually changing with time and history. Blackness remains complex because its depths and vastness have yet to be realized. Blackness, however vast, also finds itself in the visual productions that come out of Black communities to expose the realities in the margin. It is a resistive practice that shows up in the works of many Black artists who seek to move beyond body politics and the dynamic of oppression, rendering visible the realities of Blackness that are often untold or unseen. What could it mean to view Blackness as alive and constantly changing in the art museum?

In the last decade, there has been a noticeable shift in the attempt to connect and engage with Blackness in the American art museum. This shift can be attributed to the growing demand for the restructuring/dismantling of spaces that have long since been inaccessible to those belonging to what authors Fred Moten and Stefano Harney define as the "undercommons."

> If you want to know what the undercommons wants, what Moten and Harney want, what black people, indigenous peoples, queers and poor people want, what we (the 'we' who cohabit in the space of the undercommons) want, it is this – we cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgement generated by the very system that denies a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls (Harney and Moten 2013, 6).

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney critique the systems and put forward the demands of the undercommons, which is for a complete shift in institutional practice that has excluded the likes of minorities. Moten and Harney are concerned with the complete dismantling of systems to create a new version that is inclusive of all the members of the undercommons. While I share a similar sentiment, I am, however, concerned with the work that is possible now. The ongoing work that will destabilize, create new and ever-changing versions of the system that is inclusive of all members of the undercommons. Instead of discarding the institution entirely, I imagine a

conceivable future through a reimagination of the possibilities within the current system to get closer to better and ever-evolving institutions.

Addressing the question posed by Moten and Harney as to what the undercommons want, this paper seeks to address and redress Blackness in the wake of growing tension and demands for representation and inclusion in the art museums in the United States. *New York Times* art writer Randy Kennedy alluded to the tension between the art museum and the undercommons in his article, *Black Artist and the March into the Museum,*

> […] after decades of spotty acquisitions, undernourished scholarship, and token exhibitions, American museums are rewriting the history of 20th-century art to include Black artists in a more visible and meaningful way than ever before, playing historical catch-up at full tilt, followed by collectors who are rushing to find the most significant works before they are out of reach […] The shift is part of a broader revolution underway in museums and academia to move the canon past a narrow, Eurocentric, predominantly male version of Modernism, bringing in work from around the world and more work by women (Kennedy 2015).

Museums are frantically trying to address these historical pitfalls and are struggling to catch-up on the changing values and demands of the American society. There is a question as to whether museums are genuinely interested in institutional reform or are jumping on the bandwagon as a show of good faith. Further, there is no denying the potential monetary gain drawn from these previously ignored audiences. Cornering new trends in the art market promises heightened attendance, as well as new donors and trustees. These factors make the museum's altruism all the more suspicious. In any case, one might say the push for acquisitions is a viable opportunity for the museum to engage with Blackness in the United States.

Graham Black writes in *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement,* about the growing pressure museums are facing to broaden access to their collections, their audience, and develop strong community ties beyond their usual white middle

class. Contributing to this pressure is, in part, a "[…] response to a legislative framework in areas such as race relations, equal opportunities, and disability discrimination" (Black 2005, 45). Black alludes to the shift occurring with community expectation as several museums attempts to restructure and to rectify and atone for a history of inequity and silence in their institutions. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) also encourages museums to center "diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion in all aspects of museum structure and programming [as they] are vital to the future viability, relevance, and sustainability of museums" (American Alliance of Museum, n.d.). AAM's topical directives point to the fear of museums becoming obsolete institutions should they fail to take up this ambiguous yet all-encompassing charge.

It appears to me that these recommendations are vague, short-sighted, and may not contribute to any lasting institutional change as an all-encompassing statement like this could not possibly cover all of the structural issues with the museum. Nevertheless, in a show of good faith, many museums that thrive on the engagement and collaboration of people are already heading to the hallowed call to make diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion an essential cornerstone of their institution's mission and vision.

Few museums are readjusting their collection practices to make room for Blackness in their institution. In 2018, the Baltimore Museum of Art sold artworks by Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Franz Kline to make way for pieces by contemporary artists of color and women (McCauley, 2018). The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art also announced in 2019 its decision to deaccession a Rothko painting that hadn't been on view since 2002 to fulfill the museum's primary goal to broadly diversify its collection, enhance its contemporary holdings and address art historical gaps (SFMOMA 2019). In 2014, the Whitney Museum of American

Art, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Dallas Museum of Art, and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, MO. have hosted solo exhibitions devoted to underrecognized Black artists. Within the last two years, the Metropolitan Museum has acquired a major collection of work by Black Southern artists, and the Museum of Modern Art has hired a curator, Darby English, whose mission is to help fill the wide gaps in its African American holdings and exhibitions (Kennedy 2015). While this is all very attractive and propels these museums into the space of visibility, the question is whether this visibility is temporary for Blackness. These institutions hold exhibitions and make a show of their strides to represent and include Blackness into the canonical conversation but, do they genuinely understand Blackness, and are they doing the work to help their visitor truly grasp its complexities?

The art world has existed within a set of rigid values and rules constructed before the attempted inclusion of Blackness. Is it even possible to contend with the commodification of Blackness and yet create room for learning and radical visibility? Returning to the anecdote about the woman at the Expo, my intention is not to villainize this woman but to make central something so lodged in the subconscious. Even if there was probably no harm meant in the statement, “you have to get them while they are young,” its implications are resounding, —particularly for Black artist— and I am uncertain about how to prevent harm perpetuated by the market. However, I am sure that we cannot look at Blackness through the same lens in which whiteness and the museum have always existed.

The rules and systems against Blackness have been constructed in the preservation of the white idealization and othering of Blackness. The way Blackness arrives in its known predicament can be traced back to the inception of chattel slavery and the subsequent domination

and dehumanization of Black bodies for commodity. M Shawn Copeland surmises that “the dynamics of domination, the conquered peoples of the ‘New World’ and enslaved peoples of Africa were forced into ‘the matrix slot of Otherness’—made into the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational human Other” (Copeland 2013, 625–626).

If Blackness exists in the category of the Other, the invisibility of Blackness is then sealed and almost unchangeable even when efforts are made to oppose and or counter. Blackness seems to evade discussion and understanding because of societal refusal and heightened discomfort when the topic is raised. George Yancy also explores Black invisibility and otherness, suggesting that

> [...]the Black is trapped, always already ontologically closed. In each case, the Black is held captive by the totalizing power of whiteness. When the Black speaks or does not speak, such behavior has been codified in the white imaginary. To be silent ‘confirms’ passivity and docility. To speak, to want to be heard, "confirms" brazen contempt and Black rage (Yancy 2005, 227).

How then do we detach the bindings that prevents Blackness from radical visibility? Radical visibility is the act of seeing beyond the outer layers, beyond the constructions and ascriptions of what Blackness can and should be. Radical visibility for Blackness in the museum follows this want to see Blackness reimagined, re-casted and reclaimed in the social imaginary. To radically see Blackness would mean an active practice in visuality outside of the white gaze, outside of reasoning inherent to the constructions of what is expected to be Black. Radical visibility allows Blackness to be situated outside of socialized bindings and encourages a deeper understanding of its interiorities. How then does the art museum tackle radical visibility for Blackness in a way that reimagines and reclaims Blackness in the social imaginary?

Blackness in the United States[1] (and on the global front) is complicated by a history of "Black degradation." Paula Giddings discusses this Black degradation as a construction created in the makings of America to distinguish the likes of the African brought to the Americas for profit for the Englishmen, and women meant to control them (Giddings 1984, 31). The complexities of this relationship continue to permeate all facets of society, including, museums as institutions of "culture." Whatever we see in the museum today is a byproduct of this history of segregation, exclusion, and denaturing of Blackness. Whether a museum is attempting to now correct narratives or give prominence to the significance of Blackness at their institution, these complexities do not just vanish. They do not vanish into the walls of the museum, and most importantly, they do not vanish in the experiences of visitors. How then does the museum provide entry points into the interiorities of Blackness? How can Blackness exist in the art museum uncomplicated by politics and social implications? Can institutions built on histories of otherness, exclusion, and the exploitation of minority bodies ever truly be a space where Blackness can exist?

In the preservation of whiteness, Blackness struggles for citizenship and to exist beyond these ascribed identifications. George J. Sefa Dei also discusses the polarity of Blackness and whiteness, signifying that through the "[…]equation of Blackness with inferiority, criminality, and deviance was intended to position White[ness] as superior, innocent, civilized, legal, rational, pure and pristine" (Sefa Dei 2017, 44). To recoil from the implications of this construction would mean a departure from these restrictions and imaginary. Bridget Cook concludes in her book *Exhibiting Blackness* that, "[…]as long as Black people are interpreted as

[1] Although, my address of the museum focuses on the United States relationship to Blackness. My research and standpoint also include non-US perspectives.

inferior, the art they make will also be so viewed" in the same manner (Cooks 2004, 157). What will it take to change the socialized preconception of Blackness in the art museum?

To illuminate and discuss the reimagination of Blackness, I pull from the writings of theologian M Shawn Copeland regarding the invention and othering of Blackness through the use of brute force and terror. Philosopher George Yancy also explores the invisibility, othering and silencing of Blackness. Indicating that Blackness is held captive by the powers of whiteness because it is often engaged with through the ascribed lens of eurocentrism. To decentralize this lens, I also utilized the writing by Pierce C. Hintzen to discuss the mythologies surrounding Blackness to begin rethinking and informing the future of Blackness. George Sefa Dei's work on anti-racist research and approach to education is also instrumental as I begin to retheorize Blackness in the museum away from the western equation of Blackness and its polarity with whiteness. Thinking through how we begin to shift the ideologies and interiorities of Blackness from the dynamics of good and evil, I also utilize Cecil Foster's book, *Blackness and Modernity*, to begin to construct new way of seeing and imagining Blackness by way of adjusting and overhauling the very mechanism used to create meaning and ideologies to then give new meaning to Black and Blackness.

A. Methodology

There is a slow shift occurring in the museum world in the discussion of Blackness —both in its representation and collection —but there is very little dialogue on changing the popular discourse on Blackness. Nevertheless, the question of real institutional change on Blackness has yet to take root. I argue here that visibility is not enough to reclaim and reimagine Blackness in the museum. I propose the use of Critical Race Theory to create new meaning and discourse surrounding Blackness and its position in the museum. I aim to theorize how museums

can reimagine and reshape their institutions to help historically marginalized groups and current visitors to these institutions radically see Blackness and its complexities in visual media.

In my first section, I acknowledge the fluidity and differing views on Blackness through theoretical frameworks. Through these theoretical underpinning, I deduce the meaning of Blackness as it will be relevant in my later address on museums exhibiting Blackness. In the second section, I will open a dialogue on Blackness in the social imaginary, towards exposing and contextualizing current ideologies about Blackness in this country's history and in the museum. I will then make a case for destabilizing these ideologies about Blackness, to re-theorize and create new meanings for Blackness in the social imaginary and consequentially in the museum. Making central the desire to shift museums from representational practice into the exploration of the interiorities of Blackness through radical visibility. I employ the use of counter storytelling as proposed by Critical Race Theorist Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso. In their writing, *Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research*, Solórzano and Yosso affirm their belief in counter storytelling as a tool for destabilizing the master's narrative and exposing the realities of those in the margins of society. Solórzano and Yosso proposed applying counter storytelling to educational methodologies to challenge popular discourse in education and provide avenues for reclaiming the popular discourse through storytelling.

Much like educational institutions, art museums also have a pedagogical responsibility to their publics and could benefit from the frameworks outlined by Solórzano and Yosso as they begin to shift practice to become more inclusive. I propose that museums can employ counter storytelling toward educating their publics and connecting them to stories connective of their realities and those in the margins. I examine how counter storytelling can be useful in exhibition

practice by adopting the four functions for evaluation that Solórzano and Yosso outlined — I will address this later in detail. Based on these functions, I propose the following as guidelines to evaluate the successes of exhibitions in their abilities to delve deep into the realities of Blackness and its interiorities.

A) How did this exhibition foster communities in the margins?
B) Did this exhibition challenge belief systems and knowledge about Blackness?
C) Was this exhibition connective? Beyond the margins

In my case studies, I utilize this modified counter storytelling as a framework, focusing specifically on exhibition practice and display techniques to explore presentation and dialogue about the radical visibility of Blackness in the museum. I will analyze these exhibitions to gauge whether the exhibitions challenge belief systems and provide avenues into the realities of Blackness. I will focus on two specific exhibitions to discuss the areas of success and weakness in addressing and exposing the interiorities of Blackness and the Black experience. First, I will look at the *Harlem on My Mind* (1969) exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to explore errors and speculate on the impact the exhibition could have had if it employed counter storytelling in its attempt to represent the Harlem community. Then I will look at Kevin Beasley's *A View of a Landscape* (2019) exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art as an opportunity to excavate the role of exhibition practice that employs, counter storytelling and radical visibility in the presentation of the intersections of Blackness and history. Finally speculating on the future of the museum and the radical visibility of Blackness through counter storytelling to create new language for the understanding and representation of Blackness in the museum.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Blackness? What does it mean to see and understand Blackness? The complexities and intersection of Blackness transcend what meets the eye, so how can museums help us see Blackness if it is intangible? Blackness is complicated by a history of human degradation, and erosion of humanity and it is no surprise that these complications also invade the museum institution. How can the museum participate in the reimagination of Blackness?

Museums like many institutions are not immune to the implications of the social system and often they reflect and perpetuate some of the fundamental issues with the ways we see and engage with Blackness. To understand the place of Blackness in the museum, especially in the United States, it is imperative that we understand the perception of Blackness in this country and consequentially confront the way we remember and negotiate history. If the museum is adamant about the representation and inclusion of Black people within its walls, we must interrogate this relationship as it will inform the way we choose to negotiate Blackness in and out of the museum.

To theorize and retheorize Blackness, its visuality and understanding in the social imaginary, I utilized Philosopher George Yancy's writing in *Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body and* theologian M. Shawn Copeland's writing in *Blackness Past, Blackness Future—and Theology* to discuss the othering, captivity and invisibility of Blackness. George J. Sefa Dei in *Reframing Blackness and Black Solidarities through Anti-Colonial and Decolonial Prisms* to discuss the polarity of Blackness to whiteness, identity, superiority, civility and the struggle for citizenship. To retheorize Blackness and its possible future I utilized the writing by Pierce C. Hintzen, *Diaspora, Globalization and The Politics of Identity*, George Sefa Dei and Cecil

Foster's book, *Blackness and Modernity* on how to begin to shift ideologies and the ways meaning is derived to finally decentralizing the myths surrounding Blackness and its docility.

Returning to the museum, Anthropologist Anthony Shelton discusses the role of museums and their positionality as disseminators of "truths" as it relates to the nation's shared histories:

> History is compounded through the articulation of structures of events that orchestrate causal relations between different conditions, actions, and mentalities to create explanatory frameworks of the past. These frameworks exist as distinct event structures, which are sorted and rationalized to constitute national, minority, or universal histories, each legitimated by supposed truth criteria which impute it conviction and ensure it reproduction and dissemination through museums, galleries, archives, prints, electronic media and the educational system (Shelton 2013, 9).

Shelton emphasizes the role of the museum in the maintenance of frameworks that encourages homogeny in history and indirectly excludes narratives that counter this standardization. Blackness is omitted in the truths and exists outside of history and the national identity of this country. The museum's guilt in the participation and construction of this falsehood cannot be ignored as the museum shifts gear as it professes a want for inclusivity.

Bridget Cooks discussion and critique of exhibition practices regarding African American art in museums highlight two specific methodologies museums often use to curate African American art. First is the anthropological approach, which tends to either elevate whiteness as the norm while casting Blackness in the role of the other. The other, which Cook calls the corrective narrative that is attempting to present the works of "significant and overlooked African American Artist to a mainstream audience" (Cooks 2004, 1). The issues with this practice, even though these museums are playing catch up in the representation of Blackness, museums are also presenting Blackness to their audience in a way that maintains or further diminished the positionality of Blackness in the mainstream. This practice casts museums in the

role of discovery, as though Black artists have not been practicing and creating in their communities. Blackness is not lost and is not a thing to be discovered, especially not by the museum—the role of the art museum is in the modification of its institutional practice to radically visualize Blackness.

The history of this country points to direct opposition to the visibility of Blackness, and this paper convenes on the need to reclaim and carve out space where there is none. Understanding that structural issues, tracible to this country's origin, and relationship with Blackness affect the way we see Blackness. I utilize John Berger's writing *Ways of Seeing* in the deliberation of the act of seeing and how often our way of seeing is directly impaired by our learned world views. Berger signifies that everyone brings a codified understanding of the world to our viewing process (Berger 1981, 10). Museums in their edifying roles teach people how to see and understand ideas that are unfamiliar and or complex. In correlation, because the way we see and engage with Blackness is locked in a socialized way of seeing, it is pertinent that museums facilitate new and institutional ways of seeing and understanding.

Contributing to the debate on seeing and why it is crucial to retheorize our ways of seeing, I pull from Richard Powell's discussion on the "rhetoric of the body" in his book, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture*. Powell's discussion points to the relationality of the historical circumstances that have conditioned how we distinguish Black and white bodies. Powell disregards color-neutral claims to confront the harsh realities of the Black body and its belonging in the world. In confronting these realities, the complexities of Blackness are made visible and legitimized to counter omissions and social amnesia in history. If there is something fundamentally wrong in the way that we see, how do we unlearn, and most importantly, how can museums participate in this process?

Weary of the museum's ability to represent Blackness and not terrorize Black bodies, I adhere to Elizabeth Alexander's discussion about the public access and consumption of the Black body. Alexander illustrates in "*Can you be Black and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)* that chronicles of Black pain and suffering have been staged for public consumption and continues to traumatize Black bodies who are onlookers of said trauma. Alexander calls to question the way the museum intends to simultaneously create space for memory and while also think critically about how to reimagine and remake Blackness in the museum. Challenging the art museums to seek ways to protect Black bodies from constant traumatization and objectification as it attempts to carve out space for Blackness.

Borrowing from Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso's Critical Race Theory methodology for education research, I ponder on how and if museums could shift from a majoritarian practice of storytelling to include stories about Blackness through counter storytelling. Solórzano and Yosso outline the potential impact counter storytelling could have on communities as they create avenues for the learning and understanding of realities of those in the margins. Though Solórzano and Yosso's proposed functions for counter storytelling to be applied to educational methodologies, I believe museums as agents have an educational responsibility to their public. Employing counter storytelling to educate their public and connect them to stories that are connective of their realities and those in the margins. In my case study, I employ these functions as a way to evaluate and analyze *Harlem on My Mind* at the Metropolitan Art Museum in 1969 and *Kevin Beasley: A View of the Landscape* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2019.

III. WHAT IS BLACKNESS?

> *...Blackness and Whiteness have little to do ethically with the colour of the skin, and more with the "rights and privileges" of individuals who in their performances and behaviours are either good citizens or not. Blackness and Whiteness are thus ethical markers. They are not mere epistemological or ontological markers based solely on what is naturally good or evil and on the somatic or cultural. The good and evil on which they are based are, therefore, socially constructed – making Whiteness and Blackness ethical undertakings as well, but in a way that excludes skin colour, place of birth, culture, language, gender, sexuality, and so on, as primary construction materials.*
>
> - Cecil Foster, *Blackness and Modernity: The Colour of Humanity and the Quest for Freedom*

A. Theorizing Blackness

In order to explore Blackness in the museum, I will provide a nuanced understanding of what Blackness is. The way we have come to know and understand Blackness has been through the construction of a set of ideologies imposed by western hegemonic power. The way we understand Blackness is through the lens of whiteness. Blackness exists as the counterpoint to whiteness, to situate whiteness as superior, as supreme. Copeland surmises that it is essential to understand that "Blackness was invented not merely by brute force and terror but also by the terrifying force of philosophy" (2013, 634-635). It is a social invention, curated to restrict, brutalize, and maintain imaginaries and the polarization of the binaries of whiteness and Blackness. I seek modalities that upend these ideals to allow other versions of Blackness to exist in our social imaginary.

To give new meaning and to decenter the idea of Blackness from its relationality to skin color, I would like to reposition the understanding of Blackness as a signifier of human complexities and intersections. To destabilize the falsehoods enshrouding Blackness, the origins of the current positionality of Blackness must be examined. In the discussion of the politics of

identity, Pierce C. Hintzen theorizes the role of biologism in the construction of the mythologies of the race which in turn solidified the positionality of Blackness, writing:

> The biologism introduced by racial discourse by scientific racism came without the reputation of Africa as a source of blackness in the racially constructed discourse of origin. It also deepened the signification of blackness as the embodiment of the uncivilized. And this imaginary construction, black bodies are denied the capacity (understood as rationality and reason) for full belonging in the spaces of civilize modernity [...] The state and nation are markers of civilization. And blackness, understood as uncivilized, becomes ascribed to their constitutive outside. At the same time, blackness becomes the object of state regulation, control, and jurisdiction. Diasporic identity emerges in the contradiction of exclusion and inclusion that this implies. Blackness cannot be accommodated with in the national space because of its negotiation of civilization (Hintzen 2007, 252).

Suggesting that in the preservation of whiteness, Blackness struggles both for citizenship and to exist beyond these ascribed identifications. In its assigned role, Blackness is only allowed to be uncivilized, unruly, without decorum, managed, and regimented, all the while whiteness exists in opposition. Copeland also suggests that the preservation of white idealization depends on the othering of Blackness. Illuminating that through the restriction and relegation of Blackness to the "Other" category, Blackness – is misunderstood, and its interiorities are, in turn, made invisible and invalidated.

Linda Krumholz also adds that "Blackness has been used to signify many kinds of absence—the absence of light, of goodness and purity, of rationality. These definitions and others have informed racial ideologies of white superiority while also contributing to the larger erasures and absences of Black people from history and even from humanity" (Krumholz 2008, 267). Because of this invisibility, Blackness is then sealed and almost unchangeable even when efforts are made to counter this ill-conceived definition. Blackness seems to evade discussion and understanding because of societal refusal and heightened discomfort when the topic is raised. How then do we detach the bindings that prevent Blackness from radical visibility? To recoil

from the implications of this construction would mean a departure from these restrictions and fantasies about Blackness.

B. Retheorizing Blackness

Eager to carve out space and retheorize Blackness in opposition to its marginal placement and free it from the captivity of whiteness, George J. Sefa Dei proposes the decolonization of Blackness. Sefa Dei discusses Blackness through an anti-colonial framework that allows us to see and engage with Blackness outside of the conflicting gaze and projection of the white and Euro-colonial imagination. Sefa Dei writes, "[…]a critical knowledge of Blackness would demand a re-theorization of Black and African beyond physical places, Land and space, and offer a response to on-going colonialisms, as well as Euro-colonial constructions of modernity" (Sefa Dei, 45). Proposing the need for continuous work at restructuring and the creation of avenues for new meanings surrounding Blackness outside of the interpretations and frameworks that are known to Eurocentrism.

Cecil Foster postulates on the possibilities of constructing a new way to see and discuss Black and Blackness with the full awareness and recognition of its historical/ social positionality. To strip away current ideologies, Foster urges for the "[…] overhauling the very mechanisms for deriving meaning, which are the ideology and social consciousness" (Foster 2007, 15). Nicole Fleetwood also theorizes the role of visuality and performance in the production of Black subjecthood for the public sphere. Fleetwood addresses the circulation and nature of Blackness as:

> It is not rooted in a history, person, or thing, although it has many histories and many associations with people and things. Blackness fills in space between matter, between object and subject, between bodies, between looking and being looked upon. It fills in the void and is the void. Through its circulation, Blackness attaches to bodies and narratives coded as such but it always exceeds these attachments (Fleetwood 2011, 6).

Fleetwood makes room for the understanding of Blackness outside the confines of singular reading of what Blackness is and can be. In this way, we must shift our understanding of Blackness from its position as something consumable and disposable into a mode for radical visibility.

To understand the complexities of Blackness is to look below the surface of visuality and visibility. George J. Sefa Dei states that "representation and images of Blackness and Black people are important to critique because they define not only how we are seen but also how we see ourselves, since we can internalize negative images"(35). Corrective narratives to reclaim Black imagery are not only significant for the social imaginary but also for Black bodies looking for themselves. Reevaluating the meaning of Blackness in the social imaginary humanizes Black bodies and, by association, teaches new modes of visualizing and radically seeing Blackness.

The museum not only exists within prevailing ideology and culture but is also a mechanism of cultural production. It is also a primary purveyor of representations and imagery of Blackness. This situates the museum in the ideal position to tackle this retheorizing of Blackness. But in its current state, is the museum capable of shifting ideologies about Blackness? It would require a remarkable institutional shift but, as Foster argues, "overhauling the very mechanisms for deriving meaning" is the only way to do this work (2007, 15). Although this seems like a massive undertaking for the museum, it is not impossible — as long as institutions refrain from simplifying and reducing Blackness to tropes and stereotypes.

What is Blackness, and what version of Blackness should museums be presenting to their public? Blackness is not just a marker of the Black body but a signifier of all things interior and beyond. Blackness exceeds visuality and should not be restricted to one singular reading. Fleetwood remarks that Blackness has many histories and many associations with people and

things; however, it is still not rooted in those things (Fleetwood 2011). Eviscerating the ideas that Blackness is stagnant and always identifiable— instead suggests that Blackness is in constant flux, depending on the situation, and time could mean just about anything. So, what role does Blackness play, and what meanings does it hold in art museums attempting to re-theorize Blackness? Blackness is non-linear, non-singular, in constant flux, and needs excavation. This is why Blackness is complex and why the way it presents in the museum must be examined and parsed. The excavation of Blackness through radical visibility allows Blackness to be boundless without inherent coded restrictions associated with skin color, behavioral, dynamics of Euro-colonial gaze, and systems. Instead, Blackness is to be destabilized from these restrictions and seen in a way that is restorative and reclaimed.

IV. EXHIBITING BLACKNESS

> *And though wake work is, at least in part, attentive to mourning and the mourning work that takes place on local and trans-local and global levels, and even as we know that mourning an event might be interminable, how does one mourn the interminable event? Just as wake work troubles mourning, so too do the wake and wake work trouble the ways most museums and memorials take up trauma and memory. That is, if museums and memorials materialize a kind of reparation (repair) and enact their own pedagogies as they position visitors to have a particular experience or set of experiences about an event that is seen to be past, how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? Might we instead under- stand the absence of a National Slavery Museum in the United States as recognition of the ongoingness of the conditions of capture? Because how does one memorialize the everyday?*
>
> -Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake on Blackness and Being*

Seeing Blackness in the museum is still a relatively new concept. While there has been a significant rise in the exhibitions and representation of Black art and artists in museums over the last decade, Blackness in the museum space still grapples with the implication of dominant ideologies. Blackness has to not only grapple with the domination narrative of the museum space but also find itself pigeonholed as far as a foil for this dominant narrative. It is not allowed to exist in its complexity but rather must cater to the dialogues, tastes, and values of the institution. Christina Sharpe, in her book *In the Wake on Blackness and Being,* asks how we intend to memorialize the everyday (Sharpe 2016, 20). Sharpe's question is crucial to address as it centers on the discussion of the ongoing reality of Blackness. Sharpe contests with the fact that although, there was a declared end to slavery, the realities of the capture and the systems of oppression remains intact. How then does the museum intend to expose the realities of Blackness in the "ongoingness?"

The work of the museum remains to create space to radically see and understand Black bodies in order to make room for radical inclusion. How does radical inclusion differ from inclusion? Representation alone in the museum is not inclusivity, and visibility(seeing) does not lead to the understanding of Blackness. The museum must reconstitute the ways it deals with Blackness. The museum should adopt new ways to see and understand Blackness by shifting its practices radically. To see Blackness is to humanize Black bodies and to learn/unlearn our way of seeing. John Berger argues that "the painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends upon our own way of seeing" (Berger 1981, 10). Similarly, how we see and engage with Black bodies is codified by an individual's learned experience and their way of seeing.

Lanier Holt contributes to this conversation on socialized priming on Black visuality in *Writing the Wrong: Can Counter- Stereotypes Offset Negative Media Messages about African Americans?* Holt discusses the role of the dominant lens in media as it primes most Americans on how to view the world. Holt writes, "Cognitive research shows that once primed, stereotypical beliefs are activated more quickly and are more likely to cause people to view Blacks along stereotypical lines. Hence, media messages matter as they prime racial stereotypes, most notably conflating Blackness with criminality, and present the idea that crime is an inherent trait of Blacks" (Holt 2013, 111) . Through media, the perception of Blackness further solidifies, making it easier for people to believe in stereotypes and more likely to conflate Blackness with negativity. These lenses are what people carry as they navigate the world and social spaces like the museum. How does the museum intend to destabilize these ideas and counter the dominant lens as they present Blackness in their institution?

Richard Powell also contributes to the debate in the examination of the act of seeing Black bodies and how it differs from how white bodies are seen or perceived. Powell states that "the historical circumstances of Black peoples worldwide and the flesh-and-blood testament to racial discernments counter such color-neutral claims and, as a result, condition the ways on which the visual art function as a vehicle for communicating the 'rhetoric of the body'" (Powell 2008, xv). Indicating that learned judgments of Blackness have guided the ways the Black body is perceived in our consciousness. Visual art displayed in the museum context acts similarly as a vehicle for communication of body politics. Because the coded visuality practice on Blackness is deeply ingrained in the American social perception, to counter it in the museum will require a deep commitment and investment to changing the way Blackness is seen in and out of the museum. However, the evaluation of institutional practice must occur first. Bridget Cooks, in her book, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* states that "exhibitions of African American art in American art museums have been curated through two guiding methodologies: the anthropological approach, which displays the difference of racial Blackness from the elevated White 'norm,' and the corrective narrative, which aims to present the work of significant and overlooked African American artists to a mainstream audience" (Cooks 2003, 1). Both of these practices, however, do very little in the illumination and recuperation of Blackness in the social imaginary. The anthropologic view continues to perpetuate the less than narrative, and the corrective only present a selective view on the few artist and discussion deemed relevant by the mainstream art museum. The museum needs to take a careful look at its current practices and realize where it perpetuates socialized ideologies and challenge itself to counter these understandings of Blackness.

As the mainstream art museum works towards best practices on Black representation, much is to be learned from Black visual producers, who have been working tirelessly in the margins to change the socialized perception of Blackness. Jannette Lake Dates and William Barlow write in their book *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, about how Black visual producers have been working to counter the works of white image-makers, which often depict Black people through their predisposed lens. Shifting their practice to accommodate a version of Blackness that has not "been filtered through the racial misconceptions and fantasies of the dominant white culture, which has tended to deny the existence of a rich and resilient Black culture of equal worth" (Dates & Barlow 1993, 523). Because Black people have primarily done the work of understanding and exposing this body politics, there has been a noticeable shift in the depiction of Blackness in visual culture through self-representation.

The creation of space for visibility in the face of omissions has been essential to the Black visuality practice. Powell discusses the hard realities of the Black body and its belonging in the world, where it is actively working on unpacking and taking up space within aftermaths of the "transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, political struggle, and centuries of social, cultural and corporeal degradation" (Powell, xvi). Furthermore, despite these very dark realities, Black people have done the laborious work of creating realities that allows them to move beyond the transfixions of this darkness. All the while also coexisting with, "the double consciousness of African American identity[…][which] struggles not only to reconcile the Black self and American self in a constant struggle for survival, but sometimes search for origins in an African context" (Cooks 2006, 184). When doing the work of meaning-making and inserting Black bodies into the museum, it will be necessary also to realize the constant internalized battleground

in which the Black body always exists and not retreat to the safety of tropes that present Blackness as though it is monolithic.

This Black visuality practice has garnered the attention of the mainstream museums, which are eager to display this work. However, if the rise of representation is not doing anything to change popular discourse, then what exactly is it doing? It would seem that the hypervisibility of Blackness on the walls of these museums is an empty gesture —how are the rampant collecting and visibility of Black Art and Black bodies helping to see Blackness? Most importantly, how is it helping the Black community to see themselves? The act of seeing oneself in represented artwork is powerful, but what happens when the socialized perception of the Black body is locked in the debate over negative and positive imagery? The work of any museum should be to understand that the Black body is charged with politics and then work tirelessly to expand its knowledge.

A. Exhibiting/Seeing Blackness

How do we even begin to tell these stories about Blackness within the very narrow white walls of museums that have, for long, been a direct embodiment of exclusion? Realizing that Black life has always been consumed without permission, museums must do this work of representation with utmost care. Elizabeth Alexander emphasizes that "black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries. This history moves from public rapes, beatings and lynching's to the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing. In the 1990s African American bodies on videotape have been the site on which national trauma-sexual harassment, date rape, drug abuse, AIDS, racial and economic urban conflict–has been dramatized" (Alexander 1994, 79). Museums are agents of nation-building, yet they struggle to include Blackness as a necessary part of the United States national identity.

To challenge and insert Blackness into the popular discourse is to change/or defy the discourse entirely. Nicole Fleetwood discussed the preoccupation and mobilization of Black folks charged with changing the popular discourse and counter the racist stereotypes that have callously represented Blacks as "as abject, […] particularly throughout the twentieth-century cultural history of the United States" (Fleetwood 2011, 13). The success of this preoccupation is reflected in the spaces that have been created by Black people to fill the void in public education and substantiate the presence of Blackness in the history and existence of America's fraught history.

B. Retheorizing Blackness in the Museum

The art museums, in their role as collectors and curators of culture, ideas, and national identity, have a pedagogical function in educating the public on how to visualize the world. Since museums have, for long, painted a selective depiction of history and culture within their institutions, one that has notably excluded the likes of African Americans, it is now essential to re-examine and shift practice by way of radical inclusion. Beyond the performance of display practice, the role of the museum should also be in the facilitation of learning, educating the public, practicing truth-telling about national histories and identity to expose the margins, and contribute to changing socialized perception and understanding of Blackness.

Museums must not shy away from having difficult conversations and utilize counter storytelling to create the space that Solórzano and Yasso describe, where "rich and complex" characters exist to ground us in the realities of our social circumstances (2002, 29). To do this, the museum needs to avoid falling into the trappings of performing surface-level work. It must dive into the intersection, commit to expanding its public and realize the gravity of their role. They must tell a fundamentally true story about seeing Blackness in America. There is no how-to

guide for this kind of radical reframing. But take at least a few progressive steps to represent Blackness in the ways I have defined would mean, a full commitment to the "undercommons," and resolve to understanding that this work is ongoing.

C. Critical Race Theory and the Museum: A Framework for Exhibiting Blackness

In the space of the "ongoingness," Scholar Salamishah Tillet foregrounds a discussion on recurrence and impact of "social amnesia," perpetuated through the "American civic myth." Tillet suggests that in the perpetuation of specific versions of history, limited versions of truths are told, and specific groups maintain their privileged positions in the social imaginary. "By omitting such historical realities, American civic myths not only bear partiality toward certain interpretations of the past but also privilege those members of society who find themselves represented in these versions of history" (Tillet 2012, 6). In this case, if the museum continues to tell a specific version of history and does not change the way it discusses Blackness, the social perception of Blackness will not change, and the idealized version of whiteness is maintained. How then does the museum commit to an ongoing practice of evaluating and changing its practice as it exhibits Blackness?

Since history and memory play a significant role in the social relationship and understanding of Blackness, the way Blackness reconstitutes in the museum must be through a reclamation practice that exposes derogatory ideas about Blackness while also creating avenues to make new meaning. What could happen if art museums adopted Critical Race Theory tenets in their exhibition practice? How can the museum use Critical Race Theory to shift exhibition practice as it relates to Blackness?

In the undertaking of the unending work to destabilize systems of racial inequity and challenge the ongoing subordination of people of color in America, Critical Race Theory (CRT)

"continues to emerge and expand as a theoretical frame-work and analytical tool for interrupting racism and other forms of oppression" (McCoy & Rodricks 2015, 5). Since Critical Race Theory is grounded on the questioning of "[...]the very foundation of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law" (Delgado & Stefancic 2012, 3). The practice can be useful in the theorization of the ongoing future of Blackness in the museum. We have established that to get the museum close to a place where inherent belief about Blackness is destabilized, inherent beliefs about Blackness must also be destabilized in the social imaginary.

D. Why Adopt Critical Race Theory in the Art Museum?

There is a real opportunity here also to acknowledge the potential good Critical Race Theory could contribute to exhibition practice, especially in the presentation of narratives regarding Blackness. The proposition of utilizing Critical Race Theory practice in the exhibition space is not an attempt to give the final say to what will finally change the perception of Blackness in the social imaginary but an ongoing commitment to changing and learning about how to discuss and radically visualize Blackness.

Solórzano and Yosso propositioned the uses of Critical Race Theory as a framework for education research and to challenge the status quo. Exploring how a shift from a majoritarian story that harms those directly affected to counter-storytelling could be impactful in changing the popular discourse for those impacted and those privileged enough to be unaffected. As Solórzano and Yosso explain, "A majoritarian story distorts and silences the experiences of people of color" (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 29). How can museums shift from their majoritarian storytelling practice into the sphere of radical inclusion- of stories and experiences of Black people? How can museums adopt Critical Race Theory tenets specifically, counter storytelling in

their exhibition practice? Solórzano and Yosso's proposition of Critical Race Theory as a framework for education research points to ways that we could challenge the status quo using counter storytelling.

E. **Counter Storytelling**

Sociologist Margaret M. Zamudio writes in their book *Critical Race Theory Matters: Education and Ideology* that:

> One of the greatest contributions of CRT is its emphasis on narratives and counterstories told from the vantage point of the oppressed. Critical race theorists engage in the practice of retelling history from a minority perspective. In doing so, CRT exposes the contradictions inherent in the dominant storyline that, among other things, blames people of color for their own condition of inequality. Critical race theorists understand that narratives are not neutral, but rather political expressions of power relationships (Zamudio 2010, 3).

Zamudio speaks to the impact of counter stories in changing narratives and destabilizing dominant storyline. The changing of dominant narratives has been critical in my discussion of retheorizing Blackness in the social imaginary, and I believe counter storytelling can also be useful in the retheorization of Blackness in the museum specifically through exhibition practice. As Solórzano and Yosso explain, "A majoritarian story distorts and silences the experiences of people of color" (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 29). Exploring how a shift from a majoritarian story which harms those directly affected to counter-storytelling could be impactful in changing the popular discourse for those impacted and those privileged enough to be unaffected. How can museums shift from their majoritarian storytelling practice into the sphere of radical inclusion of the stories and experiences of Black people? How can museums adopt Critical Race Theory tenets specifically, counter storytelling in exhibition practice?

According to Solórzano and Yosso, through counter-storytelling educational practitioners can:

> (a) They can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice, (b) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems, (c) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position, and (d) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone (2002, 36).

All of this applies to the museum as it attempts to represent Blackness. Museums, as educational institutions, can help foster relationships with existing communities in the margins, challenge belief systems, provide avenues into the realities of those in the margins and utilize both stories and current realities to radically shift Blackness in the social imaginary. Adopting parts of these four functions to evaluate the exhibitions in the following case studies, I propose a three-step guideline to seek whether these exhibitions are utilizing counter storytelling and destabilizing master narratives.

I. How did this exhibition foster communities in the margins of society?
II. Did this exhibition challenge belief systems and knowledge about Blackness?
III. Was this exhibition connective? Beyond the margins

In my analysis of these two case studies- *Harlem on My Mind* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and *Kevin Beasley: A View of the Landscape* at the Whitney Museum of American Art– I explore the presentation of Blackness in these exhibitions and the uses and impact of counter storytelling. Both exhibitions' scope and narrative provide a good entry point to compare curatorial strategies and exhibition practice— to examine how each institution attempted to discuss and visualize the complexities of Blackness.

V. CASE STUDIES

A. *Harlem on My Mind*, 1969, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Harlem on My Mind was an exhibition that opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) in 1969. Bridget Cook discusses *Harlem on My Mind* as the Met attempted to bridge the growing divide between the Black and white citizens of Harlem in the late 60s and early 70s. In this attempt to create "racial harmony," The Met rejected the participation of Harlem residents, excluded their artworks, and instead chose to display African American people through oversized photomurals (2007, 9) (Figure 7-8). The exhibition's curator, Allon Schoener, wanted the exhibition to "transform the visitor's mind" (Schoener, n.d.). Schoener's desire was to show Harlem through a radical lens that had not been attempted before; he wanted to allow visitors to get a closer understanding of Harlem's people and the dynamics of their lives from his vantage point.

In a departure from the exhibition designs known to the Met, Schoener attributes the stylistic inspiration for this exhibition to "[…] the burgeoning electronic communications culture of the late 20th century" (Schoener, n.d.). In a radical shift for its time, Schoener amassed a large body of images, films, street sounds, music, and news clippings to demonstrate the changing times between the decades. The exhibition was laid out chronologically across thirteen galleries in the exploration of sixty-eight year of history in Harlem. The themes laid out were:

> […] 1900–1919: From White to Black Harlem; 1920–1929: An Urban Black Culture; 1930–1939: Depression and Hard Times; 1940–1949: War, Hope and Opportunity; 1950–1959: Frustration and Ambivalence; 1960–1968: Militancy and Identity (Cooks 2007, 13).

In his mission and vision for the exhibition, Schoener writes in *A Retrospective Walk Through "The Harlem on My Mind" exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969:*

> I envisioned the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition as a walk through cinematic experience utilizing photographic enlargements, film, video, slide projections, text panels with

> accompanying sound: music and recorded interviews. […] there was a slide projector presentation at the entrance to each gallery. The information viewed here defined the time period. Some photo enlargements presented life-size images. The objective was to encourage gallery visitors to project themselves into the subject of the image, thus becoming active participants in the gallery experience. Amplified recorded sound: music and recorded interviews were integral to each gallery (Schoener).

Schoener's vision seemed acutely focused on the visitor's experience, reflected in the design of the exhibition, and not with the impact of the materials and on the content of the exhibition. These stylistic choices were central in the controversy of *Harlem on My Mind*. One of the more scrutinized choices was the exclusion of Black self-representation. Without self-representation, the story of Harlem was told from the vantage point of Allon Schoener and the ideas he deemed important enough to be in the exhibition. In the creative decision to exclude artworks and point of view from the Harlem community, Cooks writes that Schoener "[…] construct[ed] an atmosphere that would re-create the way that he experienced Harlem from his position of privilege. The exclusion of art was Schoener's strategy to re-create the experience of Harlem on his mind" (2007, 17). This ultimately signified that the creative culture coming out of Harlem was not worthy of being represented in an institution like the Met. This further reinforced the line of racial separation in the Harlem community. They were relegated, and once again reduced, to abject specimens for observation. This exhibition could have been a real opportunity for the Met to connect with the Black community and make visible their attempt to understand and see not only the Black people of Harlem and also the United States.

1. Controversy and Protest

> *In fact, the difference between Schoener's concept of Harlem and the way the people of Harlem wanted to be represented formed the great tension over Harlem on My Mind. This war over cultural representation illuminated what was at stake for the Harlem community and for a larger community of Black Americans that were invested in how their story would be represented, packaged, and sold.*

-Bridget R. Cooks, *Black Artists and Activism: Harlem on My Mind (1969)*.

The controversy and protest surrounding the exhibition made it evident that the Harlem community was not interested in being objectified by the Met. There was no desire to have their stories told from the vantage point of institutions that perpetuate the larger systems that continue to render Black people voiceless. Instead, with the urgency to have their voices heard and understood, they pushed back against being rendered a stylistic option and questioned why an institution like the Met, known "for its remarkable collection of fine art [...], would produce a socio-documentary exhibition about Harlem (2007, 24). Protest ensued in response to the exhibition because the lack of inclusion was more than an aesthetic issue, and more to do with the structures that continue to exclude Black people from institutions meant to be inclusive of their community.

The director of the museum at the time, Tom Hoving, along with Allon Schoener, were criticized for maintaining unequal power relations and control over what they determined to be art worth showing in the museum. Cooks writes about the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) forming as a result of the exhibition to respond to the museum's treatment of the exhibition as an ethnographic project instead of presenting the art and contribution of the community in Harlem. Cooks added that "The references are clear and direct: the BECC criticized their treatment by the museum as a continuation of a racist patriarchal hegemonic system of Black control" (2007, 24-25). Suggesting that the museums stripping of the Black community's autonomy in this exhibition was a continuation of the othering of Black people in Harlem and the United States. A reminder of a long and painful history of discrimination and exclusionary practices in civic spaces.

2. Intention vs. Impact

Allon Schoener countered criticism responding as though a favor was bestowed upon the people Harlem. Schoener writes:

> First and foremost *Harlem on My Mind* dignified the culture of an ethnic minority in the United States encouraging them to visit a bastion of high culture where their story was being told with honesty. At that time, art museums around the world presented the art of ethnic people as 'Primitive Art.' (Schoener)

Although this exhibition was a departure from the primitive art representation of Black people, it still maintained the white gaze, which fails to see Black people beyond the exterior and topically highlights their contribution. Falling into these colonial trappings, Schoener labeled the Met a "bastion of high culture," which "dignified the ethnic minority" of Harlem. Elevating the museum to the position of high culture and simultaneously suggested that the Black people of Harlem were not primitive but in dire need of the museum to elevate them into objects worthy of dignifying once they entered the museum.

Though the exhibition failed to improve race relations in Harlem, it did, however, have areas worth highlighting as it relates to the impact of representation. Despite the overwhelming fact that the "documentary photographs in the show were made not by members of the community, but by outside observers, largely white" (D'Souza 2018, 169), Aruna D'Souza adds that "*Harlem on My Mind* did, in fact, introduce museumgoers to the photographs of James Van Der Zee and Gordon Parks, two of the great African American chroniclers of black culture" (2018, 135). Photographer Dawoud Bey in an interview in 2016, discussed the exhibitions impact on his ability to see people like himself and family members on the wall of a museum. Bey recalls the impact the exhibition had on him and his future career, citing that, "[...] the profound experience of seeing black people on the wall of the museum [...] gave me a sense of

how photographs could function as a kind of window into the past and inform what am I may begin to do as a very young photographer. Everything kind of started for me with that exhibition" (Black Art in American News, n.d). Additionally, Cooks writes of the exhibition's impact:

> Despite protests against the Met, thousands of people went to see *Harlem on My Mind*. Ten thousand visited the exhibition on opening day, double the number of visitors on past opening days. An estimated 1,500 of those visitors were Black, six to seven times the average daily number of Black visitors to the museum, attesting to the desire for Blacks to see themselves in American institutions and to support institutions that recognize them even if *Harlem on My Mind* dealt superficially with Harlem and Black America (2007, 26).

The attendance of Black visitors to the Met was essential here for a few reasons; because it signifies the want to be seen in the museum, it was an avenue for the public (in this case the Black community) to critique the institutional depiction of their reality and finally it is indicative of a dire need for civic engagement in the Black community. However, attendance means nothing if a museum does not consider the implication of what they have chosen to display. In the case of *Harlem on My Mind*, the Met felt like the authority on the realities of Blackness in Harlem, and they were met with resistance. The vocality of the Black community in Harlem, the demand to be represented appropriately, and be an equal participant in the depiction of their Blackness in the mainstream is the one major highlight in the dynamics of this exhibition at the Met.

3. Counter Storytelling

Harlem on My Mind demonstrates the impact of curatorial and exhibition practice that works outside of/in opposition to the functions of counter storytelling. The makings of an exhibition to reclaim Blackness in the social imaginary is not just about visuality and representation but in practice. Telling a story about Blackness in the museum requires the

contribution of the Black community because counter storytelling requires the perspectives of those directly impacted.

In *Harlem on My Mind*, Allon Schoener, in his curatorial role, just merely presented the public with images, sound bites, and information to contextualize that Black people existed in Harlem. It, however, failed to dive into the intersection of their lives in this community. Aruna D'Souza writes that Harlem artists, writers, and cultural activists "[…] didn't simply want to be *engaged* by historically white museums like the Met. They wanted to participate fully, by shaping the narratives and histories that those museums offered to the public, a public that included people like them (D'Souza 2018, 107). This failure to purposefully include the Harlem community silenced them in the feigning of interest as it continued to depict the Black people abject and incapable of speaking for or representing themselves. Instead of fostering a community in the margins with the people of Harlem, it rejected their participation by casting them out.

***B. Kevin Beasley: A View of the Landscape,* 2019, Whitney Museum of American Art**

Thinking of the future of Blackness in the museum, I look at the work of Kevin Beasley to facilitate a discussion of the ways the complexities of Blackness could exist in the museum. Beasley, a New York-based artist from Lynchburg, Virginia, "presents works that are at once immediate and historical—and are as concerned with giving shape to memory as they are with deconstructing the past's contemporary resonance" (Wheadon 2019). As a sculptor and installation artist, Beasley utilizes "found materials, including clothing, sports equipment, personal artifacts, and cultural ephemera," paired with sounds and performance to create multidimensional and multisensorial atmosphere. Beasley weaves together items from his "own memories and experiences, along with historical and cultural references, in order to examine the

role of power and race in American society" (Art21). His works seek to engage people beyond the space of visuality into a multi-dimensional, nonlinear, abstract mode of thinking. They ask visitors to consider all aspects of what they are engaging with, from physically tangible material to the treatment of sound, and the way they synthesize to construct narratives of the historical past and present.

Beasley's solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art titled *Kevin Beasley: A Look at the Landscape* (2019), centers and explores the role of the cotton gin motor in shaping industry in this country. In the exhibition, the cotton gin motor (figure 3) takes center stage and is then supported by,

> Massive wall-like sculptures[Figure 4-5] made of polyurethane resin, clothing, raw Virginia cotton, and other objects and materials, the three sculptures chronicle Beasley's relationship to the motor and, more broadly, to the South, reflecting the land with which the machine had for so long been associated, before moving on to Beasley's first encounter with the motor and then to the Yale campus where it was first displayed. For example, the first slab, The Reunion (2018), resembles a pastoral scene with figures rendered solely through deeply inset du-rags situated in a lush green landscape, not only referencing the Beasley's' annual family reunions but also cutting through time to suggest ghostly figures who are in the fields not by their own volition. A band of green strapping, appropriated from a cotton bale, bisects the composition, appearing to both slice through the depicted landscape and hold the sculpture together (Lew).

The cotton gin motor was encased in a soundproof vitrine (Figure 3) as "the drone of the machine is captured, manipulated, and transmitted to an adjacent room, and this disjuncture between the visual and the aural, motion and silence, both draws us in and casts us out" (Wheadon 2019). While the decision to extract the sound of the motor to be activated in another room seems like an artistic choice, it is intentional and powerful. Beasley wants visitors to engage with the cotton gin as its implications reverberate beyond the machine, beyond what viewers could imagine.

Christopher Y. Lew is the curator behind this exhibition. The use of technology is crucial to Lew's practice as a curator. Lew expressed in an interview that “The kind of work that's most interesting to me is one that doesn't just use technology for the sake of the technology, but is actually interested in trying to do something with it” (Lew, 2017). Lew is interested in the transformative experiences possible with technology, and this is reflected in the way sound is elevated in Beasley's installation of the cotton gin to create a multi-sensorial experience that transforms and activates the ominous sounds generated by the cotton gin.

Movement is crucial to the activation of the cotton gin motor. Beasley “had the motor follow the northward route of the Great Migration that the machine helped make possible, from Alabama to Connecticut, where Beasley first showed it on its own in his 2012 MFA thesis exhibition at Yale, and then to the Whitney in New York” (Lew). Destabilizing the experience and weaving varying complexities into the narratives of the exhibition, Beasley asks the viewer to think critically to understand the landscape of Blackness in the United States and the impact industrial, machine-driven systems have on the realities of Black people.

1. The Implications of the Exhibition

> *Slavery stood at the center of the most dynamic and far-reaching production complex in human history. Too often, we prefer to erase the realities of slavery, expropriation, and colonialism from the history of capitalism, craving a nobler, cleaner capitalism.*
> -Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*

Cutting through the lines of subtlety Beasley’s exhibition exposes and destabilizes this romanization to then make room for a reading of the United States history and its implication. Here stands a piece of machinery (figure 2) in its rusted physicality, old but not divorced from its implication as part of the structures that uphold our capitalistic system.

At first glance, without contextualization, one cannot simply grasp the nature and the full gravity of the conversation Beasley presents to the visitors of the Whitney museum. However, I suspect that Beasley hopes that people will see this rusting cotton gin motor and respond to it however depending on their personal entry points. It could be rage; it could be admiration and or questioning but it pushes people closer to encountering truth-telling and questioning what we know about our shared history.

The positionality of this exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art also warrants inspection. What are the stakes when this work exists in an institution like the Whitney? How is the Whitney helping their visitors see Blackness? The Whitney hired curator, Christopher Lew, in 2014 in an initiative to address diversity and inclusion gaps in the institution (Lew, 2017). Lew oversees the emerging artist exhibition program at the Whitney and is responsible for introducing new and exciting voices to engage the global visitors that frequent the Museum. On practice and curating engaging exhibition spaces, Lew expressed the importance of creating spaces where the visitor's experiences are considered from start to finish. Guiding visitors through a learning experience not just through the art objects on view but also through the physical space. Lew states that "A great work can be displayed in a way that appears less than what it is. On the other hand a well installed show can guide viewers to things they might have overlooked otherwise" (Pogrebin, 2018). Lew shows this in the way Beasley's exhibition was laid out to move the visitors from the central cotton gin to the massive wall like installation and then to the room where the sounds from the cotton gin are translated and manipulated outside of the machine. In this decision, the exhibition layout moves visitors from the physical cotton gin motor to its productions and implications.

We will never be able to fully grasp the impact of this exhibition on the many people who saw it because there's no public result of evaluations to gauge for impact. However, the success lies in the way the museum has presented avenues for the understanding of Blackness and its intersection outside of the confines of the body. There were no Black bodies on view, yet Beasley challenges viewers to find and situate the realities of Blackness as they are situated in the destabilization of the cotton gin motor. Beasley exposes deeply rooted stories that connect and implicate all of its viewers. Deviating from the exploitation of Black bodies to discuss Blackness, Beasley utilizes the absence of the body and instead utilizes objects that are also loaded with meaning depending on how the viewer approaches it.

2. Counter Storytelling in Exhibition

Looking at Beasley's exhibition at the Whitney through the counter storytelling functions proposed by Yosso and Solórzano. Beasley used his family's land and its relationship to cotton as an entry point into the stories and history of many Black people in the United States. Beasley attempts to "build communities in the margins," by making this a story about everyone by utilizing familiar objects to implicate visitors and make this story about Blackness a story that impacts and implicates all viewers. While simultaneously highlighting the structural impact, the central cotton gin motor had on the lives and history of Black people in this country. Beasley implicates museum visitors and challenged them to look beyond the cotton gin to see the stories and histories that have tended to live in the periphery.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the excavation of my Blackness in the world, and most especially in the United States, I often find myself doing a multilayered work of evaluating my position in the museum. Is this content for me? Where are the Black people at this institution? Where are the Black people in this exhibition? Am I welcomed here? What does access look like for the Black people in this community? If I can manage to find myself, the question then is, why am I here? What kind of message is this institution putting out by representing Blackness in this manner? What are their stakes in this? Is this just for show?

These questions allow interrogations of the role of the museum in the dissemination of ideas that have sociological impact on individuals and groups. In the last decade, museums have begun to shift gears in the direction of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many museums are particularly interested in and are participating in collecting and displaying Blackness without doing the work it takes to understand Blackness. With this current wave of interest, museums are seeing Blackness as a growing opportunity for their institutional following to stay relevant and meet the minimum on the front of diversity equity and inclusion. This act not only maintains the museum's positionality of the fetishizations of Blackness but also the perpetuation of Black bodies as a spectacle for the consumption of the white gaze. This model of inclusion is not institutional, permanent, and or penetrative enough to have a lasting impact on the rigid slow to change characteristics of the museum.

However, in this thesis I make a case for the complexities of Blackness and its existential place in the art museum. Understanding that the museum can sometimes be a rigid space that often resists change, there is a desire to create new ideologies in the understanding and presentation of Blackness in the museum. If there is ever going to be a nuanced understanding of

Blackness, it would be that Blackness is in constant flux, always changing, eluding clear definition and understanding, yet it is still distinguishable. In opposition to this flexible nature of Blackness are the rigid standards of the museum, which in its effort to include the likes of Blackness, may not entirely be successful if it continues to define Blackness through regressive modes that continue to diminish its mutable nature.

Harlem on My Mind came in on the curtails of political and social unrest, post-civil rights movement and the active questioning of system and scrutinization of the places accessible and inclusive to African Americans. Instead of challenging and helping visitors radically visualize Blackness at the Met, *Harlem on My Mind,* presented and failed to challenge its audience and or present a radical visualization of Blackness. Kevin Beasley's exhibition also timely in the wake of demand to shifting collecting and display practices in the museum. Beasley's exhibition instead took creative liberty as it blended the lines between history and the present— to discuss the ongoing of the systems and how they continue to impact the realities of Blackness.

Can Blackness exist in the museum uncomplicated? The short answer to this is that it is possible. We must do the work to radically see Blackness, unpack histories and systems of inequity, consult and rewrite best practices in the museum. To see Blackness is to humanize, Black bodies, their livelihood, and contributions, should the museum be ready to create space for visibility and permanence. Collecting and representing Black artists is excellent, but the museum and the art world must be ready to bend and reshape the rules of the game. We cannot afford to carry on with "business as usual" because the complexities of Blackness require the development of new traditions and engagement practices.

The future of the Museum and Blackness is possible, and we are in a unique position to question everything, re-evaluate practice, connect with communities, and commit to learning and

finding new modalities for representing Blackness. Black visuality is loaded, troubling, and I do not expect that the museum would be capable of unpacking it overnight or in a decade. However, I am hopeful for the future of Blackness in the museum and many attempts to get closer to getting it right. To see museums challenge themselves and move past their rigid practices to learn and borrow from: critical race theories on storytelling, historians on excavating truths, cultural studies on retheorizing Blackness, and Black artists who are working on depicting and reclaiming the interiorities of Blackness in the social imaginary.

Black visibility and representation in museums are not only impactful for Black people to envision themselves but, it can also be restorative as it allows the realities of Blackness to also exist in the cognition of everyone outside of the Black community. Because the visibility of Blackness is not only impactful for Black people, it is then important that the museum look critically at the way Blackness is being depicted at their institution. By readjusting and reshaping Blackness in the museum, Blackness will also be reshaped in the viewing experience of the other visitors and consequently in the social imaginary.

APPENDIX

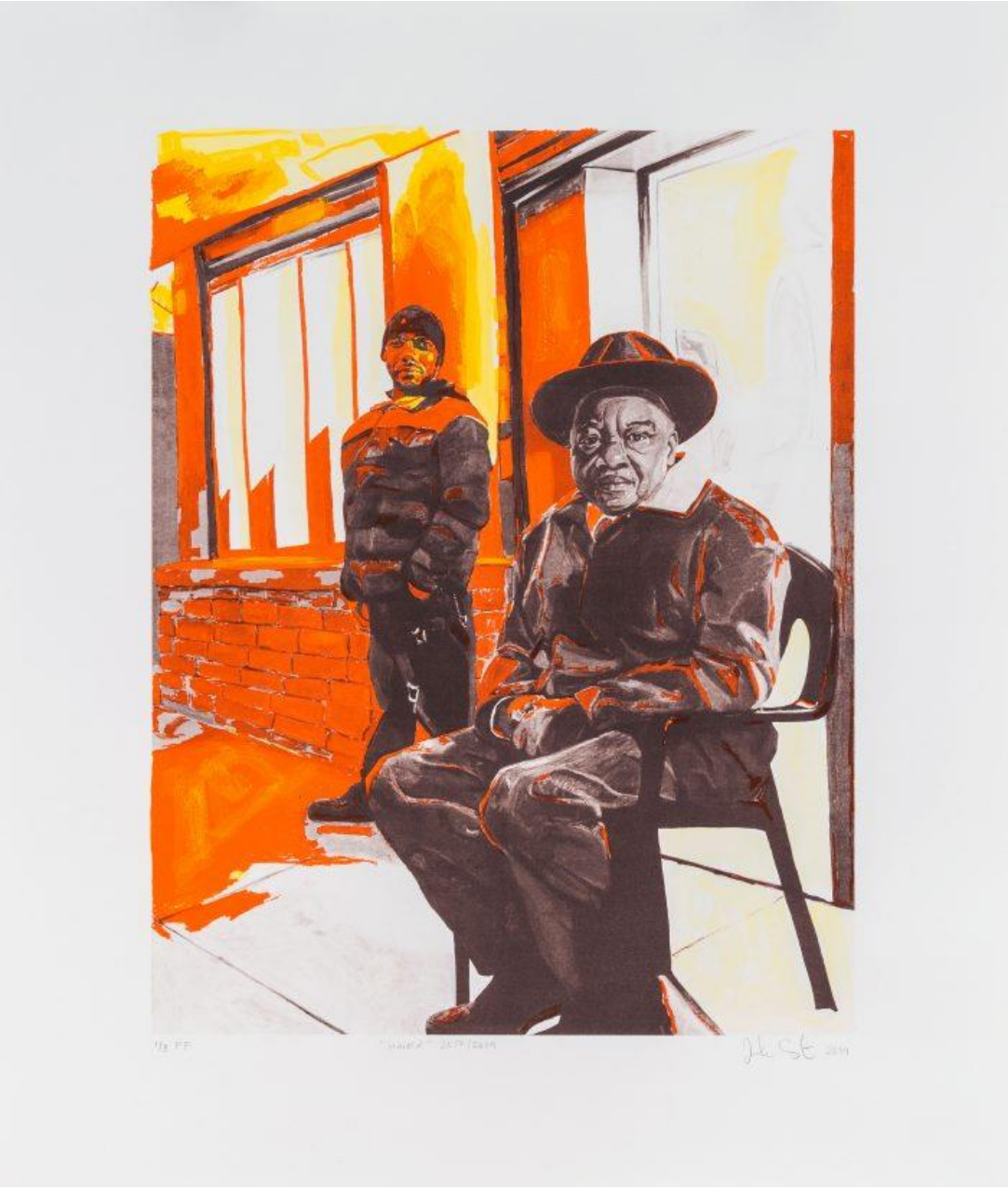

Figure 1: *Harold*. n.d. Photograph. *Art Culture Project*. https://artandculture.com/art/print/harold/.

Figure 2: Kevin Beasley, *Rebuilding of the cotton gin motor*, 2016. Photograph by Carlos Vela-Prado. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

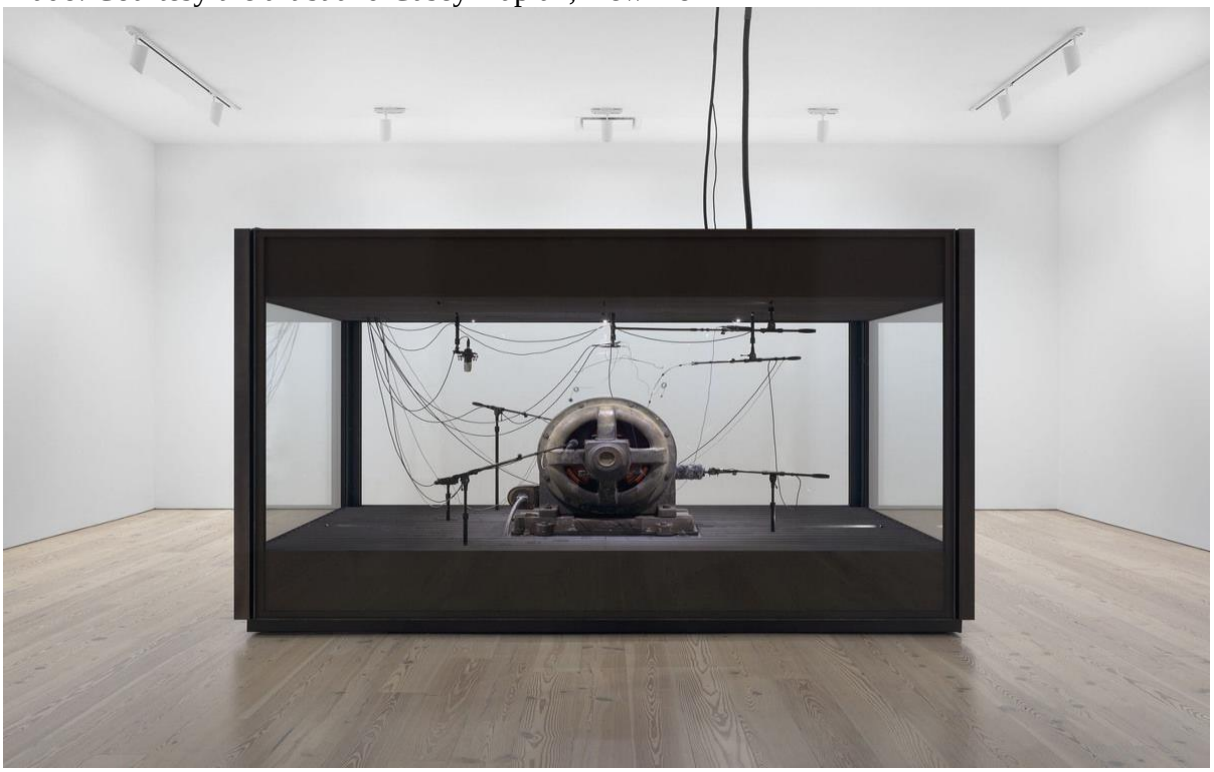

Figure 3: Installation view of *Kevin Beasley: A view of a landscape* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, December 15, 2018–March 10, 2019). *A view of a landscape: A cotton gin motor*, 2012–18. Photograph by Ron Amstutz

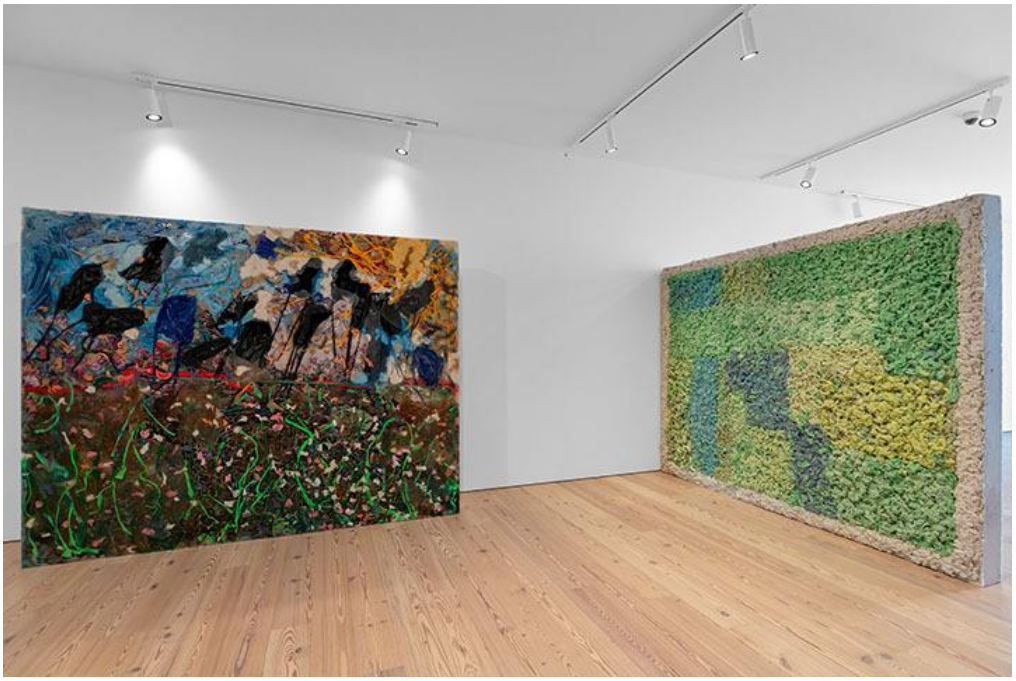

Figure 4: Left: *The Reunion*, 2018. Right: *Campus*, 2018. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Casey Kaplan, New York

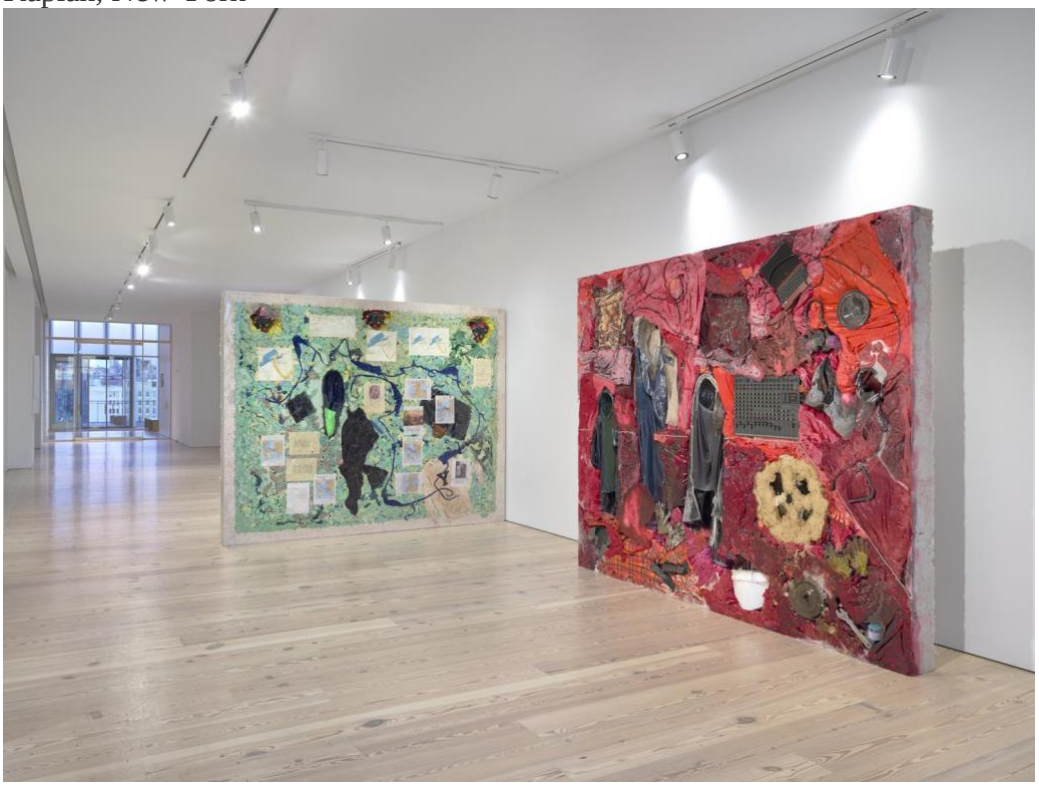

Figure 5: On the left, Kevin Beasley's *Campus* (2018); on the right, *The Acquisition*, (2018). Courtesy Casey Kaplan, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

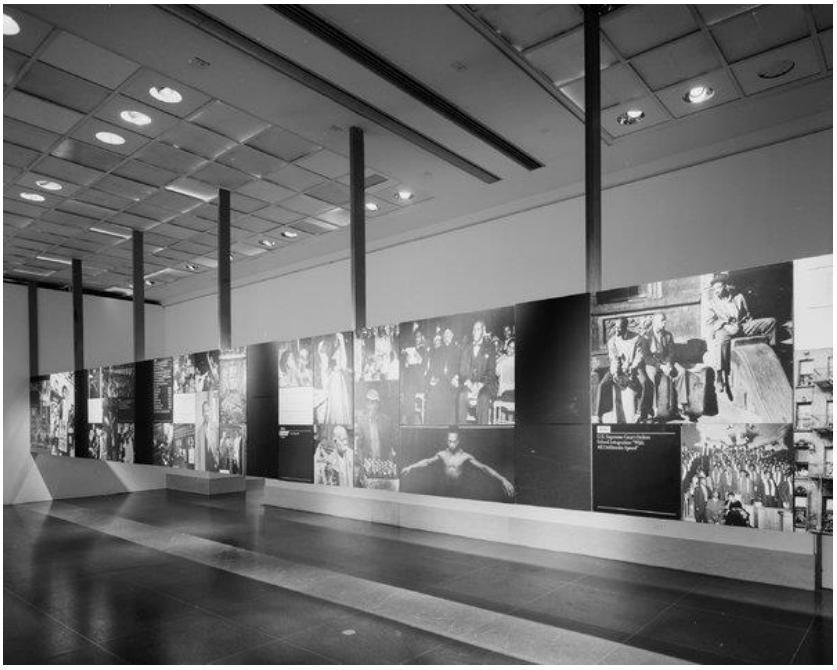

Figure 7: *An Installation View of "Harlem on My Mind."* August 19, 2015. Photograph. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/20/arts/design/what-i-learned-from-a-disgraced-art-show-on-harlem.html.

Figure 8: *An Installation View of "Harlem on My Mind."* August 19, 2015. Photograph. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/20/arts/design/what-i-learned-from-a-disgraced-art-show-on-harlem.html.

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