

Creating Learning Communities: an analysis of public events  
at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Toronto Biennial of Art

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Submitted to OCAD University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in  
Contemporary Art, Design and New Media Art Histories

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020

## Abstract

This major research paper (MRP) analyzes the potential of bell hooks's notion of learning communities within the context of contemporary arts institutions in the city of Toronto. It considers how two public programs—the roundtable discussion *Ways of Caring* at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the public gathering by BUSH gallery, *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial*, presented by the Toronto Biennial of Art—created learning environments that engaged participants in critical thinking, dialogue and self-reflexive practice. In doing so, each event challenged the colonial impositions and constructs of the host institution while subverting the structures that exclude racialized communities from their narratives. The MRP examines the diverse means through which learning communities take form, following three categories of analysis: ritualistic impositions, as discussed by Carol Duncan; participation and collective agency in relation to the writings of Claire Bishop, Pablo Helguera, and Irit Rogoff; and lastly, learning communities, as articulated by bell hooks. The essay ultimately seeks to prove that, by engaging in radical pedagogical approaches, museum education and discursive programs can challenge the institution's colonial histories and structures by prioritizing and amplifying the voices of BIPOC communities.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my partner-in-life, Joel Brkta, for his wholehearted and endless support of my creative endeavours. For believing in me and my capabilities and taking care of me on days when I would forget. I would like to thank my parents, Jaime and Roderick Cruz, for encouraging me to learn every day.

I want to thank Clare Butcher for her encouragement and support throughout this process and in my professional endeavours. To Keiko Hart for reminding me that change is inevitable and letting go is a necessity in order to grow. To Erica Cristobal for feeding me and sharing books and poems which I've kept with me throughout this entire process. And to my rocks, Laura Grier, Adrienne Huard, Emma Steen, and Erin Szikora, for inspiring me through their infinite acts of care.

I would especially like to thank my advisory committee and academic staff for guiding me through this journey. Dr. Keith Bresnahan for your guidance throughout this program. Dr. Amish Morrell for your valuable feedback and reading suggestions. And most especially Dr. Gabrielle Moser for your mentorship, understanding, and holding me accountable.

Finally, I want to thank my students, for being my co-facilitators, peers, and teachers over the past few years and showing me the importance of listening, spending time, and giving space.

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## Foreword

This study draws from my research and personal experience of events at contemporary art institutions to consider the political and cultural stakes of how knowledge is organized and presented to museum- and gallery-going publics. As a practicing educator and curator, I have become attuned to the limitations of current approaches to education and curation as they are performed within academic and contemporary arts institutions. Conventional, top-down approaches to museum education are heavily influenced by the oppressive structures of the colonial state, which are exclusionary of racialized communities. This raises questions about the accessibility of programs and exhibitions within these institutions, including those which have accessibility, diversity, and inclusion as central parts of their mandates. As a second-generation, Filipina-Canadian scholar with colonial-settler heritage, I want to acknowledge the privilege and additional resistances that accompany conducting this research not only within the academy but within a colonial settler state. As an art educator, trained within a post-secondary institution built on colonial systems, I am constantly in the process of re-evaluating my pedagogical approaches. Though I have been aware of the privilege I have in studying at a post-secondary level, this, along with the boundaries of accessibility to education, became especially apparent when I started my first year as a teaching assistant at OCAD University. During my undergraduate studies I was taught there was one appropriate way of teaching within the school system and academia: by developing lesson plans based on a predetermined curriculum prescribed by the School Board and Ministry of Education. I quickly learned that developing lesson plans through a one-size-fits-all approach was unfeasible due to the diverse ways that each student absorbs information. I realized that by failing to make accommodations for students' different learning methods, I was doing them a disservice and in turn, acting as a barrier and making the course content inaccessible to them. In order to cultivate an accessible and inclusive learning

environment I needed to also know each student's unique situation. Creating meaningful relationships with the students and recognizing their needs and strengths motivated them to critically engage in conversations around course content. By listening to their personal experiences, I was also able to encourage them to build meaningful relationships with one another which allowed us to transform our classroom into a community.

This experience, along with attending various museum education and discursive programs in Toronto, attuned me to the ways public events organized by contemporary art institutions reveal the disjuncture between the institution and its audience. Contemporary arts institutions have attempted to become *contested spaces* by hosting socially engaged programs that encourage visitors to use critical thinking as a way to engage in conversations about the institution's colonial history. However, by doing this through conventional approaches to curating and education, the institution conforms to the exclusionary and oppressive systems it was founded upon. This foundational history of colonial approaches to knowledge-making makes the contemporary institution a space that prioritizes the dominant white narrative. Although curatorial and educational staff are constantly negotiating these conventional and colonial approaches, they often overlook the role of racial prejudices in these processes of contestation. For the purposes of this paper, I use Huia Tomlins-Jahnke's definition of *contested spaces* which describes them as environments that challenge the complex layers of "white ignorance" that are habitually acted out and reinforced by pervasive and oppressive institutional structures.<sup>1</sup> Tomlins-Jahnke states that, "Ignorance in this context is more than not knowing simple facts or displays of prejudicial behaviour; rather, it can be understood as non-knowing where race has played a determining role."<sup>2</sup> As the contemporary arts institution was built on the

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<sup>1</sup> Huia Tomlins-Jahnke, "Contested Spaces: Indigeneity and Epistemologies of Ignorance", *Indigenous Education: New Directions in Theory and Practice*, (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2019), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 85.

model of the museum, established by white aristocrats as a colonial display of power, enacting conventional means of curating and educating—where curating is a form of cultural governance, educating is a performed curriculum and both are prescribed by the colonial state—is, I argue, an act of “white ignorance.”<sup>3</sup>

I want to emphasize this notion of ignorance as it pertains to race because both of the events I discuss are concerned with Black and Indigenous communities, experiences, and knowledges. Through this major research paper and my analysis of two public contemporary arts events, it is my intent to highlight how acts of white ignorance are often overlooked within museum education despite the organizers’ intent to present alternative means of engaging the audience in critical thinking and conversation. It is not my intent to suggest that it is impossible to address the contestations and acts of white ignorance within the arts institution. Instead, my intent is to highlight how the events address and challenge these prejudices through open dialogue and audience engagement, in ways that are decidedly open, organic, and embracing. In addition, I argue that the contemporary arts institution continues to participate in acts of white ignorance which nullify its role as a contested space and makes it incapable of challenging its colonial history, further producing a structural inability to be inclusive of the racialized groups it has historically excluded.

Despite the positive and sometimes even radical language used to describe the pedagogical turn—a movement in curatorial practice that frames curating as an expansion of educational praxis—the turn also risks instrumentalizing education.<sup>4</sup> As Andrea Philips suggests, the pedagogical turn in contemporary curating can result in the aestheticization of education by artists and curators which ironically evacuates education of its political potential by offering

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<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Prottas, “Where Does the History of Museum Education Begin?”, *Journal of Museum Education* 44, no. 4 (2019). 337. doi: 10.1080/10598650.2019.1677020

<sup>4</sup> Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson, *Curating and the Educational Turn*, (London: Open Editions, 2010), 12.



audiences a utopian scene where thought and action are equally integrated, while structurally, power inequalities remain intact.<sup>5</sup> Though the institution operates at a remove from the formal, state education system, making it appear to be free from the welfare state's conditions around mainstream curriculum, the contemporary art institution is still limited by its blanket approach to communicating information to the public. By continually practicing didactic modes of programming where artist and curator 'experts' deliver information to 'uneducated' audiences through unidirectional modes of delivery—such as tours, talks, and panel discussions— institutions limit the public's ability to connect with the exhibition and each other on a more transformative level. To combat this rote approach to programming, I use bell hooks's concept of *learning communities* to describe the kinds of audiences that come together through contemporary art programming. hooks describes learning communities as spaces that acknowledge the presence and contributions of all their participants which also requires accommodating the diverse ways in which each individual connects with information. Learning communities give merit to participants by refusing the idea that academics, curators, and artists are the only individuals who have specialized knowledge and expertise and, therefore, create authoritative knowledge about exhibitions to a supposedly uneducated public.<sup>6</sup> In removing this hierarchical approach to educating, learning communities value collective experience as a means of knowledge creation; they build a space where participants are equally accountable for the development and delivery of knowledge.

To understand and evaluate the benefits of building learning communities within the context of museum education and public programming, this paper investigates two public events produced by Toronto contemporary art institutions in 2019. Through my analysis of these events,

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<sup>5</sup> Andrea Phillips, "Education Aesthetics", *Curating and the Educational Turn*, Edited by Paul O'Neill & Mick Wilson (London: Open Editions, 2010), 84.

<sup>6</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 8.

I consider how and where radical pedagogy emerges and chart what lessons learning communities can offer to curators and public programmers. I suggest that learning communities can enact decolonial practices due to their application of collective agency, and their inherently inclusive nature which values all forms of experience as forms of knowledge. Learning communities allow the public to be accountable for how and what they learn, and foreground practices of multiple-authorship in making meaning from encounters with contemporary art.<sup>7</sup> Learning communities therefore encourage collaboration and meaningful relationships between community members, artists, and staff and offer a model of curating and educating that is inclusive of the institution's diverse and complex communities.

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<sup>7</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 8.

## Introduction

Though the recent pedagogical turn—a trend that sees pedagogical practices only become credible within museum spaces when they are presented as curatorial practices—has allowed for more public engagement with contemporary arts institutions, and has transformed approaches to exhibition-making, it nonetheless tends to perpetuate the assumption that education is a public service.<sup>8</sup> The distinction between educators as public servants and curators as arts intellectuals is based on the assumption that educators have limited agency due to their responsibilities to follow the rules and regulations of the state.<sup>9</sup> Not only does this distinction discredit the work of educators who are often highly trained and heavily invested in the field of contemporary art, it also assumes that workers in public programming are incapable of producing critical content of the same conceptual rigour as curators. Andrea Phillips argues that the pedagogical turn is an aestheticization of education; that is, a tactic performed by the institution to present an innovative, progressive, and adaptive approach to curating without making substantive changes to the structure of the institution and its biases.<sup>10</sup> However, despite an increased use of pedagogical approaches in curating, the contemporary arts institution is rarely able to successfully connect with its audience to make social and political transformation possible.

The museum's emergence as a product of nationalistic, colonial displays of power is one of the structures that limit the contemporary art institution's ability to connect with its diverse contemporary publics.<sup>11</sup> The history of the museum's deep-rooted relationship with the state has

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<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this paper I use Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson's discussion of the pedagogical turn as a method to present curating as an expansion of educational praxis through public engagement and participation. See Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, *Curating and the Educational Turn*, (London: Open Editions, 2010), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Janna Graham, "Between a Pedagogical Turn and a Hard Place: Thinking with Conditions," *Curating and the Educational Turn*, edited by Paul O'Neill & Mick Wilson (London: Open Editions, 2010), 126.

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Phillips, "Education Aesthetics," *Curating and the Educational Turn*, Edited by Paul O'Neill & Mick Wilson (London: Open Editions, 2010), 84.

<sup>11</sup> Nathaniel Prottas, "Where Does the History of Museum Education Begin?" *Journal of Museum Education* 44.4 (2019). 337. doi: 10.1080/10598650.2019.1677020.

meant it has functioned as gatekeeper to the public's collective heritage. According to Tony Bennett, this responsibility of cultural governance is a resource used by the state to communicate acceptable norms and forms of behaviour.<sup>12</sup> While the historical emergence of the museum informs the role of the curator, it is important to acknowledge that both the museum and education system were founded with the intent—whether explicit or implicit—of excluding racialized groups from their narratives. The art historian Carol Duncan has argued that the ritualistic manner in which the public interacts with the museum space is reminiscent of churches and ceremonial monuments. Through both its architecture and organization of space, as well as the script of behaviours that are acceptable and unacceptable for visitors to perform, the museum, Duncan argues, recognizes some citizens and delegitimizes others.<sup>13</sup> In addition, this ritualistic imposition of routines and rules of behaviour reaffirms the institution's oppressive structure and creates barriers for the public to connect with the artwork and the institution. By prescribing a set of rigid rules, the institution prevents the creation of an inclusive and accessible space, which is at the heart of the pedagogical turn in contemporary curating. Furthermore, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Stuart Hall have each observed that the Western colonial education system was structured with the intent to prioritize the intellectual development of the white settler population while also reinforcing dominance over racialized groups.<sup>14</sup> As such, an institution like the public museum, or the university, which was initially developed with the intent to exclude a particular group of individuals from its narrative, continues to operate on systems influenced by this exclusionary, racist, and oppressive history. Therefore, I argue that the idea of an inclusive and holistic education system—taught to post-secondary students in education programs as a radical

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<sup>12</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of The Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual," *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 20.

<sup>14</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

pedagogical approach—is a misconception due to the oppressive foundational systems that the institution is influenced by today.

When contemporary art institutions decide to challenge the legacies of their colonial histories, the responsibility of developing transformative frameworks is often placed in the hands of the public programming staff due to their direct relationship with the public. However, the responsibility of the curator in researching and developing exhibitions, from which public programming is derived, means the gallery’s curators are equally responsible for the development of an inclusive model that challenges the oppressive, ritualistic, and colonial histories of the space. Developing a model that successfully practices inclusivity requires treating the contemporary arts institution as a contested space and a site of public pedagogy. In this way, I build on the important work of Indigenous pedagogy theorists in describing museums as sites of contestation. In the introduction to a special issue of *Indigenous Education* which addresses new directions in pedagogical theory and practice, the editors write:

By engaging in contestation in relevant, respectful, and meaningful ways, we can begin to understand how we might untangle some of these colonial relations so that we can forge new relationships based on mutual respect and egalitarianism that eliminate the unilateral assumption that dominant Western perspectives are the only lens from which we should operate. Contested spaces and the assumption embedded within that contestation must be acknowledged in order to be critically examined and explored effectively.<sup>15</sup>

The contemporary arts institution, in the words of these authors, needs to initiate dialogue about its colonial histories to begin to contest and dismantle its oppressive systems. As the editors indicate, there must be a collective awareness of the problematic histories of the museum space before they can be challenged and changed. Paulo Freire’s statement that no reality is able to

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<sup>15</sup> Sandra Styres, et al. “Opening: Contested Spaces and Expanding the Indigenous Education Agenda,” *Indigenous Education: New Directions in Theory and Practice* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2019), xviii.

transform itself echoes this concern; radical pedagogical theory argues that only those who recognize themselves as oppressed can develop a new model that contests this oppression.<sup>16</sup> This means that it is impossible for the education system to develop a pedagogical approach which is entirely inclusive of racialized individuals if these communities are not at the forefront of these conversations. Though Freire's argument speaks to pedagogical practices within the academy, I believe this must be expanded to encompass the contemporary arts institution as a contested space and a space of public pedagogy. It is impossible to develop inclusive approaches to curating and educating without the presence of underrepresented and racialized groups that have been intentionally and violently excluded from the institution's founding.

Keeping these considerations in mind, this paper analyzes two recent events in Toronto's arts ecology from an auto-ethnographic and self-reflexive approach: BUSH gallery's *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* presented on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019; and the Art Gallery of Ontario's *Ways of Caring* round-table discussion on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Discussing these events allow me, as an educator and curator, to question whether current approaches to public programming are influenced by colonial frames of curating and educating and to ask how these two organizations might be challenging such frames. I have chosen these events because they had the potential to offer alternative modes of connecting with the public in ways that oppose exclusionary approaches to curating and educating. In analyzing these events, I consider how they exhibit three approaches to public engagement through pedagogical encounters: (1) ritualistic impositions as presented by Carol Duncan; (2) participation and collective agency, while referencing discussions by Claire Bishop, Pablo Helguera, and Irit Rogoff; and finally, (3) learning communities, as articulated by bell hooks. In considering these cases through the critical

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<sup>16</sup> Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2012), 53-54.

lenses provided by these authors, my hope is that this study will highlight the benefits of cultivating learning environments that focus on participation and collective agency in order to produce and encourage acts of place-making.<sup>17</sup> I propose that these kinds of public events can transform contemporary art spaces to be inclusive of underrepresented communities while challenging the foundational, colonial histories that remain visible in the rituals performed by the public when they enter the museum. This paper encourages both curators and educators to seek a collaborative model of exhibition-making and public programming while prioritizing inclusive, meaningful, and fulfilling learning communities.

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<sup>17</sup> I define ‘place-making’ as more than creating a temporary space for racialized groups to gather and create together, which only reinforces Eurocentric hierarchies of spatial occupation as discussed by McGraw, Pieris, and Potter. Instead I refer to a habitual practice of creating platforms for racialized communities to engage in critical interventions on their own terms. For further reading on Indigenous place-making, see Janet McGraw, Anoma Pieris & Emily Potter, “Indigenous Place-Making in the City: Dispossession, Occupations and Implications for Cultural Architecture,” *Architectural Theory Review*, (2011), 298. doi: 10.1080/13264826.2011.621544.

## The Cases

The events discussed in this research paper—*Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* by BUSH gallery, presented by the Toronto Biennial of Art, and the *Ways of Caring* round-table discussion at the Art Gallery of Ontario—were presented by the public programming and learning departments of their affiliated institutions. However, it is also important to distinguish the differences in how each institution intended for the events to interact with their associated exhibitions to better understand how their formatting does or does not fall into the three categories of public engagement that are at the core of my study.

My first case study is an event organized to coincide with the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO)'s 2018 acquisition of Toronto-based artist Zun Lee's collection of images titled *Fade Resistance*: a collection of vernacular photographs, mostly orphaned from their original context, that document African-American family life from the 1970s to early 2000s. The collection includes snapshots of weddings, birthdays, and graduation ceremonies along with candid images that attempt to counter stereotypical portrayals of Black life.<sup>18</sup> These images were not voluntarily given to Lee, but instead acquired through donations and purchases of what he describes as “lost images.”<sup>19</sup> The *Ways of Caring* round-table discussion was presented as part of a multi-year program which seeks to engage the public in conversations around the collection in the lead up to an accompanying public exhibition of the collection in 2021. The panelists were selected by Lee and included artists Deanna Bowen and Michèle Pearson Clarke, Black studies scholars Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, and was mediated by art historian Kimberly Juanita Brown. In this instance, the program was formatted as a prelude to the exhibition in order to encourage conversations amongst the AGO's community members about the planned exhibition's context.

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<sup>18</sup> Art Gallery of Ontario, *Ways of Caring*, 2019, <https://ago.ca/events/ways-caring>.

<sup>19</sup> Zun Lee, “Ways of Caring” (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, December 18, 2019).



By contrast, the Toronto Biennial of Art's series of public programming and learning events were launched in conjunction with the opening of the biennial's exhibition titled *The Shoreline Dilemma*. The exhibition addressed the ever-changing topography of Toronto's shoreline which has seen an increase in industrial production and economic growth that has resulted in many extensions and reconfigurations of the waterfront since colonial contact.<sup>20</sup> Artists were asked to address the overarching question, "what does it mean to be in and out of relation?" which prompted many stories, installations, performances, and conversations around relations to land and each other. As 2019 marked the inaugural Toronto Biennial of Art, the organization's situation was unique in comparison to the customary format of other international biennials and triennials. According to Patrizia Libralato, Executive Director of the biennial, this installment took over five years to bring to fruition, giving the organizing, curatorial and educational teams more time than they will have to prepare for future iterations.<sup>21</sup> In addition, though public programming and exhibitions were presented as separate categories in their guidebook and online platforms, the biennial's programs were meant to be presented with equal prominence as the exhibitions found at the main venues that spanned Toronto's Waterfront.

*Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* was presented and hosted by BUSH gallery, an Indigenous-led, land-based, experimental, and conceptual gallery activated by Secwepemc curator Tania Willard and Tahltan multidisciplinary artist Peter Morin. Willard and Morin were also joined by guest artist, Lisa Myers, of Beausoleil First Nation. Willard and Morin guest edited *C Magazine's* winter 2018 issue, *Site/ation*, where they published *THE BUSH MANIFESTO*, which presented the purpose and operating model of their collective. It states: "BUSH gallery is a space for dialogue, experimental practice and community engaged work that

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<sup>20</sup> Toronto Biennial of Art, "Exhibition: The Shoreline Dilemma," *The Shoreline Dilemma*, (Toronto: 2019), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Toronto Biennial of Art, "Director's Welcome," *The Shoreline Dilemma*, (Toronto: 2019), 6.

contributes to an understanding of how gallery systems and art mediums might be transfigured, translated and transformed by Indigenous knowledges, aesthetics, performance and land use systems.”<sup>22</sup> In the manifesto, Willard and Morin emphasize BUSH gallery’s intent of focusing on decolonial and non-institutional ways of engaging with and valuing Indigenous knowledge, creative production, and resurgence.<sup>23</sup> The *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* event posting on the biennial’s website invited participants to join the collective for a gathering on Toronto’s Ward’s Island Beach for an evening of games, food, gifts, and an outdoor screening curated by ImagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival. The organizers intended for participants to engage in exchange methodologies embedded in gift economies as a means to “examine the circulation of materials within and outside of the art system and Indigenous communities.”<sup>24</sup>

Though each event was presented by the institution’s public programming and learning departments, the *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* and *Ways of Caring* events varied in the ways they expanded on their affiliated exhibitions. The AGO presented the *Ways of Caring* round-table discussion as part of a larger series of programs building towards and anticipating the *Fade Resistance* exhibition. Though the round-table format may be more familiar to community members, the AGO used this event as an opportunity to transform the traditional panel discussion presented in conjunction with an exhibition to an elaborate multi-year conversation leading up to and following the launch of the exhibition in 2021. On the other hand, the Toronto Biennial and BUSH gallery executed *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* as a one-time event in conjunction with the first iteration of the biennial. For the purposes of this MRP, I analyze how both events practice pedagogical approaches that enabled, or limited, a collective

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Morin & Tania Willard, “THE BUSH MANIFESTO,” *C Magazine Issue 136: Site/ation*, 2018, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Toronto Biennial of Art, “Beach(Fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial,” 2019, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://torontobiennial.org/programs/beachfire-blanket-bingo-biennial/>.

experience as a learning opportunity. In so doing, I evaluate each program's ability to successfully create learning communities that are inclusive of underrepresented and racialized groups. Held in the context of two different contemporary arts institutions, these events point to some of the ways these organizations can challenge their own colonial and oppressive histories.

## Ritualistic Impositions

At the museum's seasonal opening reception there are a number of routines the public performs in the process of celebrating the launch of the latest exhibition. As they approach the museum entrance, they are confronted by weaving stanchions, wayfinding signage, and columns reminiscent of the Doric, Ionic, or Tuscan orders used in the architecture of Greek and Roman temples and ceremonial monuments. In her book, *Civilizing Rituals* (1995), Duncan asserts that the museum's resemblance to ceremonial monuments, such as churches, temples, and palaces, points to the art institution's desire to be respected on an equal footing with these apparatuses. Not only does the physical façade reveal these intentions, but the ritualistic impositions and routines the public performs, Duncan argues, further reveal the disciplinary function of the museum.<sup>25</sup> I expand on this by insisting that these performed rituals can be seen in the sequence of events that take place at the beginning of exhibition openings and public events. This often comes in the form of exhibition previews, which are only accessible to higher level members, opening remarks by directors and curators, and land acknowledgements by public programming and education staff. These rigid rules of behaviour and ritualistic routines reaffirm the institution's oppressive and exclusionary nature while also creating barriers that prevent the development of transformative spaces that are inclusive of racialized groups. This chapter discusses the ways each of the public events I attended either affirm or oppose the rules and rituals described by Duncan. Building on my argument that the museum is a contested space, I explore whether the AGO and the Toronto Biennial are able to address colonial prejudices and racial ignorance through alternative approaches to, and rituals within, public programming.

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<sup>25</sup> Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual", *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 10.

Tony Bennett's discussion of the museum's relationship with the state and its responsibility to cultural governance is also important in analyzing my case studies.<sup>26</sup> According to Bennett, the museum acts as gatekeeper to the public's collective culture and is a vehicle for the exercise of power while also allowing the institution to communicate changes in behavioural norms.<sup>27</sup> In the 2019 issue of the *Journal of Museum Education*, Nathaniel Prottas references the rise of the French aristocracy, the Louvre, and the French Revolution, stating that the museum emerged as part of nationalistic and colonial displays of power.<sup>28</sup> This history suggests that the museum has been a way that the state produces a carefully curated narrative of cultural histories and normalized behaviours while also creating a symbol of status for the bourgeoisie. This establishment of power also points to a complete erasure of racialized groups from the cultural narrative and indicates the exclusionary nature of the art museum. However, Prottas also argues that the act of making a once-private collection accessible to the public is a radical critique of that power of exclusion.<sup>29</sup> This poses the question: is the AGO and Toronto Biennial's act of providing a platform for Black and Indigenous individuals an attempt to represent the interests and histories of marginalized and oppressed communities? Or is this simply an act that presents the institution as being on the contemporary and mainstreamed "right side of history"?<sup>30</sup> As such, while I am considering if Duncan's ritualistic impositions are being practiced within each event, I am also considering whether their affiliated institutions have also, in the attempt to represent racialized groups, developed a ritual of upholding the historical and cultural erasure of these groups through presenting Black and Indigenous individuals and practices as subjects for

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<sup>26</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of The Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 21.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 19 and 23.

<sup>28</sup> Nathaniel Prottas, "Where Does the History of Museum Education Begin?" *Journal of Museum Education* 44, no. 4 (2019), 337. doi: 10.1080/10598650.2019.1677020.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 337.

<sup>30</sup> Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology* (London: Koenig Books, 2013), 6.

consumption by a predominantly white audience. What I am looking for in this case is whether the act of creating space for underrepresented communities also translates to the events' audiences and whether Black and Indigenous communities are also being given space to participate in and witness these conversations. In doing so, I hope to understand how the AGO, the Toronto Biennial, and BUSH gallery are actively attempting to challenge conventional and historically exclusionary approaches to education and public programs.

In developing an elaborate multi-year initiative that expands on an upcoming exhibition, the AGO superseded conventional approaches to public programming, which typically build conversations around exhibitions and deliver them to audiences through the authority of the curator. They did so by inviting a wide variety of stakeholders to speak in a round-table format: a horizontal and implicitly equalizing structure. Nevertheless, the AGO enacted Duncan's notion of ritualistic routines during the *Ways of Caring* event. Opening remarks and land acknowledgements are all traditional rituals that take place at the beginning of public programs and exhibition openings and can read as patronizing when performed in front of an audience of predominantly white individuals if they are not matched by direct action from the institution that actualizes the politics of these utterances. Land acknowledgements in particular, in attempting to bring awareness to the traditional lands on which the event takes place, can also be a harmful reminder of the settler colonial structures that continue to be violently enforced by the colonial state. Despite the event being organized as a round-table discussion with the panelists placed in the middle of the audience, the choice of elevating the panelists, appointing a mediator, and prescribing a predetermined list of questions all adhere to the same format as the traditional panel discussion. I would go further to argue that the choice of making the panelists sit at a round table further excludes the audience from the conversation, literally, by turning the presenters' backs to the guests (Figure 1).

Nonetheless, what was successful about this event in challenging these conventions is the extent to which the panelists were able to go beyond the predetermined questions and produce a conversation that was critical of the impending exhibition and the museum's acquisition of the collection. Brown opened the conversation by questioning the ethics of acquiring the more than 3,500 Polaroid images, mentioning that Lee indicated they had been donated and purchased through online platforms such as eBay.<sup>31</sup> Bowen and Clarke expanded on Brown's question by asking whether the families within the images gave consent to displaying their personal photographs while also asking about the reclamation process should a family decide, upon seeing the exhibition, they would like for their images to be removed.<sup>32</sup> However, it was later explained by Bowen that deaccessioning these images individually would be a difficult feat as the process involves developing a proposal which must come from the curator of the collection or qualified external specialist along with many other bureaucratic and institutional steps.<sup>33</sup> Later in the conversation, Clarke asked the question, "who are these images for if they are displayed in a space like this?" reminding the audience that the gallery is, in fact, a colonial space whose history has played a part in excluding Black individuals from its conversations and prioritizing white settler narratives.<sup>34</sup> If the intent of the *Fade Resistance* exhibition is to display Black life for a predominantly white audience, then the launch of the exhibition would support Protas's notion of the museum as a colonial space used for the display of power. The AGO risks further excluding Black communities from the larger conversation and thereby conforming to its historic, colonial rituals.

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<sup>31</sup> Zun Lee, "Ways of Caring" (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, December 18, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Deanna Bowen and Michèle Pearson Clarke, "Ways of Caring" (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, December 18, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> For further reading on the Art Gallery of Ontario's deaccessioning process read the AGO Deaccessioning Policy at <https://ago.ca/ago-deaccessioning-policy>.

<sup>34</sup> Michèle Pearson Clarke, "Ways of Caring" (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, December 18, 2019).

BUSH gallery's *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* was also preceded by the institution's normalized rituals of land acknowledgements and opening remarks which were performed by the biennial's public programming staff and featured promotions of the larger exhibition. However, as part the Co-Relations stream of public programs which sought to demonstrate the biennial's commitment to place-making, this event displayed how larger institutions can provide a platform for underrepresented communities to gather, learn, create, and share space free from the white cube's oppressive and colonial impositions.<sup>35</sup> As an Indigenous-led, land-based, and conceptual gallery, BUSH gallery seeks to rid themselves and their audiences of physical and systemic barriers by taking form "out on the land" to eradicate the barriers and impositions of the colonized space of the art institution.<sup>36</sup> *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* physically removed its audience from the institution as a means to focus on BUSH gallery's purpose to transform gallery systems and art mediums through Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and land use systems.<sup>37</sup> Through collaborating with the artist organizers and providing a platform for BUSH gallery to present their event away from the two main exhibition sites, the Toronto Biennial allowed BUSH gallery to fulfill many of the mandates indicated within their manifesto (Figure 2). This includes moving away from Western colonial traditions of knowledge creation and towards experiential learning and embodiment—ways of knowing embedded in Indigenous knowledge.<sup>38</sup> By eliminating the conventional format of the panel discussion or artist talk, BUSH gallery was able to create an environment that required audience members to practice exchange methodologies through the collective experience of sharing food and playing games. As I go on to discuss, this event challenged the boundaries imposed by the oppressive

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<sup>35</sup> Toronto Biennial of Art, "Programs: Overview", *The Shoreline Dilemma*, (Toronto: 2019), 67.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Morin & Tania Willard, "THE BUSH MANIFESTO", *C Magazine Issue 136: Site/ation*, 2018, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 6.



colonial rituals created by museum architecture and presented alternative approaches to learning and creating relations between participants. In creating an event which depended on the audience's active participation, BUSH gallery and the Toronto Biennial not only produced an event that highlighted the value of experiential learning but also allowed the audience to collaborate in bringing the event to fruition.

While both the *Ways of Caring* and *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* events vary in their means of engaging the public, both events point to some of the impositions of the oppressive and colonial rituals of the contemporary arts institution as discussed by Duncan. I have established that the practice of opening remarks and land acknowledgments have the ability to serve as harmful reminders of colonial structures particularly when performed for a predominantly white audience. This is a reminder that the initial responsibility of cultural governance was placed on the museum on behalf of the settler state and the habitual performance of these rituals only continues to enforce settler colonialism within the walls of the institution. However, what can be learned from these events is that there is transformative power in events that cultivate collective and embodied learning, free from the structures and systems of conventional discursive programming. This is visible through BUSH gallery's execution of *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* as an event that necessitates the active participation of its audience in order to understand what it means to engage in exchange methodologies. On the other hand, the criticality of the questions and comments from the *Ways of Caring* event's panelists shows the transformative potential in platforms that allow people of colour to deconstruct the oppressive colonial impositions of the institution. In so doing, the institution not only brings awareness to such impositions but also physically subverts them by placing racialized communities in the center of these conversations.

## Participation and Collective Agency

As I have established, eliminating some of the ritual impositions of the museum reduces some of its colonial and oppressive barriers, and opposing notions of authorship and agency further challenges its exclusionary nature, thereby allowing the institution to foster more inclusive learning environments. This chapter focuses on analyzing how the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Toronto Biennial, and BUSH gallery encourage audience engagement as a means to supports acts of place-making. Artist Pablo Helguera's book *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2011) provides a brief introduction to socially engaged practices while discussing how they can be used to redefine notions of authorship. Helguera explains that socially engaged art environments facilitate creative opportunities that move towards collaborative and inclusive models where participants can affirm their contributions as equals.<sup>39</sup> I argue that facilitating opportunities for collective agency gives contributors the ability to focus on developing meaningful relationships with one another. In this section I focus on Helguera's discussion of *collaborative participation* which is defined as a shared responsibility amongst participants in developing the structure and content of a collaborative work.<sup>40</sup> I argue that collaborative participation encourages collective agency amongst participants, thereby redefining modes of authorship and giving agency to the collective. I analyze how the *Ways of Caring* and *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* events embody Helguera's notion of collaborative participation to point to their ability to facilitate active participation and collective agency.

According to art historian Claire Bishop, the focus on participation in contemporary art and curatorial practice, which first began in the 1990s, sought to overturn the normalized relationships between the art object, artist, and audience. The role of the artist shifted from

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<sup>39</sup> Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 14-15.

individual producer of objects to collaborator and producer of situations with the audience as co-producer and contributor, while the artwork went from commodifiable object to ongoing project.<sup>41</sup> However, in her analysis of this surge in participatory art, Bishop also highlights the false binary of active versus passive spectatorship and the more popular conception of ‘bad’ singular authorship versus ‘good’ collective authorship. This distinction suggests that singular authorship only serves to glorify the artist and ignores the constant negotiations of authorship essential to each project.<sup>42</sup> Bishop gives examples of the vast terminology used to describe co-existing authorial positions in music, film, literature, fashion, and theatre to point to the lack of equivalent terminology in contemporary visual art that has produced this distinction.<sup>43</sup> Though this section examines whether each event uses socially engaged practices as a means to foster greater opportunities for participation and collective agency by marginalized audiences, it also attends to Bishop’s warning not to perpetuate the binary of sole authorship as ineffective in comparison to shared-authorship as generative and political. My intent is not to create a false claim that there is only one correct approach to curating, public programming, and developing socially engaged environments. Instead, my aim is to ask whether the AGO, the Toronto Biennial, and BUSH gallery created valuable and embodied learning opportunities which challenged conventional and colonial ways of knowledge production through shared experiences and varying modes of participation. While I look to Helguera’s notion of collaborative participation, I also pay heed to Irit Rogoff’s discussion of self-generated unconscious strategies for participation performed by the audience members of each art institution’s event. Rogoff explains that audience participation is not prescribed by curatorial or educational organizers; this would suggest a structure or system invented on behalf of the public as a display of “the good

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<sup>41</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells* (London: Verso, 2012), 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

intentions” of those who authorized it. Rather, Rogoff argues that audiences will always exceed what curators and institutions imagine for and expect of them.<sup>44</sup> I mobilize Rogoff’s discussion of self-staged participation as a means of place-making to investigate whether the *Ways of Caring* and *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* events encourage the development of meaningful relationships amongst participants. Doing so allows me to question whether the affiliated organizations allowed for opportunities for collective agency, thereby shifting the intent of their events from a display of supposed ‘good intentions’ to a genuine act of place-making.

The round-table format of the *Ways of Caring* event at the AGO makes it particularly difficult for the audience to partake in the participatory frames outlined by both Helguera and Rogoff. These frames are visible through the conversation between the panelists regarding the ethics of display practices within the walls of a colonial institution. Though the intent of this event was to facilitate a public-facing conversation, by turning the speakers’ backs to the audience, the event ironically disallowed for a larger dialogue between audience and panelists. This further created space for Black artists and art historians to critically discuss and question the contestations of the AGO’s acquisition of the *Fade Resistance* collection. Doing so allowed the panelists to remind the audience of the foundations of the institution as a space that places racialized bodies on display as objects for white audiences. When displayed in a colonial space these Black speakers’ presence reiterate the importance of Clarke’s question of “who the images are for?”<sup>45</sup> Prioritizing participatory practices amongst audience members would have prohibited or hindered the opportunity for the panelists to present critical questions that addressed the ethics of displaying Black life for a predominantly white demographic. Allowing the audience to contribute to conversations around Black life would only further exacerbate the tensions around

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<sup>44</sup> Irit Rogoff, “How to Dress for an Exhibition,” *Stopping the Process?*, Edited by Mika Hannula (Helsinki: Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, 1998), 139.

<sup>45</sup> Michèle Pearson Clarke, “Ways of Caring” (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, December 18, 2019).

the museum's historically oppressive display practices and the AGO's acquisition of the orphaned images. Doing so would create animosity around the collection, produce a division between communities, prevent the development of transparent and transformative learning environments, and discourage the collective deconstruction and renegotiation of the institution's approaches to curating and educating.<sup>46</sup> By producing an event that excludes the audience as a means to force them to witness and reflect on the conversation, in this case, gives collective agency to Black individuals to critically dissect the AGO's problematic means of acquiring a collection and producing an exhibition, and encourages them to consider how this impacts their community's lives and experiences.

While the AGO created a form of active participation that required its audience to witness as opposed to contribute to the conversation, *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* differed as it necessitated physical participation and the contribution of its audience members. Described as a public gathering, this event depended heavily on its audience to perform and execute the content of the program in collaboration with each other and with the artists. As this event required some facilitation—such as introducing the rules of 'Indian Bingo' as described by Morin—shared authorship in the conceptualization of the event was out of question. After demonstrating the rules of the game, the event organizers surrendered their positions as facilitators to allow the audience to carry out the remainder of the activity. Though the content of the event was predetermined by BUSH gallery, the artists were still able to give agency to participants by allowing them to carry out the overall intent of the event: to embody and engage in

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<sup>46</sup> This is only one approach to understanding conflict and antagonism as disruptive within the gallery context. Claire Bishop argues, conversely, that the eradication of antagonism only leaves room for the consensus of authoritarian order and removes opportunities for debate and discussion which are necessary for democratic processes. However, Bishop's discussion of the need for antagonism in the museum sometimes disregards historical inequities and assumes that all contributors within the contemporary arts institution are equals. See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October 110* (2004), 65-66.

methodologies of exchange embedded in gift economies and philosophies central to Indigenous epistemologies.<sup>47</sup> Along with this, participants were able to focus on playing the game and connecting with one another and in the process had the opportunity to build relationships through their collective learning experience. Rogoff's concept of self-generated participation as a critical mode of engagement with the museum can be seen through the partnership between the Toronto Biennial and BUSH gallery. By not interfering with BUSH gallery's production and initial intent of the event by enforcing the top-down and linear structures of conventional public programs, the biennial was able to successfully provide a platform for the artists to carry out their intentions and practice horizontal, democratic forms of place-making with audiences.

Though *Ways of Caring* and *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* varied in their success with engaging their publics, the events differed in how they enacted Helguera and Rogoff's ideas about participation. By requiring the audience's participation through listening and witnessing, the AGO was able to provide space for a panel of Black artists and art historians to engage in a conversation that deconstructed and critiqued museum practices while reminding us of the space's colonial histories. Despite being prompted by a mediator with a set list of questions, enough leniency was given to produce an organic and critical conversation. In *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial*, participation takes form on a more physical level due to BUSH gallery's intent of creating an event built on embodied collective experience. Both these events encourage their participants to actively listen to and witness conversations prior to contributing to the conversation and production of content. This forces their audiences to partake in acts of place-making and reflexivity which is at the core of creating successful learning communities within the contemporary arts institution.

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<sup>47</sup> Toronto Biennial of Art, "Beach(Fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial," 2019, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://torontobiennial.org/programs/beachfire-blanket-bingo-biennial/>.

## Learning Communities

In the previous section I discussed how audience engagement is necessary for creating inclusive and transformative learning environments. In this chapter I discuss the varying forms of audience participation in *Ways of Caring* and *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial*, and how these events cultivate learning communities by encouraging acts of place-making through open dialogue and reflexive practice. In her book *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks contrasts the social and political potential of *learning communities* against conventional and systematic colonial educational approaches. Described as a radical pedagogical approach, learning communities challenge and refuse the banking system of education: a mode of teaching based on the assumption that memorizing and regurgitating information is the only appropriate means of obtaining knowledge.<sup>48</sup> Though hooks discusses these learning communities as modes of progressive teaching which operate as microcosms within an already established education system, learning communities can also be generated within museum education and public programming. A distinguishing characteristic of learning communities is their ability to acknowledge each participant's presence while also making space for a genuine interest in one another's voices.<sup>49</sup> In order for teachers to construct these environments, hooks argues against the conventional notion that the facilitator is the only individual responsible for classroom dynamics and the communication of information. As learning communities are communal spaces sustained by a collective effort, delivery of content is carried out in collaboration with the facilitator.<sup>50</sup> Finally, learning communities are practiced through an engaged pedagogical approach which recognizes each classroom as different. Therefore strategies must habitually be

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<sup>48</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 8.

reinvented to meet the needs of each learning environment and each learner's experience.<sup>51</sup> In this section I examine how the AGO, the Toronto Biennial, and BUSH gallery facilitate learning communities in each of their events by providing opportunities for participants to equally contribute to the delivery of content and conversation. I analyze whether *Ways of Caring* and *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* have deployed learning methodologies to encourage audience engagement as a mode of experiential learning.

In this section I also examine how each event encourages critical thinking and meaningful dialogue about colonial influences within the gallery space. As both *Ways of Caring* and *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* were concerned with Black and Indigenous communities and ways of living, I argue that facilitating dialogue between artists and participants helps each public to further connect with the events' context. As previously outlined, a vital component of learning communities is the facilitator's ability to allow participants to recognize their equal responsibility for the dynamics of their learning environments. In this way, the AGO, Toronto Biennial, and BUSH gallery have the potential to create experiential learning opportunities that go beyond conventional question and answer periods which limit the audience's ability to participate in continued dialogue. As hooks states:

To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences.<sup>52</sup>

She elaborates, arguing that public dialogues can serve as useful interventions that dismantle the boundaries created by inaccessible classroom settings. While the two events I analyze share an interest in dialogical formats, I posit that encouraging audience engagement in self-reflexive

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<sup>51</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 10.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 130.



practices is equally important as allowing them to contribute to the conversation.<sup>53</sup> Encouraging the growth and practice of critical consciousness in learners, according to hooks, discourages colonial ideologies by bringing awareness to such issues and creating the conditions for concrete change.<sup>54</sup> Through actively listening to other participants' and through critical self-reflection on their personal beliefs and assumptions, members of learning communities—particularly underrepresented and oppressed individuals excluded from dialogues at institutions such as museums—practice place-making. By engaging in critical thinking and reflexive practice, participants at the *Ways of Caring* and *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* events can develop a better understanding of, and connection to, the content of each program, while also re-evaluating their own prejudices and how these are influenced by colonial ideologies. Additionally, the AGO, the Toronto Biennial, and BUSH gallery create environments that might enable participants to make meaningful connections with one another.

Although the format of *Ways of Caring* did not allow for continued dialogue amongst panelists and audience members beyond the question and answer period, learning communities also require an equal amount of active listening and self-reflexive practice. This means that though I am suggesting learning communities necessitate dialogue, I also recognize that in order to successfully create a community that is inclusive of underrepresented individuals, there must also be an active practice of place-making. While the audience at the *Ways of Caring* event were discouraged from participating in the discussion, it allowed them to reflect on and witness a conversation between Black individuals while confronting the limits of their worldview. hooks documents a conversation between herself and educator-author Ron Scapp, discussing the

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<sup>53</sup> In this instance I am using Kim V. L. England's discussion of reflexivity as a self-critical and self-conscious analytical mode of research. Kim V. L. England. "Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research," *The Professional Geographer* 46, no. 1 (1994): 244, doi:10.1111/j.0033-0124.1994.00080.x.

<sup>54</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.

importance of developing trust and respect within learning environments in order to be inclusive of racialized groups. As a white, heterosexual male within the academy, Scapp emphasizes the importance of recognizing and disrupting one's own acts of privilege and explains that this requires listening to and speaking with people of colour. hooks builds on this notion, stating:

We still live in a culture where few white people include black people/people of color in their intimate kinship structures of love and friendship on terms that are fully and completely anti-racist. We still need to hear about how inclusion of diversity changes the nature of intimacy, of how we see the world.<sup>55</sup>

In order to challenge the boundaries produced by segregated communities, learners must question the assumption that solidarity is unfeasible between white settlers and marginalized groups.<sup>56</sup> Such camaraderie is necessary to contest the boundaries that prevent communities from connecting with one another on a deep and meaningful level that has the potential to enact social and political transformation. In allowing artists and art historians from the Black community to discuss the *Fade Resistance* collection, the AGO was able to give speakers the opportunity to present critical perspectives about the ethics of displaying Black life in a predominantly white institution. Displaying a series of orphaned photographs containing imagery of Black individuals and their personal experiences in a space for a predominantly white audience creates an opportunity for white subjects to further invade and take away from the intimacy of a once inaccessible private memory. If it is true, as Zun Lee stated, that the primary intent of the *Fade Resistance* collection was to develop a social practice and not to focus on an exhibition or publication, then providing a predominantly white audience a glimpse into the personal lives of Black individuals should not be a necessary outcome of the collection.<sup>57</sup> If Lee's intentions are to

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<sup>55</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 105.

<sup>56</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 130.

<sup>57</sup> Zun Lee, "Ways of Caring" (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, December 18, 2019).

connect the Black community with the collection and each other, producing a multi-year initiative within a predominantly non-Black institution raises questions about the program and exhibition's accessibility for its targeted community.

For example, during the public conversation, Bowen raised her concern that by creating an opportunity for a predominantly white audience to look into formerly private Black lives—in the historical art institution's conventional manner of placing objects on shelves and labelling them as specimens—reinforces the institution's harmful and oppressive history in presenting Black individuals as artifacts for white Western consumption.<sup>58</sup> Not only does Bowen's remark show us how important it is for people of colour to be involved in conversations around their communities in the museum, but it also demonstrates how necessary it is for established institutions and privileged individuals to create space for underrepresented communities to disrupt colonial ideologies. By including Black artists and art historians in this panel, the organizers ensured that participants had the opportunity to speak from personal experience as individuals directly affected by the oppressive nature of the art institution. However, accessibility to both the remainder of the *Ways of Caring* initiative and its anticipated exhibition to the wider community in Toronto is still a barrier that has not been addressed.

In *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial*, learning communities are visible through a very different format. As an event that depends on the audience's embodied experience to understand its context, learning communities are created on an interpersonal level through the audience's interactions and conversations with one another. In addition, they physically partake in exchange methodologies through acts of sharing food and playing games. By creating an environment that is free from the conventional structures of education and public programming, BUSH gallery

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<sup>58</sup> Deanna Bowen, "Ways of Caring" (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, December 18, 2019).

created opportunities to build relationships through organic conversation and collective experiences. In terms of critical thinking, by presenting their mandate of being out on the land as a means to transform and rethink conventions around gallery systems, Willard and Morin gave their audience an opportunity to reconsider their own assumptions of what it means to create, curate, teach, and engage with artworks.<sup>59</sup> Removing the barriers and confines of the white cube's approach to discursive programming allows the audience to connect with one another free from the rigid rules and ritualistic impositions of the gallery space. It allows the audience to equally contribute to the facilitation and execution of *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial*, creating an environment that thrives on collective agency through successfully building a learning community.

As I have established, participants' ability to not only engage in dialogue, but to continuously participate in a self-critical negotiation of their own prejudices, is essential to cultivating a learning community. This is necessary for place-making to occur for underrepresented and racialized audiences. The AGO was able to create an event which highlighted the importance of providing platforms for underrepresented and racialized groups to discuss their communities while also deconstructing and reminding us of the oppressive structures and systems the museum was founded on. The Toronto Biennial and BUSH gallery enabled participants to contribute to the execution and facilitation of the *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial*, prioritizing experiential learning and collective experience. Both *Ways of Caring* and *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* present learning opportunities that encourage the growth and practice of critical consciousness among their participants while discouraging colonial ideologies and educational structures.

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Morin & Tania Willard, "THE BUSH MANIFESTO," *C Magazine* 136: Site/ation, 2018, 6.

## Conclusion

This major research paper analyzed how *Ways of Caring* and *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial* integrate pedagogical approaches that prioritize audience engagement, experiential learning, and the development of learning communities. I have assessed how the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Toronto Biennial of Art, and BUSH gallery are challenging conventional and exclusionary approaches to curation, education, and audience engagement. The events take varied approaches to discursive programming and its temporal function as a means to inform the public of the premises behind their affiliated exhibitions: The AGO developed *Ways of Caring* as part of a multi-year initiative in anticipation of an exhibition in 2021, while the Toronto Biennial had commissioned BUSH gallery to develop a program which reflects on their larger exhibition, *The Shoreline Dilemma*. After examining these events through the work of authors Carol Duncan, Tony Bennett, Claire Bishop, Pablo Helguera, Irit Rogoff, and bell hooks, I argue there is not one particular method by which learning communities take form. Instead, learning communities are identified through their ability to engage participants in critical conversations and thinking as well as by encouraging them to practice self-reflexivity.

As learning communities typically operate within the walls of academic and contemporary arts institutions, in order to radically challenge the institution's colonial histories, curators and public programmers must actively enact place-making for racialized communities through the exhibitions and events they design. Though the *Ways of Caring* event reproduced Duncan's notion of the museum as a "civilizing ritual" through the recitation of opening remarks, land acknowledgements, and hosting a question and answer period, this event highlights how an institution can provide a platform for people of colour to contribute to conversations about their communities and the ethics of museum practices. The AGO provided a platform which amplified the voices of Black individuals who engaged in critical conversations

about their community and the contestations of doing so within predominantly white institutions. This event excluded its public of predominately white individuals and encouraged them to engage in a reflexive, self-critical interrogation of their own prejudices while making space for Black individuals to discuss the *Fade Resistance* collection. However, if the AGO wants to continue the conscious inclusion of racialized communities in their larger mandate, they need to reconsider the methods through which they intend to exhibit the *Fade Resistance* collection. By placing imagery of Black life on the walls of a colonial institution, in the conventional manner that places racialized groups on shelves and labels them as specimens, the AGO risks further exclusion and harming of Black communities through their acts of invading the privacy and intimacy portrayed within each image.<sup>60</sup>

In the case of *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial*, learning communities take shape on a more interpersonal level between participants while also being visible in the relationship between the Toronto Biennial and BUSH gallery. As learning communities partake in acts of place-making, the biennial's act of providing a platform for BUSH gallery enables them to carry out their mandate of moving away from Western colonial traditions of knowledge creation and towards experiential learning and embodiment.<sup>61</sup> By fulfilling BUSH gallery's hopes to execute their event on the land, the biennial removed the structures that influence colonial modes of education and public engagement. The removal of such barriers allows for experiential learning opportunities to take place without being confined to linear approaches to disseminating expertise, such as the artist talk and panel discussion. In addition, BUSH gallery gives agency to their audience by allowing them to participate in the embodied experience of enacting exchange methodologies through sharing food and playing games. *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial*

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<sup>60</sup> Deanna Bowen, "Ways of Caring" (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, December 18, 2019).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 6.

subverts the oppressive and colonial frameworks the institution was founded on by challenging what it means to create, curate, teach, and engage with artworks.<sup>62</sup>

These events raise larger questions for contemporary arts institutions, their curators and educators: Is it possible to decolonize an institution initially built as a display of colonial power? And, if so, when will we know we have successfully developed a method which is inclusive of the racialized communities the institution initially excluded from its narrative? The most important aspect of creating learning communities within the context of the academy and contemporary arts institution is that there must be a deconstruction of the notion that only the established institution is able to engage in and contribute to larger conversations about the significance of contemporary art. In order for this hierarchical construct of knowledge transmission to be dismantled there must be ongoing acts of creating space for underrepresented communities to participate in dialogue and critically address the institution's colonial impositions and constructs. Embodied experience, continual dialogue between communities, and practices of self-reflexivity are vital to these acts of space-making. As predominately white institutions founded to prioritize the white settler narrative, contemporary arts institutions in Toronto must embody and actively practice self-reflexivity in order to set an example and encourage their publics to do the same. I suggest this act needs to be carried out by the staff members responsible for developing public-facing exhibitions and programming. Whether it be placing Black, Indigenous and people of colour in these positions or including them on an advisory level, the institution must continuously partake in models that place these communities at the center of their larger conversation in order to begin the process of decolonizing contemporary art spaces. In doing so the institution can begin removing the barriers that prevent

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<sup>62</sup> Peter Morin & Tania Willard, "THE BUSH MANIFESTO," *C Magazine Issue 136: Site/ation*, 2018, 6.

the creation of transformative spaces in the museum for underrepresented communities. Through engaging in dialogue with these communities and an ongoing reevaluation of their own prejudices, the contemporary arts institution has the ability to create meaningful and fulfilling learning communities.



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## Appendix A: Figures



*Figure 1.* An image of the panelists discussing some of the Polaroids from the *Fade Resistance* collection, *Ways of Caring*, Art Gallery of Ontario, photo by Cierra Frances, 2019.



*Figure 2.* An image of the BUSH gallery's Peter Morin, Tania Willard, and guest artist, Lisa Myers, addressing the group. Also photographed is a pile of gifts that was later used during one of the games, *Beach(fire) Blanket Bingo Biennial*, presented by the Toronto Biennial of Art, Ward's Island Beach, photo by Cierra Frances, 2019.