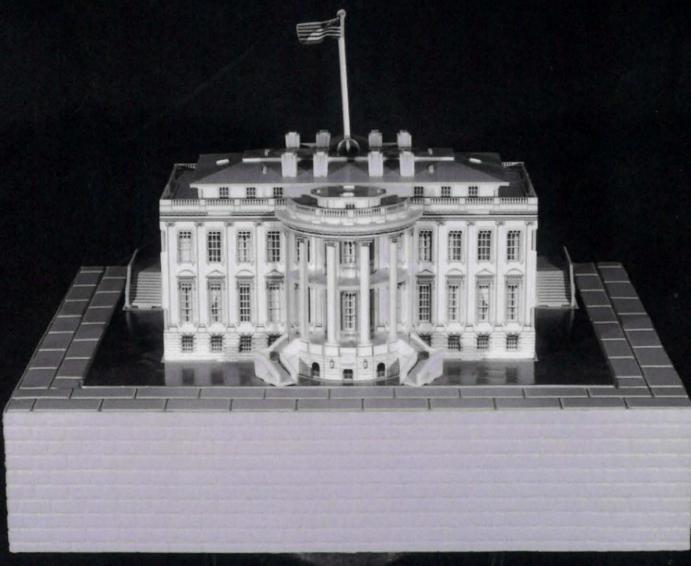


MUSEUM METAMORPHOSIS

CULTIVATING CHANGE THROUGH
CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

NICO
WHEADON



MUSEUM METAMORPHOSIS

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MUSEUM METAMORPHOSIS

CULTIVATING CHANGE THROUGH CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

nico wheadon

This book is a call to action for museum professionals, students, and anyone interested in the future of museums. It is a guide to navigating the challenges of the twenty-first century and a blueprint for creating more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable institutions. The author argues that the most effective way to achieve these goals is through a commitment to cultural citizenship, which involves recognizing the interconnectedness of all people and working to build a more just and compassionate world. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to make a difference in the world of museums and beyond.

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For *We the People*. For *Us*, By *Us*
who know ourselves as such.

There are times when personal experience keeps us from reaching the mountain top and so we let it go because the weight of it is too heavy. And sometimes the mountain top is difficult to reach with all our resources, factual and confessional, so we are just there, collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together, yearning for a way to reach that highest point. Even this yearning is a way to know.¹

—bell hooks

NOTE

1. hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

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Figure 1: A photograph of the author, Fiona C. Johnson, in 2018. She is wearing a black dress with a white fur collar and a small white bow tie. She is standing in front of a dark background. The photograph is a color print. Rights © Fiona C. Johnson, 2018. Used with permission.

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“I believe that the experience of motherhood is one of the most important and meaningful experiences that we have as human beings,” Michelle Millar Fisher told me. “It’s something that is often marginalized or even stigmatized, but it’s actually a really powerful and transformative experience.”¹ The set of photographs above shows the curatorial team for the exhibition “Designing Motherhood,” which opened at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2018. The exhibition, which ran through January 2019, was organized by Millar Fisher, along with Juliana Rowen Barton, Zoë Greggs, Gabriella Nelson, and Amber Winick. The exhibition was the result of a year-long collaboration between the Studio Museum and the Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School, a public school in New York City.

“I think that the most important part of organizing this exhibition was the fact that we worked alongside the students at the school,” Millar Fisher told me. “The students were involved in every aspect of the exhibition, whether it was helping to design the catalog, writing the text, or helping to plan the opening night.”²

KEY TERMS

The key terms are listed in order of appearance in the book.

Museum

An institution devoted to the procurement, care, study, and display of objects of lasting interest or value.¹

Metamorphosis

Change of physical form, structure, or substance, especially by supernatural means.²

Cultivate

To improve by labor, care, or study.³

Change

Transformation.⁴

Cultural Citizenship

The right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community without compromising one's right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state's democratic processes.⁵

Cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish criteria of belonging, within a national population or territory.⁶

NOTES

1. "Museum." Merriam-Webster, accessed September 1, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/museum>.
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6. Ong, Aihwa et al. "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States." *Current Anthropology* (1996): 737–62.

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and the people in the space, and the way they are received. I have been fortunate to witness many such moments in my life, and I have tried to capture some of them here. In this book, I hope to share my experiences and insights from these moments, and to encourage others to do the same. I believe that by sharing our stories, we can help to build a more inclusive and compassionate world for everyone.

PREFACE

*Take me into the museum and show me myself, show me my people, show me soul America. If you cannot show me myself, if you cannot teach my people what they need to know—and they need to know the truth, and they need to know that nothing is more important than human life—then why shouldn't I attack the temples of America and blow them up?*²¹

—June Jordan

Over the past few decades, museums have staged some of the most powerful conversations I've had. They've served as platforms through which I've built community, engaged heroes, and found love. It wouldn't be an overstatement to claim my most important personal and professional relationships have roots in the museum space. It would, however, be disingenuous to end my portrait of museums here, as this is only the underpainting to a more layered scene. Despite the haze of retrospection, I recall with tragic clarity how museums have also staged some of the worst acts of racism, cultural erasure, and subjection I've witnessed: days where museum actions or inactions led to divisive rifts among communities, heroes falling from altars, and love losing its way. The persistence of this paradoxical tension, alongside my commitment to working cooperatively to bridge it, serve as the genesis for this volume.

A brief chronology of my movements through museums and museum-like spaces is important here, as it is around these seminal experiences—and the enduring relationships they've produced—that the framework for this book is scaffolded. As a young person, I associated museums with a fraught choreography

of push and pull, where guardians dictated my relationship to and interpretation of objects that, for me, held only prescribed value. As a Black, queer woman, I—like poet and activist June Jordan—saw neither myself nor the souls of my people holistically represented in these encyclopedic museums. So, from a young age, I rejected the premise that museums are expert stewards of culture, and I fashioned an arts education all my own. I learned the language of visual art as a practicing artist in high school and college; engaged in nonacademic communities of practice, mentorship, and critique as a postgraduate in New York City; and later reentered the museum as a worker eager to learn from—and subvert where necessary—its inner mechanisms.

From 2006 to 2007, I served as a curatorial intern, and later curatorial assistant, at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where I supported the production of numerous exhibitions and publications. It was during this moment of discovery that I articulated a distinction between contemporary art museums (sites of production, engagement, and belonging) and encyclopedic museums (sites of my early childhood trauma), as our work helped me draw meaningful connections between art history and its contemporary relevance. I also identified my preference for museums that serve living artists and was seduced by the unrivaled magnetism of the Studio Museum’s mission, which drew me, for the first time, into community with other Black cultural workers.

In 2007, I left the Studio Museum to serve as gallery manager and later curatorial director at Rush Arts Gallery & Resource Center, an artist-founded and artist-led nonprofit in New York’s Chelsea arts district. Rush supported many of those same early-career artists of color I’d been building community with 100 blocks north, at the Studio Museum. I worked alongside artist, mentor, and gallery director Derrick Adams, and we mounted offbeat exhibitions and programs that mobilized a community of practice unlike any I’d ever known.

In 2010, I—the only full-time staff at the gallery—was laid off as collateral damage in the recession that threatened to wipe other small, culturally specific nonprofits off the map while numerous, majority-white cultural institutions coasted along, endowments in tow. It was then that I began to question the living legacies of institutional racism in the cultural sector and the inequity of the nonprofit industrial complex as it’s been designed.

I began researching alternative institutional frameworks that center people over profit and sustain through community buy-in over philanthropic buyout. In my research, I encountered anthropologist Renato Rosaldo’s concept of *cultural citizenship*, which asserts that “even in contexts of inequality people have a right to their distinctive heritage.”² His call for the democratization of existing

institutions—coupled with my want to acquire the necessary tools to build sustainable “for us, by us” alternatives—drastically shifted my course.

Later that year, I moved to London in pursuit of a master’s degree in creative and cultural entrepreneurship from Goldsmiths, University of London. The program, designed for and by creatives, empowers students to develop business acumen while advancing a spirit of innovation and solutions-driven change within their respective fields. Aside from this dedicated time and space to expand my knowledge base, I was drawn to London by the opportunity to test my operating assumptions about Black *community* in a global, diasporic context. And with the Olympics coming to London in 2012, I was equally eager to study the role of art and artists in driving alternative economies of cultural production surrounding global events.

During graduate school, I worked as a researcher at the Museum of Everything, “the world’s only wandering institution for the untrained, unintentional, undiscovered and unclassifiable artists of modern times,” as its website proclaims. I also participated in artist Tino Sehgal’s *These Associations*, the first live commission for the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall. While the experience at MoE left me with unanswered questions about who constructs art world identities and to what end, Sehgal’s project left me full of hope that artist- and community-led interventions could transmute the often hard, oppressive architectures of museums into soft, discursive spaces for collective belonging, learning, and growth.

I returned to the United States in 2014 and ultimately landed back at the Studio Museum, first as a communications consultant developing narrative around the museum’s then-imminent 50th anniversary and later as director of the newly established Public Programs and Community Engagement department. I was excited by the opportunity to reinterpret the museum’s mission through these new professional lenses and build out a holistic community-engagement strategy for a museum reimagining its local citizenship as part of its building project.

During this time, I launched my consultancy and began delivering cultural strategy and curatorial guidance to artist-entrepreneurs, cultural institutions, government agencies, and philanthropic foundations. I also picked up adjunct professorships at Barnard College and Hartford Art School that allowed me to continue investigating museum work on a continuum between art history and contemporary practice. The syllabi for both courses bridged theory and production; encouraged hyperlocal engagement among students; and steered them toward community resources beyond the confines of the classroom.

After five additional years learning from the rich cultural ecosystem of Harlem, I left the Studio Museum in 2019 to serve as inaugural executive director of NXTHVN, a then-nascent arts and business incubator in New Haven,

Connecticut. Having worked at the Studio Museum for most my career, it was with immense gratitude that I dove headfirst into this next chapter of institution building, cultural stewardship, and arts entrepreneurship. Another artist-founded space, NXTHVN was where I both sharpened and implemented the tools I'd gleaned along my journey and learned the ropes of building, quite literally, a culturally specific nonprofit from the ground up.

While this book was conceived during this most recent transition, its core consciousness has roots in the many experiences that preceded it. The threads of BIPOC arts advocacy, community empowerment, cultural entrepreneurship, and institutional critique that weave these experiences together *also* bind the distinct elements of this book into one cohesive volume. And its central argument—that in order to mobilize a people-powered arts-and-culture ecosystem, we must *first* decenter the museum's perceived authority over it—is derived from firsthand experience building and working within people-powered institutions over the past two decades.

My intentions in opening this book with an abridged professional biography are threefold. One, since I don't currently identify as a museum worker, it felt important to disclose my evolving relationship to, and intimacies with, museums and other cultural nonprofits. Two, because my path through museums was willfully nonlinear, it also felt necessary to caution that this circuitry is designed into this book's very construction. And three, since I share authorship with over 40 cultural innovators and changemakers in contemporary art that I've had the privilege of building with along this journey, it felt appropriate to name the milestones that mark where our respective paths have converged. While this volume initially emerged as a platform to document their work bringing cultural institutions into better alignment with community needs, the book quickly outgrew this early objective, both out of necessity and by design.

A PIVOT

This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal. I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom. Like art.³

—Toni Morrison

During the production of this book, a series of global events transpired that drastically changed its course, not only because the world we were writing about had changed but also because we, too, had changed—irrevocably. Seemingly overnight, our visions for reimaging the museum paled in comparison to the mounting threats of a global pandemic, domestic terrorism, police brutality, and the comorbid health, housing, and economic crises accelerated by COVID-19. Our daily commitments to scaffolding equity and justice within museums now felt like tending to only a symptom of the systemic racism that empowered police to murder George Floyd in broad daylight and Breonna Taylor in her sleep. And as our communities and institutions struggled to transcend the utter shitstorm, so did we. However, as Morrison asserts, artists, creatives, and cultural innovators met the moment by leaning in, learning from the new facts of our environment, and offering creative tools to unite our communities despite stay-at-home orders and widespread fear.

As people working to build equity on fronts both personal and professional, we continued to read, learn, plan, organize, create, build, and dream of a future beyond our circumstance. We did this not only as a means of spiritual survival but also to realign our work with the expanding and evolving needs of our communities. And together we confronted systemic injustice—and museums' roles in upholding it—in the streets, on the page, and through our respective platforms for advocacy.

Given the gravity of the situation and the new perspectives and priorities it yielded, I made space for the book's contributors to revisit what'd been written, out of due respect for the moment. Some of us had moved on to new positions, while others had been "moved on." Some had doubled down on their commitment to transforming museums into agents of social change, while others—out of care for their own mental health and well-being—packed their boxes and left the museum field altogether. And some had carved a path through our wildly transformed ecosystem, while others simply needed breathing room to process their fears and frustrations aloud.

As such, this volume evolved from a site of documentation and dissemination to one of celebration and affirmation, of both our humanity and our resilience—from transparent accounts of radical yet quasi-historical work to retooled recommendations enhanced to meet the urgency of now. The candid roundtables, case studies, and interviews included herein lay bare said recommendations yet are also transparent snapshots of our responses to this unprecedented moment of individual, collective, and systemic transformation. Let their coexistence in this volume serve as evidence of shared struggle, yes, but also—and perhaps most importantly—of our capacity to transcend it, together.

NOTES

1. Harvey, Emily Dennis, ed; Friedberg, Bernard, ed. June Jordan as noted in, *A Museum for the people; a report of proceedings at the Seminar on Neighborhood Museums*, held November 20, 21, and 22, 1969, at MUSE, the Bedford Lincoln Neighborhood Museum in Brooklyn, New York. Arno Press, 1971.
 2. Lukov, Zoe. "Renato Rosaldo, 'Cultural Citizenship.'" Hemispheric Institute, September 21, 2018, <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/enc09-academic-texts/item/681-cultural-citizenship.html>.
 3. Morrison, Toni. "No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear." *The Nation*, December 23, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/no-place-self-pity-no-room-fear>.