

SPATIAL REALIZATION: UNDERSTANDING BLACK CULTURAL
ENGAGEMENT IN CONTEXT OF SPACE AND WHITENESS

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For my Mom, Dad, and Sisters - Amara, Zakiya and Makeda.
For the members of the Pan African Action Committee.
For my cat, Stokely.

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which Black people interact with their culture in the context of white institutional space as approached by the art installation titled *Spatial Realization*. By establishing a space that invites engagement with Black culture contextualized within a white institution and directly juxtaposed by symbols of racialized oppression, the exhibit challenges its audience to confront the issue of conflict that is embedded even in generalized cultural interactions we tend to consider as only supplemental to our understanding of self. Ultimately, it asks the question of whether or not there is a possible reality where Black people can engage with Black culture without an inherent conflict with whiteness and what implications does that possibility bear in terms of our understanding of personal, cultural identity.

Through literary analysis, I consider the nuance of Black individuality and personal intimacy as it effects the overall experience of cultural engagement drawing from scholars such as Kevin Quashie, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, amongst others. Furthermore, both the installation and this thesis seek to expand upon the power of Black cultural spaces that minimize, or are indifferent to, white power structures.

I. ARTIST STATEMENT

At the moment, my work primarily focuses on concepts of Black cultural identity in contrast with physical space or environment. In this aspect, I draw from my own experiences as a Black person in relation to various social and institutional spaces. *Spatial Realization* is a reflection on the confrontation I've encountered as I've dedicated my time to learning more about Black culture and to creating institutional space for said learning.

Even in designing space specifically for Black students to be able to engage with their own culture, the question of who it's for constantly looms. I find that this feeling comes from the histories that are reiterated in the spaces that contextualize our existence. At a public university like Texas State, it seems impossible to escape the oppressive environments across campus to the point that any attempt to escape must be either a defense or attack. In *Spatial Realization*, I wanted audiences to feel this conflict. I wanted to curate an experience of wanting to learn more about Black history or culture that is directly interrupted by reminders of white supremacy.

My thesis installation is inspired by my work designing a Multicultural lounge and Black Students' Resource Library in the Honors College at Texas State. The development process for this space was immensely personal as I spent hours collecting literature and researching local histories alongside my peers. However, once completed, the space was no longer just a passion project by and for students; nonetheless, it was embedded in a campus that continues to reject the needs of students of color or address its only history of racialized oppression. Most of the artifacts I used for my installation are from my personal collection and reflect a particular part of my own engagement with Black culture. Similar

to the Resource Library, when curated into an art gallery setting, they become separate from me and embedded into a white space that historically functions against responsible engagement with Black culture. *Spatial Realization* challenges the notion that art galleries are safe or progressive spaces, especially for Black audiences, by creating an interactive experience that represents Black culture and invites its contrast within the white space.

This installation is the first of a series of explorations into the way Black people interact with Black culture and how it's effected in different contexts. While inviting audiences to engage with Black culture in institutionally white space such as public schools or art galleries directly involves conflict which is thus represented in the installation, meeting the generally uninvited, poorer Black audiences where they are and inviting them to engage with culture in a new way would be less focused on conflict with white supremacy but rather accessibility. I've learned that the most powerful nature of institutional spaces is their ability to adapt and grow in response to the people that utilize them. *Spatial Realization*, as a series, seeks to explore this concept as a source of hope and an answer to the question: Can Black and brown audiences enjoy their own culture as a refuge or recharge from the systemically oppressive realities that are ever-present in institutional spaces?

II. SPATIAL REALIZATION: UNDERSTANDING BLACK CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT IN CONTEXT OF SPACE AND WHITENESS

The modern formation of institutions in the United States and arguably the world is hinged on whiteness. As discussed in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the historical context of colonialism and imperialism has set the colored worlds in contrast to white and Euro-centric values. The prevailing dominance of these ideas have since become so ingrained in our societies that one forgets the foundations that they're set apart from and only feels the experience of being set apart. The primary example of this is in the way we, as people in western society, interact with cultural institutions because of the effort put into separating culture from function or production. That is to say, when I enter into an art space I'm coaxed into not thinking of the political implications of that experience or its function in the very tangible ways I interact with the world. Rather, I'm to approach it as only a supplemental experience related to the privilege of leisure or luxury. The fact that such cultural institutions are historically based on the idea of whiteness exclusive to Blackness is easily forgotten as I stroll through representations of Euro-centric values, history, culture, and gaze that nonetheless affects the way I interact with the world and myself.

Even educational institutions are treated in this way, as students are expected to experience the "functional" components of education, the more directly productive activities (in terms of grading and linear progression) such as homework, textbook readings, math and science, as an absolute process altogether separate from the cultural context of what they learn and how they learn it, which, in many cases, is but an afterthought reserved for exclusive experimental programs and private schools.

For a moment, though, we must imagine the conception of these spaces and the fact that, with any institution built before 1964, and many after, there was at some point a conversation of whether or not the Blacks/coloreds/negroes/niggers would be allowed in— simply answered “no.” A more pointed consideration is that it’s actually more likely that this is not conversation that often needed to be had as it was simply understood. This historical reality continues to define the function of these spaces despite concerted efforts by activist communities to disrupt or challenge it; we continue to treat cultural context as a supplemental experience rather than a definitive factor. For Black communities, however, this is rarely an option of which we’re in control. The few remaining institutions made specifically with us in mind have a similar history of existing primarily in relation to whiteness and, consequentially, part of their function and longevity is in the reiteration of white supremacy. What then is to be said of Black spaces that both lean into cultural context and reject or, perhaps more importantly, are indifferent to the white gaze? These spaces undoubtedly exist but, in the same sense that white institutions facilitate the forgetting of whiteness that aids in its perceived abundance, are they afforded the opportunity to facilitate the forgetting of Blackness and its potential of abundance?

Kevin Quashie conceptualizes this sensation as “oneness” in his book *The Sovereignty of Quiet*:

Oneness asserts the right of a human being to be just that — a human being — and this assertion privileges the inner life... [that] ...constitutes a sense of being capable of and related to everything (Quashie, 120).

His analysis suggests an opportunity for Black people as both individuals and as a community to pursue an existential optimism that rejects the inherent confrontation that comes simply from being *Black*. However, this optimism is hard to imagine as reminders

of oppressive realities continue to encapsulate our everyday presence. Additionally, the more one explores the cultural significance and history of Black identity the more the experience of violent oppression becomes an unavoidable, looming threat.

In 1961, James Baldwin famously remarked, “To be a negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all of the time.” However, he expands upon this idea pointing out, “[P]art of the rage is this: it isn’t only what’s happening to you, but it’s what’s happening all around you all of the time, in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, the indifference and ignorance of most white people in this country” (Baldwin, 205). Existing in a space that is institutionally indifferent to your struggle is the reality of the Black experience in the U.S. and much of the western world. However, there is an inkling of hope in Baldwin’s quote in the way that what happens around and to Black communities all of the time is, at a point, an impetus for the formation of such cultural resilience and definition. While not suggesting that Black culture is a sole production of oppressive factors, its collection into tangible, physical spaces is a result of these factors that in turn produces proud and familiar cultural communities.

Bruce D. Haynes writes in *Red Lines, Black Spaces: The Politics of Race and Space in a Black Middle-Class Suburb*, “Opposition from outside forces rather than ‘primordial’ sentiments give the defended community it’s solidarity. Racial consciousness is informed by the physical boundaries that define the community.” (Haynes, 151) This is most clearly represented in the experience Black people find in specific churches, restaurants, or neighborhoods, among other primarily social spaces. In an essay titled *Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation*, Toni Morrison describes these as “spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community”

(Morrison, 397). Considering more intimate representations of the same idea, such as kitchens, living rooms, libraries, and even the rare Black art space or museum, brings us back to the potential of oneness. Because these intimate spaces are typically experienced as an individual or with only close-knit groups of family or friends, they allow for a more introspective interaction not limited by the impending conflict of public Blackness in contrast to whiteness. Though they are not devoid of their own set of social issues still to be confronted within the Black experience (thinking of not yet formalized identities such as the LGBTQIA+, multi-ethnic or generally obscured communities), their isolation provides an opportunity for self-determination not often reflected elsewhere. Just as other marginalized groups that stand in contrast to whiteness work towards the conception and defense of space that allows them to embrace their cultural identity completely, we, too, deserve the opportunity to create institutions of cultural “oneness.”

At last, this is the idea that becomes *Spatial Realization*. The exhibit was installed within a gallery we’d been planning dedicated to artists of color. The gallery was a traditionally angular space with tall white walls but much of the work was vividly colorful and centered the experience of a person of color in one way or another. Though some wrote about their experience in conflict to whiteness in artist statements that were published in a packet that could be picked up outside of the gallery, most of the work was aesthetically introspective. Nonetheless, comments deriding the show as self-defeating and ‘racist’ against white people came within the first couple of days of the week-long show. One commenter wrote of my piece, “Be it intentional or not, as a white female, I felt unwelcome and belittled here. Robertson’s ‘installation’ told me to be ashamed that I occupy space, as

if somehow the presence of white people means s/he can't play Michael Jackson and hang pictures of Black people on the wall" (*Figure G*).

In a sense, she's correct. My goal was to create a space that allowed for Black people to be comfortable, while also forcing white audiences to question their experience in relation to Blackness, completely subverting the effects of a traditional art space. I wanted to create the feeling of intimate self-determination into a public sphere that invites Black audiences to become comfortable in spaces that reject or ignore their existence. Artifacts of Black consciousness are carefully selected to adorn the installation and encourage interaction, but conflict remains present as symbols of oppressive histories share the space. Pictures of James Baldwin and kids jumping double-dutch in Chicago then contextualize images of the Ku Klux Klan marching in front of the White House, above it a sign declaring "Coloreds Only". A VHS of Spike Lee's *Crooklyn*, a Brandy album on cassette tape, and a book facing outward titled *Look Out Whitey: Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* By Julius Lester all share the space designated for Blackness. In effect, the historical reality of white supremacy that consistently looms over the United States is set in contrast to a genuine cultural engagement and willful autonomy of Black and brown audiences.

I've approached symbols of white dominance, such as the KKK, and removed them from the context of their dominance without rejecting their existence or effect on our cultural reality. Poet and author of award-winning book *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine iterates this in an interview with *The Guardian* stating, "[I]t's important that people begin to understand that whiteness is not inevitable, and that white dominance is not inevitable" (Thrasher). For me, *Spatial Realization* is a conversation with this idea

of being able to escape from whiteness despite its persistent, violent existence in our everyday lives and culture. It's about finding a way to be engaged with the progress and learning of Black culture while not succumbing to the pressure of a historical reality that is actively invested in dismissing your humanity. The experience I hope to create within this public installation then goes beyond just a sense of intimacy or autonomy. *Spatial Realization* is an effort to represent the tangible power that resonates from the Black cultural experience and a testament to its potential abundance.

III. EXHIBIT STATEMENT

As a space curated to invite audiences to engage with Black cultural objects including media, art, and furniture in juxtaposition to clear reminders of racialized oppression, this installation explores how our interaction with Black culture is affected by the context of who a space represents and who is empowered within it.

Many people of color, especially in the south, are consistently put in a position where we can only hope to *occupy* space designated for whiteness. So, the act of claiming space for ourselves inherently involves taking it from another entity. Imagining the burden that comes even when the most generalized cultural engagement seems to require confrontation, I wanted to develop a space that embodied this experience. In the exhibit, the artifacts that draw the audience in and are meant to be used, enjoyed, and learned from are set in direct contrast with a historical reality that seeks to limit this experience. Here, you are challenged to make a choice, ignore the space altogether out of protest or disinterest or immerse yourself in a cultural engagement that maintains your awareness of your own oppression. As this interaction differs depending on the overall space and the audience that approaches the installation, a question of ownership becomes more apparent. Can white audiences engage with Black culture without understanding their connection to a history of oppression that informs it? Should they be able to? More importantly, however, can Black and brown audiences enjoy their own culture as a refuge or recharge from the systemically oppressive realities that are ever-present in institutional spaces?

APPENDIX



Figure A. The installation was intended to be a comfortable space that would invite audiences to interact with it and look closely at the various artifacts embedded in the exhibit.



Figure B. The image on the right is of the Ku Klux Klan marching in front of the U.S. Capital in 1925. More than 30,000 Klan members marched in this rally at the height of their popularity.



Figure C. I wanted the objects to invite physical engagement as much as possible but also wanted to maintain some control of how the space was used. The tape player allowed me to decide what music was tied into the exhibit. Nevertheless, most people were excited to see cassette tapes—especially one of Brandy’s self-title debut album.



Figure D. The books were mainly selected based on their titles since I couldn't be sure how long anyone would spend with the space. I use this as an opportunity to deliver eye-catching message. The book by Julius Lester stands out because of its poignant title but after some research, Lester's personal experience with Black intellectualism and autonomy adds a special layer to the portion of the space.



Figure E. A moment was captured during the gallery reception.



Figure F. Concentric was a week-long art show held in March of 2018 in the FLEX Gallery of the Joan Cole Mitte Building. Student artists of color at Texas State University exhibited their work as a part of the 3rd annual Black Excellence Week hosted by the Pan African Action Committee.

you Dumb as fuck

There was nothing racist in this gallery
The presence of this exhibit nullifies itself,
which is my biggest take away from "Concentric".
That these students can create art and have
it displayed on a position of authority and
a space for speaking wholly contradicts the
messages of disempowerment almost every piece
here attempts to convey. You cannot claim that,
(phrasing Don Thomas) the Black Woman is
underappreciated while having an entire gallery
dedicated to black culture and the "experience".
Well, you can, but nobody is going to take you
seriously.

Be it intentional or not, as a white female
I felt unwelcome and belittled here. Robertson's
"Installation" told me to be ashamed that I
occupy space, as if somehow the presence of
white people means s/he can't play
Michael Jackson music and hang pictures of
black people on the wall. If I was a
woman of color, perhaps I would feel just
as belittled; these artists perpetuate on
themselves and others that they, for no
reason other than their own
assurances, are hated, unwelcome, ugly,
and without self-worth.

Figure G. Attendees of the Concentric art showcase were encouraged to write their reflections on the gallery or particular works in an open and anonymous guestbook at the front of the space.



Figure H. The Black Students Resource Library was developed by students of the Pan African Action Committee in the spring of 2017 as an adjacent room to the Multicultural Lounge they also developed.

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