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Research Report

Curating Community: Centering Collaboration, Public Engagement, Social Justice, and Empowerment Within the Fashion Museum

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Dyese L. Matthews, PhD earned her doctorate in apparel design from Cornell University in 2024. She earned her BS in fashion merchandising from Central Michigan University and her MS in Apparel Merchandising and Design from Iowa State University. In her research she explores experiences of dressed embodiment, identity expression, and self-definition with a focus on African Diasporic identity and fashion. Dr. Matthews is an award-winning curator and scholar who has curated and contributed to several fashion and textile-focused exhibitions including *Collegiate Fashion and Activism: Black Women's Styles on the College Campus* (2020) and *Harlem Noire: Fashion Movement, Moment, & Memory* (2024).

Kat Roberts recently received a PhD in Apparel Design from the Department of Human Centered Design at Cornell University. Her primary research interests are the circular economy with a focus on upcycling, ethical/sustainable fashion production, fashion as a tool for justice, and the intersection of technology with handcrafts. She has an active art and design practice that includes curation and documentary filmmaking. This creative scholarship centers fashion, consumption, textile waste diversion, and labor in the fashion industry. Her most recent projects include the fashion exhibition *Past and Present Lives of Upcycled Fashion* (2023) and the episodic documentary series *Sustainable Studio Visit* (2023).

Jenine Hillaire (She/they) is a Lhaq'te'mish, enrolled Lummi Nation member, indigenous to what is now Northwest Washington State and a PhD student in the department of Human Centered Design at Cornell University. Their research interest is in the revitalization and continuance of Indigenous textile material practice and how these practices impact Indigenous well-being and futures. As a Coast Salish weaver and clothing maker, Jenine works with her

We would like to acknowledge and thank every artist and artist group that worked with us on this project. Additionally, we would like to thank all of the community members who took part in the public engagement activities affiliated with the exhibition.

- 1 Marie Riegels Melchior and Birgitta Svensson, *Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–18.
- 2 Ginger Staniel, Kelly L. Reddy-Best, Joshua D. Simon, Kyr G. Streck, Denise Green, Dyese Matthews, and Jennifer Gordon, "Radical Structural Change in North American Dress and Textile Museums and Collections: Critically Analyzing Social Justice, Oppression, and Empowerment," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* (2022): 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302x221132009>.

own Lhaq'te'mish community on weaving education and continuance. As a queer Indigenous academic, Jenine's methodologies stem from feminist, queer, and Two-Spirit Indigenous paradigms that emphasize Land-based teachings and social justice.

Ami Tamakloe, originally from Ghana, is a PhD Candidate at Cornell University and a self-identified Anthropologist. Ami holds a BFA in Fashion Design from Kent State University. Her/their research perambulates politics, and gender, and the use of art as a tool for producing and disseminating accessible knowledge. She/they work across mediums such as textile and fiber, film, literary works, and performance. Ami's artistic and intellectual practices foreground race, gender, sexuality, culture, and representation and she/they work to provide a platform for the stories of marginal demographics.

North American dress and textile museums have long been rooted in colonial ideals due to the long-standing perpetuation of Eurocentrism as superior to all other ways of knowing. The fashion and textile art exhibition Material Resistance: Social Justice and Empowerment Narratives Told Through Cloth (2022), curated by graduate students, contested these colonial traditions and instead centered the stories, lived experiences, and empowerment of marginalized communities. The exhibition featured social justice-focused textile works of five artists and three community organizations. The curatorial team explored methods to re-envision how curators can center social justice and empowerment within fashion and textile exhibitions through innovative approaches, building upon previous curatorial scholarship that values collaboration and combines tenets of post-critical museology, intersectionality, and self-determination. By prioritizing the voices of the show's artists and community members, being intentional about the curatorial selection and accessibility, providing opportunities for community engagement, and practicing repatriation, we provide an example of curatorial practice centering the people, not the system that has often disenfranchised them.

Keywords community engagement, quilts, textile art, empowerment, collaboration, fashion exhibition, decolonize museums

Introduction

IN THIS RESEARCH REPORT, we analyze one curatorial approach for mounting fashion and textile art exhibitions that centers on community collaboration and social justice. This case study offers a different way to think about fashion in museums by encouraging collaborative processes between curators and communities, rather than the creation of exhibitions dominated by curators alone. We argue that fashion museum curators who aim to center social justice in their exhibitions should allow for the autonomy and agency of the communities with which they share space and of the artists who they feature in the shows. This case is an example of how a collaborative and social justice centered curatorial style can result in a rich

exhibition, with significant opportunities for education and critical dialogue about social justice within the community, and the validation of fashion and textiles as a salient medium for these efforts within the museum.

Although some museums have undoubtedly been inclusive of some marginalized identities and groups' dress histories in their exhibitions, as an industry, museums are rooted in colonial ideologies, histories, and motivations.¹ It was not until recent political unrest grabbed the public attention that museums, art and fashion-related ones in particular, began to make public statements and declarations of being committed to social justice.² The May 25, 2020 murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by law enforcement sparked a global movement of

awareness and activism. After this horrific incident, many North American dress and textile museums modified their missions and diversity statements to show solidarity with a plethora of social justice movements.³ These museums began to take more initiative in displaying dress histories representative of marginalized identities. One example is from one of the most prominent North American fashion museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, which featured the exhibition *In America: An Anthology of Fashion* in 2022. The show included dresses made by Elizabeth Keckley, Fannie Criss Payne, and Ann Lowe—all monumental Black women modistes/designers—whose contributions to American fashion history have long been overlooked. As museums continue to advance the ways in which they research, explore, and display dress, a call to action for more collaborative and social justice centered museum practices is still prevalent and necessary.

Material Resistance: Social Justice and Empowerment Narratives Told Through Cloth (2022) was a fashion and textile art exhibition that was mounted physically at the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University and made digitally available to the public shortly thereafter. As curators of the show, we centered community collaboration and social justice in our curatorial approach. We prioritized collaborating with different communities (campus and the surrounding community, international organizations, and artists featured in the show) to center the voices of community members. This was achieved by utilizing tenets from theoretical lenses—post-critical museology, intersectionality, and self-determination—when facilitating workshops, both local and abroad; inviting the featured artists into the curatorial process; and collaborating with organizations whose work was grounded in the community. We also centered the exhibition's theme around social justice to create a space for critical dialogue about different issues that affect the same

communities with whom we collaborated.

In the show, five fashion/textile artists—Agnes Yellow Bear, Dr. Tameka Ellington, Kate Sekules, Sylvia Hernandez, Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi—and three community organizations—LGBTQ+ Rights Ghana, Drama Queens Ghana, and the Social Justice Sewing Academy (SJSA)—were invited to feature their work, which is focused on themes of social justice. The objects displayed included garments, quilts, quilt banners, textile art, audio clips, and a film. Some of the injustices confronted through the art in the show included the violation of women's rights, violation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex or asexual (LGBTQIA+) rights, gun violence, hate crimes, dispossession, slavery, community erasure, and the school-to-prison pipeline. All of the artists and organizations featured in the exhibition contributed in unique yet related ways, which prioritized the centering of identities and lived experiences that have historically been marginalized and deserve to be empowered, especially within a museum space.⁴

Reframing Museum Practices to Center Social Justice: Critical Theoretical Approaches

Researchers have and continue to address the ways in which museums and their missions have historically been rooted in colonization and assimilation.⁵ Many of the earliest museum collections in North America were made up of objects that had been stolen from marginalized communities and were put on display for the White gaze. This sentiment is still prevalent in many museums today, as only a few public-facing museum institutions have set the precedent of returning these types of objects to their rightful owners, and have shared their efforts.⁶ Additionally, some scholars question the call for museums to center social justice and decolonization in their work, arguing that taking on the “responsibilities of social justice

3 Staniel et al., “Radical Structural Change,” 9–10.

4 Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 1–28; Dyese L. Matthews and Kelly Reddy-Best, “Curating a Fashion Exhibition Centred on Black Women,” 149–60; Kelli Morgan, “Art, Whiteness, and Empire,” *Hyperallergic*, March 14, 2023, <<https://hyperallergic.com/807813/art-whiteness-and-empire/>>.

5 Dana Carlisle Kletchka, Adéwélé Adénlé, Shannon Thacker Cregg, Anna Freeman, Damarius Johnson, Megan Wanttie, and Logan Ward, “Imagining the Not-Museum: Power, Pleasure, and Radical Museum Community,” *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* 37, no. 1 (2020): 64, <https://doi.org/10.2458/jcrae.4751>; Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 1–20.

6 Marisa Elena Duarte and Miranda Belarde-Lewis, “Imagining: Creating Spaces for Indigenous Ontologies,” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 53, no. 5–6 (2015): 678–79, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2015.1018396>>; Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 3–9.

- 7 Chet Orloff, "Should Museums Change Our Mission and Become Agencies of Social Justice?" *Curator: The Museum Journal* 60, no. 1 (2017): 35, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12189>>.
- 8 Kelli Morgan, "How Can Museums Truly Shake Off Their Colonial Legacy? Representation Alone Will Not End Inequity in Art Museums," *Hyperallergic*, March 8, 2023, <<https://hyperallergic.com/806866/how-can-museums-truly-shake-off-their-colonial-legacy/>>.
- 9 La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawski, "Museums Are Not Neutral: We Are Stronger Together," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2019), <<https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2277>>.
- 10 Maura Reilly, "Toward a Curatorial Activism," *Cairns Indigenous Art Fair 2011* (2011): 10–23.
- 11 Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, "Henry Luce Foundation Launches Museum Partners for Social Justice," Gardner Museum, <<https://www.gardnermuseum.org/news/luce-foundation/>> (accessed April 12, 2024).
- 12 Erica de Greef, "Curating Fashion as Decolonial Practice: Ndwalane's Mblaselo and a Politics of Remembering," *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 6 (2020): 903.
- 13 De Greef, "Curating Fashion as Decolonial Practice," 901–20.

agencies . . . is a stretch beyond most museums' current capabilities as keepers and interpreters of our communities' art, science, and history."⁷ However, there are museums (for example the National Museum of the American Indian, National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the Los Angeles Methodist Museum of Social Justice) that actively combat these sentiments via their mission/vision statements, curatorial approach, and/or exhibitions and related programming, which center social justice.

Curatorial and museum scholars also advocate for marginalized stories to be included and be prioritized in the museum. For example, Kelli Morgan, the senior curator at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, investigates anti-Blackness in visual culture and advocates for museums to stop upholding colonial ideals.⁸ Similarly, curatorial educator and co-producer of the *#MuseumsAreNotNeutral* campaign, La Tanya S. Autry, confronts museums for perpetuating the "myth of neutrality" and advocates for museums and related institutions to address said myth by actively being more inclusive of marginalized stories and histories.⁹ Additionally, curator and arts writer Maura Reilly has written extensively about how curation practices have long been used as a consequential form of activism, creating space for voices outside of the hegemonic White, male, Western norm long centered in museums and exhibitions. Reilly describes three strategies of resistance: revisionism (the rewriting of art history so that inclusive histories are added to the canon), area studies (the creation of exhibits that spotlight the work of excluded communities), and relational studies (shows and exhibitions that feature the works of diverse makers in conversation, thus challenging the monologue).¹⁰

Centering social justice and community collaborative approaches to fashion exhibition curation is not a new idea. One recent example is the Henry Luce Foundation that launched the inaugural 2021 Museum Partners for Social Justice (MPSJ) grant project. The grant

was awarded to four museums (Mississippi Museum of Art, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Weatherspoon Art Museum at UNC Greensboro, and Memphis-Brooks Museum of Art) to support the implantation of community-focused initiatives that center anti-racist frameworks within the museum.¹¹ A similar community collaboration approach was also implemented by fashion researcher and curator Erica DeGreef in her exhibit *21 YEARS: Making Histories with South African Fashion Week* (2018). In the words of DeGreef, she intended for the exhibit accomplish three goals:

[Firstly,] to create conditions within the exhibition that would ensure a disruption of the dominance of Western fashion narratives in fashion exhibitions internationally; secondly, it was critical that the exhibition would welcome a diversity of local fashion voices in the museum; and, thirdly the exhibition needed to meaningfully engage a local audience, as much as it would interest international visitors.¹²

The surrounding community was brought into conversation within the exhibit through programming that included public talks and workshops, similar to our own curatorial approach. Those participating in the workshop brought in fashion objects of personal significance for which they wrote reflections and presented on.¹³ As curators we built upon this concept of bringing social justice and community collaboration into our curatorial approach, though we also brought a new perspective by inviting participants to create the works of art that were displayed in this show. We accomplished this through the textile art project *Human Too* and the forthcoming community art quilt that was started with our SJSU on-campus workshop. Through these community-collaborative exhibition initiatives, we as curators created an opportunity for the community to be deeply involved in the critical dialogue about social justice in the museum.

In our efforts to center social justice within our curatorial method we drew

from several theoretical approaches including post-critical museology, intersectionality, and self-determination. We implemented tenets of these approaches while considering thematic inclusion, artist collaboration and object selection, in-gallery displays, community engagement initiatives, and label writing. Post-critical museology as an approach embraces “visitor-centered and socially responsive” ways of curation that “respond to important community issues through public participation and dialogue with art museum collections . . . and the local community.”¹⁴ We used this approach when developing the goals of the exhibition, and again throughout our curatorial selection process, which is described in detail in an upcoming section of this article. People who engage with intersectionality theory, introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, argue that identities should be reflected upon as interactive with one another rather than isolated.¹⁵ That is, for one to comprehend their lived experience copiously, they must consider the ways in which their many identities (gender, sexuality, age, etc.) intersect and interact with one another.¹⁶ We considered intersectionality when exploring how the many stories of injustice shared throughout the exhibition were both individualized yet highly related in nature. Finally, self-determination is an Indigenous-centered, decolonial approach that requires curators to serve in a facilitatory role by working collaboratively with the communities they are representing, being sure to prioritize the communities’ voice, needs, and representation.¹⁷ We implemented this principle by prioritizing the voices of artists throughout the show, and by facilitating multiple community-focused workshops related to the exhibition.

Material Resistance Curatorial Summary

Our exhibition was part of Cornell University’s Biennial, a campus-wide arts initiative that invited artists to feature their work in the semester-long

event. As a new 2022 initiative, and in partnership with various stakeholders, student teams were awarded honorariums and project funding to curate exhibitions with full autonomy over which artist(s) were featured and the overall budget. The adequate exhibition budget included honorariums for all invited artists and all costs related to the exhibition and programming. After submitting an exhibition proposal, our group was one of two student groups selected. The Biennial is an event hosted by a campus-wide cultural organization and is not affiliated with any one museum or department. Therefore, we decided to mount our exhibition inside the Jill Stuart Gallery, located in the same building as the Human Centered Design department, the homebase of the majority of our team’s student curators. The building houses numerous lecture halls, labs, gallery spaces, classrooms, open study spaces, and dining hubs, allowing for a high volume of foot traffic. We selected a gallery space that is open from 9am to 5pm Monday through Friday (and by appointment on the weekends) and is free and open to the public. This allowed our target audience, the campus and immediately surrounding community, flexibility in accessing the physical exhibition.

As justice-minded recipients of the Biennial Curatorial Award, we were intentional in the allocation of project funding, constantly referencing our core perspectives and approaches introduced earlier in this paper. Reflecting our self-determination approach, instead of using some of the artist honorarium funds for other allowable expenses, we allocated the maximum amount of this budget to each of the artists, in an effort to support them and their social justice and community-centered initiatives.¹⁸ In addition, we made sure to implement post-critical museology by prioritizing funding for community-focused initiatives through textile art workshops that centered community engagement, wellness, and expression in multiple geographic locations.¹⁹

14 Kletchka et al., “Imagining the Not-Museum,” 300.

15 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

16 Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1243–50.

17 Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 29–73.

18 Victoria Hollows, “The Activist Role of Museum Staff,” in *Museum Activism*, ed. Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (Routledge, 2019), 80–90.

19 Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 29–73; Rachel Zollinger and Carissa DiCindio, “Community Ecology: Museum Education and the Digital Divide after COVID-19,” *Journal of Museum Education* 46, no. 4 (2021): 487–89, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2021.1983711>>.

- 20 Anamari Vänskä, "Boutique—Where Art and Fashion Meet: Curating as Collaboration and Cultural Critique," in *Fashion Curating: Critical Practice in the Museum and Beyond*, ed. Anamari Vänskä and Hazel Clark (Bloomsbury, 2017), 119–36; Hollows, "The Activist Role of Museum Staff," 80–90.
- 21 Denise Nicole Green, Jenny Leigh Du Puis, Lynda May Xepoleas, Chris Hesselbein, Katherine Greder, Victoria Pietsch, Rachel R. Getman, and Jessica Guadalupe Estrada, "Fashion Exhibitions as Scholarship: Evaluation Criteria for Peer Review," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 39, no. 1 (2021): 81, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302x19888018>>.
- 22 Linda Birt et al., "Member Checking: A Tool to Enhance Trustworthiness or Merely a Nod to Validation?" *Innovative Methods* 26, no. 13 (2016): 1802–3, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870>>.
- 23 Dana Carlisle Kletchka, "Toward Post-Critical Museologies in U.S. Art Museums," *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research* 59, no. 4 (2018): 301–4, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2018.1509264>>.
- 24 Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 26.
- 25 J9dsign, "Agnes Woodward—Loved Beyond Words," Soundcloud audio, 3:38, November 2022, <[https://soundcloud.com/j9dsign/agnes-woodward-loved-beyond/s-ELPIOX4T2pA?in=j9dsign/sets/\[name\]-biennial-artist-material-resistance/s-xQAEwESXTqe&si=11ac467661b84f238f175b76cb757678&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/j9dsign/agnes-woodward-loved-beyond/s-ELPIOX4T2pA?in=j9dsign/sets/[name]-biennial-artist-material-resistance/s-xQAEwESXTqe&si=11ac467661b84f238f175b76cb757678&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)>; J9dsign, "Dr. Tameka Ellington—Sis Alligator Meets Trouble," Soundcloud audio, 4:34, November 2022, <[https://soundcloud.com/j9dsign/dr-tameka-ellington-sis-alligator-meets-trouble/s-njVPIHLMtT?in=j9dsign/sets/\[name\]-biennial-artist-material-resistance/s-xQAEwESXTqe&si=e8a79d0ec158496a8cd7344cd2ccda3c&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/j9dsign/dr-tameka-ellington-sis-alligator-meets-trouble/s-njVPIHLMtT?in=j9dsign/sets/[name]-biennial-artist-material-resistance/s-xQAEwESXTqe&si=e8a79d0ec158496a8cd7344cd2ccda3c&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)>.
- 26 Emmanuel Akinwotu, "Ghanaian LBGTQ + Centre Closes After Threats and Abuse," *The Guardian*, February 25, 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/25/lgbtq-ghansians-under-threat-after-backlash-against-new-support-centre>>; Ian Austen, "How Thousands of Indigenous Children Vanished in Canada," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/07/world/canada/mass-graves-residential-schools.html>>; Native Hope, "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW),"

Collaborative Curation through Artist-Centered Self-Determination

To develop a genuine collaborative and transparent relationship with the artists, we remained in constant communication with them.²⁰ One of the main and most apparent ways we collaborated with the artists was through writing the label copy for the exhibition. Label text is vital to any exhibition as it contributes to "the viewer's experience and understanding of the subject" and "influence[s] the ways such creative work is perceived and used to teach . . . these factors contribute to the ways in which a story is told through fashion curation and display."²¹ We developed our labels by drawing upon a revised version of member checks.²² That is, instead of initially writing the label copy ourselves as the curators (which is a common museum practice) and then sending it to the artists for their review, edits, and approval, we gave the artist full autonomy to write their own label copy in the form of artist statements, an implementation of self-determination. Then, we made sure not to edit the statements in an effort to keep the voices of the artists in the exhibition as authentic as possible.²³ The conscious decision to abandon traditional approaches to label text—where the curators are the interpreters of the objects on display, and to instead feature the voices of the artists themselves—is self-determination actualized.²⁴ The artists' statements were also included in the physical exhibition catalogs, which were free upon entry into the gallery space.

Additionally, we invited all artists and organizations to create and send us an audio recording of themselves speaking about the artwork featured in the exhibition. Our goal was to ensure that the artists' voices were prioritized within the show by encouraging their assertion within the space. With the exception of technical guides to ensure audibility of the recordings, we did not impose any rules on the audio and gave full agency to the artists and their creative approach. Two of the artists, Agnes Yellow Bear and Tameka Ellington,

created audio clips that were made accessible to visitors via a QR code on the accompanying label text.²⁵

Finally, once we began installation we remained mindful of the artists' self-determination and our facilitatory role as collaborative curators and adhered to all display requests received, which came from the SJSA and Yellow Bear. SJSA requested that their *Activist ABC* quilt, made of six separate panels, be hung closely together and at the same height. Yellow Bear requested that her designed garments be displayed on mannequins of color as they speak to issues specific to racialized Indigenous bodies in a White supremacist system of classifying humans. Two dress forms fitted with black fabric coverings were used for the ribbon T-dress and jingle dress, and one black mannequin was used for the ribbon skirt with a graphic T-shirt. After the installation of these artworks, we sent images to the artists for their approval and adjusted them as necessary, per their requests.

Object and Artist Selection Process: Post-Critical Museology Enacted

As curators, with personal affiliations to various social justice movements, we choose our artists based on their advocacy for social justice work. We also considered our curatorial position of influence in bringing important dialogues to the forefront for community members with whom we share marginalized identities. We continue to witness and experience many injustices, including violence against marginalized communities and the erosion of women's reproductive rights that plague our society, and therefore we unanimously determined that our exhibition would center on social justice and utilize a post-critical museology approach that directly responded to issues affecting the community.²⁶ As previously stated, we identified five fashion/textile artists and three community organizations, that emphasize the use of textiles in art and expression, to collaborate with and

FIGURE 1 Detail image of the jingle dress *Loved Beyond Words* (2020) by Agnes Yellow Bear featured in *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. The image depicts a close look at the red metallic jingles as well as the text printed throughout the garment. Photo by Simon Wheeler for Cornell University.



feature in the exhibition. This process was one of the most challenging as we tried our best to be equitable in selecting artists with whom to collaborate. We ultimately relied on the judgment of our collective curatorial team as well as our respective knowledge of each of the artists selected. The artists and organizations were chosen for their work on social justice that actively responds to community issues and for their profound artistry. In the process of identifying the artists featured in the show, we also used a lens of intersectionality. We considered how their respective focus on social justice was unique, but also how their topics intersected with one another to create a uniform call to action.

Agnes Yellow Bear (formerly Woodward) is a Cree, First Nations regalia maker and Indigenous activist whom we initially approached because of the ribbon skirt she made for Deb Haaland, the first Indigenous American (Pueblo of Laguna) to be sworn into the office of US Secretary of the Interior.²⁷ Additionally, Yellow Bear's garment and fiber art designs, which bring awareness to and aim to empower Missing, Murdered, Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2S+) organizations and affected families, made her essential to our exhibition. She submitted three ensembles that

FIGURE 2 Full in-gallery view of the ribbon T-dress *Still Here* (2022) by Agnes Yellow Bear featured in *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. Photo by Simon Wheeler for Cornell University.



used ribbon work, appliqué, and regalia-making adornment techniques to communicate Indigenous-specific social justice issues to the exhibition: *Never Forgotten*, a ribbon skirt, *Loved Beyond Words*, a jingle dress (Figure 1), and *Still Here*, a ribbon T-dress (Figure 2).

Dr. Tameka Ellington is the Founder and CEO of the First Generation Revolutionaries movement and curator of creative scholarship that is inspired by African art and folklore. Ellington provided the creative design, *Sis Alligator Meets Trouble* (Figure 3). This one-of-a-kind piece was inspired by the Gullah Geechee folktale "Bruh Alligator Meets Trouble" written by Virginia Hamilton.²⁸ This artwork, accompanied by an audio-reading of the original folktale told by Dr. Ellington was included in the exhibition as a form of acknowledgment and preservation of stories and oral histories deriving from the descendants of

Native Hope, 2022, <<https://www.nativehope.org/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-mmiw>>.

- 27 Hallie Golden, "She's Representing All of Us: The Story Behind Deb Haaland's Swearing-in Dress," *The Guardian*, March 23, 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/23/deb-haaland-swearing-in-skirt-dress-agnes-woodward>>.
- 28 Virginia Hamilton, Leo Dillon, and Diane Dillon. *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (Knopf, 1985).

FIGURE 3 Full in-gallery view of one-of-a-kind dress *Sis Alligator Meets Trouble* (2019) by Dr. Tameka Ellington featured in *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. Photo by Simon Wheeler for Cornell University.



enslaved Africans in the US and the continual oppression and cruelty imposed on them by society.

Mending and fashion activist and scholar *Kate Sekules'* works featuring worn and stained garments embellished by widely accessible techniques and highly affordable materials were deemed essential for the show. Sekules' resulting works illustrate how used fashion pieces may be engaged to convey stories about material and personal meaning. Sekules loaned two dresses to the show, the first being *Sew Her Name* (Figure 4), which powerfully memorializes women of color who have been victims of police violence by featuring the names and quotes from Black women killed by law enforcement

intricately embroidered with colorful cotton thread. Centered at the neckline are the words "SEW HER NAME" embroidered as a homage to Kimberlé Crenshaw's "#SayHerName" movement. The second garment by Sekules, *Ooops* (Figure 5), is a simple, black A-line cotton dress that features an appliquéd underarm patch depicting an open mouth with a tongue of a stylized US flag and the word "oops" embroidered below it in cursive script. In response to the 2022 Supreme Court decision to strike down *Roe v. Wade*, Sekules posted an image of this dress, which she made in 2020, on Instagram as a vehicle to publicly discuss her decision to abort an unintended pregnancy. The Instagram

FIGURE 4 Full in-gallery view of the dress *Sew Her Name* (2020) by Kate Sekules featured in *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. Photo by Simon Wheeler for Cornell University.



FIGURE 5 Detail image of the dress *Oops* (2020) by Kate Sekules featured in *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. The detail shows the underarm patch of the dress made of a worn Rolling Stones T-shirt, placed above the phrase "oops" embroidered in cursive script. Photo by Simon Wheeler for Cornell University.



post became a safe space for people who have had similar experiences to meaningfully connect.²⁹

Sylvia Hernandez, a self-taught master quilter, was selected because her art addresses a wide range of universal human rights issues including incarceration, mass shootings, water rights, racism, and reproductive rights. While many of her quilts are used to call attention to injustices, she also creates works that celebrate the creativity, impact, and heritage of historical figures. Hernandez loaned four quilts to the show: *Community PTSD* (2021) (Figure 6), *Guns Have More Rights Than a Uterus* (2021), *Birmingham Bombing* (2012) (Figure 7), and *Basquiat* (2021). These quilts were displayed alongside one another in the gallery space to represent their individualism and interconnectedness.³⁰

Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi is a Ghanaian, trans, multidisciplinary

artist (or artist/activist), curator, mentor, founder and artistic director of perfocraZe International Artists Residency (pIAR). Upon request, Fiatsi provided access to their visual art in the form of a short video titled *Rituals of Becoming* (2017). This played on a continuous loop on a large television screen inside the gallery (Figure 8).³¹ As stated by Fiatsi, the video “presents conditions of the process, product, intimacy, privacy and the body in sets of rituals that are embodied in the concept of ‘becoming’, that which is performed daily and intimately.”³²

One of the curators also co-facilitated an in-person community art project in Accra, Ghana with the organizations **LGBTQ+ Rights Ghana** and **Drama Queens Ghana**. LGBTQ+ Rights Ghana is a community-focused organization that recently opened a communal space

- 29 Kate Sekules, “My Abortion Mended My Life,” Instagram, June 25, 2022, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CfPSeRmpTXS/?igsh=eXdqM3l2cnVoN2Z4>>.
- 30 Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1243–50.
- 31 Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi, *Rituals of Becoming*, performed by Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi (2017, Accra, Ghana), video recording, <https://vimeo.com/250720337?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=30280925>.
- 32 Andrei Zozulya-Davidov, “Rituals of Becoming According to crazinisT artist,” *Fucking Young!*, March 31, 2017, <<https://fuckin-young.es/rituals-becoming-according-crazinist-artist/>>.

FIGURE 6 Image of the quilt *Community PTSD* (2021) by Sylvia Hernandez, which was featured in *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. The quilt features the phrases “family,” “witnesses,” “victims,” and “friends” along with silhouettes of human figures placed inside caskets. Photo by authors.



FIGURE 7 Image of the quilt *Birmingham Bombing* (2012) by Sylvia Hernandez, which was featured in *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. The quilt features photos of the four young girls killed in the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Photo by authors.



FIGURE 8 Still image of in-gallery screen where the film *Rituals of Becoming* (2017) by Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi was played on a loop. Photo by Simon Wheeler for Cornell University.



in Accra to provide services and safety to LGBTQIA+ persons. After learning of this space, the Ghana Police Service forcibly closed the establishment, which was followed by the Ghanaian parliament enacting the Proper Reproductive Rights and Family Value Bill.³³ The terms of the bill criminalize LGBTQIA+ people and allies, impose fines and jail time for any kind of support of LGBTQIA+ persons, encourage whistleblowing on suspected LGBTQIA+ persons, and propose conversion therapy for intersex people. Drama Queens Ghana is an activist organization that is dedicated to using the arts for human rights activism through a feminist, LGBTQIA+, environmentalist, and pan-Africanist worldview. In the facilitated workshop, LGBTQIA+ people and allies wrote or drew answers to prompts that focused on humanity, citizenship, and celebration of personhood in efforts to position queerness as just one part of an individual's identity. The resulting collection of thirty-two self-narratives inscribed on cloth using a combination of text and drawings was brought back to the US

and was featured in our exhibition as the installation titled *Human Too* (Figure 9). As curators, we found it was important to include this artistic project in order to represent an innovative curatorial approach that encourages the community to not only engage with the exhibition, but also to contribute to it in meaningful and creative ways. To maintain the safety of community members the location and updates about the art event were shared in secured group chats.

Lastly, we selected quilts from *The Social Justice Sewing Academy (SJSA)*, a non-profit organization. SJSA aims to empower community members by utilizing textile art as a form of activism through the crafting of quilts that highlight social injustices. The quilts from SJSA are made by combining the efforts and talents of community members and highly skilled volunteer quilters. Individual quilt blocks are joined together into completed quilts, which are publicly displayed. SJSA loaned five community quilts that speak to various social issues including land dispossession, police violence, and mass

33 Dheeraj Diwakar, "Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill Makes LGBTQ+ Community Illegal," *Jurist*, August 23, 2021, <<https://www.jurist.org/commentary/2021/08/dheeraj-diwakar-human-sexual-rights-bill-ghana-lgbtq-illegal/>>.

34 The SJSA Remembrance Project works with families who have lost loved ones to violence to create quilted banners that can be displayed by local and national organizations. The aim of these banners is to highlight the lives of the victims while bringing wider awareness to the issue of systemic violence. More information can be found at the following link: <https://www.sjsacademy.org/remembrance-project/>.

FIGURE 9 Detail image of *Human Too* (2022), which is a collection of thirty-two handkerchiefs created during the workshop in Accra, Ghana. This photo is of a selected number of handkerchiefs—all thirty-two were hung in the gallery for *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. Photo by authors.



incarceration, among many others (Figures 10, 11, and 12).

In addition to the quilts, SJSA also loaned five memorial banners, which are part of the SJSA Remembrance Project, designed in collaboration with families who have lost a loved one to violence.³⁴ Each of these banners features two individuals whose deaths resulted from violence (Figure 13). Though the name of the individual the banner is honoring is included, the rest of the quilt block's appearance is at the discretion of the

maker(s), who are usually family members of the victim. In some instances, the family chose to have their loved one's likeness appliquéd on the block. For other individuals, imagery that the victims' loved ones associate with their memory is displayed.

Designed Outcome

We provided ample space for individual pieces to be viewed separately. We also actively placed objects together so that

FIGURE 10 Image of the six separate panels that make up the full quilt *Activist ABCs* (2017) by the Social Justice Sewing Academy. These banners were featured in *Material Resistance* at Cornell University and depict every letter of the alphabet with an affiliated image related to justice. Photo by authors.



FIGURE 11 In-gallery view of two Social Justice Sewing Academy quilts—*Activist ABCs* (2017) on the right and *Agency* (2018) on the left. The dress *Sew Her Name* (2020) by Kate Sekules is also visible in this image as it was situated in front of the quilts in the gallery for *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. Photo by Simon Wheeler for Cornell University.



FIGURE 12 Image of the quilt *Lakota Youth Speak* (2018) by the Social Justice Sewing Academy, which was featured in *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. The quilt depicts six messages/image stories specifically related to Indigenous social justice issues. Photo by authors.



FIGURE 13 In-gallery view of the five Social Justice Sewing Academy memorial banners from The Remembrance Project (dates ongoing), which honor those lost to violence. Photo by Simon Wheeler for Cornell University.



FIGURE 14 Installation view of the full gallery space for *Material Resistance* at Cornell University. Image features from left to right *Birmingham Bombing* (2012), *Guns Have More Rights Than a Uterus* (2021), *Ooops* (2020), *Never Forgotten* (2017), *Still Here* (2022), *Loved Beyond Words* (2020), *Agency* (2018), and *Lakota Youth Speak* (2018). As shown in the image, all dress forms and mannequins are placed atop pedestals and configured to invite visitors to navigate freely throughout the space. Photo by Simon Wheeler for Cornell University.

35 Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1243–50.



they would be viewed as being in conversation with one another (Figure 14).³⁵ Because the exhibition space was a large open gallery, we decided to place all mannequins on pedestals spaced throughout the floor in a curved path, while being sure to keep the space wheelchair accessible. The result was a visually dynamic placement that also provided a greater sense of direction, encouraging visitors to move throughout the entirety of the space. The object labels were constructed and placed with accessibility in mind. The labels were printed on high-quality matte paper to limit glare and were placed in consistent locations in proximity to each object. Hence, they were easier to locate and were mounted at a height that was appropriate for viewers at varying heights and in wheelchairs. These considerations meant that the exhibit complied with standards set forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Community Connection: Expanding Community-Centered and Collaborative Curation

The nexus and innovativeness of this textile-focused exhibition was to engage with the community in critical dialogue around topics of social justice.

Considering this, we included multiple community-collaborative outreach programs as part of the exhibition: two being the workshops held in Accra, Ghana, and a third workshop that was held on campus. All events were free and open to the public. As mentioned, the workshops held in Ghana were organized within secured group chats and facilitated by one of our team's curators. The facilitator developed prompts that encouraged each participant to think critically and artistically about their own identities and allyships. The prompts included language such as the following: "If you had a superpower, what would it be?" "What do you think

FIGURE 15 Photo of community members who participated in creating quilt blocks at the on-campus workshop facilitated by SJSA. As part of *Material Resistance*. The workshop took place at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art on November 11, 2022. Photo by authors.



Ghana loses by depriving queer people of the ability to just be?” “What is the best part about being Ghanaian?” All thirty-two attendees were encouraged to create a unique textile design, using a white handkerchief as a base, to respond to a prompt. Handkerchiefs represented a clean slate on which individuals could design their lives. Participants were provided with white handkerchiefs, fabric markers, fabric paint, and other art supplies. Since the closing of the exhibition, the handkerchiefs have been returned to the organizations in Ghana that helped coordinate the workshop.

We collaborated with the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University to host our on-campus workshop in one of their studio and lecture hall spaces. The museum also promoted the workshop to their broad network, which propelled our curatorial intent to

reach as many community members as possible. The workshop was facilitated by SJSA and opened with a discussion on social inequities, self-reflection, and activism. Then, twenty-four community members participated in the first steps of making a university-specific social justice quilt by creating quilt blocks of the social injustices they feel strongly about (Figure 15). The blocks were made using donated fabric scraps and basting glue. Each participant also wrote their own artist statement and detailed instructions for the volunteers embroidering their blocks, an exercise that granted the participants agency over their design and message. The blocks were then collected by SJSA to be shipped, embroidered, and sewn into a full quilt by volunteers. When the quilt is complete, it will be displayed on campus and then returned to SJSA to be

included among their other quilts that are displayed across the US. This art project is another example on how we, as curators, provided a space where community members could contribute to the exhibition in creative ways.

Additionally, as part of our community engagement mission, we conducted exhibit tours for student organizations, classes, and general visitors. We collaborated with the Indigenous Graduate Student Association (IGSA) and the American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program (AIISP) to bring Yellow Bear to campus to give a talk and gallery tour explaining the story and motivation behind her designs. We also hosted an in-person opening reception that was made available on Instagram Live.

To introduce the exhibition to audiences beyond the museum's walls, we created a digital version using the largely accessible and easy-to-use platform Microsoft Sway.³⁶ The digital exhibition features images of the installation inside the gallery, artist bios, various photos of each of the items featured in the show and installed in the gallery, and all label text. We also used a variety of video and digital tools to allow the website's visitors to have a more comprehensive and engaging experience with the digital version of the exhibition. These included a 3-D, interactive experience of the exhibition space via Matterport technology, a video recording of the opening reception, videos of the SJSU community workshop, audio clips that were included in the exhibition show, and some behind-the-scenes videos of the curatorial process.³⁷

Conclusion

As facilitator-curators of this fashion and textiles exhibition, we made space for the self-determination of the artists and communities that allowed their voices to be heard in the ways they wanted and needed. We also approached collaboration in ways that mitigated possible misinterpretations and bias structures inherent in typical museum practice.

We were intentional during the curatorial selection process, assuring that all objects included in the show highlighted social justice while intersecting with one another. As temporary caretakers (conservators) of the works in the exhibit, we focused on the continuing life of each piece through our respect and reciprocity to the communities and artists gracious enough to loan their work to us. We emphasized the importance of art and other objects on display within museums and galleries to be repatriated to or remain within the communities in which they were created. Additionally, we subverted hierarchal practices within conventional curatorial approaches by highlighting the importance of creating spaces that center community members' contributions to exhibitions through the making and inclusion of textile art. This inclusion of the community generates life by creating space for further engagement and critical discussion that reaches beyond museum galleries and storage spaces.

We invite textile and fashion curators, museums, and scholars alike who aim to center the essential need for social justice in their work to emphasize collaboration with artists and designers, empowering the systemically disempowered, and to implement inclusivity of communities that are marginalized. We believe that this approach allows for re-envisioning how curators can center social justice and empowerment within fashion and textile exhibitions. It allows for more personal engagement between communities, artists, curators, and museum visitors, while focusing on opportunities for liberation within the realm of fashion and textiles. We also encourage museums to prioritize engagement with community members by providing opportunities for organizations to participate actively in the action of social justice (workshops, digitally accessible exhibitions, and other programming) and to think critically about how fashion design and textile art can intersect with social justice work. Furthermore, providing educational

36 Heike Jense, "Converging Practices: Fashion Exhibits Across Museums and Social Media," *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty* 10, no. 1 (2019): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb.10.1.31_1>.

37 Dyese Matthews, Kat Roberts, Jenine Hillaire, and Ami Tamakloe, "Material Resistance," Microsoft Sway, November 2022, <<https://sway.cloud.microsoft/SJIOW0JbWkfsRtU3>>.

gallery tours and inviting the artists to give talks about their artistic methodologies and lived experiences are essential to this curatorial approach. Our intersectional and post-critical museology style sparked critical dialogues that arguably a simple gallery exhibit excluding these elements would typically not. We hope to serve as an example and an

inspiration for these approaches as we aim to empower those who are too often disenfranchised, especially within fashion and textile museums.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).