Diversity and Accountability: A Conversation with the Movement Research Artists of Color Council

On November 2, 2016, Movement Research’s Artist of Color Council (AoCC) held its first public event, a Studies Project discussion with core council members Alicia ayo Ohs, Lisa Parra, Marya Wethers, and council coordinator Tara Aisha Willis. The artists driving this new Movement Research (MR) initiative opened their ongoing conversations to a wider audience. In support of accountability efforts underway within Movement Research in working towards two-way transparency, the council invited the concerns of the community around cultural diversity, equity, and sustainable structural integration into the space.

Tara Aisha Willis: I want to say the names of the other folks who have been involved over the past year with this council and in the concentrated process of forming a mission statement: niv Acosta, Edisa Weeks, Ni’Ja Whitson, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, Ryutaro Mishima, and yon Tande. Jaamil couldn’t be here, but he sent a statement that’s a great invitation to the conversation:

For the past couple years I’ve been involved in an ongoing think tank of artists coming together to discuss issues that they relate to racial bias both in and outside of MR’s curatorial platform. I am honored to be part of this group and saddened to miss this important discussion as I am currently abroad performing and teaching in Finland.

It seems clear to me that MR is taking real strides to examine and correct, both internally and externally, from board to staff to community support and funding structures the institutional biases that the organization has naturally inherited because, well, we live in America. MR has chosen to keep these conversations going to support the AoCC in becoming more visible and in an ongoing effort to stay accountable for its actions, and has encouraged the council to meet regularly to ensure that equity and inclusion become systemic within the organization, policy, and public practices. As a member of multiple organizations having these kinds of conversations, I see change happening. It’s not happening extremely fast, but it’s happening. Our silence will not protect us, so we artists of color and our allies must stand together and make our voices heard. Consider this an invitation to be heard. I wish you all a wonderful discourse.

I’ll give some history for context. In 2001 there was an effort to think about equity in the curation of the Movement Research at Judson Church performances on Monday nights. Artists are selected based on their applications by a new panel of artist-curators each fall and spring season. In response to some frustrations artists expressed, Trajal Harrell started to curate one or two artists of color per season. So, two to four artists per year bypassed the application process and were curated into the series. In 2010, Trajal invited a new artist curator each season to select three artists of color. Since 2010 we’ve had six artists of color per year perform at MR at Judson Church performances. Also in 2010, Trajal created a pilot program, organizing four meetings for invited groups of artists and guest speakers over about two years as a resource for artists of color. In 2013, I organized an open conversation with the goal of meeting four times per year. The list of artists we contacted was somewhat...
Accountability: with the Artists of Color Council

Diversity and Accountability:

Throughout its extended artists of color council resources for artists of visibility, opportunities, and engagement with resources for artists within the field. Movement Research artists of color within the field. A lot of hard work went into making the work sustainable and supported. I'm going to discuss some of the major themes that made it into the mission statement. This was a discussion around race, and diversity is not only race. That came up right away: it’s a complicated but crucial step for being able to understand what's actually going on at MR, who's involved in MR programs, and figuring out what to do about it structurally. The board decided that all board and staff need to participate in an equity, inclusion, or anti-racism training by the end of the fiscal year. I want what it will look like to have longevity with this programming, which essentially is designed to make itself unnecessary or obsolete. And in true MR style, how to support artists of color over time while having a rotating council, making sure a lot of voices get heard?

Alicia ayo Ohs: MR paid me to facilitate the mission writing process after that, which was an important step in making the work sustainable and supported. I'm going to discuss some of the major themes that made it into the mission statement. This was a discussion around race, and diversity is not only race. That came up right away: it’s a complicated but crucial step for being able to understand what's actually going on at MR, who's involved in MR programs, and figuring out what to do about it structurally. The board decided that all board and staff need to participate in an equity, inclusion, or anti-racism training by the end of the fiscal year. I want what it will look like to have longevity with this programming, which essentially is designed to make itself unnecessary or obsolete. And in true MR style, how to support artists of color over time while having a rotating council, making sure a lot of voices get heard?

TAW: What does it mean to make this kind of structural change through MR, change that might be applied to any organization? To think more broadly about the dance world?

AO: MR supports our platform, but we have the autonomy to organize it for us. Visibility was a really big topic. Especially this artists of color Judson curation process that nobody knew about! And also our visibility as a group, what kind of role we wanted to take publicly. Tina Vasquez's idea of integration versus supplantation: with supplication, we're offering programs and resources as band-aids to a problem; with integration, we're trying to structurally change the root causes, why those supplemental programs have to exist. It became clear that we wanted to do both. We wanted a membership structure that could allow us to do both.

Marya Wethers: With this invisible artists of color Judson curation process, it wasn’t because they were hiding anything, but it’s always this predication of affirmative action. Of, “We’re going to create this spot and you get it because you’re that.” Everybody wants to feel like they receive something because of their merit. I feel the organization’s commitment to address these issues on multiple levels. Are we still in the same climate where we want to protect that invisibility in this way? It could go either way. And now you all know:

How can the council look beyond what already exists in MR without trying to reinvent the wheel? This Studies Project discussion, this existing series is a way to make public the work we’re doing. MR's publications are another way to have a reach, to have AoCC-generated content.

AO: We had a lot of conversations about including the word "equity" versus "equality" in our mission statement. We knew we wanted to include structural integration and diversity issues – the "d" word! – to meet with nine consistently involved artists to get the mission statement process started. The statement was born this summer, and now the AoCC is listed on the website and brochure along with other programs. Structural change through MR, change that might be created by the end of the fiscal year. I wonder what it will look like to have longevity with this programming, which essentially is designed to make itself unnecessary or obsolete. And in true MR style, how to support artists of color over time while having a rotating council, making sure a lot of voices get heard?

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Providing support for artists. Making opportunities more accessible geographically.

Providing multiple ways for artists to engage with the AoCC. Support for work and active material change. Spaces to meet, discuss ideas, exchange information, and have a home base. Critical Correspondence and Movement Research Performance Journal have a column or an editor emphasize artists of color’s perspectives. Provide access to resources to a broad spectrum of people normally left out or who don't have the education or connections. To be a model in actual practice, not just in name, for other white organizations and effect change across dance organizations. Encourage mentoring and visibility where people of color are mentioned as artist administrators or teachers.

MW: Part of doing this work is that it’s always volunteer. You show up because you care. And we’re investing, literally, life energy. Our embodied experience. It’s connected to all the reasons why we have to keep having these conversations and that takes a toll. We’re doing this work often on behalf of organizations because we care about the organizations and we care about the community. Why am I giving myself away? Why are we giving ourselves away? So I raised questions of monetizing. If this is truly something that’s important, then we should be compensated.

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TAW: We got a budget and we've been able to back pay the artists involved in this mission writing process and there will be a small stipend for being a core member of the AoCC. One thing that came out in all of our conversations was how to make it possible to choose to be deeply involved in afflicting MR policy and programming as an advising council, but also for it to be a resource for artists of color beyond the core council, holding events, etc. So it's not just this pocket of artists in a room hacking it out over and over, like a band-aid on the problem, rather than structurally changing how MR is run. And is it possible for artists who don't want to be involved in, say, looking at demographics and thinking about how to affect an MR program that's struggling to get artists of color involved?

Lisa Parra: For me, a lot of it is about how language is being used. Not just written, but how things can be said, interpreted, or translated. I also thought about our geography and how this can go beyond, to other communities and geographical spaces. The intention of the group is that in the future we won't need this kind of thing. That's really important: to think about it in the long term as well.

TAW: Let's open it up to questions.

Ali Rosal-Salas: How does the AoCC envisage the artist of color curation for Judson in relation to the work that you do?

MW: This year, as we're assessing it on a larger level, we collectively made a list of possible artist-curators and artists – actually, I curated it for the fall, based on this list, because we knew that we needed to be more relevant. How can we address this exclusion of folks of color. It's interesting to hold the reality that the conversation used to be that we couldn't use all of the artists – actually, I curated it for the fall, based on this list, and it was only white artists. It just seems so painfully obvious to me: How can the Artists of Color Council create access to opportunities, programming, and workshops for communities of color outside of MR? We also wanted to use this opportunity as a way to receive feedback.

Marissa Perel: I didn't know that Trajal was doing this on his own – putting in that labor – for so many years. His conflict and identity is evident everywhere. You inherited that there was that secrecy in an otherwise transparent organization. As part of this community, I also inherited that secrecy. I'm trying to process knowing that, as a white fellow artist who inhabits this space a lot, I can't do that anymore. How do you see for your labor. How are you not just doing that labor over and over? How to imagine a future MR that feels like it could be realized by the people of color that this group could become unnecessary. But say the group has to be – how can we really work on that?

How can the AoCC be accountable to artists who don't want to be involved in, say, looking at demographics and thinking about how to change that? It's such an important piece and I'm just really lost, I'm reminded – and this is not a cop-out – that this work is slow and steady. How long have our ancestors been doing it and talking about it?

TAW: This is one of my fears: that this conversation is starting so beautifully in different spaces, but it will be overtaken two years later by a future priority anymore. It's gorgeous that race and equity is surfacing in a way that's so impossible to ignore that we can suddenly have these conversations in more public spaces. Artists of color are getting opportunities to have their voices heard. But how long will it last? To even begin to think about equity – in our ideal world there would be a small stipend for being a core member of the AoCC. But that would be equity, right? That national, global timeline. Is it equity for MR to mirror the demographics of NYC, the way the world already is, versus chipping away at this long history? Slow and steady seems crucial. To build this infrastructure in detail, with clarity at each step.

J. Sota: In a lot of groups I work with, where the same topics are coming up, there's this problem of compartmentalizing things and just holding the moment, identifying with each other, being empathetic; thinking about how difficult it is to bear these kinds of burdens and also deciding to move forward, to see both succeed. But slow and steady seems like the most genuine way. And I think that class is almost always involved when it comes to diversity. We think how to hide it or learn the language. I don't wear it on the outside, being a working class person. I'm new to the nonprofit world, and mostly an artist. Who gets invited to the table? That's the question. Do we change that or take it over? This group is my way to begin to think about equity – in my ideal world there would be a small stipend for being a core member of the AoCC. We begin to think about equity – in my ideal world there would be a small stipend for being a core member of the AoCC.

Do we change that or take it over? This group is my way of feeling like maybe I can do something for someone. But I don't know how to change that: it's such an important piece and I'm just really lost, I'm reminded – and this is not a cop-out – that this work is slow and steady. How long have our ancestors been doing it and talking about it?

Maura Donohue: I'm really grateful that the AoCC exists. If there was one issue that has come up, over and over, like a band-aid on the problem, rather than structurally changing how MR is run, it's the freedom to speak in the way I want, and move. I'm looking for is a feeling. It could start with the culture and consciousness of that. I wonder if there's going to be a white artists council – and this is not a cop-out – that this work is slow and steady. How long have our ancestors been doing it and talking about it?

We talk about things like the hidden European aesthetic, or artists who don't want to be involved in, say, looking at demographics and thinking about how to change that? It's such an important piece and I'm just really lost, I'm reminded – and this is not a cop-out – that this work is slow and steady. How long have our ancestors been doing it and talking about it?

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