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Diversity and Accountability A Conversation with Movement Research 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, Mar'ya 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 who are selected by an artist of color and are not part of the panel selection process. 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

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haphazardly compiled; they were artists who had participated in MR's programs or were connected to MR. I wanted the group to be led by the desires of artists in it rather than by me. We ended up having two years of really great conversations – it felt special to be in a room with a bunch of brown people. But that exhaustion factor kicked in: what now? In Fall 2015, we hired Tina Vasquez, who is a dancer and studies organizational behaviors around race 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.

Concrete things are happening. MR has implemented a more consistent, careful demographics collection process. 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 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?

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: How should we address diversity as a council? And that was before we had a name. We weren't called the Artists of Color Council. We weren't anything. We were the blob. We thought, “let's focus through this one lens and then know that it can blossom from there within MR.” We also had a discussion about what it means to exist within Movement Research, the idea that we were an organizing body within MR, using it as a springboard. MR is the place we started, knowing we want to stay able to move past MR if it becomes necessary or available.

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 supplication: 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.

María Wethers: With this invisible artists of color Judson curation, it wasn't because they were hiding anything, but it's always this predicament 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 it exists!

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 that “equity” felt like a political stance. And we decided to do that. We talked about transparency and accountability: How do we want MR to be accountable to us? How do we stay accountable to artists of color within the community? And this conversation today is a manifestation of that. But how are we inviting people into this conversation? I'm going to read the mission statement: “A cohort of artists of color addressing cultural diversity, equity, and sustainable structural integration in Movement Research's operations, programming, outreach, and throughout its extended communities. The Council aspires to increase visibility, opportunities, and engagement with resources for artists of color within the field.” A lot of hard work went into the mission statement and there's still a lot missing. To facilitate the process, I used Kim Klein's *Fundraising for Social Change*. We talked about what things felt like goals – our wish list. I'm going to read a very rough draft of that brainstorm:

Providing support for other 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 of artists that they serve. But I'm getting to the point where I'm like, “Why am I giving this away? 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.

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 affecting 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 structural change. How can AoCC also be accountable to 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, and translated. I also thought about 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 Rosa-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 of time constraints. I do think the curation is still necessary. We wouldn't need a special curation if that was happening already. We're very conscious of getting the applicant pool more diverse. There's been success with that on the panel side, but the applicant pool is not changing to the extent that really we need.

TAW: Over the past five years, I've seen the staff go from operating from a place of lack to a sense of abundance around forming panels with artists of color on them. The conversation used to be that we couldn't use all of the people of color on a panel because there wouldn't be any left for the next one. Now there's less scrambling and fear of running out. But it's a reality that the people applying to MR at Judson are not an especially diverse pool. There's something to be said for guaranteeing that six artists of color will perform, and two artists of color will practice curation through MR at Judson each year. MR has always been a place where artists who wouldn't otherwise curate get to curate.

MW: That artists of color curation initiative was the first time I performed my work in NYC. I'd been dancing for a long time, but because someone was like, "I wanna let you ask these questions," I made something and performed it. That's not a small thing in my trajectory.

Maura Donohue: I work at Hunter College. After one of your visits with the students, Mar'ya, you said, "So, there're a lot of students of color who are New Yorkers. Why aren't they in the MR community after college?" I used to tell students, "Get to MR! That's where you should find your way." And they would come back and say, "I don't feel like those are my people." Their work might align with MR, but they didn't feel included. They're often the first generation in their family to go to college; they're expected to support their families. They can't afford the struggling artist thing. I'm also thinking about Dance/NYC's recent report on NYC demographics. Would these diversity initiatives become unnecessary when we see an equal representation of staff or artists to the demographics of the city? What would we consider the moment when we've arrived?

MW: MR is thirty-nine years old. It built a thing. It's framed an avenue of inquiry. And it did that at the exclusion of folks of color. It's interesting to hold the reality that MR built this important thing, and then to think about dismantling it to some degree to correct or think differently about that exclusion. It'll take forty years to build the new thing that's actually what we're after. Not that I think we'll ever get to the point in my lifetime where we're like, "Got it! Done. Equitable." But it would be at least another forty years.

AO: This is like a little seed. We're a little baby; we just germinated. It's important that we don't over invite without having infrastructure with which to support other artists of color. It's important that we're creating an environment, structure, money, and resources for artists of color who want to be involved in MR.

MW: That's where so many organizations have gone wrong. The attitude is, "We're ready for you!" And then

the people of color still have to do all the work. We still have to find your organization, get there, knock on the door, walk in. People would already be here if it felt relevant. How do we make it relevant? That's the question.

AO: We talk about things like the hidden European aesthetic in MR's history. Or not hidden! And what's the potential of a council like this to engage with high schoolers? Who then becomes the next generation of artists within MR? If you walk into any high school in NYC, the demographics you see are not even close to what is represented in MR.

MW: Or in the field at large.

Marissa Perel: I didn't know that Trajal was doing this on his own – putting in that labor – for so many years. His conflict over whether it should be visible. You inherited 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 inherits a lot of privilege that I don't see. Thank you for your labor. How do I, as an ally, hold myself accountable for your labor? So you're not just doing that labor over and over? How to imagine a future MR that feels like it could be realized? It's idealistic to think how this group could become unnecessary. But say the group has to be necessary – how can we really work on that?

TAW: One concrete thing: I'm hoping that the AoCC can be a resource for nominating people of color consistently to every panel and festival curatorial team. To consistently have a voice in nominating panel members so that people not already deeply involved with MR start to get involved through curation.

LP: I think there was some invitation to the teachers in Dance Makers in the Schools to do an anti-racism or equity training. Education is where you face these questions really directly: "Oh, you want to be a dancer and you see *this* in school, but you see *that* outside of school." As a teacher, a student asks you a question and you have to have an answer. Maybe you don't have to.

AO: We have a list of questions to ask artists of color in the room: What would you like to see a council like this doing on behalf of communities of artists of color? How is advocacy a part of our role? What are your interests and needs in terms of advocacy and resources? When situations of discrimination or micro-aggressions arise within MR's programs, what would you like to see happen? How can the Artists of Color Council create accessibility to opportunities, programming, and workshops for communities outside of MR? We also wanted to use this opportunity as a way to receive feedback.

Miguel Gutierrez: I've taught many times for MR and one of my frustrations is that it's such a white student body. I think "Thank you for being there," but I get disillusioned because it starts to confuse me: What do people see me as? Who's got the money to go to class? I would love to go to an MR at Judson and for there not to be all white artists being shown. There cannot be a night at Judson where all the artists are white. It just seems so painfully obvious to me: Can there just be like this obvious choice of "We will not allow this?" Or, "There have to be four interns of color?"

Jay Bouey: My first piece performed in NYC was for MR at Judson a couple weeks ago. Up until that point, I had a feeling of exclusion and otherness, even attending performances of friends who were the one person of color out of the four or five artists presenting. It's a feeling. It isn't quantifiable. One thing I'm learning is when you volunteer with a community that's often been othered – specifically working with dance in black communities of Harlem and the South Bronx – there's often a big push and an even faster retreat. It feels like an oil drilling of the culture. I'm afraid these meetings will end in that way. There's another meeting and then nothing happens, or there's a big push, it falls short, and you start to see cracks. What I'm looking for is a feeling. It could start with the culture in which I participate and belong to is also represented in this space. There is a white space of white walls, but then there's how people are allowed to be themselves in the space. The aesthetic, that changing and shift. I'm code-switching when I'm speaking. I'm trying so hard not to; that's the little internal battle I'm having right now. But it's the freedom to speak in the way I want, and move.

MW: I feel like you just named part of the invisible component of the challenge – culture. Not in an art way, but the cultures we move through, participate in, and feel supported or neglected by.

The first thing maybe is just acknowledging what it is: it's a white culture. How do we make that welcoming?

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?

TAW: This is one of my fears: that this conversation is surfacing so beautifully in different spaces, but it will be over in two years because it won't be a funding 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 my ideal world there would be 500 years of only brown people in charge. 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. Soto: In a lot of groups I work with, where the same topics are coming up, there's this tension between operationalizing things and just holding the moment, identifying with each other, being empathic; between feeling how difficult it is to bear these kinds of burdens and also deciding to move forward. Part of me wants to see both succeed. But slow and steady seems like the most genuine way. And I think that class is almost always left out. Because it can be invisible. We learn 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 – the complexity of that – doesn't get paid enough attention. Diversity also includes worldview, culture, behavior, embodied languages. That often gets left out. When I think about resources and access, we go to money – but worldview is also a resource. The worldview you were brought up with, that you see yourself in, is a huge resource. I'm thinking about ways to be ambassadors to young, working class artists of color.

Erick Montes: I'm from Mexico. And I feel myself that I have been part of the community. But sometimes I feel invisible because there are not many other Mexicans here. They come in a flash and go back to Mexico, just moments of contributing their view of the world. So in the moment when it is like my community, I don't see my people. There are white and black people, but sometimes they understand me as a person of color, from all kinds of backgrounds. I come from not only a racist but a classist culture. The contradictions come when the African-American community and the white community assumes my knowledge of the world. I am interested in a council that impacts that diversity immediately.

Chloe Chotrani: What comes to mind is cultural inclusion, we're digging into immigration history and we can use that history as building blocks to go out and participate beyond the borders. Growing up in a third world country, like you were saying, your viewpoint is a resource. I feel a certain sympathy lacking from Eurocentric perspectives. That's why I find communities of color. That third world perspective develops cultural competence that is needed to move forward, from both communities of color and white folks.

Eli Tamondong: I'm really grateful that the AoCC exists. I wonder if there's going to be a white artists council dismantling their own whiteness in MR. I need white people to take the reins for themselves. Be in solidarity with us. Do the work with us. We need to know that you are doing your work alongside us.

AO: There are two things eating away at me. Lisa brought up, in a beautiful way, language and accessibility. I threw some words out there tonight. But if you're interested in engaging with this council and you want to talk about equity versus equality, supplication and integration, I'm so down. I should have made that language a little more accessible. Lisa also brought up the issue of geography. I want to call out that right now we are on stolen land. I don't know whose land it was, but maybe...

LP: Lenape.

MW: Among others. Maybe that's a good closing. To acknowledge them. Thank you.

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Edited by Tara Aisha Willis