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ON TOPIC CULTURAL LEADERSHIP

There has never been a more important time to think about cultural leadership than right now. As we struggle through this pandemic, cultural leaders show us not merely the way to survive, but to actualize a vision of the world we want to see. Cultural leadership embraces creativity as the source, foundation, and nexus for how a community can access its greatest potential.

The essays by Liz Ogbu, Caroline Woolard, Angie Kim, and Joseph Kunkel, and the artwork of Julie Buffalohead detail a vision of leadership that is about approaching uncertain conditions with growth, care, and reflection. Cultural leadership allows us to see the opportunities of these conditions from a culture of making, and the support of making, regardless of what that making is. As you can see in these essays, cultural leadership is not bound, owned, or contained by institutions. Rather it is a form of leadership which embraces the wonderful asymmetry that exists in the world, privileges knowledge-building over information-sharing, and embraces qualities like vulnerability and contemplation as essential qualities.

Cultural leadership embraces creativity and innovation alongside empathy as a fundamental method for understanding the world and solving our most pressing problems. As we face seemingly insurmountable issues, cultural leadership celebrates the problem solvers among us who embody a methodology and approach that involves care, collaboration, listening, decisiveness, and an elevation of one's own voice alongside the voice of others.



President
Sanjit Sethi

Before there can be political change, there must be cultural change.”

Said by the artist activist Favianna Rodriguez in 2016 shortly after Trump’s election, this comment comes to mind often, especially now. As I write this, it has been nearly three weeks since the murder of George Floyd and the attempted murder of Christian Cooper. nine weeks since the murder of Breonna Taylor. Twelve weeks since the murder of Ahmaud Arbery. And sadly, the list goes on...

It has felt like the ground has shifted more in the past three weeks than it has in three decades. There are daily protests in streets not only around the country, but also around the world. Heads are rolling, figuratively at corporations and literally from statues. Books about antiracism and white fragility have gone from the special interest section to required reading for the [white] mainstream populace. And for those of us whose work is interwoven with the fight for racial justice, this head spinning moment is often filled with hope, exhaustion, and wary.

Hope is for the daring belief that this inflection point is different, and that the cracks in the system of white supremacy are breaking open in ways we’ve not seen before and that might meaningfully help the communities that we serve and partner with. Exhaustion is for the labor that often falls on those who have been in the fight long before the change was big enough to be visceral and visible. And the wariness is from the knowledge

that the inspired action that comes with the urgency of now, often gives way to the enduring stuckness that accompanies the complacency of later. I can’t help but wonder where we will be by the time you read this: urgency, complacency, or some third state that has yet to be defined.

As an architect and spatial justice activist, I have come to realize that my work is, in part, to support that third state. For some time, I’ve been diving deeply into explorations around this. And while I haven’t figured out every step of that journey, there are some thoughts that I can share.

First and foremost, this journey is ultimately about taking down the structures of harm (white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy) and replacing them with structures of healing. Healing is something that I focus a lot on in my work. To work on spatial justice means acknowledging that justice has a geography, and that in countless cities across the country, we have far too many examples that show differences in which communities get good housing, transport, parks, etc. and which don’t. For the neighborhoods that are on the losing end, the physical impacts of these differences are like visceral wounds on the land. And when we layer demographics over this geography, we find that Black, Brown, Indigenous, and poor communities have disproportionately been harmed. This has been no accident.

The wounds of spatial injustice aren’t just physical; they’re also emotional. This means that healing won’t come

about just through building more housing, establishing new bus routes, or even repurposing funds from a police budget into a new community center. It requires more; it requires holding space for the complexity that created and has sustained these wounds as well as doing the work to close the wounds in such a way that they can never reopen. In other words, continuing to drive cultural change forward also requires embracing the preconditions to healing.

Before we can heal, we have to acknowledge the wounds: their existence, their depth, and their pain. And while this has been a feature in my work for years, perhaps what is making this moment feel so different is that it feels like in the space that is being made for the cries of the protestors, the more public accounting of and within non-Black communities, and the reaction to images and statistics documenting the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on communities of color, that the acknowledgement of the wounds caused by the structures of harm finally feels broad and collective.

Holding space for acknowledging these wounds is critical and hard, but it is also not the only precondition we must embrace. To move towards healing also requires that we grieve. Grieving means leaning into the discomfort and uncertainty of sitting with that acknowledgement. It is about being willing to stay vulnerable and brave long enough to ask hard questions of ourselves and others, listen to and be in dialogue around the answers, and make

peace with where those conversations take us. It is not something that many of us know how to do well, if at all, but it is a necessary step for healing.

Grieving, like cultural change, doesn't just happen. It relies on a collection of healers whose work is to tend to the wounds. As I think about who those healers might be, I find myself recalling the words of curator Ashara Ekundayo, who talks about "artists as first responders," essential workers to cultural change. In the liminal space between urgency and complacency, I'm reflecting on what it would mean to use my skills and resources to support and increase our individual and collective capacities to grieve. And I can't help but wonder what healing and change could ultimately be unleashed if every artist, designer, and cultural worker also committed to that purpose.

The Preconditions to Healing

Liz Ogbu—Founder + Principal at Studio O—is a designer, urbanist, and spatial justice activist. Liz is an expert on engaging and transforming unjust urban environments. Her multidisciplinary design and innovation practice, Studio O, operates at the intersection of racial and spatial justice. She collaborates with/in communities in need to leverage design to catalyze sustained social impact. Among her honors, she is a TEDWomen speaker, Public Interest Design's Top 100, and Aspen Ideas Festival Scholar. Find her projects at mcad.edu/ontopic.