

Care as an Infrastructure of Fluid Forms in Zeelie Brown's *Queer Mothers' Space*

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At the heart of Zeelie Brown's *Queer Mothers' Space* is a deep trust in the potential of the gift to upend normal patterns of work and narrow models of exchange. Brown's installations reflect a deep investment in restoration and recovery. They imagine generous and materially layered forms of circulation for life-giving provisions, as well as evincing a serious grounding in the invocatory and radical power of making. Through installations and public works, Brown's artistic practice extends here into infrastructural forms that model new possibilities of refuge and care, drawing on sonic practice, ecological elements such as plants and the actual nourishment of food, and spiritual sites of witness and ancestral connection. Brown's reflections on work, rest, queerness, and maternity take shape as invitations to the viewer to step out of their ordinary patterns of toil. The artist attends to the viewer's nourishment and refuge, reminding us of the need for self-recovery in the face of the various dispersions of our energy into mechanized forms of work. Brown has made the food and preserves in the exhibition and its public events partly from the ingredients grown in her own garden. The dishes evoke the motherly comfort of a familiar meal. In addition to its provisions of food, *Queer Mothers' Space* intentionally provides space to welcome mothers, caregivers and their children, with possibilities for play and rest foreseen and already carved out within the exhibition. Other dynamics are also at play within the space—the shrine room makes appeals to mother Yoruba gods. The self-theft/sand room creates space that acknowledges both the eye and the body—it offers an immersion that is not merely optical, but which carefully regards the physical presence of the viewer's whole person. Throughout the exhibition, Brown proposes deep forms of care and ritual as radical social structures.

In *Queer Mothers' Space*, mothering care is realized as a form of light and movable infrastructure, a mobile assemblage that can step out to meet us where we least expect it—in the midst of an ongoing pandemic, in the midst of a gallery space in a dense urban setting. There are certain strains of inquiry in play here that, in the abstract, might seem contradictory—a subtext of critical reflections on capitalist terms of work, along with a robust interest in the motherly labor of maintenance, protection and restoration. Yet Brown conditions new compositions of labor that are not transcribable into the strict score of 'the market.' Brown's artistic practice probes the core of self-sustenance in both its material and soul-giving terms. In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire has written about the economic bases of societies prior to their colonization: "I am talking about natural economies that have been disrupted—harmonious and

viable economies adapted to the indigenous population... They were societies that were not only ante-capitalism, as has been said, but also anti-capitalist.¹” Brown’s installations in *Queer Mothers' Space* create environments through which social forces for and against ‘work’ (that, to us, often seem opposed) mingle together in new ways. On second thought, these ways are not really ‘new,’ as Césaire reminds us. Nor is their model of mutualism with the earth, and within community, a model of exchange that slides easily back into a capitalist frame.

In *Queer Mothers' Space*, material and maternal reflections on distribution, circulation, and economies of care, combine with spiritual and religious influences, and a critical anti-capitalist sensibility. **In the theft/sand room you can hear music made for the exhibition.** Brown, who is also a cellist, continues inquiries into the sonic alongside her reflections on paradigms of economic distribution. It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the conjunction of these two interests. These investigations into the sonic and the economic, seemingly disparate, can suggest mutual opposition due to the incommensurable qualities of their materials—on the one hand, sound’s suggestive, potentially uncontrollable resonances and on the other, economy’s highly structured, networked and transaction-based form of sociality. The shelters created in Brown’s installations—like other previous works that she has called “soulscapes”—are often acoustically full, or otherwise invoke ‘vibration’ in a looser sense, as a condition of spiritual contact across time. Brown’s work might be seen, in part, as an investigation into what happens when we consider markets from a starting point of sonic emanation—where transactions are not taking place at specific ‘points’ but rather unfold through an environmental field. Guided by a sonified logic, Brown brings us into an atmosphere of care, in which creation and maintenance is not exacted through a binary give and take, but resonates out across myriad planes of space and life. Brown’s sonic environments are immersive but non-spectacular. In them you can listen to others and to yourself. This is one possible starting point for imagining queer motherhood. Brown’s interest in alternate economic forms is also reflected in the artistic techniques she relies on—for instance, her interest in prints and reproductions are partly driven by a desire for an art form that can be made easily and serially. Like the other forms of care enacted in the exhibition—which combine lightness and ease with deep and loving modes of labor—the print makes itself known as a seemingly ephemeral copy but is inseparable from a laboriously made **lithographic** base, and all the exertion required to enact images’ repetition.

Queer Mothers' Space turns the gallery into a place of nourishment, of hospitality, of refuge and of ritual. It bears provisions that you can take with you. What does it mean to reimagine care through the lens of this queer Mothers' space, where it mingles with reflections on work and economy, and where lovingly grown food offers itself up to the viewer, perhaps *giving* much more than the visitor was expecting? Contemporary art gives us many models of social practice or ‘participatory’ work, many of which also invite the viewer to eat or rest. Shifting the terms of

¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), pp.43-44

these models, Brown recovers the *work* in such relationality, the laborious relations sometimes held at bay from figures of ‘interaction’ almost as much as working relations are obscured from our generic paradigms of mothering. The weight of economic pressure is lightened for us by Brown’s work—yet it remains suspended in the exhibition as a subject available for contemplation, letting us ask: What distinguishes the merely uncompensated work or labor from the *gift*? Recent art history has already proposed some models for the latter—the relational, the participatory, social engagement. Relational aesthetics, perhaps the most fraught of these, can feel self-reflexive, as though its generosity were merely a mechanism to construct an artwork’s own public. A formally ‘relational’ work may seem to embed an element of surprise, seeking to surprise its viewers through overturned expectations that alter the normal conditions of visibility and change the artwork’s own terms of legitimation. The ‘relationally aesthetic’ assumes that we do not expect (perhaps do not deserve?) the seeming generosity we are confronted with—a bowl of soup, for instance. It asks us to be slightly disoriented, to be uncertain at first not only whether this is art but whether we can come up to touch, eat, be with it. In its more formalized versions, the relational’s trademark offering operates as a redrawing of the terms of the work’s own publicness. It pulls the viewer into a new experiential artistic regime, as *participant*. The viewer of Brown’s work, by contrast, is not a participant but a recipient. The food offered is not exchanged for the price of artistic closure, but is given without expectation of reciprocation. Its nourishment is not a condition of the artistic viability of the work or of the viewers’ mutual recognition of it. Brown’s care is offered freely, not as a way to enlist the viewer in the completion or realization of the piece. The artist creates a deep level of hospitality that understands *being nourished* as the very condition of existence within the shared space of the exhibition.

Another prominent, though subtle, element in *Queer Mothers’ Space* is the evocation of water. Throughout the exhibition, water meets us by turns as a borderland and as a hymn, offering up access to the diaspora of objects, affects, feelings we have been suppressing or have lost through time. This liquid zone is another extension of *Queer Mothers’ Space*’s offerings of refuge. Water shows up in literal ways through elements of the installations, and in symbolic ways through the functional role of deities to whom Brown has dedicated the Shrine. In addition to her interests in the sonic and in the lush potential of gift-oriented making, Brown’s work also engages contemporary virtuality and the status of images that it underwrites. The virtual—including its most ordinary mode of image-consumption-as-sociality—is often coded in terms of ‘flows,’ which offer a model for the ease of access to the virtual’s contents. In virtuality’s wake, one might well think that anything can be found—or at least viewed. Whether viewing is in fact finding is a question Brown puts into play.

Viewing—or looking—is often marked out as a representationally-driven practice (as opposed to non-representational listening, which often symbolizes the resonance in sound). In *Queer*

Mothers' Space, Brown shows us how looking can become sonified. The artist turns the gaze into a way of being ensconced, being encompassed, and of looking without *fixing* ourselves or others. This sonified withholding and witnessing is a modality that queerness asks for—its off-genres, its rich disjunctions between identity and body demand flexible, open, imaginative looking in order ethically meet the other with an eye that welcomes, an eye that does not anticipate or ask for expectations to be answered. Viewing is also a racializing modality. As Achille Mbembe has written in *Critique of Black Reason*: “To a large extent, race is an iconic currency. It appears at the edge of a commerce—of the gaze. It is a currency whose function is to convert what one sees (or what one chooses not to see) into a specie or symbol at the heart of a generalized economy of signs and images that one exchanges, circulates...”² Queering race, pulling race out of what Mbembe calls its strict ‘iconic currency’ requires pulling the racial away from its underpinnings in that “generalized economy of signs.” Moreover, the intersection of race and gender has always modified the latter through the estranging lens of the former—the black female body is often recoded as masculine, or de-gendered entirely. *Black Queer Mothers' Space* initiates the viewer’s experience through the vantage point of the maternal, while at the same time diverting the usual tracks of gendered anticipation that society exerts on black and other bodies.

At stake in the problem of virtuality and its interface with the broader environment is the question of immersion. The art historical canon has supplied us with plenty of modernist, ‘environment’ type of immersive situations, in which the ordinary world is de-substantiated and replaced with an *elsewhere*. Brown’s *Queer Mothers' Space* intensifies our experience of *this* world—because it reverses processes of dispersal, centering the viewer through its offerings of refuge and “self-theft.” It does not aim to fix the meaning of wayward symbols but rather to delimit the circle of their wandering, so they become accessible and available to us. While the signal-receiver model of communication privileges distance and the differentiation of a message’s start and endpoints, Brown’s model of connection forms a sensorium, an environ that is porous with those experiencing it, able to be used by them. *Queer Mothers' Space* creates immersion as a site of nourishment rather than of otherworldliness.

Blackness is only one node in the constellation of *Queer Mothers' Space*, but it is a site that situates and concentrates Brown’s reflections throughout the exhibition. Reflections on Blackness also form a major aspect of Brown’s artistic practice. Blackness is subtly present in this new exhibition, not as a difference in subjectivity, but as a shared condition of economy. It also suffuses the Shrine Room, which invokes Haitian and Yoruban deities. Blackness hovers throughout *Queer Mothers' Space* as a negative paradigm of the exploited self, of the exteriorization of the body into things it is not—fungible, commodified. One cannot think through the implications of ‘self-theft’ or self-recovery without passing through terrains that have been continually inhabited by the black body. Blackness has often been marked as

² Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p.110

non-geographic, placeless, infinitely diasporic—in addition to and as a byproduct of being thingified as a product, or dehumanized as boundless labor. Self-theft opens the possibility of pulling oneself back from this. In *Queer Mothers' Space*, self-theft moves the body away from economic enclosure into its space of refuge. It prepares and welcomes you for a new kind of movement—not one of being dragged or coaxed but of moving in a lively collective body that builds and mends together. Fantasies of black maternity plague American culture—in which black motherhood and even black authority is recast, in the culture of white supremacy, as an alienating domestic obligation, reduced to caring primarily for others while being simultaneously estranged from one's own family and from one's own self-nourishment. These limited possibilities of care are opened up and surpassed in *Queer Mothers'*. Brown's queer process of care is not an intervention within a world pre-determined as a nuclear family unit, but rather is self-sustaining, operating on its own and yet far more collective terms. Moreover, when you receive food in this exhibition's space, it is not from within a colonized model, but from an ecology that sustains itself. In this vein, Brown is not trying to imagine resources created from thin air where they were not, but to reverse terms of engagement—it lets you experience *receiving* from someone who was perhaps not expected to give nor to be present for you. In the language of schizoanalysis, which has relentlessly challenged and rethought the configuration of the nuclear family, *Queer Mothers' Space* allows for the familial and maternal to deterritorialize itself beyond the family—on its own terms rather than in strict fealty to a form or a class that isn't one's own. The care within the exhibition runs full circle, but never in one dimension—always towards a space without limit.

Another theme within *Queer Mothers' Space's* offerings of care is ritual, devotion, and ceremony. The exhibition's Shrine is partly influenced by Santería aesthetics. Within this vast ritual tradition, the creation of ritual objects not only “honors” but also “calls into presence” the oricha—the Yoruban gods.³ The Shrine calls in the oricha, while the room of self-theft allows one to take oneself away, suggesting that these gestures are not discrete but that in furtively taking oneself back from self-estrangement, one is making a gift at the altar of a divine figure. How do you call yourself, identify yourself? With an image? No, rather, through a theft of self. Through an invocation. The Shrine brings us into potential connection with ancestors, as well as in touch with an Afro-diasporic religious tradition in which creation and the continual creation of beauty is an important votive practice. Contemporary thinkers such as Quentin Meillassoux have spoken about ancestrality in relation to the deep time of the Earth. They ask, how can we make human-centered statements or assumptions about events that transpired before any consciousness⁴? The reality of black America is that certain truths about our experience, which

³ David H. Brown, “Toward an Ethnoaesthetics of Santería Ritual Arts: Altar-Making and Gift Exchange,” in Arturo Lindsay, *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, p.80

⁴ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008)

still very much exist, are now present within a language that is lost to us. Black America deals with history as an artifact and a fossil that is present in material truth but whose interpretation is ambiguous. Cultures, names, languages have been erased across colonial time, leaving behind sentences that lost their terms of expression, although their history remains. Brown's model of self-theft proposes a model of recovery that allows us to look into these indeterminate histories. While the Black experience is often shot through with rifts, erasures, losses, forced substitutions, Brown presents sites of care that enables self-recollection rather than just grief. Her ceremonial undertones model a practice of refuge.

Care can also be a way of allowing for restful disappearance, for covering and withholding oneself from external viewers. The Santería aesthetic charts a manner of making that combines both an object and its container—allowing for a sacred withholding of objects from view. When Brown makes a case for the importance of the *offering* on a social as well as spiritual level, her ways of offering also deflect the degrading fungibility of blackness and suspend restricting flows of images. Silvia Federici's account of the women's movement connected with her "wages for housework" campaign as described in her book *Revolution at Point Zero*, is interesting to consider in connection with Brown's use of spiritual ritual to disrupt the way bodies get drawn into flows of capital. For Federici, bringing domestic work into a transactional framework was a way of disrupting domestic labor's naturalization in the context of capitalist relations. Federici recounts how the program of asking for a wage for housework was not a way of *entering* capital relations but rather of "break[ing] capital's plan for women."⁵ In the same way, 'exiting' the sanctified art space by constructing a sanctuary to replace it with is not a way to impose the space of the home on the gallery, but rather to change the terms of its institutional enclosure. As Brown has stressed, *Queer Mothers' Space* models the exhibition space as a place of nourishment, provision, and hospitality. We can also look at Federici's work from a queer standpoint. She notes "the attributes of femininity are in effect work functions."⁶ Caring is work, mothering is work, mothering can be queer. The emphasis on 'care' introduced during the pandemic, and which rippled through so many contemporary art spaces as the paradigm of the moment from which to create a newly viable practice, leaves us with the problem of how we can continue this paradigm. What radical stance can care combine with that can counter the continuing pressures of our ceaseless work? Care and sanctuary continue to create revolutionary spaces for rest, as well as new models for collective infrastructure, generous labor, and recovery of self.

Queer Mothers' Space models new infrastructures through a radical understanding of the gift and with generously open explorations of mothering's social reproduction. The viewer can furtively withdraw, recover, rest, and imagine futurity from a new standpoint in which social

⁵ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (PM Press, 2020), p.43

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 28



frameworks—as Lauren Berlant has written of infrastructures⁷—are fluid, affective and mobile mechanisms. Brown imagines the labors of care not as purely mechanized nor as necessarily restrictive, but as potential forms of refuge and restoration. Leaving the exhibition, one can take one of the jars or cans that Brown has filled with food and preserves. These containers are also, in a way, possible artifacts of a future self, models of miniature “self-thefts” existing in the fluid borderland between necessity and possibility. Fundamentally, *Queer Mothers' Space*'s reflections on care are also reflections on survival. The two are inextricable and moreover, as Brown shows and continues to develop, they are important components of critical practice. In thieving oneself out of circulation, one may chart new forms of caring movement within the world.

⁷ Lauren Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times,” in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (vol. 34, no.3 2016)

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¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), pp.43-44

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