



The Life Quilt (2018), exhibited in *Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana* (2019), at Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: courtesy of the Newcomb Art Museum. Produced by The Graduates, The Life Quilt was beaded by Black Masking Indians, portraits painted by Brandon 'BMike' Odums, and sewn by Louise Mouton Johnson. It features the names of 107 women serving life sentences in Louisiana in 2017.

Journal of Curatorial Studies
Volume 10 Number 2

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https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00045_7

Received 1 March 2021; Accepted 10 August 2021

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Community-Driven Curating in *Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana*

Abstract

The exhibition Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana (2019) developed community-driven and co-productive curatorial practices through a partnership with directly impacted stakeholders. This article presents three characteristics that made the partnership between the Newcomb Art Museum and consultants from a community of formerly incarcerated women and activists in New Orleans a success: an understanding of the politics of both the issue and the site, a sharing and collective building of power, and a polyvocal exhibition format. Within the context of the role of curating in struggles for social justice, this article outlines the importance of working with external actors, such as movement leaders and activists, to ensure accountability, equity and reciprocity in exhibitions that address social issues.

Keywords

community-driven
curating
community
engagement
co-production
curating and
incarceration
Newcomb Art
Museum
Per(Sister)
polyvocal curatorship

As visitors entered *Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana* (2019), they encountered *The Life Quilt* (2018), a collaborative work that featured the names of the women serving life sentences at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women. The work was created by The Graduates, a performance ensemble composed of former members of the prison's drama club. As visitors proceeded through the galleries that displayed artwork in a range of media, they could stop at a listening station to hear the voices of the formerly incarcerated women whose stories inspired the art and the exhibition. They could



jackie sumell, *A Solitary Garden for Incarcerated Moms* (2018), exhibited in *Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana* (2019), Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: courtesy of the Newcomb Art Museum.

read about the particular health toll that incarceration exacts on women. They could walk along a history of mass incarceration that wound through the exhibition. They could retreat to a sectioned-off room for a quiet moment if the stories and imagery became overwhelming. Leaving the exhibition, they could take home one of dozens of leaflets on local organizations working to combat the excessive criminalization and incarceration of people in their state. Outside the museum, they could participate in the planting of *A Solitary Garden for Incarcerated Moms* (2018), a flower bed that surrounded an aluminum sculpture by jackie sumell that replicated the 6 ft × 9 ft dimensions of a solitary prison cell. Ultimately, visitors had many access points, ranging from sculpture to music to maps, in order to more fully understand the state of mass incarceration in Louisiana.

Per(Sister) at the Newcomb Art Museum (NAM) of Tulane University was co-produced in partnership with a community of formerly incarcerated women. Throughout the three-year process of creating the exhibition, the partnership resulted in a community-driven curatorial practice. The pursuit of social justice is a collective endeavour and, as prison abolitionist and organizer Mariame Kaba often says, 'everything worthwhile is done with other people' (cited in Ewing 2019). Likewise, the success of *Per(Sister)* can be attributed to the co-productive ethos at its centre. *Per(Sister)* was the result of years of relationship building and the eventual contribution of over one hundred individuals. The exhibition concentrated on the incarceration of women in Louisiana and aimed to educate students and museum visitors about an issue that has

made the state infamous. NAM partnered with two formerly incarcerated women advocates, Dolfinette Martin and Syrita Steib, to create an exhibition that would include the voices of formerly incarcerated women as well as provide important historical and political context for the phenomenon of mass incarceration and criminalization in the United States. The exhibition was created for multiple audiences, offering those who had been impacted by the carceral system an opportunity to see their experiences reflected in paintings, sculpture and musical compositions. It also served as an educational platform for visitors previously unaware of the brutality and arbitrariness of the criminal legal system.

The politics of mass incarceration motivated *Per(Sister)*'s embrace of curating for social justice. As curator and writer Kayleigh Bryant-Greenwell (2019) notes, '[S]ocial justice practice requires taking a stand. It is political. It is polarizing. It is everything that neutrality is not'. In addition to partnering with community members and organizations outside the museum, the development of the exhibition required a frank understanding of the politics of the museum as a site. Reflection on the power dynamics at play between the museum (and the university it represents) and the community partners was then followed by a sharing and collective building of power between the museum and its community partners. The result was a polyvocal exhibition in which the voices of 30 formerly incarcerated women and numerous scholars and advocates, as well as museum visitors, were presented in the gallery in various ways. Additionally, the exhibition's multiple panels and discussions stimulated dialogue *between* visitors and incarcerated women. In this article, I will briefly describe the exhibition as one committed to social justice before outlining how three characteristics of the co-productive process propelled *Per(Sister)* into becoming a successful example of community-driven curating.

***Per(Sister)*: Curating for Social Justice**

As of 2019, the State of Louisiana has incarcerated 683 people per 100,000, earning it the title of 'incarceration capital of the world' (Skene 2019). Upon arriving in New Orleans as then director of NAM, Mónica Ramírez-Montagut wanted to create an exhibition on an issue central to the state and the city. As a small, university-affiliated art museum, NAM (2019b) creates exhibitions that 'explore socially engaged art, civic dialogue, and community transformation'. With this stated aim, NAM was primed to develop a method of community-driven curating, a process that required growth and flexibility on the part of the curators and museum staff.

Over the course of several years, Ramírez-Montagut worked to establish and sustain relationships with organizers and members of the community of those impacted by incarceration in the city. The result was an art exhibition that presented the personal and intimate stories, in their own voices, of dozens of formerly incarcerated women. NAM committed to holding three exhibitions on the issue of mass incarceration over the course of ten years.¹ *Per(Sister)*, the inaugural show, centred on women's experience with incarceration, in part due to the museum's association with the legacy of Newcomb College, the first coordinate women's college within a US university.²

To create *Per(Sister)*, NAM hired two New Orleans community leaders and formerly incarcerated women, Dolfinette Martin and Syrita Steib, as consultants and included them in almost every stage of exhibition planning. Steib is the co-founder and executive director, and Martin is the housing director, of

1. The community established through the co-production of *Per(Sister)* will consult on the next exhibition, which will focus on juvenile incarceration and is slated to open in 2023.
2. A coordinate college is a women's-only college paired with a men's college. Founded in 1886, the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College remained a women's college until Tulane's restructuring following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.



Allison Beondé, *Per(Sister) Portraits: Syrita Steib, Mary McLeod, Zina Mitchell, Bobbie Jean Johnson, Danielle Metz, Andrea Martin (2018), archival pigment prints, exhibited in Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana (2019) at the Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: courtesy of the Newcomb Art Museum.*

3. *Per(Sister)* originated at NAM under the leadership of then-director Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, with curatorial assistance from Laura Blereau and production assistance from Miriam Taylor. It was developed in equal partnership with Syrita Steib and Dolfinete Martin, with additional support provided by Operation Restoration and Women with a Vision. Sierra Polisar served as the exhibition registrar and Tom Friel served as the coordinator for interpretation and public engagement. I served as the curatorial research assistant through an Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship for Community-Engaged Scholarship.

Operation Restoration, an organization that supports women and girls who have been impacted by incarceration, just one of over a dozen local organizations with which NAM has worked. Reflecting on the partnership, Ramírez-Montagut remarked, 'Together, we decided the focus, the themes – they were at the table for every single decision. We wanted true self-representation' (cited in Feinstein 2020). For this reason, rather than focusing on the 'curators' of *Per(Sister)*, I am going to discuss decisions made by the exhibition team, which was composed of the curators, the community partners, the museum staff and myself.³

Designing an exhibition around the theme of mass incarceration required extensive research and incorporated a polyphony of voiced experiences. NAM further consulted with legal and policy experts to write a comprehensive wall text that provided detailed context for the rapid increase in the incarceration of women – 834 per cent over the last 40 years nationally (Sawyer 2018). To frame the unique circumstance of women's incarceration, four exhibition themes were determined: 'The Root Causes of Female Incarceration', 'The Impact of Incarcerating Mothers', 'The Physical and Behavioral Health Toll of Incarceration', and 'The Challenges and Opportunities to Reentry'.

Once the exhibition themes were determined, leaders at Operation Restoration and the organization Women with a Vision invited 30 formerly



Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana (2019), installation view at Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: courtesy of the Newcomb Art Museum.

incarcerated women to participate in the exhibition by sharing their personal stories of persistence and resilience. The title *Per(Sister)* derived from these stories and was quickly adopted by the women as a self-referential term reflective of the community that was built through the exhibition planning process. The museum staff conducted and recorded interviews with each *PerSister*, which were then transcribed. The curators assembled a list of participating artists and created a portfolio of their work. The *PerSisters* selected an artist to collaborate with from the portfolio. Museum staff sent the interview transcriptions to the artists, many of whom elected to include their partner in the creation of the work itself. In addition to the artwork, each *PerSister* was represented in the exhibition by an audio recording of them telling their story, as well as a photographic portrait shot by artist Allison Beondé. The *PerSisters* were compensated by NAM for the time they spent being interviewed by museum staff, having their portrait taken, and participating in any panels or exhibition events. An equitable contract was developed between NAM and the artists wherein the *PerSister* would receive a percentage from any sale made of the work created from their experiences. Artworks in various media, from original musical compositions to abstract painting, addressed a range of issues, including the link between mass production and mass incarceration, the idea of familial incarceration, the historic lineage of mass incarceration in slavery, and the inhumane conditions that the *PerSisters* experienced, while also illuminating aspects of their lives outside prison. Tying community-driven

curating to social justice struggles in this way necessitated the museum's political engagement.

Politics

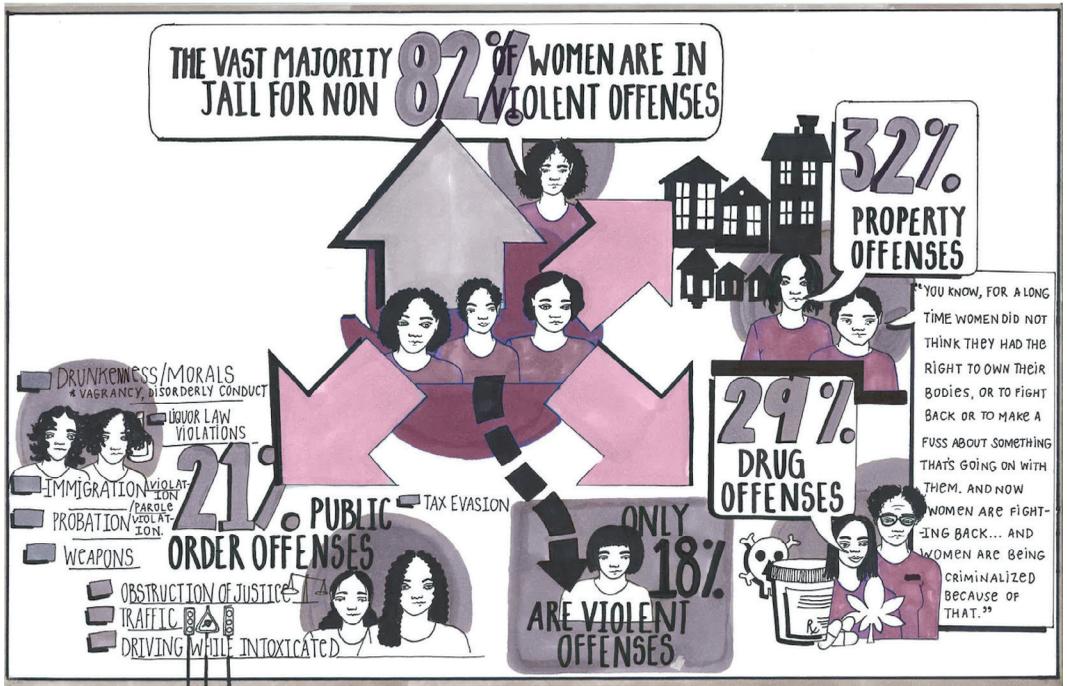
Constituent to designing the exhibition, the *Per(Sister)* team had to consider the politics of the site and Tulane University as an institution. The planning process began with an exploration of the museum's history, spatial politics and relationship to the residents of New Orleans. Tulane University is a private institution, a historically and predominantly White institution in the majority Black city of New Orleans. Despite the existence of university-community initiatives that aim to bridge the gap between Tulane students (the majority of whom come from out of state) and the surrounding community, many New Orleans residents remain sceptical of university outreach. The hostility that many community members harbour towards the university proved to be an initial barrier to collaboration for *Per(Sister)*.

To build trust, Ramírez-Montagut held conversations with local organizers for several years before the exhibition opened, and it was this process of relationship development that resulted in a community-driven curating model. In addition to offering their insights on the carceral system, the community partners also performed the critical role of holding the museum accountable to the marginalized population of women with whom the exhibition was partnering. Most of the formerly incarcerated women had experienced a great deal of trauma. The *Per(Sister)* team worked to ensure that participants in the exhibition were protected from any potential exploitation by the museum, and that the representation of their experiences in an exhibition did not create further harm.

The community partners taught the museum staff numerous nuances and details of working ethically with formerly incarcerated women, ensuring that no one profited financially from the telling of the women's stories. To underscore their agency, the women retained shared ownership of the work they created. Further, the *Per(Sister)* team had to address the ethical challenges of collaborating with incarcerated individuals. Prisons have strict communication restrictions that make it difficult to work with the people incarcerated inside. Community members raised the concern that currently incarcerated women could possibly face retribution from prison officials for participating in an exhibition addressing the prison-industrial complex. These factors informed the exhibition team's decision to primarily partner with *formerly* incarcerated women.

In this way, the museum's collaboration with partners of differing viewpoints and priorities sustained the aim to not reproduce harm. Where curators did not have specialized training in social justice work, they were informed through conversations with such experts. Engaging with informants from outside the museum may also help those employed by institutions who are hesitant to disrupt the status quo, since outsiders can agitate beyond what a museum's board or director might be willing to tolerate from an employee. Such inclusion requires extensive research to identify community organizers who are leading discussions and conducting campaigns on certain issues, as well as the investment of time and resources to help prevent a commitment to social justice from descending into platitudes or clichés.

As part of this commitment to social justice, the exhibition not only educated visitors on the issue of incarceration, but also provided them with



Taslim van Hattum, *Untitled 2 (2018-2019)*, digital scan of original ink drawing, exhibited in *Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana (2019)* at the Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: courtesy of the Newcomb Art Museum.

avenues for taking action. In addition to representing personal stories, the exhibition team identified dozens of local organizations that work in one way or another with people impacted by the carceral system. At the end of the exhibition, there were two stations framing the exit, one that offered literature on these local organizations if visitors felt compelled to get involved, and a mini library of resources on mass incarceration in the United States. Both guided visitors towards further action so that the exhibition avoided a simple aestheticization of the issue. The exhibition team also created a narrative that contextualized the *PerSisters'* stories within the larger national increase in incarceration. The inclusion of the racial and socio-economic demographics of incarceration – as well as such statistics as the percentage of incarcerated women who have experienced partner violence (77 per cent), and the average income for women prior to incarceration (\$13,890) – reveals a bigger picture beyond the simple (and false) assertion that ‘more people are committing crimes’ (Swavola, Riley and Subramanian 2016; Rabuy and Kopf 2015; Beckett and Sasson 2004).

The *Per(Sister)* team included the greater narrative of national incarceration because they did not know what aspects of the *PerSisters'* stories the artists would choose to highlight. The exhibition team was concerned that the artwork might be too abstract, causing Ramírez-Montagut to ask: ‘How will we convey information that we as researchers and the women themselves want people to know about the root causes of the incarceration of women and girls?’ (cited in Clein 2019). Therefore, the research conducted by the exhibition team and Tulane faculty was present in the wall text, as well as in

infographics designed by the artist Taslim van Hattum. Many of the PerSisters themselves do political work as community advocates. For example, in his multimedia work *Whispers to God, Being Here When Women Need Me to Be Here!* (2018), artist Carl Joe Williams used video testimony that Dolfinette Martin had recorded as part of a 2018 campaign to abolish non-unanimous juries in Louisiana; prior to this reform, felony convictions in the state could be decided with only ten of twelve jurors voting to convict. Additionally, PerSister Wendi Cooper asked artist Tammy Mercure to create a work about Louisiana's LGBTQ-discriminatory Crimes Against Humanity law. *Per(Sister)* would not have included work that so specifically reflected local conditions if the exhibition had curated already-existing artwork about the prison-industrial-complex by non-incarcerated artists. The sharing of power through collaborative commissions resulted in an exhibition wherein the women participated in the representations of their stories.

Power

In building mutually transforming power with the community, *Per(Sister)* recognized the knowledge and expertise that is present outside the museum. The partnership proceeded under the presumption that the community partners were the experts, that they were the ones best equipped to tell this story. Anything less than a shared building of power can mimic a charity structure wherein artists and visitors of marginalized identities have representation or engagement 'gifted' to them by the very elite institutions that have often been responsible for their systemic exclusion. Co-production, on the other hand, opened the possibility of collaborative activism and meaningful community building both within and outside the museum.

Thus, *Per(Sister)* was conceived less as a unilateral redistribution of power from an institution to a marginalized community, and more as a sharing and collective building of power through negotiation and reflection. That said, the community-driven curatorial process required frank acknowledgement of the power dynamics between Tulane as an institution and the PerSisters. Throughout the planning, NAM organized frequent brunches that brought together the museum staff, artists, PerSisters and advocates in communal gatherings to discuss the progress of the exhibition. The brunches continued after the show ended to offer community members the space to reflect on the successes and failures of the show and to begin brainstorming themes and ideas for the next exhibition. These frequent reflections served to ensure that the community partners were not there to merely rubberstamp pre-existing plans, and further embedded the collaboration and engagement at the root of the exhibition process.

Likewise, the exhibition team brought co-production into the art making process. NAM facilitated in-person collaboration between the artists and PerSisters wherever possible. Steib noted that such a collaborative process prevented the exhibition from being 'voyeuristic' in its representation of the women's stories, something she noted can occur in artistic representations not in dialogue with those directly impacted (cited in NAM 2019a). The co-productive creation between the artists and the PerSisters meant that the exhibition team exercised little control over the aesthetic outcome. Ramírez-Montagut remarked, 'We did not direct the artists in any way, shape, or form. We truly did not know what would be on the walls' (cited in Clein 2019). *Per(Sister)* centred on the social justice issue and explored it *through*



Sensory Room in Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana (2019), installed at the Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: courtesy of the Newcomb Art Museum.

the facilitation of encounters with objects, rather than solely curating an aesthetic experience.

In addition to bringing the community *in* to the museum through co-production, exhibitions can be effective in the struggle for social justice when they are brought *out* into the community. Although the exhibition team discussed holding satellite exhibitions throughout the city of New Orleans to reach more people, *Per(Sister)* remained at the NAM gallery on Tulane's uptown campus (a very White and wealthy area) and later at the Diboll Gallery on the university's downtown medical school campus. NAM did take steps to increase access by providing free childcare at all events; arranging transportation for those who collaborated on the show; and creating a permanent website that displays all the artworks, portraits, musical compositions, data and interviews. Despite these steps, the question of who had access to the exhibition remains a relevant critique.

Another factor that potentially limited participation was the exhibition's representation of abuse and neglect, which featured in so many of the stories. As Martin noted about the *PerSisters*, 'Our stories are unique, but they're the same – they're all rooted in trauma' (cited in Feinstein 2020). The *PerSisters* were asked to relive this trauma in sharing their stories, and concerns were raised from the beginning that the exhibition material could be triggering to them and to other visitors. Architecture students, as part of the class 'Creative Community Shaping', taught by Ramírez-Montagut, designed a sensory room within the exhibition that included soft chairs, calming sounds, and a number

4. In addition to the sensory room, students designed a map of Louisiana and video projection that visualized the number of carceral facilities in the state, the action stations at the end of the exhibition, the participatory timeline of incarceration, and a field of floating envelopes that held letters to and from incarcerated women.
5. This is nearly double the previous attendance for a NAM exhibition, with the exception of the show *Empire* (2018) that commemorated the 300th anniversary of the city.

of sensory objects that could treat stress.⁴ Primarily, the room served as a space where visitors could retreat if the exhibition became overwhelming. This type of trauma-aware practice is something that will be further developed in the next NAM exhibition in this series, which will centre on juvenile incarceration.

The tenet of sharing power reflected an honest embrace of the interdependence of museums with their communities. During the initial run of *Per(Sister)*, 8305 New Orleanians showed up to view an exhibition that featured the stories and images of their neighbours, demonstrating how the museum could increase its relevance by including more voices.⁵ The community-driven curating of *Per(Sister)* garnered positive press for the museum, including the award of Exhibition of the Year by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. The exhibition has since travelled to the Ford Foundation Gallery in New York City and the Broad Museum of Art at Michigan State University. Though *Per(Sister)* speaks broadly to the prison–industrial complex as a national issue, the local resonance is admittedly lost when the exhibition travels. However, even outside Louisiana, *Per(Sister)* showcases the result of community-driven curating and demonstrates to museumgoers the possibilities of co-production with their local museum.

Polyvocality

The success of *Per(Sister)* can be attributed to the work of over one hundred individuals, whose voices were present in the gallery in different ways. *Per(Sister)* brought the actual voices of the formerly incarcerated women into the exhibition space by creating listening stations where visitors could hear the women tell their stories. As a university art museum, NAM capitalized on the strength of the Tulane faculty and its programmes that address the criminal legal system. Faculty members aided in the writing of the exhibition wall text and participated in panels throughout the run of the exhibition. Several Tulane courses were designed with *Per(Sister)* as an integral component resulting in student contributions in the form of exhibition guides and design elements.

Polyvocality also transformed the exhibition into a dialogue by incorporating visitor voices. NAM offered visitors opportunities to contribute to the narrative of the exhibition, thereby demonstrating that the museum is not the exclusive authority on this issue. The show included a ‘History of Mass Incarceration’ timeline that ran along the floor of the exhibition to provide historical context. As the end of the timeline hit a wall, it grew into a ‘tree’ that featured details on recent reform legislation from the past five years. Nearby was a station where visitors could write their own histories (personally relevant dates and events the museum might have overlooked) on ‘leaves’ that could be added to the tree. One visitor wrote: ‘June 5, 2015 – Makes 10 years that I have been out of federal prison. So thankful and blessed to still be in my right mind and determined to succeed’. The participatory aspect allowed visitors to insert themselves into the timeline and into the history of incarceration, which is so often written without the input of those directly impacted.

Per(Sister) did not just include visitors’ voices in the exhibition but also attempted to connect them to the community of participants. In the final room of the show, the gallery was filled with a sea of floating envelopes, including cards from formerly and currently incarcerated women offering details about their lives. Visitors were encouraged to write their responses on notes that the museum staff eventually scanned and sent to the women. The messages remained on display for the duration of the exhibition, visualizing the dialogue



Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana (2019), installation view at the Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: courtesy of the Newcomb Art Museum.

that *Per(Sister)* attempted to facilitate between those who imagine themselves far removed from the criminal legal system and those who have been directly impacted.

The emphasis on dialogue was also reflected in the programming that accompanied *Per(Sister)*, which offered more than thirty free programmes, including tours, storytelling activities for children, film screenings, educational workshops and performances. There were lectures and panels on such topics as mass incarceration and the law (involving formerly incarcerated women as advocates), on art as a tool for social change, on Louisiana's carceral policies, and more. The museum hosted 27 school visits and four free family days. The mayor of New Orleans visited, as well as the director of a juvenile facility who brought her staff to the exhibition to conduct an empathy workshop.

Radical Imagining

I will note that the emphasis on empathy in *Per(Sister)* may have stymied further discourse on the role that prisons play in US society – a role that is rarely acknowledged, let alone questioned. The cultivation of empathy on an individual basis can result in a search for what carceral geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls 'the relative innocence line' (cited in Kushner 2019), that is, those who are relatively innocent and therefore deserving of empathy. Gilmore notes that when people focus on those who are relatively innocent and therefore undeserving of 'the forces of state-organized violence',



Timeline of Mass Incarceration in Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana (2019), detail of installation at the Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: the author.



Participatory tree in Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana (2019), detail of installation at the Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: courtesy of the Newcomb Art Museum.

they are missing a critical opportunity to see something else. They are missing the opportunity to question the greater picture and to ask ‘if we need organized violence’ (cited in Kushner 2019). *Per(Sister)*, at times, practised this search for ‘relative innocence’ by dedicating an entire section of the exhibition to the impact of incarcerating mothers, and emphasizing data showing that the majority of the women were non-violent offenders who had previously experienced trauma in their lives. Abolitionists and anti-prison activists often avoid framings such as this because it seemingly reinforces the idea that some people *do* belong in captivity (Kaba 2021). In the film *The Arrest* (2018), *PerSister* Chasity Hunter describes the dehumanizing conditions of the five days she was held in Plaquemines Parish jail because she could not afford the \$450 bail. Director Kira Akerman said that it was important to describe Chasity’s experience in jail, rather than answer the question of why she was there. Akerman wrote, ‘To me the “why” matters only insofar as it begs a bigger question: does anyone, under any circumstances, deserve this kind of [cruel, isolating, dehumanizing] treatment?’ (cited in NAM 2019b).

The exhibition’s cultivation of empathy for the *PerSisters* as survivors, while an honest reflection of their experience, also created a narrative whereby visitors could empathize with the women without having to ask why the United States incarcerates 2.3 million people (Sawyer and Wagner 2020). Although *Per(Sister)* did provide larger systemic context for the historical expansion of what is considered ‘criminal’ in the United States, thus answering



Participatory station in Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana (2019), installation view at the Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: the author.



Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana (2019), installation view at the Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. Photo: courtesy of the Newcomb Art Museum.

the *how* of mass incarceration, it could have gone further in answering the *why*. Exhibition literature, for example, describes *Per(Sister)* as an attempt ‘to challenge the dehumanization of those rendered voiceless’ (NAM 2019b). Yet, there are unanswered and unposed questions, such as, who has dehumanized and rendered them voiceless and why? Scholars have demonstrated the role of globalization and corporate migration (Gilmore 2007), the profits of private corporations and the generation of state revenue (Schenwar 2014), and the maintenance of social (Foucault 1995) and racial control (Alexander 2012) as factors driving mass incarceration. Visitors to *Per(Sister)*, thus, could have been invited to ponder the numerous individuals and corporations that benefit financially and politically from incarceration, as well as the role Tulane University plays in the incarceration capital of the world and, by extension, how they themselves might be complicit in a society that incarcerates nearly 1 out of 100 people (Sawyer and Wagner 2020).

These are challenging issues because, in the words of abolitionist and activist Angela Y. Davis, ‘it is extremely hard to imagine life without [prisons]’ (2003: 10). However, the radical imagining necessary to challenge the naturalization of prisons in the social landscape is a struggle to which art is uniquely able to contribute. As art critic and curator Risa Puleo writes, ‘The museum is a repository for all that a society values, and the prison a site for storing all that the same society seeks to disavow and discard. Indeed, the two institutions are inextricably entangled’ (2018: 26). Within a US culture inundated with media

devoted to the depiction of prisons and 'criminals', *Per(Sister)* created an alternative imagery by visualizing the faces and voices of those held captive by the carceral system. The exhibition demonstrated how curatorial practices rooted in solidarity and collaboration can contribute to this struggle for social justice.

As NAM continues to develop the process of long-term, co-productive curating, future exhibitions may further provoke debate over not just whether there are too many women in prison, but whether any human being should be. In the meantime, *Per(Sister)* will continue to travel and generate discussion. As a social justice initiative, the community-driven curating by the *Per(Sister)* team led to an exhibition created not *about* a community, but rather in solidarity *with* it. The exhibition would not have been possible without the expertise, generosity and commitment of the community partners. By collaborating not just with directly impacted stakeholders, but also movement leaders and advocates, *Per(Sister)*'s organizers were driven to consider the politics of its site, to collectively build power and to incorporate diverse voices. Such solidarity is reflected in this visitor's message to the PerSisters: 'I know my freedom is bound up in yours. I'm with you. We're with you' – a testimonial informed by the community-driven curating of *Per(Sister)* and the interdependence of the museum with the communities it serves.

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Suggested citation

Flattley, Megan R. (2021), 'Community-Driven Curating in *Per(Sister): Incarcerated Women of Louisiana*', *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, 10:2, pp. 248–66, https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00045_1

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