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Introduction

Culture Track is a research study of audience behaviors, attitudes, motivations, and barriers to cultural participation, which has been conducted by LaPlaca Cohen since 2001.

Culture & Community in a Time of Transformation: A Special Edition of Culture Track is a collaboration between LaPlaca Cohen and Slover Linett Audience Research, graciously supported by our generous funders, partners, and collaborators listed on p. 37. The study, which began in 2020 as an integrated research and strategy platform, aims to connect the cultural sector with the needs of its audiences and communities during and long after our pandemic times.

The first wave of the study was designed and conducted before the murder of George Floyd ignited a national upswell of anger, sadness, and activism and the Movement for Black Lives began to reshape the discourse around racism in every aspect of American life—including the cultural sector.

Introduction

With that context, and in an effort to celebrate Black experiences that have long been undervalued by our society, LaPlaca Cohen and Slover Linett embarked on a qualitative investigation of the role of creativity, joy, belonging, and connection in the lives of Black and African American adults around the nation. By placing Black experiences at the center of this examination, we aim to learn from Black communities, highlight their lived experiences, and illuminate the way forward with their perspectives.

The study drove the creation of two reports, the first of which was Slover Linett's *A Place to be Heard, A Space to Feel Held: Black Perspectives on Creativity, Trustworthiness, Welcome, and Well-Being*, which provided an in-depth exploration of the research findings. In this second report, LaPlaca Cohen draws on and interprets insights from the first publication to spotlight the distinct ways that cultural practitioners can activate the findings in their work.

Introduction

Likely due to the disproportionate strain on Black people throughout the crisis, healing and well-being were at the heart of the interviews and participants' calls for action. We hope this report will empower readers to answer that call and realize the full potential of arts and culture as a source of collective healing.

Methodology

Participants represent a range in age, location, income, education level, gender identity, and abilities, as well as participation and attendance patterns at arts or culture institutions.

Conversations focused on pandemic-era and creative activities, trust, and welcome. Culturally responsive research practices were used, including guiding the conversations to be responsive to each participant's contributions, and focusing inquiries on positive experiences, allowing any negative thoughts to come organically from each participant.

This report is not meant to speak for all Black or African American people in the U.S. The activations and implications offered here are reflective of the experiences of those interviewed—and reveal many more questions ripe for future inquiry and research.

For more information on the study methodology, findings, and interview approach, please refer to Slover Linett's report _A Place to be Heard, A Space to Feel Held: Black Perspectives on Creativity, Trustworthiness, Welcome, and Well-Being_.

50 Black and African American adults

**Interviewed
February 26 – May 11, 2021**

90 minute conversations via Zoom or phone

With this report, we aim to transform cultural spaces by centering Black needs and community care.

Our goal is to amplify Black insights and prompt inclusive transformation of the arts sector toward a future in which Black voices are not only heard, but also valued and central to shaping the future of culture.

It is our hope that the findings and activations in this report, fueled by Black perspectives, can deepen understanding of Black experiences and support cultural workers in imagining and building experiences that are safe and welcoming for audiences of all backgrounds.

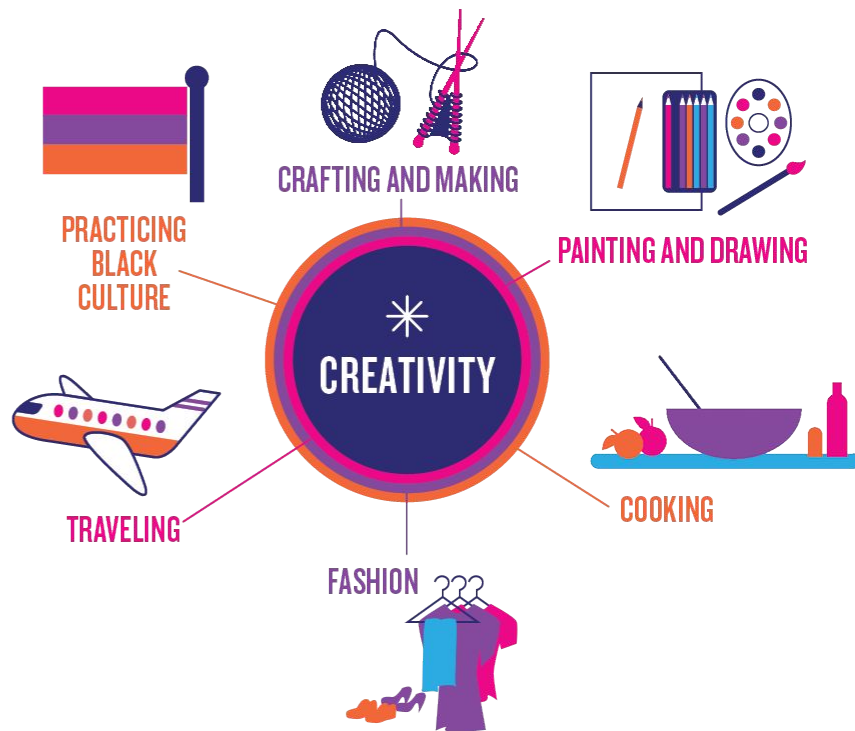# Creativity & Its Impact: An Intimate Portrait

Creativity helps drive cultural participation on multiple planes, from individual practice and collective participation, to mass cultural consumption and niche artistic expression. Examining how participants define and engage in their own creativity—and the underlying benefits of those activities—illuminates the vital role of culture in our lives.

Creative Liberty

Participants interpreted creativity broadly, offering an inclusive definition of creative practice informed by Black identity, freedom of expression, and expanded perspective.

PRACTICING BLACK CULTURE

CRAFTING AND MAKING

PAINTING AND DRAWING

CREATIVITY

COOKING

TRAVELING

FASHION

Creative Liberty: In Their Own Words

"I think that everybody, particularly Black people, are just living works of art, in our culture and being. I express my creativeness in how I present myself, how I do my hair, how I walk, cooking."

"There is nothing nicer to me than a beautiful silk of cashmere, and putting looks together. I think that is one of the ways I have creativity."

"Traveling was a creative space for me, experiencing different foods and culture. You're a different person when you're out there."

Joys of Creative Living

Creative habits yielded an array of personal outcomes throughout the pandemic. Participants shared how creative expression enhanced their lives, fueling connection with others, self-care and emotional catharsis, as well as personal fulfillment.
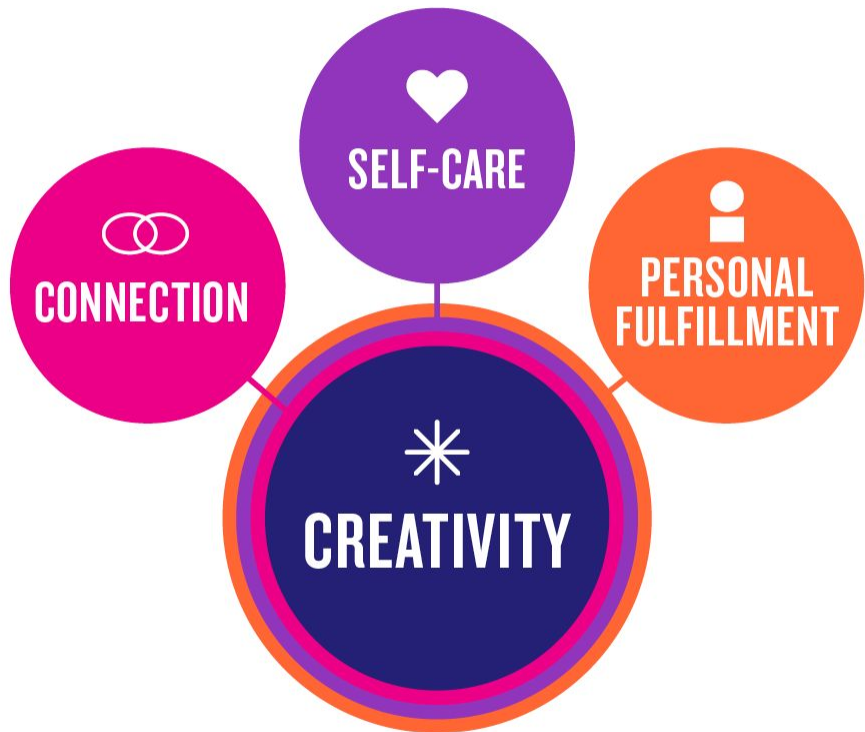
Joys of Creative Living: In Their Own Words

"A lot of times when I paint, I paint over Zoom with other people. Do you have a canvas at your house? I'll Amazon Prime one to them, and we'll bond over that."

"I write poetry. I'll write reflections on my day, and I'll express my frustrations through writing."

"Over the last year, especially when I was down, I was just engaging in play [with the piano]… I'm going to play around with this keyboard for twenty minutes and I feel good about it."

Creativity for Community Recovery

Creativity and culture are powerful tools for personal well-being, both in the form of individual self-expression and larger cultural participation. This indicates a potential activation for the field in which these same tools are used to help communities process pandemic experiences and collaboratively imagine roads to recovery. By investing in collective healing within and beyond their walls, cultural organizations can deepen their connection with larger audiences while also bolstering community resilience efforts.

Culture & Collective Care

Like personal creative expression, cultural participation at the community level acts as a form of care—but on a bigger scale. Participants described collective care experiences where cultural engagement, events aimed at emotional wellness, and collective participation intersected to support community well-being in imaginative ways.

Culture & Collective Care: In Their Own Words

"There's a museum that I like, and it [held] a grieving session. It was stressful, but collective grieving was really great... Two artists facilitated it, and it was on Zoom. It was thoughtfully done. There was voice and meditation, there was collective singing and chant. And they would put the name of someone you were thinking of, who'd passed away, or you were holding space for."

Culture & Collective Care: In Their Own Words

"[An artist friend] does events where they light this bonfire on the lake, and people come out and sit around the fire… You burn whatever you need to release. You just throw it in the fire… whatever, burn it and leave it."

Priming Spaces for Welcome & Belonging

Cultural spaces, whether in-person or online, have the power to enrich our societies by prompting audiences to engage their creativity in the pursuit of collective well-being. To do so, cultural practitioners can begin by understanding and addressing the ways that America's cultural spaces have excluded and alienated Black audiences. Participants shared the importance of welcome and belonging, and the following activations illuminate concrete steps organizations can take to build meaningful trust and connection with Black audiences and communities.

Building Trust

Participant insights indicate that organizations can create trust through an ongoing process of consistent action, community engagement, and accountability.
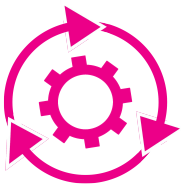
Consistency

Equitable internal workplace culture and hiring practices

Ongoing action and long-term commitment

Ethical curatorial and producing practices

Community Engagement

Meeting immediate community needs during crises

Events and programs for diverse audiences

Engagement in continuous dialogue with community

Accountability

Recognition of past harm

Statements backed by action

Evaluation, measurement, and reporting of community impact
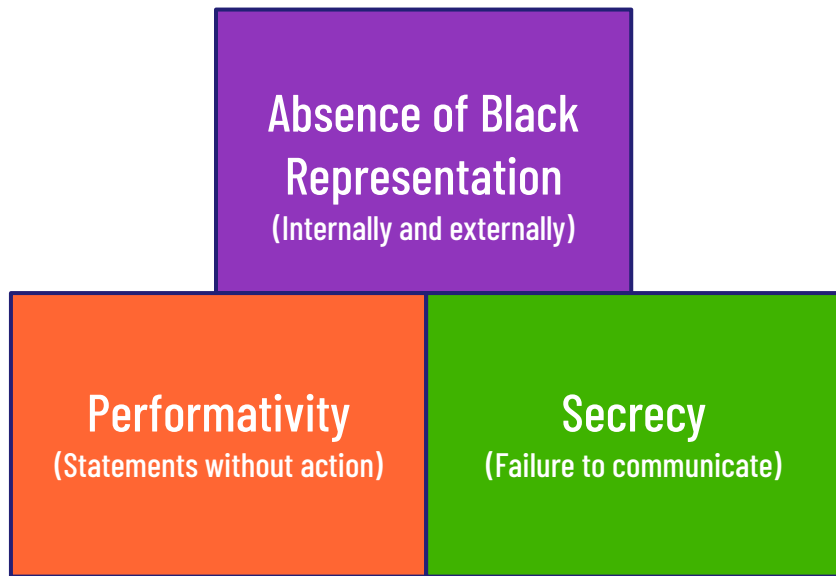
Building Trust: In Their Own Words

"Trust is an active thing, something that needs to be affirmed... It's not a static destination on the map. You have to feed it."

"If we only see white people in a cultural organization, that's not because only white people are interested, it's because the programming is only really for older white people."

"I go to the [art museum], half this stuff is stolen. This is not trusted... Also, how many people in leadership positions represent people like me? You're not paying people correctly. There are layers at these institutions that don't solicit trust."

Trust Barriers

Participants shared that trust is a dynamic state that is constantly under evaluation and can be weakened or lost. New information about an organization's past, present, or future decisions, as well as disregard for the "pillars" of trust building, can erode trust.

Absence of Black Representation
(Internally and externally)

Performativity
(Statements without action)

Secrecy
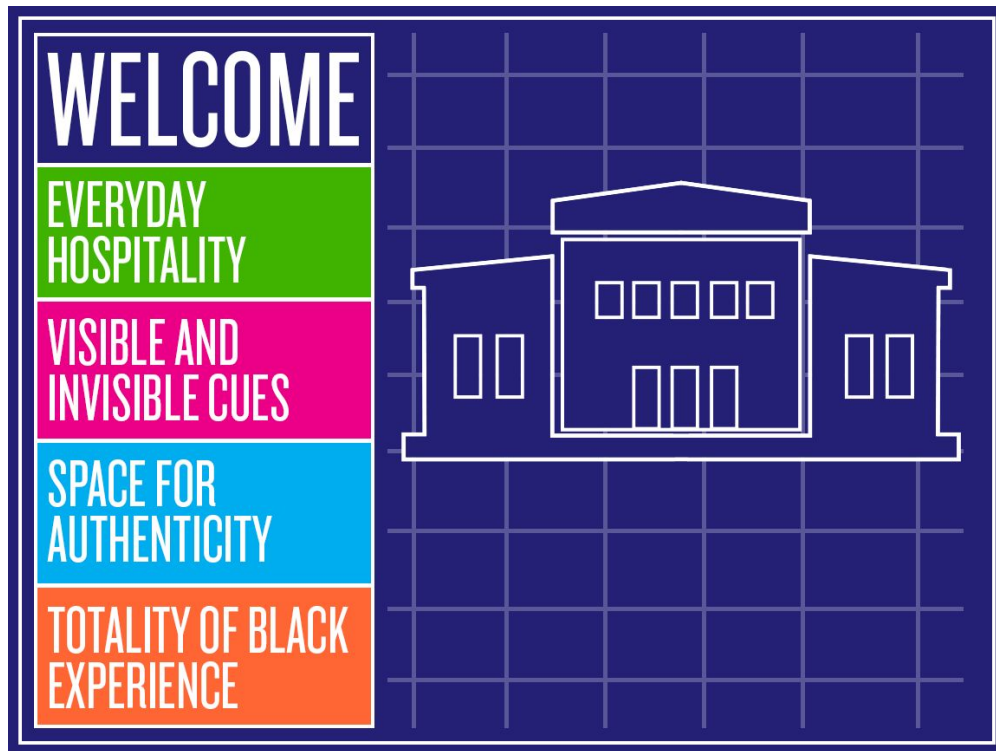(Failure to communicate)

Trust Barriers: In Their Own Words

"Some of these organizations, they've posted these Black Lives Matter [statements], but I don't think that's true in some situations. Because you look at their staff, their board... If your mission is serving the general population, then that needs to be represented in the staff."

"Gestures can be hollow without actual action. I still want to know that you've made concentrated efforts to diversify your board and staff. Put out a press release, you're doing it. Put it on a billboard. That's fine if you're [actually] doing it."

A Blueprint for Welcome

From barriers to access to outright exclusion, Black communities have not always been welcome in America's cultural spaces. Participants defined welcome as environments and interactions where they felt fully embraced as Black people. To create such spaces, cultural organizations can begin by prioritizing four primary factors.

WELCOME

EVERYDAY HOSPITALITY

VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CUES

SPACE FOR AUTHENTICITY

TOTALITY OF BLACK EXPERIENCE

A Blueprint for Welcome: In Their Own Words

" There are little cues to prime a space to be successful. When I walk into a space, I'm absorbing every element about it... "

Everyday Hospitality

Demonstrations of kindness, even small acts, contribute to welcome by supporting feelings of comfort and belonging. Conversely, the absence of kindness in spaces could be interpreted as an anti-Black atmosphere, as negative interactions prompted participants to wonder if their experiences were attributable to rudeness or discrimination.

WELCOME

EVERYDAY HOSPITALITY
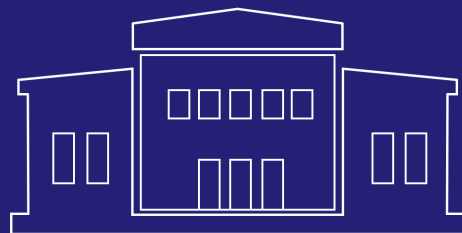
Greet all visitors warmly

Allow for audiences to experience at their own pace and leisure

Proactively respond to visitor needs, offering assistance throughout the experience

Everyday Hospitality: In Their Own Words

"[Places that are welcoming, there's] someone genuinely asking how you're doing, and there's time for that chit-chat. There's some type of greeter. There are times I've broken the ice with people I don't know...I can do it if I have to. But it's even better if people welcome you."

"There are instances in which it is hard to tell if your treatment is a result of racism or rudeness. And the part of me that doesn't want things to be racist prefers to attribute it to rudeness, but one has to wonder."

Visible and Invisible Cues

Participants shared that the signs of welcome are both overt and subtle, and begin well before a visitor enters a cultural institution. This reveals a need for cultural institutions to understand the many ways welcome is perceived so that it can be constructed from the inside out.

WELCOME

VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CUES

Design inclusive programming that reflects audiences of diverse backgrounds

Practice engagement with historically excluded communities

Continually and humbly pursue cultural literacy and demonstrate it in organizational messaging

Visible and Invisible Cues: In Their Own Words

"What makes it feel like you don't belong there is because no one looks like me."

"If I walk around my community and I don't see [symphony orchestra] hanging on billboards, but I go to a white community and people are talking about the orchestra and how the orchestra is coming to their neighborhood, it makes me feel like they don't care about my viewership."

Space for Authenticity

Participants emphasized the freedom to be one's authentic self as a key characteristic of the most welcoming environments. Support, shared identity and values, and affirmation of Blackness can act as a recipe for realness, encouraging authenticity that promotes meaningful cultural engagement.

WELCOME

SPACE FOR AUTHENTICITY
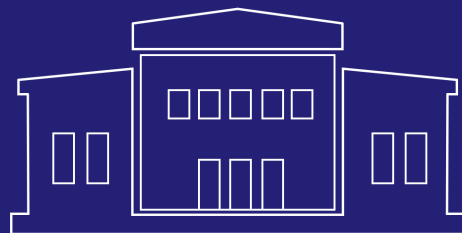
Invest in and support issues important to Black communities

Create safe, curious spaces that invite visitors to explore the many facets of human diversity

Construct affinity spaces for diverse audiences to connect over shared identities, interests, or values

Space for Authenticity: In Their Own Words

"It was like a queer party performance, burlesque, poetry. They get people from the LGBTQ community performing….Everyone was really supportive, and it was incredible."

"At Afropunk, the festival, I feel authentically myself and like I'm safe there, because I can express all pieces of me. I think it's being surrounded by so much beauty and so much uninhibited Blackness."

Totality of Black Experience

Reflecting the breadth of Black life in culture is an integral component of welcome. Participants shared that many cultural spaces either lack Black stories or are fixated on Black trauma, suggesting that some arts and culture institutions are filtering Black experiences through a white gaze.

WELCOME

TOTALITY OF BLACK EXPERIENCE

Incorporate a range of Black perspectives into decision-making

Highlight diversity of Black life and experiences

Surface Black contributions to the cultural canon in the past, present, and future

Totality of Black Experience: In Their Own Words

"If you go to Sweden to the Nobel Prize museum, [you'll be] blown away by how many Brown people have won the Nobel prize... I went to Mozart's house, and I saw how he played alongside Black classical composers. Look at all this greatness we don't talk about [in the U.S.]."

"I think what's kept me grounded and brought me joy is kind of just watching Black folks. We're just out here and killing it in this really [bad] situation. It brings me sorrow, grief, and rage, but also a lot of joy."

In Conclusion

The events of 2020 ignited a rising desire to hear and learn from Black perspectives about how systemic racism has and continues to shape our world, and to dismantle the remnants of racial discrimination in the arts and culture sector. From protests to open letters to unionization, the calls for field-wide action came swiftly, but the work is not complete. By spotlighting the voices of Black people, we hope this report acts as a megaphone for more truth and actionability in our field.

While the 50 participants in this study speak specifically to their individual experiences as Black people, the thoughts they shared on creativity, trust, welcome, and well-being speak to shared struggles, desires, and values. We believe this report points to opportunities for transformation in the sector specifically informed by Blackness and beneficial for all.

Implications

Become a force for collective healing.

Design cultural experiences aimed at supporting communities in processing and healing from pandemic-era impacts. Study participants revealed the power of everyday creativity and culture for promoting well-being, suggesting that this collective need can easily co-exist with the missions and programs of cultural organizations.

Implications

Build trust through consistent action.

Audiences are discerning for themselves which organizations are trustworthy, and in some cases, which institutions are truly committed to systemic change. Earning and keeping the trust of audiences and communities requires ongoing action and accountability, going far beyond public statements to demonstrate justice-minded values in practice.

Implications

Redesign with welcome in mind.

Interactions, no matter how brief, work to either signal welcome or exclusion of diverse audiences within a cultural space. To create spaces that embrace communities of all backgrounds, treat welcome as an arc of engagement that begins at the moment of discovery (via culturally-inclusive marketing and outreach), carries through the visitor experience, and culminates in ongoing invitations to return.

Implications

Showcase the breadth of Blackness.

While the cultural sector has made strides to increase Black representation in programming, displays of Blackness are often limited to depictions of grief and trauma. The full spectrum of Black experience is far vaster, encompassing joy, love, pleasure, freedom, invention, resilience (and more). Diversify your organization to include Black voices, from board to leadership to curation. Their influence will reshape cultural spaces to honor the spectrum of Black life.

We're grateful to our funders and partners for their vital support of Culture + Community in a Time of Transformation:

We invite new partners and collaborators to join in this effort.

We'd like to thank our Advisory Group for generously contributing their time, input, and perspectives.

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Lavita McMath Turner
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THANK YOU

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