

IMAGINING THE WORLD ANEW

- Topic: Imagining the World Anew: The Arts and the Beauty of Impasse
 Convener: Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, St. Catherine University
 Moderator: Susan Ross, Loyola University of Chicago
 Presenters: Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, St. Catherine University
 Rachel Bundang, St. Catherine University
 Maureen O'Connell, Fordham University

The unifying thesis of these presentations claimed that the visual and performing arts not only make visible the often hidden or ignored aspects of the many impasses that shape our contemporary reality, but also offer an invaluable way to circumvent the American civic and religious aversion to impasses. The panelists explored the viability of the arts in squarely facing, entering into, and then imaginatively three contemporary expressions of impasse.

In a paper titled, "Beyond the Devastation: Beauty, Ecology and Emily Carr's Clearcut Forests," Colleen Cullinan introduced the work of Canadian artist Emily Carr (1871-1945) as a way to speak about the imagination as a route through impasse. Carr's most famous works are paintings of the British Columbian rainforest, a dramatic and intimidating landscape. Cullinan focused on works such as *Logger's Culls* (1935), *Scorned as Timber*, *Beloved of the Sky* (1935), and *Odds and Ends* (1939), all of which are strikingly gorgeous paintings of what should be a profoundly ugly subject: recently clear cut forest. A few trees remain in each painting, and in each, one can see the "screamers," Carr's word for the ripped edge of the stumps where the tree finally gave way. Cullinan contrasted these quite beautiful paintings with photographs taken by the British Columbian Forestry Service during the 1930s, and argued that Emily Carr's ability to see beauty in the midst of this devastation was rooted in Carr's particularly Christian focus on resurrection, not death, as the key to how to see and understand the world. Carr spoke clearly in her journal about how important it was to see the world "the Christ way . . . dipped in love," and that kind of vision clearly animates these particular paintings. Cullinan argued that finding a way to see the world "the Christ way" is in the end a route through impasse.

Rachel Bundang, in "From Old School to New School: Rethinking Tradition and Social Change in Remix Culture," began by clarifying terms. She noted that hip hop, which is grounded in history and experiences of struggle, building community, and making both meaning and memory among the urban African diaspora, can be used as an exercise in moral and theological imagination and creativity, whether done collaboratively or independently. As a means of interactivity, cultural production, and resistance/engagement, it provides a liberative metaphor and practice for us to challenge ourselves to experience the world from different perspectives and—in the process—recognize the personhood and dignity of the other.

She then explained that remix culture is born of hip hop's ethos and practices of sampling, much like jazz practices of improvisation that preceded it. Its

artists—whether in music, video, images, or text—take content from an existing work and recontextualize it so that it becomes not just a copy but, more often, a new work in its own right.

In the process, hip hop provides a space for asserting personhood in ways that are not just historical or socio-political, but also theo-ethical. The remix provides as a *participatory* model for arriving at thoughtful, complex/nuanced cultural criticism coming from a variety of perspectives that are attentive to feminism, race, class, and religion. It may well be a means for rethinking tradition, social change, and right relation—a means for handling better the criticism and conflict that might otherwise be destructive and life-denying.

In her paper, “A Faith That Imagines Justice: Beyond Reward and Punishment to Restoration and Recovery,” Maureen O’Connell identified two affective impasses that cultivate cultural values and frameworks of meaning which diminish the humanity of many residents in contemporary metropolitan areas and fuel conditions of concentrated poverty in inner-cities: the code of the street which relies on violence to navigate interpersonal relationships and whiteness or unearned privilege which supports a defensive and apathetic consciousness. These two impasses merge around a third, the prison industrial complex, which increasingly trap metropolitan citizens in an a seemingly endless cycle of mass incarceration which degrades all persons connected to it through retributive punishment, reifies violence and isolation from the common good, and alienates inner-city and suburban populations from one another. She suggested several facets of engagement with beauty and the arts in the context of community muralism and an “aesthetics from below” that it encourages that might interrupt these otherwise inevitable impasses including emotional and embodied engagement with self and others, creative moral agency, inclusive and nonverbal communication, and aesthetic solidarity.

Discussion centered on three points of engagement: 1) the potential for uncritical artistic expression or engagement of the arts to re-inscribe ideologies that only exacerbate existing impasses, 2) the ambiguity as to whether the examples used could be accurately identified as expressions of religious art and resources for critically engaging them as religious art, and 3) the marginalization of the arts in political and educational contexts, as well as in the theological academy.

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