by Courtney McFarlane

I want to say something about censorship as it relates to other issues of identity and difference. The debacles about censorship rage on. When I hear the word, I hear associations about self-censorship, social censorship, community censorship. I hear the myriad ways that we or people of colour internalize the oppressive attitudes of our society, our community and stifle the work we produce, we create. I don’t often hear about the state-sponsored censorship that most people talk about. Most anti-censorship activists rarely address the issues of censorship that I experience directly.

Censorship is actually not an issue I feel very passionately about. The language used in discussing it is basically outside my experience. In order to participate in a panel discussion on this issue, I had to do some basic research. I was somewhat ashamed to admit my ignorance of the Butler decision. I was aware, in a peripheral kind of way, of the harassment of lesbians and gay bookstores, custom sadness of queer images and other incidents around the city. However, I had not personalized the issue. What I knew did not lead to my reaction or even outrage. I have recently finished four years at the Ontario College of Art, as insulating a educational institution as any other. Perhaps that explains some of my ambivalence about the issues.

As someone with a double consciousness, as a gay man and a black man, I recognize that the issue is often framed and defined by people who are relatively privileged by this society. Censorship is often only viewed in the suppression of cultural productions related to sex and sexuality by the state, institutions of the state, and conservative elements of society. This limited definition is something I feel very outside of. Yes, there should be freedom to create, exhibit, distribute work of any nature and I should support that, but I am not passionate in that support or defence. I certainly have difficulties with that narrow definition of censorship. It often does not recognize the other subtle ways in which censorship is practiced: the forms of social censorship that exist within the queer artistic communities.

We should all fight to defend freedom of expression, but recognize that we aren’t equally free to express, create, exhibit, publish, perform, be picked, praised, criticized, recognized and be paid... much less be censored. Within a white, supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal, heterosexist society I might have forgotten something about freedom to be distributed and used. Even though we as lesbians and gay artists have struggles that intersect, they are not identical. The effect of censorship differs with one’s place in the hierarchy. My struggle is about creating a community to support my expression, my cultural productions, to access resources from organizations or communities that don’t necessarily see my silence or invisibility as a priority.

In the case of one’s place in the hierarchy, my struggle is about creating a community to support my expression, my cultural productions, to access resources from organizations or communities that don’t necessarily see my silence or invisibility as a priority. Institutions continue to value and privilege the way others represent me rather than the way I choose to represent myself. That defines my existence and critiques my work by standards by which I will always be found lacking. I am coming from a space where there isn’t the luxury of time to create when energy is diverted in the fight for access to resources and in developing these communities to support and nurture my work.

That is basically where I am coming from in terms of this issue. So I would like to ask how much of this work that we are so passionately defending is by people of colour? How much of this work speaks to issues that are outside of your experiences? That takes place with which we disagree? Any movement to combat censorship must recognize social censorship, market place censorship, by extension, personal censorship. Not only censorship that directly affects and those like ourselves, but the censorship that we participate in. As gay and lesbian activists, as artists, we are censored by the state and society but despite our social identity, those of us who are privileged whether it be by race, gender or class, have to acknowledge that privilege. So any struggle against censorship for me has to adequately address not only the state-sponsored censorship, the social censorship, but also the censorship I feel I live and breathe everyday. Unless censorship includes that struggle, I will continue to be disinherited about the anti-censorship movement.

While writing the original version of this article I went to a dub poetry festival in Toronto. Many of the people who support the black artistic productions such as this festival are lesbians and gay. So as we watched the performances that went on well beyond closing time, one of the performers, a well-known dub poet in the city, slipped in the world “lesbian” and within that space we heard it. The word… yeh we caught it, sort of like dog hearing right, we heard it and thought it was so quick no one else would hear. Talking to a lesbian film-maker on the way home, she described how this woman up front was saying “Oh yeh and swepst, me like that except for the lesbian part.” Where I’m coming from within the Black community, lesbians and gays don’t exist. The issue of homosexuality is never addressed and often we as Black lesbians and gay artists within those spaces are pressured to remain invisible and silent. In this culturally conscious queer milieu that is predominantly white, we continue to be marginalized and silent. Both of these realities form a censorship that I experience, that are real for me. Finally, I recognize that all forms of censorship limit all of our struggles and that these linkages have to be made.

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