Souped Up: Slow Building of Support Networks Through Commensality

Marsya Maharani and Geneviève Wallen

Building Our Own Table

Geneviève: Souped Up is a new endeavour initiated by Marsya and I. The idea of hosting dinners with racialized curators and cultural workers was first sparked due to a pleasantry about Marsya’s hostess skills, suggesting how in her friend circles she is probably everyone’s “Martha Stewart.” Following that tangent, there was conversation about creating a web series that we would co-host, interviewing artists and curators while cooking simple dishes. Marsya has this gift for uniting people from different formal and informal friend circles with great food in a welcoming atmosphere, creating instances of meaningful and heartfelt engagements. And on my end, although hosting puts me in a state of anxiety, I am blessed with the skill of being a great conversationalist. In June 2019, on the occasion of

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curator and producer Tian Zhang visiting Toronto, we decided to organize our first dinner event. The title *Souped Up* came through a simple google search on English food idioms. Through this search, I stumbled on the expression “souped up,” which means to render more powerful or stylish. Through our dinner series, guests empower one another through shared food, drinks, and conversations.

Marsya: It’s also fitting that “souped up” originated from the context of racing, referring to performance-enhancing drugs for horses or, later, supercharged cars. I have been fixated on the reality TV adage “I’m not here to make friends, I’m here to win,” hoping to upturn that sentiment in the way I work. The feeling of isolation in winning culture was wearing me down, especially after finding myself as the only woman of colour at too many meeting tables. I seek methodologies of working together that are centred around making friends, collaboration, collectivity, and supportive networks, particularly coming from Asia. Our *Souped Up* project is envisioned as a platform for making friends in spite of artworld pressures that encourage competition, and a place where we “soup up” by an open sharing of vulnerabilities and failures.

Geneviève: Looking back and thinking through the why and how this project started we wondered about what made food such a potent platform not only to care for others via sustenance, but as a voice amplifier. What makes eating together a catalyst for vulnerability? Although food has the power of bringing people together with a purpose, what is food’s place in conversations about support networks? What can we literally and figuratively stomach? How does the kitchen table hold space for trust and safety? While there is plenty of fascinating and complex history and theory on these questions, we wanted to start with practice-based research that approaches these inquiries based on our own experiences.

Marsya and Geneviève: *Souped Up* is a platform that explores communal meals and the creation of long-term reciprocal caring systems. Two questions guide this ongoing project: What does it mean to eat together? What kind of relationships can emerge from this dinner series? What we hope is that these meals encourage community instead of competition amongst racialized arts practitioners conditioned to have a scarcity mentality, while also contributing to a supportive ecosystem for co-mentorship, radical friendship, resource-sharing, and collective governance as primary foundations.

What also drives this initiative is a shared exhaustion from the burden of carrying out commitments to decolonization and inclusion and from
navigating toxic and precarious workplace culture that continues to proliferate in Canada’s cultural institutions. We fight for change all the time, from discrete gestures of refusal to loud manifestos. We deserve to be fed, to be cared for, and to share our experiences without having to explain or censor ourselves. Around our table, there is no need for the maintenance of an over-theorized space, particularly when such a space is often performative. We do not have to be burdened with a goal, we do not have to legitimize this initiative through institutional standards, and that is a great respite. While mobilizing, we can also just be.

Our framework takes in the existing landscape of social meals orchestrated by curators and artists within the art institutional realm of Toronto. However, our objective to expand our solidarity networks necessitates a different structure. Our initiative is not rooted in public spatial activism, education or social performance, but rather in the generative potentiality of support networks that are built on already shared socio-political agendas. Longevity and sustainability are therefore central for us. Making space for solidarity, friendship, and togetherness is refreshing in the context of temporary exhibitions, biennials, and festivals. Reoccurring sociable meals can focus on sustaining face-to-face engagement, relationship building, and meaningful exchange. These meals offer deeper interactions when fleeting encounters, transactional relationships, and tokenizing metrics-oriented inclusion often define how the practices and relationships of racialized cultural workers operate with and within institutions.1

For each *Souped Up* gathering, we aim to create a congregational space that can be maintained beyond a project-based mindset, which has pervasive effects on the nature of our collaboration. We see so many one-off programs tending to privilege short-term care which feed into disposability culture. So far, every dinner has had a different group of people onboard; but our guests are usually invited more than once so we can continue to deepen our relationships. We hope to have a sense of continuity, while also expanding our relationships and social circles. In building our table, we largely invite those who are already part of our extended networks of friends and acquaintances. We struggle in making this decision but realize the importance of easing into the process of trust-building among our guests. There is a limit to how many people can sit at the table for trust to be nurtured. We try to open it up by bringing together our separate (but sometimes overlapping) circles of acquaintances, so that this is not entirely an exclusive power club. What we can share beyond a seat
at our dinner table is our research and lessons from our past dinners, as a loose roadmap for anyone interested in building their own supportive network.

A heartfelt thank you to all of past and future participants, we are grateful for your presence, your trust, your invaluable work in the arts, your thoughtfulness, genuine engagement, emotional labour and excitement. Thank you for eating, sharing stories, and laughing out loud with us. We are honoured to care for you, and to be in your care.

**WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR**

*Session One: Testing the Idea*

_Souped Up: how to hold each other_

Thursday, June 20, 2019, 7–10 p.m.

with guests Liz Ikiriko, Safia Siad, Shani K. Parsons, and Tian Zhang

Menu: Smoked salmon rolls, fig and goat cheese salad on toast, stuffed bell peppers with shrimps, Klondike bars and lemon pie

“Dear all,

We are so excited to host this dinner which will hopefully be part of a lasting series. For now, it is at its experimentation phase. This dinner has been conceived as a way to carve space for care and support building among curators who identify as POC, Black, and Indigenous. Aware of the isolating and competitive nature of our work as curators, especially when working independently, we believe that sharing meals together can perhaps break down some of the weight brought on by these factors and more. While working towards different collaborative models for BIPOC curators (and in the future artists will also be part of the conversation). We hope to work beyond scarcity mentality; to share resources and strategies; to mobilize, advocate for, and build up one another; to dismantle hegemonic ideas of power dynamics, leadership models, winning culture; and to learn together.

The conceptual thinking behind the menu is meant to reflect the conversation we are hoping to have around the table. For this occasion, we are thinking about serving simple dishes with foods holding other ingredients, echoing the thinking process and concerns that can go into holding space for one another, considering that our needs are different, yet similar in many ways. In addition, to accept that sometimes even with the best intentions,
when generating spaces for conversations around vulnerability, accountability, and support, it can get very messy, like a fully-loaded taco. What happens then, when you are trying to catch the falling pieces with your hands? Alright enough taco/sandwich metaphor, but you got our vibe, right?

For this first iteration, we are so happy to host Sydney-based independent curator Tian Zhang as our guest of honor. Zhang is a socially-engaged curator and creative producer whose research into non-European /Asian diasporic cultural forms of curating and leadership serve as a means and methodology to deconstruct social issues and facilitate change. If you are free this Wednesday, FYI - Tian will be presenting a talk on Curating For The Future: https://www.facebook.com/events/2440704475969123/.

Old friends, new friends, we are so happy that you can be present for our very special first edition of Souped Up!

With love and food,
Marsya and Geneviève"

Geneviève: Souped Up’s first iteration was more of a test than anything else. It was the result of a mutual need fed with exciting what ifs. What if we are able to provide a space wherein our isolation as curators can be set aside? What if we can actually make time to eat together and share our aspirations and interests? What if this can become something bigger? Even with all of these questions, we didn’t have an end goal in mind apart from experiencing the meal, and gauging our peers’ interest. Ultimately, we wanted to explore if a shared meal could help us further our commitment to empower and enable each other’s successes.

The individuals invited were part of our social circles. We also had the desire to continue the conversations generated at the Xpace Cultural Centre’s first curatorial focus group for racialized emerging curators, which was held in April 2019. Given Zhang’s research in non-European approaches to curating and leadership, her visit to Toronto gave us a small window of opportunity to simply give this a try, without overthinking it. We were excited about the prospect of creating an international supportive network of racialized curators.

Other factors that were considered in our organizing of this event were space and budget since this event was supported by us, out of our own pockets. At this point, Souped Up was in its experimental stage (quite frankly, it still is) since we wanted to better understand the parameters of our intentions. When the dinner occurred, it was not yet envisioned as an
event to pitch to an arts council for funding or to an institutional host or partner. However, we have to admit that after the first session we were so excited that we started to apply to calls for submissions from residencies and artist-run centres.

“The particular structure of the meal and the event (the kind of food served; the levels of formality expected; the division of labour required) is connected to the kinds of relationships people are trying to create.” To Alice J. Pulier’s point regarding the importance of structure in setting a tone, we prepared the meal together and set up as one would when having friends over. We brainstormed recipes, made a grocery list, shopped for the ingredients, and cooked a meal together based on the time we had to pull this dinner off. We opted to take the route of a thematic meal as a practical incentive. We asked our guests to bring something to drink or deserts (which would follow the theme), and their wonderful selves.

Arts workers do not have too much time on their hands, especially for “purposeless” dinners. In all honesty, we are both guilty of being most responsive to project-oriented invitations. Being aware of the challenges to bring people together outside of exhibition openings, artist talks, or other institutional driven activities, led to focusing on eating with purpose as a step towards self and communal care. Food is never just food, especially when generating support systems. We ended up being a small group of seven, and when debriefing, realized that keeping these events intimate offers the best format.

It was a memorable evening that went “overtime.” The discussions gravitated around the necessity of having a fee schedule for curators because of the challenges we have in enumerating our labour. We examined what are the parts of our job that are not quantifiable and remain invisible as well as the financial status of emerging curators in Canada, the United States, and Australia. We made space for each other’s concerns about the difficulties of conjugating the independent gig economy with balancing family-partnerships, our wellbeing, hobbies, and artworld expectations and pitfalls. Our souls and bellies were full.

Session Two: The Question of Time, Duration, and Opportunism

Souped Up: Collective Pot

Friday, January 31, 2020, 6–8 p.m. at the Textile Museum of Canada

Souped Up: Collective Pot is taking place within the context of Petrina Ng’s artist residency at the Textile Museum.
With guests: Hannia Cheng (Tea Base), Eric Chengyang (Glory Hole Gallery), Marina Fathalla (MICE Magazine), Raven Lam (Whippersnapper Gallery), Peter Rahul (BUMP TV), Rachel Wallace (Durable Good), Florence Yee (Friends of Chinatown and Tea Base), as well as Textile Museum staff Khadija Aziz, Leah Sanchez, and Susan Fohr.

Menu: Hot Pot Potluck

“This session is envisioned as a space to discuss ways of sharing resources. Many of us are reluctant to share ideas, keeping a lid on resources that could be enjoyed by many in the interest of self-preservation. What if we can instill trust among us? To see each other as accomplices rather than competitors for funding and opportunities? We encourage everyone to come with ideas on persevering together to create sustainable relationships among collectives in the city.

Souped Up menus are meant to reflect the conversation we are hoping to have around the table. For this Collective Pot edition on resource-sharing, if you like/are able to, we invite you to bring an ingredient for a collective vegetarian Hot Pot soup or chocolate fondue dessert. Even something that you already have in the fridge!”

Marsya: We tend to host Souped Up without having to meet any expectations of productivity or a regular schedule. Though not unapologetically, we cannot even seem to invite people with enough notice. We appreciate the chance not to be dictated by a production schedule but by need. Due to these parameters alone, Souped Up as a space and practice becomes largely illegible to funders and institutions. But as it happened, we gathered at the Textile Museum of Canada at the invitation of artist-in-residence Petrina Ng, whose project at the time looked at legacies of colonialism both abroad and locally from a diasporic perspective, while also investigating the Museum’s own colonial histories.

As with Geneviève, Petrina and I had also been talking about forming a group of racialized cultural workers. We were interested in ways of navigating existing organizational structures, and in reimagining new approaches to institution-building. The idea was brewing for many years, but we did not find the capacity to put in the work until we were both working as independents and became drawn towards collective modes of organizing. Petrina’s residency became a small window of opportunity to bring together representatives from local DIY artist collectives with a majority of racialized members who are interested in space-making and community-building on the ground.
The gathering was called *Collective Pot*, after a concept by the same name put forth by the collective-of-collectives Gudskul Ecosystem in Jakarta, Indonesia. It refers to a radical sharing of resources and clout to lift the collective’s long-term sustainability, which to my view also benefits the careers of everyone involved. Through residencies organized by the Art Gallery of York University, Gudskul members met with artist collectives in the Toronto area—including an open meeting at Tea Base⁴—leading to the term “collective pot” gaining resonance locally.⁵ We wanted to pick-up on these threads and begin an action plan to weave our own supportive fabric.

Representatives from collectives Whippersnapper Gallery, MICE Magazine, Tea Base, Glory Hole Gallery, Durable Good, BUMP TV, and Friends of Chinatown were able to join. Geneviève and I as members of Younger Than Beyoncé Gallery also represented the collectively-run nomadic gallery at this gathering. Some of the issues discussed were familiar to us: burn out, tokenizing relationships with large institutions masked as “opportunities,” conflict, and financial instability. Despite the collectives’ differing mandates, platforms, and interests, banding together to address shared operational challenges made sense. Perhaps even more so precisely because of these differences. After synthesizing the stories shared at this session, an idea emerged for a ten-month think-tank in which the same collectives co-learn and innovate upon various aspects of running a small-scale, community-forward, grassroots art organization, without replicating the same systemic barriers that we have all experienced as rooted in the organizational structures of many Canadian cultural and arts spaces.⁶

Ironic perhaps that this plan was hatched at an institution, but isn’t all this labour a direct response to our institutional experiences—the good, the bad, the somewhat uncomfortable? The institutional resources are useful in generating the most measurable successes from all of our *Souped Up* sessions so far. We had the space, budget, and platform to host practitioners outside of our circles. But did we nurture a supportive network within the institutional space of the Textile Museum? Out of respect for the staff of the Textile Museum, we had a strict two-hour window, which is not exactly conducive to putting everyone at ease and to the meanderings of gossip and conversation that *Souped Up* typically supports. We also had to come up with ideas fast to meet a grant deadline. Time restrictions
forced us into action, which led to starting something new that has great potential. But while we did meet our goals by sitting around a boardroom table, we also wondered, was this all sufficient in starting a ten-month, and possibly longer, bond and collaboration? Does the institutional space support the way of working and being together that we want to explore?

Essentially, in this session of *Souped Up*, we dipped our toes in the institutional resource pool to quickly jump back out. And as for the think tank, we plan to take turns to meet in each of the collective’s spaces. Sharing the responsibility of hosting could aid in building a non-hierarchical space for collaborative knowledge-production. By spending time in each other’s spaces, we can perhaps better intimate each collective’s unique circumstances and characters, become more comfortable in sharing our experiences and ideas, and nurture a long-term collective trust.

Session Three: In This Together

*Souped Up: Bring Your Own Soup (BYOS)*

Monday, March 30 and Thursday, April 2, 2020, 7–8:30 p.m. EST
With guests Su-ying Lee, Tian Zhang, and Petrina Ng (Monday);
Vince Rozario and Alexia Briard (Thursday).

Menu: Open

“For this 3rd iteration, entitled *Bring Your Own Soup (BYOS)*, we wish to share a meal while exploring current shifts in our lifestyles and their immediate impacts on our practices. We are wondering about the following:

*What have you been doing to take care of yourself; how would you redefine balance?*

*How does rest vs restlessness manifest in your routine (thinking also about privileges and precariousness in relation to resting)?*

*What do we want to take away from this moment when we get back into full capacity within institutions?”*

Geneviève: During this period of confinement due to COVID-19, we thought that it would be a good opportunity to experiment with *Souped Up*’s format and bring it to the virtual realm. This moment in time is a hard one to navigate because of the layers of inequities exposing themselves through the fraught systems regulating our lives. We are also deeply affected by fear for our loved ones, the collective grievances that we share
and the mixed bag of emotions surfacing about how we relate to ourselves and others. The fragile ecosystems that structure our lives are shaken and the arts and culture sector will never be the same. This is a time wherein we re-evaluate the sense and meaning of being productive, of constantly feeding into the burnout culture in our field of work, battling illusions around worthiness and labour. This is the moment to question the ways in which we connect with one another, to think through the quality of our interactions, and ultimately how we can work toward sustainability. What do we want to manifest post-pandemic? How do we want to contribute to the new “normal”?

These questions and concerns brought about the need for healing conversations and support, and so the idea of bringing the event online emerged. Therefore, for this shared meal we returned to a looser form. We ended up facilitating meandering google hangout sessions. Two dates were proposed to provide flexibility but also to make sure that we both had the bandwidth to support this version of Souped Up. It was organized during the third week of the quarantine in Toronto and Montréal. It is funny that when debriefing, we realized that most people did not eat during the conversations, and although we invited our guests to open the invitation to their housemates (if desired), they chose not to. Our schedules not being what they used to be, the ways in which we engage with food were greatly affected. We also observed that during this period of adjustment, the individuals we invited were overwhelmed with the number of online interactions they had through work, social, and familial commitments. Juggling employment (or the lack of), roommates, couple and family living situations, and other factors heightening anxiety, weighed down on many of us. In addition, it turned out that two sessions in the same week were too much for us. We were less organized for the second session and less attentive to logistics resulting in us missing the opportunity to interact with one of the interested parties. And so, we wondered about how we can be intentionally present for each other, in the context of social distancing, especially when we are already overstimulated with online content and emotionally saturated.

Crucial meditations on the factors aggravating the precarity of our work and how this crisis can be leveraged for institutional accountability were brought forward in the conversations we had. Petrina Ng raised concerns about the relevance and use of certain laws for project-based contracts. Many of us are facing project cancellations and postponement.
The “Acts of God” clause in many of our contracts releases both the artist and the institution of their responsibility during times like these. This is worrisome since this pandemic is an unprecedented occurrence; it can be used as a protectionist measure against contractual employees. Post-COVID, we believe that particular attention to the language that binds us to institutions is in order. Furthermore, Tian Zhang shared how independent cultural workers in Australia take advantage of the renewable structure of core operating grants to campaign against well-funded institutions with questionable practices. This is important in thinking about how we can mobilize for better accountability in regards to institutional care. We were informed that Australian art institutions are renewing their operational funding currently and that the jury is led by practitioners. As assessors, factors such as how institutions have been thoughtfully supporting their constituencies during these hard times can potentially weigh in the final decision. We wondered how this model could be applied here, in Toronto and Montréal.

**speaking our truth**

Geneviève and Marsya: The last iteration of *Souped Up* became a way to meditate on the immense potentiality of the event: how it can be patient, fluid, forgiving, and how there can always be another time to meet and to support one another, whether we have an agenda or not, or whether we have a specific goal in mind.

Marsya: As we recall these past sessions, I am reminded by something artist and curator David Garneau once said at a conference about relationships between institutions, artists, and publics: “it is by sharing our stories that we begin to map the contours of oppression.” We think of the dismissed and overlooked spaces for gossip and stitch-and-bitch sessions, their appearance of smallness and incompatibility with the gentrifying grandness of contemporary art spaces and starchitect-designed museums. The latter has the tendency to make us feel small, voiceless, and isolated—conditions that can easily nurture self-doubt, especially when coupled with a lack of representation of our own experiences. With *Souped Up*, we build on the former to claim a seemingly illegible space for time- (in)sensitive meandering hangouts where everyone is an expert of their own experience. But while we pit one space against the other, we still also toy with the question: do we want to be more legible to large-scale institutions?
The short and true answer is yes, because we want to access funding so that we as co-hosts and all of our guests can be paid for this labour—the kind of labour that we find urgent and lacking. The long answer? We do not know. On the one hand, why would we want to be legible to the institutions that have brought us harm? It is tiring to do the dance of trying to be seen by someone who barely makes an effort to see you, to see just how useful you can be. On the other hand, how far would refusal take us? During a recent visit with curator and community organizer Chen Yun, I asked for advice for how an emerging curator can hold power while accepting a tokenizing invitation by a big institution. She asked me, “What can you do that is meaningful to you but does not add value to the institution?”

So here we are, co-writing in our respective cities amidst the COVID-19 lockdown, dreaming up future iterations of *Souped Up*. I want to be in Geneviève’s kitchen, freshly painted with a warm strip of marigold yellow. We also have visions for a picnic in a park, a catered meal by small businesses run by racialized folks, and a mall food court or food truck *rendez-vous*. While I do miss art, as it turned out I do not miss being in institutional art spaces.

Geneviève: Recognizing the emotional labour and value in the knowledge shared with our peers during these dinners is the reason why we would endeavor to apply for funding. Returning to our conversation about what part of our work is quantifiable or invisible, emotional labour is one of these often unnoticed realities. Not only through the nature of our relationships with our collaborators, but more so with the institutions hiring us.

We are in constant negotiation. Longevity is something that I am looking into as a racialized curator. Longevity as a radical form of resistance, resisting short-lived collaborations, academic burnout, ranking my physical and mental health after my work in the fear of not being given another opportunity. As a Black curator, the artworld is not conceived to provide me with an opulent and long career; it created a system that allows for overbooking but only when my presence is deemed urgent and relevant, to box my aspirations under the ethos of equity and diversity, while leaving me grappling with the extra labour that comes with all the intersections composing my positionality. The hiring of racialized professionals in permanent roles of leadership being rare, our presence is mainly temporary. We are expected to appear and disappear at command, with a
selective archiving of our accomplishments. Marsya and I want sustainability, slowness, slow-building projects, lasting relationships, working with collaborators more than once, and moving away from superficial bonds. In these ways, longevity for us and for all resides in a willingness to understand our worth when working independently, acknowledging each other’s grind, and redistributing resources when available. I do not want to feel out of breath anymore. As the past sessions of *Souped Up* unfolded, we concluded that focusing on the qualities of the domestic and the everyday contributes to our refusal. The shared trauma of institutional oppression heightens the praxis of care that can be practiced around our own table, the one we are slowly building with our co-conspirators, whether they are based in our vicinity or elsewhere in the world.

**NOTES**

1. We acknowledge that we are not the only ones who are passionate about the unique qualities inherent to collective meals. Artists and curators alike (such as Basil AlZeri, Dana Prieto, Alvin Luong, Su-Ying Lee, Myung-Sun Kim, Annie Wong, Shellie Zhang, Anique Jordan, Lisa Myers, cheyanne turions, Magdalyn Asimakis and Heather Rigg of ma ma projects, Renelyn Quinicot, among others) have been investigating food as a vessel to practice reciprocal relationships, social justice, or unearthing individual and collective histories.
2. Alice P. Julier, *Eating Together: Food, Friendship and Inequality* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 188.
3. We specified in the invitation that POC and white led collectives should ensure that their POC members attend. We also requested that if our guests knew of another collective who they think should be on our list, to please send us an email.
4. “Collectively Collecting Collectives: A Collective Conversation,” organized by Tea Base on April 9, 2019.
5. In fact, Gudskul’s practice is centred on making friends and hanging-out, and was among the main inspirations for *Souped Up*.
6. The project will be administered by Petrina and I, as we were recently appointed as the new stewards of Gendai Gallery—an organization supporting artists of colour with a 20-year history in collectivity.
7. David Garneau, “Living Agreement,” Banff International Curatorial Institute Symposium: Living Agreements (Presentation, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Banff, Alberta, August 8, 2019).
8. Personal interview with Chen Yun, founder of the collective Dinghaiqiao Mutual Aid Society, in Shanghai on November 28, 2019.
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