

An abstract graphic on the left side of the page, featuring a large black curved shape that overlaps a grey background. The shape is composed of several overlapping segments, creating a dynamic, organic form.

# WHITENESS AND “DEFAULT CULTURE”

**Willie Cole***To get to the other side*

2001

32 cast-concrete lawn jockeys,  
mixed media, galvanized steel, wood  
32½ × 198 × 198 inchesTang Teaching Museum collection,  
gift of Peter Norton, 2015.26.35

“The symbol of the lawn jockey is perceived as negative. But in this piece, I’ve turned [the lawn jockey] into a symbol of power by placing it in the position of power as a member of a chess team, but also giving it the embellishments of spiritual icons from African traditions... The lawn jockey is a stand-in for Elegba, the god at the crossroads, the presenter of choices. His symbolism might be the doorway, the cross, the colors red and black; the so-called traditionally painted lawn jockey has those same symbols.” —Willie Cole



# FUCK THE GRAMMYS

## The Conundrum of “Transcending” Race and the Politics of Excellence

Treva B. Lindsey

“I’m the first Black woman to headline Coachella—ain’t that a bitch!” uttered Beyoncé playfully from the stage of her stellar performance at the annual desert music festival. The two-hour-plus set was electrifying. Fans and critics alike sang the praises of the performance and its unapologetic celebration of Black cultural institutions, traditions, and expressive practices, especially those of historically Black colleges and universities. The fact that the performance was history making, however, is unsettling. Despite branding itself as an event including both well-known and relatively unknown artists, Coachella waited more than a decade to feature a Black woman as its headliner. Beyoncé’s own remarks about being “first” reveal an ambivalence about marginalized people disrupting the default, or dominant, white mainstream culture.

The act of pioneering carries the weight of exceptionalism as well as of a reification of a white, masculine, heterosexual, cisgender, financially secure, and able-bodied status quo, that is, the default space for cultural significance. Beyoncé’s callout of Coachella is often overlooked in favor of a narrative in which she emerges as a transcendent figure. In reality, however, her decision to center historically Black colleges and universities in her show challenged the festival’s attempt to render her a symbol of its progress toward greater inclusivity. The show also derided the celebratory impulse that accompanies first-time access to white cultural spaces. “Beychella” illuminated a complicated relationship between African American women and dominant culture. When marginalized folks become the first in formerly—and formally and informally—exclusionary spaces, the excitement often overshadows a larger issue: that the default culture is used as a point of reference with which to assess or validate cultural and expressive practices. What is at stake in relying on a dominant culture for this kind of marker of achievement?

In cultural production, the desire among both white people and people of color for non-white artists to cross over or attain mass appeal stems from present-day assumptions as well as from underscrutinized ways of evaluating excellence and achievement. Prestige and accolades emerge from spaces deemed elite or discerning. White men, historically and contemporarily, act as “objective” arbiters of excellence; in fact, they reproduce a

meritocracy centered around white maleness. For example, the paltry number of Black women Oscar winners reflects not a lack of talent in front of or behind the camera, but rather the insufficiency of standards established by a group of people who view culture through a lens that explicitly and unconsciously privileges a white status quo. Black women, and women of color more broadly, do not register as cultural producers to the organizations that are charged with recognizing artistic merit. Declarative statements about standards, universality, and quality inscribe a cultural context in which the opinions, ideas, and perspectives of white men shape what and who is lauded. Consequently, the concept of excellence is and has been determined by the precepts of a privileged and exclusionary group of people.

Acceptance in white spaces is often viewed as a sign of both progress and deracialized appeal. A favorable reception is posited as “transcending race,” as opposed to countering racism and white supremacy. Beyoncé publicly rebuked Coachella; even so, the festival benefited from the tremendous success of her show. The almost instant sell-out of festival passes and tickets and the live-streamed performance (filmed for the 2019 Netflix documentary *Homecoming*) ensured that the festival nabbed countless headlines. Although the event was labeled Beychella, Coachella won because Beyoncé headlined. Coachella’s organizers have an important stake in being more inclusive: profit. Beyoncé, too, had a vested interest: using a platform within default culture to foreground Blackness.

She also highlighted her disbelief at being “first.” Disrupting the status quo isn’t solely about entering predominantly white spaces; as marginalized cultures enter these restricted spaces, their overvaluation becomes clear. Crossing over, transcending are almost exclusively the provinces of non-white, non-male artists who appeal to white audiences. By problematic default, those artists identified as crossover or even transcendent are people of color who have been embraced by mainstream and “high-brow” white culture(s). A white artist awarded a BET Award and a Black artist awarded a Grammy do not resonate in the same way because default culture assigns more value to the Grammy.

The descriptions “Grammy-winning” and “Oscar-nominated” carry a distinct cachet. The hypervaluation

of these honors reproduces a situation in which white male arbiters of cultural significance can claim their assessments are colorblind. While the myth of an objective meritocracy may be under attack by efforts such as April Reign’s #OscarsSoWhite campaign, the power of white male cultural supremacy continues to shape default culture. Consequently, a racialized hierarchy remains intact. The illusions of meritocracy and colorblindness help to naturalize a system in which the ability to garner acclaim and accolades from these organizations signals excellence.

The superior value placed on white, male-dominated spaces also pervades the culture of electoral politics. In 2018, US voters elected an unprecedented number of women of color to Congress. Trumpeted as a watershed moment in democratic governance, it also led to pointed conversations about the predominance of white men in Congress and what that predominance means for legislation and policy. Almost immediately after they were sworn in, the first-term congresswomen of color made their presence known and felt. Their efforts to transform the default culture of Washington led to acutely polarized responses. Whether with harsh attacks or high praise, the media, fans, and critics alike fixated on Representatives Rashida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Lauren Underwood, and Ayanna Pressley. Viewed by some as the future of the Democratic Party and by others as its demise, these women challenge the status quo of Congress by both their presence and their comparatively progressive politics. Their voices, bodies, perspectives, adornment practices, and identities deviate from the norms exhibited by their male counterparts, who are mostly white, heterosexual, financially secure, able-bodied, and Christian. Although the congresswomen made history, their literal and figurative disruption of a space occupied historically and primarily by white men reveals that deeply entrenched ideas about who can and should govern rely on prejudicial and exclusionary cultural conventions and assumptions.

The first-term representatives brought to the legislative table their experiences as Black, Latina, Muslim, immigrant, and refugee women. These women of color refused to conform to the default culture of Congress or even of their own party. They cosponsor progressive legislation,

speak out on hot-button political issues, and use social media as a means of connection. Unlike many of their white male counterparts, they spend little to no time with lobbyists or with the large corporate donors who wield considerable power in Congress. Tlaib, Ocasio-Cortez, Omar, Underwood, and Pressley alongside some of the veteran women of color, such as Representative Barbara Lee, form a defiant subculture within the default culture of Congress. Admirers, detractors, and the media, mainstream and otherwise, pay close attention to their words and actions, whether mundane or substantive. For some, these representatives are reshaping the political landscape and helping to normalize the presence of women of color in seats of power. For others, their refusal to adhere to the status quo is infuriating.

The adornment practices of these congresswomen—Ocasio-Cortez’s bold red lipstick, Omar’s hijab—unsettle the cultural landscape of electoral politics. Omar in particular is seen to deviate from mythical norms of US identity—especially those of white males—enraging her critics as much as her progressive and sometimes unpopular opinions do. Omar is a Black Somali Muslim refugee woman. Any of those identities counters the norm, but her embodiment of several “othered” identities renders her particularly vulnerable to resistance from the default culture of electoral politics. In the face of virulent Islamophobia in Congress and in US society more broadly, Omar dons her hijab and defies the Christian cultural hegemony that has existed throughout the history of US government. Death threats and other menaces do not deter her from embracing her identity, nor do they result in an assimilation into or a reproduction of Congress’s default culture.

It is without question difficult to avoid the seeming ubiquity of default culture. Whether in pop music or electoral politics, the prominence of ideas about who belongs and who excels creates a context in which transcending can become aspirational for non-white people. Speaking out against hierarchized value might require an artist or politician to stop seeking the approval or adulation of entities created and led by white men. Substantive risk accompanies this approach, just as tangible value accrues to winning Oscar and Grammy awards or appealing to white, male, Christian voters. Pushing back against

the demand to transcend or the racialized and gendered politics of excellence necessitates a divestment from default culture. Rarely if ever does divestment not come at a high cost. But the inability to imagine a world in which the default becomes the defunct, in which the status quo is radically transformed, reveals a cultural cowardice. Ain’t that a bitch? ▲

# Matthew Cooke

filmmaker

# Treva B. Lindsey

scholar

# Dara Silverman

organizer

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Isolde Brielmaier **Junot Díaz, the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, made an interesting statement in a 2015 interview: "We live in a society where default whiteness goes unremarked—no one ever asks it for *its* passport." What exactly is this whiteness that Díaz is speaking of? And what or how might that relate or not relate to "default culture"?**

Matthew Cooke When I was fifteen years old, I remember smoking a cigarette across the street from my high school, Evanston Township High School, just north of Chicago. A couple of police officers came up and said, "You can't smoke across the street from the high school." And I said, "What the fuck is this? Is that what's up?" My friends said, "Dude, they're going to cart you off to jail." And I said, "No, they're not. You can't do that. You can't arrest somebody for smoking." And I kept walking.

But other friends of mine have told me stories of much lesser things that got them taken into custody. It was at that point that I recognized that there was some sort of... But that word *default* just bugs me for some reason. I think it's because I want to challenge it. Despite my perception of myself as being other—even though I elected into that position—I recognized at that moment that there was something I had in common with these particular police officers that afforded me a certain freedom to say, "Fuck you, this is the land of the free. You can't tell me what to do."

Dara Silverman One part that's important for me about naming whiteness and being explicit about it is that as a white person, I'm never really asked to name it, I'm never asked to contextualize myself, and everyone's expected to understand where I come from.

Over the past few years, as the Movement for Black Lives has grown and as the Immigrant Rights Movement has grown, what we've seen is more and more communities of color fighting more publicly and saying, "White isn't the norm in our lives and in our experience." And so, for those of us who are white, it's really a question of how we start to see that the world we see isn't what everyone else is experiencing. It isn't what the majority of people in the United States are experiencing—we are in a privileged position. What does that mean every day when we're walking around with this privileged lens hiding all the things that we can't see?

Treva B. Lindsey When I hear the word *whiteness*, I think power, and the invisible and yet hyperfelt and hypervisible ways in which it's able to function. I grew up in low-income housing in Northeast DC, and then I went to an elite private school. The very different ways that I saw my body engaged made a huge impact.

Similarly, I heard things like, "She talks like a white girl, that means she's educated." Being educated was read as white, and all of the things loaded into that are extraordinarily problematic. It at once normalizes and valorizes whiteness or some kind of vernacular speech but also demonizes African American vernacular speech by saying that it is less valuable. In one fell swoop, you're demonizing the spaces of Blackness, valorizing whiteness, and reinstating power.

The idea of whiteness being something of power—being a default when we don't name it and when we don't identify it within a system of power,

within a system of privilege, within systems of marginalization—means that everyone else is at fault. So thinking about fault and how we think about “Who can be wrong? Who can be held accountable? Who can be seen as disposable?” within that context leads to the question, “Who becomes invisibilized by the invisibilizing of whiteness?”

**IB I should point out that we’re having a very US-centric conversation. We know people say race is a social construct; it’s also very much a lived experience for many of us, including white people, right? And it looks very different when you move over to Europe; perhaps there are some similarities when you move to the global South. I want to be conscious that we’re speaking specifically in this context.**

**When you talk about race, in most people’s minds, it connotes Black and brown people—African American, Latinx, Asian, Chicanx. So how do we make that shift of putting more of the spotlight on the idea of whiteness as a race?**

**Matthew, I know you’re not fond of the notion of default culture or this idea that whiteness becomes an unspoken and presumed standard against which everything is measured.**

**MC** I just want to change *default* to *dominant*. We have a responsibility as human beings in this mysterious experience of life to figure out what it is that we’re doing. What’s the point? Why are we sitting in a room talking about a topic? Who cares? We could be doing other things. What’s the point of being alive, of living, of making any of the little to large choices we’re going to make?

To me, there’s a simple direction, which is the alleviation of unnecessary suffering. What is peace? Peace is the alleviation of not just violence but any type of suffering: the suffering that comes from being in a world without understanding, being in a world with communication that’s broken down, the violence that comes from living a life that’s unfulfilled, from doing work that gives you no feeling of satisfaction or no feeling of self-worth, from being spoken to, talked to, looked at, and in every way, shape, and form marginalized or disenfranchised. That’s violence as well. So when I think about a purpose to life, of living in a purpose that brings about peace, that’s the kind of peace I think we would all want, not only for ourselves but something we would want for all of our brothers and sisters in our immediate family and on the whole planet.

When we sit here and talk about whiteness and the default culture, what I think about is a dominant culture. And a culture that, I’ve come to learn and understand, committed a genocide against Native peoples here, which is a travesty for all of us because what do we not get as a result of embracing that culture? We don’t get all that wisdom, and all that understanding, and all that depth of how it is to live in harmony with the world, and with the earth, and with the gods as they represented them, and what about all those other elements that we just miss out on because of an ancestry that many of us today feel very, very challenged in facing?

I’m talking about white people like myself. It can be very challenging to look at something. We might say, “Are you talking about me? I cut the tusks off the elephant? No. I didn’t do that.” I think that’s why we’re

here, to talk about that and to challenge some of those ideas. I’d be uncomfortable myself as well, of course, because there’s so much obviously that I can’t see and haven’t seen. But we need to face that reality of the history of a genocide against a culture, the history of having a slave trade and a slave labor force that created the most powerful economic structure on earth.

We have never, ever come to terms with what we did. From my perspective, there should be a memorial on every corner. There should be reparations. There should be an acknowledgment of everything that was done, not just to say, “I’m sorry,” but so that we don’t all have such a fragile identity that crumbles at the idea that by not giving proper homage to MMA or football, we’re all going to fall apart. That is a weakness that we in ourselves deserve to heal. I don’t want to be that type of person, so fragile.

**TBL** What’s so interesting in this moment is that I often hear that the Movement for Black Lives is about claiming Black humanity. The idea that this is a humanizing project is a failure of recognizing the inhumanity that you’re talking about. We have to look at the dehumanization of whiteness and white people to think about what allows people to do such harm to a community. What allows someone to participate in the genocide of Indigenous people? What makes it possible for someone to participate in the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery, to establish Jim Crow, to not afford women rights, to not guarantee food security for people, and to have all of these systems of marginalization that stem from notions of anti-Blackness, antifeminist, anti-queerness, anti-poorness that are circulated in these spaces?

We often talk about dehumanization as this reclamatory project for people of color or dehumanized people—people who have been actively dehumanized through these processes of violence. But I think the real question is a humanity question that is specifically targeting whiteness, that’s targeting maleness, that’s targeting positions of power in saying, “What kind of human do you have to be to cause this kind of harm?”

And that is a really difficult conversation to launch, because, as you said, it’s easy to feel attacked and to go into the space of fragility. In feminist spaces, we joke that masculinity is so fragile, but these little things make you feel like your masculinity is pulled apart.

There’s something that is afforded a fragility in this kind of default or dominant position that we have to get past. And when we say “It’s uncomfortable,” it should actually be painful because what you may have to do, as we examine and self-reflect in these conversations around whiteness, is look at the history of dehumanity and inhumanity that is very much part of the history of whiteness.

**IB The notion of white fragility is something that needs to be looked at head-on, and that’s part of the pushing through, right?**

**DS** A big piece of it for me, as a white person, is asking what it means to lose my humanity. As a Jew, what did my people give up for me to get white privilege? Not all Jews are white, but for Jews who are white, what did we

have to give up? What made my grandmother, when she saw me running through the airport when I was six years old, turn to my mother and say, “She’s really cute, but she’s going to have to get a nose job.”

I think about that and about the constraining of what it means to be female, of what it means to be white, of what it means to be presentable in mainstream culture. For me, as a woman growing up and coming out as a queer person, part of what that meant as well was asking, What are these norms that are put on me of what attractiveness is and what’s acceptable?

And then I started to unpack my whiteness and to see the ways in which my family over generations gave up parts of our identity to gain what we saw as the privileges of whiteness. And what came with that was mental illness, was distance from our culture and from our identity, and was this separation, both from other Jews and from other white people. We had to figure out how to succeed. What is it that we gain from this capitalist system that benefits us if we buy into it?

When I think about white fragility, and this idea that Robin DiAngelo has put forward of white people being so scared of being critiqued, part of it for me is around asking, How do we love each other?

But for a lot of us who are white, it’s also asking about the roots that we come from. What are the small towns that we come from? And how do we connect? How many people in the room have a relative who supported Trump or voted for Trump and now you’re trying to figure out how to talk to them or how to relate to them? It’s not just for white people; there are a bunch of us.

This is a gap that all of us are struggling with. How do we reach across that divide? What does it mean to say, “I’m going to value my whiteness above the lives of people who will be killed by the policies that this government is going to put into place”? And what do we benefit from when that happens?

IB **We’re making people uncomfortable.**

DS But that’s part of the goal, right? To really dig in on how we talk to our relatives who supported Trump. A friend called me this morning and said, “I called my mom and I tried to get her to call her legislator to speak out against the health-care bill,” and the mom said, “People don’t deserve handouts. I didn’t get any handouts, so why should other people get that?” There’s a disconnect between “People will die when they lose their health care” and “People don’t deserve handouts.” Where do we get the sense that government isn’t actually about supporting all of us, particularly people who are struggling?

IB **Where do we get that sense? I hear people saying, “Oh, my gosh. I can’t believe how divided things are.” But things have always been divided. There have always been these different camps, specifically along lines of race, gender, and sexuality. Let’s focus on this idea of whiteness, which Matthew calls a dominant culture. It’s interesting that you call it that because I don’t see it as dominant. I don’t want to give it power. It doesn’t dominate my life. I feel fully dominant and in control. The reason I use *default* is that there is this implicit, unspoken standard that we are always**

**acknowledging in the art world and the academy. When we talk about race, the assumption is that we’re going to be talking about Black people.**

**In the Whitney Biennial right now, there is a painting that many are finding problematic by the established, highly regarded painter Dana Schutz, who is white. This painting, *Open Casket*, is based on a photograph of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old who faced a severe beating and lynching in 1955, when he was laid to rest in an open casket. It is a large-scale painting where Emmett Till’s face is abstracted and the body is somewhat clearer. It has set off protests; people have found it offensive—so much so that there have been calls for the museum to remove it and destroy it. The thinking here is that, A, it’s displaying and using Black people’s pain, specifically Emmett Till and his family’s pain, as raw material; and B, it will eventually leave the Whitney exhibition and enter into the market.**

**Then there’s a painting by Henry Taylor. He is now in his late fifties, and he has always painted Black life. He painted a portrait of Philando Castile bleeding to death in the back of his car. There’s not as much pushback with Taylor’s painting. For me, it brings up the idea of cultural authority: who has the right or who has the privilege of telling whose story? Where does this leave us?**

TBL I’m of many minds about it. I consume Black death on a daily basis. But in the moment in which Emmett Till is killed, the media looked completely different, and the point of Mamie Till displaying the body of her brutalized, beaten son in that photograph was to galvanize something.

Now I can go on my phone, go to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, whatever platform, and watch it on a loop in private. Black death has become a consumptive practice—and it always has been, right? But now we can say we’re doing it in the guise of raising awareness, and I’m very careful about Black death as spectacle because this again speaks to the inhumanity of whiteness, not the dehumanization of Black people.

I don’t have to reclaim Emmett Till’s humanity in this moment, but I want to ask, Why would you make this piece? We need some real talk about what it means for a white woman to do a rendering of Emmett Till in the form that she did, in part given how a white woman’s lie is what propelled the event in 1955. Quite recently, the woman who was at the center of this case confessed that she was lying about what happened, which is something pretty much every Black person already knew. But now she’s on record, and it was actually in a fairly sympathetic article in *Vanity Fair*, where she said things like, “I wonder now. I think about his mother.” Now you think about Mamie Till?

This analysis is an interesting instance of race and gender and class intersecting in what it means for a privileged white woman to render Black death and to make it visible to an audience that’s largely not Black and brown and not in the neighborhoods that feel the afterlife of Emmett Till. The afterlife of Emmett Till is Philando Castile, is Trayvon Martin, is Sandra Bland, is Rekia Boyd. That afterlife resonates very differently. Then, Dana Schutz gave a completely tone-deaf response to the pushback that she received.



DS In her response, she talked a lot about how she created the piece as a mother. And that in approaching it as a mother, she decoupled her race and her whiteness from this idea. I think for a lot of white people, the notion of a threat to their children is a new realization. There are studies that show that white parents start talking to their kids about race when they're twelve or thirteen and parents of color start talking to their kids about race—well, in the studies, they say five or six, but in my experience, it's...

IB **Three or four. That's when it started in our household.**

TBL Three or four.

DS Because of social media, many white people are being faced with Black deaths so much more explicitly. There's been pushback in the communities that I'm a part of with people saying, “Don't share videos of Black people being killed. We are surrounded by this all day. It is in our lives. It is in everything around us. Don't share those videos.” But for many white people, they haven't seen those videos or those experiences before, and somehow the history of lynchings and the history of attacks on communities of color and on Black and brown bodies hasn't gotten through until the past couple of years.

The way that whiteness works has been to protect white people. It's part of the project of protecting whiteness to say, “We're not going to look at the hard parts. We're not going to see those parts that are so difficult. We're not going to see what it means to protect our communities so that we don't have to see the death and destruction that happens.” For example, in the southeast part of the United States, people have events on plantations—white people have events on plantations—and don't think about what it means. They don't ask, “What does it mean to have a celebration on a place that was literally seeped in the blood of enslaved Africans?”

MC We're certainly experiencing the reality of being very, very far down a slippery slope of idiocy. Part of it is just a commodification problem in general, and the commodification of human beings. But this idea that it's the same thing to talk about an issue and raise awareness of it as it is to do something about it is part of the huge problem.

Also, law enforcement, as an apparatus, has continuously, since the birth of the nation, been used as an oppressive device to stamp out Native Americans, to keep African Americans on the plantation, to go hunt them down if they escaped, or what have you, and that still exists in every form today in the prison industrial complex.

IB **Absolutely.**

MC When we talk about stuff historically, it's not just historically. It is the precursor to how we live today. We have the largest prison system in the history of humankind, and it is disproportionately targeted against not-white people, and most white people don't know it.

Even though numerically more white people are killed by police officers than not-white people, it's disproportionate by population. The

thing is that white people are the collateral damage in a war against not-white people that's been going on for hundreds of years. Another casualty of this ongoing war is this cultural acceptance of commodification of basic human values, which we see right now in this horrific portrait of somebody.

TBL But there's no point in US history where the Black body isn't a commodity, right? It's not shocking that we continue to consume the Black body. The productive and reproductive labor of Black bodies produces wealth in this country. But we were brought here as chattel, as property. The continuation of that is convict leasing, what we now know is the prison industrial complex—which is still about containment, of course, but also about this establishing of property.

You talk about this hyper-commodification and this reality, but there's no time in history where Black bodies weren't tied to commodification. And that's why the response is so visceral and painful for a lot of folks witnessing this. You can write that idea into a narrative of awareness and motherhood, but then it is such a troubling thing to think about Black motherhood in particular.

IB **Especially over the summer.**

TBL Over last summer. There are mothers who are actively in this legacy. It's a terrible thing to think the legacy of Mamie Till—Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin's mom; Lucy McBath, Jordan Davis's mom—is somehow similar to white privileged motherhood. There's this idea of motherhood as a universalizing experience or womanhood as a universalizing experience. Well, Black motherhood was used to create antiwelfare rhetoric.

Right now in the prison industrial complex, we have the opioid crisis and we have opioid patients. We were crack whores and crack moms and had crack babies. We were criminalized and fed into the prison industrial complex in unprecedented ways, both in terms of the actual institutions of prisons but also in the decimation of our neighborhoods, communities, and families as a result of that. Black motherhood has been demonized, seen as invalid, seen as not valuable, and yet Black mothers have nursed this nation, figuratively and literally.

She could have done a portrait of Emmett Till. Why is it his death that was chosen? What would it mean if she had painted the picture that was next to the casket of him in his suit and smiling versus the picture of his body brutalized and assailed? What is the value of that? It is saying to us collectively that the only value Black bodies have in forwarding this conversation is to be dead bodies. That our violated bodies are what propels conversations. How many violated bodies do we need to see, to witness, to bear witness to, before we bear *with*-ness to what's happening?

DS That is such a huge question that we have to grapple with in this moment because the other epidemic that we're seeing in the United States is of white male shooters. Most of the shootings that happen in the United States are done by white men. Most of them are done with guns that were purchased legally.

Also, the narrative has shifted around opioids and the heroin epidemic—living in upstate New York, it’s something that’s talked about in very sympathetic tones, which is not the way that it was talked about in the 1980s or 1990s. There’s a question of how white people are humanized around suffering, whether it be around heroin or around white murderers who are killing across the country every day, and there is no legislative will to limit the purchase of guns.

One of these situations happened just recently. A white man came up from Maryland to New York City...

TBL To kill Black men. But the news framed it as “Army Vet Shoots Homeless Black Man Who Had Eleven Prior Cases.” I know the victim’s criminal record. I don’t know the shooter’s criminal record. I have no idea about the shooter. I know he’s an Army vet.

I remember Renisha McBride, a sister who was killed in Detroit. The headline said something like, “Homeowner Shoots Drunk Woman on Porch.” I didn’t have to know the race of the person to know what *homeowner* meant, to know what that was signaling. And I knew who the drunk woman was, regardless of the fact that there was no race mentioned anywhere in that headline. The media apparatus has a way of letting us know this. So as soon as I saw “Army Vet”...

DS You knew.

TBL I knew who was being referred to. And then “Homeless Man Who Had”—it’s just all of these signals: Who’s disposable? Who’s not? Who gets to be heard about? Who gets to be written about? Who’s valuable? The politics of disposability in our nation suggests all of these things in very real ways. Crack whores, crack babies are disposable; opioid patients aren’t. That doesn’t mean I agree—we should have always approached drugs as a public health issue—but it’s not like white people just started doing drugs yesterday. White people have always done drugs, but the arrests for Black and brown people are at disproportionately higher rates. Even now we see the legalization of marijuana. Who’s going to profit off of that? And who’s still incarcerated because they were doing that?

DS In some places, corners that used to be the heaviest corners for Black drug dealing have now become gentrified by white marijuana shops. But if you have a previous conviction for selling marijuana...

TBL You can’t have a marijuana shop!

DS You can’t do it. And so again, when something becomes commodified and legalized, then it becomes a purview of white people, and it’s preserved in that way: with laws to preserve the wealth for white communities. It’s this question of, How do we reach white people to get more and more white people to recognize this as well? Which I’m not at all saying to people of color in the room, but actually to the other white people in the room.

IB **I’m so glad you’re saying this because I want to get to the doing, too. What are the takeaways? What can we do?**

MC The war on drugs was completely invented as a means for social control. It was racist from its inception. Opium laws were targeted at the Chinese; marijuana laws were targeted at Mexicans. There were news articles that said, “Marijuana gives Mexicans superhuman strength.” That was a real story that existed. The goal was to galvanize the constituency so that certain politicians would get the votes and be able to get jobs or whatever benefits they were looking to get for their particular community. And the same thing for cocaine with African Americans. There were stories about “cocaine-crazed Negroes” attacking white women in the streets. This was used as evidence that we needed to have cocaine laws levied particularly against Black people.

The reality, though, was different. There were studies done at the time that showed the highest rates of cocaine use were from white women in the suburbs. As many people know, it was mixed with all kinds of things: Coca-Cola was the alcohol-free alternative to a cocaine beverage.

So what are we going to do about it? And that can be incredibly confusing, especially in a day when, if our phone gets turned off, we don’t know how to get anywhere. I don’t know anything without technology. And major media corporations control 90 percent of our media. Boom, they control everything. We have to be inventive in each one of our talents, whatever that unique thing is that we’re bringing into the world. For myself, as a filmmaker, what I can do is learn about the history of things outside of my upbringing and incorporate it and have heroes that are outside the dominant culture.

IB **I love what Matthew is saying in terms of everyone having a talent, having a focus, and paying attention. Not being afraid to be uncomfortable, to feel small, and to take all of that and channel it into whatever it is that you focus on or hope to focus on.**

DS There are two parts that I think about. One is interpersonal, right? Sometimes people say to Millennials, “You’re snowflakes, and you’re going to melt under the pressure.” And I think the reality is that Millennials are incredibly resilient and don’t want to put up with the shit that a lot of us have put up with for a really long time.

Turn to the people around you and be in conversation with them. There can be a real desire to be only with the people who agree with you, and I would encourage all of us, particularly the white people among us, to be in conversation and engage others. Not just in your class, and in the school, and in the town, and in the town that you come from, but to have conversations with people elsewhere. Even if they mess up and they don’t have the “right” language, to not focus on the words but to ask, What is it that they’re trying to get across? And how can I be in this with these white people who are around me?

The other piece is structural. As much as Donald Trump is our president and there is something horrific and disease-ridden in our government, we’re also in what can be called the “moment of the whirlwind,” where thousands of people are emerging and wanting to take action. We need to do really boring things, like go to a town meeting, which is mostly filled

with older white people, and actually engage with them and make the conversation be about affordable care and defunding the military and putting money into our communities.

There is an anarchist idea of dual power: How do you take down the systems that are oppressive and build up alternative structures? How do we build food co-ops, and how do we build workers’ cooperatives and health-care collectives? At the same time, how do we destroy the government and the systems that are controlling us in so many ways? We need to do both of those things at once. And to do that we all need to be organizers.

TBL What I say is, “Stay in your lane.” And everybody’s got lanes to do things for which they are uniquely gifted.

From the first time I went to Ferguson, after the Ferguson uprising and the killing of Michael Brown, one of the people I remember most is this woman in the community who cooked us food. Everybody knew who this woman was because, well, she could just cook, and that was her contribution to the movement. She could sustain us.

Not all of us are going to be out in the street, and not all of us are going to be crowding jails, not all of us are going to be writing books or making films or being an organizer that’s doing that kind of work, but there are so many ways for you to be impassioned about something and to act. For me, it is about using our unique gifts and talents and skills, and learning and unlearning a lot of stuff, too.

And listen to marginalized folks—really listen, don’t just hear. Because so many of the things that we’re talking about institutionally, that we’re saying we need to build, are what marginalized folks have had to build when things have fallen. Black Panthers, for instance, created free breakfast programs. They had medical centers and clinics—these are things you don’t often hear about the Black Panther Party. You see the image of the guns, which is also part of the movement. But let’s be very clear: these programs were actually coopted and initiated by the government and now they’re on the chopping block.

And in the wake of that, organizers in over thirty cities around the country have created “books and breakfast” to refeed communities. People on the margins have always created things to sustain ourselves when we knew that dominant powers, default culture, would not provide those things. So look at models that already exist from people who’ve always had to create freedom dreams when the nightmare is right at their door.

Too many of us waited until the nightmare was at our door before we got concerned and motivated. So as much as I’m inspired by the hundreds of people at town halls, I’m wondering, when I was in Ferguson, at every Black Lives Matter march I went to, at rallies I’ve gone to for transwomen being murdered, or the ten girls who went missing in DC in one week, where is everybody at? Where have we been? Did it need to be you for you to have to feel the thing? And I know for a lot of people that’s the reality that we’re dealing with—that it has to affect you.

But again, this is about a humanity project of questioning and learning the spots of inhumanity that we have had, and what it means to care for

somebody and understand that their nonliving or dying impacts all of us. And I don’t mean financially or in this capitalistic way, but more like, if I died right now on this stage, that should impact you, right? But there are millions of me dying right now that we don’t give a damn about.

So I ask us to think about that in the work that we do and imagine that the work that we’re doing is literally saving a life because all of our lives are in jeopardy. And marginalized folks have already lived in that precarity, but now we fill it more grandly. Welcome to the struggle, for those who weren’t here before. We welcome you. Understand that we may be a little skeptical, a little cynical, a little “where were you?” You have to sit with that, but still do the work while sitting with that.

Audience You all talked about history several times. Lately I’ve been thinking about history because I was watching this documentary on Netflix about hip-hop, about how people who created hip-hop are still alive and what has happened to hip-hop and why. I think that once someone doesn’t know the history of things, there is no connection. My question is: What do you all think about or can speak to about the importance of history? Even between generations, between people?

TBL This is one of the reasons I did my PhD in history. I think it comes from how we defund public schools. Civics education used to be a part of education. I’m thinking about that work now. I’m thinking about what it means to create spaces of political education, because as we stand now, and with who we have leading the charge on education, and seeing the way states and municipalities are defunding public education in particular, we’re going to have to use models that we’ve seen before to provide that space to offer these histories. The arts have a large part to do with how we’re doing this.

There’s a show, *Underground*, about the Underground Railroad and fugitive and enslaved resisters, agitators. It’s historical fiction, but there’s a way that people are learning about enslavement in a fundamentally different way from what and how they’ve been taught in schools. We see textbooks now that say “unpaid laborers” as opposed to “slaves.” I say “enslaved persons” as a framing tool. That political and civics education is part of this work as well.

I hope that when people know better, they do better. That’s not always true, because they can know better and still be invested in power and still make terrible decisions as they pertain to marginalized people. But I do believe that there’s a core, critical mass of people who, if they knew how deeply entrenched the act of slavery is in how we function today, would have a different conversation around reparations—if we actually knew and had a large consensus about what enslavement meant.

The Dakota Access Pipeline protests look very different if we have a larger history about being on occupied land. I usually start by acknowledging the occupied land on which we sit. I think about what it means to say, “Water is life,” and connecting that to Flint and to other places throughout the world that are struggling through water crises right now. There isn’t a longer history about how people have talked about natural resources and land and ownership. People just don’t know.

If we invest in and create spaces for political and civics education and advocate for the systems that formally educate to include these histories in the curriculum, it’s important to do that advocacy but also know that it may not work and some people are not interested. We all are teachers and learners at different moments in our lives. And so we all can bring something to that conversation. But I think it’s important that we create those spaces in the absence of our government creating them.

I am unapologetically about getting free, and so all of my work is unapologetically oriented in that way. More of us who have the privilege of writing in the academy have to put that on the line in doing the work that we do. As students, think about the projects that you choose. Ask yourself a question you never thought to ask yourself: Why do most of the workers on our campus look like this? Why do most of the students look like this? What’s the history there? You can research that right here. You don’t have to go anywhere. Research that and ask yourselves those questions.

- DS And build political education into any event that you do. For white folks in the room, we don’t always have a lot of models of white people doing racial justice work. We don’t hear about John Brown or about the Grimké sisters. There is a history of white people who have been doing racial justice work and who have been showing up again and again and again and who have been in accountable relationships with people of color. Not relationships where they made themselves smaller and said, “I’m just going to do whatever you say, and I’m just going to do childcare and fundraising.” But were actually asking, “How can I organize my people and what does that mean for me to be organizing my people in this moment?”

Part of the work for white people is how we take action and take accountability through taking action. And know that we’re going to make mistakes, but keep showing up because we can’t see all the things that are there. That consistency and continuing to show up is a part of the work.

- MC Context is everything, and if we don’t have history, we have nothing. The act of providing context that challenges institutionalized authority is resistance, and it’s that step that makes us feel empowered and motivated.

At one point I was having an argument with people on Facebook about the term *race-baiting*. I went back to Howard Zinn for history. A hundred-year span of time seems to be completely missing from the mainstream US educational system. We’re taught that slavery ended, and then there was Martin Luther King and then Obama. So I thought, What are the five points that I can make that can connect this time and this time?

I had a list of points, and it got longer and longer and longer until I realized, nobody’s ever going to read that Facebook response. But I’m a filmmaker, so I made a piece, and it was nine minutes long. It’s called *Race-Baiting 101*. I felt super awkward making it because I’m a white guy doing African American history in nine minutes. But I put it up and forty million views later, it’s used in prisons around the country. And it’s just a little bit of research and a lot of Facebook arguments. And it had some impact. Besides the hate mail and the death threats, there were

significant numbers of white people who said, “Oh, I didn’t know that, and I didn’t get it, and now I get it, and I totally see that differently.”

So if you found out something about the history of hip-hop, share it. It takes all of us or nothing’s going to happen.

IB **Please share it. Write it. Investigate it. Research it.**

MC Rap it.

TBL Paint it, dance it, code it.

Audience When we talk about white people showing up, how do we challenge white supremacy without centering whiteness or re-centering whiteness?

DS This comes up all the time. One of the big pieces is naming race and also naming our own complicity in it, the benefits that we get individually from the system. It’s not something that we created, but we’re pulling some of the veils back to make it more apparent.

There is a stage that a lot of white people go through where they think, “Oh my God. I need to talk about being white, and I feel really bad about taking up space by talking about being white.” And we spend ten minutes talking about how bad we feel in that moment. But it’s also really important. You live in a racialized space. And so, as white people, how do we name that and then also not turn to the person next to us to say, “Was that okay? Did I do that right?” But instead turn to other white people and say, “How can we support each other in doing this?” And also be in accountable relationships with people of color and ask, “What could be most helpful in this situation?” People will tell you if you ask them.

I went to Bard College, not so far from here. Most of the people who worked on campus there were white. Not that they were just hiring white people, it’s that that’s who was doing service jobs there at that time. I was on work study, and I would ask, “Hey, what is it like working here?” And they’d say, “Well, it really sucks... I’m barely getting paid minimum wage and I’ve worked here for ten years.” And there ended up being a union drive that a bunch of students ran in partnership with longtime cafeteria workers. They ended up unionizing, and they’re still a union. I went back for my reunion, and people there said, “That union has meant that I’ve been here for twenty years.” There’s real power in building those relationships. Building those relationships across class with people who are working on campus and building them within the community of people who are here and not assuming that we have all the answers but also not assuming that we don’t have any answers.

Audience The email invitation for this event had this image that I found to be quite striking. When I came in and saw the sculptures, I was taken aback because it reminded me of what my family used to call these figures when they didn’t have the embellishments to be so assertive and aggressive looking. I apologize if this is hard for other people to hear, but they were called “yard nards.” And it was the most humorous thing we could say at the time when we would see these horrible things in people’s yards. I wondered what it was like for you all to come into this room, having these figures over here next to you this whole time?

IB I’m really glad you brought that up. These sculptures are three pieces from a much larger chess set created by Willie Cole in 2001 called *To get to the other side*. I’ll read a brief description: “*To get to the other side* [is] a large floor-mounted chess board with game pieces comprised of embellished and transformed lawn jockeys. A powerful work, *To get to the other side* comments on the historical origins of the Jockey Boy statue as a Revolutionary War memorial figure while simultaneously referring to Cole’s belief that it is a contemporary stand-in for the Yoruba god Eleggba.”

Cole has embellished each of these figures with blades and nails, jars, and other items. For him, there’s this notion of getting to the other side within a Congolese belief system. Congolese people believe that you can live in multiple realms and that your life is essentially a journey from one realm to the other.

There’s also a reference to what we refer to as Nkisi N’Kondi, or power figures, derogatorily referred to as fetishes. These figures are important staples within Congolese communities; they are cared for by a caretaker referred to as a Nganga, and they serve as ways to resolve disputes among individuals in the communities. So each of the nails and the blades stands for a particular issue that was discussed. And sometimes a tiny piece of hair was used to bind that person and their agreement. So the more nails and blades and inserts, the more powerful the figure.

Cole’s sculpture is a reference and an homage to Congolese culture, but also an appropriation of an incredibly multilayered lawn jockey statue that has racist connotations—there are layers of class, layers of servitude. In chess, the figures are imbued with certain powers. There are pawns, who are all identical, who are guarding the king, the queen, the castle, and they all have to physically be moved in an effort to challenge your opponent. Here, taken out of the chess context, the figures are posed as one big question/problem: What is this? What do I do with it? How come this is here?

DS We were talking earlier about the exhibition at the Whitney, and I think there’s something about the creation of art by people of color not meant for the white gaze.

I also think about what the art that was created for my culture is. Not to just reinforce the mainstream, but for me, as a Jew, what is the art that reflects a Judaism that isn’t about colonization and isn’t about maintaining or supporting state power? And that can represent something different? And how does that build a larger movement for decolonization and against colonization both here in the United States and in Israel? That’s something that I have to grapple with as a white Jew.

TBL Dara, I’m glad you mentioned the white gaze. When I see these sculptures, I have a visceral response, particularly seeing the singular figure versus the whole installed sculpture, putting it in context, thinking about the very diasporic way that these pieces come into being. There are certain things you just got to know to know. And that happens in Black cultural production across the diaspora.

There are certain things that aren’t for everyone to know. There are different literacies that we have with reading particular pieces. One of

those literacies, for me, is America’s racist history. So when I see these works, I don’t see them outside of that. I see it in conjunction with all of these other things. In race- and representation-oriented classes, you hear “white gaze” as this thing that’s deployed. We often don’t get at the nuts and bolts of it, and the ways in which white bodies have needed Black bodies to be seen. What was so fascinating to me about seeing the sculptures in a panel to talk about whiteness is that it does signal the ways in which whiteness has engaged Black bodies in very significant ways—which impacts even how I see Black bodies.

How whiteness imagines Blackness is not my shame or my discomfort. But to think about this in the larger piece of the strategy, the routing: what is it to be menacing? “Menacing” has been used against Black folks, but what is menacing as a re-appropriated tool of resistance and armed resistance to these things? So I see this, and I also see Korryn Gaines in Baltimore, who was shot by the police, who was an armed Black mother trying to protect her child but is seen in this very complicated way. And notably Black folks really teetered as to whether they should support her or not. Because we, too, saw her as a menacing or bad mother, and we know the history bad Black mothering has in a US imaginary.

I can’t escape the Americanness of the ways in which I process images, either. I have to unlearn that, too, so that I rail against individual and collective fears of Black men walking down the street. I get so many messages that tell me that I should be afraid. The white gaze is not specific to white people—I want to be clear about that. That’s where dominance and default and power and privilege go, so I have to actually construct an oppositional gaze. It’s like bell hooks’s resistive practices—practices in order to see things differently and to not let those histories dictate the way I process and engage and move through the world.

Audience A lot of white people are beginning to accept and come to terms with their privileged role as being oppressive, especially in communities that are largely upper or middle class and white, like this college. I’m wondering how white people can be part of this destabilizing conversation that’s meant to unseat white power without taking over that conversation and making it a way in which to retain white power.

IB **Dara, you touched earlier on that idea of decentering without becoming the center, or this idea of intervening within a space without taking it over.**

DS There’s something around taking risks. Sometimes we can get so caught up in “Is it the right thing to say? And am I going to be taking up too much space?” Part of it is also the roles that we’re conscripted to.

In terms of your question about how we raise questions about race, how we do race work as white people without taking it over: sometimes you’ll be given a little bit of space and will make mistakes. How do we take risks and know that we’re going to make mistakes and keep trying? And build genuine relationships with the people of color who are around us? I was a white person in the Movement for Black Lives, and for so long it was so rare to see other white people who were in it. There would be these waves after Philando Castile was killed, after Sandra Bland was

killed, after the burning of the Black churches... There would be this wave of white people who would come in and say, “Oh my God, I just realized we live in a racist country...”

TBL [Throws hands up] What?

DS Exactly. And they’d be around for a couple weeks and then a lot of people would fade away. Whether you stay in it for the long haul is part of what makes a difference. It’s that consistency of showing up and showing up again and showing up again and not always being the person on stage. I’ve been doing this work for a long time. I am on stage right now, but in my town, I’m cleaning the floors and I’m cooking the food, and we’re figuring it out together because we’re in it together.

TBL I also think you create spaces to do a certain kind of work that holds you accountable. I can be in my classrooms as a professor. I can be a race whisperer and a gender whisperer. But when I’m organizing and moving in other spaces, my work isn’t actually talking to white people about race. That’s something I’ve self-selected out of because there’s the work of me being Black and getting to my car and not dying. That can be a real thing and real labor, unfortunately. Adding another thing to the labor of oppressed people is always a sticky thing for me.

Let’s first unlearn and get all the guilt and shame out and get all that bullshit out in the beginning to start this. Let’s start from the place of stating that white supremacy exists, so what are we going to do? How uncomfortable are we willing to be? How willing are we to diminish our own proximity to power? When I think about movements right now, the tactic of going and getting arrested is not to put it on your Instagram. It’s to actually flood the jails and make it impossible for them to hold everybody who’s in there. That’s not work you can ask undocumented people to do and yet they do it anyway because their lives are at risk. Sometimes we show up for ourselves because no one else is showing up.

For those who are building spaces that are antiracist, anti-ableist, anticlassist, antisexist, antitransphobic, the question becomes: What are you willing to risk? “If freedom is in your vocabulary, then death is also in your vocabulary” is my riff-off of Malcolm X’s powerful quote, “If you’re not ready to die for it, put the word ‘freedom’ out of your vocabulary.” We’re fighting against a system that has literally killed to maintain itself.

When you say, “Are you ready to die for this?” it seems very grand and up there, so I also ask, What are you willing to give up? Are you ready to be present? To show up?—which means you will be wrong at times. I’m wrong in spaces all the time, particularly around how I moved and thought about and learned as a nontrans person thinking about activism and asking my trans sibs to be in spaces when I know they’re policed in a very different way than I am as a nontrans Black woman.

Those questions of taking up space I appreciate deeply, but I also want to encourage you to create space and have that space to be accountable to the communities that you’re fighting alongside. You’re not speaking for them but speaking with them and in conjunction with the work that’s going on. Within the Movement for Black Lives, we have times when we

say, “This is a Black space,” and we claim that very clearly. Or: “This is an all-women-identified space.”

In the interim, that doesn’t mean you get a day off when we’re doing that work. That means, on that day, you get you and your cousins—cousins in the playful Black vernacular sense, your peoples—and you get them together and you have conversations about what we need to do and what work we need to do in this moment that would be most supportive to the agenda that’s been given to us by these communities of color who are seeing the world in this way, and feeling and experiencing the world in this way.

MC Right now you might be in a space where if you started talking about a certain issue, there might be a couple other people here who you seem to be taking up space for, but there are so many other situations in which you will be alone out there and you will find yourself not amid the people who can speak up for themselves at all. You’ll be at an immigration checkpoint or you’ll be somewhere where someone’s getting arrested right in front of your face.

Do you all remember the Milgram experiment? I’ll jump to the conclusion: 65 percent of human beings will electrocute somebody to death if instructed to do so by an authority figure—65 percent. So whether we believe that that’s by nature or nurture, we’re genetically predisposed to obey and we have that working against us. We need to train and practice those modalities of resistance, that psychology of resistance, that psychology of saying, “No. No. I’m actually going to go, and I’m going to disagree with you.” And maybe at first, it’s with shaking hands and it’s not with the right words. So what? And then you try it again, and the next time you’re more comfortable with it—you might get checked here and there but it’s so worth it. So many people’s lives are just brutalized.

I’ve spent time in our prison system. And I encourage you, if you haven’t, to take a tour. Just take a look at what’s going on in prisons or the local jail or a courthouse. And watch how it functions, and observe that in a nation where everyone should have the right to a free trial, 95 percent of all cases are resolved by plea bargaining, which means that a prosecutor laid on the charges and told you, “You’re going to need \$50,000 to \$100,000 to fight the case, so you might as well just plead guilty and you’ll spend x amount of time and then you’ll be out of there.”

And the next thing you know you’re spending a couple years in the most horrific, barbaric environment that one could not possibly imagine without taking a look at it. And I mean that. I’ve seen some horrible, horrible stuff in my life. And what I saw in LA County Jail and what I heard about, I couldn’t have come up with it in the sickest corner of my mind. You’ll never make a decision again to just vote for the corporate Democrat.

There are all kinds of reasons why we might not want to speak up or might not want to challenge something or feel self-doubt. Just give it a shot. The old way has brought us to where we are now, and it’s not working; let’s try anything else.

TBL Use the privilege of being able to take up space. Use your privilege right now. This is actually when a white person speaking of seeing someone

stopped and unfairly treated at the airport matters differently. What can you do to be an interrupter of the kinds of violence that are impacting marginalized communities? Because even if it doesn't work in that exact moment, that person needs to know that somebody cares and that they weren't rendered both violated and invisible in that moment. So it is the day-to-day as well as these more concentrated moments. I'm not saying at every moment that you see something that you act, because you'd just be exhausted. But really take a look at those moments and ask, What can I do in this exact moment that stands between this person and the system that was designed to kill them?

And if you think of these systems as systems that were designed to kill people slowly and commodify people and commodify the worth of people, then I think it emboldens us more to contest that at every level. We think about the everydayness of this. And it reminds you that every day, marginalized people wake up marginalized people. So every day when you wake up with whiteness or the privilege of class or heterosexuality or whatever it is, use that to challenge so that we get closer to a world in which that privilege doesn't have that kind of power. ▲