

Engaging Matters

Doug Borwick on vibrant arts and communities

an **arts**JOURNAL blog

The White Racial Frame

March 6, 2013 by Doug Borwick



[Guest post—second on this topic—by Roberto Bedoya, Executive Director of the Tucson Pima Arts Council. Mr. Bedoya reflects on the need to consider the impact of unconscious racial perspectives before we address diversity policies in the sector.]

Before I offer my commentary, I want to give thanks to my peers for responding to [my prompt](#). This inquiry into the perplexities and complexities of whiteness that we see working in the cultural sector from our various perches has triggered much thought and feeling within me and I suspect with the others as well. I deeply appreciate [Barry](#), [Clayton](#), [Diane](#), [Doug](#), [Ian](#) and [Nina](#)'s efforts to walk down this path of investigations and a special thanks to Doug for his invitation to me to participate in this field reflection.

My prompt was “to share with us some of your good thinking and deep reflection on your understanding of how the White Racial Frame intersects with cultural policies and cultural practices.” And to that end, the thrust of my commentary will be on US cultural policy.

So let's me begin with a definition:

The scholar Joe Feagin defines the white racial frame as “an overarching worldview, one that encompasses

important racial ideas, terms, images, emotion and interpretation. For centuries now, it has been a basic and foundational frame from which a substantial majority of white Americans – as well as others seeking to conform to white norms – view our highly racialized society. ”

And what are the characteristics of whiteness – its good, bad and ugly, I ask myself. There are many writers who have written eloquently and with great rigor about whiteness: Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Tim Wise, George Lipsitz, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Renato Rosaldo, David Roediger, Peggy McIntosh to name a few authors in my library that inform my thinking. And at the core of their writings is an examination of identity, bias and privilege.

The examination of whiteness in other sectors of our society, e.g. law, health care, education, has been animated and substantial. Yet, in the cultural sector it has been anemic. And I wonder why – are we lazy, fearful? Are we too comfortable with the status quo that believes whiteness as stated in my previous blog “...is the default frame that defines cultural value and worth; it is used (mostly unconsciously) to analyze, classify and quantify both what is understood as the norm and the notions of “other” – of diversity” and so be it.

I take no pleasure in examining deficiencies when there’s no analysis of the causes behind it. So a study of the racial composition of audiences for dance, theater or the visual arts that folks find alarming because of its lack of racial diversity demands an examination of the racialized hierarchies that shape audience participation and in turn cultural policies. This is not a tidy examination but it is necessary. Coupled with this examination is an analysis of privilege – who has it or doesn’t have it; who has access, legitimacy, power or doesn’t have it, adds to the complexities of this undertaking.

A starting off point for me is this examination of the white racial frame is “possessiveness”. One of the scholars on whiteness that I admire is George Lipsitz who writes about the possessive nature of whiteness and its relationship to racialized hierarchies. He states “I use the adjective *possessive* to stress the relationship between whiteness and asset accumulation in our society, to connect attitudes to interest, to demonstrate that white supremacy is usually less a matter of direct, referential and snarling contempt and more a system for protecting the privilege of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility. Whiteness is invested in, like property, but it also a means of accumulating property and keep it from others.”

What is asset accumulation in the cultural sector... the new wing of a museum, the positive reviews of a performance season, the new donors, the poems the third graders wrote about their neighborhood, the award letter from a foundation? Are cultural investments a continual investment in whiteness? What are

the cultural policies in place that enable or deny asset accumulation? How do we understand the assets one has or an asset one has that is managed by another? Beginning in the 70's the articulation of "first voice" by communities of color as part of a cultural agenda of self-determination fed the development of artists and arts organization that understood their assets and began to build upon them... yet the support system today for these artists and arts organization is weak. Is this weak condition a by-product of a tension related to the possessing of assets or asserting one's assets? In addition to this point about assets, today's conversations about social capital and its relationship to authenticity and asset building must take a look at the possessive nature of whiteness and ask if the articulation of social capital is complicit with whiteness or a counter-frame to it.

In regards to the racial diversity conversation, I ask myself whether "diversity" policies that began during the civil rights movement morphed into a possessive investment in whiteness that promotes a blindness to racialized privilege systems that impact and define audience and cultural validation methods.

For many of my peers the diversity conversation today is about equity. The equity mandate is interwoven with social justice practices that are addressing racialized hierarchies within the cultural sector. Additionally, within communities of colors there is a strong feeling that we are beyond the politics of recognition (which has produce Black History Month... etc.) and must now engage in the politics of distribution, with fairness and equity at the center of policy-making and cultural decision making practices.

As I was gathering my thoughts for this blog, last week Justice Antonin Scalia called the Voting Rights Act "the perpetuation of racial entitlement" – a comment that shocked me and illuminates a line of thinking of white racial resentment at play in our society...when did the right to vote become a racial entitlement? Let's push out this line of thinking ... are our cultural policies that support the expressive life of our multi-racial nation being characterized as racial entitlement? I feel that is the case in the "post-racial" conversations I encounter in our sector. I was recently reading about the work of the Native American visual artist Tom Jones and I came across this quote of his "I question if a denial of one's cultural background is generated by mainstream Western art norms or if it is a form of identity genocide." Are the post-racial conversations occurring in our sector a form of "identity genocide" and who has the privilege to carry on this conversation? I live and work in the politically toxic state of Arizona where racial profiling of Latinos by police officers is sanctioned by the State and Mexican-American studies has been eradicated from the Tucson schools. Even prior to the programs' dismantling the works of Sandra Cisneros, Leslie Marmon Silko, Rodolfo Acuña and Shakespeare's *Tempest* (cuz that Caliban dude...he's trouble!) were banned in those classes. This is a story of identity genocide and the ideology of whiteness at play through governmental, education and cultural policies.

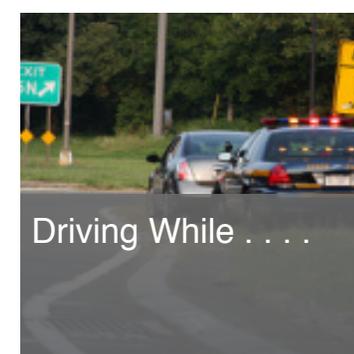
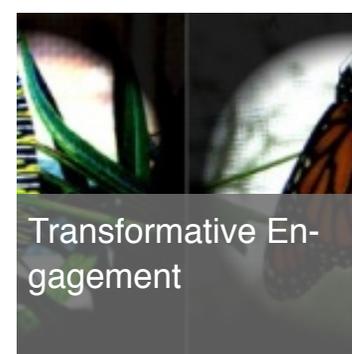
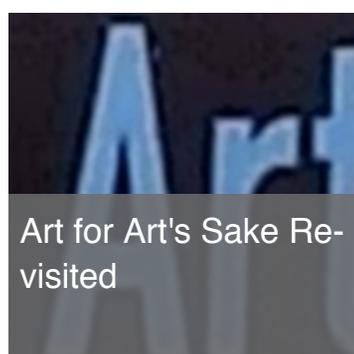
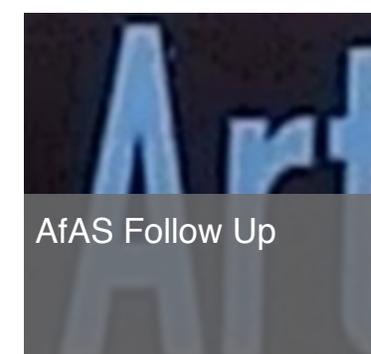
I define U.S. cultural policy as a system of arrangement that affects the allocation of resources and the articulation of value. I am mindful of these arrangements and ask where the ideology of whiteness is in this system? I know that there are many folks asking this question when they advocate for a healthy and robust support system for the arts that is equitable and just. Given the thinking of Judge Scalia and the policies of the state of Arizona as an example of the possessive nature of whiteness as it relates to one's civil and cultural rights, it also reveals how our society is not immune from racial biases that embrace and support a politics of dis-belonging.

I feel that it also enters into the social imagery of the nation, of the phrase "We the People" and who belongs or dis-belong to this "We". So often in US public and cultural policies, regrettably, the meaning of "We" is reduced to a privatized "me and my friends" meaning of the word. Does "We the people" operate to reinforce whiteness as a privilege system that works to keep power in the hands that already have it, based on racial hierarchies? The democratic ideal of "We the People" as a secular "We" that includes people one doesn't know is often lost in cultural policy discussions and actions. I am aware that I am asserting my democratic ideal of "We the People" and one thing I know about this "We" is that it is multiracial as well as the inclusive gender, sexual, and class formations of "We".

I have asked a lot of questions in this blog and probably troubled the water for some, in the spirit of critical witnessing to the ways of whiteness. To end with a suggested course of action, a counter-frame to the white racial frame, let me suggest that artists and arts leaders support the ethical imagining of the meaning of "We" that includes people you don't know. This can be done to support the development of one's ethical identity that is anti-racist, that is grounded in an ethos of belonging, that understands systems of support as the equivalences we make among us that is fair and equitable. It can also be done so that we as policy actors and as individuals embrace and support the multi worldviews among us, that animate our pluralities as we move forward in our passions to advance humanity. Onward.



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Comments



Andy Horwitz says

March 7, 2013 at 12:05 pm

Thanks so much for this follow-up piece! Love your writing and insight, it has prompted a lot of conversation over in our little part of this big arts ecology. The need to redefine “we” and expand/embrace multiple publics cannot be overstated.

I have a genuine question to the philanthropically knowledgeable. Given that philanthropy as we know it in the U.S. is historically a “white” sector (the major foundations having been founded largely by white men now long gone, I assume) – what is the state of minority-founded and administered philanthropies, particularly with arts funding priorities? I don’t mean to sound naive but are there foundations of significant scale that were founded by wealthy people of color that are prioritizing culturally-specific funding at all, much less in the arts?

I know that Arcus Foundation is pretty big and supports LGBT causes with some arts funding available. What is the diversity like in the philanthropic landscape and what does that mean for funding generally, arts funding specifically?

thanks,

Andy



Nancy Ellis says

March 7, 2013 at 1:47 pm

Hi Andy!

I second your question. What I gleaned from Lisa Dietlin's talk at the Willamette Valley Development Officers conference last week is that different cultures have historically different cultures of philanthropy. Her general comments suggested that: 69% of African American households give (largest minority group giving per capita), Asian and Pacific Islanders have the least ingrained culture of philanthropy, particularly if they come from a communist country, and that Hispanic/Latino donors give discreetly to help their relatives.

In the PNW, we have the Spirit Mountain Community Fund, to name one important minority-directed foundation. "The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde through the Spirit Mountain Community Fund fulfills their Native tradition of potlatch, a ceremony at which good fortune is distributed. The Spirit Mountain Community Fund's focus is to improve the quality of life in Northwest Oregon through community investments that provide lasting benefits consistent with the Tribe's culture and values." They give to the arts and promote, as does the Meyer Memorial Trust and others, the importance of equity and inclusion, particularly on decision-making boards and committees.

Onward, like Roberto says.

-Nancy



Roberto Bedoya says

March 7, 2013 at 9:54 pm

Andy,

Good questions. The state of "minority-founded" philanthropies is very thin. I don't have hard data on this but beside Oprah's foundation there are no others that come to mind. What is occurring in the sphere of private foundations there are a growing number of program officers of color in charge of art portfolios e.g., the Ford, Irvine, Kresge, Heinz, who shape funding priorities. In regard to other areas of philanthropy: among local art agencies who distribute public fund you'll find the

Executive Director of the arts council in Chicago, LA, San Antonio, Atlanta and Dallas are of color; among Community Foundations and similarly some family foundations they exists examples of funding policies that address cultural equity issues and then there's the art service organizations like the that National Association of Latino Art and Culture or Alternate Roots who support artists and art organization of color through their grant-making opportunities.

To drive down further on your query how philanthropy works among communities of color it's often the church-giving model of giving small monies with regularity over a period of time. The deep pockets of the 1% who are of color...rare, and when that changes maybe we will see the philanthropic landscape change as well.

thanks also for you appreciation of my writing.

Best

Roberto



michael rohd says

March 9, 2013 at 2:04 pm

I'm grateful to read your thoughts, Roberto, and the thoughts of others in this conversation.

I just wanted to note that in your conclusion, you suggest-

"...artists and arts leaders support the ethical imagining of the meaning of "We" that includes people you don't know. "

I find that a clear and cogent summary of what we've been exploring at Sojourn Theatre and at the Center for Performance and Civic Practice for a while now.

Its a great definition, call to action, question, and frame for interrogation and multivalent process.

Thanks for that.

Roberto Bedoya says



March 9, 2013 at 3:31 pm

Michael

Thanks for your comment. I'm a fan of your work and of Sojourn Theatre. The interconnectedness of aesthetic and ethics and how it shapes public life is something I think about often, which I know you do as well. So let's pump the poetics and politics of this entanglement. Abrazos r



richard kooyman says

March 11, 2013 at 7:29 am

Robert,

The important issues of equity in support, presentation, and engagement are directly tied to political control of resources. We as a country have all the money in the world for bombs and guns but fail to provide any real money for our cultural production. To many of use have fallen for the party line of those in control that austerity is something we just have to accept.

Is the real problem that predominantly white assets are being used to build a new wing on the predominantly white engaged museum or rather we as a country aren't providing the needed funding to support all of our diverse and equally important cultural sectors?

Too many of the recent online discussions on this issue seem resigned to the fact that the our large cultural sector only has a small piece of funding pie. As a white visual artist I want my museum's that focus on the canons of art that interest me to grow and prosper. Even while their appearance is dominant and flush I'm sure they work hard and struggle everyday to keep their doors open. I equally desire a multicultural community where any other ethic groups or canonical systems get to focus on their interests and succeed in building their institutions and means of engagement. I want it all and that demand isn't unreasonable.

We all believe in the importance of a diverse arts and culture community and in the needs that community provides to our humanity. The problem is we, as a society, are not providing enough money to pay for it and I fear we are starting to eat our own as a result.

richard kooyman says



March 11, 2013 at 7:31 am

Roberto, Please excuse my typo in calling you Robert.



Roberto Bedoya says

March 12, 2013 at 1:27 am

Richard,

Thanks for your comments. The profound undercapitalization of the cultural sector in America is a shameful and sad story. How the politics of resources and position impact cultural validation systems, cultural support system and the expressive lives of our multiracial nation is damaging our potentialities. How we move ahead and face this given is to utilize our creative resilience and engage in politics – support our government’s investment on the arts, take on those that create barriers that prevent access to the wide breathe of our arts community and resist polices that say me not you – the privatization of the pronoun we. that I refer to in my post. It is not glamorous work and not for everyone but it needs to happen.

Roberto



Carter Gillies says

March 11, 2013 at 11:35 am

The questions of identity are at the center of so much of our creative and cultural industry, and it only makes sense to be aware of these influences and how they affect what gets done, how, and why. Its a mistake to ignore this.

And yet, there are other motivations we also would do well to take into account. For instance, identity can be seen as personal, group affiliation, and as specific to our shared humanity. We can be motivated by all these things at different times. But also separate from aiming at identity we can consider the issue of quality. For instance, style or genre in art can be identity specific, you can have good and bad within each of these permutations, and yet the notion of quality is not dependent on stylistic identity and not equivalent to it. They are not the same things and we make a mistake in treating it so simplistically.

Think of it as the difference between personality and character. To be motivated by personality implicates a sense of identity, whereas to be motivated by character implicates a sense of what is right to do regardless of personal preferences. "Whiteness" is a manifestation of group identity, and yet we are also capable at times of acting equitably and without reference to group. Each seems to have its rightful place. Its not either/or.....

And a third motivation that is independent of both identity and quality and which directly implicates the Arts is that of exploration. Oftentimes an artist will create independently of issues of style/identity or quality/value and instead will be doing things just to see what happens. Think process art and its like. These are equal opportunity endeavors, and the rules for their implementation have not and possibly will never be written.

So the underlying question I see is that artists ARE motivated by all these issues and our failing is that we only infrequently acknowledge or are sensitive to them. If arts policy and advocacy rest on only a poor understanding of the motivations for making art, just what are we hoping for? We need to understand identity motivations but also these other sources of our work. And plenty more besides, I'm sure.....

If commissioning art were as simple as commissioning a loaf of bread or building a bridge then political and economic factors might be all we need consider. But because art is motivated in ways that few other cultural artifacts are we need to be sensitive to those differences. "Whiteness" is simply one of many ways that art and culture gets manifest, not the only, and certainly not the most important. And if we think about it, it surely does not warrant the seemingly unquestioned status we grant it in our culture..... What do you think?



Roberto Bedoya says

March 12, 2013 at 10:18 am

Carter,

What do I think? Well, there's a lot to reflect upon in your thoughtful and probing post. And an extended dialogue on quality, identity, motivations could go on for days. What I think about is the sociology of art – how aesthetics judgments are made, impact motivations and shape our cultural support systems. The social nature of the aesthetic and how hierarchies operate in this sphere of experiences is complicated and need to be mindful of the ways of motivation. I often think of the great poet Robin Blaser and his statement "Cultural condition always approaches what we mean by the word 'world' or the process of composing one....The world is never separately—by simplicity's trick—social, political, artistic, or sacred, but, rather, it is made up of an entanglement of discourses having to do with men, women, earth, and heaven." And this entanglement (bewitching as it is) shapes identity, art, and explorations. I think your comments are rich.

Roberto



University of Tulsa, Arts Administration Students says

March 12, 2013 at 2:18 pm

Blog Comment for "Engaging Matters"

We are art administration students from the University of Tulsa. We really appreciated the metaphors about white canvases and white .jpgs because they provide a good way to explain how many of us perceive whiteness as the "default" or the "norm," when in fact "whiteness" carries a lot of ideas and assumptions. Your and Bedoya's posts have provoked a conversation about race in our classroom, which can be a difficult thing to do. Reading over this post again, we had a couple of questions. Could you clarify what you meant by the distinction between serving the cultural needs of a community and "simply" achieving diversity? Do you think that arts organizations are progressing from our Eurocentric traditions, or are they stagnant?

Haley Stritzel

Dani Napier

Victoria Steinhart



Doug Borwick says

March 12, 2013 at 9:33 pm

“Simply achieving diversity” could be thought of as completing a demographic scavenger hunt. “Do we have one of those?” “Do we have any of these?” Serving the cultural needs of the community demands deeper thought and effort on the part of the arts organization. Your second question is impossible to answer because arts organizations, like individuals, are unique. Many are making progress, but many are still kind of stuck. I think the arc of history will resolve this eventually. As I’ve said numerous times elsewhere, the arts will, of course, always exist. I would simply like the vast investments we have made in the current arts infrastructure to survive and to serve the cultural needs of far greater portions of our populations than has been true in the past.



richard kooyman says

March 13, 2013 at 8:09 am

To the question “Do you think that arts organizations are progressing from our Eurocentric traditions, or are they stagnant?” Let’s not forget that our Eurocentric traditions have brought us beautiful and ground breaking aesthetic objects and concepts. From classical Ancient Greek sculpture to the ideas of Modernism these traditions have provided us with rich and meaningful art. The racism and ego centric aspect of this tradition has evolved, and continues to evolve as our culture does. We as a society should not abandon the importance of what has been called Eurocentric aesthetic traditions (isn’t that tradition in fact different today?) but rather we should be adding to the scope of all of our ethnic and cultural exposure.

Trackbacks

Cultural Democracy and Representation | The Brooklyn Commune Project says:

May 30, 2013 at 8:07 pm

[...] of these shifts requires long-term support of organizations to truly make a change. However, Doug Borwick argues that we need to question who is leading this change, how investments are being made, and how [...]

ABOUT DOUG BORWICK



Doug Borwick is immediate past President of the Board of the Association of Arts Administration Educators and was for nearly 30 years Director of the Arts

Management and Not-for-Profit Management Programs at Salem College in Winston-Salem, NC. He is CEO of Outfitters4, Inc., providing management services to nonprofit organizations and ArtsEngaged providing training and consultation to artists and arts organization to help them more effectively engage with their communities. [\[Read More ...\]](#)

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Building Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States was published in 2012 as a “why to” book on community engagement. Engage Now! A Guide to Making the Arts Indispensable is a “how to” manual for the arts organization seeking to become invaluable. Doug is ... [\[Read More...\]](#)

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Posted Jan 13, 2016



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Posted Dec 17, 2015



Stephen on Driving While

Great job flagging this! Artists who address social issues should be thinking about how to treat the subject.

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Doug - I swear, I've been working on a blog post based on the same fracking analogy. I couldn't agree with...

Posted Nov 12, 2015

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