The Roots of White Supremacy in the Arts

Indianapolis Arts Council
IDEA Learning Series
Friday, August 19, 2022

by Benjamen Douglas
PhD student, Applied Intercultural Arts Research,
The University of Arizona
Introduction

Who Gets Most Arts Money? Still Large, White Organizations

A study from Helicon Collaborative shows that 58 percent of arts funding goes to 2 percent of big-budget arts organizations—and it’s a trend that’s worsened.

BY DIEP TRAN

https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/07/21/who-gets-most-arts-money-still-large-white-organizations
The identity of the U.S. is intertwined with race—and racism. Until the Civil War, entertainment was integrated and democratic. "The arts" were created for exclusion at the same time the rest of society segregated. Cultural fathers established national tastes and systems based on white supremacist ideologies. Change requires action.
What is “the work” and how do we do it?

Moving beyond critique to action through imagination
“The time has come for us to reimagine everything. We have to reimagine work and go away from labor. We have to reimagine revolution and get beyond protest. We have to think not only about change in our institutions, but changes in ourselves.... It’s up to us to reimagine the alternatives and not just protest against them and expect them to do better.”

Grace Lee Boggs (1912-2012)
“We have to constantly critique imperialist white supremacist patriarchal culture because it is so normalized by mass media and rendered unproblematic.”

bell hooks & Amalia Mesa-Bains

Ensuring Shared Understandings
“...the system – that values whiteness above all others. It’s a worldview, often unacknowledged, that can be held by a person of any race.”

“...white supremacy... is never named... Naming white supremacy changes the conversation in two key ways: it makes the system visible and shifts the locus of change onto white people, where it belongs.”

“The Arts” as White Property

What’s the first thing that comes to your mind?

- “He’s a great artist, but he’s no ________.”
- “Listening to ________ makes your baby smarter.”
- “To be a great dancer, you must have a strong basis in ________.”
- “Great literature starts with ________.”

What's the first thing that comes to your mind?

- "He's a great artist, but he's no Picasso."
- "Listening to Mozart makes your baby smarter."
- "To be a great dancer, you must have a strong basis in ballet."
- "Great literature starts with Shakespeare."

“The Arts” as White Property

- To say that something is “the arts” elevates its status and grants it a certain kind of value.
- The practices traditionally categorized as “the arts” are presumed to belong to European cultural tradition, and serve as evidence of European cultural superiority. That superiority then became justification for cultural imperialism and conquest.
- The stratification between “high art” and “low art” led to a hierarchy of certain creative forms being seen as more sophisticated and therefore lead to the creation of objects and practices that are more valued than others—so painting is perceived as more important than weaving, playing the violin seems to rank above more “primitive” instruments, and dancing on a stage above dancing on the street.
- To say that “the arts” are white property is to say that they are institutionalized within structures that protect the property values of whiteness, such as schools, museums, and opera halls. These institutions determine who gets included or excluded, and directly impact multiple forms of capital, often held by white people.
- Whiteness constructs white cultural practices as good, beautiful, and innocent while simultaneously relying on the oppositional construction of non-White bodies and cultural practices as abject, threatening, and the Other.
Racial Thought in the US Around the Birth of the Arts
Euro-Americans’ Racial Thought, mid 19th c.

- Manifest Destiny
- The Enlightenment & pseudo-science
- The ___________ problem
- Federal policy
  - Genocide
  - Elimination of non-whites

Source: researchgate.net
German Thought

- Influx of Germans
- Saturation of German intellectualism
- Anglo-Saxon dominance
- Caucasian as beautiful

Source: NIH.gov
The Era of Minoritizing Peoples

- ...in 1846 the United States waged a bloodthirsty war against Mexico in which it seized about one-half of that nation's territory. Later, Anglo lawyers and land-hungry settlers colluded with courts and local authorities to deprive the Mexicans who chose to remain in the conquered territory of their lands—which were guaranteed by the peace treaty.

- ...at the very same time, Congress was passing the despised Indian Appropriation Act, providing that no Indian nation would be an independent entity capable of entering into a treaty with the United States. ...not long afterward, the Dawes Act broke up land the tribes held in common, resulting in the loss of almost two-thirds of all Indian land.

- And in 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act making it a crime to employ Chinese workers.
Formation of Racial Identity, National Identity, and Cultural Identity
Formation of National Identity, Racial Identity, and the Arts in America, 1865-1965
Antebellum Culture and Entertainment

Until the mid-nineteenth century, “Everywhere in the nation burlesques and parodies of Shakespeare constituted a prominent form of entertainment.” At the time, Shakespeare was what we would now call “popular culture.” His work, along with juggling, opera, circus, and Blackface minstrel performances, were a common evening’s entertainment. There was no such division as highbrow / lowbrow until the Civil War era.

The Rise of Arts Institutions

“...after 1870, the arts became the business of organizations that, like the art they purveyed, were segmented into two fields: the “high” and the “popular.” In the United States, within fifty years, each of the fields was institutionalized on the national level, and the classifications high and popular (and the contents of each side of this dichotomy) were largely taken for granted.”

Coleman, Bourdieu, and Coleman, Social Theory for a Changing Society
The Rise of Cultural Capital

- Birth of cultural capital
- Boston elites established art museum, symphony orchestra, private schools, and private clubs at the same time
- The rise of “cultural experts”
- Model followed by elites in Chicago, Philadelphia, and every other major city

Source: Wikimedia
Proliferation of German Music

- Germania Musical Society (1848-54)
  - Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner
- Theodore Thomas Orchestra (1868-1875)
  - "Life was never the same afterward… this world of beauty, wholly apart from everyday experiences."
  - Symphonic music could only be understood by the most cultivated persons

Source: CSOarchives.wordpress.com
Sacralization of Culture

- 1860’s as beginning of “sacralization of culture”
- The arts reinforced stratification and segregation
- America’s cultural “sophistication” was used as proof of the superiority of Europeans—to demonstrate the successes of their race in taming this wilderness—and that God was on their side.

Source: musicmotion.com
Cultural fathers, eugenics, and funding for the arts

1. Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919)
2. Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919)
3. Henry Ford (1863-1947)
4. W. Averell Harriman (1891 - 1986)
5. Nelson Rockefeller (1908 - 1979)

images: Wikipedia.org
White Supremacy in the Arts Today
The Legacy of Theodore Thomas

- Since Theodore Thomas's tenure, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has NEVER had an American-born principal conductor and, other than the Argentine, Daniel Barenboim, has exclusively had white, male, European-born conductors.

- Furthermore, every titled conductor has been a European-born white male.

- It's also worth noting that Sir George Solti and Pierre Boulez are two of the top three all-time Grammy winners.
The Metropolitan Opera

A selection of next season’s Met operas

Years an opera was staged by the Metropolitan Opera, since 1883

- Aida
- La Bohème
- Carmen
- La Traviata
- Barber of Seville
- Don Giovanni
- Tristan und Isolde

Years: 1900, '20, '40, '60, '80, 2000

Source: The Metropolitan Opera
The Cycle of White Supremacy in the Arts

1. White philanthropists define cultural tastes
2. White people determine the repertoire
3. White people perform the repertoire
4. The work becomes popular
5. Newcomers are discouraged
6. Tastes are set; patrons yearn for it
7. White arts managers program it
From the Rockefellers to Local Arts Councils

- Rockefeller created NYSCA; model for NEA
- NEA founders shared elite assumptions, like that the arts can be categorized into higher and lesser art forms
- The establishment of the NEA led to the creation of state arts agencies (SAAs)
- SAAs often prefer to fund well-established institutions because they are believed to be more accountable for public money
- Most arts council members and advisory panelists are affluent, highly educated, and of white Western European origin; many feel a deep responsibility to preserve and nurture the traditional European “high arts”
- There is an informal *quid pro quo* where arts agencies' affluent members use their influence to advocate for increased funding
- Grant review panels determine what gets funded, and often, whether something “is art”
Dismantling White Supremacy in the Arts
Arts Managers’ Social Responsibility

- Arts managers administer humankind's most liberating pursuit
- The arts also cut off large numbers of people from participation, contrary to democratic ideals of accessibility to the arts by all who wish to enjoy them
- The role carries a special onus to examine implications of presiding over exclusionary spaces

"So long as the field of arts administration does not decisively address these issues and recognize the inextricable connection between cultural and social justice, so long as little is done to rectify the disabling imbalances, what should be a far nobler profession is being egregiously compromised."

Identifying White Supremacy in the Arts

- Can be OVERT or COVERT
- Bulk of funding and opportunity goes to white artists, administrators, board members, and audiences goes unquestioned
- Often mirrors characteristics of white supremacy culture, including:
  - Perfectionism
  - False sense of urgency
  - Defensiveness
  - Quantity over quality
  - Worship of the written word
  - Only one right way
  - Paternalism
  - Either / or thinking
  - Power hoarding
  - Fear of open conflict
  - Individualism
  - I'm the only one
  - Progress = bigger, more
  - Objectivity
  - The right to comfort
A Path Forward, Dismantling White Supremacy in the Arts

- Accept the onus for white arts managers to understand this history and lead the work
- Learn to identify white supremacy; be bold enough to name it
- Racial equity-driven funding is imperative to accomplish justice
- Work toward cultural democracy and radical multiculturalism through racial equity, self-determination, and Indigenous sovereignty
Working Toward the Future We Imagine
Cultural Equity to Achieve Cultural Democracy


–W.E.B. DuBois, 1926

FOUR VISIONS FOR CULTURAL EQUITY

Diversity
Mainstream institutions become more diverse and reflective of their communities.

Prosperity
Large-budget organizations focused on artists of color present work to a broad audience.

Redistribution
Funders provide more resources to organizations rooted in communities of color.

Self-Determination
People of color have ownership over shaping cultural life in their communities.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Artists Paid</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
<th>Community Served Census Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African-American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Considering that several states in the U.S. are already “majority minority” and the nation itself will reach majority-minority status by 2044, and since the wealthiest, white citizens do not pay their fair share of taxes, if the taxpayer base that funds governments—and therefore arts agencies—is 40%, 50%, or more people of color—but the organizations, artists, and audiences receiving funding are primarily white, then that amounts to state-sponsored white supremacy.
Conclusion

- White supremacy in the arts is no accident
- Responsibility to name—and dismantle white supremacy in the arts
- Actively funding racial equity is imperative for change
- A vision for the future: cultural equity—through radical multiculturalism
Thank you!

benjamendouglas@arizona.edu


Questions?

benjamendouglas@arizona.edu