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Stoic Indulgence, Gratuitous Restraint: White Feelings and Campus Art

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The 2010s saw a revival of reactionary politics on college campuses, which now appear to have paved the way for contemporary right-wing culture-war talking points regarding K–12 education. Revanchist attitudes around race, as well as gender and sexuality, can be linked to White Americans’ affective attachments to ideas of historical entitlement, which can be seen both in campus responses to university art programming and in acts of student vandalism. I describe a campus gallery exhibition I organized in 2016 around the theme of White affect, and I make connections between expressions of rage, anguish, and reasonableness on the part of White people within White-dominated institutions of art and education, before considering what possibilities and difficulties may exist for leading substantive classroom discussions and projects that engage explicitly with race generally, and Whiteness in particular.
Introduction

University campuses have long represented a flashpoint for figurative and literal struggles over the politics of education (C. R. King, 2010; Rooks, 2006; Wilder, 2013), with radical gestures intended to call attention to excluded histories frequently igniting firestorms of backlash. Over recent decades, there have been numerous incidents around race and visual culture, sometimes focusing on university galleries. This article intends to touch on this history, before talking about a specific exhibition in 2016, White Feelings, that gathered artists who made work reflecting on the ways in which racialized Whiteness was often expressed through both statements and gestures tied to affect and emotion. I intend to close by talking about the larger significance of affect and Whiteness in relation to fine art, particularly to work by BIPOC artists. I suggest that reactive resistance against cultural projects of racial liberation is to be expected and must be addressed in university fine arts programming, as well as in K–12 arts education.

Tragic Censorship, Scandalous Farce

Public art on college campuses became a point of controversy in the past decade, with a majority of attention being given to statues and buildings commemorating wealthy and powerful White men connected with histories of extraordinary exploitation, cruelty, and genocide (Fairbanks, 2015; Jaschik, 2016; Peltier, 2021; Redden, 2020; Rothman, 2015; Wilder, 2013). Well before “critical race theory” became a conservative talking point in the educational culture wars, the 2017 White supremacists at the Unite the Right rally in the university town of Charlottesville, Virginia, infamously denounced the removal of statues honoring Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson.

But anti-antiracist scandals have gone beyond these institutional landmarks, extending to less visible campus “monuments.” In September 2018, an installation titled American MONUMENT by artist lauren woods (who prefers her name be uncapitalized), opened at the university gallery of California State University at Long Beach (CSULB). The piece features vinyl records that play audio related to murders of unarmed Black civilians by police officers, along with extensive documentation of these killings. The university gallery director, Kimberli Meyer, was laid off by the university just days before the opening, prompting a firestorm of criticism. At the opening of American MONUMENT, after sharing emotional words on the collaborative planning process that preceded the exhibition, woods acted to “pause” the installation as a show of support for and solidarity with Meyer. Eventually the installation found a gallery venue in 2019 at the University of California, Irvine, but the event at CSULB may still be its most well-known legacy.

Writing in an October 2018 opinion piece, Nizan Shaked, a professor of contemporary art history, museum, and curatorial studies at CSULB, decried not only Meyer’s firing, but the larger context in which it took place.
Despite no official statement from the administration, not to mention Meyer’s central role in securing a major recent donation to the university, and bracketing the excuses proffered by Jennifer Moran, an administrator representing the staff union, the real explanation might lie elsewhere—perhaps in staff annoyance in being asked to take part in antiracist education or in staff fears around exhibiting antiracist art (Zeiger, n.d.), or perhaps in choosing not to consult local police about the exhibition (Morris, 2018). Moran’s statement, declaring any implication of censorship to be “hurtful” as well as “defamatory” (as cited in Morris, 2018, para. 31), recalls a story that Black scholar Sharon Patricia Holland relates of declining to move her parked car for a White woman loading groceries in a Bay Area parking lot, prompting the White woman to sanctimoniously declare, “And to think that I marched for you.” For this woman, as for Moran, “the civil rights struggle was not about freedom for us all, it was about acquiring a kind of purchase on black life” (Holland, 2012, p. 2). Such emotionally charged attitudes permeate White society, regardless of gender or education level (Jensen, 2005; Roediger, 1999; Sullivan, 2014).

In her piece, Shaked noted that “Meyer was hoisted to the ranks of several other radical women leaders in the arts who [had] recently been fired from their jobs, such as Helen Molesworth, Laura Raicovich, and María Inés Rodríguez” (2018, para. 10). All in this latter group were major museum directors who were pushed out or resigned in 2018: Molesworth from the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in March; Raicovich from the Queens Museum in January; and, also in March, Rodríguez from the Musée d’Art Contemporain in Bordeaux, France. All three were acclaimed, politically engaged administrators who were vocally supported by many artists, critics, and curators. While Shaked does not draw out the implications explicitly, there seemed to be a shift in the wind as regards the tolerance of institutions for highly visible autonomy on the part of women creating politically critical and socially relevant programming, decoupling themselves from a White supremacist consensus. But the fact that non-Black women curators are being targeted should not obscure the fact that they are being targeted for the amplification of BIPOC voices.

While the profile of the CSULB gallery may not be comparable to those of these other institutions, university galleries do have an established track record of sparking controversy (Pickus, 2007). In 1989, a piece in an exhibit at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) faced vitriolic censure from none other than President George H. W. Bush and resulted in flag desecration legislation being brought before the U.S. Congress (Schmidt, 1989). This was Black artist Dread Scott’s What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?, an installation in which a photo of American-flag-draped coffins and another of an American flag being burned in South Korea hung above an actual American flag. This flag lay on the gallery floor, and a viewer would be expected to stand on it to write in a provided guestbook. Scott’s flag piece is recognized as an iconic image of the late 1980s culture wars, appearing a few months before established artists like Karen Finley, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Andres Serrano were made scapegoats for the decimation of federal arts funding.

A year or so before What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?, however, a far more forgettable artwork ignited controversy. This was a painting of the recently deceased progressive reformer Harold Washington, who was Chicago’s first Black mayor, dressed in frilly lingerie. Titled Mirth & Girth, it was removed by police from another SAIC show at the insistence of Black city aldermen, resulting in a successful American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit against the city on behalf of the artist,
David K. Nelson, Jr. It would seem that the outrage of Black viewers, even Black public officials, lacked the moral authority of George H. W. Bush and the legions of scandalized gallery visitors who scrawled their bloodthirsty rage into Dread Scott’s guestbook (captions can still be found on Scott’s website).

Jumping forward in time to December 2015, another non-monumental monument was left on the main quad within the University of Illinois campus, on the highly visible south terrace of the student union. Built on a plywood base, the piece featured wooden planks sawed into points and stabbing through a white sheet over supplicating white plaster hands, all bespattered with red paint. What created the public consternation was the timing of the guerrilla intervention. The piece appeared on the spot where, hours before, a Black student group, Black Students for Revolution, had held a protest in response to a planned event promoted by a so-called Illini White Student Union (IWSU) page on Facebook, now deleted. Both Black students interviewed in the local paper and the administrator(s) of the IWSU page reacted with alarm (Jackson, 2015), but the IWSU predictably went a step further, issuing a screen-captured post claiming that the piece was left by “Black supremacist students” to “threaten and harass White students” (White Illini Student Union, personal communication, December 4, 2015).

As revealed in a public statement made by the School of Art and Design (2015), the piece, titled Monument to Trauma, was a work made for an undergraduate class, in which an assignment had been given to create a site-specific work. From what I came to understand secondhand, the artist was a student who made and placed the piece with no knowledge of the political charge of that space on that day. Ultimately, this inarticulate gesture and the resulting chaos may have as much light to shed on the overlap of art and politics as does the firing of Kimberli Meyer (Figure 1).

A Feast of Feelings

Between the profound and the pathetic, Dread Scott and David Nelson, there seemed to be an intriguing gray area. There was an aura of both trolling and terrorism in regard to the Monument to Trauma, which led me to propose a group show titled White Feelings. It would be the final exhibition at Figure One, a storefront gallery maintained for many years by the University of Illinois in downtown Champaign. But the gallery closed—not due to controversy, but due to state budget cutbacks. The call for proposals for the gallery’s final semester of operations was titled “With a Bang, Not a Whimper.” But, in many senses, a whimper is exactly what our show, their last show, would represent.

In sum, this would be a show about the interaction of race and affect, which would ideally foreground the past and present responsibility of White Americans for the invention and perpetuation of racial ideas, largely through an analytical performance of distancing, repressing, and violently redirecting feelings. The title of the show was derived from “Black lives > White feelings,” a slogan that first appeared in response to the infamous 2014 police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The phrase “White feelings” seemed to take on a life of its own with commentary around a 2015 Supreme Court case regarding affirmative action, in which a young woman named Abigail Fisher was the symbolic plaintiff in a lawsuit against the University of Texas. Fisher is White and claimed that her racial identity was what kept her from gaining admission to the university (Liptak, 2016). She lost the case, and Fisher’s tear-stained face ended up being featured on the postcard for the White Feelings exhibition alongside Robert Rialmo, an officer for the Chicago Police Department.
who in 2015 shot and killed two Black civilians, one unarmed and one wielding an aluminum baseball bat, and later sued the victims’ family for emotional distress following the media blowback from the case (BBC News, 2016; Figure 2).

I used email and social media to solicit friends, friends of friends, acquaintances, and near-strangers, to enlist artists with an interest in taking part in the exhibition. Work by 18 artists was on display when the show opened in June 2016, nine of whom were White men and two of whom were White women. This White overrepresentation was unintentional and undesirable, but artists of color made memorable contributions. In *Pomp and Stabler / Stoic Indulgence, Gratuitous Restraint*
Figure 2. Marc Fischer, *Killed by Police and A Cop Kills a Student* poster display, 2016. Installation view in White Feelings exhibition. Photograph by author, June 8, 2016.
Circumstance, Sonia Rodriguez embroidered a monogrammed lace pillowcase for Abigail Fisher, which, in recognition of Rodriguez’s ancestry, she stuffed with Mexican corn masa and Thai lottery tickets. Filipino–American artist Christopher Santiago created a yard sign, complete with an Astroturf base, which declared in all caps, “I HAVE A BLACK FRIEND.” Colombian-born artist Diana Gabriel’s large print, Making Amends, declares repeatedly, through a haze of geometric lines, “I’m not sorry.” And the one participant in the show who did not identify as an artist, Black Students for Revolution student organizer Sunny Ture, allowed us to project an image of a chalk tag he drew on the same quad where the rally happened and the Monument to Trauma sculpture appeared. The text, scrawled in response to pro-Trump graffiti and situated by a storm drain, announced, “I DRINK WHITE TEARS” (Figure 3).

The work by White artists was strong as well. Emmy Bright’s series of large, cartoonish, unframed prints, White Feelings/White Tears, tells a subtitled story in which “White feelings” turn to “White tears,” then “more White tears,” and yet “more White tears,” and which finally ends in an image without text, where all the tears are now black. Marc Fischer, known internationally for his work under the name Public Collectors, as well as with the collective Temporary Services, contributed two stacks of free posters. One, titled A Cop Kills a Student…, shows Rialmo’s face and describes the killing and the lawsuit, while the other, Killed by Police, features a photo of and text about Bettie Jones, the unarmed neighbor who was accidentally killed when Rialmo shot at the mentally ill bat-wielding teenager, Quintonio LeGrier. In a video performance by E. Aaron Ross, titled A Single Tear, the camera tracks a tear in close-up as it rolls from the artist’s eye down the length of his nude body, until it falls through the air and returns to his eye (Figure 4).

I arranged an event on June 22 to discuss the themes of the show, lining up a panel with two men and one woman of color balancing out two White women and myself. Along with a general discussion of Whiteness as a toxic affect, race scholar Junaid Rana recalled media responses to the O. J. Simpson trial, organizer Kristina Khan reflected on being part of a family full of White cops, Sunny Ture spoke on the extinction of Whiteness as a revolutionary goal, art historian Terri Weissman talked about the 1993 “identity politics” Whitney Biennial, education scholar and former high school teacher Boni Wozolek critiqued public schools for “spiritually lynching” youth of color, and everyone touched on the cultural habit of valuing White feelings over Black lives. The turnout was great, and the crowd spilled out of the small back gallery. My favorite quote was from Ture, the one participant in the show who took part in the panel, as well as the sole African American in both the show and on the panel. His first public utterance of the night was, “I don’t give a fuck about White feelings,” followed with, “So I’m going to talk about White responsibilities.” Questions and comments were thoughtful and touched on concerns, including provocative White activists recklessly endangering their fellow Black protestors during the demonstrations and uprisings in Ferguson, reforming or abolishing the police, and the problematic nature of the White “ally” (Figure 5).

The exhibition garnered a preview by Rebecca Knaur (2016) in Champaign-Urbana and a review by Hiba Ali (2016) in Chicago, where the show traveled for a smaller incarnation at a backyard art space known as The Franklin. Both articles called attention to the White-dominated artist roster, but both writers gave me space to talk about my hopes and intentions for the show, and Knaur also interviewed some of the artists. Both seemed supportive of the sentiments motivating the
project and brought out my interest in not merely restating the entitlement, obliviousness, and narcissism of Whiteness, all of which were explored at the panel on June 22, but also the supposedly unmediated nonaesthetic of “free expression” in which the overall tone of White political speech and White modern art is neutral, impassive, and “civil.” This thoroughly White contrast between unfiltered self-indulgence and calm, measured impartiality was exemplified, I felt, by two online responses to the Monument to Trauma guerrilla piece on the University of Illinois quad in December 2015: the hysterical race-baiting of the Illini White Student Union, and the nonconfrontational calm expressed in the statement issued by the School of Art and Design (Figure).

Campus Trolls and Press Releases

Artist Lauren Woods, who paused her American MONUMENT display in Long Beach to protest the layoff of curator Kimberli Meyer, opened an exhibition titled M(other)land at the University of California, San Diego, early in 2010. The exhibition consisted of photos, film, video, audio, and objects drawn from media representations of Africa and the diaspora. During the run of the
show, the university was hit by a racism scandal, in which students were publicly invited during Black History Month to a “Compton Cookout,” featuring watermelon, “40s,” and a “ghetto chick” dress code for female attendees. In separate incidents, a noose was hung in the university library, and a statue outside that library was fitted with a Klan-style hood (Beil, 2010). An official statement was issued regarding the noose, portraying it as an innocent, uninformed mistake. This reasonable tone of hedging and
avoidance of blame has similarly characterized other official statements issued by universities in response to controversies caused by official structures on campus (Baylor University Commission on Historical Campus Representations, 2020; Gagliano, 2017; Princeton University, 2020; University of Missouri, 2020; Vassiliadis, 2017; Yale University, 2016).

Another noncommittal apology was issued by the University of Illinois’s School of Art and Design in December 2015 in response to the uproar around Monument to Trauma. This apology, however, put the incident in context, referencing a public art project undertaken at the university in 2009 by Indigenous contemporary artist Edgar Heap of Birds. The artist made a series of signs to call attention to the Indigenous history of the land that was appropriated for the university, and many of these signs were, over the course of months, vandalized with racist graffiti. Knowing both

Figure 5. Sonia Rodriguez, Pomp and Circumstance, 2016. Monogrammed lace pillowcase stuffed with Mexican corn masa and Thai lottery tickets. Installation view in White Feelings exhibition. Photograph by author, June 8, 2016.
the context for this art piece, and for its response, requires knowing a bit about the culture of the university.

The official mascot of the University of Illinois is “the Fighting Illini,” named after the French word that designated a Midwestern confederation of Indian nations, and which gave the state its name. As in many places (C. R. King, 2010), the Indian mascot has long been a point of controversy, particularly around the figure of Chief Illiniwek, a White man who paints his face and dresses in fictional native garb to perform at sports games. The casual racism motivating
supporters of “the Chief” is likely a key reason that the word “Illini” was included in the name of the short-lived Illini White Student Union, the Facebook entity who referred to "Monument to Trauma" as expressing “Death to whitey.” The distaste and anger sparked in many others by the racist redface of Illinois sports fans is one of several reasons that Edgar Heap of Birds titled his intervention Beyond the Chief (Heap of Birds, n.d.). Despite being officially retired in 2007, the mascot has not been replaced, however, owing to the inaction of school officials afraid of losing alumni financial support (Gaines, 2020).³

I would tentatively suggest that none of these campus-situated overlaps of antiracist and racist, anticolonialist and pro-colonialist, sanctioned and unsanctioned, tasteful and tasteless, or calm and furious, should be thought of as merely coincidental. If so, this same noncoincidence perhaps informed the firing of Kimberli Meyer, who sought to amplify expressions of Black suffering at the hands of the state, thereby transgressing codes of campus civility more definitively than any “respectable” eugenicist author invited to speak on campus (Valley, 2017). The main factor is that colleges and universities became sites for acts of public racism during the Trump administration and faced the challenge with studious denial. Hate crimes and various forms of public hate speech on campuses, as well as recruiting for avowedly racist and misogynist organizations, were rampant during this period (Bauman, 2018; Kerr, 2018; Quintana, 2017; Schmalz, 2017). Many recall the right-wing tiki-torch campus march in Charlottesville, Virginia, that occurred on August 11, 2017; this was the evening before the aforementioned Unite the Right rally around a public statue of Robert E. Lee, at which one antiracist activist was killed and many more were injured, followed by the chilling “bad people on both sides” presidential response. This hardly seemed like an isolated incident; in fall 2018, my first semester teaching at Appalachian State University, swastikas were scrawled in a campus pedestrian underpass (Newell, 2018), leading to the mural-lined walls being literally whitewashed; that same fall, a gallery at the University of Colorado faced controversy around images of nooses in a student exhibition (Neidringhaus, 2018).

One reason for the blossoming of extroverted racism among college undergraduates, with White men as often the most well-represented group, might be the fact that elementary and secondary school segregation has become so extreme in the United States that many White people arrive at college campuses never having spent time around numerous people of color, especially Black people (Stancil, 2018). And, as can be seen with the unchecked ubiquity of campus sexual assault (Muehlenhard et al., 2017; Yung, 2015), it appears as if a collegiate cocktail of hormones, freedom, and intoxicants (including toxic cultural traditions) sparks something that might also qualify as White feelings in some young White men.

The Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon referred to the White colonizer’s “dissatisfaction” and “overcompensation” (1967/2008, p. 65),⁴ and described in chilling poetic detail the staggering ignorance of White people in regard to the experiences of the Black people they presumptively dominate, and the fear, fascination, and aggressive denial that such ignorance entails. As the writer James Baldwin puts it, “They are, in effect, trapped in a history which they do not understand” (1963/1985, p. 336). But Black people know the White man all too well. Fanon says, “The white man wants the world; he wants it for himself alone. He finds himself predestined master of this world. He enslaves it. An acquisitive relationship is established between the world and him” (1967/2008, p. 97).

Equally in thrall to media representations and other White supremacist folklore, the
White college freshman and the White university administrator seem to choose similar nonwhite objects on which to project violence, in the form of fantasy or anxiety. The continued success of well-funded right-wing campus organizations like Turning Point USA (Stone, 2021) and Campus Reform (Speri, 2021), both of which exist to harass instructors perceived to have left-wing politics, prove the longevity of this approach, which appears now to have shifted to encompass a culture war over K–12 schooling.

**Paint It White**

Being a White man myself, I worked as a freelance and public school art teacher in a highly segregated Midwestern city for 16 years. I facilitated projects with Black and Brown students that encouraged critical reflections on racial injustice in areas such as housing, incarceration, and policing; engaged with Black traditions of hairstyling and homemade instruments; and even simulated the defacement of symbolic structures, as well as projects that ended up brilliantly subverting my initial assumptions and intentions (Stabler, 2020). One project I put together in 2010 was explicitly about curating, as well as refusal (Harney & Moten, 2013), but not explicitly about race. I invited art teachers from around the city to submit student works to an exhibition titled PROM, featuring pieces that would not merit consideration for the annual citywide public school art exhibition, or for high scores in Advanced Placement (AP) art classes. The city art exhibition does not release demographic statistics, and it’s challenging to find racial statistics for the AP Art examination, but a racial gap remains in all areas of AP testing (Jaschik, 2019), and, like many standardized examinations, the tests have a long history of being culturally biased (Au, 2008). Structural barriers such as these allegedly meritocratic settings provide pretexts for highlighting the presumptive invisibility and disavowed ubiquity of White cultural gatekeeping. Albeit obvious, it is worth mentioning that it is harder to talk about Whiteness in a classroom with a majority of White students than it is in a class comprising mainly students who are not White.

To restate, in the current political climate of schooling, including higher education, there are few easy ways to talk about Whiteness in a genuinely public forum. This is a result of our forceful, centuries-long disavowal, perhaps amplified by the Trump presidency, of any shared White history. It is fair to say that many of the earnestly decent middle-class Obama-voter liberals featured in Shannon Sullivan’s narrative about “good white people” (2014), have gone on to become members of diversity-initiative reading groups mulling over Robin DiAngelo’s 2018 bestseller, *White Fragility*, a book that does offer a commendable discussion of White feelings. Regrettably, DiAngelo does not supplement this with a substantive critique of institutions that sustain and insulate White supremacy, her rhetoric of atonement unintentionally, but inevitably, allowing the often-mocked “virtue signaling” and “woke” professionals reading her book to distance themselves from the moral failings of modestly educated small business owners at the core of the Trump base (Sunkara, 2020). The discomfort for which DiAngelo advocates is an affect that may, in many settings, harden White resentment (Robinson, 2021). And, perhaps more importantly, “woke” professionals do not comprise a majority of those sitting on rural school boards at any educational level, where throngs of Americans seem to be decrying the theft of the wages of Whiteness (Roediger, 1999).

Still, artists are harder to censor than books, and showing work by artists critical of racial hegemony can spark a range of feelings. Art may not come across as an accusation as readily as a didactic text—and
even a frank visual accusation may have the ability to short-circuit a viewer’s verbal reflexes. Ultimately, while neither racist assumptions nor works of art require logical arguments, both may be unsettled through discordant juxtapositions. With this in mind, work by White artists may reveal some of their cultural assumptions most readily in dialogue with work by BIPOC artists. Of course, BIPOC artists also need to be studied and celebrated on their own and in other contexts; art that is White property cannot point beyond White supremacy (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018). But if White people are going to be shown a mirror, it may be something we are, effectively and affectively, unable to do for ourselves.

**Zombie Formalism**

Defensive projection is not only a reflex common among White students, administrators, and school board members, but also among the White art critics who have defined the academic discourse of contemporary art. Jean-Michel Basquiat faced contemptuous dismissals in his early career from numerous White critics, many of whom are now revered elders, as bell hooks (1995) mentions in her discussion of the artist (p. 35). A celebrated and prolific painter who never attended art school, and a former graffiti artist who tagged the tongue-in-cheek moniker “Samo,” Basquiat was the most famous neo-expressionist of any race, and perhaps the first Black art-market star (Petty, 2017). As just one example, writing in the *Village Voice* of Basquiat’s work in the 1981 New York/New Wave group show at the Museum of Modern Art’s PS1 space, Peter Schjeldahl condescendingly demurred, “I would not have suspected from Samo’s grotty defacements of my neighborhood the painterly and graphic talents revealed here” (as cited in Petty, 2017, para. 6). But this pales (so to speak) in comparison to Robert Pincus-Witten’s snide 1985 review of Basquiat’s exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery; the critic suggests the artist’s dreadlocks were “pressed into service by way of catalogue justification,” before opining, “All is shot through by the anguished inexpressivity of he-who-would-be-found-out, and a child sacred monster glares about the room in inverse timidity” (p. 103).

Critics have made the case that Basquiat is still understood today less as a critical, visual, and poetic master and more as a depersonalized and exoticized cultural phenomenon: a heart, a hand, or an image, lacking a mind (Petty, 2017; Rodrigues, 2011). To a large degree this should be understood as a tactic (although not a conscious one) to avoid the intensity of feelings aroused by Basquiat (hooks, 1995), both as a figure and as the creator of works that reclaim and repurpose the atavistic bravura appropriations made by “primitivist” White Art Brut figures such as Jean Dubuffet.

A feature that art presents to any dialogue, which can in this context be an advantage, is that works of art are in themselves material facts, as inscrutable as any other physical object, before and beyond conveying messages or inspiring particular responses. bell hooks (1995) encounters the paintings of Basquiat in this affective register of ineffability.

At the opening of the exhibition of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s work at the Whitney Museum in the fall of 1992, I wandered through the crowd talking to folks about the art. I had just one question. It was about emotional responses to the work. I asked, What do you feel looking at Basquiat’s paintings? No one I talked with answered the question. People went off on tangents, said what they liked about Basquiat, recalled meetings, talked generally about the show, but something seemed
to stand in the way, preventing them from spontaneously articulating the feelings the work evoked. If art moves us—touches our spirit—it is not easily forgotten. Images will reappear in our heads against our will. (p. 35)

Discussing art that is not straightforwardly referential, let alone representational, can be challenging. This is especially so when the work may not be made to convey clarity of intention to a significant portion of its audience, but rather to forcefully project the opaque fact of trauma. hooks (1995) goes on to say, “Designed to be a closed door, Basquiat’s work holds no warm welcome for those who approach it with a narrow Eurocentric gaze” (p. 36). Later she contends that “to see and understand these paintings, one must be willing to accept the tragic dimensions of black life” (p. 39), and that “Basquiat journeyed into the heart of whiteness” (p. 43). Working with and through this sort of charged inscrutability is undeniably a task of art education. The respective historical and social positions of the maker and viewer are always relevant to that effort, which can be both confusing and exhilarating, and can allow innumerable points of entry. Hopefully though, with guidance, less options are available for routes of exit. That is to say, thoughtful engagements hopefully may help us as White viewers to bypass some of our deep cultural solipsism in apprehending the racial dimensions within works of art.

Given this ineffability, it’s hard to know what meaning, affective or otherwise, can be attributed to a canceled show like American MONUMENT, a successful White-dominated show like White Feelings, or any of the many gallery shows on race over the past several years at major institutions of higher education, such as Boston University, Michigan State University, and Washington University, not to mention the several solo and group shows at university spaces that lauren woods has taken part in since 2019. Michalinos Zemblyas (2015) characterized race and racism as “technologies of affect” within schools that have both direct and indirect effects on the experiences of students, and while it is certainly the case that race is both a shared historical and present fact, race is not, in and of itself, something that lends itself to a coherent discussion between people of different experiences, let alone to clear pedagogical exposition. Rather, race functions as a fantasy that deflects analysis, similar to Alenka Zupančič’s characterization of sex as a “stumbling block of meaning” (2012, para. 20). To echo Zemblyas’s invocation of technology, the word “function” is key; race does far more than it means.

**Cause and Affect**

Art is one way to get a sense of the charged relationship between feelings and race. Considering “affect” and “race” as productive and reproductive of each other,” Ulla Berg and Ana Ramos-Zayas (2015) spoke of “racialized affect” (p. 655) as a way of understanding structured political relationships that operate through a socially shared set of emotive presuppositions that define in-group and out-group interaction. Underscoring the gender-coded overdetermination of race, as well as trying out the active possibilities of “affect” as a verb, Rachel Gorman (2017) remarked that “the modern (white) subject is initiated in its subjecthood through its capacity to affect, and not to be affected” (p. 311). Perhaps more pointedly, American Afropessimist authors (Hartman, 1997, 2008; Wilderson, 2003), along with antiracist South African scholars of psychoanalysis (Coetzee, 1991; Hook, 2012), use the psychoanalytic idea of the “libidinal economy” to examine how White emotional well-being is maintained through the large-scale exclusion, torment, and decimation of Black
people. These measures operate irrationally, yet transactionally, allowing White people (and, for Afropessimists, other non-Blacks) to retain a sense of innocence, safety, rationality, and full humanity, propped up by Black subjugation and servitude.

In regard to her interaction with the aggrieved White woman in the grocery store parking lot, Sharon Patricia Holland (2012) noted that “[her] inability to serve... represented an intrusion upon the woman’s daily activities” (p. 10). Holland begins her book by linking the charged affect of her quotidian experience to spectacular acts of gendered anti-Black violence (2012, p. 3), providing an anecdotal introduction to what her title names as “the erotic life of racism,” an American history in which sexual assault has been racialized, with White men’s hysterical fears of non-Whites raping White women paperying over the devastating historical reality of White men raping Black and Indigenous women, over the course of generations and centuries, on a vast scale.

Simply put, White aesthetic pleasure is inextricable from White sexual anxiety. As Fanon said in a footnote:

> It is usual to be told in the United States, when one calls for the real freedom of the Negro, “That’s all they’re waiting for, to jump our women.” Since the white man behaves in an offensive manner toward the Negro, he recognizes that in the Negro’s place he would have no mercy on his oppressors. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that he identifies himself with the Negro: white “hot-jazz” orchestras, white blues and spiritual singers, white authors writing novels in which the Negro proclaims his grievances, whites in blackface. (1967/2008, p. 136)

In this regard, the rap music regularly booming from the windows of mostly White or all-White fraternities throughout the country provides a fitting flipside to an Oklahoma fraternity’s racist chant caught on video in 2015, a reminder of the ongoing segregation of Greek life (Rosenberg, 2015). But the problem with campus culture is not just fraternities, nor merely what is legally referred to as “noxious” expression (Miller-Idriss & Friedman, 2018, para. 6). It is the fundamental Whiteness of Western academic expression, an Enlightenment-born “project of taste” in which “aspirations to cultural status would oscillate between the desire for the refined subject or object to exist for itself and the ugly fact that the idea of cleanliness was often driven by a mechanism of exclusion” (Gikandi, 2011, p. 100).

While radical ideas on all topics, including art, are discussed in universities, it’s easy to see why institutions controlled primarily by White and wealthy trustees, donors, regents, and administrators would, despite a smattering of putatively freethinking faculty, remain deeply conservative (Walsh, 2017). As major Western museums came to exist through colonial looting, so university art museums arose as libraries of vicarious experiences, linked to art schools—and eventually student galleries—that strive to train scholars of visual expression (Singerman, 1999). Quoting lauren woods, “The institution’s utter disregard for not only the ‘artwork’ but for the work that is greater than ART is hard to underestimate [sic]” (2018, para. 10). In other words, the artwork, the artist, and the context of their significance are all secondary to the framing authority exercised by cultural and academic institutions.

Within the institutions of the museum, the K–12 school, and the university, the affective potency of art by BIPOC artists effectively remains the property of White artists (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018), not Black artists like Dread Scott, lauren woods, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Supposedly primal and undomesticated emotions linked to non-White
lifeworlds are only provisionally countenanced within the artistic citadel, contradicting as they do the invisibility, ubiquity, and innocence of Whiteness. As the Nigerian–British artist Yinka Shonibare (2021) observed, “Things haven’t changed that much for people of African origin. You’ve had the whole kind of modernist temple, so-called high art, built on the back of the art of Africa. But that’s never really confronted and acknowledged” (para. 14). It may be worth considering that, as with the near-universal appropriation of African diasporic music by White musicians, not only the imagery but the ineffability, the prized emotional kernel animating modern artwork, is owed to a sense of unrestrained erotic authenticity that White people “discovered” via the colonial encounter and intend to keep. In other words, even our most refined aesthetic feelings are stolen property that we as White people refuse to share.

In reflecting on the aforementioned structures of repression—cultural and educational, as well as emotional and political—which overlap and mutually reinforce one another in official art spaces, both in universities and K–12 schools, there are no clear conclusions or simple solutions. The purpose of my reflections here is to offer a context for White cultural backlash, and, for what it’s worth, to encourage teachers, professors, and curators to be strategic but stalwart in presenting the liberatory insights offered by BIPOC artists, with the understanding that these works may provoke forceful pushback rooted in deep anxiety. There are more and more examples every day of artists, teachers, and curators who are building cultural spaces where the erosion of barriers and the delegitimation of violence are both imagined and enacted.

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ENDNOTES

1 *Affect* is a general term that, as a noun, relates to a variety of nonverbal internal experiences, including but not limited to what we commonly describe as “feelings” or “emotions.” I do not intend to unpack the history of the concept or its diverse recent interpretations, often indebted to the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987). But *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth in 2010, offers many worthwhile points of entry.

2 Interestingly, at the Chicago opening of *White Feelings*, these posters actually did yield tears from white gallery visitors who knew Rialmo’s family. In a 2019 fund-raiser for Rialmo’s family, gift certificates for guns were raffle prizes.

3 Whether or not hostility toward Indigenous people should be described as racism has been challenged in the past decade by the concept of settler colonialism, with the long-term occupation of land posited as qualitatively different from the kidnapping and extermination of people common to African slavery and Native genocide. While Jodi A. Byrd (2011) critiqued histories in which “the native peoples of the
Americas are collapsed into slavery” (p. xxv), Tiffany Lethabo King (2020) expressed an opposing concern, that “the overwhelming and (at times) uncritical adoption of settler colonial discourses … displaces conversations of genocide, slavery, and the violent project of making the human (humanism)” (p. 81). Certainly the colonial and postcolonial histories of Indigenous peoples and members of the African diaspora differ in many ways, and their respective experiences of deliberate and oblivious White cruelty may have been and may still be qualitatively different. But it is difficult to know what meaningful difference registers in the acquisitive hindbrain of White desire, wherein presumed proprietary entitlement has historically overwhelmed any recognition of sovereignty over either territories or bodies.

4 The violent culture of young White “incels” that arose during this period helps to underscore the links between race, gender, and sexuality (Kelly, 2020).