

# OUT OF PLACE

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(eds.)

Artists,  
Pedagogy,  
and Purpose

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First published in 2021 by punctum books, Earth, Milky Way.  
<https://punctumbooks.com>

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-004-0 (print)

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-005-7 (ePDF)

DOI: 10.53288/0367.1.00

LCCN: 2021949029

Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Book design: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei

Cover image: Joseph Kunkel, Northern Cheyenne Reservation, Tongue River, July 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

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*spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion*

I.

The major league of global art production and its farm team, higher education, are the aesthetic laundromat of the mechanisms of hegemonic power. Artists and educators provide its biofuel. Our free will and creative output have been recuperated to serve private interests. We see this imprint in cycles of gentrification and displacement; but often we don't acknowledge that when we move to a neighborhood in search of a cheap studio, we are increasing the real estate value of that neighborhood and performing a destabilizing role in residential dynamics. At every level of production of contemporary art—from the school and studio to the exhibition and collection, and across varying levels of engagement, from issues of representation to gentrification to cultural competency within art school curricula and teaching—the field reproduces the same forms of economic, race- and gender-based oppression we find across culture, writ-large. Collectively, these factors cultivate and maintain an illusion that the visual arts are a bastion of free expression, when in fact the small subset of people who have the means and contacts to access its tools must confirm ruling class vanity in order to remain relevant. The perpetuation of this system is only possible by the ignorant participation of those privileged with access and continues to sow distrust amongst those who are materially excluded.

What might it look like for us to veer toward alliance with structurally oppressed and materially excluded communities? What might it look like for us to call our collective critical literacy into action? For hundreds of years, activists and thinkers like Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. DuBois, Audre Lorde, Grace Lee Boggs, bell hooks, Toni Cade Bambara, Beverly Smith, Barbara Smith, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, James Baldwin, and many others have pulled from their intimate knowledge of the

system and decoded it for their children and the rest of us.<sup>1</sup> It is incumbent upon us to stop being ignorant of the mechanisms of these systems and our own roles within them and to join the legions of people who work toward dismantling systemic oppression.

I am an internationally exhibiting artist who serves as a department head at a private art college. Taking intersectional organizing to heart has ushered in a radical reorientation toward love, community, and solidarity in my own life. This reorientation requires me to recognize an abscess of white supremacy at the core of my being, and to perform a loving, repetitive self-surgery. This self-surgery has allowed for my movement away from the apathy and isolation that often accompanies the conventional white, Western, liberal, postmodern, and critique-based orientation of most contemporary art production.

My ongoing study of critical race theory, intersectional feminism, disability studies, and queer theory has changed my understanding of what is possible within my personal and professional engagement. My new practices include community building, engaged pedagogy, intersectional feminist practice, honest communication, and a willingness to decenter myself so I can effectively respond to feedback. My commitment to these methods has impacted the structure of my creative and collaborative art practices, classroom teaching, and department leadership. Across all of these power dynamics and relationships, I take up the work of sharing information and tools with those in my midst, including liberal and progressive white folks and other interested parties so that we may identify and engage forms of structural oppression manifesting in elements of our work as artists and art educators.

I have only come to understand any of this over the last decade. This delay in comprehension has everything to do with the fact that my upbringing in the affluent suburbs of south Florida during the last three decades of the twentieth century taught me to fully embrace bourgeois conventions. By the time I was twelve, I had already been to the major art museums of Europe. Both of my parents hold Ivy League degrees, and aiming to attend Columbia University was a matter of course in the planning of my future. My mother understood the correlation between en-

1 For more on the work of these activists and intellectuals, please see Sojourner Truth "Ain't I Woman?" Speech Delivered at Ohio Women's Rights Convention, May 1851, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ain%27t\\_I\\_a\\_Woman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ain%27t_I_a_Woman); W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1935); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994); Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: SUNY Press, 1981); and James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Cambridge: Beacon Press, 1955).



richment and merit. From a very early age she navigated me toward participation in programs and opportunities that would have an impact on my ability to be competitive in the eyes of top-tier institutions. Her literacy regarding how enrichment yields merit has everything to do with her cultural and class backgrounds and nothing to do with my innate talent as an artist. My father made sure that I developed the proper study habits and oratory and analytical skills to thrive in competitive academic environments. When I lacked aptitude, tutors were hired.

Long before the art fairs legitimized Miami's status as a cultural capital and certainly before any white people I knew understood that gentrification was a euphemism for the displacing mechanics of mercenary capitalism, my parents participated in the real-estate boom that was fueled by an infusion of cartel cash into the local economy. They designed and built five consecutive luxury homes while my mother secured grants to build less-alienating forms of affordable housing. As an Ashkenazi Jew, I was taught to over-identify with the civil rights struggles of the Black folk who provided reproductive labor for my family, like driving me to and from Jewish Community Center summer camp so both of my parents could pursue their chosen careers without sacrificing the care of their children. My mother's feminism was decidedly second wave, which provided me ample cover during the formative stages of my gender-identity but provided no analysis of the persistent racism within the National Organization for Women. Since my late teens, my family's financial situation has changed drastically. This certainly contributed to my ability to form a class analysis at all. I understand both of my parents to be liberal and acutely concerned with the plight of those who are disenfranchised, but the painful trajectory of what we gave up to become white, including an acknowledgement of our own participation in oppressive systems, never entered the conversation until quite recently when I began to share such ideas with them.

## II.

My own unlearning process began slowly around 2012. I was digesting ideas about the formation of subjectivity with its roots in Enlightenment-era notions of the free and autonomous individual and connecting this to the position of the contemporary artist-as-bourgeois-invention.<sup>2</sup> This inquiry coincided with preparations toward a re-

2 See Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 1–24. To synthesize this in relationship to how the Enlightenment project connects to white fragility, white supremacy, and white centrality see Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70. For a resource that addresses racialized codes of discourse, including whiteness and politeness, please see Derald Wing Sue, *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Dif-*

search trip to Afghanistan supported by then-director of Global Initiatives at Creative Time, Laura Raicovich. There I was, about to take a fully funded trip to Afghanistan to research and photograph Soviet infrastructural projects, War Museums, and monuments in Kabul and Herat, yet I was carrying a productive but pressing doubt about my entitlement to do so. It is now clear that however destabilizing this particular psychic and cognitive dissonance was, it was also an important travel companion. I was already in the process of questioning my own positionality as I understood it in relationship to everything I encountered, but every day I spent in Afghanistan delivered a lesson in the inaccuracy of my worldview. For example, one day, I was on Swimming Pool Hill outside of Kabul with my fixer Hikmat Zahid. I was taking pictures of Soviet-era tanks left over from the days of Russian occupation when an Afghan man in traditional attire approached us. My entire body tensed and all I could imagine was that we had unknowingly transgressed a territorial line. I was terrified that he would know I was an American and that something violent would happen. Clutching my camera, I stood next to Hikmat while he translated. The man had seen my camera and wondered if I would take a portrait of him and his dog and then show it to him. This is just one example of hundreds that alerted me to the fact that my worldview was inaccurate, racist, islamophobic, and ignorant, despite my idealized sense of self as curious, open minded, and benevolent.

The first step of many healing modalities is to recognize the problem. Thankfully, before I started teaching full time, I was aware of my ignorance. After Afghanistan, commuting through the pattern violence of systematic disenfranchisement in north Philadelphia to my first full-time teaching job, made it impossible for me to ignore that I was a critical academic working within the walled fortress of a university, aggressively expanding its presence by displacing and neglecting the surrounding community.<sup>3</sup> The routine alerts transmitted over text messages from the university police, describing crime in the vicinity of the school, almost exclusively profiled across race and gender lines. The tone and content of these alerts had much in common with the State Department alerts I received in the months leading up to my trip to Afghanistan. They cast me, the recipient, as a vulnerable object in a barrage of reports, threatening imminent danger at the hands of those continuously profiled.

My embodied experience on the streets of north Philadelphia was similar to my embodied experience in Afghanistan. Anticipating that bad things would happen, my adrenal system was in high gear. While the situations were vastly different, one variable was consistent: my misunderstanding of my position in relationship to it all.

*ficult Dialogues on Race* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2015,) 55–64.

- 3 For an analysis of the fort versus the surround and the role of the critical academic within it, please see Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 25–43.

I was assigned female at birth and my culturally programmed beliefs around scarcity and insecurity chase each other up and down the same, well-worn neural pathway. This neural pathway relies on misinformation to generate fear about potential violence, this fear then generates reactivity and recenters my position as a vulnerable object, even though the entire system is set up to justify its racist practices in the name of protecting me. The interlocking logic of white supremacy, white centrality, and white fragility was automatic and immediate in ways that prevented me from perceiving how the mechanisms of systemic oppression were dictating the narrative of my experience. Simultaneously, my own matrix of privileges prevented me from understanding my actual role within these mechanisms. This pattern was hardwired into my reptilian brain long before my fancy pedigree, international exhibition, and travel experiences. This chain reaction incorrectly signals to my adrenal system that fight or flight is necessary. In order to understand these mechanics, I had to slow down and pay attention so I could learn to redirect the surge of energy generated in my body.

Part of this process was the decision to turn toward and tend to my own racism, internalized sexism, internalized homophobia, internalized ableism, and classism because these belief systems, and the paradoxes they produce, were limiting my growth. In my classroom practice, this meant acknowledging and putting an end to the fact that I struggled to remember the names of cis, femme students; that I tended to provide a disproportionate amount of attention to students of color which is its own form of racism; and that my go-to artist suggestions were predominantly white and male. Reckoning with my identity as an ethnic white person has meant uncovering the violence of erasure of my own heritage by my own family. Jews became white during my lifetime.<sup>4</sup> This violence can be traced from the survival mentality of my first-generation grandparents to the class aspiration of my Ivy-League-educated parents that squarely distanced me from a history of vulnerability and persecution. From here it was easier to accept ruling-class values as though they were my own. In February of 2014, I attended an anti-racist workshop which took up the relationship between the impact of oppressive structures and the messaging produced by white indoctrination.<sup>5</sup> The complicated, nuanced, mess of white indoctrination has to be approached in a way that is multisensory, multidisciplinary, and cross-modal because to the favored class, hegemony is like a cast covering a broken limb. There is a rawness to molting and a sensitivity once the cast gets removed. The trainers introduced information, tools, and practices that helped me reassemble my beliefs and

- 4 For more on Jews and the process of becoming white, see Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 138–70.
- 5 For more on the work of Training for Change, visit <https://www.trainingforchange.org/>.

behaviors as a person with skin, class, and education privilege. This knowledge set also provided support for the ways that my marginal identity markers around ethnicity, gender, disability, and sexual orientation make me vulnerable to anti-Semitism, ableism, transphobia, and homophobia.<sup>6</sup> At the time, what I understood to be a loving, learning environment where I felt seen, heard, and empowered was actually the culture of intersectional feminist practice, engaged pedagogy, and direct education. Clearly, I too could cultivate a sense of belonging in the classes I facilitated.

Because failure and iteration play a critical role in the long-term success of this work, I externalize my own unlearning process through an instructional and leadership style that blends the folk-educational model of the organizer's workshop and the critical orientation of academic methodologies. This combination of storytelling and theory potentiates a weakening of the ideological instruments of white, Western philosophical thought that prevent us from experimenting and learning in public. Imagine leaving behind the disempowering register of paternalistic and hierarchical learning. Imagine leaving behind the fear-mongering of a dominance and subordination paradigm that is bent on punishment and evaluation. Imagine bringing shame out of the shadows so it can no longer be used as a silencing tool especially against those who are discovering new and liberatory ways of being. Imagine releasing the orthodoxy of mastery and its henchmen who tell us that we are not ready to take up this work. Only through intersectional thinking, cultural analysis, and feminist practice will these cultural touchstones and practices of art institutions that reify, maintain, and validate patriarchy, white centrality, and white supremacy be unlearned.

### III.

Indoctrination into the practices of intersectional feminism and engaged pedagogy has both brought on and supported the activation of a previously undeveloped cognition. It has also produced a kind of estrangement that I now understand to be productive. At first, this estrangement tormented me; it felt like a nauseating social freefall. I felt so completely alienated from almost every single white person I encountered, like I had a secret heretical position that was itching to get out. But it also jolted me out of the comfortable numbness that characterizes whiteness. I could now attend to how listless and isolated I had actually become; how much intimacy and connection with others I had lost in the process of being ignorant; and how much I had relied on the framework of hegemonic narratives to explain the world to

<sup>6</sup> This is an important piece of learning because in previous iterations of my thinking, my learning was slowed by a construct that only allowed me to either perceive the complexity of others' or the complexity of myself but never the two together as actors on an interrelated stage of hegemonically produced dynamics and structures.



myself. Now this estrangement is motivation for the care work I take up in my own community. I seek out ways in which my words and actions can be in solidarity with BIPOC who have been asking white people for hundreds of years to work to change our own communities. Because I can finally hear the ignorant clamor of white supremacy housed in the codes of conflict-avoidant, well-meaning, white, progressive utterances, I am perpetually and generatively estranged from the values and beliefs held by members of my family, life-long friends, and colleagues. And I confront it.

But seizing the opportunity to address asymmetrical power dynamics and unarticulated, but deeply felt, ideological and ethical constraints as I encounter them, doesn't just mean "Shame the Racists!"<sup>7</sup> Rather, it often means helping the people with whom I share so much experience by virtue of our skin privilege understand that the institutions to which we belong are grounded in racist ideology: that this applies to formal institutions—such as specific universities or governmental practices—but also to categorical ones—such as education, as well as informal ones, like gender roles; that people with privilege cannot elect to disown their privilege; and that, thankfully, there are ways of existing and moving within the world that contradict racism, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny. Sharing tools and best practices with stuck and confused white people is loving, white work.

Often while leading public programming with audiences of my "peers" or in casual conversation, it is suggested that I am preaching to the converted—that the people who "really need to hear this" are, conveniently, not present in our community, but somewhere "out there." I have come to understand this allegation as a stalling tactic, however, a defensive move made by those who think they understand white supremacy but have not yet examined their own lives. I know when I am actually preaching to the converted because they affirm "the sermon," so to speak. The converted understand that when I describe the insidiousness and ubiquity of what bell hooks has named the cis imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, they respond to my words with a hearty "amen."<sup>8</sup> When I am preaching to the converted, I am with my comrades in arms.

The ways I create large-scale installations and nurture artistic collaborations have been profoundly affected by my unlearning and relearning processes. When I am teaching and serving as department head, I am able to envision different possibilities in the classroom and departmental cultures that I create. Even though my art, teaching, and leadership practices didn't start out as vehicles for anti-racist and intersectional work, they contained the seeds of what I now understand my work to

7 For helpful guidelines on how to lovingly intervene when racist microaggressions occur, see <http://interactioninstitute.org/love-while-challenging-racist-behavior/>.

8 For a contextualized explanation of this term, see bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria, 2004), 17–34.

be. Several years into a new orientation, I understand a few steps to be absolutely vital in the process of doing intersectional work in my communities. I want to stress that these lessons do not emerge from a vacuum. The alienation of white supremacist ideology is antithetical to the community of intersectional Black feminism. Every practice I seek to pass on in this essay is one I have learned from others, from thinkers and activists like those I named early in the essay, to friends, to ancestors, to students.

To lay the groundwork for group ethics, mission, and vision with long term collaborators and colleagues I have invested in the processes of building a common language and understanding. This work required me to listen to the needs, desires, strengths, and deficits of those around me and take the opportunity to learn from them. In order to remain in solidarity with those who bear the brunt of systemic inequity and to compassionately teach the privileged, I have found it necessary to commit to facilitating and participating in complex conversations across differences. This means I must acknowledge microaggressions and overt abuses of power as they occur, confirm solidarity with those who have been harmed, and commit to teaching and learning alternative behaviors. Keeping these practices aligned requires me to ask for feedback, depersonalize it to keep the goblins of white fragility out of it, and work to implement change, period. The processes of following and refining these steps has aided me in my attempts to support a creative and pedagogical community that values the contribution and honors the learning of each person. It also makes these spaces more supportive to me as I continue my work in a disabled and trans body that is more vulnerable to censure and hazing than my cis-hetero, able-bodied counterparts.

The two relationships that beautifully overlap in respect to these outcomes are my ongoing collaboration with my band Peebls and my relationship with my colleagues in the Sculpture Department at Rhode Island School of Design. My formation of and continued engagement with Peebls is possible precisely because I created conditions to support the building of a common language between us. Our process of choosing a language that suits our purposes cultivated an ethical orientation toward collective liberation for all beings that is best understood through the lens of intersectionality. We use our shared understanding of the concepts that form the cosmology of intersectionality to design the terms of our engagement, resolve conflict, and build trust.

This was accomplished at first because I was able to introduce intersectional ideas to them within a focused classroom setting. Because Peebls is composed almost exclusively of my former students, I had to facilitate an open conversation about the asymmetry of power dynamics and disparity of access to resources among us<sup>9</sup>. This

9 Peebls members include Joanna Bellettiere, Maia Chao, Teresa Cervantes, Filipe

has been essential to the development of our relationship. It's not just that power dynamics between faculty and student, mid-career artists and emerging artists are essentially asymmetrical, it's also that systemic oppression affects white and BIPOC members differently, masculine and femme members differently, and cis and trans members differently. Our group acknowledges and interferes with the presence of systemic oppression on behalf of, and alongside with, one another. Because of this commitment, we have established an exalted incarnation of integrative teaching, learning, and creative practices.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV.

My commitment to the craft of teaching and learning including and leading up to the formation of Peebls has birthed a strengths-based perspective that is directly transferable to my leadership role as department head. I'm grateful that when I arrived at RISD, I encountered a school where all manner of student actions and protests had sparked momentum for transforming the foundation of art pedagogy, trends in hiring, and instructional methods, such as group critique.<sup>11</sup> I also encountered a cohort of colleagues who were open to my ideas about how we could transform the department.<sup>12</sup> As a department head supported by my colleagues who were also quite sensitive to the student movement at the college, I could make a wide range of near-immediate transformations to staffing and curriculum, and my leadership style found affinity with the desires of the students I serve.

de Sousa, Jorge Galvan, Maria Leguizamo, Lisi Raskin, Daniel Stern, and Daniel Zentmeyer.

- 10 Since 2015, we have been working on a story album that tells the tale of a group of friends of varying ages and identity markers who meander through their neighborhood learning about queer, Latinx, and Black radical tradition as it applies to the formation of their values, ethics, and community relationships. This is a soundtrack for the movement for collective liberation that models alternative narratives for resolving the conflict resulting from structural oppression. We imagine characters who model an understanding of how their small scale actions impact larger patterns of oppression.
- 11 For more on the student movement at RISD in 2015–16, see “The Room of Silence,” 2016, dir. Eloise Sherrid, in collaboration with co-producers Olivia Stephens, Utē Petit, and Chantal Feitosa, and the organizing efforts of the student group Black Artists and Designers.
- 12 My colleagues who have generated and supported the department's vision at RISD are Funmi Aileru, Taylor Baldwin, Doug Borkman, Teresa Cervantes, Maia Chao, Tanya Crane, Felipe De Sousa, Gail Dodge, Carla Edwards, Amber Hawk Swanson, Tomashi Jackson, Ben Jurgensen, Lane Myer, Victor Pacheco, Laine Rettmer, Heather Rowe, Dean Snyder, and Daniel Zentmeyer.

My practice of engaged pedagogy translated directly into consensus-based leadership, supporting a culture of co-learning among faculty. When it came to reimagining the curriculum of the Sculpture Department at RISD, I described the process of writing a curriculum as that of authoring a living document that would contain space for our inevitable learning within it. I authored a new vision and mission statement, detailing what we as faculty wanted each student to walk away with in terms of knowledge sets; asked for and incorporated student feedback; and based on group-generated knowledge, engineered a three-year track that hit these outcomes. In collaboration with my colleagues, we identified that the deep state of the discipline of sculpture, as we inherited its traditional legacy at the college, centered whiteness and masculinity. We attend to these problems by putting practices into place that cultivate and coordinate an expansive and inclusive read of art history. We employ intersectional methods as we promote and demonstrate critical thinking skills, shop-based skills, and have crafted curricular pathways, making space for research and literacy in a studio-heavy curriculum. Attending to these problems is a formidable task, but, because everyone is participating, I understand that the task is a shared one. And it is an ongoing task, one where each educator in their individual classroom continues the development of their pedagogical models in ways that are different from one another.

Much is possible when a group of faculty sets out to model and practice intersectional feminist leadership; decides not to reproduce a dominance and subordination paradigm; and transparently facilitates activities that aid the formation of loving community. We have tethered the shifts in our department culture to our own practices of continued learning, resource-sharing, loving collegiality, and respect for one another. Our students benefit from seeing that we care about each other and from our commitment to framing multiple perspectives in relationship to one another. If we are committed to empowering students, we must never forget that when we bring examples of artists, theorists, and philosophers who share culture with them, it means that the examples themselves are relevant. And if they believe they are relevant, they can understand that what they make can change the world.

## V.

Challenging the myths we have inherited is a fundamental part of this change, which is why I must acknowledge another truth. It wasn't merit but rather some combination of luck, skin privilege, and access to powerful networks that landed me in the role of department head of Sculpture in the first place. It is incumbent on justice-minded, art educators to continually and candidly audit the origins of their status. We have to ask what structures benefit from a myth of meritocracy and be willing to consider who benefits when artists and professors perform their work under the presumption that they "earned" what access they have. In addition to granting me

access to higher education, as well as the freedom to elect such a precarious and risk-prone professional identity, skin and class privilege absorbs much of the risk that a less well-resourced BIPOC artist faces as they pursue a career in this field.

By design, I land on my feet. That my family has been allowed to accumulate wealth means that they have been able to support me through ups and downs in my professional status and earning capacity. And herein lies the argument for why it is so important that middle class, and upper-middle class, college-educated, white folk take up this work: while our conditioning would have us believe that everything is at stake, we are literally less vulnerable than our BIPOC counterparts. Capitalist white supremacy urges me to pursue my career in a frenzied panic about whether there will be “enough”—enough opportunities, enough money, enough lines on the cv. Further, white supremacy would have me conceal the role it played in my acquisition of an Ivy-League terminal degree, which in turn granted me access to networks of power, which in turn allowed me to develop my cv. White supremacy generates mercenary greed and then provides the rationale for the cover-up. When white artists and art cultural workers oppose hoarding of resources and opportunities, we acknowledge that what’s usually at stake in our careers is not our housing, or an incarcerated family member, or friend whom we’re also supporting, but rather our identities, our egos, our perceptions of ourselves as uniquely successful and brilliant.

I see my overlapping roles as a creative problem solver, educator, and colleague as ones where I can impart useful methods that aid in the process of developing visual and critical awareness of race, gender, disability, and other overlapping intersections. This means explicitly centering and paying homage to the work of indigenous communities, third-world women, Black feminists, womanists, and all of their children through the ages. If I abdicate responsibility for the impact of my actions in these spheres, I essentially fall into practices that collude with hegemonic power and reinscribe inequity. It is imperative that I choose how to comport myself in relationship to the power that is arbitrarily conferred on me. It is imperative that I realize the impact and terms of my artistic inquiry and the subjects I engage. When I teach, I set the stage and create the culture of my classroom. Regardless of who my students are, I have more power than they do. In most cases this means that unless I am self-aware and act ethically, and with kindness, and compassion, I will cause harm. With the work I describe in this essay, I pick up the burden that has already traveled such a distance on the labor of so many queer and trans folk, disabled folk, and BIPOC folk throughout the ages. I call on other white folk to take up our place on the field. We must show our respect and gratitude for the liberation work of those who came before us by picking up the ball and running with artists of all kinds, so that together we can produce new models for pedagogical, intellectual, and artistic production.