# Flip the Script: A Dialogue on the Arts and Race

**David Mura Moderates a Conversation with Tish Jones, Chaun Webster, Guante, and Chava Gabrielle at The Loft Literary Center, February 22, 2015**

## Part 1: Intro to the Conversation

**David Mura:** Before we begin our conversation, I want to make a few preliminary remarks. First, over and over, people talk about the need to talk about race. We say we need more dialogue, but that actually rarely happens.

And so that was one of the reasons why I wanted to have this series. In American today, there are certain beliefs about race which I think actually mitigate against our having these conversations. And I'd just like to introduce of few of these, what I call loops.

Loop one is racial bias can only be proved if someone openly admits they are a racist and have acted in a racially biased way. Since such admissions do not generally occur, racism does not exist. Now, lest you think that this is ridiculous, actually, the Supreme Court actually ruled according to that.

When the Supreme Court was presented with racial disparities in the death penalty in Georgia, which there was clear statistical evidence of, the Supreme Court said the statistics do not prove that. You have to have somebody saying, "I actually discriminated against blacks." So that's one loop.

The second, loop two, is I have not seen or experienced racism. Therefore, racism does not exist. Number three is not talking about race is a sign that racism is no longer present. Talking about race causes problems and tension. Not talking about race is therefore the best way to solve any problems concerning race, which might still exist. If no one talks about race, that proves racism does not exist.

Loop four: silence about race is proof one is not a racist, i.e. I don't even give a thought to considering the world that way. If I talk about race, I might say something which will offend someone, or I'll be charged with being a racist. Therefore, I should never talk about race. If no one talks about race, racism doesn't exist.

Number five: racism is a problem of the past. It is no longer a major factor in American society. Those who bring up charges of racism therefore are living in the past, or viewing the current American society through the lens of the past. Such people will not let the past go. Their inability to let the past go is the source of the vast majority of racial tensions that now exist in American society, which is one of the reasons why—what state is it that's trying to ban?— I think it's Arizona, trying to ban AP History?

**Audience:** Yeah.

**David Mura:** In contrast to this, we have all these statistics. The United States incarcerates more African-Americans than Apartheid South Africa. The race gap in wealth in the United States right now between the median white family and the median black family is 18-fold. That's greater than the black-white wealth gap was in Apartheid South Africa. Just think about that.

On any given day, a black person in Minnesota is more than 20 times more likely to be stopped for a traffic offense than a white person. Evidence of disparities in the state in ratios of arrest rates: African-American to white: 10 to 1, Latino to white: 4 to 1, American Indian to white: 3 to 1. So we have this contrast between this idea that racism doesn't exist and all these racial inequities, which are actually there in statistics that we all know.

So I would offer a contrast to this to the work of artists of color, who are constantly examining facets of race in America and their lives as people of color. Jeff Chang, in his recent book, "Who We Be, The Colorization of America," he examines the issues of race over the last 50 years in terms of cultural changes and artistic production, particularly by artists of color. And here's what he says.

"Here is where artists and those who work and play in the culture enter. They help people to see what cannot yet be seen, hear the unheard, tell the untold. They make change feel not just possible, but inevitable. Every moment of major social change requires a collective leap of imagination. Change presents itself not only in spontaneous and organized expressions of unrest and risk, but in explosions of mass creativity. So those interested in transforming society might assert, cultural change always precedes political change."

So I repeat that. "Cultural change always precedes political change. Put another way, political change is the last manifestation of cultural shifts that have already occurred." And I would say these artists are all involved in those cultural shifts, the shifts where we're preparing for a country where we will no longer have a white majority, sometime around 2040.

Beyond this, as everyone knows, in the last year, we've had an explosion of activist movement around the issues of race, around the shootings of Michael Brown and Tamir Rice, the choking death of Eric Garner, Black Lives Matter, the Million Artist Movement. So I think we're going to look 10, 20 years from now back at this time and this year as a crucial turning point in the ways, at least in certain facets of our society, we talk about and deal with race.

So before we begin formal questions, I just want each of the panelists to tell the audience a little bit about yourself, your art, and your participation in the Twin Cities arts and activist communities, whatever you want to say about yourselves. So we'll start with Tish.

**Tish Jones:** My name is Tish Jones. And I tend to get thrown the ball first on panels.

**David Mura:** That's because you're such a great hitter.

**Tish Jones:** That's very witty. My name is Tish Jones. I started off as a student of the arts scene in the Twin Cities. I'm born and raised here in Minneapolis/Saint Paul, Minnesota. I graduated from Saint Paul Central High School. So I came through CTT. And CTT exposed me really to all of the phenomenal folks that make up this community, or was a catalyst to my meeting those folks.

I began to consider a professional career as an artist—I'm dating myself— 11 years ago. So I've been practicing in the scene locally and nationally for 11 years. And I'm committed to creating a space for other folks. I hope that my work helps other folks, serves as a springboard, or the catalyst, for other folks and their action and their entry point into this work as professionals, or into this work as committed community members, dedicated critical thinkers, et cetera.

**David Mura:** Great.

**Chaun Webster:** Hi, my name is Chaun Webster. And my work is involved in a number of things that I think at the heart question how we legitimately—the question of legitimacy. So I've always been interested in publishing, in books. So that was an easy entry point for me into the work of the word, like writing interesting stories.

Virginia Hamilton, her work was really inspiring to me as a kid. I was just in Yellow Springs and saw her house. And then I started asking questions, in learning about the history of folks like Broadside Press and Third World Press and Third Woman Press, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. These sources of spaces set me on fire, that folks like Audre Lorde called up Barbara Smith and said, "We got to do something about publishing. This shit is crazy," essentially. And they brought folks together to say that, you know what? We need to be publishing the work of women of color, because this work is not coming out like it should.

And so to me, I thought about the work of publishing first as an entry point for thinking about how I'd like to— but this, that is radical work. That's important work. And there also, bookstores were always important to me. And so that's a part of the entry point into thinking that we needed other kinds of spaces to be able to share that work, and that the bookstore as a space is a space to do not just something commercial, that folks like Lewis Michaux and their Harlem bookstore served as a meeting place, as a place where Malcom X went to study, as a place where Nikki Giovanni found her work floating through and finding audiences, and where jazz musicians came to play and people came to love that, that that's important. And so I think of place as political work and space as political work.

And I write some. And I like that. But I've been having interesting conversations about what I think that that means. And we'll probably get more into that. But that's a little bit about me.

**Guante:** Cool. My name's Kyle. My stage name is Guante. I moved here maybe eight years ago. And I moved here because Sha Cage and E.G. Bailey, who some people in the audience may know, signed me to their record label.

And I think that is meaningful to me, because my whole history with hip-hop, with spoken word and slam poetry, and with activism, has always been very relationship-based. Because my own

actual personality—I'm not the type to put myself out there or get involved in things or leave my house ever. But because the people in my life, including family, including friends, including professional acquaintances, consistently have challenged me to do that.

And so where that's lead to today—I'm the communications director of TruArtSpeaks. And I am incredibly grateful to just kind of be Tish's henchman. I don't know. She probably wouldn't put it like that.

[LAUGHTER]

**Guante:** But it's been incredible. We've been running this conference for the last five hours here today. I'm maybe a little fried. I can't speak for Tish. So let me give you the short and sweet stuff. I tour as Guante. I play spoken word shows, largely at colleges, and largely themed spoken word shows, where I'll go and perform for an hour, but then facilitate a conversation based on that performance, usually around the issues of power and identity and positionality, stuff like that.

I'm also a grad student. I'm at the U right now, doing an interdisciplinary master's program around social justice education and mass media and social media stuff, through an arts lens, smashing all those different things together. I'm really interested in poetry as independent media, as a way to communicate or just talk to people. Yeah.

**Chava Gabrielle:** What's up?

[LAUGHTER]

**Chava Gabrielle:** I don't know. That's just how I break the ice. What's up? I don't really know. Hey, I'm Chava. I don't know, I guess we're telling our backstory or whatever. That sounds like what's happening.

I was 13, started writing for myself. All my writing was super politically-charged, but not in relation—I didn't show it to anyone. And then at the same time, I was doing activism work at my junior high. And I started the GSA at my junior high.

And so I was doing these things because I was just board, impatient, and angry. And somebody had to do it. And so I figured I had to. And it wasn't until I went to Central High School and joined the Central Touring Theater that I really merged the two, the art and the activism, at once.

So now people call me, and they're like, "Yo, you want to do something?" And I'm like, "Cool, yeah, I'll do it." And I work with TruArtSpeaks whenever I can. I do sex ed. So I do presentations. Aside from racial work, which I am very involved in and do a lot of work with, I also teach sexual education.

I work at a children's rec center, teaching African diaspora through art and science. I run a writing circle. I drink lots of coffee and have a lot of conversations. And that's about what I do.

**David Mura:** OK, great. Thank you.

## Part 2: Chaun Webster on Accessibility and an Open Letter to the Walker

**David Mura:** One of the issues that's always here in the arts is the issue of accessibility, partially, I think, because it's so cold here. But we had over, today, 300 people said they were coming here on Facebook, which would have been beyond the capacity, right?

And so the question came up. If that happened, should it just be first come, first seated? And then what would happen then if the audience that was seated was mainly white and older, since this was a conference for young people? And then how would we actually do this, deal with that issue?

And so I'll talk a little bit about how decided. But we didn't have the overflow, so we don't have to deal with it. But one of the reasons why I wanted Chaun on the panel, along with many things that he's done, is he started raising the issue of what happened when the Walker Art Center brought the director Steve McQueen and the film "12 Years a Slave" here.

So I'm just going to ask Chaun to just talk about the issues that came out of that, how the issues arose with that, what happened, to give a little brief history, and then talk about what sort of inclusions or lessons or principles that came out for him out of the work with that, and dealing with issues of accessibility in relationship to the Walker Art Center.

**Chaun Webster:** Mhm. So I think in terms of when I first initially heard that the Walker was showing that film that there was already concern.

[LAUGHTER]

**Chaun Webster:** So I'll just say that. Then, knowing that the Walker was showing the film, and it was sold out, and that there wasn't much even lead time prior to when it was up, that the film was sold out, and there was going to be a conversation surrounding Steve McQueen, and I think that all of these things brought a lot of questions to place surrounding when you're showing a film like that, that our performances aren't like something that happens inside a silo or a vacuum, and that the audience plays an instrumental role, I think, in the ways in which narratives are constructed.

And so with that film particularly, I was really interested in what it is that captures the white imagination surrounding the film, seeing as that's a lot of who that audience was going to be, and the ways in which there's no sense of—I mean, folks get caught up in their fantasies surrounding black pain. That gets imbedded in the way in which it becomes eroticized in ways. It's capitalized off of.

And so that was a lot. I had issues with that. I had issues that we see so many disparities here already, as it exists, with regard to whether it be income or education, or any number of other issues, and that there was no thought even, it seemed, to engage this as a moment to have conversations about where we are, that that's rooted in a history, and that those whose ancestors were a part of that history would largely not be present.

And so oftentimes I think that black art is acceptable where black bodies are not, right? And so that was a part of the question surrounding "12 Years a Slave," right? I think that was a part of questions that I've had with a number of things, like not just like that, right?

I'll say that my intentions—and I'll speak for my intentions, because it was a group that wrote the letter. But my intentions with regard to the letter was not to request the Walker to be a better Walker. So I'll be clear to say that I don't know necessarily that I—and I'll be clearer, in that I don't think institutions like the Walker are interested in doing anything but what they're doing, which I think is informed by white supremacy, which I think is informed by a neoliberal form of capitalism, which I think is informed by any range of oppressive systems that we interact with on an everyday basis. And I think they're quite invested in that.

And so the letter to me was less about saying "Master, will you please let us in" as much as it was about exposing contradictions so that communities that I connect with can have a conversation about how we need to start being about the business of building alternatives. Because as long as we are only invested in being the exceptional negroes or brown or indigenous folk that are inside these spaces, that can show our artwork, and can do our fancy dance, and can have our bigger office, our studio, I think that these systems remain pretty much intact.

And I'm not invested in that. I think that that's a part of the game of the grant hustle. I think that's a part of the game of what folks from INCITE!, through South End Press, identified as the nonprofit industrial complex, and that the revolution will not be funded, which does not mean that I am not without my contradictions, right? Because I'm not necessarily a purist, right? I'll write a grant, right? But I think that in regards to—and I'll take the money, right?

[LAUGHTER]

**Chaun Webster:** Right? But I think that to the point that we think that writing the grant and taking the money is the only way that we can go about doing the work is a problem. Right? So then when we get to the conversation of "Master, will you let me in," I think that that becomes this impulse, right? There's this impulse surrounding, "Can I be the one?" Because it's a Highlander fucking game. And there can only be one, you know?

[LAUGHTER]

**Chaun Webster:** And maybe two, right? And if it's a black person, it's got to be a man, you know? Because black women don't really exist, right? And black trans folk don't exist, right? Black queer folk don't exist, right? So it's a pretty particular kind of person of color and body that needs to be embedded in being the exceptional one even in the first fucking place.

So I think that if we're asking the question of, one, what the Walker was doing, the Walker was doing what the Walker is doing. For me, it was like, how do we utilize that as a stage for engaging and pushing the conversation to the left?

Lessons learned are that black folks continue to take advantage of that, and get their exceptionalism on from that, right? Because what ends up happening is that, to be real, project-based positions are created from that, right? And folks at the Walker and other places, when you have these sorts of conversations, I think that their game plan is then, "Oh, shit, we need to get a brown or black person in quick. What project do we got on a table?" And so they create project-based positions that folks get hired for, right?

And I ain't got beef with folks getting their bread, right? I have no beef with that. But to the end that that becomes a representation of them doing something, I got real issues with that, right? To the end that that becomes a part of the creation and sustaining of this narrative that there's some equity—that's why I can't with the language of diversity. I can't get with that language.

Just because black folk or brown folk are present don't mean that their issues are represented, you know? Just because there is a white racial minority in the United States does not mean that the issues of power have changed. South Africa was a white minority. Power is the question. And I think that that's the game plan. So that's the lesson learned. And I'll try to be succinct then to move on. So that was a lesson learned, that project-based, it's a project-based position. When the project's done, you're done.

[LAUGHTER]

**Chaun Webster:** I don't know.

[LAUGHTER]

**Chaun Webster:** But sometimes we play games. Then some folks hold up positions like that. There can be ways in which we perform and understand that that position in something is like, "I'm in it, right?" like "I'm in." But it's like, really? Yeah, that's a lesson learned. So I don't know.

**David Mura:** Yeah, thanks Chaun. Just a footnote for those of you who are not familiar, Chaun and a group of others wrote on Opine Season and also directly, I think, to the Walker, right? An open letter to the Walker.

**Chaun Webster:** Yeah.

**David Mura:** And then the Walker tried to rebound with— and initially they said, "Well, we can't possible have a second screening." But it actually was possible.

**Chaun Webster:** They didn't need to come to us to do the second screening.

[LAUGHTER]

But to the end, that's important though, right? They didn't come to us to do the second screening. So it's like who is the head negro in charge that we go to to have the conversation?

So then when you go to, whether it be when you go to the person that you defer to surrounding race talk, race talk being shorthand for black talk— because we have this essentialism surrounding how we negotiate race in that conversation. So then when you do that though, you rip out any chance of there being any nuance in the conversation. It's not a conversation, it's a management of anything that could potentially come out of it.

So to me, I wasn't feeling that screening. It happened. And so I'm like— I don't know that I would like that as a victory. I don't know that I would. And that's [?all?].

## Part 3: Tish Jones on Button Poetry and TruArtSpeaks

**David Mura:** In a related issue, there were a series of issues and conversations that happened when the spoken word organization Button Poetry began to move into the Twin Cities. And Tish and TruArtSpeaks had some issues with that. So this is a related issue about accessibility, about issues of power. So I'm going to ask Tish to just talk about the background to that, and your reactions to it and what you feel are the lessons, or principles, or issues we need to think about coming out of that issue.

**Tish Jones:** I want to give Button Poetry their due diligence that some of the folks who put in work at Button Poetry are Saint Paul residents and Minneapolis residents. So it isn't necessarily that they were outsiders that came into this space.

It is that Button Poetry is known primarily for the work that they do online, showcasing slam poetry. So they go to events and do the thing and upload it to YouTube. And so part of the qualm at the time was that Button had been in relationship with this community for a very, very long time. Button had ties to some of the folks that gave us, at this table, our start. They also assisted Button in their upbringing. Their management, or their admin is very young.

So part of what it was was that erasure, which happens a lot when you're talking about issues of white supremacy and white privilege and people of color in community. So part of the issue on our end was an erasure of folks in this town who had also extended a hand, and an opportunity, and an ask for a collaboration. So there was an open invitation to work together on initiatives and to support one another.

And instead of making that decision, Button Poetry chose to do their thing independent. And the conversation never ended. So it was sort of a— it's interesting because there's not really a politically correct way to give a background of this story. So that's also something I have to say.

I'm trying to find— I'm trying to sift through the words— how do you say, someone back-doored you, and hit your partners up, like community partner.

**Chaun Webster:** I can say it.

[LAUGHTER]

**Tish Jones:** So what it was was literally, like the timetable is, "Hey, we're thinking about doing this thing." "Hey, don't do that thing. Let's partner, let's work together because together we can be really effective. And this is some of the work that we're already doing with the population that you desire to serve. And we're already trained. You won't need to go train other people to figure out how work with cross-cultural differences."

But that's not the decision that their administration went with. And that's also not what they communicated. And then there was a lot of— the way we first found out that they had decided to move forward with the initiative was through our partners, who they solicited to work with them, our partners.

So that felt like ew, you know? But then so is an erasure of years and years and years of this work though, as well, and then years and years and years of partnerships as well. So like Central Touring Theater, The Minnesota Spoken Word Association— sort of how TruArtSpeaks was gifted with our biggest program, which is Be Heard was through a cultural practice.

E.G. Bailey, Sha Cage, Melissa Borgmann, and Dudley Voigt, they were the folks who got the buzz around really holding down the youth spoken word movement in the Twin Cities a while ago with the help of Diego Vazquez Jr., Carolyn Holbrook, and a handful of other folks. These folks were like, "Yo, this wonderful opportunity is happening and let's make it happen."

And for years, those four individuals maintained it. When they no longer were running the program, it was a baton passing thing that happened. It was like, "OK, here are the tools, here are the connections, here are the resources. This is how we want this program to continue to exist in our community. Let us know what you need."

And everybody shows up and gives back. So it was also an erasure of all of that because of the power that Button has. So it's also about those sorts of dynamics. Again, it's not really a political way to say this, but the administrative staff at Button Poetry is white, all white. Button Poetry is mega-palatable. TruArtSpeaks is not.

[LAUGHTER]

Or maybe they are. It's interesting because I was with a couple of my mentors a couple weeks ago, a 40-year-old white guy and a 40-year-old black guy. And the 40-year-old black guy's like, "I can't ask for money. He has to ask for money. If I go and ask somebody for money, I'm begging for it. If he goes and asks somebody for money, he's telling them what they need to invest in."

That's the Button Poetry shit, really. We've been doing this work. So it was part of that. It was also the misappropriation of people's images. That was a really wack aspect of what had

happened with Button Poetry. They used a teaching artist's images in this field and portrayed him as a student, and did so without his permission. And he was the face, the poster boy for their program. And that was really problematic.

But then also, really, it was symbolic. It was symbolic with things that happened in this community. It was symbolic of a big fish eat little fish. "And we're a palatable organization and we have all this money and yeah, you've been doing it for a long time. We really like your model. We're going to look at it, figure out how to do it, and do it because we can get the bread for it, and bye." And we were like, "ah, that's wack."

[LAUGHTER]

And I also think it was really important in the thing that didn't come up in the conversation was before we decided, in terms of our practice, internally it's like a unilateral distribution of power. We have arts organizing and an activism background, so we don't really do the whole totalitarian dictator E.D. thing. Like it's a thing, but it's not a thing.

We talk, we sit at a table together and we make decisions together as a collective because we believe in each other and we really are a family, in terms of the way that we make choices. So saying that, we also didn't do anything before we spoke to the young people we work with. We didn't write a letter, we didn't send a tweet, we didn't call a meeting, we didn't make a phone call, or respond to emails from our partners until we spoke to the young people.

We said, "Hey, here's what's cracking. This is the end goal of—literally, just a timeline. Here's a timeline. We're going to put in on a wall. This is what has happened. Here's potentially what could happen, like benefits. This is what could be the opportunity of this thing. And this is also what could be a consequence of this thing. What's your—"

We went through Liz Lerman's critical response, which we adapted from Minneapolis Public Schools. We went through that shit. So we were like, "Boom. Look at this thing. What do you notice? How does that make you feel? What questions do you want to ask? What does it remind you of? Speculate the intent." It was a teachable moment. And we used it as a teachable moment. And that's literally what happened. We called a meeting with the youth.

And the youth were like— it was two, maybe three hours of conversation and questions and feelings and emotions. And the last thing that they said was, "We got to do something about this."

[LAUGHTER]

And they told us what to do. And there was some maneuvering because we also had to make sure that we kept them safe. So part of the community dialogue that we had, we never put the youth on front street. The questions and the concerns that were the youth's, we never put them in a place where they could be attacked in that meeting. So we took a lot of heat and weight also advocating for the young people that we work with, and putting their concerns first.

Had they said, "Let's make it pop," then maybe I wouldn't be on this panel right now. But that's not what the young peoples' authentic and honest and natural response was to that. They too saw all of the invisibility being rendered. They too saw all of the marginalization being rendered, the dominant narrative being perpetuated at home.

**David Mura:** We're going to open up for questions near the end. But Dennis, did you want to say anything? Because you raised your hand.

**Audience:** More of a moment of moral support for Tish.

**David Mura:** OK. Guante or Chava, do you want to pick up on any of this, what either Tish or Chaun have talked about?

**Chava Gabrielle:** I think we are all good.

## Part 4: Guante on his Opine Season Editorials, Arts and Activism

**David Mura:** All right. This question is for Guante, who has a series of just wonderful editorials in Opine Season. And he wrote one on what the arts activist scene in Twin Cities could look like. So Guante, could you just elaborate on some of the ideas in that piece? And then I'd like all of you to address that question.

**Guante:** So it's funny. When you asked that question or when you sent me that question, I revisited the piece and I noticed things about where I was at, and where I'm at now, and how much credit I gave to a lot of people in this room. It probably goes without saying, but we should say, there's so much brilliance in this room right now in terms of elders, in terms of youth, in terms of our peers. And I'm really endlessly appreciative of that living in this community and being able to bounce ideas off of each other and hear people.

So that's all to say I looked at this list of things I've been writing about. What could things look like? And I looked through it, and now I'll make observation about these things. One is more all-ages shows, more all-ages venues. I'm a very practical thinkers and this is a list of practical things. For me, that's one of the biggest ones.

Particularly coming from the hip hop community, I think hip hop artists can do a better job of thinking outside the box. Maybe this is easier for theater folks and spoken word, but I think hip hop artists, we don't have to play night clubs. We can play theaters, we can play coffee shops, we can play different types of spaces in order to make those shows all ages.

I'm talking about stuff like the intentional sharing of access and resources, in terms of if you know about a grant, and a bunch of other people don't know about it, let them know and how both sets of conversations can happen. More of organic partnerships between artists and activist organizations, in terms of not just being like, "Hey, come to my fundraiser and play and do a

poem." But how can we really think about our approach to this work and how can we integrate those things, and learn from each other, et cetera.

More intentional signal boosting. I'm a big social media presence, for better or worse. What I mean by that is like a lot of times an artist who may have 100,000 Twitter followers will re-tweet an activist organization or a movement or an event that maybe has 300 Twitter followers. That's a cool thing. I just think it could be more intentional where it's not just like I happen to see something, so I happen to re-tweet it.

But it's, again, building more relationships between artist and activist organizations. I think of when Toki Wright goes to the Minnesota Voices for Racial Justice racial justice report card presentation last week, 7,000 extra people then know about what's happening. They could potentially plug in what's happening. Again, a very, very practical thing.

The other thing I noticed was reimagining performance space so it's not just, "I'm going to stand at the front of this big room, and I'm going to be brilliant, and everyone's going to clap. And we're all going to go home." But how can performance space not just be space for performance, but be a place where we can all contribute to that. I think spoken word is a great example of how that can work when it works.

But again looking at all these things, I notice just how individual they are and how individual artists, or individual organizations are making choices to operate differently as opposed to reimagining the larger structures of how these things are happening and the space in which they're happening. Again, to play off of a lot of what Chaun was talking about, how can we go further than these things that we can do as individuals.

Also, I agree with all these things. But I don't think any of them by themselves, or maybe even all of them together are enough to redistribute power and resources and wealth. The metaphor I keep coming back to is, particularly as a touring artist, I travel a lot and I play shows. And I know that when I play shows and facilitate conversations, I know that that is good work. I fucking dig myself up.

But I guess the metaphor is we're always talking about planting seeds as artists. I can skip around the country and plant seeds like Johnny Appleseed. The thing I've been thinking about is the difference between planting wildflowers and planting crops. It's very easy as an artist to just throw seeds out and see what kind of flowers come up. But can there be more intentionality in terms of how can we really plant crops that can sustain communities and that can radically change how things are. And I don't have answers to that and that's part of why I'm excited about this event.

The other thing I notice is The Walker "12 Years a Slave" thing, The Ordway and "Ms. Saigon" thing, The MPR, The Current State of Hip Hop thing, the Button Poetry TruArtSpeaks thing, those are the hooks we're hanging this conversation on. And they're all kind of crisis-based, short-term things. And how can we move beyond that frame of it too.

**David Mura:** To just open up that question about art activism and all the issues, any of you want to chime in on that? What should be done? Well, let me pause there. I am somebody at The Walker. And there is a whole— if you go to the open letter on Opine Season, you'll follow a whole line of arguments that go down there. And some of them just blew my mind. In defense of the Walker, they said, "Well, even I feel uncomfortable with The Walker," as if that was a good thing about the Walker.

[LAUGHTER]

But I think these issues of power, how do we actually go from on the ground and among us artists, how do we deal with it. But also institutions are struggling with us. And I wrote an editorial on Opine Season just, do we need these huge institutions. Because if you look at the amount of money that the Guthrie consumes, or the Minnesota Orchestra consumes, or The Walker consumes, and who goes to these institutions, as opposed to do we need— one of the things I think structurally— do we need a lot of smaller community-based organizations?

To say that The Walker is going to reach, say, the Somali community, that's ridiculous. Go to people in the Somali community and fund them rather than fund The Walker for a program to bring the Somali community to go to The Walker. So that would be one policy change, I would say, is just have many more smaller grants to smaller community-based organizations.

Also geographically, have institutions based throughout the city in a more equitable fashion. But whatever suggestions do you think? Because you have some policy people and grant makers here in the audience. So this is your chance to tell them what you think should be done.

## Part 5: Tish Jones and Chaun Webster on Funding Arts and Activism

**Tish Jones:** I think there might be something that other— probably not Chaun, but Guante might touch on to you grant folks. I'm really interested in— a mentor of mine who I'm claiming him as my mentor right now in this moment, right now. So I hope you see this, Monty. His brother works for an organization in D.C. called Words Beats & Life. And he and I were having a conversation. He put me on a small paradigm shift.

He's like, "You know, Tish, my work right now—" His work right now is about empowering the folks in his community. So he's like, "When you're a philanthropist, that $2 that you're giving to Words Beats & Life so that we can do some hip hop programming, so that we can do a mural tour on bicycles with the folks in D.C., these brown folks in D.C. pay them to do the mural, go on a bicycle tour, yadda, yadda, yadda, and so forth and all the wonderful programming that he's doing.

"The $2 that you're giving me so that you can't get on the bus to go kick it with your homies, that is a philanthropic move, bro. You are sustaining this organization, you're sustaining life in this community, you're sustaining people of color in this community." And we need to re-invest in

ourselves. So grants are wonderful and great. And how can we empower ourselves? We have got to power ourselves.

TruArtSpeak, I think, is power, youth, voice. Power, youth, voice— how can we power ourselves in what we're trying to do? How can we show up for ourselves? How can we invest in ourselves? And can we not see that dollar as an investment in ourselves, or that $10? Whatever it is, whatever the amount is, it matters. It matters.

And specifically when you're inside of these sorts of institutions as an E.D. of a non-profit, no, you're $2 goes so far. And it goes so far because it's the only flex money we get. That's the flex money that we get. That's the money where it's unattached to anything. It's not for this program, it's not for this project. It's for whatever might come up.

First of all, it's a side note but it matters. Not to throw you under the bus, Guante. Guante brought doughnuts this morning. And we're like, no, we don't serve— we're trying not to serve not healthy food that's—I don't know.

[LAUGHTER]

But it's there. So it's there. It's just like none of the young people get any doughnuts. We gave one doughnut to a young person because we're soft like that. But it was whatever. We pay for food. We order from Quang Deli. That's a family-owned Vietnamese spot. It's right in the middle of where we frequent. And when we came in, he was like, "Yo Tish, it's you!" It's like, "Yeah, it me." "Oh, I thought your name was familiar." "Yeah, OK."

We're investing in ourselves and our community. We're powering our entire community and folks are able to eat good. But that's like— "Thank you. I'm glad you all liked it. Word.

[LAUGHTER]

But the joy in this is like the grant might not have paid for that. In fact, a grant did not pay for that.

[LAUGHTER]

That's important to think about though. You know what I'm saying? That's important. That's what we need. We need more of us investing in ourselves so that the regular— because I'm like, I want some big picture. Yo, you know, first of all, we serve predominantly young people of color who may also be living in food deserts, who may have had their after-school joints cut, which may mean that they don't get that meal. If they don't get that after-school meal that they then count on for two years now that the joint's cut off. That's a real thing.

So your $2 goes a long way. So that's what I'm thinking about. And definitely restructuring the way that these grants are. So pushing back— we do also need to push back and speak up for ourselves inside of these institutions about what we need and how things need to be re-imagined. And our job, we need to be talking to admin. We need to be doing that. We need to be giving

feedback. We need to be showing up at these grant panels and showing up. That's part of what we need to do.

However, this is hundreds and hundreds of years old. These institutions are also indoctrinated into white supremacy, heteronormativity, and da, da, da, da, da. I think we can create those cultural shifts a little bit faster than we can move these large institutions. I kind of want to make every pledge. What are you going to do? No, I'm not going to do that. That's the thing, we have to decide to do something different now.

**Chaun Webster:** And to that point, which I think is beautifully stated, those practices— I give big ups to what you're talking about in regards to the cultural practices that need to be— that we need to start engaging in that. From the where it is that you're getting your coffee from, to the ways in which we're so quick in regards to what it is we want as books, or other things, i.e. Amazon, which might be building a distribution center in Saint Paul so that you can get it same day, which is already going on in Manhattan, which doesn't just affect book culture.

But in regards to those sorts of things, we gotta change practices. We've got to change practices that we can change now. Beyond that though, in the larger sense, which is also something that I'm very interested in and it's not an either/or, we have to start thinking about—these things come back to, these questions of power come back to questions of land to me. Whose land we on anyway? These questions come back to questions of labor. The enslaved African labor that build capitalism, and other labor that is also sustaining it now, other exploited labor.

So the question in regard to even what stays around and why we see, for example, so many bookstores closing, why we see so much of like the phenomenon of gentrification. We've got to start thinking about ways in which we build infrastructure. When Audrey Lorde called up Barbara Smith saying, "We've got to do something about publishing," she was saying, we've got to do something about infrastructure. Women of color are being erased from the record. We have to do something in the infrastructure so that that is not continuing to happen.

And that work is phenomenal work. It is phenomenal work that we learn lessons from and continue to need to learn lessons from. Kitchen Table Women of Color Press didn't last long. I think we need to explore models like that though, and what was it and why was it that they were doing what they were doing. We're in a literary town, but in this literary town where we have so many bookstores and publishers and all these other spaces that are out here that are doing the work of literature, why is it that we are so few, in terms of the folks of color and the indigenous folks that are represented in those spaces?

I think that, to me, moving beyond that means that we have to stop looking to those places to do what they haven’t' been doing in the first place. So that's a question of legitimacy. Does that mean then that I'm seeking legitimacy from this set standard of criteria that says you are now a literary artist? You are now a writer now that you have said things in your knapsack. Which I'm not hating on, right? MFA's are great. All that stuff is great. You got this grant, you got this fellowship, those things are great and it's not just something that siloed in the literary arts, but I'm speaking to what I know.

If we say that those things then legitimate it, do we foreclose possibilities in other places? Octavia Butler was working in a potato chip factory. Henry Dumas didn't have an agent. Toni Morrison went looking for him. I'm just saying how are we building the places that are operating to do that work now? And I don't know that there's as much desire to do that because of the fact that we're so stuck in wanting to hospice dying systems.

**David Mura:** I think also there's a parallel between the women of Kitchen Table not being here any longer and this community would never let The Walker go under. It would never let the Guthrie go under, just like the government would never let the big banks go under. But the government will let all sorts of people starve, be thrown out of their houses. And that same thing, that same sort of logic actually happens in the arts.

20 years ago, along with a bunch of other Asian-Americans, we started the Asian-American Renaissance, which actually fostered a lot of Asian-American arts in this community. But that organization eventually died. And I feel like if the funding community was really committed to diversity, they just simply wouldn't have let the organization die.

**Tish Jones:** People make this stuff up though. People make these things. I do think as individuals we do need to take some of this responsibility. Because one of the first things when you're going to meet with a funder is you have to recognize that they're people. "They're people, Tish. You've got to maintain that relationship, Tish. You've got to say thank you, call them on their birthday, do this and do that."

[LAUGHTER]

For real. That's real life and so are we. We are people. We power those major institutions as well. And if they need to go down, then let us take them down. And if they need to be uplifted, then we need to lift them up. Because when it all boils down to it, it's a set of people. And there is this historical context too. If we're going to really have a cultural shift, we have to start seeing ourselves as— me too, like Chaun Webster is an institution.

We have to start seeing ourselves as that powerful if we're really going to enact some sort of change in this community. We have to do that.

## Part 6: Chava Gabrielle and Tish Jones on Bringing Youth into Arts and Activism

**David Mura:** I want to move on to new questions [?directed at?] Chava. I was yesterday at an event where Claudia Rankine and Marlon James were. And it was for teachers. And it was interesting because I was talking to teachers about what happened in various high schools in Minneapolis after the decision of Darren Wilson where he was not indicted.

And in some schools, they had conversations. And in some schools, they were actually told not to have conversations. In some schools, students just sat in the hall. There were no conversations.

In one school, there were conversations but the teacher said a student came into her class and was so mad with the way the teacher held the conversation about the issues coming out of Ferguson that the kid was just fuming.

So I guess, Chava, I want to know from your perspective, both what can be done to bring more young people into the arts and into activism? And then— and this is a really large questions— what is your perception of where young people are about these issues?

**Chava Gabrielle:** Well first of all, I'd say we don't really need to bring young people into the arts. Young people are already in the arts. Young people are making art. You walk into a junior high classroom and you ask the kids, " how many of you guys write every day, or draw something, or paint, or whatever?" Ask them how many of them do some sort art form, I'd bet you that at least 90% of that class will have their hand up.

The problem is bring them a place or a space where they can do their art and feel safe and comfortable. A place where they know they can share it and they'll get real critical feedback. And it's not just feedback like, "Yeah, I support you. And that's good." But like real feedback that's going to help them grow and develop as artists.

Touching on what I was going to say in the last question is we need to change the way we look at young people. We need to stop using young people as props in spaces. We need to stop using young people as these people that they're sitting here, this is their art. Aren't they so special? OK, now you guys can go into the corner. Your opinion doesn't matter.

When we have conversations about race, and about anything in activism and social justice work, I can promise you that the young people, they have opinions. And their opinions aren't just, "I think it's bad," which is a lot of times what I feel like adults often are expecting to hear from a young person. There's a lot of low expectations of cognitive thinking skills and critical thinking skills, when really what it is is a lack of vocabulary, or a lack of access, or a lack of adults who they feel like will actually listen to them when they speak.

Or a lack of peers who they feel like they could go to that will bond with them, or who will connect with them on this. Or a lack of peers who they can look up to as artists. Because I feel like peer education is a huge format. That's how I got involved in a lot of the work I do is because other people who were my age were teaching me what I was doing.

Allowing young people into the spaces where they're making the decisions about what they're going to be talking about, whether or not they're going to have these conversations, who's going to be facilitating these conversations. Anybody else can pick up on this too because I'm just hitting a lot of feelings right now.

**David Mura:** What are those feelings? Speak to your feelings.

[LAUGHTER]

**Chava Gabrielle:** I guess for me, the first time I ever slammed I was 15 years old. And I walk into this slam, and it was an 18 plus show. And I lied to everyone and told them I was 18.

[LAUGHTER]

Then after everyone figure out that I definitely wasn't 18, it turned from this sense of like wow, you're actually a credible artist to oohh, look at the baby. She's so cute on stage. And we can't look at young people like that. Young people aren't babies. They're not cute, they're not children. Young people are the future, literally. Young people have disposable income. They have access. They have free time.

Young people literally are what is going to cause this movement to happen. Because there is nothing to lose. There is literally nothing for these young people to lose right now. But because people don't give them trust or power, they don't have a chance to not lose it and go after what really needs to happen.

**Tish Jones:** Can I just jump in? So some of the young people today, just to doubling back to the question and thinking the verdict and young people's role in the movement, and expression, et cetera, unguided, uninstructed, some of the young people who were in this building today were also part of individual movements where there were school walk-outs. "No indictment, we ain't working." "No indictment, we can't talk about it, well, we ain't working." "No indictment, we can't talk about it, we ain't working, and we leaving."

[LAUGHTER]

And nobody told them to do that. They called and asked for support, some of them called. We were like, "it's cool. You good. Come to the march. You good." But it was all their own thinking. So I love that you're saying, "Quit underestimating us." Because we should not underestimate the folks. They're present and privy to these conversations just like we are, and capable of making decisions and self-regulating, and organizing, and et cetera.

And specifically here, it's trippy, man, because so many, even today, you hear so many young people say whatever about bouncing, and leaving, and being like— There is an interesting thing here with leadership in terms of community organizing and arts leadership in the Twin Cities. David Mura is moderating this panel. There are some really great folks in this room.
And some of the skills that these young people have, we model that stuff here. They're seeing it, they're picking it up quick, rapid. It's fast. So underestimating them I think is one of the things that will be the detriment of us if we don't look really quick and see what happens.

And they're charged up. I think seeing so many schools have walkouts— and so many student bodies show up at the rallies. The rally on Lake and Hiawatha, there were several schools that showed up. We were at a school. We were at a school and had to—they locked themselves inside of their cafeteria on a day we were supposed to come do this big spoken word showcase thing, right? And we're like, "Can we talk to you all? Will you guys unlock the door and let us come and just chat it up?"

[LAUGHTER]

**Tish Jones:** And they're like, "Yeah." So we did the thing. And then they're like, "OK, we appreciate you guys coming, we're going to connect with you guys," so on and so forth, "and we're going to leave the school now and go to the rally." And we're like, "OK, cool. We're coming too."

[LAUGHTER]

**Tish Jones:** And then [INAUDIBLE]. You know what I mean? Yo, man, they also really feel about these issues and need an opportunity to speak about it, and are creating their own spaces too. So how do we support?

And when we talk about exceptionalism and there only being space for one, how do we actively start funneling and putting resources into spaces that are providing opportunities? How do we avoid young people having their hearts broken because they're not the exceptional one? We need to do that.

**Chava Gabrielle:** Yo, and on the note of support, that's so important. Because as powerful and intellectual and capable as young people are, the system doesn't see us that way. And for that reason, we need support from adults, because the system doesn't see us as powerful, as much as people might see us.

So the fact that people are calling up Tish, and like "Yo, want to help?" and Tish is like, "Yeah," that is a beautiful thing that Tish is doing for young people. She allows young people to take control. Also, just support, you know?

## Part 7: Intersectionality

**David Mura:** I'm going to ask one more question, and then we're going to open up for questions from the audience. I got here—I'm dating myself—in 1974. I'd go anywhere, and there were no Asians. And there was a black population here. There was a Native American population here, but not much else.

Now 70% of the kids in both the Saint Paul and Minneapolis schools systems are kids of color. I can't remember what the exact number of first languages are. But I know just in the junior high my kids went to, there were 35 first languages.

And there have been so many ways in which the traditional dialogue on race in America has been a black/white dialogue. And as we were talking about issues that we wanted to talk about for the panel, one of the things we wanted to talk about was intersectionality, and also, not just in terms of people of color talking to each other, but also within our own populations, the GBLT community and issues arising out of that, issues arising out of women's issues. And the question: how do we work on increasing the communication between our communities and within our

communities about all these issues, and about how we as people of color relate to each other? I'm going to ask Guante to speak on this first.

[LAUGHTER]

**David Mura:** I have to play the teacher here and go, "Guante, you haven't said anything all day."

**Guante:** I can't speak other's hesitation. My hesitation is because I don't know if it's my question to answer, right? I identify as mixed. But I also identify as someone who walks down the street as a white person, maybe more appropriately, stands on the stage as someone reads as white. So I won't speak to the specifics of how different communities of color can, obviously, interact with each other.

But I will say one thing that we talked about today at the conference with all the people is just the importance of showing up, again, a really, really practical thing, but I think a really, really, important thing that I know I myself forget sometimes. And I try to constantly remind myself to show up physically, to go places and be places, and also, not just the literally showing up, but also the deeper sense of showing up.

**Chaun Webster:** There was an anthology that was written a while ago that has a title that always sticks with me that talks about how all the women are white, all the blacks are male, but some of us are brave, right? So one is that we have a hard time having conversations about intersectionality, that we're walking in multiple identities, right? And we have a hard time really having some conversations about coalitional politics and what that might mean, right?

So one, generally, in race conversations, I'll state how I enter these conversations. One is that I am less interested in doing the work of educating white folk, right? I don't feel like that's my work. I'm not going to do that work, especially because most times I'm asked to do that work, I'm asked to do it for free.

The other— I'm invested though in how we have conversations about race that aren't centering on whites, right? And how do we have conversations, particularly amongst communities of color and indigenous communities, that look at nuances, right? I don't think even in the conversation of talking about blackness that I see much of, if any, nuance surrounding how we talk about that, right?

So when we're talking about black folks, are we including Afro-Latinos? Do folks like my kids, who are black but also have Chinese heritage, which might not be read as black, but have African ancestry—how is it that we talk about the scope of blackness as an orientation, right? Are black trans and queer folk a part of that conversation? Are we talking about simply—especially when it's talking about issues that are related to violence against particular bodies, are we just talking black cisgender heterosexual men, as a starting point, or a point of departure for liberation, right? So that's a problem.

So I feel like intersectionality means, in these kinds of conversations that move us to a place where we're actually dealing with coalitional politics and building in ways, means that we got to

slow down, in some ways. I feel like I have to practice listening often. I think that language, that is larger language, shouldn't just be used interchangeably. So if we're talking about folks of color, but we're just identifying issues within a black/white binary, then I think that that's a problem. And that doesn't do anybody any good, right?

So those kind of essentialisms and narrowing of the spectrum is a problem. It's a problem. And so I feel like we have to really have harder conversations. And I think that that requires smaller rooms and probably a lot more questions and more time. So those are some things on my mind. I keep on passing the mic. But you all got a mic.

**David Mura:** Go ahead, Tish.

**Tish Jones:** I agree.

[LAUGHTER]

**Tish Jones:** I do. When we were talking to some of the young people today, we were emphasizing— and this is the same thing that Chaun and everyone else is saying—relationship building. Really thinking about ourselves in relationship to one another is important, and then really thinking about ourselves, so thinking about intersectionality in terms of one's own individual body, identity politics and things, but also thinking about ourselves in relationship to one another, and thinking of that body of selves that are in relationship to one another in relationship to the system that is the white supremacist patriarchal [?buleness?]. I made that word up just now.

[LAUGHTER]

**Tish Jones:** [?Buleness?], see what I mean? So I agree. I concur. I think that's the work.

**David Mura:** Mhm.

**Chava Gabrielle:** It'd be cool if people of other cultures invited me to things. I don't know. I guess my thing is for me I feel like— and I'm not saying that I don't get invited to things about other cultures. But for me, I feel I'm invading a space if I wasn't invited into a space. So I think we as people remembering to invite people who aren't just like us to events that we enjoy or events that are our space in order to fill that cultural gap. Because I feel like a lot of times, we kind of just ease into or are comfortable with people who look like us, talk like us, act like us. But if we branch out—you might be my friend, but why didn't I think to invite you to the Re-Verb Open Mic on Thursday nights? Just reaching out and inviting your friends who don't look like you or act like you or talk like you to the spaces that you will be at, you know?

**Tish Jones:** There's a learning that has to happen also. There's a learning that has to happen. Assimilation is real. Forgetting is real. Being forced to forget is real. And it would be fun to re-learn and un-learn. And I think that's a really interesting way of thinking about being in relationship with one other.

And this was also part of the critique of the whole Button Poetry thing, is like a self-articulated "I don't know how to be in relationship," or "we may not know how to work with folks of color in this capacity." But that's a really interesting thing, the work of working, the work of being in relationship with. And what does it mean to step into a space that is outside of your norm? And how do you respect that space? And how do you not inflict wounds? And how do you not disrespect, and et cetera?

And so that's part of it as well. You know what I mean? And what spaces— and then what other work do we need to do? Because it's also not anyone else's job to make you feel any kind of a way. I am not supposed to make you feel comfortable here. I'm about to talk this black woman shit right now. And if you don't like it, oops. You know what I mean? Oh, well. That's your bad.

So what work do you need to do for yourself when you're coming into a black space, or into any space? But I'm suing this. This is my body you need to listen to.

[LAUGHTER]

**Tish Jones:** So if you come into my black-ass space and I'm talking black shit, what do you need to do to not feel like, "Oh, my god?"

[LAUGHTER]

**Tish Jones:** And not take it personal, because it has absolutely nothing to do with you, and everything to do with this.

**Audience:** Yeah.

**Tish Jones:** Straight up, in any given situation. It's just so complex. And we're so complex. And how do we honor the complexities of our existence?

**David Mura:** I would just say a couple things. One is just live with discomfort. Live with fears. And put your spaces in places where you're uncomfortable. And just deal with it.

The other thing I will say is I look at friends and students that I have now. And they're from places on the globe when I was growing up I didn't even think about. I have friends and students from Nigeria, Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, Palestine. When I was growing up, I didn't think about those things.

And I find I'm constantly running up against my own ignorance. And I'm constantly feeling like I have to educate myself. And I think that's one of the great things about being an artist, is you're curious about the world. And you keep learning about the world. And they more you learn about the world, the more interesting the world is.

And I run, and I will never keep up. I will never know enough. And I always will run into my own ignorance. And when I run into my own ignorance, it's just like, yeah, fuck, I didn't know about that shit.

[LAUGHTER]

**David Mura:** Maybe I should have known about that shit, but I don't. So I'm going to learn about that shit.

[LAUGHTER]

## Part 8: Q&A