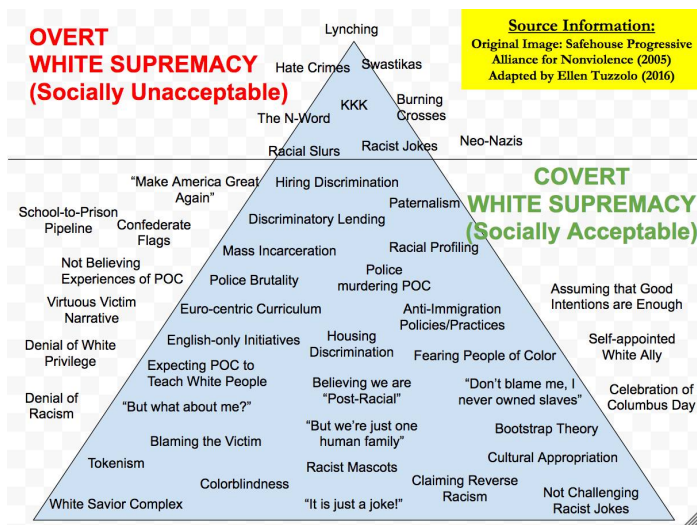


# THE OWL OF MINERVA

By Sherri Cornett

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As I sit down to write in June 2020, our country is responding to the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota after he was arrested for allegedly trying to use a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. A white police officer, Derek Chauvin, knelt on Floyd's neck for 8:46 minutes until he died. Not long after this, Rayshard Brooks, who fell asleep in his car at a Wendy's restaurant, was killed by police. There are still calls for criminal charges to be brought to the police officers who killed Breonna Taylor in March in her own apartment. These victims were black. The unjustifiable use of guns on black people continues. The video, which captured the length of time that Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck, was a match to the powder keg that has been growing for centuries in the United States and which was escalated by the 2016 national election of a president who has methodically dismantled our social and environmental protections . . . a president who has put the white American male on a pedestal, given him renewed and unchecked freedom of power over others.



These deaths have, finally, brought to glaring light the inequities of our social contract with people of color, with women, with our LGBTQ populations, and with non-Christians. Citizen protests, memorials, walks and art have brought their fear and anger and frustrations into the public realm, after more peaceful actions, such as kneeling during the national anthem, were broadly condemned.

As artists and curators, we have reacted to the anomie, the lack of moral guidance from our president, with a tidal wave of works and exhibitions and events. We have examined and made visual this hermeneutic cycle of questions and answers and more questions as we evolve with and process these horrendous acts and the making and unmaking of policies.

Figure 1: developed by Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence (2005) and adapted by Ellen Tuzzolo (2016)

We have created frameworks in which voices and emotions and stories and perspectives are shared . . . safe environments for our own actions and words to be challenged, places where we can listen and show sympathy and empathy . . . spaces to build some level of common understanding, enough of a shared humanity that we can look at how our racist culture and history has impacted us all.

These conversations, these protests, the expressions of such warranted anger and the call for white people to look deeply into how systematic racism has roots in each of us was long overdue. If there is any gift arising out of our president's actions, inaction, narcissism and inability to express human decency, it is a motivation for each of us to look back and examine how we learned to care, to be kind, and to be conscientious. It can motivate us to make the walls around those older lesson more porous, more vulnerable so that we can see and hear and learn where they need to be overhauled so that our morality is more encompassing.

Our president's words, so often dashed off in tweets, discourage this kind of examination and feed into the fear that many people have . . . of being wrong, of being shamed, of losing power by admitting mistakes, of questioning what they thought made them a good person.

As a child, the church provided me those guidelines for good person citizenship – guidelines that were prevalent at that time. After eighth grade, and through the Methodist Church, I began spending summers with the Appalachia Service Project, helping people rebuild and renovate their homes. We, the volunteers from outside, were told “it is better to teach a man to fish, than to give a man a fish.” So, we worked with the families to fix their roofs and walls and windows. We felt so much better about ourselves and the world after a week with these families. Yes, the families benefited from our work, but this system was not equitable. We were taught not to judge, but their “less than” status was obvious. And any guilt that we might have due to our young privilege was assuaged by this do-gooder work . . . and renewed when we returned the next year. The underlying lesson was that we, as people with more resources, just needed to volunteer our time or money every now and then and we could then prove to others and ourselves that we were good people. And, that was enough.

Now, these lessons around equity and inequity, justice and injustice, are being put under a microscope and we, as white people, must do the work to put them into a new focus. We are finally looking at the pervasiveness and many layers of our colonial history – how European immigrants to this continent slaughtered, enslaved and abused indigenous people, blacks and immigrants of color to make the acquisition of these lands possible. As a white person, I am being called to stand up, to stop making my actions and my do-goodedness about me. I am called to see the weariness of the people of color and the non-binary folks in our lives, in our communities and in our world. And to turn my focus inward, to see how I can fix what is inside me that perpetuates the hate and brutality, how my privilege makes it so easy to close the blinds when the view is difficult. I must, finally, be here and see and acknowledge that what has happened and what is happening is horrible, atrocious, horrendous and to promise that I will continue to be here, to watch, to listen, to learn.

Art, artists, curators and creatives of all genres can challenge us to do this work. Art that comes from the darkness of childhood trauma. Art that may bring out the divisions between us and our family, our friends and our communities. Art that shines a light on things many would rather ignore. Art that is coming out of the fringe galleries into more public spaces to make us uncomfortable enough to act. Art that helps us learn from each other.

Angela Davis was one of the keynote speakers for the Open Engagement Conference “Power” at the Oakland Museum in 2016. She talked to us about how artists in the 1960s, inspired by the Black Power movement, chose to give art a pivotal role in changing the consciousness of our nation. After all of her years of activism, she said there is a place for softness and hardness, that the softness is the space for reflection, imagination and possibility.

As a curator, I see this softness as creating a generous space, an environment that allows people to be both uncomfortable and comfortable, that disrupts complacency and where the Dionysian chaos of emotional responses finds acceptable outlets. At its best, this art framework encourages visitors to be open to new information, to be surprised, to learn something that they did not know they did not know, to recognize that we are all imperfect and have ideas and information that need updating and that it is our duty to keep working on those imperfections.

How our president is leading is not normal; he continues to act in such numerous and frequently unpresidential ways that they are difficult to process. As we navigate this necessarily messy and emotional public reckoning with the events and realizations that our president’s and our police forces’ actions have aroused, we will make mistakes and our mistakes may be presented to us in less than kind ways, but it is our

morality, our strength in community that will assist us in hearing about our imperfections and seek out change in ourselves and in the ways we collectively interact.

Hegel believed that the owl of Minerva or wisdom would only be evident when whatever we are considering is over or almost so. I prefer to think the growth of wisdom can be an ever-present process, that Minerva's owl is a reminder to take the time, frequently, to evaluate and get feedback, to get some perspective, listen to suggestions, ask new questions, formulate new actions and then, as creatives, make new art and exhibitions and events that help us see ourselves, our communities and our world in fresh ways. This review process is never an end or permanent solution. It is not easy, but it is a moment, a conversation and an opportunity.

*Sherrí Cornett is an artist curator living in Billings, Montana. Using her degrees in political science and art, her years of advocacy around human rights and environmental issues and her passion for community building and dialogue, Cornett has created and directed feminist, social justice and community-engaged art projects and exhibitions in China, South Korea and at the United Nations for the Women's Caucus for Art, around the U.S. as a partner and curator in Gutfreund Cornett Art, and in Montana. Her most recent projects have been in collaboration with ForFreedoms.org and a creative place-making partnership in East Helena, Montana.*

Original Image:

[Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence](#)

(2005) "Building a Multi-Ethnic, Inclusive & Antiracist Organization-Tools for Liberation Packet for Anti-Racist Activists, Allies, & Critical Thinkers".

Adapted by: Ellen Tuzzolo (2016)