“Color is the first thing Black people in America become aware of. You are born into a world that has given color meaning and color becomes the single most determining factor of your existence. Color determines where you live, how you live and, under certain circumstances, if you will live. Color determines your friends, your education, your mother’s and father’s jobs, where you play, what you play and, more importantly, what you think of yourself. In and of itself, color has no meaning. But the white world has given it meaning—political, social, economic, historical, physiological and philosophical. Once color has been given meaning, an order is thereby established.”—H. Rap Brown (Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin), Die Nigger Die!: A Political Autobiography (Dial Press, 1969)

“Social exclusion works for solidarity, as often as it works against it. Sexism is not merely, or even primarily, a means of conferring benefits to the investor class. It is also a means of forging solidarity among ‘men,’ much as xenophobia forges solidarity among ‘citizens,’ and homophobia makes for solidarity among ‘heterosexuals.’ What one is is often as important as what one is not, and so strong is the negative act of defining community that one wonders if all of these definitions—man, heterosexual, white—would evaporate in absence of negative definition. . . . At every step, ‘universalist’ social programs have been hampered by the idea of becoming, and remaining, forever white. So it was with the New Deal. So it is with Obamacare. So it would be with President Sanders. That is not because the white working class labors under mass hypnosis. It is because whiteness confers knowable, quantifiable privileges, regardless of class—much like ‘manhood’ confers knowable, quantifiable privileges, regardless of race. White supremacy is neither a trick, nor a device, but one of the most powerful shared interests in American history. And that, too, is solidarity.”—Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Enduring Solidarity of Whiteness” (Atlantic Monthly, 2016)[1]

White people are always getting together. We get together in churches and workplaces and informal gatherings. We defy the geographic sorting that might explain our other get-togethers; we even hang-out on the Internet together. White people get together so much that it usually isn’t even named. Except for those composed by extremists on the right or activists on the left, there tend not to be organizations that even acknowledge they are made up entirely or primarily of white people. People getting together—that is power. Organization.

Organize Your Own was an exhibition and event series inspired by the dispossessed and working-class white activists in Chicago and Philadelphia during the 1960s and 1970s (the Young Patriots Organization and the October 4th Organization), who sought to organize their own communities against racism. This book and the larger project it emerges from take up the question of people getting together generally, with specific examples of people who think they are white people and nonwhite people getting together, together and on their own.[2] This text will meander through a consideration of the relationship between current discourses around
race and the role of politics and poetics in complicating and clarifying these ongoing conversations—the ones that happen when people get together.

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Confusing discussion around race persistently impedes solidarity, while the category of whiteness baffles well-meaning anti-racists in particular and society in general. While race remains a loose[3] cultural paradox, defying any attempt to coherently claim its biological basis,[4] incredibly complex forms of oppression are often the result of political and economic agendas carried out with race explicitly or implicitly in mind.” As historian Nell Irvin Painter describes it, “nonblackness,” or whiteness, is a category in expansion, absorbing many people along national and skin color spectrums, while “poverty in a dark skin endures as the opposite of whiteness.”[5]

While we know that there are significant exceptions to such a formulation, Painter centers class as a consistent feature and characteristic of the nebulous category of race. Despite all the progress made in drafting anti-discriminatory policies, a thorough solution has yet to acknowledge the link between race and the economic poverty underlying the distribution of power in society. As cultural critic Walter Benn Michaels argues, the turn towards a free-market fundamentalist culture of political discourse has no significant problem accepting the “political morality” of anti-discrimination on its own. As he states, “American society today, both legally and politically, has a strong commitment to the idea that discrimination is the worst thing you can do, that paying somebody a pathetic salary isn’t too bad but paying somebody a pathetic salary because of his or her race or sex is unacceptable.”[6]

While Benn Michaels’s argument for a hierarchy of oppression may seem to contradict Painter’s point about the disproportionate racialization of poverty, the integration of the two perspectives offers a chance to consider more carefully the great efforts that are mobilized towards perpetuating white privileges within a capitalist economy.

In the United States, the experience of work and the opportunity for work is decidedly racialized (and historicized). The critical race theorist Charles W. Mills explains the depth of this condition when he describes the economic exploitation of nonwhite people and, in return, the psychic and economic payoff received by white people through a “Racial Contract.” Mills discusses how the diverted income of slavery, the underpayment and denial of equal opportunity since Reconstruction has been calculated as equal to the entire wealth of the United States.[7] This builds on W. E. B. DuBois’s 1903 assertion that the ongoing crisis for Black people in the post-Reconstruction American South is “debt in the continued inability . . . to make income cover expense, [which] is the direct heritage . . . from the wasteful economies of the slave regime.” Mills concludes that:

White people, Europeans and their descendants, continue to benefit from the Racial Contract, which creates a world in their cultural image, political states differentially favoring their interests, an economy structures around the racial exploitation of others, and a moral
psychology (not just in whites but sometimes in nonwhites also) skewed consciously or unconsciously toward privileging them, taking the status quo of differential racial entitlement as normatively legitimate and not to be investigated further.[8]

This powerful assertion suggests that a moral code underpins society with a set of agreements that empower those who identify as white to identify and determine the status of those who are not.. Mills concludes, "All whites are beneficiaries of the contract, though some whites are also signatories to it."[9]

While there are historical examples of white activists contributing to the rights and liberation struggles of communities of color throughout the history of the United States—most notably through Abolitionist work—the cross-cultural organizing around legal discrimination and general social conditions for African Americans that crystallized into the “Civil Rights Movement” offers the most cited legacy for today. Fifty years ago, the members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) civil rights organization made a historic call. SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael wrote, “One of the most disturbing things about almost all white supporters of the movement has been that they are afraid to go into their own communities—which is where the racism exists—and work to get rid of it. They want to run from Berkeley to tell us what to do in Mississippi; let them look instead at Berkeley. . . . Let them go to the suburbs and open up freedom schools for whites.” He continued, “There is a vital job to be done among poor whites. We hope to see, eventually, a coalition between poor blacks and poor whites. . . . The job of creating a poor white power bloc must be attempted. The main responsibility for it falls upon whites.”[10] Today the refrain can be heard again, with “Organize Yourselves” serving as the directive offered to the question, “What can white people do to support #BlackLivesMatter?”[11]

The largely-unknown histories of the October 4th Organization in Philadelphia and the Young Patriots Organization in Chicago offer lesser-known histories of white activists focusing their energy within working-class white communities of Kensington and Uptown respectively. Emphasizing the work of poor and working-class whites can offer a corrective to the incommensurate emphasis placed on Black and Brown images of poverty in the United States. True, the poverty rates amongst people of color are disproportionate to the population, but 70 percent of people living in poverty are white—in 2013, that meant 18.9 million whites were poor.[12] According to an article by Rachel Godsil for The Root, a blog focused on progressive politics from an African American perspective, the stereotype of poverty as non-white:

[H]arms black people in myriad ways, especially because the political right has linked poverty with moral failure as a trope to undermine public support for government programs. . . . Our collective—and selective—memory can have a cost. When we benefit from government help but later don’t acknowledge it, we are contributing to the effort to portray government programs as paid for by white people but not for us. And we are hastening their demise. We are and always have been part of these categories, so it's time we come out of the shadows and into the pictures.[13]
In a present-day context—where surpluses and scarcity of work, opportunity, and free-time are distributed unevenly—we have two options. We can either place the blame and responsibility on individuals to resolve this inequality, letting some climb to the top while others fall, proving exceptions exist within this often racialized dynamic. Or, we can create more general and generalizable forms/words/frameworks/practices that account for positions across the full spectrum of human experience and difference. If we fail to do this, those abandoned or, as James Boggs wrote in his *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party* (1969), those “pushed out of the system by the system itself” will strike back.[14] What this will look like is known, and is certainly reflected in the disenchantment resulting from racist fear-mongering and other counter-productive behaviors. In 1963, Boggs, a Black auto-worker and political theorist living in Detroit, outlined his analysis further when he claimed that “productivity can no longer be the measure of an individual’s right to life. . . . Now that man is being eliminated from the productive process, a new standard of value must be found. This can only be man’s value as a human being.”[15]

The idea that there is liberatory potential in exclusion from the formal economy—where time could be distributed differently—stands in stark contrast to social policy focused on re-integration for continuous growth. Beyond work and welfare, consideration of these bodies and lifeforces is a necessary commitment, so that all people can have some work and some free-time, to avoid a situation of fewer jobs and more work.[16] It is a predicament premised on turning exclusion into a conversation about what it means to be human.

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*These racists have plans!* As a kid growing up in Kentucky and wandering the stacks of the Louisville Public Library, I came across *Blood in the Face*, a book about Neo-Nazi culture.[17] I was confronted with a map of racial bastions designed by David Duke, representing a proposal for the re-territorialization of the United States, based on sorting out the country’s racial groups. *These racists have plans!* The map stuck with me for decades, serving as my earliest memory of the power of images to serve as visions for the future. It confirmed that those on the side of the angels did not have a monopoly on pre-figurative projections of the future, and despite the absurdity of the racist proposal—the anti-racists needed plans, as well.

My adolescent experiences with anti-racism involved a strange mix of retro civil-rights and hippie culture that advocated pacifism and more direct confrontation with the remnants of explicit racist culture—basically punks protesting whenever a handful of old Klansmen would roll into town to hold “free speech” rallies on the steps of a government building. The counter-demonstration was organized around points of unity such as, “We go where they go. Whenever fascists are organizing or active in public, we’re there. We don’t believe in ignoring them or staying away from them. Never let the Nazis have the street!”[18] Should we have ignored them? Would they have gone away or become emboldened (as they have today)? Each aspect seemed to engage in a backwards-looking orientation: a reverent approach to the
successes of the 1960s and a disproportionate amount of attention paid to old dudes in sheets. Armed with an inherited ethical-sounding rhetoric of allyship[19]—anti-racists weren’t visionaries with plans for the future—they became reactionaries, defenders of recent policy gains and social movement heritage, and NIMBYS.[20]

In the context of contemporary social movements concerned with justice and power–making, plans and generating images for your plans are intimately intertwined. When #OccupyWallStreet, #IdleNoMore, #SayHerName, and #BlackLivesMatter spread images of their accomplishments and community actions, they also create a virtual gathering space for dialogue and a rallying cry to take the streets. Building on a long history of activism staged for the mass-media camera lens, these movements extend internal organization into external exhibition and become activist processes engineered for social media. Plotting, planning, deliberation, debate, and critique become public and transparent modalities through the use of comments and hashtags. Slicing through the mundanity of pet and baby photos, these dialogues, previously withheld from movements’ official historical narratives until tell-all memoirs are published decades later, become the contemporary social movement archive that is the material from social media.

Through these powerful self-representations, movements can be viral and agile, while offering more people points of entry into the sub-culturally coded language and behaviors that may have previously served as exclusionary devices between activists and non-activists. Movements also open themselves up to the distractions of easy memes, fake campaigns, red-baiting, trends, cooption, misrepresentations, comment trolls, and “Call Out” culture. Take for instance the debates pitting Caitlyn Jenner’s transgender identity vs. Rachel Dolezal’s transracial identity,[21] incessant privilege-checking,[22] or the largely fictive “White Student Union” pages on Facebook.[23] Underlying each of these instances is an opportunity for principled and thorough debate lost to visceral reactions and attacks, which begs the question: Does airing the movement’s dirty laundry to a mass audience produce much-needed transparency or simply new forms of activist self-referentiality and subcultural marginality?

And yet this is far from fringe. Movements for racial justice impact mainstream politics, as presidential candidates manipulate and negotiate their relationship to hybrid entities like #BlackLivesMatter, which are both discrete organizations and diffuse networks. Within the halls of government, racial identification has turned into precarious capital, where lip service is expected around subjects such as police brutality, mass incarceration, and reparations, as most white politicians concretely consider only the “demographic appeal” of certain campaign stops, polling statistics, running mates, and calculated social-media posturing.[24] This cynical appropriation of the beautiful aspirations of multicultural diversity has not been secluded to politicians. In the “non-profit industrial complex,” tokenistic gestures about who sits at the metaphorical decision-making table have obscured more substantial conversations about the redistributive policies needed to create pathways to real tables and what is to be done once seated there.[25]
The brand of anti-racism that I was introduced to as an adolescent informed me that, as a white male, I should use the leadership roles I was afforded to “decenter” myself and “make space” for the voices and bodies of women and people of color.[26] Implementing these profound, if vague, principles was achieved with varying levels of “success,” due to a combination of my own inabilities as a conscious organizer; statistical demographic constraints on the number of people of color relative to white people in a given context; and sociopolitical barriers that generate circumstances such that people don’t want to be in rooms that are disproportionately made up of people with whom they do not identify. As my eclectic work began to take on public association with professions such as “editor,” “curator,” “administrator,” “consultant,” “advisor,” “author,” and “artist” (often under the broad umbrella of “organizer”), I became increasingly confronted with questions about representation: Who was at the table, how did they get there, what qualities did they find once they got there, what pathways existed for others to get there, and at which juncture did I have what responsibility to leave the table?

Over time, these considerations were often privately considered, as I found the rhetorical approaches of most white people to anti-racism surprisingly without nuance and not an appealing use of my energy to collaboratively interrogate. I often spent late night and early morning hours analyzing the demographic representation of projects that I organized, trying to be considerate while also avoiding direct conversation with my collaborators, co-workers, or employers. This work became further obscured as projects operated or were presented under organizational or collective authorship or in institutional settings. Most people I would discuss these issues with would either pay them little consideration, if at all, or fall victim to ambiguities that conflated the power dynamics of political organizing with those of the cultural sector, through acts such as editing magazines or curating art shows. While my own education in anti-racism was deeply informing my work as someone empowered to frame and facilitate the work of others, I was often confused about the implications of erasing my own role in the process, as well as my own identity. I was becoming curious to develop a kind of inquiry that would be able to directly confront these tensions.

The first time I heard of the Young Patriots and a Chicago neighborhood called “Hillbilly Heaven”[27] was from historian James Tracy at a dinner party following the 2006 National Conference on Organized Resistance in Washington, DC. It was right on the heels of founding the publication AREA Chicago:[28] within a few months, Tracy submitted an interview to AREA that he had done with Bob E. Lee, a member of the Illinois Black Panther Party involved in multi-racial coalition building with the Young Patriots Organization (YPO).[29] Following the further publication of articles on this history in AREA in 2008,[30] the release of Hillbilly Nationalists, a book by Tracy and Amy Sonnie, in 2011,[31] and my subsequent review of that book, which interwove my family’s own history with that of the YPO, in 2012.[32] It felt like a broad community conversation was forming to correct a historical omission about the role of working-class white people in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, one that highlighted the intersection of race and class in our present moment as well as our historical narratives. In the
In the spring of 2012, I received correspondence from one of the original members of the YPO, Hy Thurman, and by fall of 2013, we had met on a walking tour of Uptown history he led with historian with Jakobi Williams. At that time, he presented me with an invitation to help re-circulate out-of-print poetry by the YPO. By December 2013, my proposal to present the poems in the context of an exhibition on related contemporary art was accepted by Leviton Gallery at Columbia College—within a year and a half, the exhibition had been awarded funding from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage to produce a Philadelphia incarnation of the project at Kelly Writers House, with dozens of participants enthusiastically accepting invitations to join in. Initiatives like Organize Your Own do not develop quickly or in isolation, but through a slow-burn of consideration and collaboration.

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“Now more than ever we need words to help us think through that which cannot be thought. Poetry can help lift the ceiling from our brains so that we can imagine liberation.”—Mariame Kaba, prison abolitionist (2016)[33]

“The Dream thrives on generalization, on limiting the number of possible questions, on privileging immediate answers. The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing. . . . The art I was coming to love lived in this void, in the not yet knowable, in the pain, in the question.”—Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015)[34]

Colonialism and slavery are “deposits and sediments in time” that serve as the closest circumstances we have experienced as human beings to total domination, and as scholar Tony Bogues suggests. they therefore deserve to be “foregrounded” in any conversation about human freedom.[35] Bogues qualifies this by saying that “the slave, the ‘native,’ always demanded freedom and equality as a bundle,” and in turn, that domination was never absolute and human practices of freedom have always been able to be expressed even under such violent and demoralizing circumstances. But what do those “practices of freedom” look like? Are they protests or are they poems?

There is an archive at the foundation of this book that you cannot see – a record of practices of freedom that emerged from a deeply oppressive context. It is a collection of poetry that was published by the Young Patriots Organization, the group of Appalachian whites who migrated to Chicago’s Uptown neighborhood and responded to police brutality and economic injustice by organizing alongside the Young Lords and the Black Panther Party. They called their publications, four in all, Time of the Phoenix, and wrote in their introduction to the second volume: “Search the shelves of bookstore or library and you will find ample materials written for and about poor people but far and few in between are those written by poor people themselves. This anthology of song and poetry is written by poor people.”[36]

In a review of the books at the time of their publication, Albert Vetere Lannon (author and former president of International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union Local 6) wrote that “The
YPO—born of the streets they work in—recognized the talents among their people and encouraged poetry and songmaking along with rent strikes and revolution."[37]

The archive of out-of-print poetry was provided to the participating artists and poets featured in this book, alongside the above Stokley Charmichael quotation, and the 1969 film, *American Revolution 2*, which documents the first meeting of the Black Panther Party and the Young Patriots, as a kind of prompt.[38] The materials were intended to encourage and support the participants to share in a common language or points of reference, despite their diversity of cultural and geographic contexts and backgrounds. Inferred by this was a suggestion to the participants that they consider this history, but not be bound by it—the goal was not to produce yet another New Left/Black Power/Civil Rights/Sixties Heritage nostalgia project. And yet intergenerational dynamics are all around us—from Hy Thurman’s invitation, which serves as a foundation for this project, to reconnect with the poetry of the YPO to the persistence of #BlackLivesMatter activists calling upon white activists to organize themselves, in a manner that strikingly echoed Carmichael’s call fifty years before. So it was not about avoiding history, but making use of it, after all.

There are, I think, good reasons this project became an art—and not a history—exhibition. Both ambiguous and critical concerns are bound up in any look at the past, let alone the present. The participants are living and breathing new life into their actions and their questions about racial justice and what “your own” means today. As many of the projects explore, there is not necessarily a coherent entity called the “Black community” (or let alone, “white community”) that one can attach to—despite it attaching itself to our demographic and statistical selves all the time. And while there have been moments when race in the United States felt Black and white, that has never been the case—any calls to abolish racism or complicate over simplistic conceptions of race in society would start with an expansion and then complication of this premise. Further, the concept of “self-determination” underlying this book and exhibition, which was so powerful in its anti-colonial inception to fight “predetermination” of life and living, can and should include some consideration of how the self is both one and many. And finally, while there is focus on the 1960s and ’70s for good reason, any deep exploration confronting racial oppression in the US has other equally important connections to the indigenous, rebels, “race traitors,” and nonconformists that have emerged before and after those pivotal decades. The future needs new plans. And it is poetry—in a broad sense, that includes the written and the visual—which can help us build on the plans that have already been generated to provide more direct paths to convoluted realities and inherited dreams.

Joan Didion once wrote, “The Dream is teaching the dreamers how to live.”[39] The deformation that characterizes our present social life is untenable, and this has a great deal to do with race. It takes so much work to maintain the present configuration of social relations—and while that work is distributed unevenly, we are all demoralized and psychically beat down. Thus far, the attempts to confront such conditions have left many dead and wounded, while some continue to march under their banners more fiercely, and in some cases, more violently than ever. This includes the self-determinationists and the separatists, the racists and the police, the youth and
those who gained ground long ago. Legal scholar Michelle Alexander recently offered up this challenge to our present moment: “The question that remains unanswered is are we going to be capable of extending care, compassion, and concern across lines of race, class, religion, nationality or are we going to be enslaved by our punitive impulses and respond to those we label ‘other’ with pure punitiveness? . . . [This] is ultimately a test of whether this multi-racial, multi-ethnic will succeed or fail in the long run.”[40]

As we think about getting together and all that means today, depending on with whom and where and why we convene, there are no guarantees we will succeed, but at least we can stop dreaming the same terrible dreams and start making plans.

Footnotes
2. “On Being White . . . and Other Lies” by James Baldwin (Essence, April 1984) was the first text to formulate this phrasing, with its more recent usage introduced by Ta-Nehisi Coates in Between the World and Me (Spiegel & Grau, 2015).
5. Painter, p. 396.

16. For an explanation of how this “labor saving technological change” affected the US auto industry, which saw increased output despite outsourcing, see *In and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives* by Greg Albo, Sam Gindin, and Leo Panitch (Spectre/PM Press, 2010), p. 85.


28. AREA Chicago is a publication focused on the intersections of art, research, education, and activism in Chicago founded in 2005 and continuing publication through the present, recently releasing their fifteen issue. <areachicago.org>.


34. Coates, p. 50.


38. Gray, Mike and Howard Alk, dir. *American Revolution 2* (Film Group, 1969).
