

# You have to tell Them, i’m not a Racist.

# Abolish, She Said Kendra Place

If the media function in a systematically racist manner, it is not because they are run and organized exclusively by active racists; this is a category mistake. This would be equivalent to saying that you could change the character of a capitalist state by replacing its personnel.

Stuart Hall, *The Whites of Their Eyes*, 1981

# Divya Mehra Georgia Scherman Projects September 7 –October 14, 2017

*You have to tell Them, i’m not a Racist.* was first exhibited in 2012 in St. Boniface, Manitoba. Divya had already presented two solo shows in 2010 and 2011, both of which worked with a variety of media—photography, sculpture, and installation, as well as original, borrowed, or appropriated texts. Both had introduced waves of gossip and settler anxiety among the various classes that formed the art scenes in Winnipeg and Vancouver at the time. In 2012, white or otherwise privileged people were finally becoming conscious of police brutality. Idle No More was just around the corner, and Divya’s third solo show refused to mince words specifically by doing so.

I went to the opening at La Maison des artistes, across the river from downtown Winnipeg. The show looked significantly different than Divya’s other work, with an apparent absence of objects and colour (neon and gold). Here she was using the conditional aspects of exhibitions, elements that are often taken for granted even as they form the basis of art presentations—vinyl lettering, gallery space, lighting, and acrylic paint. Divya had redirected curatorial material, applying white plastic letters across entire walls of the white cube with deliberate compositions and sight lines. I admit that I am enchanted by art that finds a medium in the (art world’s) architectural unconscious.

The texts (dis)appeared in three languages, clumsily translated by Google from English to Hindi and French, until the original meanings were significantly distorted. The phrases consisted of things people say—racist jokes, ignorant and repeated assertions. People had said these things to Divya, or she had overheard people saying them. The texts also consisted of perspectives that might be closer to those held by the artist herself—satirical thoughts that she could not, perhaps, say out loud under certain circumstances: “Whites Have Wonderful Weekends” and “People of Color (Currently Fashionable).” Guests were confronted with the white vinyl lettering on white walls under the obscuring/revealing glare of fluorescent lights. Kegan (another friend of Divya’s) and I strained to read the text by negotiating the reflection off the plastic. Legibility—any simple reading or meaning—had been radically interrupted.

The title of the show worked as a proposition, setting the tone as a challenge to both those who attended and those who did not (there were many who would rather avoid such interpellation, preferring instead to dwell in the fantasy that it does not apply to them). The work performed was at least two-fold. First, the art asserts its knowledge that racism, along with its violence and its intersections, is often expressed and experienced by individuals as speech (jokes, dismissals), while it is denied by institutions and their liberal agents as not actually existing. Second, the art performed a counter-speech act to the very structure of racist discourse. Where speech had united with language (as reality and as utterance of hate or condescension or mockery by those with privilege and power), Divya had inverted the rules of the discourse, making available its operations: the white neutrality of the gallery-as-art world (as world) was brought to light, and both whiteness (/lightness) and racism could no longer go undiscussed.

Dearest Divya,

Remember the last time we saw each other? We were sitting in your black SUV parked around the corner from Corydon Ave. You had a heavy heart, and I was a listening ear. As you talked about the things going on in your life, the craziest things, psychologically violent things that perpetually enter your life, I watched this little blonde kid across the street playing with his mom on their front sidewalk. He seemed happy to be outside at this time of night, but she was just staring in our direction. I wondered if she had come outside just to keep an eye on us. We were two strangers idling on *her* street. One dark skinned, and the other not quite dark, but not quite white like her. Maybe she could tell we were women, and didn’t feel the need to call the cops, but we were still different enough to arouse *her* suspicion. The bass could be heard thumping from your car, and sticky smoke was wafting out of your half-rolled up windows. What’s she staring at? I pay my taxes. We were all old enough to be friends.

But we were not.

I was watching her watching us, but you didn’t notice her or the kid until I pointed them out to you. Maybe you just can’t see it anymore, all the rude and shitty things people do and say simply because they are miserable and see difference as an easy threat. I still see them, even if they aren’t directly targeted at me. This is what being racialized means. To witness and endure all of the societally acceptable micro aggressions made against “POCs” because they are not \_\_\_\_ enough.

I mean, this isn’t even *her* street. We are on Treaty 1 territory, where the Métis people have long been screwed out of their land by thieving European settlers and thuggish British colonizers. There really is no honour amongst thieves. Does that explain why white immigrants are always so suspicious of all other immigrants? Do they think we are going to swarm in, like they did, and rob the land and the people blind, like they did?

Earlier that day, I was rooting around in the Manitoba Archives. One of their archivists, the one giving me an orientation of their system, asked me what I was specifically looking for. She was possibly in her late twenties, early thirties, with dairy white skin and chestnut brown hair. I said I was looking for any provincial records they may have on immigrants and settlers who were not Anglo or Franco in origin. She stared at me blankly. Offering her some of her own language, I said I was looking for information on “culturally diverse” groups. She lit up—“Oh!”—and showed me a catalogue of a Scottish society group and some history on the Boy Scouts. Now I blinked at her, and said I was looking for something more specific, like, do you have any records of South Asian people in your catalogue, for example? Chestnut took a moment, and in all earnestness, said that the Manitoba Archives also holds the Hudson Bay Archives, and that in their hey day, the Hudson’s Bay Company held posts all over North America, and sometimes those posts had servants, if that is what I meant.

Presented now in a Toronto commercial gallery, the exhibition is again an ironic and intentionally alienating act: the show naturalizes whiteness, English, art, and the gallery, pushing their supposed givenness toward excess until their histories and constructedness become the subject matter. It could seem that more is at stake in 2017, as expressions of white nationalist racism might be more explicit and “alarming” than latent. Yet, whether the exhibition’s effect is cathartic, triggering, or implicating, it is undeniable that there are stone layers of speech, law, belief, and nation-state building that have allowed an English man to commodify a Pakistani man. That allow a white Canadian to joke about this process. That allow the artist to turn this joke into critical art that might never sell but nonetheless holds value and capital of many kinds. That allow me to write about it. Meanwhile, throughout Turtle Island, Confederate plaques are being removed from department store walls and monuments to enslavement defenders are being toppled and targeted for replacement with statues of Missy Elliot and Divine.

Personnel changes are necessary and urgent. Where inclusion is suspect, however, Divya is holding out for something more substantial than what can sometimes be tokenizing diversity or spectacular multiculturalism, such that white people are no longer the hegemonic curatorial, editorial, and directorial influence, and people of colour are not reduced to a fleeting trend. Here Divya reminds me of feminist philosopher Judith Butler: the artist as linguist. In the essay “Burning Acts, Injurious Speech,” Judith explains structurally what many racialized people already know on every register about the wounding power of words. She examines a case where charges were dismissed against a white Minnesota teenager who burned a cross in front of a black family’s house in 1990, showing how the political discourse collapsed into the juridical discourse as the case was appealed through higher courts: the racist act became “fighting words” and finally a protected “viewpoint” in the “free marketplace of ideas.”<sup>2</sup> The question remains how structural transformation can end the capacity of the justices to isolate (and thus reproduce) injurious speech from histories of white supremacy, or the privilege of the curator (or writer or reader or art lover) to collapse the survivor’s art (counter)discourse into the normative art discourse.

This weekend, if you find yourself enjoying a wonderful time at your family’s second cottage or stuck in the city processing all the negative feelings, I believe there are many ways to check ourselves until everyone who benefits from white privilege agrees not to escape toward innocence nor to center guilt as fragility. Between the white artist wishing there was some way to intervene without also being racist and the femme caryatid who will step aside, even if or so that the whole temple falls down, we can commit to the relentless pursuit of abolishing white supremacy, by which we mean whiteness. First we listen, then we take on the burden of our learning so that people of colour and Black and Indigenous peoples don’t have to.

<sup>1</sup> “UN Issues Rare Warning Over ‘Alarming’ Racism in US,” *Al Jazeera*, aljazeera.com, August 23, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/issues-rare-warning-alarming-racism-170823225952827.html

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, “Burning Acts, Injurious Speech,” in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 43.

Dearest white people (who are trying to be politically correct or whatever you think it is you are doing):

YOU ARE THE ABSOLUTE WORST!

Stop asking me how I can help *you* become an ally. My time is valuable. Reliving my traumas and oppressions from you, For you Absolves nothing for me, Everything for you.

Stop calling me *your* “POC allies.” I am not *your* anything.

Please be quiet now Your opinion is digging you in deeper, If you actually stop and listen to me for a moment, And do not even think of using #notallwhitepeople When you brand me and everyone I know as a

Person of Colour

Don’t expect me to nod or Smile That’s white people talk For anyone who doesn’t look like you Smell or eat like you Fuck like you An acronym for the rest of us

Pitted against each other in the POC DIVERSITY Categories Opportunities

Stop flattening the spectrum of Iranians, Nigerians, South and North Koreans, Peruvians, Chinese, Lebanese, Pakistanis, Columbians, Egyptians, Indians, Indonesians, Nepalese, Vietnamese, Syrian, and The hundred plus more distinct languages, customs, and Cultures into a single diversity checkbox.

De-center your own whiteness! Don’t ask me to do it for you! I work hard enough to de-center your whiteness from myself And now you want me to de-center it for you, too?

A version of this exhibition was first presented at La Maison des artistes visuels francophones in St. Boniface, Manitoba in 2012.

Divya Mehra born 1981, the year of the Rooster.

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