



**CRITICAL
RACE
CONVERSATIONS**

A Folger Institute Fiftieth Anniversary Project
Supported by the Mellon Initiative in Collaborative
Research

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This is not who we are?

DESCRIPTION: Dialogue with Ian Smith, Michael Witmore, and Kathleen Lynch
Thursday, April 22, 2021

KATHLEEN LYNCH: Welcome, everyone. Welcome to Critical Race Conversations. This is a series of monthly conversations hosted by the Folger Institute and funded by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. We're delighted on this monthly basis to gather so many friends old and new for these conversations, which we recognize as addressing some of our most urgently pressing social issues today. There was an overdue reckoning with ongoing social and racial injustice last summer that coincided with the institute's 50th anniversary.

LYNCH: At that time, we made a commitment to draw on work and all of our areas of programming to highlight the need for a sustained and collective examination of the enduring legacies of premodern racialized thinking and racism. Our speakers in our monthly sessions have been acknowledging deeper and more complex roots to enduring social challenges, and they're conducting more inclusive investigations of our contested pasts. All of this with the goal of creating a more just academy and contributing to a more just society.

LYNCH: The institute is providing the framework and the platform. But, as is our practice, we turn to experts in fields across disciplines and career stages to lead discussions, in this case, about Critical Race studies from their own experience and expertise. If you've been with us throughout this monthly series, you know we've been ranging around a number of fields of studies with some regular returns to Shakespeare studies. We come to Shakespeare again this month, the month of April, the month in which the Folger Shakespeare Library celebrates Shakespeare's birthday.

LYNCH: The month in which the Folger Institute's signature contribution has been an annual birthday lecture delivered by a distinguished and influential scholar to provide some vital insight into up to the minute scholarly debates and developments. This is the second year that we are hosting Professor Ian Smith in conversation in lieu of that in-person birthday lecture. We will get to that in-person birthday lecture as soon as it is safe to do so. But in the meantime, it's wonderful to

welcome you back, Ian. Smith is the Richard H. Junior and Joan K. Sell Chair in the Humanities at Lafayette College. This session is very much framed as an alternative to or a placeholder for that lecture. This session also departs from our norm with this Critical Race Conversations series in that we have a Folger voice on the program, our director, Mike Whitmore.

LYNCH: Thank you, Mike [LAUGH] for joining us. That comes about by Professor Smith's request. I think they may address a little bit more when they get into their conversation about how this is part of an ongoing conversation that they've been having. But I would like to note, too, there have been many important online conversations about Shakespeare and race in this last year. At Lafayette College, Professor Smith himself has hosted a series on Shakespeare, Race, and Queer Sexuality. At Arizona State University's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, there's been a galvanizing series of Race Before Race conversations.

LYNCH: In some real sense, the conversation that we had last year, Ian, your introduction to whiteness studies for us was the launching pad for this ongoing series. So, thank you for that. I will note finally the topic for this month's conversation, this is not who we are? But with that strongly declarative assertion changed into a question. This is not who we are question mark. Over to you, Ian and Mike. And thank you all for joining us.

IAN SMITH: Thank you so much, Kathleen, for that introduction. And thank you for inviting me again to be here. I'm delighted to be joined this conversation with Mike Whitmore, the director of the Folger Shakespeare Library. Mike was very kind and generous in accepting my invitation to join this conversation with me, and so I'm looking forward to hearing a lot from you, Mike, and learning a lot from you as well. I'd like to open with a brief statement just to set up a little bit of the framework for what we're doing today.

SMITH: A few days ago, Mike actually shared with me an article that appeared in The Guardian written by Robert P. Baird titled, "The Invention of Whiteness: The Long History of a Dangerous Idea." That article opened with a reference to Christian Landers' satirical blog *Stuff White People Like* that subsequently became a book. Our sensibilities have changed, Baird argues, noting an important shift even within these last few years. Whereas Lander could score a bestseller with a book mocking whiteness as a bland cultural *mélange* whose greatest sin was to be uninteresting.

SMITH: Just nine years later, Ta-Nehisi Coates would have his own bestseller that described whiteness as quote "An existential danger to the country and the world" end quote. After last year's interview with Kathleen Lynch, thank you, Kathleen, for that, we lived through a summer of protest in the wake of George Floyd's murder that challenged and changed us as a nation. We're here today the week in which the verdict on that murder was delivered. We're meeting today at the very moment when Daunte Wright is being laid to rest.

SMITH: The title of today's conversation "This is not who we are" registers the spirit of challenge and change and acknowledges our collective cultural grappling with whiteness punctuated by a visibly placed question mark unsettling seeming certainties and probing looking for possible paths forward. And so, Mike, because we begin, I'd just like to ask if you would say a little bit about your tenure as Director of the Folger. Maybe share a little bit about your responsibilities and the role. I'm not sure if everybody knows exactly what you do, so we'd love to just start with that before we get into the rest of our conversation.

MICHAEL WITMORE: Well, Ian, thank you so much for the invitation to be here with you, and thank you for that important tone setting and scene setting for our conversation. This is quite a week, and I think the tenor of your question is will there be more such weeks? And I think we'll wanna talk about that. I am the Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library. It's an institution that has been around since 1932. It's a very significant collection of Shakespeariana, and cultural materials connected to the English Renaissance and Northern European Renaissance that verges on the exploration and the creation of the Atlantic world.

WITMORE: So, intellectually it has a fairly broad ambit. It's also a performing arts organization, and organization that exhibits material and interprets it for the public. It's an institution that produces editions of Shakespeare, and trains teachers, so it's a place that is multi... I would say sometimes it feels like it's five nonprofits rolled into one. But it's situated two blocks east of the United States Capitol, and my thought on that was it was a polemical act to assert that some form of poetry, theater, history needs to be part of a diverse and democratic society.

WITMORE: I doubt that is how the Folger's founders would've said it or maybe even thought it in the 30s. But I will say that over the 10 years of my tenure here, that statement strikes me as absolutely true, and one of our challenges as a civil society, but as human beings, is really to understand what we can contribute to that diverse and truly democratic society.

SMITH: Great. Well, thank you. So, why don't you have a go at defining [LAUGH] what our caption says to us. Kathleen gave us a very clear sort of setting for that with the questions at the end, but I'd like to hear what you thought because we came up with this together and I'd love to hear your reflections on that.

WITMORE: Well Ian, I thought that your punctuation move was absolutely brilliant, that posing this statement as a question is like putting a mirror up to every person who uses that statement. And I sometimes... when I think of those words, I think of it as a caption, and I put it over the pictures that I see in the newspaper, and it's immediately clear that while it's an aspiration, it's also an admission that maybe this is who we are. And I think both, or the aspiration and the question are true.

WITMORE: But I think we need to grapple with the fact that they are both so real, and the one that demands urgent attention now is the question. How serious are we about being a society that is diverse, inclusive, equitable? Open question.

SMITH: Great. Ibram X. Kendi wrote a piece that echoed this sentiment, this is not who we are but without the question mark. But what he speaks about there in that piece is there's a memorable phrase, a line that he uses, and he says "Denial is the heartbeat of America" he says. And that's the sort of takeaway line from that piece. And scholars who work in whiteness, again and again return to this notion that denial is such an integral part of what it is to be white and the history of the United States.

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: And so I think that one of the things that I think that Kendi wants us to think about there, and I agree with him, is this issue of denial. And maybe defensiveness as well. Right?

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: What do you think about that?

WITMORE: Yeah. I think that's a great point to make. Let me just reflect on it from my own experience. What we learned first from scholarship is that white as a predicate of a person for a long time was seen as just redundant. One implied the other. And over time, and this is, I think, where Kendi's remark really hits home, it's becoming more and more visible that white is specific. It's not generic.

WITMORE: It's not implied. It's something that has a real existence in history

SMITH: Hmm.

WITMORE: And so the adjustment of vision and perception that is required, to make that shift from an invisible property to a specific quality that has with it a history of advantage and violence is itself, something to be acknowledged, but it's, I think, a challenge. The whole structure of whiteness as a kind of assumed perspective rather than just the color of someone's skin. The encompassing perspective whiteness is, I think, the real challenge to people who look at sound like me, and to people who lead institutions that represent canonical figures who have been enrolled in a long history.

WITMORE: Not just of these are great writers, but at times, they've been used to inflict violence. And so I can see why it's hard to acknowledge, and I'll be honest with you, you know, Ian, we've been talking about this for years, but it was a couple of years' process for me to understand how to acknowledge and live in a body that

carries all of that, and to be able to talk about it, and to be honest with you, it's not easy.

SMITH: No, it's not. And it's so interesting that you talk about sort of this conflation of the ideology of whiteness, and the body that carries it in some way. Right? And that conflation makes it very hard to see the distinction between the two.

WITMORE: Right.

SMITH: And but seeing that distinction between the two, in fact, is quite important, because therein lies the possibility for a politics of liberation I would say, right? Because one is not necessarily wedded to the ideology by virtue of the body that carries it.

WITMORE: Right.

SMITH: And understanding that you can separate the two is so critical to that liberation. I think we will come back to that perhaps a little bit more at the end too. But thank you for saying that. As we were speaking, something has occurred to me when you were describing the sort of history of that sort of evolution of this idea of what whiteness is. The term I use for that is systemic whiteness. In the way we should talk about systemic racism, I think there's systemic whiteness to shift our attention to what it is that is the motivating force and factor in so much of what has happened in the history of this country, and what continues to happen today. Right?

SMITH: To talk about systemic racism is to speak indeed about sort of structures that are in place to perpetuate systems of injustice, et cetera. But to zero in on systemic whiteness is to call out a little bit more clearly I think something which is hidden or can be hidden when we speak about systemic racism. So, that in the same way that this caption "This is not who we are" is another form of hiding, because it is about denial. It is about denial that gets overwritten with this notion of idealism. Right?

SMITH: This is an assertion of we are something better, but in saying that, we constantly neglect to speak about the systemic whiteness that's in play. Right? So, it leads me to think about the 19th century French historian Ernest Renan. Renan said, as many people know, but I think it's so critical to speak about it here, that he says all nations are founded in violence on one kind or another. And, so, the function of sort of national stories has let us forget that violence, has let us not remember that that's there. So, this idea of forgetting, I think, needs to be placed side by side beside of denial.

SMITH: That Kendi speaks about as well. That we forget. And I think, you know, I want to tease out that forgetting a little bit more as we go along, but again, it just strikes me as so critical to think about the way we want to forget when we declare this is not who we are. And how we use our idealisms in a way to not just for the

end or goal of making a better society but making us forget where we're coming from.

WITMORE: Yeah.

SMITH: And forget what we are in fact continuing to do.

WITMORE: Yeah. You know, you're asking me a specific version of a more general question. How do we live with memory? And how do we live with the facts on the ground that are left to us from the past? How do we occupy those spaces in some form of responsibility? And what would be a just acknowledgement of that history?

SMITH: Mm-hmm.

WITMORE: My feeling is saying this is not who we are precisely at this moment is not satisfactory. I wouldn't put it away as [LAUGH] an aspiration, because I think there's some true revulsion, even for people who never thought of themselves as beneficiaries of this system which you described in your distinction as white supremacy, but it's an entire ideology. And it's actually got a quite specific history, and it's distributed across institutions and practices and ways of dressing and ways of speaking, ways of reading literature.

WITMORE: It's there. It's pervasive. But the desire to say not that, not now, but this, you know, in any drama, there's a question of what motivates the change. And that change of attention, right? Is part of, I think, a struggle to figure out what is an appropriate acknowledgement, not just of a particular act of violence today, but of an entire raft of ideas and practices.

WITMORE: How we'll... we're not gonna us "we"... how might I be answerable for that? As a citizen, as a friend, as a family member, as a parent. Right? And people will... I mean, my experience is that people will take that on in different parts of their lives and actually you need to ask what parts of my life am I going to take this on in, and how much. But, you know, Ian, to me, that feels like a very different path. It's more a path of trying to come up with a language and but also just a set of commitments, really.

WITMORE: And that's very different from putting a caption on an image.

SMITH: Right. Okay. So, I'm gonna just ask for a little bit of a transition directly to your role, your job, your commitment to being Director of the Folger. Insofar as... I referenced the idea of forgetting. It's important to think about institutions as well,

and their role in terms of remembering. Right? Institutions that whose job it is to not let us forget.

WITMORE: Hmm.

SMITH: Can we ask you a little bit then about the role of the Folger as you imagine it? And what you've been doing there for the last 10 years. Again in your own terms, but also with regard to the question that's on our table today, which is "this is not who we are". You know, what has the Folger done under your tenure, and what will it continue to do?

WITMORE: Well, Ian, to talk about institutions as actors is a funny thing. Institutions and, you know, actually it's important to start by saying the Folger was created and understood as a living memorial to William Shakespeare in the form of a major collection and a landmark building that evokes the English past. So, that was completely deliberate, and the question of what to do with that memorial is an open-ended question for an entire institution.

WITMORE: And the answer, I think, is a set of actions as much as it is a vision for what the institution should be. The second thing I would say is that institutions last, and so, the ways that institutions can act, and I feel very privileged to work there in all those senses of the word, but I feel that there is, you know, it's not one person, it is a bunch of different people who essentially need to agree on the mission. And that includes a board.

WITMORE: So, that's a little bit different from making up your mind about where you sit with a particular history or a particular event. Change in institutions occurs over 10 years. And Director of the Folger, my hope is that on the far side of 10 years, and I've been there for 10 years, the Folger is recognizably more engaged, is bringing all of the history that we not only talk about, but haven't talked about, bringing that all as part of our mission because as you say, memory is a funny thing, and books speak in many tongues. Sometimes a trend which I've seen, which I think is gonna continue, the desire to go into these collections, ask different questions, look for the silences, look for the gaps, build a collection in such a way that there are more voices and experiences represented.

WITMORE: I think that's crucial, and that's an important act of memory. But there's also a cultural change that happens in an institution, and the one that we're going through is one in which a literary figure who, to my mind, has extraordinary power as a poet and playwright, is also wound up in a history of unfreedom, and at

times, for example, colonial violence. And what is our role in acknowledging that history, but also saying here's what we know. Here's where Shakespeare may continue to speak or be someone to engage with in a society that is, I hope, renewing itself by embracing its diversity and confronting racial injustice.

WITMORE: So, what's the end result of that? I think practically for our institution, it means the future is Shakespeare and... which is what else is in the tradition that may need to say something that Shakespeare can't, or well, he shouldn't be asked. And that's certainly I think what teachers need to be thinking about. But also, you know, as a culture, is the institution ready for the truly deep look at what Shakespeare has been for, and a frank accounting for that. I mean, Ian, I'm really not someone who looks a lot in the rearview mirror.

WITMORE: Probably the reason I came to the Folger was because I like to look ahead and ask, "Where should we be?" "What should this place feel like in 10 years?" And I'm gonna say we're, you know, we're halfway there, but we're not there yet. And internally, you know, there's all kinds of opportunities externally to make statements. In fact, what I'm saying right now could be interpreted and frankly is a statement of intent from a leader of an organization. But really, it should be about action and results.

SMITH: So, two things as I listen to you speak. One is you talk about a kind of soul searching, a deep, internal sort of thoughtfulness and of the institution and so on. So, there's that, which I think that's important, obviously. And I want to ask the question about that which is to bring this back to the question I think that is at the core of this conversation today was all about whiteness. How do you do that kind of work in an institution, and this may be a terribly difficult question, but I'm just intrigued to hear what the answer might be.

SMITH: How do you do that work without doing the kind of rigorous self-examination with regard to whiteness... or maybe you have. I don't know. Not you personally. Institution.

WITMORE: Sure.

SMITH: How does the institution do that work without that sort of rigorous self-examination? Because there are risks for not doing that. Right?

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: I think of Charles Mills' description of whiteness, and white epistemology, and he talks about whiteness, and white epistemology as something that is constantly misinterpreting reality. Something that's just constantly sort of misrepresenting the world.

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: And, you know, that's what whiteness and white epistemology does, simply because it's grounded in power, et cetera, et cetera. Right? A historian from the writing in the 90's, David R. Roediger talks about whiteness is, you know, is oppressive and uses its force in particular ways for its own sort of particular ends.

WITMORE: Hmm.

SMITH: And if this institution is a monument to a living monument too, at least in its initial sort of stages, to a particular figure, how do we get to that point where the institution can serve its community? Which I know you value that tremendously.

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: How you serve the community, serve the public in a way that also means that it has done that sort of internal questioning about whiteness that misinterprets, whiteness that mis-acknowledges, whiteness that doesn't recognize reality, that transforms reality to suit its own purposes. That is the constant threat if we listen to what Mills is saying. How does one do that without that kind of work? Or has that work been done?

WITMORE: So, it's not possible to do that without that form of work, and what you're describing is, you know, what I would refer to as internal capacity building.

SMITH: Hmm.

WITMORE: But the Folger is about to embark on a multiyear effort with a partner who has a great deal of experience working with institutions that are coming to grips with the ways in which pervasive white culture, or the loose structures let's

say of white supremacy, and, you know, when I say that, there's academic meaning of that word, and there's the kind of caption of a picture you see in the newspaper. I mean more what you're describing in terms of a pervasive epistemology. And ways of feeling and ways of presenting.

WITMORE: You know, the default assumption that if I am good at reading and pronouncing a line of early modern verse, then I have some moral or intellectual advantage in that I've just demonstrated it. Right? How on earth could that be true? Why would that be true? Why is that a proof point? And finding the subtle ways, the policy ways, the hiring practices, the leadership selection processes, all of that is part of I think an internal reflection.

WITMORE: But the other side of it, Ian, is I think that institutions have to act, and my hope is that the programming that's been online and in person for several years now is a proof point that an institution with a history like ours, which is a white founded institution for a canonical writer who carries a lot of baggage both good and bad, right? That that type of institution can be a place where people see clearly what the past has been, and then can see past it, and the first has to happen.

WITMORE: So, you know, you could ask the question well, why should the Folger Shakespeare Library talk about race at all? And why even enter that conversation? Why talk about Shakespeare as a white writer when whiteness, you know, wasn't even invented in the 17th century. Well, the reason why is because the horizon of expectation now includes all kinds of assumptions about what it means to be a person who understands Shakespeare, who represents Shakespeare. You know, I was speaking with someone about six months ago who said to me "When I walk into the Folger, I feel underdressed." You know, so what does that mean?

WITMORE: There's a certain kind of antiquarian formality...

SMITH: Yeah.

WITMORE: That comes straight from the 19th century and is connected to these ideologies that exist as invisible until someone calls attention to it.

SMITH: Right. So, of course I couldn't sit here and not say that, you know, the piece that I referenced at the beginning of our conversation talked about, you know, whiteness as something that began in the 17th century. Gary Taylor also has this argument about whiteness starting maybe in 1613 or something, and I'd just like to

say that I disagree with both those people. I think that whiteness is something that predates those dates, that we can find whiteness as clearly as a kind of very much racial concept in Shakespeare even in the plays that are in the end of the 16th century.

SMITH: I just have to go on record to say that, you know, and we can have that conversation another day about what...

WITMORE: Ian if I could just... an addendum. You know, what I know from machine learning techniques apply to the corpus of words from both drama and from the history of print in the early modern period, mostly text by English, it is very clear that white, as an adjective, is systematically connected to positive virtues, and this is empirical. I mean, this is at the level of habit and repeated uses of words hundreds, thousands, thousands of times. I don't think that raft of association, which we're going to learn more and more about, and be able to document more and more of, I don't think that comes about by accident.

SMITH: Oh, absolutely not. And I can tell you as... and I'm sure that many in our audience as teachers, you know, on a daily basis as we do this work, it is something that becomes clearer and clearer as we teach and do the research that that is absolutely not at all extent. As I say, we could do that discussion and find examples another time. But I just think it's important to not let those kinds of statements go unchallenged because I think then to say that, then we lock ourselves into a version of well, this wasn't really said about Shakespeare. Whiteness wasn't there. And so we're doing sort of addendum work.

SMITH: Which I think does harm to the scholarship.

WITMORE: Hmm. Mm-hmm.

SMITH: It doesn't make the scholarship accurate at all. After all, those of us who have done, you know, critical race studies work, we've lived so long with another version of that about the field. Oh, race didn't exist before X blah blah blah. And what that meant was Blackness as race didn't exist. Right? So, we've lived with that so long, so, you know, if I'm eager to just underscore those points, it is because I think when those claims are made about critical race studies to begin, they were made in part because people may not have done the work.

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: But remain in part to also stall the work that people were doing.

WITMORE: Hmm.

SMITH: To not make it happen. And so, you know, I just wouldn't want to see us fall to that trap again of doing that, so it stalls the work.

WITMORE: Sure.

SMITH: And misrepresents the work. The very word that I used early on in regard to Charles Mills, right? The constant misrepresentation of our field because it serves a particular other kind of purpose. Not historical fact, not sound scholarship, but ideology. Right?

WITMORE: Yeah.

SMITH: So, I just wanted to call that out.

WITMORE: I just wanna add a little bit of punctuation to that, Ian. I think also there is a level of... so, there's a long tradition of, actually, studies of race and what we would call racial identity that goes much further back than, you know, recent special articles in Shakespeare Quarterly. Goes far back. And there's a genealogy there that is one of continuous scholarship, debate, discovery.

SMITH: Absolutely.

WITMORE: Right? And now you add the urgency, which was always felt by people who experience racial injustice, but the more widespread acknowledgement that there must be a history here that is there for real discussion.

SMITH: Yeah.

WITMORE: That, combined with the intellectual intensity of this field... I mean, as someone who works in a building where a lot of research happens in Shakespeare studies, being able to say that the level of intellectual intensity is so high, and that it's not a kind of a fad. I mean, I don't think there's anything wrong with passing waves of scholarship and response to urgent human problems and needs. That's part of what we do. We respond as rapidly as we can.

SMITH: Right.

WITMORE: But I wouldn't want anyone to mistake the more recent-ism of thinking about scholarship on race, racism, and Shakespeare for a long history of deep inquiry, and now, I mean, these discussions are at the richness point where, and clearly this is gonna be a research program for another 30 years. Right? Or 50.

SMITH: No, well, thank you for saying that. I do appreciate you're also underscoring that. Before we move onto something else, I just wanted to ask this question. You know, when we speak about race, we talk about, at least, the sort of the two-step version of it, right? The idea that Blackness is about race, and then now whiteness is about race, but then there are also other sort of ethnic and racial categories that we also think about. The Folger's supportive of all kinds of work, but as an institution, does it see itself prepared to do that two-step sort of, again, internal work that will allow the, you know, just better work to get done?

WITMORE: Mm-hmm. Could you say just a little more about the two step?

SMITH: Yes, well, that may just be the wrong expression I'm using. What I mean is, you know, when we say race, sometimes the fault is, oh, we're talking about Blackness and people who are not white.

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: In last year's conversations, today's conversations, we're talking about whiteness as a racial category. Right? You know, the long history of whiteness that scholars have shown repeatedly is that whiteness wants to be invisible, and it makes itself so invisible, et cetera. Right? And so I'm saying now that we're talking about whiteness as a very visible sort of racial category as well, I'm saying that there are two obvious ways to think about race. There's traditional non-white, and the other white. And the other sort of categories that we can place under the non-white.

WITMORE: Hmm.

SMITH: How does the Folger sort of see itself, what I call doing... in other words, I mean, they're two sides of one coin, obviously. But, you know, how does the Folger sort of see itself... because for a long time, sure, you know, we were thinking okay, we're gonna talk about the race projects that are really non-white projects.

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: What about the projects that are about whiteness? And how do you see those two things having dialogue? How do you see that going forward?

WITMORE: That's a very interesting question, Ian, and, you know, I'll confess to not having posed it to myself in quite that way.

SMITH: Mm-hmm.

WITMORE: Which is why I like talking to you, because you give me a different way of formulating the question. So, whiteness as a research program, right, is something that has been advancing and will continue to advance in our collections, that is understanding the pervasiveness in history of that perspective and mindset in epistemology. That's an intellectual venture. I think it will go all the way into cataloging and the descriptive practices that we use to refer to materials and make them accessible and available.

WITMORE: But it's a program, and it has kind of an intellectual basis in the shift in perception that you just described, which is the other half of the binary as seen as interested and historical. So, whiteness as a topic for investigation. But I think there's also a question of awareness, right, and what is it about a particular programming choice, let's say, who's on stage, who's directing, what do the notes say, who's coming to that show, what communities have had a say in, hey, this is the kind of programming I wanna see. Who was asked?

WITMORE: You know, those types of practices, and the Folger has been engaged in in those activities since our doors closed for renovation. But being in dialogue with communities who may not have felt invited to be here, may not have felt like it was for them, may not have felt free to speak about what they want, like, and don't like.

But showing up and listening as a way of them raising awareness about what an institution knows or doesn't know, and being curious about that, right, is about awareness. And it's gonna manifest itself in choices.

WITMORE: You know, a lot of times the question for me boils down to accountability. Accountability is important, and there are reasons why people who are in leadership positions, because they're accountable for the results. And the tricky part here, I think, is that there was a limited window of accountability around range of address, the diversity of perspectives, the representation of persons, the self-awareness on staff, all of that, say, years ago, right, would not have been part of a job interview question, and would not have been part of a strategic plan or a year's performance goal as, you know, in academia, you know, you get to kinda do what you want. [LAUGH]

WITMORE: If you have tenure. But, you know, in a nonprofit, you work for a board and I do answer for the progress we make or don't make. And I think that every time the conversation comes back to accountability, and accountable for what? We're given an opportunity to be aware of the aspects of our culture, whether that's the phenomenon that you've been studying, and we've been talking about whiteness, whether it's economic exclusion, whether it's the feeling of exemption. Many of the institutions that are on the Federal Mall feel no connection to the District of Columbia and its culture.

WITMORE: Its leadership, its citizens. There's a lot in there to address and change, but I'm very proud of the Folger's resolve, and by that I mean the staff and the board, to not be incurious, but in fact, ask what are the invisible or unacknowledged forces that are making it hard for us to actually deliver on a mission that is about addressing the full range of the human experience, acknowledging those conflicts that continue to divide us, and remaining aspirational. Right? I have to believe in both sides of that and that they're connected.

SMITH: No, thank you so much for saying that. And again, I just wanna repeat, I do know, having, you know, spoken with you for a number of years, that you're deeply committed to this and this sort of awareness and responsibility and accountability to the community. And I think that's so important, and really... commendable doesn't do justice, but, you know, it's the right and just thing.

WITMORE: Well, and it's also a part of the mission.

SMITH: Yes.

WITMORE: I mean, I'm now engaged in institution speak, but until it's put forward as core to the mission calling and reason for being of an institution, it's not going to be a major part of how institutions make choices and how they act.

SMITH: Yeah. I know that you're also interested in this question of the humanities of the moment, of course, right? We just heard... is it this week? That Howard University's decided to dissolve its classics department, so, you know, there's a lot to think about there. But again, even prior to that...

WITMORE: Cornel West has just written about that.

SMITH: Yes. Yes. West and Tate¹ wrote a piece together about that. And I know you're deeply interested in committing [to this side of humanity?] so I want to give you a chance to sort of talk about that, one of your, you know, heartfelt favorite subjects.

WITMORE: Sure. Well, I think that there's a role for the humanities to play in convening conversations about hard topics that must be resolved in equitable dialogue with the benefit of historical knowledge and critical thought. That's a long sentence. But there are some conditions that have to be met, which the humanities have been working on for a long time, that could inform the way institutions think about their history, their choices, who they serve. Those conditions I think the humanities have done a reasonably good job in finding and identifying.

WITMORE: And the proof point there is that many of the things that we're talking about and struggling with, and many of the places where answers are coming from are experts with deep backgrounds in the humanities who have done the work, and who have the benefit of the intellectual traditions that you and I were discussing that inform debate. And so, you know, conversation, that's a tricky, slippery word. Right? What's actually going on there?

WITMORE: Conversations that hold us to account to each other, and to the facts on the ground are the gold standard. In my opinion. Now, there's debate on the House floor and the Senate floor, and that is a more oratorical conversation. And actually that's quite important, and Shakespeare's played a role in all of that. But I'm more interested in Shakespeare as a place or a medium that we go to, and I think of your

¹ Jeremy Tate

work. Frankly, I... just in recent memory, Kim Hall, Margo Hendricks, Arthur Little, Ayanna Thompson, you know, the ways in which this cadre of thinkers and scholars have said well, I mean, we could talk about how great Shakespeare is, but let's not.

WITMORE: I mean, of course, you can talk all about that. Let's talk about it as a place for thinking about who gets to speak, what stories are remembered, and because it's a litmus test that kind of goes decade by decade and holds that mirror, right, it's the question... this is not who we are?

SMITH: Mm-hmm.

WITMORE: You know, Ophelia... we know what we are, but we know not what we may be. I mean, for some people, that would be an empty statement, but it's a pretty good encapsulation of a dialogue that needs to happen, and, you know, can we measure the results of that dialogue, and can we know that it is always sincere? No. Do we know something about the conditions under which those dialogues become productive? Yes.

WITMORE: It means including the largest possible range of perspectives and voices at the table, supplementing those conversations with a long history of scholarship and thinking, and speaking to the histories and experiences we bring to the table with us as people who think and live.

SMITH: Thank you. Well, a few years ago now, I invited you to come to my school at Lafayette, and one of the topics that was, you know, Shakespeare, Race, and the Practical Humanities. So, and you were splendid at that presentation that you gave. And so I just want to circle back again to this idea of is there an opportunity at this moment for this kind of work? This work on critical race studies, and Shakespeare. Is there an opportunity for that kind of work to step into that place because the humanities have been sort of, you know, battered and bruised it would appear for, you know, so long.

SMITH: And how do we maintain, and, you know, and justify in the face of sometimes what feels like skepticism, role of the humanities? How can we do that? And I think that the work that you just mentioned, the work that Kim and Arthur and Ayana are doing, right, that that kind of work says the humanities has a role to play. That it asks the kinds of questions, and has the kinds of engagement that other disciplines can't quite do...

WITMORE: That's right.

SMITH: Or do as well as humanities can.

WITMORE: Well Ian, there's a reason why you organized that conference, and you spoke beautifully and eloquently about exactly this topic. There is a special role for the humanities to play, and you know, I'll put it in a negative way, but I hope it makes sense. If your goal was to prove that the humanities no longer matter, that we could just leave them behind. Unfund them. Okay? If that was your goal, and maybe there's some administrators out there who feel that way, if that was your goal, one proof point would be for someone to stand up and say the humanities really have nothing special to contribute to this important conversation we're having now about race, about literature, about history.

WITMORE: Right? [CLEARS THROAT] That is the evidence. That's not the only piece of evidence, but it's certainly one of the most powerful that we have today. And I hope that our institution, as a place that has traditionally been associated with an exclusionary, almost mythical form of white excellence, could be an important place to lead or follow a conversation about a different future.

WITMORE: And it's significant that that happens in a place like the Folger, in the location like Washington DC, around a writer who has the global and classroom purchase of William Shakespeare.

SMITH: You reference the Cornel West piece, and I'd just like to quote a little bit from that, because I think it picks up just exactly what we're talking about. And the passage I want to quote is they say "The removal of the classics is a sign that we, as a culture, have embraced from the youngest age utilitarian schooling at the expense of soul-forming education. To end this spiritual catastrophe, we must restore true education, mobilizing all of the intellectual and moral resources we can to create human beings of courage, vision and civic virtue."

SMITH: The phrases, right? Spiritual catastrophe.

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: Soul searching education. He was speaking about, of course, the classics at Howard, but if we're thinking about... as I understand it and I think you do too, the

significance of having discussions about race, justice, equity. And that we, so many of us, working in early modern studies have pursued those concerns relative to Shakespeare and early modern writers. That we are, I think, engaged in precisely those things.

SMITH: The soul searching. Not necessarily sit around pondering, but as scholars and as intellectuals saying who are we as a field? And who are we in terms of doing this sort of history that we're involved in, who are we? And what are we doing to do? Right?

WITMORE: Yeah.

SMITH: It's one of the things, again, you know, a term that I've used before, this idea of racial literacy, which is in my mind, you know, becoming competent in the history and forms of expression of race and its epistemology, and it's the competence that you then translate into not just knowledge for knowledge sake, but learning how to be in relation to others. And learning how to be in relation to oneself.

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: So, I think that this work that you just described that scholars are doing, and that the Folger has supported, I think it's so critical at this moment where we continue to think about the role of the humanities. Our time is about... oh, sorry.

WITMORE: Oh, no, I couldn't agree more, Ian, and there was a word you used, spiritual, which I think a lot of academics have allergies to.

SMITH: [LAUGH]

WITMORE: Okay. And it does not fit in the elegant vocabulary which we grew up learning from Foucault and others, but [LAUGH] I mean, one of the things we talked about when we first started talking as colleagues and we were talking about race. I remember, we were in the hotel in St. Louis at the SAA, and you said something to me that really struck me. You said, "One of my challenges as a thinker and academic is that I operate in a field where I cannot bring my entire self and what I know to the table."

WITMORE: And that was such a clear expression to me, not just of an intellectual loss for our field, okay, and there are huge consequences to that, but I think some of the work is also speaking to a spiritual catastrophe. And I don't mean that in a new age sense, I just mean a sense of what we owe each other and ourselves.

SMITH: I completely agree. I think that's true. And so when in fact West and Tate used that word, spiritual, as you said, it's not the kind of word that we often use in our typical sort of academic discourse, but what are we doing?

WITMORE: Yeah. What does that mean?

SMITH: Yes, right?

WITMORE: What is it? Why is no one allowed to talk about it? [LAUGH]

SMITH: Because we can talk about existence, right?

WITMORE: Right.

SMITH: Existence is also a way of talking about our existence as spiritual people. Again, how we are in relation to one another.

WITMORE: Absolutely.

SMITH: That's what I see as spiritual in that sense, too. Right? And that's what we're pursuing I think. We have a few minutes to go before we open up for Q and A, but I do want to ask about possible... for the future, what do we see for the future, Michael? Any possible remedies? I mean, that's always a sort of grand gesture to ask if there're remedies. I don't know what the remedies might be, but do you have any thoughts about that?

WITMORE: Well, one of them is for institutions to take momentum which can be passing, and to build them into lasting structures. So, my hope for the Folger is that its discussion and knowledge of our own history, but also where racial injustice sits as a barrier to the kind of conversations and true inquiry that you and I were just describing. That actually can be built into a long-term practice. So, there's a role,

and you can tell I'm an institutionalist. I'm optimistic that institutions can play that role.

WITMORE: I'm not gonna go much further than that, but I would say, you know, I think about the title of the dialogue today, which does have an almost empirical, you know, it's a question about a state of affairs.

SMITH: Mm-hmm.

WITMORE: And I wonder if we were to have this same conversation a year from now, would the state of affairs have changed, or would our perspective on it have changed. And so, you invited me, but I would love if we could repeat the dialogue, and I'm not proposing [LAUGH]... I don't wanna muscle in on the Shakespeare Birthday Lecture. That's its own forum and standard, but I wonder if a return to the question could be productive.

SMITH: I welcome that because I think you're quite right. Earlier we talked about this idea of institutions forgetting, institutions and imagining change and so on, and, you know, one of the things that we're being asked to forget historically, but we're seeing in recent years we can't forget... and we've sort of come full circle, it's sort of this... the constant sort of death toll of the bodies. Right?

SMITH: This month, in April, it's 100 years since the Black Wall Street devastation in Tulsa, Oklahoma where 1,400, homes and businesses were destroyed. Ten thousand people left homeless. Hundreds killed. And the newspapers reporting it reported X number of white deaths.

WITMORE: Hmm.

SMITH: The Black deaths were not recorded.

WITMORE: Hmm. Mm-hmm.

SMITH: And so, again, the concept of forgetting of Black life. So, I think you're absolutely right as we, you know, we've gone from, you know, you know, from Michael Brown, Eric Garner, through to George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daunte

Wright. We're being asked to forget, and this is why in some sense this has become so pivotal, people are wondering are we gonna be asked to forget again?

WITMORE: Yeah. That's a good point. Yep.

SMITH: And so, I do think that your question and proposition, which is a year from now what will our answers look like? I think it's an important sort of empirical test. I think you're absolutely right. For ourselves as a culture, and certainly for the work we do to ask ourselves those questions. So, I absolutely would welcome that for sure. And I hope that this welcome that too. Yeah. Yeah, go ahead, Mike.

WITMORE: No. I'm seeing the questions coming, but this is not who we are question mark as a repeated forum with its own humanities thrust, but an invitation to reflection. I see the first question that came in is what will it take for white Americans to leave behind their denial of who we are? Well, begin with asking the question is this who we are?

WITMORE: Feel permission to ask that question. If you need to ask it alone, do it, but if you need to do it in dialogue with others who are ready for that dialogue, that is the time to act. And I do think there's a struggle... I'm now gonna just generalize, but I think there is a struggle for white Americans to take that... now how can someone take in an entire epistemology and their entire history. Use me, for example.

WITMORE: An entire history of living in that matrix. Right? Who does that? Well, it doesn't happen in an instant. [LAUGH]

SMITH: Right.

WITMORE: Right? And I just think that perhaps one of the greatest problems is what I would call incuriosity. It will take some drive if you're the person in this question who has to ask this question. It can't all come from the outside, because frankly, the world will become saturated with these images of violence, and then we'll be forgetting impulse.

SMITH: Yeah. Michael Eric Dyson was actually asked that same question recently, and he answered in part in what you did. He said look, talk to people. And then, you know, start reading. [LAUGH] Right?

WITMORE: Hit your bookshelf. Hit your bookshelf.

SMITH: Yes. Be curious. Speak to other people other than the people you'd normally have in your close, sort of small circle. Listen to other points of view, et cetera, et cetera. And, you know, I mentioned at the beginning that I took my cue for this is not who we are from listening to Kendi, and he said something quite interesting along those lines. He says "Whenever an American engages in a racist act, and someone points it out, an inevitable response is the sound of that denial. I am not racist."

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: It can't be "I was being racist, but I'm going to try to be antiracist." It is always "I am not racist." No wonder the racist acts never stop. So, there's an interesting little thing here, right? Just "I was being racist, but I'm gonna try to be antiracist." That's a good place to start.

WITMORE: And the script is really short.

SMITH: Yep.

WITMORE: You don't have to see a whole Shakespeare play to-to learn that interaction.

SMITH: That's right. But what you said earlier was also very important, that this doesn't happen in an instant. It's work that is long. It's work that is slow, it happens over a period of time to actually know that. Right? So, as you said, it requires curiosity and requires the will, but don't expect to be transformed in an instant to use that phrase.

WITMORE: Oh gosh, and...

SMITH: It is slow, hard sometimes, but hopefully rewarding work.

WITMORE: You're reminding me of a story. I once worked in an institution that owned a First Folio and the special collections librarian invited me to have a look, and before we touched it, she asked me to wash my hands, because she said, "Clean heart, clean hands."

SMITH: [LAUGH] Oh.

WITMORE: And I thought about that a lot. But I think if you're a person who has the feeling of "I'm a moral person, I've got a good heart, I treat people around me right", that's not really the same thing as asking, "Am I antiracist?"

SMITH: It's not.

WITMORE: And there's some shame and anger in the mirror moment of recognizing well, I could be a lovely person and write great thank you notes and wash my hands before I touch a First Folio, all that might be true..

SMITH: Yeah.

WITMORE: But that's not really the point here.

SMITH: No, it's not. It's what scholars call the Good White Person Syndrome. Right? It's I'm a good white person, so how can, you know, anything else be wrong or off here? And so you're absolutely right. It requires more than that. And this goes back, again, to what you said earlier about that sort of separating out of the body and the ideology.

WITMORE: Yeah.

SMITH: Being a good white person is, you know, is in some sense about learning good manners. It's of the same kind of thing. Right? But how do I treat the person next to me? How do I think about the person next to me? How do I want to imagine their justice for that person? How they live their lives. Right? That's what I to sort of begin to ask myself those questions. Then humility comes with that, I think. And humility is oh my goodness, being a good white person is not enough, is it? You know, but that's what all important moments of self-interrogation are all about.

WITMORE: Yep.

SMITH: It comes with humility of there's more for me to do.

SMITH: That's everybody.

WITMORE: Why not be a better person? A better white person.

SMITH: Better good white...

WITMORE: Like, why not try... you know, what is the curriculum for that? Even if it's just etiquette. You were talking about racial competency, in other words, knowing the history. But addressing these unconscious acts and behaviors, the acts of to oppress, and introduce inequity in an environment. Right? I mean, I'm not talking about a manners school. Right? But on a certain level, there's a kind of merely behavioral set of competencies that actually have to be in place for a successful workplace, for a successful academic environment.

WITMORE: Just that's the case. But, you know, as you speak, Ian, I think, well, what is the curriculum for the thing you're talking about? And I bet Shakespeare could... could, doesn't have to be, could be a part of that.

SMITH: I think Shakespeare could play a significant role in that because he has such cultural capital. So, we can use that to very good ends.

WITMORE: Right.

SMITH: Oh, you're absolutely right. As you were talking about the sort of remedy, then one of the... and, you know, we talked about slow, hard work. I was also in fact thinking about this question of well, what will curriculum look like if we try to do this thing that I'm called racial literacy? What does that look like? Well, first of all, we have to graduate students to meet the moment and time that we're in. That's what we have to do. Educate students in the sort of, you know, utilitarian only way, which is, you know, what West and Tate are talking about.

SMITH: It's not enough. Right? Because people can be skilled, but not know how to be skilled in treating other people well. And so the idea that we need to have a curriculum which if we let's say I teach at an undergrad institution, if you have four years, what do we do with those four years? And that's tough, because, you know, departments, disciplines have their own investments and so on. But if you have to think beyond that, then we have four years where we could actually do some work in taking students through the slow, careful... because repetition is important part of this.

WITMORE: [LAUGH]

SMITH: Repetition is part of this slow work.

WITMORE: Like learning a language.

SMITH: Yes. But that would have to require sort of reimagining of the whole curriculum, and reimagining of the humanities, you know, can do, et cetera.

WITMORE: We're supposed to be good at that.

SMITH: Sorry? We are right?

SMITH: We're supposed to be good at that.

SMITH: But it also has to do with reimagining what whiteness is. That's what we have to.

WITMORE: It's part of... or the move.

SMITH: Yeah.

WITMORE: And we're in a phase of the conversation where you and I are egging each other on, which I think means that we've found our rhythm. There are questions still coming. Are there any of these, Ian, that you would like for us to respond to?

SMITH: Oh, I haven't even looked at them. I was hoping you would choose.

WITMORE: All right. Okay.

SMITH: I'm completely relying on you to choose them. Okay?

WITMORE: I'm happy to be the altimeter here and see where we ought to go. Where do you see scholars successfully meeting the challenge of systemic racism in the academy, and where are they falling short?

SMITH: I'll have a go at this. I think that we see people... let's speak about the work and sort of Critical Race studies. I think we do see people being more and more interested, attracted to recognizing the importance of doing this work. Right? And you referenced that.

SMITH: We're in part of the excitement around this work now in really sharp contrast to the sort of earlier days it felt like we were rowing a boat uphill. Now, you know, people are attracted to it. But here is the thing, and if I seem as if I'm beating the drum, because it's critical. The two things I think that we need to bear in mind when that happens, so we want to attract more people because we think this work is important, so obviously that is true. On the one hand, there is also... and this takes us back to the point I made when I cited Charles Mills that whiteness has its own sort of protocols and its own sort of dispensations and its own ways of doing things.

SMITH: Right? When we brought the field, you know, the names we mentioned earlier, Kim, Arthur, and so on, right? These are scholars of color, these are African American scholars who are invested for a long time, so there's a long time doing the work, learning, et cetera.

WITMORE: [INAUDIBLE]

SMITH: Right? When you have the field opened up and you have white scholars coming into the field, to be direct and blunt about it, then there's always the danger on the one hand of a sort of near colonial attitude. If whiteness is some colonizing by nature as, you know, some of the people I mentioned, the scholars I mentioned...

SMITH: then it means that we have to be alert to... everybody has to be alert to that near colonizing those moves might be... if the field is going to grow and survive. If not, it will be damaged severely.

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: But on the other hand, there is, again, the question of if whiteness is grounded in its own sort of will to misrepresent, as Charles Mills would say. Then we have to ask ourselves once again, when that sort of intellectual disposition confronts the work of race, what happens?

WITMORE: [LAUGH] Well, the work of race is to confront that disposition.

SMITH: Yeah.

WITMORE: Yeah. I also think about accountability in scholars to each other. You know, I wasn't trained in Critical Race studies or early modern race studies. I was trained by new historicists and intellectual historians and came to this work quite late. I expect my colleagues to pay attention to the way I am advancing, or research agenda, or institutional agenda. And there are ways of creating accountability.
[LAUGH]

WITMORE: But you have a very important point about, you know, what will this field feel like in 10 years?

SMITH: But I think we have to be alert to that.

WITMORE: Uh huh.

SMITH: And be aware of that... for multiple reasons. One, for the state of the field, but also for the work that's going to get done.

WITMORE: Sure. Sure.

SMITH: You know, we can be attracted to doing something, but we have to also know what our strengths and weaknesses are when we're doing that something. Right? And so I really do think it's a critical thing that we have to address or will have to address, and it may not be a comfortable thing for people to hear.

WITMORE: Mm-hmm.

SMITH: But this work is too important to think about discomfort.

WITMORE: The work is more important.

SMITH: Exactly. And more often than not, discomfort can be a very productive thing. Intellectual discomfort, I mean is an important thing.

WITMORE: Yeah. Yep. Yep. Nope. I see Kathleen reappearing, which must mean something.

LYNCH: It must mean that we don't have to stop this conversation because we are all agreed, we're picking it up again. And I've got [LAUGH]... I've got our slightly rearranged topic sentence for us. We're working with the who we are, and maybe asking ourselves who we can be together, next time. How much work have we done in this next year to pick up the conversation with who we can be together.

WITMORE: Well, we will get the caption right.

LYNCH: Okay.

WITMORE: I bet six months from now it'll hit us, a different one.

SMITH: Of course.

LYNCH: Right.

WITMORE: Let's hold the occasion, Ian, if you're willing, and we'll just continue the conversation.

SMITH: Thank you so much. I'm more than willing. And thank you. Very gracious and generous of you.

WITMORE: Well, I'm really, really pleased and flattered to be invited to speak with you.

LYNCH: Thank you both. You give us so much to think about in terms of the basic human relationships of our everyday lives, and the significance of approaching them with humility, with generosity, in a much more welcoming style. I really appreciate this conversation. Thank you.

SMITH: Thank you.

LYNCH: Let me thank also those of you who have joined with us and have been with us for this series. A special thanks to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for their support of this series. Our next episode [LAUGH] as it were, is May 27th at 3:00 PM Eastern Standard Time on premodern race and religion. Lindsay Kaplan of Georgetown University, Mayte Green-Mercado of Rutgers University, and Rachael Shine of the University of Colorado, Boulder will be with us talking about that topic. So, finally, in concluding appeal, during our renovation project, and Mike, you've been talking about this, the work that we're doing internally, the opportunity we've had to step back a little bit from the day-to-day work and think deeply about where we wanna go.

LYNCH: Using all of this time to imagine and plan new ways of offering thoughtful and innovative and more integrated across the institution kinds of programs. We're working hard to bring collections, research, performance in teaching into a more intentional, organic whole. At the Folger it's work we're proud to do, it's work we're privileged to do. We ask for your continuing support if you can. If you're in a position to contribute, we'll be grateful. Our institution was founded on philanthropy, and your philanthropy will help us to continue to address these fundamentally important questions, not just about scholarship and teaching, but how we live. How we live together in our society.

LYNCH: And to bring many more people into these conversations. So, again, thank you for being with us, thank you Ian, thank you Mike, hope to see many of you again next month.