

Primer for an

Impossible

Conversation

TUE, FEB 23, 2021
6 PM

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Marcella Murray, David
Neumann, and Tei Blow
for Advanced Beginner
Group with Mikki Kendall

Primer for an Impossible Conversation

Running time is 75 minutes including interactive moderation by author Mikki Kendall. To participate, sign in to the chat function on Vimeo.

This performance is best experienced using headphones.

Cocreators and performers David Neumann, Marcella Murray, and Tei Blow

Guest appearances Julius Powell and Hyung-Seok Jeon

Technical design and direction Tei Blow

Assistant editor Hyung-Seok Jeon

Producer Boo Froebel

Guest speaker/moderator Mikki Kendall

Images from "How to Stage Your Show Without Being Super Racist" by Makoto Hirano are used with permission of the artist.

Original images from *Distances Smaller Than This Are Not Confirmed* used in *Primer* were taken by Peter Richards.

FROM THE CURATOR

In the past year, many generations of racial, economic, and cultural violences came thundering into the public eye. At the historic 2021 United States presidential inauguration, the words of poet Amanda Gorman's ringing performance lingered in many of our minds (and on our social media streams): "And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us / but what stands before us." But to what extent do connection and shared goals require dissent and disagreement? If performance is adept at blurring fiction and reality, creators David Neumann, Marcella Murray, and Tei Blow take it one step further. Together they imagine (virtual) theater as a place to experience difficult dialogues with complexity—and uncertainty. *Primer* is theater as conversation, conversation as theater. Just as COVID-19 has demanded new ways of communicating, with this newly commissioned work the artists ask one another (and their audience) to experience each other—sometimes with discomfort—through the screen. The "social distancing" here is both spatial and political, and ultimately for the good of everyone.

This event itself blurs formats: it is our first time presenting a performance as a Dialogue Series conversation and our first time doing a fully virtual, livestreamed theatrical production. I'm thrilled that Chicago's own Mikki Kendall, brilliant Black feminist author, advocate, and thinker, will join the artists in their productive uncertainty. As Gorman recited, this society is not broken, "but simply unfinished."

Tara Aisha Willis
Associate Curator, Performance and Public Practice

ABOUT THE WORK

"*Primer for an Impossible Conversation* is an articulation of two people's desire to walk through fraught territories, and try to undo, even a little, what sustains our unjust system. As we imagine spaces beyond earth, we wonder if we're able to undo the patterns of thought we've inherited.

When we made *Distances Smaller Than This Are Not Confirmed* for the stage last year, Marcella asked: "What DO Black folks get out of this sort of thing besides teaching someone else something fundamental...again?"

— David Neumann

"I still cannot answer that question fully. The hope is to always create less suffering.

However, I do find myself learning more about how I have internalized the current systems and expectations. I am unable to accept the imbalances with the same unawareness that I once did. As we work, the cost of it becomes clearer and makes obvious what must change.

We have found ourselves in a place where I get to explore the question of what I would do when we intentionally center my perspective. Which is new."

— Marcella Murray

SOURCES INFORMING THE ARTIST'S WORK

Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, Dr. Jill Tarter, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Richard Dawkins, WNET, astronaut accounts, Marcella Murray, David Neumann, Julius Powell, Tei Blow, Melanie George, The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, R&B from the 1980s, Janelle Monae, N. K. Jemisin, NASA, SETI Institute, and Bill Bryson

SOME ANTI-RACISM RESOURCES

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson. [Available for purchase](#) at Semicolon, a Black woman-owned, Chicago-based bookstore.

Resmaa Menakem's practice of somatic abolitionism and his books *Rock the Boat: How to Use Conflict to Heal and Deepen Your Relationship* and *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. These books are available on his [website](#).

[Race Forward](#)

[People's Institute for Survival and Beyond](#)

[The Blacksmiths Racial Equity Toolkit](#)

Books by Chicago-based author and activist Mikki Kendall are available [at the MCA Store](#).



TOP: David Neumann, Marcella Murray, and Tei Blow for Advanced Beginner Group, production still for *Primer for an Impossible Conversation*. Image composite: Tei Blow. BOTTOM: David Neumann and Marcella Murray, production still from *Distances Smaller Than This Are Not Confirmed*, Abrons Arts Center, 2020. Photo: Maria Baranova.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

TEI BLOW (Cocreator/Performer) is a media designer and performer based in Brooklyn. Blow's work incorporates photography, video, and sound culled from found materials and mass media alongside live instrumentation. He performs music as Frustrator on Enemies List Recordings and is one half of Royal Osiris Karaoke Ensemble, whose ongoing multipart series *The Art of Luv* is a recipient of the Creative Capital and Franklin Furnace Awards. He has performed and designed for Dmitry Krymov Laboratory, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Jodi Melnick, Big Dance Theater, and David Neumann/Advanced Beginner Group. Blow's work has been featured at Hartford Stage, Dance Theater Workshop, PS122/PSNY, Lincoln Center Festival, The Kitchen, BAM, The Public Theater, The Broad Stage, MCA Chicago, MFA Boston, Kate Werble Gallery, Baryshnikov Arts Center, Roundabout Theatre Company, the Wadsworth Atheneum, and at theaters around the world. He is the recipient of a 2015 New York Dance and Performance Bessie Award for Outstanding Sound Design for David Neumann/Advanced Beginner Group's *I Understand Everything Better*. Blow is currently a Baryshnikov Arts Center Cage/Cunningham Fellow.

BOO FROEBEL (Producer) is an independent producer, curator & creative consultant, currently general manager for Tamizdat; consultant for Bloomberg Philanthropies' AIM/Arts Innovation & Management program; and producer for David Neumann & Marcella Murray's projects for Advanced Beginner Group (*Distances Smaller Than This Are Not Confirmed*, 2020 Obie Award, and *Primer for an Impossible Conversation*). Previously, Froebel served as producer of Lincoln Center Festival and The Onassis Festival; executive producer of the Imagine Festival of Arts, Issues & Ideas (Obie Award); curator/producer of live art at The Whitney Museum; and artistic director of Galapagos Art Space (Obie Award). Froebel has nominated, evaluated, and served on panels for foundations and cultural councils including Creative Capital, the CalArts Alpert Award, US Artists International, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, the Lambent Foundation, the French Cultural Services, and the MAP Fund. She is a member of The

Blacksmiths collective, and sits on the boards of Movement Research and The Poetry Project.

HYUNG-SEOK JEON (Guest appearance) is a South Korean multi-disciplinary theatre artist based in NYC. He also works as a videographer, film-editor. In 2014, Jeon's video work, including his short film *Autumn* (2014), was installed by the artistic director Robert Wilson at the Watermill Center Annual Benefit. In 2016, he performed in a dance puppetry piece, *Tough the Tough* (Redux: Steve), directed by David Neumann. In 2017, he created and performed in *How a River Carries You* as a part of Puppet Blok 2017 at Dixon Place. 2018, he created and performed a solo piece *A Held Posture* at Theatre Lab, a meditation on generational loss in relation to the sensation of sinking into deep water. He is a recipient of a 2015 Fulbright graduate study award. He graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in 2017 with an MFA in Theatre.

MIKKI KENDALL (Guest speaker/Moderator) is a writer, diversity consultant, and occasional feminist who talks a lot about intersectionality, policing, gender, sexual assault, and other current events. Her essays can be found at *Time*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *Ebony*, *Essence*, *Salon*, *The Boston Globe*, *NBC*, *Bustle*, *The Islamic Monthly*, and a host of other sites. Her media appearances include BBC, NPR, The Daily Show, PBS, Good Morning America, MSNBC, Al Jazeera, WVON, WBEZ, and Showtime. She has discussed race, feminism, education, food politics, police violence, tech, and pop culture at institutions and universities across the country. She is the author of *Amazons, Abolitionists, and Activists: A Graphic History of Women's Fight for Their Rights* (illustrated by A. D'Amico) and *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot*, both from Penguin Random House.

MARCELLA MURRAY (Cocreator/Performer) is a New York-based theater artist from Augusta, Georgia. She is a playwright, performer, collaborator, and puppeteer. Murray's work is heavily inspired by the observed ways people

tend to segregate and reconnect. Her work tends to focus on themes of identity within a community and (hopefully) forward momentum in the face of trauma. Performances include *The Slow Room*, a piece directed by Annie Dorsen at Performance Space New York; a workshop of *Ocean Filibuster*, which was co-created by the team PearlDAmour (Lisa D'Amour and Katie Pearl) with composer Sxip Shirey at Abrons Arts Center; *I Don't Want to Interrupt You Guys*, which was created in collaboration with Leonie Bell and Hyung-Seok Jeon during RAP at Mabou Mines; *New Mony*, created by Maria Camia at Dixon Place; and *Shoot Don't Talk* at St. Ann's Warehouse/Puppet Lab, created by Andrew Murdock. Along with David Neumann, she recently cocreated *Distances Smaller Than This Are Not Confirmed* (Obie Special Citation for Creation and Performance), which opened at Abrons Arts Center in January of 2020. Murray is part of an artist collective called The Midwives.

DAVID NEUMANN (Cocreator, Performer, and Founder of Advanced Beginner Group) original work has been presented in New York at Performance Space New York, New York Live Arts, The Kitchen, Abrons Arts Center, Central Park SummerStage, Celebrate Brooklyn, Symphony Space, The Chocolate Factory, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. ABG has also performed at the Walker Art Center; Carolina Presents; Alverno College; MASS MoCA; The Fusebox Festival; The Ringling International Arts Festival, and the American Dance Institute/Lumberyard, among others.

Neumann worked as a performer for many years alongside Mikhail Baryshnikov; Big Dance Theater; Doug Elkins; Doug Varone; and Sally Silvers among many others. Recent non-ABG projects include: Tony-nominated Choreographer of *Hadestown* (Broadway / National Theater UK / New York Theatre Workshop); *The Total Bent* (Public Theater); *War* (Lincoln Center Theater III/LCT3); *Futurity* (Ars Nova / Soho Rep); *An Octoroon* (Soho Rep/Theater for a New Audience); directing Geoff Sobelle in *The Object Lesson* (BAM / New York Theatre Workshop); *Hagoromo* at BAM with Wendy Whelan and Jock Soto; and Movement Director for Noah Baumbach's film *Marriage Story*. Neumann is currently professor of theater at Sarah Lawrence College.

Neumann's most recent work with Advanced Beginner Group, *Distances Smaller Than This Are Not Confirmed*, in collaboration with Marcella Murray, received a 2020 Obie Award for creation and performance, and 2016's *I Understand Everything Better* received two NY Dance and Performance Bessie Awards, one for Outstanding Production and one for Outstanding Music Composition/Sound Design. In 2016, Neumann was named the first performing artist in Residence at the SETI Institute and awarded a Robert Rauschenberg Residency. Over the years, Neumann has received three Bessie Awards, a Foundation for Contemporary Arts award, an Asian Cultural Council Fellowship (Noh immersive), residencies at MASS MoCA, ADI/Lumberyard, Baryshnikov Arts Center, Mabou Mines, MacDowell, White Oak, and MANCC, and support from the Rockefeller Foundation, Creative Capital, NYFA, and National Dance Project, among others. Neumann received a 2019 Chita Rivera Award for Outstanding Choreography of a Broadway Musical for *Hadestown* and, also for *Hadestown*, a 2019 Tony Award Nomination for Best Choreography.

JULIUS POWELL / JULIE J (Guest appearance) is a New York City based performer, writer, and drag artist. They have performed in various theaters in New York City including Ensemble Studio Theater, TADA Theater, The Dixon Place, The Secret Theater, Hudson Guild Theater, and The Acorn Theater (Off-Broadway) and Abrons Arts Center. Internationally they have performed at Spazio ZUT!, La Mama Umbria, and in the 2019 Prague Fringe Festival. Julius' created work focuses on cultural insertion, relationships between history and identity, and the tactics of escape utilized by marginalized bodies. They are currently developing work that combines drag performance, dance, and experimental modes of storytelling. They are a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and have studied at Upright Citizens Brigade and La Mama Umbria's Directors Symposium. In January 2021 their episodic drag show FAULTY DEFENSE MECHANISMS premiered in the digital ether, or in layman's terms, on YouTube.

ADVANCED BEGINNER GROUP (ABG) is a collection of artists across many disciplines and approaches that come together for specific projects such as *Distances Smaller Than This Are*

Not Confirmed (Obie award-winning), *I Understand Everything Better* (Bessie award-winning), and *Big Eater*. ABG makes work that is at its core an irrational response to our perceived place in the universe. ABG makes pieces from scratch, bringing to word, action, and proximity a delighted embrace of our contradictory lives. Words and actions can only point to experience. The collection of artists actively attempts to create experiences that are difficult to describe. ABG's most recent work, *Distances Smaller Than This Are Not Confirmed*, premiered in January 2020, cocreated by David Neumann and Marcella Murray, cocommissioned and copresented by Abrons Arts Center and The Chocolate Factory Theater, and associate-produced by Mabou Mines.

SUPPORT FOR THIS MCA STAGE PROJECT
Deep gratitude to Kendall Karg for her early producing work to bring this project to fruition, and for her recommendation of Mikki Kendall's work.

Many thanks to the staff at Gotham Artists for bringing Mikki Kendall into this project.

SUPPORT FOR THE ARTISTS
Primer for an Impossible Conversation has been co-commissioned by MCA Chicago and the Wisconsin Union Theater at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with additional major support from the David and Leni Moore Foundation. A complete donor list may be found on advancedbeginnergroupp.org.

Special thanks to Kendall Karg, Tara Aisha Willis, Laura Paige Kyber, Matt Sharp, Matt Test, and the MCA Chicago production crew, Chanel Blanchett, Erica Sweany, Montana Lampert Hoover, Melanie George, Murray Family, Montana Blanco; Abrons Arts Center, the Chocolate Factory Theater, Mabou Mines, MassMoCA, Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography, PS21 Chatham, Baryshnikov Arts Center, the Rauschenberg Residency/ Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, the SETI Institute (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), and the Advanced Beginner Group board of directors (Amanda Brandes, Sue Killam, David Neumann, Margo Sweany).

RELATED PROGRAMS

DIALOGUE SERIES 2021: DISSENT

This presentation marks the start of the MCA's 2021 Dialogue Series, a museum-wide commitment to sustained inquiry about museum practice, equity, and inclusion. The annual series includes eminent speakers presenting innovative, cross-disciplinary work, panel discussions, and opportunities for open dialogue between local arts professionals and audiences. This year we focus on the topic of dissent and how pushing against existing structures strengthens our social bonds. We'll consider how we talk with each other, nurture each other, call each other out, and ask more of each other and the structures around us.

March 19
Open Dialogue: adrienne maree brown on Talking With Each Other

April 6
Open Dialogue: Jason Hammel and Diana Dávila on Feeding Each Other

April 20
Dialogue Keynote: On Dissent with Zainab Salbi

[Click here](#) for more details on the Dialogue Series.

Sat, March 27, 4 pm
MUSIC TALK: JUSTIN VIVIAN BOND WITH JIM HODGES

Acclaimed singer-songwriter, author, painter, performance artist, and actor Justin Vivian Bond chats, riffs, and improvises with longtime friend and collaborator, installation artist Jim Hodges.

MCA Music Talks pair powerhouse musicians pushing the boundaries of musical genres with prolific artists, activists, writers, and thinkers to take on big ideas in art and culture. These intimate evenings of performance and conversation reveal their art world anecdotes, shared ideas, and creative inspirations.

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The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago is committed to fostering social connections and presenting the most thought-provoking creative arts of our time. The MCA commissions and presents performing arts and opportunities for dialogue with leading artists and scholars from Chicago and around the world. These events serve as spaces for gathering throughout the museum and online. The MCA's groundbreaking live experiences are an integral part of the museum'scutting-edge, multi-disciplinary programming. Along with exhibitions, publications, and programs, MCA Performance and Public Practice welcomes visitors to experience the work and ideas of living artists and exercise their own civic voices.

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AT THE MCA BOX OFFICE 220 E Chicago Ave Chicago, IL 60611

Standard single performance tickets starting at \$30; \$10 for students, limited availability.

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Membership at the MCA isn't just discounts—it's about belonging to a community that supports living artists and their work. Members see it first: access invitations to previews, events, and more. Members see it most: receive admission for a year, plus guest passes. Members see it best: shop, dine, and park with exclusive discounts. Join today at mcachicago.org/join.

ZOOM HELP

Questions about getting connected or questions about virtual events at the MCA? Visit mcachicago.org/virtual-help to learn more.

ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION

Select MCA performances and public programs include open-captioning, sign-interpretation, listening devices, or are sensory relaxed. Please call 312-397-4010 in advance to reserve seats and inclusive services.



REPRODUCTION

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