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# THE WHITE CARD

## TOOLKIT



Written by  
CLAUDIA RANKINE

# Welcome!

This Toolkit contains a wealth of materials introducing important topics related to the A.R.T. production of ***The White Card*** by Claudia Rankine, presented by ArtsEmerson.

In ***The White Card***, a conversation at a dinner party thrown by Virginia and Charles, an influential Manhattan couple, for up-and-coming African American artist Charlotte raises questions about what—and who—is actually on display. Claudia Rankine’s 2014 *New York Times* best-selling *Citizen: An American Lyric* unpacked the insidious ways in which racism manifests itself in everyday situations. Now, this world-premiere play poses the question, “Can American society progress if whiteness stays invisible?”

In the pages of this Toolkit, you will find inside peeks at the development and inspirations behind ***The White Card***, including: looks at the creative team, writing process, and design of the show; Claudia Rankine’s writing; displaying race through visual art; and charged topics of activism, violence, and whiteness in discussions of race in America.

The articles, media, and activities in this Toolkit are curated both for classroom use and for individuals looking to take a deeper dive into ***The White Card***.

See you at the theater!

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# Table of Contents

## **THE WHITE CARD: IN PRODUCTION**

Overview, Cast and Creative Team.....	5-6
Profile of Playwright Claudia Rankine.....	7-8
Setting the Scene: The Stage Design of <i>The White Card</i> .....	9-11
Staying in the Room.....	12-16

## **THE ARTISTIC CONTEXT**

An Excerpt from <i>Citizen: An American Lyric</i> .....	18-20
The Art of <i>The White Card</i> .....	21-22
Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem with Contemporary Art's Appropriation of Race.....	23-28

## **THE SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

The Long, Painful History of Police Brutality in the United States.....	30-34
Herstory: The Origins of Black Lives Matter.....	35-36
Why Talk About Whiteness?.....	37-40

## **EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES.....41**

## **RESOURCES..... 42**

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# *The White Card:* In Production

# THE WHITE CARD

This section of the Toolkit examines the inner workings of the production. First, read a brief overview of the play itself and the cast/creative team bringing it to life (page 5-6), then a profile of playwright and poet Claudia Rankine (pages 7-8). Next, take a look at the unique set design of ***The White Card*** (pages 9-11)). Finally, an interview with Claudia Rankine by ***The White Card*** dramaturg P. Carl about some of the important ideas in Rankine's work (pages 12-16).



The Cast of *The White Card*. From top left: Karen Pittman (Charlotte), Daniel Gerroll (Charles), Colton Ryan (Alex), Jim Poulos (Eric), and Patricia Kalember (Virginia)

## Overview, Cast and Creative Team

ArtsEmerson presents  
the American Repertory Theater production  
Written by Claudia Rankine  
Directed by Diane Paulus  
Dramaturgy by P. Carl

In ***The White Card***, a conversation at a dinner party thrown by Virginia and Charles, an influential Manhattan couple, for up-and-coming artist Charlotte raises questions about what—and who—is actually on display. Claudia Rankine's 2014 *New York Times* best-selling *Citizen: An American Lyric* unpacked the insidious ways in which racism manifests itself in everyday situations. Now, this world-premiere play poses the question, "Can American society progress if whiteness stays invisible?"

The cast includes Karen Pittman (Broadway's *Good People* and *Passing Strange*) as Charlotte, Daniel Gerroll (Broadway's *Enchanted April* and *Shadowlands* at Off-Broadway's Acorn Theater) as Charles, Patricia Kalember (Broadway's *Don't Dress for Dinner* and *Losing Louie*) as Virginia, Jim Poulos (Broadway's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *RENT*) as Eric, and Colton Ryan (Broadway's *Dear Evan Hansen*) as Alex.



## Overview, Cast and Creative Team (cont.)



**Claudia Rankine**, *Playwright*, is the author of five collections of poetry including *Citizen: An American Lyric* and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, two plays including *Provenance of Beauty: A South Bronx Travelogue*, and numerous video collaborations. For *Citizen*, Rankine won both the PEN Open Book Award and the PEN Literary Award, the NAACP Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. (*Extended bio on page 7*)



**Diane Paulus**, *Director*, is the director of Eve Ensler's *In The Body of the World*, *Waitress* (currently on a national tour), *Pippin* (Tony award for Best Direction of a Musical), *Finding Neverland* (also on tour), and many other works. She is also the Terrie and Bradley Bloom Artistic Director of the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) at Harvard University.



**P. Carl**, *Dramaturg*, is the Dramaturg and Producer for Melinda Lopez's *Mala* (winner of 2017 Elliot Norton Award for Outstanding New Script), and Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen's *How to Be a Rock Critic*. Dr. Carl is a distinguished artist in residence at Emerson College in Boston and the founder of the journal *HowlRound*. In 2017, Dr. Carl was given a prestigious Art of Change Fellowship from the Ford Foundation.



Playwright and Poet Claudia Rankine

Photo: Claudia Rankine, © John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

## Profile of Playwright Claudia Rankine

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, poet Claudia Rankine earned a BA at Williams College and an MFA at Columbia University. Rankine has published several collections of poetry, including *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), a finalist for the National Book Award and winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry, the PEN Center USA Poetry Award, and the Forward poetry prize; *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004); and *Nothing in Nature is Private* (1994), which won the Cleveland State Poetry Prize. Her work often crosses genres as it tracks wild and precise movements of mind. Noting that “hers is an art neither of epiphany nor story,” critic Calvin Bedient observed that “Rankine’s style is the sanity, but just barely, of the insanity, the grace, but just barely, of the grotesqueness.” Discussing the borrowed and fragmentary sources for her work in an interview with Paul Legault for the Academy of American Poets, Rankine stated, “I don’t feel any commitment to any external idea of the truth. I feel like the making of the thing is the truth, will make its own truth.”

Rankine has coedited *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002), *American Poets in the 21st Century: The New Poetics* (2007), and *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*

## A Profile of Playwright Claudia Rankine (cont.)

(2014). Her poems have been included in the anthologies *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present* (2003), *Best American Poetry* (2001), and *The Garden Thrives: Twentieth Century African-American Poetry* (1996). Her play *Detour/South Bronx* premiered in 2009 at New York's Foundry Theater.

Rankine has been awarded fellowships from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Academy of American Poets, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Lannan Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 2013, she was elected as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and in 2014 she received a Lannan Literary Award. She has taught at the University of Houston, Case Western Reserve University, Barnard College, and Pomona College.

Source:

"Claudia Rankine," Poetry Foundation, Accessed January 20, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claudia-rankine>



# Setting the Scene: the Stage Design of *The White Card*



Photo: Gretjen Helene Photography

by James Montañño

***The White Card*** is an intimate story: five characters at a dinner party working through their relationship to art, each other, and a larger conversation about race in America. With such intimacy built into the play, how does one stage such close conversations in Emerson Paramount Center's Robert J. Orchard stage, with its 596 seat capacity? Director Diane Paulus and Scenic Designer Riccardo Hernandez crafted an ingenious solution: bring the audience into the room with the characters.

Theater has consistently examined how space affects the unfolding of a story on stage. On Elizabethan stages at the turn of the 17th century, Shakespeare's plays were performed right next to the audience, with the actors on a

## Setting the Scene (cont.)

platform—called “thrust staging”—surrounded by audiences on three sides. Imagine Hamlet turning to the audience member standing right at the edge of the stage and asking, “To be or not to be, that is the question...” The famous soliloquy becomes an actual question aimed at the audience rather than a dreamy hypothetical. As theater spaces evolved, the separation between audience and performer has widened to the proscenium-style theater space most people think of nowadays, with an audience seated together facing the performance on the box-like stage.

Though the proscenium model is the standard configuration, theater is staged in a variety of non-traditional spaces, sometimes in the round (audiences on all sides), in traverse (audiences facing each other on two sides), and thrust (audience on three sides). In recent years, there has been an explosion of immersive theater, which intends to place the audience directly inside the action of the play.

All of these staging styles rethink the ideas of distance and closeness between the audience and performer and some also consider the relationship of audience member to audience member. The energy of live theater may be carried by the action on stage but it is multiplied by the sheer mass of audience members experiencing a work side-by-side. Have you ever had the experience of seeing a comedic film with a large audience, then seeing it later by yourself? The film could still be funny, but the energy of a room full of people cackling and hooting together can make the experience all the more exciting. That communal experience is also one of the unseen but important powers of theater.



**The White Card** team built a huge white box that sits on the Paramount stage and reaches slightly over the house seats, where the audience normally sits. In the middle of the large white box is the playing space—the stage where the performance takes place. As the opening scene is a dinner party, there is a table, some chairs, and wine glasses. Around the action, on both sides of the playing space, sits

the audience in the traverse configuration. The audience is peering into the space while also seeing one another's response to the play, giving an entirely

different experience of closeness with one another. The white walls, floor, and ceiling also allow for the artwork discussed in the play to stand out in stark relief. The blank, white set also serves to provide little distraction to the important and moving conversations happening on the stage.

To borrow from the musical *Hamilton*, it's important to be in "the room where it happened." ***The White Card*** hopes to put everyone in the room for a play that will be funny, insightful, and challenging. It's a conversation that only happens with everyone present, in the moment, together.

Stage design is the art of taking the words in a script and creating a physical environment that the story can inhabit. But, as the design of ***The White Card*** attests, it can be so much more than the physical window dressings of a story. It can be a place for an audience to engage with the play and with each other. This can only be achieved when a stage designer and director are very thoughtful about how the set can both reflect the play's fictional space and still engage a living audience with one another.



Photo: Kelly Davidson

Dramaturg P. Carl and Playwright Claudia Rankine in conversation at ArtsEmerson.

## Staying in the Room

During the development process of ***The White Card***, playwright Claudia Rankine (author of five collections of poetry, including *Citizen* and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*), gave a presentation at ArtsEmerson's Cutler Majestic Theatre entitled "On Whiteness" to a sold-out house on March 24, 2017.

The presentation shared research conducted by Rankine for "Constructions of Whiteness," the course she teaches at Yale University. Following the presentation, Rankine further explored these themes, and their role in the development of ***The White Card***, in a conversation with P. Carl (Dramaturg for ***The White Card***).

The following is an excerpt of that conversation. Video of the full presentation and conversation is available at [howlround.com](http://howlround.com).

**P. CARL:** Claudia, you and I have spent a lot of time together in this last year making a play. One of the things I wanted to ask you was: I keep thinking of your students' faces post-election, and I'm looking at this incredible, filled theater, and I can feel the urgency in the audience. But knowing you, I know that you have felt this urgency all along. Does anything change for you? Is there a pre-election urgency and a post-election urgency, or is the work the same for you?

**CLAUDIA RANKINE:** Well, I think there is a new urgency. I think that I will continue working as a writer in the way that I've always worked. But I do think as a citizen, my habits might change. They have changed. I now feel irresponsible if I don't check the



## Staying in the Room (cont.)

news in the morning. I now understand that more will be asked of me. I'm not the kind of person who usually would have gone to rallies or protests. But we can change. It's one thing to buy into the myth that all of this is new. It's not new, but what is new is the blatant disregard for the First Amendment. There are a lot of new things. And I think we as American citizens have to be vigilant in the ways that we should have been vigilant before. But now, we don't have a pass.

**There's a question from the audience that I'm going to read: "Given the historical roots of racism in the US, is the American experiment worth continuing, and do you think redemption is possible?" In 30 words or less.**

*(Laughs.)* I don't know who wrote that question, but I wonder if they have children. You know, we are here—we have brought forward another generation of people. It is our responsibility to make this thing work. And part of making it work is to understand how it's broken. And part of understanding how it's broken is understanding that whiteness is made up of racism. That's part of it. These false conversations around "I'm not racist": let's stop that. Let's just move forward.

**I'd love to talk about that a little bit. One of the things that has been so interesting about getting to know you well is that we've been at many dinner parties where I watch people try to prove themselves not racist to you. It's fascinating to encounter. And as we've been talking about making theater, one of the questions we've been asking is, "can a white person and a black person have an authentic conversation about race, and how does that happen?"**

I feel like I'm being set up. *(Laughs.)* Well, that is the question. That is what we have been working on with the play: how do you stage the conversation that has stalled so many times before? And that is the biggest conundrum in my creative life right now. How do you make that happen? So—it's going to happen.

**It's going to happen. In the talk, you mentioned the idea of "internalized dominance" versus "white privilege." First of all, the fact that "white privilege" was first mentioned in 1988 is such a remarkable thing. But could you talk about "internalized dominance" and unpack that a little bit?**

Well, you know, sometimes—when I'm relaxing *(Laughs.)*—I Google Robin DiAngelo and watch her talk about internalized dominance. You think I jest? This happens. The term is incredibly useful to me because it begins the discussion after the moment when you say, "white people are racist" and don't feel defensive around that.



## Staying in the Room (cont.)

Everything in the culture has worked over time—overtime—to allow white people to feel that dominance. And no individual in these United States could have avoided it. No matter what their intentions are. There is no stepping outside the culture.

And for the Asian population, for the Arab population, for the black population, we have all known that whiteness is the most valuable thing. Not white people, but whiteness. That's why people are using bleaching creams across the world—they'll go that far. Because they're not dummies. They want the jobs. They want what whiteness affords white people. It's just the way it is.

So one of the things I've been thinking about is how to demonstrate in the play what it means to stand inside the notion of white dominance and still be able to move into an ethical position. That really would redeem whiteness, right? The recognition that the dominance is there. And given that, ask the question "what do we do now?"

**Another thing you've talked about is inside this question of white dominance is white distress. And I wonder—because it feels like such a central piece of where we are politically right now—if you could talk a little bit more about your understanding of that.**

Well, Betsy McKay wrote a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* [on March 23, 2017]. And it's about the study done by two Princeton economists on the fact that, for white people, the mortality rate is rising. And it's rising because of an increase in opiate use and suicide. And it's affecting people 26 to 65 years old, across the spectrum, and usually in the category of people who don't have a college degree.

So that would seem like it's pointing to economics, right? But that would also mean that African Americans in that category or Asian Americans in that category would also be committing suicide. But they're not. So, why are white people suddenly so depressed?

They're depressed because this idea of dominance, this internalized dominance, was meant to play out in their lives. And suddenly, due to many things—outsourcing, you know, technology, many things—they don't have jobs, they don't have health insurance, they don't have a lot of things. And other people, like black people, let's say, who don't have those things, are like, "Oh, we never had those things."

But white people are like, "Wait, you said that those things were rights. I had the right to those things." I mean, when you have people like Dylann Roof going into that Bible study and shooting all those people—sure, that's racism. But there's also something

## Staying in the Room (cont.)

else tied to it. It's a sense that "something has gone very wrong in my life." The easy answer is, "it must be the black person. The black guy did it. So, I need to kill them." So, all you black people, you better start getting those vests. They cost \$400. (*Laughs.*)

But there's also true despair. And it has to do with the sense that "these things were my right as a white person. You told me I was white, so therefore, all these resources were mine. All of this mobility was mine. And now I don't have that. So, I'm going to take myself out, and I might take some of you all out with me." So I think, that's what's going on with them.

**Finally, I'd love to bring us to the question of art and your work. I feel like your work has had such an impact in showing us the importance of art in changing the conversation in this country about race. And I wonder if you can talk a little bit about your life as an artist inside the frame of this conversation that you're still trying to get at. How important is it to have time to be an artist? I think about that with the funding of the NEA threatened. Many artists right now, I think, feel, "I don't have time to do art. I have to go do these other things." How do you stay connected to the art inside the urgency?**

Well, I think one of the things that is amazing about artists is, you never did it for the money. That was never the thing motivating you in the first place. And so I feel like we will continue to work. We were in a workshop in New York earlier this week, developing the play, and at one point, I looked at this table, and there were a dozen people around the table making a piece of art—bringing the full commitment of their imaginative, professional drive and will towards the creation of the piece. It made me proud to be in that room.

I don't know what it looked like for you, Carl, but when I graduated from Williams, I went to work in a law firm. And I was sure I was going to go to law school. You know, my parents were immigrants; I'm an immigrant. Can you imagine the conversation? "So, I think I might be a poet." My parents would have been like, "What is that? Excuse me?"

So it took me something like four years to back out of that law firm. And I did because I had to, because there was something in me that was pushing me forward in terms of what language can do. And the only reason I was interested in what language can do was because I knew its profound effect on me. I knew how I felt as a reader. I knew what I had learned in the theater. So, I think that the issue of defunding of the NEA is tragic. It's tragic that a first world country would even consider that.

## Staying in the Room (cont.)

But there are always two things. There is the reality of the tragedy, and then there's us. The will of the people. So, this is it. We are inside the will of the people. And I'm curious to see how far it will get us.

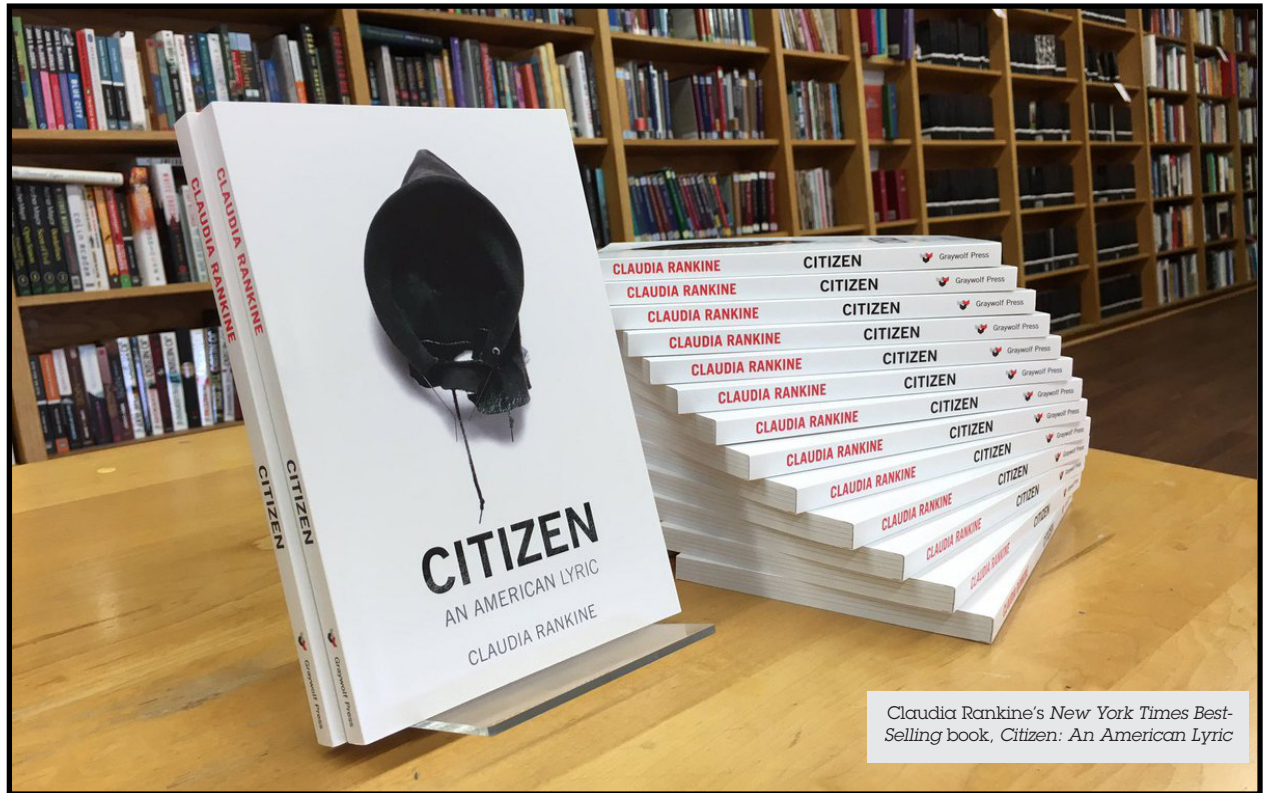
*The recipient of a 2017 Art of Change Fellowship from the Ford Foundation, P. Carl is the Dramaturg for **The White Card**, a Distinguished Artist in Residence on the faculty of Emerson College, and a frequent writer and speaker on the evolution of theater practice and theory.*

*This article originally appeared in the January-March 2017/18 A.R.T. Guide.*

### DISCUSSION

- Claudia states that she hopes conversations about whether or not one is a racist “stops.” Why is this a necessary hurdle to move past?
- How is “whiteness made up of racism”?
- What could Claudia mean when she says that “whiteness is the most valuable thing”? Is she speaking about actual skin tone or does her response move beyond that?
- In context, what do the phrases “white distress” and “white privilege” mean? How are they related? How are they different?

# The Artistic Context



This section explores the artistic world of ***The White Card***. The themes from Claudia's book of prose poetry, *Citizen: An American Lyric* lend themselves to the conversations in ***The White Card***. This section provides an excerpt of the book to examine and discuss (pages 18-20).

Much of the play also concerns the world of visual art. Peruse a brief primer of some of the art referenced in the play (pages 21-22) and read pertinent commentary about the state of black artists and subjects in visual art today in the article, *Black Bodies, White Cubes* (pages 23-28).

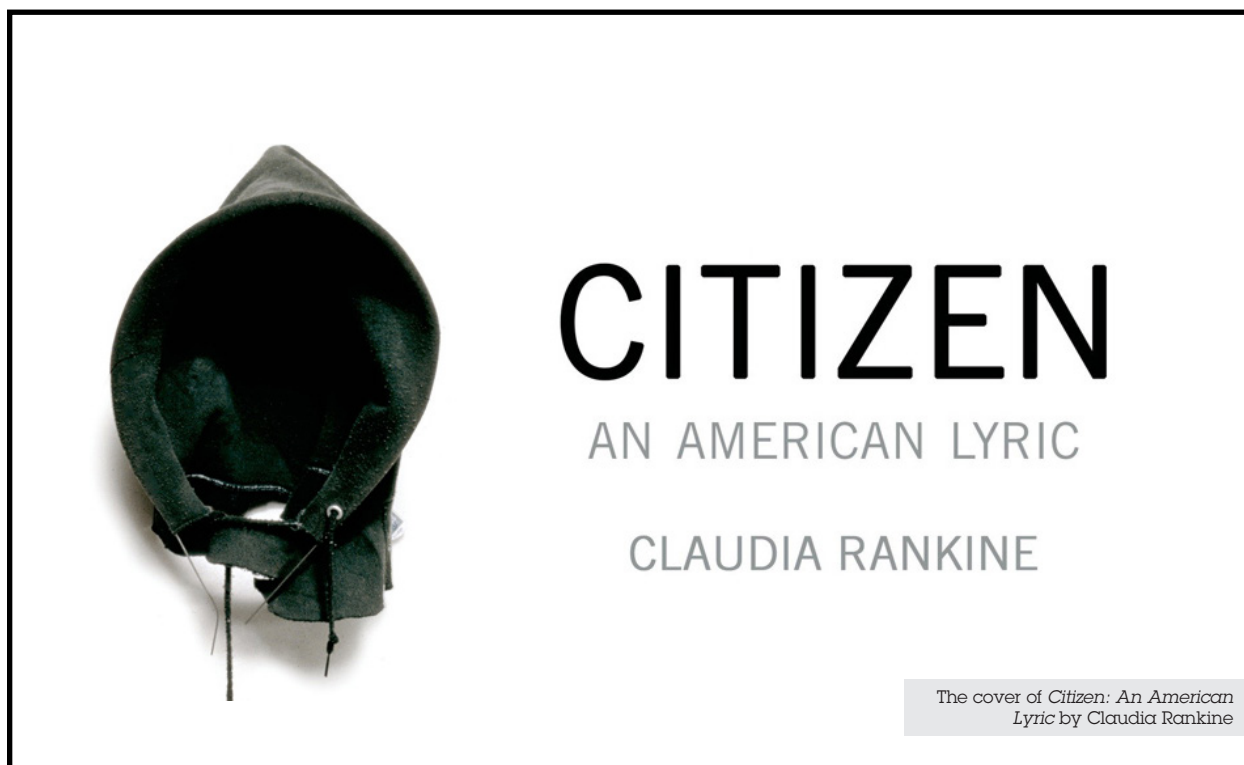


Image: In the Hood (1993), by David Hammons. From Graywolf Press

# An Excerpt from *Citizen: An American Lyric*

*The following excerpts come from an early section of the book, which focuses on the physical and mental toll microaggressions take on people of color. The book is constructed around a variety of small prose poems like the ones below. As you read, focus on the tone and word choice Rankine uses.*

You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.

You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.

Why do you feel okay saying this to me? You wish the light would turn red or a police siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, be propelled forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly



## An Excerpt (cont.)

be exposed to the wind.

As usual you drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said. It is not only that confrontation is headache producing; it is also that you have a destination that doesn't include acting like this moment isn't inhabitable, hasn't happened before, and the before isn't part of the now as the night darkens and the time shortens between where we are and where we are going.

/

When you arrive in your driveway and turn off the car, you remain behind the wheel another ten minutes. You fear the night is being locked in and coded on a cellular level and want time to function as a power wash. Sitting there staring at the closed garage door you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists a medical term — John Henryism — for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the build up of erasure. Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high. You hope by sitting in silence you are bucking the trend.

/

When the stranger asks, Why do you care? you just stand there staring at him. He has just referred to the boisterous teenagers in Starbucks as niggers. Hey, I am standing right here, you responded, not necessarily expecting him to turn to you.

He is holding the lidded paper cup in one hand and a small paper bag in the other. They are just being kids. Come on, no need to get all KKK on them, you say.

Now there you go, he responds.

The people around you have turned away from their screens. The teenagers are on pause. There I go? you ask, feeling irritation begin to rain down. Yes, and something about hearing yourself repeating this stranger's accusation in a voice usually reserved for your partner makes you smile.

/

A man knocked over her son in the subway. You feel your own body wince. He's okay, but the son of a bitch kept walking. She says she grabbed the stranger's arm and told him to apologize: I told him to look at the boy and

## An Excerpt (cont.)

apologize. And yes, you want it to stop, you want the black child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his feet and be brushed off, not brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself.

The beautiful thing is that a group of men began to stand behind me like a fleet of bodyguards, she says, like newly found uncles and brothers.

/

The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.

At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house. What are you doing in my yard?

It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry.



*Click for a reading of this selection by the author.*

*For a facilitated guide to further discuss this book, go to:*

<https://artsemerson.org/ArticleMedia/Files/CRFacilitatorGuide.pdf>

### DISCUSSION

- Do you see microaggressions played-out in this excerpt? Where?
- What do you think is the point of view of the narrator on microaggressions? What about those who commit the microaggressions? Are they intentional or unintentional?
- In these interactions, what role does interpretation and intention play in how the interaction goes?
- Who is the “you” the author addresses in this excerpt?

# The Art of *The White Card*



Photo: © Robert Longo

By James Montañó

**The White Card** references a variety of popular and culturally relevant visual art work. This reference sheet highlights some of that work and contextualizes it in the world of the play.



Photo: © Robert Longo

**Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)** (2014) (see above) and **Men in the Cities** (1980) series by Robert Longo. The characters Charles and Virginia own *Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)* and admire it for what they believe to be the artist's criticism of fascism. Charlotte has heard of Longo's series *Men in the Cities* but

hadn't seen *Untitled*. She questions the couple's perception of *Untitled*.

**Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)** (1983) by Jean-Michel Basquiat. Charles and Virginia also own this piece, which references a September 1983 incident when twenty-five-year-old Michael Stewart was arrested and fatally strangled by New York City police officers.

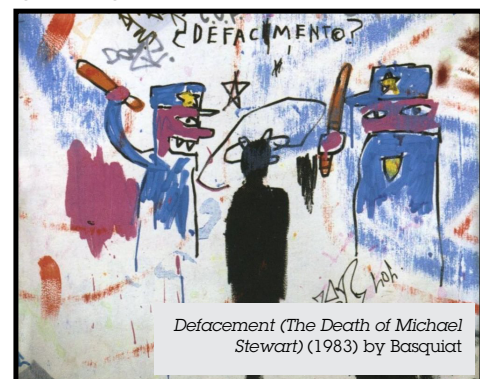


Photo: © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat

THE ARTISTIC CONTEXT

## The Art of *The White Card* (cont.)



**Mimic** (1982) by Jeff Wall. As an Asian man walks beside a white couple, the white male points to his eyes in a brief gesture. This work is discussed in the play as staged moments of “unfreedom;” moments where racism erodes the ability to feel and act as a free citizen. Wall describes his work as “cinematography,” requiring performers and a small crew to stage moments as one would a film.

**The Slave Ship** (1840) by J.M.W. Turner. A staunch abolitionist, J.M.W. Turner painted this work to reference a horrific incident aboard the slave ship *Zong*. The captain of the ship threw slaves overboard to collect the insurance money on each slave’s head, sending many to their death. The painting is noted in **The White Card** as an example of artwork that can be both aesthetically powerful and a mouthpiece for an activist-artist.



**The Times They Ain't Changing Fast Enough!** (2017) by Henry Taylor. The work shows the 2016 shooting of Philando Castile by a Minnesota police officer. As part of the 2017 Whitney Biennial, the powerful work was overshadowed by controversy surrounding Dana Schutz’s *Open Casket*, also in the Biennial. Her work depicted the funeral of Emmett Till, a lynching victim in

1955 Mississippi. Much was made of Dana Schutz being a white artist depicting the death of black males, as opposed to Henry Taylor, who is black. Other criticism notes that the formal elements of the work are equally important in the criticism of Schutz. The prone helpless Emmett Till of Schutz’s work is mutilated but alone, as opposed to Henry Taylor’s Castile, who lies in the presence of his murderer. The officer is clearly implicated in the act. In **The White Card**, Charlotte notes that the representation of suffering is also significantly different when the artist themselves can just as easily have such violence inflicted on them due to their own race; it gives the work an urgency missing in the distanced representation by a white artist.





# Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem With Contemporary Art's Appropriation of Race

By Taylor Renee Aldridge

*The artistic representation of black bodies becomes an important conversation in **The White Card**. In the play, Charlotte, a black visual artist, uses her art to expose microaggressions against people of color, while the white art collectors Virginia and Charles purchase and celebrate art that depicts violence towards people of color—a practice that Charlotte finds troublesome. The dialogue around the artistic representation of the abused or killed black body has only continued to grow in the art world alongside the many protests against police brutality. Cultural critic Taylor Renee Aldridge examines this conversation in her 2016 ARTnews article.*

In December 2015, while at Art Basel Miami Beach, I was scrolling through my Instagram feed when I found a video of a large inflated object. The object was a body, lying face down, on its stomach. It was a black subject, male, and large. The sculpture, I learned, was called *Laocoön*, by artist Sanford Biggers, and was part of a solo exhibition at the David Castillo Gallery in a wealthy neighborhood of Miami Beach. The work depicts Fat Albert, from Bill Cosby's *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, and so it was dressed in a red shirt and blue pants. I watched the video for a moment and saw that the body was inflating and deflating slowly, like a person who was having trouble breathing, or perhaps experiencing his last breaths. I thought of Michael Brown. I thought of



## Black Bodies, White Cubes (cont.)

black lives. I thought of death. Then I noticed that in the video, the body was surrounded by a festive group of gallery goers, sipping wine, taking pictures of the panting body. The scene was grotesque. I thought, Not again.

Many contemporary artists respond to instances of police brutality, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia through their creative practices. In the wake of the recent attack on the LGBT community in Orlando, for instance, the art community rallied around the victims. Pioneer Works in Brooklyn held a vigil concert. Terence Koh recited the names of the Orlando victims in a meditative performance at Andrew Edlin gallery. Hank Willis Thomas posted a photo on his Instagram of an enormous flag he'd made featuring some 13,000 stars—one for every victim of gun violence in the U.S. in 2015.



Photo from Instagram: @hankwillisthomas

As new political movements like Black Lives Matter have gained influence in recent years, social practice has risen in stature and popularity in the art world. This has contributed to the hypervisibility of cultures that have, for a long time, operated along the margins—consider how integral the work of Theaster Gates has become to at risk communities in the South Side of Chicago, or how *Project Row Houses* by Rick Lowe, taking inspiration from Joseph Beuys, has helped revitalize a section of Houston's Third Ward. But there is a new wave of contemporary work influenced by racial injustices, one that has arisen in the last two years and is decidedly more sensational, predominantly focusing on pain and trauma inflicted upon the black body. Artists have made systemic racism look sexy; galleries have made it desirable for collectors. It has, in other words, gone mainstream. With this paradoxical commercial focus, political art that responds to issues surrounding race is in danger of becoming mere spectacle, a provocation marketed for consumption, rather than a catalyst for social change.

Too often, I wonder if artists responding to Black Lives Matter are doing so because they truly are concerned about black lives, or if they simply recognize the financial and critical benefits that go along with creating work around these subjects. The year 2015 was a watershed in the new art responding to racism, arriving just after two separate grand juries failed to indict police officers who killed unarmed black men—Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York. Another shattering incident was the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, who mysteriously died while in custody, en route to a local police station. Artists responded to these events in different ways. At the Venice Biennale, Adam Pendleton covered the walls of the Belgian Pavilion with large panels that read BLACK LIVES MATTER. Robert Longo made a

## Black Bodies, White Cubes (cont.)



hyperrealist charcoal drawing of the heavily armed Ferguson, Missouri police, which was later purchased by the Broad museum in Los Angeles. Photographer Devin Allen—who was, in fact, protesting while documenting (or vice-versa) the 2015 Baltimore protests in response to Gray's death—captured a profound image of the Black Lives Matter movement that ended up in *Time* magazine.

There were, however, two artists—both white—inspired by Brown who stand out in particular for their unsettling crudeness. In March 2015, Kenneth Goldsmith gave a public performance in which he read aloud Brown's autopsy report, with slight edits to the text, during a conference at Brown University. A few months later, Ti-Rock Moore, a New Orleans-based artist, exhibited a realistic life-size sculpture of Brown's body, lying face down, recreating the moment after he was killed, taking his last few breaths before dying. Both of these pieces sparked wide-ranging criticism, but resulted in few repercussions for the artists. Goldsmith was later profiled rather glowingly in the *New Yorker*. And even after Brown's father shared his disgust about Moore's lifelike sculpture of his son, the work remained on view in a Chicago art gallery. The artist then unapologetically admitted that she creates her so-called socially relevant work for profit in an interview with *Pelican Bomb*. "My art is expensive to make. I am very far in the hole, and it has gotten to the point that I must start making money to be able to make more art," Moore said.

This is lewd voyeurism masquerading as empathy. Moore's case is even worse for being sanctioned by a commercial gallery. (Her sculpture of Brown was not for sale, as Moore told the *Chicago Tribune*, but other works—including one that depicts the Confederate flag—did sell.) The platform that makes space for a sculpture of a black corpse by a white woman only further perpetuates the exploitation of black traumatic experiences. This co-optation is a general concern for artists interested in the new wave of social activism and racial justice. In a 2015 interview with *Milk*, the performance artist Clifford Owens said:

I know that it [Black Lives Matter Movement] is important but my concern is that the movement is an image. It's about a representation of blackness and I don't know if that's enough. I don't know if black American artists are doing enough because what I see some Black American artists do is use the image of #BlackLivesMatter to promote their own interests. Some have even made commodity out of the movement.

## Black Bodies, White Cubes (cont.)

Owens's argument is not a new one. The extent to which the representation of blackness by artists and institutions is either enlightening or degrading has been debated for as long as artists and institutions have been representing blackness. In 1971, 15 artists withdrew from the Whitney Museum's "Contemporary Black Artists in America" as a result of the show being exclusively organized by white curators. In 1999, Kara Walker's *A Means to An End*, a five-panel etching depicting a grim antebellum scene with a pregnant slave and her abusive master, was censored from a show at the Detroit Institute of Arts after intense condemnation from representatives of the museum's Friends of African and African American Art. The group, according to the *Detroit Free Press*, "complained that the piece had offensive racial overtones."



The representation of the black image in response to issues championed by Black Lives Matter is something else entirely, though. In these works, blackness becomes a metaphor for the movement itself, a kind of branding that can be bought, sold, marketed, and consumed. This played out in comments Biggers made about *Laocoön* recently at a conference on art and race in Detroit. The artist showed a video of the artwork, and the room was silent. "He's on a pump, so he's actually breathing his last breaths," Biggers told the audience, which responded with a collective moan. "Ultimately, I think this is about the loss of trust and authority. Bill Cosby was America's father figure, and through recent events we lost trust in him. We've lost trust in police, and their authority because they take our bodies."

In the conference, Biggers went on to share that "my work does live inside of white cubes, museums, galleries and so on, but I do have opportunities to take it out, because I think context adds to the theme of the piece." Biggers is not naïve about the importance of context, especially when presenting blackness, but this awareness makes *Laocoön* all the more perplexing. In recreating the image of Brown, frozen in lifelessness, Biggers only valorizes the power of authority he aims to critique, and places it in a space that is necessarily voyeuristic—the white cube, where objects are gawked at.

I was in attendance at the conference, and as Biggers talked about the work, I surveyed the audience. Many of the reactions to the piece were simply silent, coupled with scattered gasps of exasperation and sadness. The audience members, I imagine, were recalling instances of police brutality—unwanted, yet deeply entrenched memories. This is what I was thinking of, anyway. But Biggers generally glossed over Brown—whose body, lying in the street, has become one of the default images of Black Lives Matter. The artist instead

## Black Bodies, White Cubes (cont.)

spoke nebulously about “authority” and fell back on the image of Fat Albert, a comedic cartoon character. This was crass and irresponsible, and depoliticized the very premise of *Laocoön*.

Nonetheless, this practice of incorporating (popular) historic material into

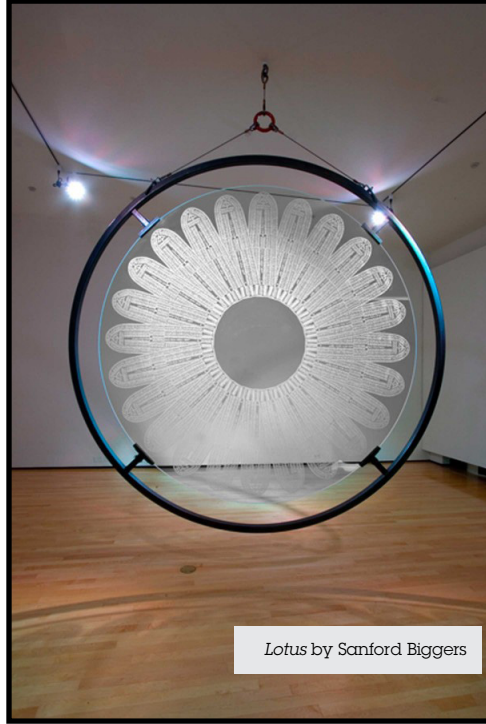


Photo: © Sanford Biggers

art is nothing new for Biggers, and has been used to better effect in his work, like *Lotus* (2011), a 7-foot-diameter glass disc with hand carved images. The shape is modeled after the lotus flower, a popular symbol in Buddhist culture representing purity, wholeness, peace, and transcendence. In the work, only visible at a close encounter, each petal in the flower has carved images of diagrams depicting slaves in slave ships. Another version of the piece was later installed on the outer wall of the Eagle Academy for Young Men, a high school in the Bronx, New York, that aims to prioritize young men from the black and Latino communities in the borough. Students had an opportunity to experience the work and “acknowledge a past that shall never be forgotten,” as Biggers said during the conference.

The work’s pedagogical element places social engagement at its core, unlike *Laocoön*’s surface-level confrontation with its audience. This is a crucial distinction, one that other successful political artists have explored. Simone Leigh has committed much of her work to promoting healing and self-care—two priorities that are extremely important in black America now considering the continuing brutality inflicted upon black bodies. Leigh has not exclusively tied her work to any contemporary political movement, but she reflects the experiences and needs of marginalized people, particularly black women. In 2014’s “Funk, God, Jazz & Medicine: Black Heritage in Brooklyn,” a public art project organized by The Weeksville Heritage Center and Creative Time, Leigh created the Free People’s Medical Clinic. The clinic, staged inside a 1914 Bed-Stuy brownstone mansion that was once home to a private obstetrical gynecological practice, Leigh recreated a free walk-in health clinic modeled after similar spaces opened by the Black Panther Party in the 1960s. Leigh has been one of the few artists to respond to social injustices by focusing on black subjectivity—not just black bodies.

As I was writing this piece, I learned there had been more murders of unarmed black men by the police, one in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and yet another in St. Paul, Minnesota. These killings have become common and visible in



## Black Bodies, White Cubes (cont.)

recent years, but they remain, especially for a black person in this country, life-shattering, disabling, and immensely traumatic. I was reminded of an exchange I had with the artist and activist Dread Scott, in October 2015, when we appeared on a panel together. Scott has incited critical dialogue around American injustices ever since burning an American flag on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in 1989, an action that influenced policy, and led to the landmark Supreme Court decision in support of free speech, *United States v. Eichman et al.* Scott has also responded to the murder of Michael Brown, through his 2014 performance *On the Possibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide*. Prior to the panel, Scott passed out flyers for a protest he was co-organizing with the Coalition to Stop Police Brutality, Repression and the Criminalization of a Generation. It was clear that his activism was a full-time commitment. I mentioned that his work in interrogating U.S governmental systems must be exhausting. He responded matter-of-factly, “Either you’re helping the movement or you’re not. There’s no in-between.”

Article adapted from *ARTnews*:

Taylor Renee Aldridge, “Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem With Contemporary Art’s Appropriation of Race,” *ARTnews*, July 11, 2016, <http://www.artnews.com/2016/07/11/black-bodies-white-cubes-the-problem-with-contemporary-arts-appropriation-of-race/>

### DISCUSSION

- The author describes some of the artwork as “lewd voyeurism masquerading as empathy.” What does the author mean by this?
- What kind of artwork do you think the author suggests should replace the artwork that she describes as “lewd voyeurism?”
- What does the author mean when she suggests that “artists have made systemic racism look sexy”? Is this problematic?
- In the author’s view, what is the important impact of Sanford Biggers’ *Laocoön*? How is his work “crass and irresponsible”? How is his piece *Lotus* different?



# The Social Consciousness



This section of the Toolkit takes a look at the social context of ***The White Card***. To understand the background of some of the protest artwork described in the show, read about the history of police brutality in the U.S. (pages 30-34). Then, a short history of the women who formed protest movement Black Lives Matter (pages 35-36). Finally, a helpful resource to help in the often challenging conversation about whiteness (pages 37-40).



Photo from the Library of Congress

# The Long, Painful History of Police Brutality in the U.S.

*As a part of their 2017 exhibition, “More Than a Picture,” the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture displayed a selection of photographs by and about the lives of black people in the U.S. In Smithsonian Magazine, Reporter Katie Nodjimbadem tracks the visual parallels between historic police brutality and the current cultural climate. The subject of police brutality, activism, and the art generated from such events underscore many of the conversations in **The White Card**.*

By Katie Nodjimbadem

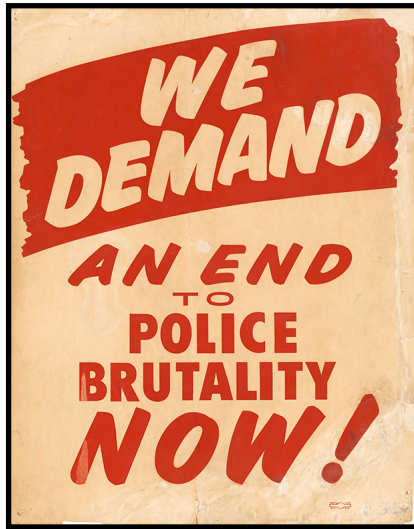
Last month, hours after a jury acquitted former police officer Jeronimo Yanez of manslaughter in the shooting death of 32-year-old Philando Castile, protesters in St. Paul, Minnesota, shut down Interstate 94. With signs that read: “Black Lives Matter” and “No Justice, No Peace,” the chant of “Philando, Philando” rang out as they marched down the highway in the dark of night.

The scene was familiar. A year earlier, massive protests had erupted when Yanez killed Castile, after pulling him over for a broken tail light. Dashcam footage shows Yanez firing through the open window of Castile’s car, seconds after Castile disclosed that he owned and was licensed to carry a concealed weapon.

A respected school nutritionist, Castile was one of 233 African-Americans shot and killed by police in 2016, a startling number when demographics are considered. African-Americans make up 13 percent of the U.S. population but account for 24 percent of people fatally shot by police. According to the

## The Long, Painful History (cont.)

*Washington Post*, blacks are “2.5 times as likely as white Americans to be shot and killed by police officers.”



Today's stories are anything but a recent phenomenon. A cardboard placard in the collections of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and on view in the new exhibition “More Than a Picture,” underscores that reality.

The yellowing sign is a reminder of the continuous oppression and violence that has disproportionately shaken black communities for generations—“We Demand an End to Police Brutality Now!” is painted in red and white letters.

“The message after 50 years is still unresolved,” remarks Samuel Egerton, a college professor, who donated the poster to the museum. He carried it in protest during the 1963 March on Washington. Five decades later, the poster's message rings alarmingly timely. Were it not for the yellowed edges, the placard could almost be mistaken for a sign from any of the Black Lives Matter marches of the past three years.

“There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, “When will you be satisfied?” said Martin Luther King, Jr. in his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech at the 1963 march. His words continue to resonate today after a long history of violent confrontations between African-American citizens and the police. “We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.”

“This idea of police brutality was very much on people's minds in 1963, following on the years, decades really, of police abuse of power and then centuries of oppression of African-Americans,” says William Pretzer, senior history curator at the museum.

Modern policing did not evolve into an organized institution until the 1830s and '40s when northern cities decided they needed better control over quickly growing populations. The first American police department was established in Boston in 1838. The communities most targeted by harsh tactics were recent European immigrants. But, as African-Americans fled the horrors of the Jim Crow south, they too became the victims of brutal and punitive policing in the northern cities where they sought refuge.

In 1929, the Illinois Association for Criminal Justice published the Illinois Crime



## The Long, Painful History (cont.)

Survey. Conducted between 1927 and 1928, the survey sought to analyze causes of high crime rates in Chicago and Cook County, especially among criminals associated with Al Capone. But also the survey provided data on police activity—although African-Americans made up just five percent of the area's population, they constituted 30 percent of the victims of police killings, the survey revealed.

“There was a lot of one-on-one conflict between police and citizens and a lot of it was initiated by the police,” says Malcolm D. Holmes, a sociology professor at the University of Wyoming, who has researched and written about the topic of police brutality extensively.

That same year, President Herbert Hoover established the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement to investigate crime related to prohibition in addition to policing tactics. Between 1931 and 1932, the commission published the findings of its investigation in 14 volumes, one of which was titled “Report on Lawlessness in Law Enforcement.” The realities of police brutality came to light, even though the commission did not address racial disparities outright.

During the Civil Rights Era, though many of the movement's leaders advocated for peaceful protests, the 1960s were fraught with violent and destructive riots.



Image from the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum

Aggressive dispersion tactics, such as police dogs and fire hoses, against individuals in peaceful protests and sit-ins were the most widely publicized examples of police brutality in that era. But it was the pervasive violent policing in communities of color that built distrust at a local, everyday level.

One of the deadliest riots occurred in Newark in 1967 after police officers severely beat black cab driver John Smith during a traffic stop. Twenty-six people died and many others were injured during the four days of unrest. In 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson organized the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate the causes of these major riots.

## The Long, Painful History (cont.)

The origins of the unrest in Newark weren't unique in a police versus citizen incident. The commission concluded "police actions were 'final' incidents before the outbreak of violence in 12 of the 24 surveyed disorders."

The commission identified segregation and poverty as indicators and published recommendations for reducing social inequalities, recommending an "expansion and reorientation of the urban renewal program to give priority to projects directly assisting low-income households to obtain adequate housing." Johnson, however, rejected the commission's recommendations.

Black newspapers reported incidents of police brutality throughout the early and mid-20th century and the popularization of radio storytelling spread those stories even further. In 1991, following the beating of cab driver Rodney King, video footage vividly told the story of police brutality on television to a much wider audience. The police officers, who were acquitted of the crime, had hit King more than 50 times with their batons.

Today, live streaming, tweets and Facebook posts have blasted the incidents of police brutality, beyond the black community and into the mainstream media. Philando Castile's fiancée, Diamond Reynolds, who was in the car with her daughter when he was shot, streamed the immediate aftermath of the shooting on her phone using Facebook live.

"Modern technology allows, indeed insists, that the white community take notice of these kinds of situations and incidents," says Pretzer.

And as technology has evolved, so has the equipment of law enforcement. Police departments with military-grade equipment have become the norm in American cities. Images of police officers in helmets and body armor riding through neighborhoods in tanks accompany stories of protests whenever one of these incidents occurs.

"What we see is a continuation of an unequal relationship that has been

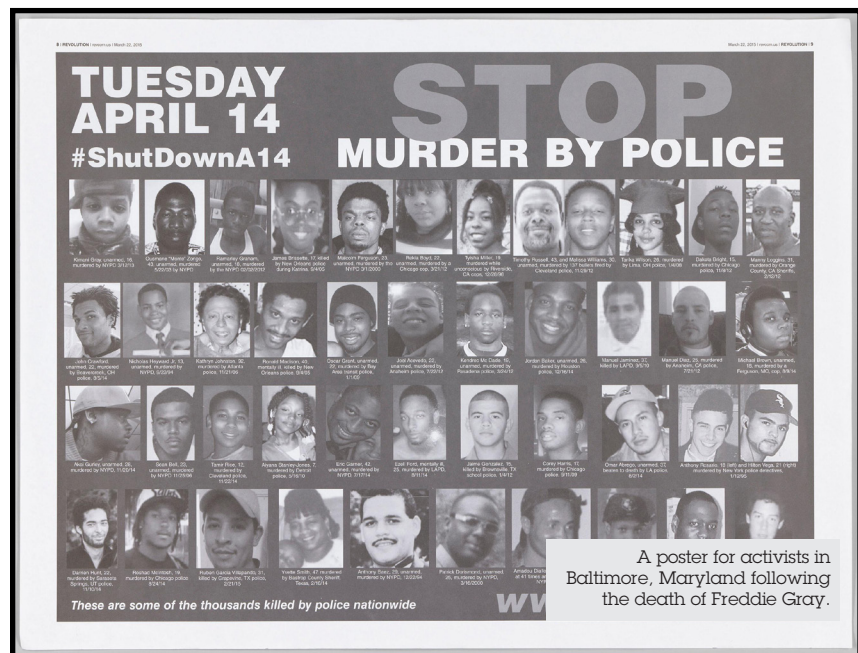


Image from the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum



## The Long, Painful History (cont.)

exacerbated, made worse if you will, by the militarization and the increase in fire power of police forces around the country,” says Pretzer.

The resolution to the problem, according to Pretzer, lies not only in improving these unbalanced police-community relationships, but, more importantly, in eradicating the social inequalities that perpetuate these relationships that sustain distrust and frustration on both sides.

“There’s a tendency to stereotype people as being more or less dangerous. There’s a reliance upon force that goes beyond what is necessary to accomplish police duty,” says Holmes. “There’s a lot of this embedded in the police departments that helps foster this problem.”

Article adapted from *Smithsonianmag.com*:

Katie Nodjimbadem, “The Long, Painful History of Police Brutality in the U.S.,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/long-painful-history-police-brutality-in-the-us-180964098/>

### DISCUSSION

- How do trends of police violence relate to microaggressions and the themes of *The White Card*?
- If police brutality has been a continuing problem, why does it seem like the mainstream discourse is only now catching up?

# Herstory



*The activist organization Black Lives Matter has made a strong national impact since its inception in 2013. This brief history from Black Lives Matter looks at its inception from the women that shaped the movement.*

In 2013, three radical Black organizers—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—created a Black-centered political will and movement building project called #BlackLivesMatter. It was in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman.

The project is now a member-led global network of more than 40 chapters. Our members organize and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes.

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.

As organizers who work with everyday people, BLM members see and understand significant gaps in movement spaces and leadership. Black liberation movements in this country have created room, space, and leadership mostly for Black heterosexual, cisgender men—leaving women, queer and transgender people, and others either out of the movement or in the background to move the work forward with little or no recognition. As a network, we have always recognized the need to center the leadership of women and queer and trans people. To maximize our movement muscle, and to be intentional about not replicating harmful practices that excluded so many in past movements for liberation, we made a commitment to placing those at the margins closer to the center.

## Herstory (cont.)

As #BlackLivesMatter developed throughout 2013 and 2014, we utilized it as a platform and organizing tool. Other groups, organizations, and individuals used it to amplify anti-Black racism across the country, in all the ways it showed up. Tamir Rice, Tanisha Anderson, Mya Hall, Walter Scott, Sandra Bland—these names are inherently important. The space that #BlackLivesMatter held and continues to hold helped propel the conversation around the state-sanctioned violence they experienced. We particularly highlighted the egregious ways in which Black women, specifically Black trans women, are violated. #BlackLivesMatter was developed in support of all Black lives.

In 2014, Mike Brown was murdered by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. It was a guttural response to be with our people, our family—in support of the brave and courageous community of Ferguson and St. Louis as they were being brutalized by law enforcement, criticized by media, tear gassed, and pepper sprayed night after night. Darnell Moore and Patrisse Cullors organized a national ride during Labor Day weekend that year. We called it the Black Life Matters Ride. In 15 days, we developed a plan of action to head to the occupied territory to support our brothers and sisters. Over 600 people gathered. We made two commitments: to support the team on the ground in St. Louis, and to go back home and do the work there. We understood Ferguson was not an aberration, but in fact, a clear point of reference for what was happening to Black communities everywhere.

When it was time for us to leave, inspired by our friends in Ferguson, organizers from 18 different cities went back home and developed Black Lives Matter chapters in their communities and towns—broadening the political will and movement building reach catalyzed by the #BlackLivesMatter project and the work on the ground in Ferguson.

It became clear that we needed to continue organizing and building Black power across the country. People were hungry to galvanize their communities to end state-sanctioned violence against Black people, the way Ferguson organizers and allies were doing. Soon we created the Black Lives Matter Global Network infrastructure. It is adaptive and decentralized, with a set of guiding principles. Our goal is to support the development of new Black leaders, as well as create a network where Black people feel empowered to determine our destinies in our communities.

The Black Lives Matter Global Network would not be recognized worldwide if it weren't for the folks in St. Louis and Ferguson who put their bodies on the line day in and day out, and who continue to show up for Black lives.

Source: "Herstory," Black Lives Matter. Accessed January 10, 2018, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory/>

# Why Talk About Whiteness?

By Emily Chiariello

*Implicit in conversations about race in America is the concept of “whiteness.” Yet, it remains difficult to look at whiteness when it is both ever-present and rejected as an identity. **The White Card** frankly engages in the identity of whiteness, revealing how silence around it’s erasure only confuses conversations about race in America. Emily Chiariello is a teacher/facilitator interested in engaging with the concept of Whiteness in the classroom. In this article it should be noted that, as a white educator herself, Emily uses “we” and “us” in certain contexts, referring to white readers.*

“I don’t think I’ve ever come across anything that has made me aware of my race. I don’t believe there is any benefit of anybody’s particular race or color. I feel like I’ve accomplished what I’ve accomplished in life because of the person I am, not because of the color of my skin.”

These are the observations of a white female participant in [The Whiteness Project, Part I](#), an interactive web-based collection of voices and reflections of Americans from diverse walks of life who identify as white. Her statement illustrates why educators, activists and allies doing racial justice work are increasingly focused on the importance of examining whiteness: It’s impossible to see the privilege and dominance associated with white racial identity without acknowledging that whiteness is a racial identity.

This fundamental disconnect between the racial self-perceptions of many white people and the realities of racism was part of what motivated documentary filmmaker, director and producer Whitney Dow to create The Whiteness Project. “Until you can recognize that you are living a racialized life and you’re having racialized experiences every moment of every day, you can’t actually engage people of other races around the idea of justice,” Dow explains. “Until you get to the thing that’s primary, you can’t really attack racism.”

Dow’s work, among other activism and scholarship focused on whiteness, has the potential to stimulate meaningful conversations about whiteness and move white folks past emotions like defensiveness, denial, guilt and shame (emotions that do nothing to improve conditions for people of color) and toward a place of self-empowerment and social responsibility.

## Why Talk About Whiteness? (cont.)

### Whiteness, History and Culture

Why does whiteness fly beneath the race radar? The normalization of whiteness and the impenetrable ways it protects itself are cornerstones of the way institutions function in the United States. In a 2015 interview, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Junot Díaz said of the United States, “We live in a society where default whiteness goes unremarked—no one ever asks it for its passport.”

This poses a challenge for educators committed to racial justice. We know it’s important to make space in our classrooms to explore students’ cultures and identities, but when it comes to white students, many are left with questions about how to talk about group membership and cultural belonging. These questions stem in part from the fact that, while it’s true whiteness is seen as a social default, it is not true that whiteness is the absence of race or culture. As one male participant in The Whiteness Project puts it, “As a white person, I wish I had that feeling of being a part of something for being white, but I don’t.”

One place to start is by acknowledging that generations of European immigration to the United States means that our country is home to the most diverse white population anywhere in the world. Differences between Jewish, Irish, Italian, Greek, Polish or German culture matter—a lot—to those who identify as ethnic whites. Part of “seeing” whiteness includes caring about these rich histories and complicating our discussions of race by asking questions about the intersection of ethnicity and race.

In her work on white racial identity development, diversity expert Rita Hardiman explains that, as white people become more conscious of whiteness and its meaning, we may simultaneously struggle with two aspects of identity: internalized dominance and the search for cultural belonging. The search for culture draws some white people to multiculturalism and appreciation of other cultures and heritages. Others find roots outside the container of race, woven into proud family histories. A small minority cling violently to their white cultural identity, sometimes with tragic consequences. (In any case, it is important to note that the ability to trace one’s genealogy is an inherited privilege not enjoyed by most African Americans, the majority of whom are descendants of enslaved people.)

Reconciling the meaning of white culture can be complicated by the fact that being white has not always meant what it means now. Whiteness—like all racial categories—is a social construct: Its meaning is culturally and historically



## Why Talk About Whiteness? (cont.)

contextual. The physical characteristics we now associate with whiteness have been artificially linked to power and privilege for the purpose of maintaining an unjust social hierarchy.

Attorney, scholar and anti-racist educator Jacqueline Battalora of Saint Xavier University studies the legal and historical construction of whiteness in the United States, what she calls the “invention of white people.” In her book *Birth of a White Nation*, she shows that white people didn’t exist—even as a label, much less as a race—until the end of the 17th century when the elite class enacted anti-miscegenation laws and other laws designed to keep black and white workers separate, both efforts to, in part, divide and control an increasingly ethnically diverse labor force. As students enter middle and high school, teaching about this history and about the concept of racial construction is another way educators can bring discussion about whiteness—and its relationship to racial justice—into the classroom.

### Got Privilege? Now What?

In 1988, anti-bias educator Peggy McIntosh published her now-classic essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” In it, she describes the phenomenon of white privilege as a collection of “unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious.”

McIntosh’s essay launched the term white privilege into wider academic and activist circles (where the essay is still widely read), but recently the term has gained a mainstream audience. Examples include #OscarsSoWhite, Latina college student Thalia Anguiano asking Hillary Clinton for examples of her white privilege and Jon Stewart challenging Bill O’Reilly to defend why he believes white privilege doesn’t exist. White rapper Macklemore mused about Black Lives Matter in his nine-minute song “White Privilege II,” in which he asks, “Is it my place to give my two cents? Or should I stand on the side and shut my mouth?”

While these examples are positive in that they make whiteness and white privilege more visible, popular discussions of white privilege can also prompt backlash.

“I think it’s very hard in a culture that’s built around this myth of the individual American who makes their own way, to say, ‘Well, you actually have a built-in inherited advantage,’” Dow points out. “We view ourselves as just people, but that this country was founded on racist white supremacist principles is undeniable. I think people feel implicated because there’s a cognitive

## Why Talk About Whiteness? (cont.)

dissonance built into how Americans view themselves.”

But even if white students are able to overcome this dissonance and acknowledge their privilege, is that enough? Recognizing white privilege is a necessary but insufficient means for confronting racism and increasing opportunities for people of color. In fact, acknowledging white privilege but taking no initiative to own it or address it can be harmful and counterproductive. Molly Tansey, a member of the Young Teachers Collective and co-author of “Teaching While White,” says, “Early on in doing this work, I was definitely driven by the self-satisfaction.” She talks about the need white people sometimes have to make their non-racism visible, giving the example of someone who takes a “selfie” at a protest to post on Facebook.

We haven’t acknowledged our white privilege if we’re only talking about it with people of color—who are already well aware of white privilege. White allies need to talk to other white people who may not see their privilege. Though it’s less comfortable, Tansey says, naming whiteness and its privileges among white friends, family and colleagues is where the real work needs to be done.

We’re also not adequately engaging the concept of white privilege if we leave intersectionality out of the conversation; doing so has the potential to render other identities invisible and obscures how multiple systems of oppression work. Blogger Gina Crosley-Corcoran made this point in her blog “Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person,” in which she describes the difficult process of identifying with her white privilege because of her low-income upbringing. The same could be true for any white person who has a disability, doesn’t speak English, is undocumented or LGBT—or any combination of the above. Intersectionality does not erase white privilege, but may affect a person’s experience of privilege.

Acknowledging white privilege must be followed with anti-racist action. As scholar Fredrik deBoer argued in a January 2016 article for *The Washington Post*, “Disclaiming white privilege doesn’t lower African Americans’ inordinately high unemployment rate or increase educational opportunities for children of first-generation immigrants. The alternative is simpler, but harder: to define racism in terms of actions, and to resolve to act in a way that is contrary to racism.”

Article is adapted for length from the *Teaching Tolerance Journal*:

Emily Chiariello, “Why Talk About Whiteness?” *Teaching Tolerance* 53 (Summer 2016): <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2016/why-talk-about-whiteness>

# Educational Activities

## Lesson Plan Index

### EXPLORING IDENTITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN POETRY

*In this activity, students will read texts representing a variety of perspectives and use those texts as inspiration to write poetry that develops their experiences using effective literary techniques and well chosen details. They will also explore their own identity by creating poems inspired by source texts that develop their experiences using effective literary techniques and well chosen details.*

*This activity can either precede or follow a viewing of **The White Card**.*

### ACTIVATING VISUAL ART

*In this activity, students will explore the elements of visual art by using appropriate terminology and observation to analyze various pieces from African American artists. Using observational tools, students will create a physical story of the piece using theatrical tableau, imagining the works of art in a continuum of narrative.*

*This activity can either precede or follow a viewing of **The White Card**.*

### READING TO CRITIQUE; WRITING TO EMPATHIZE

*In this activity, students will explore concepts of identity. They will then compare the points of view of two authors' perspectives on the Black Lives Matter protests. Students will analyze why certain accounts of an event might differ. Students will also write a narrative about a current event from multiple points of view.*

*This activity can either precede or follow a viewing of **The White Card**.*

Full lesson plans are available for classroom use by request:  
**[education@amrep.org](mailto:education@amrep.org)**

# Resources

Aldridge, Taylor Renee, “Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem With Contemporary Art’s Appropriation of Race,” *ARTnews*, July 11, 2016, <http://www.artnews.com/2016/07/11/black-bodies-white-cubes-the-problem-with-contemporary-arts-appropriation-of-race/>

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