

DOMINIQUE
MORISSEAU'S

PIPE LINE

DIRECTED BY LOU BELLAMY

Pipeline

A play by Dominique Morrisseau

Directed by Lou Bellamy

A **Penumbra Theatre Company** Production

October 1-27, 2019

Study Guide by **Free Black Dirt**

Erin Sharkey & Junauda Petrus

About Penumbra Theatre Company

Conceived in the Black Arts Movement and Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director Emeritus Lou Bellamy, Penumbra Theatre Company has long served as a nurturing space for the artistic exploration of the African American experience. As the sole professional African American theatre in Minnesota, Penumbra carries forth a long, proud tradition of providing career-building opportunities to theatre practitioners of color, both on and off-stage. Penumbra has produced all ten of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson's Century Cycle plays, cementing his renown as one of the most important playwrights of modern time.

Penumbra Theatre's production history spans the depth and breadth of the African American theatrical canon, illuminating pioneers such as Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*, *Les Blancs*) and Charles Fuller (*A Soldier's Play*, *Zooman and the Sign*), genre-bender Ntozake Shange (*Spell #7, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*), late 20th century stalwarts August Wilson and Pearl Cleage (*Flyin' West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*), and emerging stars such as Katori Hall (*The Mountaintop*) and Dominique Morisseau (*Sunset Baby*, *Detroit '67*). Langston Hughes' *Black Nativity* signifies the cornerstone of Penumbra's contribution to the black musical theatre tradition. Each year 25,000 people see a play or musical at Penumbra Theatre and experience the variety of lenses through which African Americans view and engage with the world. In its 43-year history, Penumbra Theatre has produced 37 premieres of new work by African American artists.

The Mission

Penumbra Theatre creates professional productions that are artistically excellent, thought provoking, and relevant and illuminates the human condition through the prism of the African American experience.

Penumbra's goals are:

- To increase public awareness of the significant contributions of African Americans in creating a diversified American theatrical tradition.
- To encourage and facilitate a culturally diverse and all-inclusive America by using theatre to teach, criticize, comment and model.
- To use theatre to create an American mythology that includes African Americans and other peoples of color in every thread of the fabric of our society.
- To continue to maintain and stabilize a black performing arts community.

Education and Outreach

Penumbra's Educational and Outreach initiatives provide opportunities for audiences to explore the synthesis of theatre with social engagement. The observer is able to experience storytelling on the visual, audial, and aesthetic levels, while also engaging with the ideas of a play at their own pace, and through their most effective methods of understanding.

Strong educational and outreach programming makes the theatre a safe space for individuals to process personal, local, national, and worldwide events in cooperation with theatre practitioners, scholars, community leaders, and teaching artists. Penumbra provides audiences with a broad range of educational tools for analysis and reflection, increasing the possibility for life to follow art from idea to action.

Each year, Penumbra exposes 5,000 students to nurturing opportunities that range from summer internships to a multi-year leadership development program for teenagers. These programs allow young people to use theatre as a tool to experiment with their ideas of creating a more just and peaceful world. While some of these young people may go on to become theatre professionals, many more will emerge with increased capacity in the areas of critical thinking, creative problem-solving, self-expression, and community leadership. These skills will serve young people in their lives as entrepreneurs, service members, employees, and citizens.

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About the Play

Pipeline tells the story of Nya, an inner-city public high school teacher, who is committed to her students but desperate to give her only son Omari opportunities they'll never have.

Setting

"Not necessarily NYC, but definitely modeled after it. Can be any inner-city environment where the public school system is under duress. However, the quick pace of the language is NY-inspired and should be maintained in any setting. Present Day. Also, we have Undefined Space. This is a place where location doesn't matter. It is sometimes an alternate reality bleeding into reality. It is sometimes just isolated reality that doesn't require a setting. Only words."

Character Descriptions

NYA -

Black woman, mid-late 30's. Single mother. Public H.S. Teacher. Trying to raise her teenage son on her own with much difficulty. A good teacher inspiring her students in a stressed environment. A struggling parent doing her damndest. Strong but burning out. Smoker. Sometimes drinker. Holding together by a thread.

OMARI -

Black man, late teens. Smart and astute. Rage without release. Tender and honest at his core. Something profoundly sensitive amidst the anger, Wrestling with his identity between private school education and being from a so-called urban community. Nya's son.

JASMINE -

Black or Latina woman, late teens. Sensitive and tough. A sharp bite, a soft smile. Profoundly aware of herself and her environment. Attends upstate private school but from a so-called urban environment. In touch with the poetry of her own language.

XAVIER -

Black man, mid-late 30's. Single father - struggling to connect to his own son. Marketing exec. Wounded relationship with his ex-wife. Financially stable. Emotionally impoverished. Nya's ex husband. Omari's father.

LAURIE -

White woman, 50's. Pistol of a woman. Teaches in Public High School and can hold her own against the tough students and the stressed environment. Doesn't bite her tongue. A don't-fuck-with-me chick.

DUN -

Black man, early-mid 30's. Public High School security guard. Fit and optimistic. Charismatic with women. Genuine and thoughtful and trying to be a gentleman in a stressed environment. It's not easy.

Descriptions from the play, setting and characters - Morisseau, Dominique. Pipeline. 2014

The Playwright

Dominique Morisseau

Dominique Morisseau is a playwright whose works portray the lives of individuals and communities grappling with economic and social changes, both current and historical. With a background as an actor and spoken-word poet, she uses lyrical dialogue to construct emotionally complex characters who exhibit humor, vulnerability, and fortitude as they cope with sometimes desperate circumstances.

Her plays juxtapose beauty with destruction, hope with despair, and bring to light the complicated realities of urban African American communities. The Detroit Project, a trilogy of works inspired by August Wilson's Century Cycle, paints an authentic picture of the city at three moments in time. Set during the riots of the summer of 1967, *Detroit '67* (2013) delves into the bond between a brother and sister and the difficult, life-altering decisions they must make against a backdrop of chaos and economic instability. *Paradise Blue* (2015) dramatizes the lives and music of the jazz community in a Detroit neighborhood in 1949, where legendary artists performed and flourished before urban renewal policies forever altered the landscape. The final play in the trilogy, *Skeleton Crew* (2016), is set in 2008 in an automotive stamping plant during the worst of the recession and centers on characters wrestling with conscience, identity, and the instinct for economic survival. Music features prominently throughout The Detroit Project, with Motown, jazz, and hip-hop tracks serving to accentuate a mood and



Photo credit: John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

characters wrestling with conscience, identity, and the instinct for economic survival. Music features prominently throughout The Detroit Project, with Motown, jazz, and hip-hop tracks serving to accentuate a mood and

underscore dialogue, while Morisseau captures the city's distinctive rhythms of speech to further convey the specificity of place.

Other works include *Sunset Baby* (2012), a raw, potent look at a daughter's relationships with her estranged revolutionary father and her drug-dealing boyfriend, and *Pipeline* (2017), which explores a mother's desperation and fatalism as she witnesses her black son's seeming inability to avoid the "school to prison pipeline." Still early in her career, Morisseau is a powerful storyteller whose examination of character and circumstance is a call for audiences to consider the actions and responsibilities of society more broadly.

Dominique Morisseau received a B.F.A. (2000) from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. She is currently a Residency Five Playwright at the Signature Theatre. She has had work commissioned by the Steppenwolf Theatre, the Hip Hop Theater Festival, the South Coast Repertory, and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival; and her work has been staged at the Public Theater, the Williamstown Theatre Festival, and the Atlantic Theater Company.

From MacArthur Fellows - <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/1018/>

For more about the playwright visit-

[Playwright Dominique Morisseau | 2018 MacArthur Fellow](#)

[Trailer for Pipeline at Lincoln Center](#)

[Video of discussion with Dominique Morriseau](#)



Dominique Morisseau is the author of *The Detroit Project* (A 3-Play Cycle), which includes the following plays: *Skeleton Crew* (Atlantic Theater Company), *Paradise Blue* (Signature Theatre), and *Detroit '67* (Public Theater, Classical Theatre of Harlem, and NBT). Additional plays include *Pipeline* (Lincoln Center Theater),

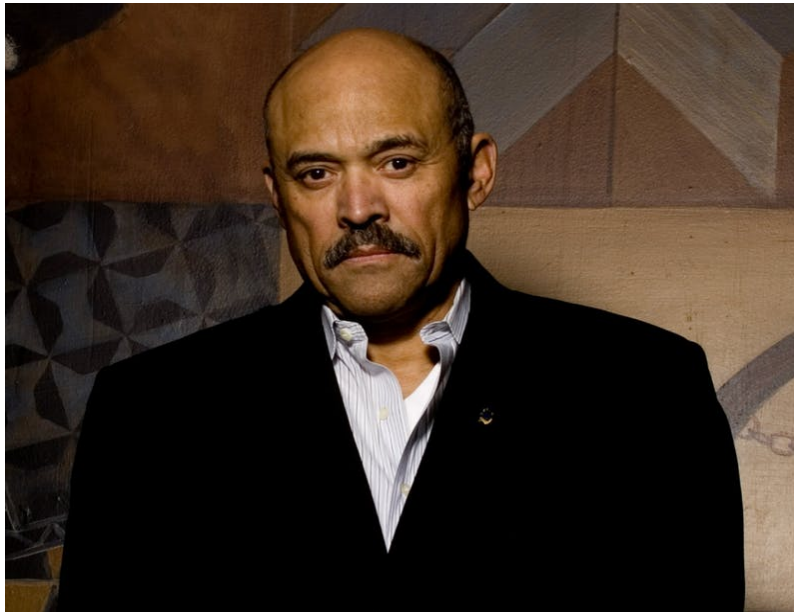
Sunset Baby (LAByrinth Theater), Blood at the Root (National Black Theatre), and Follow Me To Nellie's (Premiere Stages). Dominique is an alumna of the Center Theatre Group L.A. Writers' Workshop, The Public Theater Emerging Writers Group, Women's Project Lab, and Lark Playwrights' Workshop, and has developed work at Sundance Lab, Williamstown Theatre Festival, and Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference. Her work has been commissioned by Steppenwolf Theatre, Women's Project, South Coast Rep, People's Light and Theatre, and Oregon Shakespeare Festival/Penumbra Theatre. She most recently served as co-producer on the Showtime series Shameless. Following its record-breaking run at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 2017, her new musical Ain't Too Proud-The Life and Times of The Temptations opened at the Kennedy Center (Washington, D.C.), the Ahmanson (Los Angeles), and the Princess of Wales Theatre (Toronto). Awards include Spirit of Detroit Award, PoNY Fellowship, Sky Cooper Prize, TEER Trailblazer Award, Steinberg Playwright Award, AUDELCO Awards, NBFT August Wilson Playwriting Award, Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama, Obie Award, Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellowship, and being named one of Variety's Women of Impact for 2017-18.

Bio from Broadway World - <https://www.broadwayworld.com/people/bio/Dominique-Morisseau/>

Dominique Morisseau dedicated Pipeline to her mother, who she describes as a “master-educator and proud public school teacher for 40 years in Highland Park, MI”. She follows this dedication with this: “This isn’t her story. It’s just a similar world in which she was a fiercely committed educator, and worked very hard to help her students transcend”. (Morisseau, Dominique. Pipeline. 2014)

The Director

Lou Bellamy



Lou Bellamy is the founder and served as artistic director of Penumbra Theatre Company in Saint Paul, Minnesota for forty years. Under his leadership, Penumbra evolved into one of America's premier theaters dedicated to dramatic exploration of the African American experience. Penumbra grew to be the largest theater of its kind in America and having produced 39 world premieres, including August Wilson's first

professional production. Penumbra is proud to have produced more of Mr. Wilson's plays than any other theater in the world. Mr. Bellamy is an OBIE Award-winning director, an accomplished actor, and for 38 years was appointed as Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota in the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance. Directing credits include plays at Arizona Theatre Company, Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Penumbra Theatre, Signature Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, The Cleveland Play House, Indiana Repertory Theatre, The Guthrie Theater, The Kennedy Center, and Hartford Stage Company.

Lou Bellamy, Penumbra Theatre founder and the director of Pipeline, shares: "I am so very proud to lead the gifted creative team to bring you this insightful and entertaining comment on one of the most pressing issues in our community; the pipeline that often transports our young people from home and family to the prison industrial complex, or even death. The ensemble that has been brought together and charged with enlivening Ms. Morisseau's play is remarkable in their talent, commitment, attention to truth and detail."

Costume design

Mathew Lefebvre



Examples of cast costumes

Set design

Vicki Smith



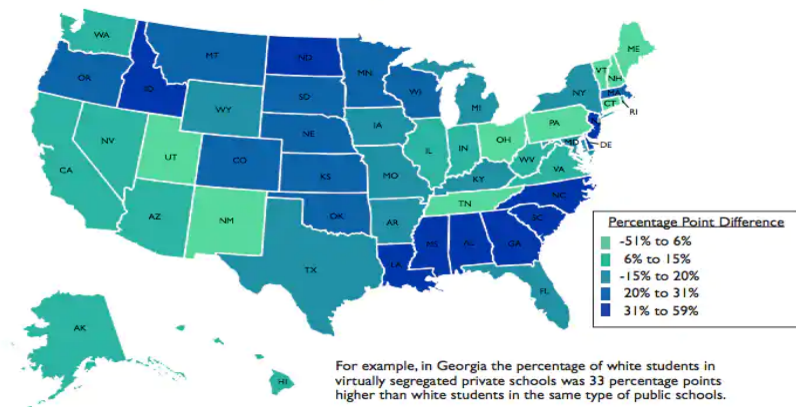
Images of Pipeline set at Penumbra Theater Company

School

Public school/ private school: challenging choices

Greg Forster, a senior fellow at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, told the Washington Post that it's not surprising that segregation persists five decades after Brown v.

**WHITE STUDENTS IN VIRTUAL SEGREGATION:
THE EXTENT SCHOOLS EXCEED PUBLIC SCHOOLS: 2012**



Source: SEF Computations of NCES Data, 2012

Board of Education and the Civil Rights Act. White students are more likely to attend private schools because the nation's white families have higher incomes than other families, on average. Compared to public schools, private schools are more likely to be virtually all-white, which is defined as a school where 90 percent or more of students are white.

Steve Suitts from the Southern Education Foundation says that it's not simply economic, "The number of black, Latino, and Native American students enrolled in private schools is far lower than the number of minority families that could afford it".

According to the New York Times, minority students of color in private school settings report feeling estranged, among peers who often lack any awareness about their socioeconomic status and the differences it entails. They describe a racism that materializes not in insults, but more often in polite indifference, silence, and segregation. In a review of the documentary American Promise for the Atlantic, Judith Ohikuare describes her personal experience with private school, which some view as a ticket to upward mobility. as not just cultural shock but cultural disillusionment.

Further reading:

[The Racial Makeup of Private Schools Often Nonprofit is Very White](#)

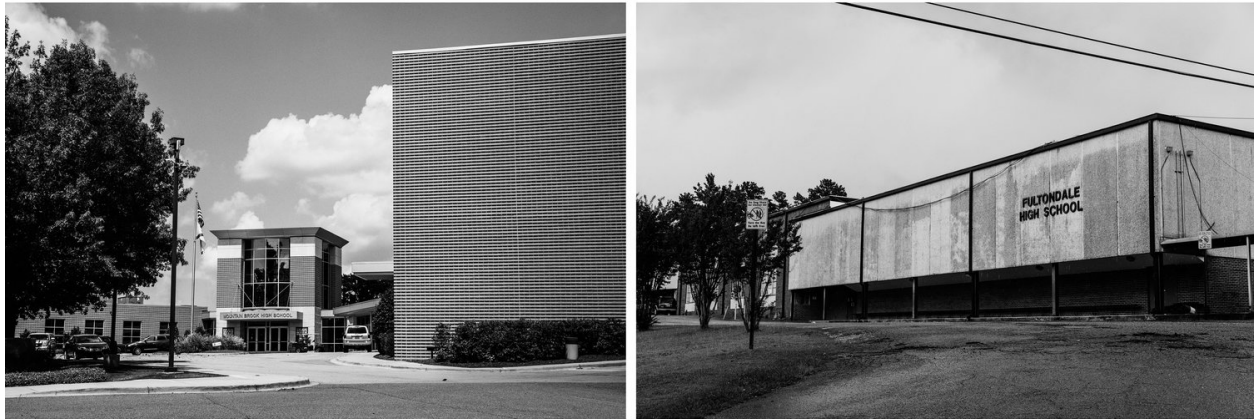
[When Minority Students Attend Elite Private Schools](#)

[For Minority Students At Elite New York Private Schools Admittance Doesn't Bring Acceptance](#)

[Head or Heart, Black Parents Face Tough Trade Offs When It Comes Education](#)

Legacy of Busing and segregation

EdBuild, an organization that studies school funding systems, uses a term call racially isolated schools systems and asserts that in communities across the country, “one school district directly abuts a district that differs dramatically by racial makeup and spending per student. Almost 9 million students attend these underfunded, racially isolated districts.” The differences between districts is largely rooted in persistent housing segregation, “because school funding begins with local taxes, these lines also largely determine which kids have access to what resources”



Side by side, but worlds apart in Alabama: Mountain Brook High School (left) and Fultondale High School in Jefferson County/ Wes Frazer for NPR

[This Interview on Fresh Air](#) with Terry Gross features Nikole Hannah-Jones, a reporter focused on education and racial injustice provides insights into the complex individual decisions parents of students of color might consider when choosing a school for their students.

Further reading and listening:

[Separate And Unequal Schools](#)

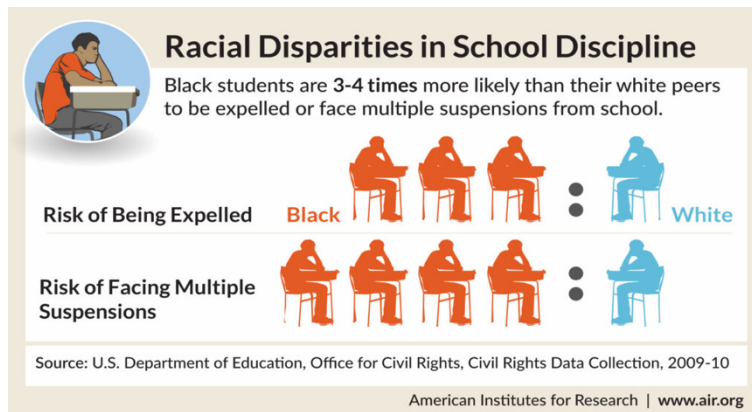
[EdBuild.org](#)

[Millions of US Children Go To Racially And Economically Segregated Schools](#)

School to Prison Pipeline in the context of Mass Incarceration

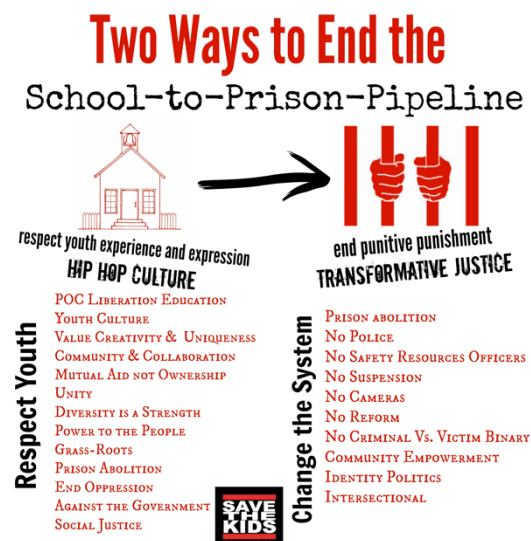
A Black boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime and a Latino boy a one in six chance of the same fate.

Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, reminds us that the “how school discipline policies have been influenced by the war on drugs and the “get tough” movement. Many people imagine that zero tolerance rhetoric emerged within the school environment, but it’s not true...



one of the earliest examples of zero tolerance language in school discipline manuals was a cut-and-paste job from a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration manual. The wave of punitiveness that washed over the United States with the rise of the drug war and the get tough movement really flooded our schools. Schools, caught up in this maelstrom, began viewing children as criminals or suspects, rather than as young people with an enormous amount of potential struggling in their own ways and their own difficult context to make it and hopefully thrive. We began viewing the youth in schools as potential violators rather than as children needing our guidance.”

The Washington Post reports that African American students are 3.8 times more likely to receive one or more suspensions as white students, according to data released by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights.



Further Reading:

[Stop Recidivism](#)

[Rethinking Schools – Michelle Alexander On The New Jim Crow and The School to Prison Pipeline](#)

Minnesota and The School to Prison Pipeline

Some have argued that in Minnesota we don't have a school-to-prison pipeline but rather a cradle-to-prison pipeline. A bill ([HF1785](#)) was introduced in Minnesota this year (2019) which would aim to do that by prohibiting the suspension or expulsion of any child enrolled in a prekindergarten program. Across the country in 2016, according to a National Survey of Children's Health, an estimated 50,000 preschoolers were suspended at least once. Another 17,000 were expelled from preschool programs across the United States.

The Star Tribune reported that a statewide assessment of Minnesota schools found that in 2016 "students of color make up only 31 percent of the student population but accounted for 66 percent of all school suspensions and expulsions in the 2015-16 school year. Specifically, American Indian students were

10 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers, and black students were eight times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students — higher than the national average."

According to the Children's Defense Fund, Minnesota spends 3.7 times as much money per prisoner as per public school student each year.

Further Reading:

[Multiple Districts In Minnesota Take Steps to Reduce Disparities In School Discipline](#)

[Cradle to Prison Pipeline Minnesota Fact Sheet](#)

[Hamline report on School to Prison Pipeline](#)

[Bill aims to stop the "pre-K to prison pipeline"](#)



Discussion questions

Laurie complains about the “cute young blonde straight out Teacher’s College” substitute who took over her class while she healed from having her face reconstructed. This substitute showed students *The Wire*, the last one showed them *Dangerous Minds*. What is the consequence these films, and media like them, have on students in urban public schools?

Laurie says “I’m a white chick who has never had the luxury of winning over a class full of Black and Latino kids. This is war”. What damage is inherent in this positionality towards students? Is Laurie any better or worse than the substitutes?

“Half these damn kids are suffering from mental illness. That’s what the real problem is. A classroom can’t fix that shit. And neither can Ritalin” How might schools be better equipped to handle mental health challenges? Should this be the responsibility of schools?

How has a history of corporal punishment in schools evolved in this era? How is surveillance a new manifestation of this kind of control? How do you think this legacy permeates the educational experience of students of color?

“What the hells the point of the security cameras they put in if it’s not going to scare off these hoodlums.”
(pg)

Security cameras are not the only kind of surveillance being employed in schools. In what way does the role of social media and cell phone cameras make things more complex? Do they give students power?

Jasmine and Omari uses celestial phenomena like metamorphic rocks and a lunar eclipse to describe their connection to one another. What makes space a metaphor for their relationship?

Nya explains to Jasmine that she fears involving the school after she discovers that Omari has disappears, fearing “they’re going to sound the alarm. Make more of a problem. And then whatever trouble Omari is in, he’ll be faced with more.” What about the race dynamic at play make is more dangerous for black parents to seek help from the institution? What barriers exist for schools and parents of students of color to partner for student well being?

What is the role of uniforms for private school students and the visuals in this play? How do they signal changes in character?

What effect is achieved by weaving together Omari's voice and Nya lecture to her students about the poem "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks? How has the playwright used the audience as stand in for the students?

Omari compares his experience in the class to being questioned and to feeling like an animal. How can tokenization fatigue in the classroom feel like this? What can educators do to avoid tokenizing students?

Glossary and Key Figures

School to prison pipeline- The ACLU defines the “school-to-prison pipeline”, as “a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse or neglect, and would benefit from additional educational and counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished, and pushed out.” <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline>

Zero-tolerance policies- policies that criminalize minor violations of school rules. Students of color are especially vulnerable to these discriminatory forms of discipline. <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline>

Franz Fanon (1925-1961) was a West Indian psychoanalyst and philosopher known for his social theory that some neuroses are socially generated and for his writings on behalf of the national liberation of colonized people. His critiques influenced subsequent generations of thinkers and activists. In 1952, Fanon published *Black Skin, White Masks*, which analyzed the effect of colonialism on racial consciousness and forwarded an expansive view of the psychosocial consequences of colonialism on colonized people. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frantz-Fanon>

Richard Wright (1908–1960) was an African American writer and poet who published his first short story at the age of 16. Later, he found employment with the Federal Writers' Project and received critical acclaim for *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of four stories. He is well-known for his 1940 bestseller *Native Son* and his 1945 autobiography, *Black Boy*. *Native Son* is the story of a 20-year-old African American man named Bigger Thomas. [Biography.com](https://www.biography.com/people/richard-wright)

Wright, the grandson of slaves, was born on a plantation in Roxie, Mississippi, a tiny town located about 22 miles east of Natchez, in Franklin County. Wright's family soon moved to Memphis, Tennessee. While in Memphis, his father Nathaniel, a former sharecropper, abandoned them. Wright, his brother, and mother Ella, a schoolteacher, soon moved to Jackson, Mississippi, to live with relatives. In Jackson, Wright grew up and attended public high school. Here, he formed some of his most lasting early impressions of American racism before eventually moving back to Memphis in 1927, where he began to read extensively and become enamored with literary writing, and particularly the writings of the preeminent American journalist H. L. Mencken.

Eventually, Wright moved to Chicago, where he began to write, becoming active in the John Reed Clubs, and eventually joining the Communist Party. Wright moved to New York City to become the Harlem editor of the *Daily Worker*, a communist newspaper, also contributing to the *New Masses* magazine. Wright experienced positive contact with whites during his communist activity, but became frustrated by the party's theoretical rigidity and disapproved of the Soviet Union's purges.

Wright first gained notoriety for his collection of short stories entitled *Uncle Tom's Children*, published in 1937. In this work he fictionalized the incidents of lynching in the Deep South. He followed up this work with a novel *Native Son* (1940), which was the first book written by an African American to receive the endorsement of the National Book of the Month Club. *Native Son* relates the story of the murderer, Bigger Thomas, intended by Wright to be a representation of the limitations that society placed on African Americans. In the novel, Thomas, desperate from poverty and struggling to survive, is only able to gain his own freedom through becoming a heinous criminal. Wright was much criticized for the book's concentration on violence, but the book nonetheless garnered serious critical acclaim and continues to be widely read and taught on college campuses.

Wright is also renowned for the autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945), which describes his early life from Roxie through his move to Chicago, his clashes with his Seventh-Day Adventist family, his difficulties with white employers and social isolation. *American Hunger*, (published posthumously in 1977) was originally intended as the second book of *Black Boy*, which details his involvement and ultimate disillusionment with the Communist Party, which he left in 1942.

In May 1946 Wright traveled to France as a guest of the French government, where he was well received by French intellectuals. It was after this visit that he settled in Paris to become a permanent American expatriate, though on occasion he would return to the United States. In the last years of his life, Richard Wright became enamored with the Japanese poetry form of haiku, writing over four thousand of them.

Wright contracted amoebic dysentery on a visit to the British Gold Coast (now Ghana) in 1957, and despite various treatments, his health continued to deteriorate over the next three years. He died in Paris of a heart attack at the age of 52. He is interred there in Le Père Lachaise Cemetery.

Biography from https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Richard_Wright

James Baldwin- (1924–1987) was a novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and social critic. His first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, appeared in 1953 to excellent reviews, and his essay collections *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time* were bestsellers that made him an influential figure in the growing civil rights movement. Baldwin spent much of his life in France, where he moved to escape the racism and homophobia of the United States. He died in France in 1987, a year after being made a Commander of the French Legion of Honor. ([Penguin Random House](#))

Quotes from Pipeline

Omari's girlfriend and schoolmate, Jasmine, tries to explain his behavior: "Sometimes people push you too far, make you feel like an animal from another jungle"; at that point, "you become the expectation." (30)

"She wants us to think about the "We" before the next line... Each "We" questions their existence and worth" (23)

"I keep trying to explain to them that someone like me would actually survive better in an environment in which I am COMFORTABLE instead of being the token poor girl of color that everyone thinks is trying to sleep with their pussy ass boyfriend or take their goddamn cocaine or crystal meth or whatever, meanwhile the worst shit my friends from the block are smokin' is weed. (27)

"It's a gamble, Jasmine. All the time. You send your young man out into the world everyday, or away for the weekend. A semester. A schoolyear. But you dont know... you have no idea if theyre safe. You have no idea if one day someone will try to expire them because they are too young. Or too Black. Or too threatening. Or too loud. Or too uninformed. Or too angry. Or too quiet. Or too everyday. Or too cool. Or too uncomposed. Or too mysterious. Or just too TOO." (34-35)

"It's like you send us here to become these different people. You want us to have so much and you want to protect us from ourselves. You love us and we know that. But you hate us too." (35)

"I have tried... like religiously...like an ongoing prayer...to protect you." (48)

"I will take a bullet for you. I will suffocate the sun for you. I will steal the sky for you. I will blind Moses for you. I will strip the wind and the rain and the forests for you. Before I let you die or rot or lose your freedom, I will surrender my own." (48)

"All my son's life, I thought there was space for him. A little opportunity and education and he'd be complete. But Members of the Board, I'm here to tell you that I miscalculated. Omari's actions arent his bag alone. They're mine. All of ours. We didnt carve out enough space. He doesnt belong anywhere. There is no block. No school. No land he can travel without being under suspicion and doubt." (81)

Relevant Readings

Gwendolyn Brooks's **We Real Cool** - <https://poets.org/poem/we-real-cool>

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.



Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, on June 7, 1917, and raised in Chicago. She was the author of more than twenty books of poetry, including *Children Coming Home* (The David Co., 1991); *Blacks* (The David Co., 1987); *To Disembark* (Third World Press, 1981); *The Near-Johannesburg Boy and Other Poems* (The David Co., 1986); *Riot* (Broadside Press, 1969); *In the Mecca* (Harper & Row, 1968); *The Bean Eaters* (Harper, 1960); *Annie Allen* (Harper,

1949), for which she received the Pulitzer Prize; and *A Street in Bronzeville* (Harper & Brothers, 1945). (Poets.com)

She also wrote numerous other books including a novel, *Maud Martha* (Harper, 1953), and *Report from Part One: An Autobiography* (Broadside Press, 1972), and edited *Jump Bad: A New Chicago Anthology* (Broadside Press, 1971).

In 1968 she was named poet laureate for the state of Illinois. In 1985, she was the first black woman appointed as consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress, a post now known as Poet Laureate. She also received an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, the Frost Medal, a National Endowment for the Arts Award, the Shelley Memorial Award, and fellowships from the Academy of American Poets and the Guggenheim Foundation. She lived in Chicago until her death on December 3, 2000.

Essay about We Are Cool by Tyehimba Jess

"[We Real Cool](#)" is the poem so many of us know from grade school: the Seven (that sacred number of the seeker, the thinker, the mysterious) at the Golden Shovel (the shovel be golden but be ready to dig your grave). Them lounging streetcornerwise in our consciousness under some flickered neon of mannish-boy dream. A Chicago/Detroit/Harlem/St. Louis/L.A./Gary/... corner. Someplace where the rhyme is always as good as the reason, anyplace where the cost of gin is precious enough to thin but solemn enough to pour on the sidewalk for the departed, anyplace where the schools are overcrowded and underfunded and black and brown enough to not really miss the Seven, who were underperforming on the standardized tests and had been diagnosed as ADD or BDD status anyway. Anyplace where sin gets hymned out—straitlaced into storefront chapels on Sunday mornings—but sewn back into Saturday night doo-wopped breakbeats, finger-snapped shuffles of promise.

We know the Seven. Know them like our neighbor's boy gone bloodied to bullets. Like our cousins nodded off into prison terms or hyped into the ground. Like our brothers gone homeless. Like our fathers gone missing. Like ourselves when we look in the blurry mid-morning mirror. One for every day of the week, one for each of our deadly sins. One waiting around the bend of each American corner. We stand in the June of our lives and try to sing it all the way through each season, always ending each line on the word that brings us together as much as it pivots us into new revelations: We. We. We. We. We. We. We.

(<https://poets.org/text/tyehimba-jess-we-real-cool-gwendolyn-brooks>)

Films to consider-

Native Son (2019) HBO

If Beale Street Could Talk (2018) Barry Jenkins

Further Reading:

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

Native Son by Richard Wright

If Beale Street Could Talk by James Baldwin

[Paris Review on James Baldwin's Optimism](#)

[Many Thousands Gone by James Baldwin](#) (Notes On A Native Son)

James Baldwin's Notes On a Native Son - In Notes on A Native Son's "Many Thousands Gone", James Baldwin writes that not only does an American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro's heart" and that "no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull." (38)

The Fact of Blackness by Frantz Fanon - Frantz Fanon discusses the feeling in his 1952 essay, L'expérience vécue du noir (The Fact of Blackness). "In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. To put an end to his tension, he acts, he responds to the world's anticipation."

Themes within Pipeline

By Junauda Petrus-Nasah

Black Boyhood Interrupted

Native Son by Richard Wright and “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks are texts that Morrisseau engages and activates in this work in ways that speak to the complexities of Black boyhood in a society that doesn’t see childhood in Black boys or honor divinity in Blackness. The anxiety felt by both Nya and Omari’s character are palpable in this piece and in Black communities nationwide.

Nya as mother is attempting to protect her son from a reality that she can’t control and she is haunted by it. Omari is feeling the pressure of Black male adulthood in ways that interrupt and distract from his humanity and existential blossoming. Both characters struggle with how to find joy in a society that has historically made it unnecessarily complicated to do so for Black folks.



Boyz in the hood, When They See Us, Moonlight and Heavy, like Pipeline have provided space to contemplate the “unbearable heaviness of being” that often overshadows Black boyhood in this nation. These examples of coming of age reflect on how masculinity and specifically Black masculinity has to navigate violence as a form of hardening, accept softness as a liability and/or a sign of weakness, and be assumed to have high levels of sexual maturity and experience. These tropes are all contorted and complicated in these works in the effort of uncovering the multi-dimensional beings that live within these characters.

Black Men As Menace

In this play, Nya and Omari are holding the anxiety of living in a society that harms Black lives with impunity. You don’t have to look far to see that mainstream culture and society in the U.S. has a legacy of villainizing Blackness and Black people. When it comes to Black men, the fear is grounded in stereotypes of sexual menace, inherent violence, and assumed criminality, that were created by White supremacists who designed this nation for their gains. These White men were in the business of enslaving and oppressing the descendants of stolen African people in order

to fund their personal wealth and the building of this country. These two-dimensional, contrived Black archetypes, have been used to continuously vindicate violence and repression against Black life for the objective of White social stratification and gains in wealth and power.

In the last decade, in the public sphere, we have seen how acute and deadly the disease of White supremacy and fear of Blackness can land on the souls of Black people just living their lives. In the cases of Eric Garner, suffocated for selling loose cigarettes, or Trayvon Martin murdered while walking in his father's neighborhood, or Stephon Clark shot down while holding a cellphone in his grandma's backyard we see that Black skin and masculinity was all that was needed to inspire deputization against their existence. Nya is deeply aware that she is raising Omari in a land that makes assumptions about him first, and will force him to demonstrate his worth and safety before he is even asked his name or his dreams. Morrisseau writes, her characters into this current moment of Black survival and thriving with sensitivity to this

Emotional Femme Labor

Pipeline explores through the relationships with women and men, as well as women and institutions, that there are expectations for women and femmes to repress their stress and pain, while making themselves available and supportive to the struggles of the men and patriarchies in their lives.

Pipeline begins with Nya smoking a cigarette and trying to communicate with her ex-husband about the fight their teenaged son has gotten into at his elite prep-school. She is anxious at the current trouble her son is in. We feel the wait of her awareness that consequences for a son like hers is often inflated due to his race. She is one of two parents, but you feel the burden of parenting un-equally on her shoulders, even from the one-sided phone call to Omari's father. Morrisseau's writing of the Nya character has her balancing the weight of her personal issues with that of her son's angst and frustration in a way that begins to drown her.

We see a similar dynamic in the relationship between Omari and his girlfriend, Jasmine. Although they are the same age and in the same situation of being "fish out of water" in a private school, we see Jasmine fulfilling the role of caretaker to Omari in the absence of Nya.

OMARI

I don't know where I'm gonna be two days from now. Or two hours.

And I can't be pretending we in some fairy tale fantasy

where all I need to do is chill with you in a castle with our horses or whatever.

JASMINE

Horses?

OMARI

Or whatever. I'ono. Whatever they got in castles. Truth is I got too many worries and bein' with you don't make 'em go nowhere. You feel me?

JASMINE

You sayin' I'm addin' to your stress level?

OMARI I'm sayin' I got stresses. Real ones. And hiding out in your dorm ain't 'doin nothin' but prolonging the inevitable.

JASMINE This some wack version of a breakup?

OMARI

It's just me bein' honest.

JASMINE

Well fuck your honesty.

Seriously Omari, you gonna make my heart explode with all yo' back and forthness.

One minute you tellin' me I'm the cure.

Next minute, I'm the cause.

Maybe you your own stress problem and I ain't got nothin' to do with it.

OMARI

Maybe I am.

JASMINE

(Pssshhh) Fuck you.

OMARI

Maybe I'm confused.

JASMINE

That's the realest shit you ever said.

Even in her youth and personal challenges, she creates space in herself to support and contemplate the weight of Omari's issues in ways that he does not reciprocate. Her journey and needs are upstaged by the difficulties that her boyfriend is going through.

Laurie, Nya's colleague, who has been a teacher in an urban environment for her whole career, is introduced in the play when she is returning to the classroom after needing surgery for a school fight intervention gone wrong.



LAURIE

Well that's enough socializing for me. I've got to get my room in tact
'fore the next set of hooligans comes in.

DUN

You need me to come up there for any reason, you know how to buzz me. I got you on priority.

LAURIE

Don't worry about me. Take care of these young gals who don't know shit about how to fend for themselves. Me? I'm an old dame. A little reconstructive surgery and I'm back in the game.

DUN

Got it mama.

Laurie walks to the door. Takes a strange and revealing inhale.

LAURIE This is my den, you know? This is always my den.

She is frustrated at the overwhelming struggle of her job, but she also has resigned herself to the immovability of her plight within the profession of public school teacher she has chosen. Morrisseau's portrayal of the isolation of oppression across gender and the emotional labor that exists within femme bodies layers into the central actions of this play.

Urban kid meets private school

In ways both poetic and dissonant, Pipeline, leads us into a story of Omari, a young black man navigating social and familial pressures in order to become himself. Omari is a kid from an urban environment attending a predominantly White private school. He feels like an outsider and is struggling to succeed despite his intelligence, motivation and support systems. In his English class, his teacher attempts to pressure him into representing and explaining Blackness to his peers in a way that is demoralizing and humiliating to a young spirit. This confrontation results in an unexpected break in Omari.

NYA

Questioning you how?

OMARI Didn't feel like being bothered. I said that to him, Ma. I told him I wasn't in the mood for being questioned.

NYA

Omari he's your teacher. He has the right

OMARI

Nah... he don't. Not how he was doin' it. Been doing it a lot and I was sick of it. We get to discussing the reading. Native Son- Richard Wright. And he start asking questions. What made Bigger Thomas kill that woman? What were his social limitations? What made the animal in him explode? And who he lookin' at when he askin' all these questions, Ma. Who he lookin' at?

NYA

Omari.

OMARI

Like I'm the spokesperson. Like I'm Bigger Thomas. Like I'm pre-disposed or some shit to knowing what it's like to be an animal.

This theme of displacement and seeking belonging while striving to overcome the pitfalls of oppression is the hero's journey that Omari is on.



The expectation is that Omari will benefit from the multiple ways he will learn how to adapt and succeed within spaces of elite whiteness and the micro-aggressions inherent within. Although he is experiencing emotional and social violence within his education environment, the end will justify the means of supposed racial uplift. He and Jasmine, much like Ruby Bridges and The

Little Rock 9 (and so many more Black children who desegregated racist institutions) are meant to be warriors in academic spaces, that are White supremacist and emotionally traumatizing. The belief is that a good education will overcome a racist society and its inherent barriers for Black people. Omari operates as a canary in the mineshaft when he reacts to the latent hypocrisy of his teacher and his schooling. Why must he endure toxic schooling designed by his oppressors in order to succeed? Especially in a world that wants him to submit or disappear?

Omari's character shows us the soul crumpling that happens when young Black people are foreclosed from the whimsy and personal exploration that occurs in a society that forces you to fixate on survival and conformity instead of joy.

Poetry and Lyrics in conversation with Pipeline

Excerpt from Dear Mama

By Tupac

[Verse 1]

You are appreciated
When I was young, me and my mama had beef
Seventeen years old, kicked out on the streets
Though back at the time I never thought I'd see her face
Ain't a woman alive that could take my mama's place
Suspended from school, and scared to go home, I was a fool
With the big boys breakin' all the rules
I shed tears with my baby sister, over the years
We was poorer than the other little kids
And even though we had different daddies, the same drama
When things went wrong we'd blame Mama
I reminisce on the stress I caused, it was hell
Huggin' on my mama from a jail cell
And who'd think in elementary, hey
I'd see the penitentiary one day?
And runnin' from the police, that's right
Mama catch me, put a whoopin' to my backside
And even as a crack fiend, Mama
You always was a black queen, Mama
I finally understand
For a woman it ain't easy tryin' to raise a man
You always was committed
A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how you did it
There's no way I can pay you back, but the plan
Is to show you that I understand: you are appreciated

[Chorus]

Lady, don't you know we love ya? (Dear Mama)
Sweet lady, place no one above ya (You are appreciated)
Sweet lady, don't you know we love ya?

[Verse 2]

Now, ain't nobody tell us it was fair
No love from my daddy, 'cause the coward wasn't there
He passed away and I didn't cry, 'cause my anger
Wouldn't let me feel for a stranger
They say I'm wrong and I'm heartless, but all along
I was lookin' for a father, he was gone
I hung around with the thugs

And even though they sold drugs
They showed a young brother love
I moved out and started really hangin'
I needed money of my own, so I started slangin'
I ain't guilty, 'cause even though I sell rocks
It feels good puttin' money in your mailbox
I love payin' rent when the rent is due
I hope you got the diamond necklace that I sent to you
'Cause when I was low you was there for me
And never left me alone, because you cared for me
And I could see you comin' home after work late
You're in the kitchen, tryin' to fix us a hot plate
You just workin' with the scraps you was given
And Mama made miracles every Thanksgivin'
But now the road got rough, you're alone
You're tryin' to raise two bad kids on your own
And there's no way I can pay you back, but my plan
Is to show you that I understand: you are appreciated

[Verse 3]

Pour out some liquor and I reminisce
'Cause through the drama I can always depend on my mama
And when it seems that I'm hopeless
You say the words that can get me back in focus
When I was sick as a little kid
To keep me happy there's no limit to the things you did
And all my childhood memories
Are full of all the sweet things you did for me
And even though I act crazy
I gotta thank the Lord that you made me
There are no words that can express how I feel
You never kept a secret, always stayed real
And I appreciate how you raised me
And all the extra love that you gave me
I wish I could take the pain away
If you can make it through the night, there's a brighter day

Nikki-Rosa

BY Nikki Giovanni

childhood remembrances are always a drag
if you're Black
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn
with no inside toilet
and if you become famous or something
they never talk about how happy you were to have
your mother
all to yourself and
how good the water felt when you got your bath
from one of those
big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in
and somehow when you talk about home
it never gets across how much you
understood their feelings
as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale
and even though you remember
your biographers never understand
your father's pain as he sells his stock
and another dream goes
And though you're poor it isn't poverty that
concerns you
and though they fought a lot
it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference
but only that everybody is together and you
and your sister have happy birthdays and very good
Christmases
and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy

Nikki Giovanni, "Nikki-Rosa" from Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment. Copyright © 1968, 1970 by Nikki Giovanni. Used with the permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Source: The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni (2003)

Dinosaurs in the Hood

By Danez Smith

Let's make a movie called Dinosaurs in the Hood.
Jurassic Park meets Friday meets The Pursuit of Happyness.
There should be a scene where a little black boy is playing
with a toy dinosaur on the bus, then looks out the window
& sees the T. Rex, because there has to be a T. Rex.

Don't let Tarantino direct this. In his version, the boy plays
with a gun, the metaphor: black boys toy with their own lives,
the foreshadow to his end, the spitting image of his father.
Fuck that, the kid has a plastic Brontosaurus or Triceratops
& this is his proof of magic or God or Santa. I want a scene

where a cop car gets pooped on by a pterodactyl, a scene
where the corner store turns into a battle ground. Don't let
the Wayans brothers in this movie. I don't want any racist shit
about Asian people or overused Latino stereotypes.
This movie is about a neighborhood of royal folks —

children of slaves & immigrants & addicts & exiles — saving their town
from real-ass dinosaurs. I don't want some cheesy yet progressive
Hmong sexy hot dude hero with a funny yet strong commanding
black girl buddy-cop film. This is not a vehicle for Will Smith
& Sofia Vergara. I want grandmas on the front porch taking out raptors

with guns they hid in walls & under mattresses. I want those little spitty,
screamy dinosaurs. I want Cicely Tyson to make a speech, maybe two.
I want Viola Davis to save the city in the last scene with a black fist afro pick
through the last dinosaur's long, cold-blood neck. But this can't be
a black movie. This can't be a black movie. This movie can't be dismissed

because of its cast or its audience. This movie can't be a metaphor
for black people & extinction. This movie can't be about race.
This movie can't be about black pain or cause black people pain.
This movie can't be about a long history of having a long history with hurt.
This movie can't be about race. Nobody can say nigga in this movie

who can't say it to my face in public. No chicken jokes in this movie.
No bullets in the heroes. & no one kills the black boy. & no one kills
the black boy. & no one kills the black boy. Besides, the only reason
I want to make this is for that first scene anyway: the little black boy

on the bus with a toy dinosaur, his eyes wide & endless

his dreams possible, pulsing, & right there.

Link to [Dinosaurs in the Hood](#) video recited by St. Paul poet, Danez Smith

[Gioncarlo Valentine's Searing Portrait of the Fears of Young Black Men](#)

By Kiese Laymon

The first time I saw Gioncarlo Valentine, what I felt was jealousy. It was in a photograph, a nearly nude self-portrait, showing Valentine spread out on a bed. The look on his face awed and terrified me—I'd never seen someone with a big, beautiful black body like mine look so content to be naked in a photograph. What shocked me was not simply how Valentine must have conquered a fear by appearing naked and comfortable in that bed; it was how the image seemed to capture the expansive contours of our fears—the shared fears of black men—in a photo that was uniquely and absolutely him.

The next day, I looked him up online and found every photograph of his that I could. I learned that he was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1990, and grew up as a queer kid in a family and community that didn't know how to accept him. The photographs I discovered—like the ones in his series "The Soft Fence," which feature other young black men from Baltimore—catalogue the damn-near infinite ways that we ritualize fear in our bodies.

All of the subjects in "The Soft Fence" move, walk, pose, stunt, and style like they're afraid. Valentine understands that, when asked to pose for pictures, most black men, regardless of where we're from, move from smile to ice-grill in the span of a second, from fingers stretched or freely dangling to fingers clenched or in the shape of some sign that connects us to a group, a region, a culture, a state, a state of peace. Our schools, churches, and sometimes families try to discipline the fear out of our bodies; often, they end up giving us more and more reasons to be afraid. We go to all lengths to show the world that we aren't afraid, or alone. Only terrified people go to all lengths to show that they aren't afraid. "I'm always afraid, but people assume I'm fearless," Valentine told me recently.

I've spent the past few months on a book tour, promoting my memoir, "[Heavy](#)." The book explores, among other things, what we do with the weight we carry and the weight we inherit in a nation obsessed with progress but horrified by liberation. "Why aren't black men vulnerable?" I've been asked in some form at nearly every stop of the tour. I respond that I don't know any

black men who aren't vulnerable, but I do know a lot of men who don't know how to talk about why we are vulnerable, and how a failure to accept our vulnerability makes us harmful to ourselves and to folks around us. I wish I could just show my audiences "The Soft Fence." Valentine has allowed us space to occupy photographs in the way we actually occupy life: fearfully stylized. I'm thankful to his work for reminding me that we are afraid, and that the acceptance of fear, in all its shades, colors, codes, and consequences, is how we will prevail.

Playlist inspired by Pipeline

They School- Dead Prez (Explicit)
Thieves in the Night- Black Star (Explicit)
The Charade- D'Angelo
Lost Ones - Ms. Lauryn Hill
Ooh Child- The Five Stairsteps
Dear Mama -2Pac (Explicit)
To Be Young, Gifted and Black- Nina Simone
Someday We'll All Be Free - Donny Hathaway
Did You Hear What They Said?- Gil Scott-Heron
Respiration- Black Star, Common (Explicit)
What's Going On - Marvin Gaye
Living For The City- Stevie Wonder
Who are you - Bilal
Rasool - Jill Scott
You Got Me - The Roots
Hungry Hippo - Tierra Wack
Rooftop - Jordan Rakei

Archival Images and Visual Art inspired by the play's themes



George stands on the stairs of an unidentified church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Original photograph held by Winifred Irish Hall. 1935-1945.

Digital scan captured by Lolita Parker, Jr. for inclusion in the Lower Roxbury Black History Project. George stands on the stairs of an unidentified church, Massachusetts, Lower Roxbury Black History Project records, 2007-2009 (M165), Archives and Special Collections Department, Northeastern University Libraries, EH 2



RANDERSON ROMUALDO CORDEIRO, 2008, KEHINDE WILEY



Unidentified players for the Panthers athletic club, which met in Madison Park, pose for the camera. Original photograph held by Winifred Irish Hall. 1935-1945. Digital scan captured by Lolita Parker, Jr. for inclusion in the Lower Roxbury Black History Project. Unidentified Panthers players pose for the camera, Lower Roxbury Black History Project records, 2007-2009 (M165), Archives and Special Collections Department, Northeastern University Libraries, EH 2



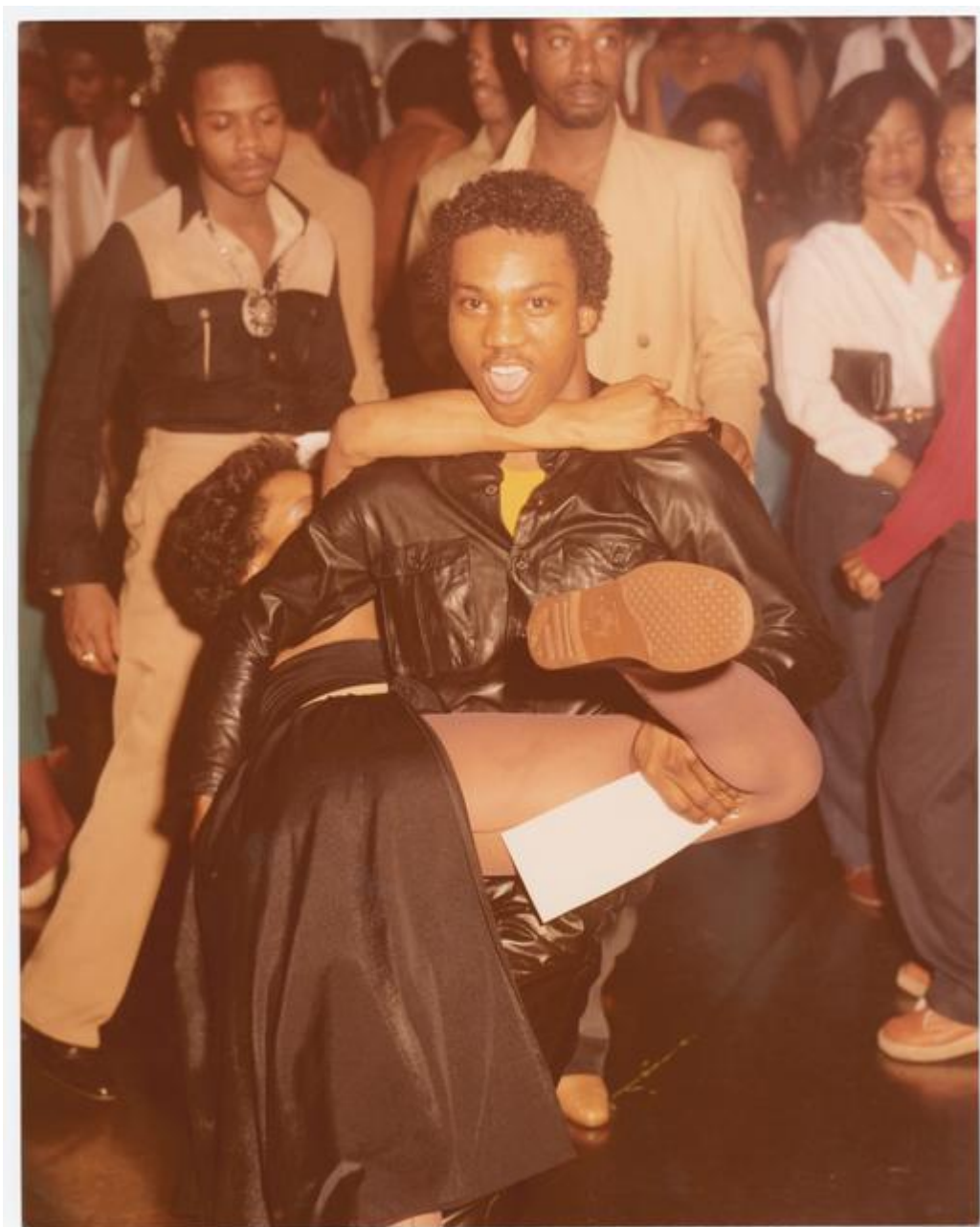
Unidentified Black boy. Approximately 1975 - Approximately 1985. Minnesota Historical Society Twin Cities African American community photograph collection, I.



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Two unidentified boys sit against a black vehicle in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Original photograph held by Winifred Irish Hall. 1935-1945.

Digital scan captured by Lolita Parker, Jr. for inclusion in the Lower Roxbury Black History Project. Two unidentified boys sit against a black vehicle, Lower Roxbury Black History Project records, 2007-2009 (M165), Archives and Special Collections Department, Northeastern University Libraries, EH



Dance contestants at Taste Show Lounge.

Approximately 1975 - Approximately 1985. Minnesota Historical Society.



Basquiat's Self-Portrait, 1984. Photograph: Jean-Michel Basquiat/Barbican



Boy with June Bug. Fort Scott, Kan., 1963.

Gordon Parks, Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

About the Free Black Dirt

Free Black Dirt is an artistic partnership formed by Minneapolis based collaborators Junauda Petrus and Erin Sharkey. Committed to creating original theatre and performance, hosting innovative events, organizing local artists, and promoting and supporting the emerging artists' community in the Twin Cities, Free Black Dirt seeks to spark and engage in critical conversations.

Junauda Petrus is a writer, pleasure activist, filmmaker and performance artist, born on Dakota land of Black-Caribbean descent. Her work centers around wildness, queerness, Black-diasporic-futurism, ancestral healing, sweetness, shimmer and liberation. She is the author of *The Stars and The Blackness Between Them* (Dutton Books for Young Readers). She lives in Minneapolis with her wife and family. www.junauda.com

Erin Sharkey is a writer and cultural producer based in Minneapolis. She is the co-founder, with Junauda Petrus, of an experimental arts production company called Free Black Dirt. Erin was a Bell Museum Artist-in-Residence, Loft Mentor Series mentee, VONA fellow, Jerome Travel and Study grantee, and Givens Foundation fellow. Her work has appeared in *Brooklyn Quarterly*, *Paper Darts* and *Walker Sightlines* and *Primer* Magazines and is editing a forthcoming publication on Milkweed Editions. In 2019, She was awarded the Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative grant, and is currently producing, *Sweetness of Wild*, an episodic web film project, and teaching with Minnesota Prison Writers Workshop.