

The logo for the play 'The White Card' features the word 'THE' in a small, italicized, serif font at the top. Below it, the word 'WHITE' is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the word 'CARD' is written in a medium-sized, italicized, serif font. The entire text is white and centered on a solid black rectangular background.

# THE WHITE CARD

A play by Claudia Rankine

*A Play in One Act*

Directed by Talvin Wilks  
A Penumbra Theatre Company Production  
Regional Premiere  
February 4 - March 1, 2020

## **The White Card**

A Study Guide by Free Black Dirt  
Erin Sharkey and 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 over 30 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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## Play Overview

Virginia and Charles are wealthy, white arts patrons with a keen interest in racial injustice. Over time they have acquired an impressive collection of contemporary art depicting the violence exacted against black Americans. Tonight, they are excited to host Charlotte, a black photographer on the verge of great renown, at a private dinner in their home. As the conversation ventures into our current political climate from the first champagne toast, it's clear neither artist nor collector is what the other may have expected. With incisive wit, Rankine's play turns the camera from the casualties to the collectors.

## About the Playwright



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*

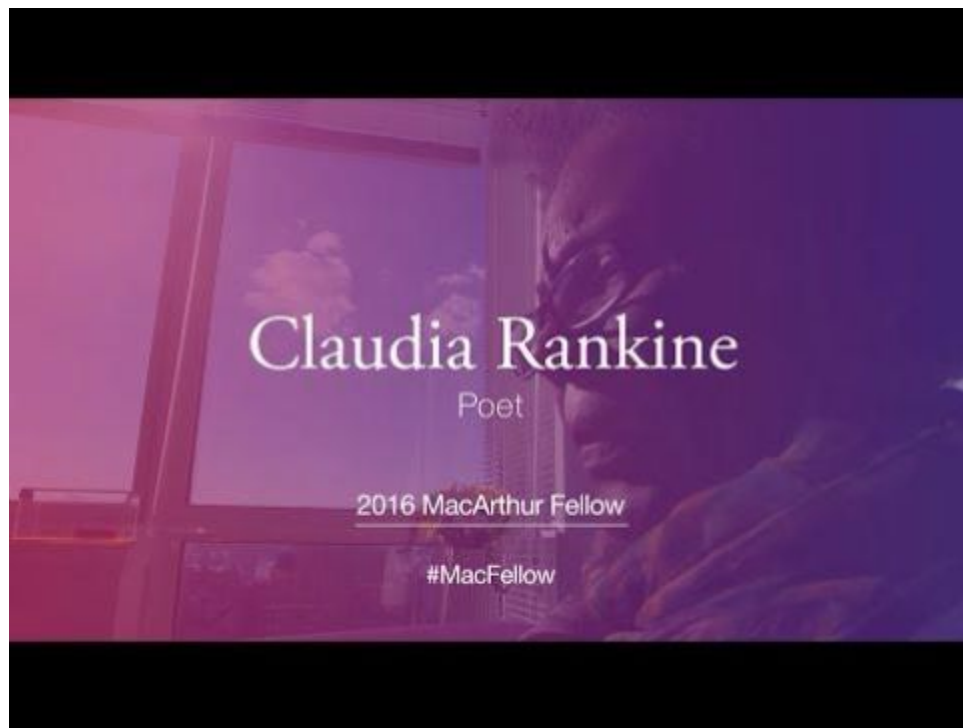
*Lyric* (2004); and *Nothing in Nature is Private* (1994), which won the Cleveland State Poetry Prize. Her work often crosses genres as it tracks wild and precise movements of mind. Noting that “hers is an art neither of epiphany nor story,” critic Calvin Bedient observed that “Rankine’s style is the 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 co-edited *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* (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.

Bio from [poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org)



Double Click image above for [Video](#) from MacArthur Foundation

### About the Director

**Talvin Wilks** is a playwright, director and dramaturg. His plays include *Tod, the Boy, Tod*; *The Trial of Uncle S&M*; *Bread of Heaven*; and *An American Triptych*. Directorial projects include the world premiere productions of *Eyewitness Blues*, by Mildred Ruiz and Steven Sapp (New WORLD Theater/New York Theatre Workshop), *UDU* by Sekou Sundiata (651Arts/BAM), *The Love Space Demands* by Ntozake Shange (Crossroads), *No Black Male Show/Pagan Operetta* by Carl Hancock Rux (Joe's Pub/The Kitchen), *Banana Beer Bath* by Lynn Nottage, (Going to the River Festival/EST), the Obie Award/AUDELCO Award winning *The Shannequa Chronicles* by Stephanie Berry (Ensemble Studio

Theatre), *Relativity* by Cassandra Medley (Ensemble Studio Theatre – AUDELCO nomination for Best Director 2006) and *On the Way to Timbuktu* by Petronia Paley (Ensemble Studio Theatre – AUDELCO nomination for Best Director 2008). He has served as co-writer/dramaturg for ten productions in Ping Chong's ongoing series of Undesirable Elements, and dramaturg for four collaborations with the Bebe Miller Company, *Necessary Beauty*, *Going to the Wall*, the Bessie Award winning, *Verge*, and *Landing/Place* for which he received a 2006 Bessie Award for Dramaturgy.

#### **Interview with The White Card Director, Talvin Wilks**

Free Black Dirt had a chance to talk with "The White Card" director Talvin Wilks. His insights and reflections into the themes of the play and its questions were powerful and timely. His words and experiences of his own journey as a Black artist in White theatre and arts landscapes was also powerful. Here is an excerpt of our conversation.

#### **Free Black Dirt:**

Have you, as an artist, ever had a white card moment?

#### **Talvin:**

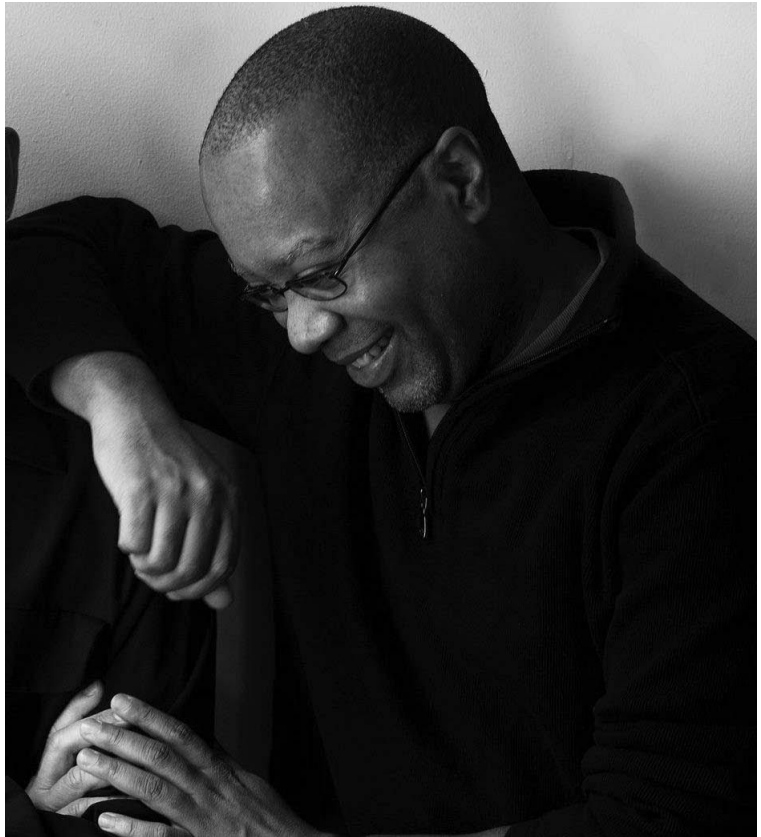
So, for me, The White Card is a landscape in which we travel through this terrain of white privilege, entitlement. You know. You could use the term "microaggressions" because they pop up in the text, but that's not really what it's about. It's really about getting white people to see themselves inside of the context of history, to be accountable, as opposed to stepping out of it as if that is not them, they're not... that's not part of... they have no role in that, it's for you. "How can we always help you?" As opposed to really seeing themselves as the subject, which is the white card. You play that white card! Which is that particular entitlement, "I can take myself out of this history."

#### **Free Black Dirt:**

Right, yep.

#### **Talvin:**

And, in my liberal, progressive sensibility, I can help you!



**Free Black Dirt:**

And still re-establish my sense of power in the situation.

**Talvin:**

Right, right.

**Free Black Dirt:**

Yeah.

**Talvin:**

And have I had a white card experience? I don't know. It's interesting, because I would say my whole journey has been, in ways, navigating that experience, going to a predominantly white private school, going to Princeton University, stepping in the traditional American theater landscape, trying to understand yourself inside of that, your identity inside of that, often being misinterpreted or misunderstood in the challenges and the cause of. I will say, in one particular review of an early play, because I started my career as a playwright, I had a brilliant white card moment in which a critic just blasted the play, just the worst thing ever, but at the end of the review had to say, and had to call himself out in this particular moment, "To be honest," he said, "I have to admit that this production got a standing ovation and roaring acclaim."

And then he goes and he says, "But I find the play overwrought and empty." And then he goes further to say, "Maybe that's because I'm white and sort of oblivious or disconnected... or maybe not." And that's how the review ends.

And so there was something about, "I can identify myself in this and I can call and can say I don't see or understand the moment. I can possibly acknowledge that I'm incorrect, but I don't think so."

**Free Black Dirt:**

Have there been moments in working with the cast, in that they've had realizations or they're feeling personally connected to the narratives?

**Talvin:**

I was very impressed by the cast, because they were very honest and able to, in their ability, to express, "I'm not sure I fully understand these things. I haven't really thought about these things. Also, I don't know these reference points. This is a real learning curve for me. I'm challenged by having these conversations around race. I feel a bit intimidated by just having an open conversation around some of the issues that are coming. I don't feel well-informed or as informed." So there was an honesty right up front that even just stepping into the play is a journey for.

So, I think, we took a very step-by-step process into that. I'm sure that we still are, just as an ensemble, still living in an uncertainty. That notion of still trying to discover fully how should this land? Even just last night, we did a second run of part of the first scene and I had to make a major

adjustment about just letting the language live. No over-expression, don't embellish. Let's just try that, as an experiment. You know, it's a terrible thing to say, "Actor, don't act!" ... don't try to over-embellish even what you think the intention is. Let's see what the language really does for us and where we get to on the other end. And they discovered a whole new rhythm and a whole new dynamic, and it got to this other level of clarity, and I could go, "Yes, let's go, let's start there." And then if there are any other things that we need to add for clarity's sake, we can do that, but that was the breakthrough for me from yesterday. That was the moment where I thought, "Okay, the language is working for us."

**Free Black Dirt:**

I guess the last question we have is, what is something that sort of blossomed, or you learned, through doing this particular play for yourself, as a director?

**Talvin:**

Wow. That's a great question. You always throw yourself in a work and you want to get out of the way, you want to understand it, you want to interpret it for yourself, you want to bring your ensemble along with you, your design team along with you, you want to have this thing manifest, and I think I had a real education with doing this play.

I had read most of the material, the essays, but the full complexity of really living inside of those ideas and inside of the visual art world... And I did a very big, deep dive in really trying to find a way of creating a composite for Charlotte as a black woman visual artist today and who could that be? And, really, there is this visual art moment that seemingly is happening as people are trying to break through that sort of glass ceiling of curatorial presence and... Can we call it the de-whitening of those sort of art museum cultures? And that this play challenges that and questions that, because we still see it. It's still a commodity. They bounce around million-dollar conversations and \$150 million auctions for a Lichtenstein.

So all of those things you begin to really understand, just what a visual artist of color is up against inside of the history of that institution and just how much work we have to do to, to break through that, deconstruct that, reconstruct that, even if that's possible... and the legacy of entitlement inside of that culture really, I think, comes through in this conversation. Even though, in some ways, it's not so specifically about that, but it's in the air and it really gets you to begin to question my right to be in those institutions and the reasons why I have not been.

I won't call it an awakening, maybe, perhaps, a broadening of that contemplation and just what that dance is, because you're absolutely right. Charlotte says, "I'm no activist and I understand my work is in galleries, it's not on the streets," but there is something important and significant about that work being in the gallery and that you have to have that experience and relationship to begin to understand just how entrenched white supremacy is in the culture.

**Free Black Dirt:**

Thank you. You're delightful!

## The White Card Characters

**Charlotte Cummings:** female, black Yale MFA graduate, forty-sh. Her most recent collection of work uses photography. She received major prizes and is on the verge of breaking into the international art market. Her mother is a lawyer for the ACLU and her father is an epidemiologist at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital and a professor at Columbia University.

**Eric Schmidt:** male, white. Dealer, early forties. The great-grandson of Anton Franz Schmidt, who founded one of the most prestigious art galleries in New York. Eric is a connoisseur of modern conceptual art and a strong advocate of young progressive artists. He has been instrumental in shaping the Spencer Art Foundation.

**Charles Hamilton Spencer:** male, white. Entrepreneur, art collector, early sixties. Highly knowledgeable, well connected to political figures and businessmen, he is a lover of contemporary art who made his money in real estate. He is also a well-respected philanthropist who is interested in ideas around diversity.

**Virginia Compton Spencer:** female, white. Charles's wife, fifty-five to sixty. She is interested in art and in her later twenties was an art for corporate clients. They have been married for thirty years and have two sons.

**Alex Compton-Spencer:** male, white. Twenty, a junior at Columbia University, and an activist. Deeply involved in current American politics, he is passionate as he sees the injustices in America. He sees his parents as part of the problem.

## Scenic Design

### Thoughts and Inspiration on the set of the White Card by Chelsea M. Warren Scenic Designer

If possible the audience surrounds the dinner party to enable audience members to also be looking at each other.” This provocation from Claudia Rankine was one of the primary considerations within the scenic design process. How could we situate this conversation into Penumbra Theatre and invite the audience to the dinner party? Many considerations ensued, including possibilities of putting a part of the audience onstage, wrapping all the audience chairs



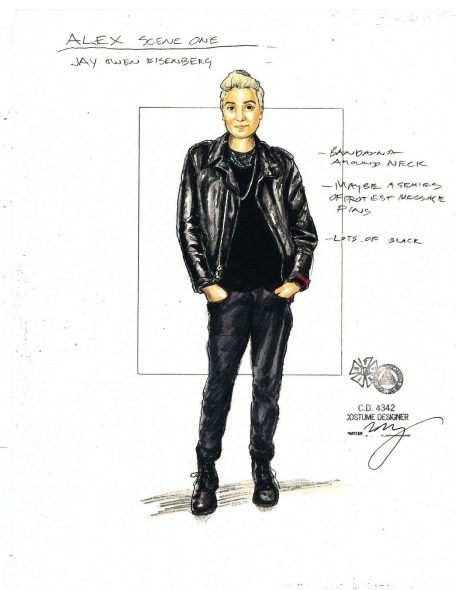
Image and design by Chelsea M. Warren

with white coverings, and draping all the theatre walls with white fabric. One of my favorite discoveries was bridging the NYC loft entryway through the audience. It was fascinating to research methods in which art is displayed in galleries, homes and meditative environments. With prominent canvases placed at eye level throughout the room and extending into the audience, we strove to find the balance between white walled art galleries, elegant Tribeca loft and a theatrical arena of idea and conversation.

## Costume Design

### Notes on Costume Design for The White Card by Mathew J. LeFebvre Costume Designer

One of the aspects of costume design that has always intrigued me is how people dress to not only reflect their personality, but often to also make an impression through the clothes they wear. A theme that runs through *The White Card* is the significance of appearances. Everyone in the first scene is dressed to impress Charlotte, yet give the appearance, that they are very casual, that they didn't spend hours thinking about how they would come across to Charlotte. The whole thing takes on a "staged" quality, like a spread in *Architectural Digest*. With the exception of Charlotte, all the other characters wear a fairly tight, almost monochromatic color palette, as if they were designed to fit in the setting, like a Rothko painting. There is an overall neutrality to their look, but each costume has subtle details that reflect the attitudes of each character, without giving away too much before it is revealed during the course of the production. Charlotte, by contrast, wears a brightly colored and patterned dress. She too, is dressed to make a good impression, but this contrast further distinguishes her from the rest of the characters.



## Artwork and Artists Referenced in The White Card

Robert Rauschenberg, [\*White Painting\*](#) (1951)

Consisting of three module panels and painted completely white, *White Painting* (1951) by Robert Rauschenberg was initially poorly received with some critics calling the work a 'cheap swindle', is now considered an important early example of Minimalism and Conceptualism.

Rauschenberg set out to create a painting made without human touch.

Rauschenberg was a white artist born in 1925.



Robert Longo, [\*Untitled\*](#) (2014)  
(*Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014*)

This 10 ft wide charcoal drawing of police officers in riot gear silhouetted by bright lights and teargas smoke. The officers are faceless and are depicted in this drawing from a photograph of protests after police kill 18 year old Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri, in



August of 2014. Longo is a white American artist born in 1953.



Glenn Ligon, [\*Hands\*](#) (1996)  
(Monumental  
Silkscreen of news  
photograph from  
1995 Million Man  
March)

Artist Ligon depicts  
the controversial  
convening of  
African American  
men on the

National Mall. Created using a screen printing technique innovated by Andy Warhol, *Hands* uses layered press images, against a stark black background.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, [\*Defacement, The Death of Michael Stewart\*](#)

This painting, described by some as the most personal work by Basquiat, depicts the fatal beat of 25-year-old artist, Michael Stewart, by New York Transit cops in Sept 1983. Although Basquiat and Stewart were only acquaintances, the two shared an ex-girlfriend and many friends in the New York City art scene like friend Keith Haring and Stewart's death



affected Basquiat significantly. Basquiat was a American artist of Haitian and Puerto Rican descent born in 1960.

Francisco Goya, [The Disaster of War](#)



This image is one of 82 etching in the Disasters of War series by Spanish artist Goya. These images depict the Peninsular War (1808-1814)

Edward Hopper, [Nighthawks](#) (1942)

Some consider this image to be one of the best known pieces of 20th century art.

“Hopper was an American realist painter and printmaker. While he is best known for his oil paintings, he was equally proficient as a watercolorist and printmaker in etching.

Both in his urban and rural scenes, his spare and finely calculated renderings reflected his personal vision of modern American life. “(From Wikipedia)



Jeff Wall, [Invisible Man](#) (2000)



Jeff Wall's *Invisible Man* is inspired by the 1952 novel of the same name by Ralph Ellison and images the books protagonist hermit in a basement apartment with a ceiling full of bulbs powered by stolen electricity.

Jeff Wall, [Mimic](#), (1982)

Jeff Wall's photography has been described as cinematographic. This image resembles a candid shot and features a white man slanting the corner of his eye in an act of hatred and mockery towards an Asian man. This commentary on social issues was made in response to an encounter the artist witnessed first hand.



J. M. W. Turner [The Slave Ship](#)



The Slave Ship, originally titled *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on*, is a painting by the British artist J. M. W. Turner, first exhibited in 1840. Measuring 35 3/4 x 48 1/4 in. in oil on canvas, it is now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In this classic example of a Romantic maritime painting, Turner depicts a ship, visible in the background, sailing through a tumultuous sea of churning water and leaving scattered human forms floating in its wake. (From Wikipedia)

Kerry James Marshall, [Heirlooms and Accessories](#)



Finished in 2002, it is based on the famous photo of a white crowd watching the lynching of two black men in Marion, Indiana in 1930. Marshall uses the technique of “ghosting” to lighten the photograph, but for the faces of three women who turned toward the camera as the photographer was taking the picture. Around the faces of the three women, he added images of ornate necklaces with sparkling rhinestones, highlighting these “accessories” to the heinous crime.

The passive acceptance of this violence on the faces of the three women serve as an “heirloom” of sorts, passed down through generations much like a necklace would be. (From <http://curatedbyki.blogspot.com>). Kerry James Marshall is an American artist born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1955

Dana Schultz, [Open Casket](#), 2016.



Open Casket is a 2016 painting by Dana Schutz. The subject is Emmett Till, a black 14-year-old boy who was lynched by two white men in Mississippi in 1955. It was one of the works included at the 2017 Whitney Biennial exhibition in New York curated by Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks. The painting caused controversy, with protests and calls for the painting's destruction. (From Wikipedia)

**Essays on *The White Card* by Free Black Dirt**  
**Thoughts on the Preface to *The White Card***  
**by Erin Sharkey**

In the preface to *The White Card*, Claudia Rankine recalls an encounter with a white middle aged man who asked, “What he could do for (her)? How could he help?,” after a public reading from *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014). She explains that this led her to address what she interpreted to be a “white guilt” response or a shield of defensiveness.

Rankine refers to Teju Cole’s essay “The White-Savior Industrial Complex” in which Cole writes of the afterlife of white supremacy. In his essay, he forwards that white saviors approach the race problems in terms of what needs to be fixed from the outside-- “All he sees is need, and he sees no need to reason out the need for the need.” But Cole argues that they should be asking what he can do for himself, and in which, positioning the problem of whiteness as a problem for white people to take on from inside. “The White-Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.”

Rankine invites us to consider the dinner party in a high end NYC loft as a setting to discuss race in America rather than the site of a police officer pulling over a black couple in Falcon Heights, MN. She sets the table in the home of a white family, which she writes has been prescribed as a benevolent, natural, if not, neutral site. But the conversation is anything but. Teju Cole’s essay can be found [here](#).

**The White Card - Play as Ekphrasis**

There is a rich history of authors describing visual art as a literary device. This is called ekphrasis. The *White Card* is an interesting version of this kind of writing. Here paintings are the visual product, its composition and meaning, but also a snapshot of the economic moment and the ways capitalism is a system driven by white supremacy. Here art is history and meaning, subject and artist and consumer. Because art exists on many levels and in many venues, from casual expressions of everyday to records of history to a multibillion dollar industry, art provides an exciting venue for talking beyond simple visual representation.

The *White Card* offers both commentary on the current moment in race relations and also the way art is considering the current moment and whether its considering perpetuates harm. It is also art inspired by reaction to art, in the recollection of Claudia Rankine’s own experiences sharing her art and fielding responses to it.

**Consuming Blackness, Art and Emotional Alchemy**  
**by Junauda Petrus-Nasah**

The *White Card* centers Charlotte, a Black woman artist and drops her into the “sunken place” of the mainstream art world and the souls of White folks via a dinner party. Eric an art buyer, Charles and

Virginia, a married couple and collectors of high-end Black art and their activist son, Alex are her hosts. Each of these White folks in their own way are trying to understand unconsciously or subconsciously who they are through the spectacle of racialized oppression of Black bodies via the seeming innocuity of art. The stakes are high, microaggressive and meta. At a dinner, all is hidden in plain sight, amidst the White, amidst the wealth and power. In this sterile backdrop all is under examination, in full display, as public and visceral as a lynching.

Black suffering in America's nightmare was harnessed in our bodies and became the essence at the center of so many things inherently "American" such as: blues, hip-hop, Basquiat, bounce, cha-cha slide, cookouts, basketball, spectacular-ebonical-vernacular, double-dutching, throwing shade, respect for big booties. Charles who has bought several art works by several edgy and political Black artists is immersed in the energy of this power as it hangs on his walls, yet is still somehow unable to connect. He marvels through his art collection, at the ability of Black people to innovate creativity in the midst of this brutality we were not meant to survive in. It's a phenomena the world has attempted to vampire from Black people, much like Charles, through consuming our art. As long as Blackness and our Black bodies have been subject to the enterprise of capitalism and consumerism, we have experienced the split between being devalued as a default, while being worshipped for our ability to endure in ways that defy imagination and logic.

One of many questions this play seems to center is, how can White people consume Black culture while simultaneously ignoring the conditions that blossomed it, specifically White supremacy? This play shows how White folks also participate in a very unique "double consciousness", they are aware that oppression of Black people exists, but are unwilling (whether consciously or unconsciously) to connect the dots of it back to themselves, their actions or their ancestors. There is an intimacy they crave to have with Blackness (not necessarily Black people) however never at the expense of White supremacy and its limitless benefits. There is an empathy Charles and Virginia mimic, but never seem to truly internalize. Questioning their complicity in Black suffering is never an option so ingrained is the protection of their White hierarchy. Yet there is this desire to feel us, know us and in many ways be loved by us.

This White Card and its themes make me think of two White American phenomena in particular: The Kardashian family and Blackface. The Kardashians show with audacity and impunity how consumable, profitable and cherry-picked Blackness can be indulged in within a dominant culture that has devalued our bodies and souls. They are White women immersed in the aesthetic and culture of Blackness without having to express any knowledge or commitment to Black history or liberation. In a society that is inherently anti-Black, the fetishization and appropriation of Blackness is often used to disguise complacency to ending anti-Black racism. Just because you wear cornrows, buy a booty, or have Black children doesn't equal freedom for Black people or a promise to interrogate how one has benefitted from White supremacy. This separation of logic is often to protect the enterprise of White capitalism and this schism is made apparent in the play when Alex, points out the hypocrisy of his father buying Black art while also profiting from a prison system that disproportionately incarcerates Black people. Charles in turn defends his business with indignance and defensiveness.

Blackface was literally the act of White people blackening their faces and acting out their fantasies of Black existence via theatrical performance and music starting in the 1800s. These White performers would stare in the mirror and put liquified ash and shoe polish on their skins, scripting pseudo-Black vernacular and feeble mentalities and performing it for the satisfaction of other White folks. This act of racist presentation has been indulged in by a myriad of White folks to this day, from frat boys to world leaders. There is a fascination with Black skin and the soul power it represents to those that have tried to break it down for their own gain and catharsis. They used this performance as a ritual to prove to themselves superiority, even while they looked stupid AF and were proving yet again, a perverted and sideways fascination with our Blackness.

In the last scene of the White Card, this fixation with Blackness was forced to invert and look at itself. Charlotte in a moment of insight decides to flip the gaze onto Charles, his Whiteness and the unbearable, omnipresent existence of it. Charlotte with her camera, her “weapon of choice”, asks him to be in his skin and begin to see himself, as a White man without looking away. Rankine, in this piece is mirroring her beloved Serena Williams and is swinging against the Whiteness of it all and putting the volley in their court. Through this work she is asking White audiences to look and be with their Whiteness in a way that is meditative, unleashed, responsible and unflinching.

## Historical figures referenced in The White Card

**Michael Stewart** - 25-year-old graffiti artist killed by police in [September 1983](#).

**Dylann Roof**- [Racist Terrorist Shooter](#). Killed nine people in bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina.

Freedom Summer Murders of **Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney** In Neshoba County MS in [June 1964](#). The three men, associated with COFO (Council of Federated Organization) and CORE (Congress on Racial Equality) and were working to register voters in Mississippi. .

**Michael Brown** - Unarmed black teenager shot and killed [Aug 9, 2014](#) by Ferguson Missouri police officer Darren Wilson

Officer **Darren Wilson** - officer who shot and killed teenager Michael Brown on [Aug 9, 2014](#).

**Ernst Leitz** - Manufacturer of the Leica camera. Aided many fellow citizens persecuted for their race, religion and political beliefs escape the Nazi Regime during WWII

**Aggie Gund** - Philanthropist and patron of the arts, who founded the Art for Justice Fund. The New York Times asked if Agnes Gund was “the last good rich person” in a [Nov 3, 2018](#) article.

**James Byrd Jr.** - African American man murdered in [June 1998](#) by three white men who beat him, chained him to the back of a truck and dragged him to death. The documentary *The Two Towns of Jasper*, by filmmakers Marco Williams and Whitney Dow, follows black and white residents of the town he was murdered in.

## Glossary of terms

**White supremacy-** the belief, theory, or doctrine that white people are inherently superior to people from all other racial and ethnic groups, especially Black people, and are therefore rightfully the dominant group in any society. (Definition from Dictionary.com)

**White fragility-**the tendency among members of the dominant white cultural group to have a defensive, wounded, angry, or dismissive response to evidence of racism. (Definition from Dictionary.com)

**White privilege-** White privilege (or white skin privilege) is the societal privilege that benefits white people over non-white people, particularly if they are otherwise under the same social, political, or economic circumstances. With roots in European colonialism, the Atlantic slave trade, and the growth of the Second British Empire after 1783, white privilege has developed in circumstances that have broadly sought to protect white racial privileges, various national citizenships and other rights or special benefits. (Definition from Wikipedia)

"I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks." ~Peggy McIntosh from White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

**Ekphrasis-** a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art. (Definition from Dictionary.com)

**Elegiac** - relating to elegy, mournfulness

**The Charleston church shooting-** (also known as the Charleston church massacre) was a mass shooting on June 17, 2015, in Charleston, South Carolina in which nine African Americans (including the senior pastor, state senator Clementa C. Pinckney) were killed during a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Three victims survived. This church is one of the oldest Black churches in the United States, and it has long been a center for organizing related to civil rights. The morning after the attack, police arrested Dylann Roof in Shelby, North Carolina; the 21-year-old white supremacist had attended the Bible study before shooting. He was found to have targeted members of this church because of its history and stature. (Definition from Wikipedia)

**Charlottesville White Supremacist Car Attack** -On August 12, 2017, a car was deliberately driven into a crowd of people who had been peacefully protesting the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, killing one and injuring 28. The driver of the car, 20-year-old James Alex Fields Jr., had driven from Ohio to attend the rally. Fields previously espoused neo-Nazi and white supremacist beliefs. He was convicted in a state court of hit and run, the first-degree murder of 32-year-old Heather Heyer, and eight counts of

malicious wounding, and sentenced to life in prison with an additional 419 years in July 2019. He also pled guilty to 29 of 30 federal hate crime charges to avoid the death penalty, which also resulted in another life sentence handed down in June 2019. (Definition from Wikipedia)

**Million Man March**- political demonstration in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 16, 1995, to promote African American unity and family values. Estimates of the number of marchers, most of whom were African American men, ranged from 400,000 to nearly 1.1 million, ranking it among the largest gatherings of its kind in American history. (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Million-Man-March>)

**Unfreedoms**- noun. The condition of being unfree. A particular limitation of one's freedom.

**Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ)**- “is a national network of groups and individuals working to undermine white supremacy and to work toward racial justice. Through community organizing, mobilizing, and education, SURJ moves white people to act as part of a multi-racial majority for justice with passion and accountability.” (From the SURJ website)

**Black Lives Matter**- Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an international activist movement, originating in the African-American community, that campaigns against violence and systemic racism towards black people. BLM regularly holds protests speaking out against police killings of black people, and broader issues such as racial profiling, police brutality, and racial inequality in the United States criminal justice system. In 2013, the movement began with the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin in February 2012. The movement became nationally recognized for street demonstrations following the 2014 deaths of two African Americans: Michael Brown—resulting in protests and unrest in Ferguson, a city near St. Louis—and Eric Garner in New York City. (From Wikipedia)

**Moonlight and La La Land at the 89th Oscars**-At the (2017 Oscars) ceremony, presenters Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty read *La La Land* as the winner of Best Picture. Beatty later stated that he had mistakenly been given the duplicate Best Actress envelope, for which Emma Stone had won for her role in *La La Land* several minutes prior. When the mistake was realized, *La La Land* producer Jordan Horowitz came forward to announce *Moonlight* as the correct winner. (From Wikipedia)

**Microaggressions** - Terms coined by Chester M. Pierce in the 1970s, to describe the insults and slights he had witnessed against black people.

<https://www.vox.com/2015/2/16/8031073/what-are-microaggressions>

**Private prisons** - is a place where people are imprisoned by a corporation that is contracted by a government agency. One criticism of private or for profit prisons is that it incentivizes the expansion of mass incarceration because it is tied to profits.

(<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/private-prisons-united-states/>)

**Colorblindness (race)** - Those who argue we are in a **color blind** society assert that racial classification does not limit a person's opportunities, and operate under the assumption that we are living in a world that is "**post-race**", where race no longer matters. They might say something like "I don't see race." Leslie G. Carr, *Color-Blind Racism* describes "color-blindness" as an ideology that undercuts the legal and political foundation of **integration** and affirmative action.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color\\_blindness\\_\(racial\\_classification\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color_blindness_(racial_classification))

**Returning citizens** - individuals re-entering after incarceration or imprisonment. Term used by group who offer services like housing help and job training to legal aid for expunging of records

**Black death spectacle** - Parker Bright wore a shirt that read "Black death spectacle" to the 2017 Whitney Biennial which featured Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016).

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-unpacking-firestorm-whitney-biennials-black-death-spectacle>

### Suggested Supplemental Reading

Teju Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex"

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Dr. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism*

Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*

Layla Saad, *Me and White Supremacy* (<http://laylafaad.com/meandwhitesupremacy-workbook>)

### The White Card Discussion Questions

How do you understand the title of the play? What is the white card? Who is playing it?

What is the responsibility of the black artist when white audiences patronize their work? Is Charlotte complicit in reinforcing this power dynamic? Do you think turning the lens on white wealth is the answer?

How do you see microaggressions play a role in *The White Card*? Do you think it matters if the white characters are unintentionally microaggressive? What is the role of interpretation and intention when it comes to these kinds of encounters? What might white folks do in these situations to intervene? How can white folks learn to better identify microaggression when it is happening?

How does this play land on you? If you are indigenous, black or person of color how do you feel the text living in your life or not? If you are white how do you connect the experience of your whiteness to what is being expressed in this play?

The names of main characters Charles and Charlotte echo the place names of the racist terrorist events in Charleston and Charlottesville. Why do you think Rankine chose these monikers?

In this play, Virginia and Charles are living their complicated and uneasy feelings about their whiteness, wealth and privilege through the consumption of high-end, art by Black artists, artwork which largely deals with themes of racialized oppression on Black bodies. What other spaces, whether in pop or mainstream culture of past, present or future, do you see this phenomena of White consumption of Black existence/oppression/magic for personal catharsis happening?

Rankine uses the idea of a racial imagination. How can you unpack the ways race and racial dynamics inform your imagination? How does your racial imagination and your moral imagination interact?

The phrase, “pulling the race card”, is used to describe instances in which race is evoked by Black people in times when it is inappropriate or in order to stop the conversation as if White folks are unable to respond in conversation when race is the subject. How can we push through these moments rather than dismiss them?

Have you ever had a “White Card” moment? How would you describe it? How did you navigate it?

What are the range of ways the white characters in this piece understand themselves and their racialized bodies and those of black folks?

How have the characters Charles and Charlotte changed by the end of the play? What do you think about it?

The play ends with a “shooting”; what does the play’s ending mean to you?

Below is an excerpt from *Citizen: An American Lyric*. As you read, think of a moment when your body told you something was wrong. How did you respond? How might you have responded differently?

Why do you think these kinds of experiences affect us in such a visceral way? What is the usefulness of that intuition? Why do racialized experiences trigger feelings of discomfort or fear? Spend some time naming those feelings.

**An Excerpt from *CITIZEN: An American Lyric***

By Claudia Rankine

Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs. Like thunder they drown you in sound, no, like lightning they strike you across the larynx. Cough. After it happened I was at a loss for words. Haven't you said this yourself? Haven't you said this to a close friend who early in your friendship, when distracted, would call you by the name of her black housekeeper? You assumed you two were the only black people in her life. Eventually she stopped doing this, though she never acknowledged her slippage. And you never called her on it (why not?) and yet, you don't forget. If this were a domestic tragedy, and it might well be, this would be your fatal flaw – your memory, vessel of your feelings. Do you feel hurt because it's the 'all black people look the same' moment, or because you are being confused with another after being so close to this other?

\*

An unsettled feeling keeps the body front and center. The wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth and puke runs down your blouse, a dampness drawing your stomach in toward your rib cage. When you look around only you remain. Your own disgust at what you smell, what you feel, doesn't bring you to your feet, not right away, because gathering energy has become its own task, needing its own argument. You are reminded of a conversation you had recently, comparing the merits of sentences constructed implicitly with 'yes, and' rather than 'yes, but.' You and your friend decided that 'yes, and' attested to a life with no turn-off, no alternative routes: you pull yourself to standing, soon enough the blouse is rinsed, it's another week, the blouse is beneath your sweater, against your skin, and you smell good.

\*

The rain this morning pours from the gutters and everywhere else it is lost in the trees. You need your glasses to single out what you know is there because doubt is inexorable; you put on your glasses. The trees, their bark, their leaves, even the dead ones, are more vibrant wet. Yes, and it's raining. Each moment is like this – before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen. What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? The moment stinks. Still you want to stop looking at the trees. You want to walk out and stand among them. And as light as the rain seems, it still rains down on you.

An excerpt from Claudia Rankine's poetry collection, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, published by Graywolf Press. <https://granta.com/citizen/>

### **Supplemental Links**

Article- [Claudia Rankine: Notes on The White Card](#)

Article- [The White Card by Claudia Rankine – A Conversational Review](#)

Article- [Claudia Rankine on Death, Reparations, and Becoming a Playwright](#)

Article - [Stacked Deck: With the White Card, Claudia Rankine Turns to the Stage](#)

Video - [How The White Card Organically Grew from Citizen](#)

## About 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](http://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.