

A Northern Stage, Leeds Playhouse, Birmingham Repertory Theatre
and Soho Theatre production, in association with HOME Manchester



THE WHITE CARD

Written by Claudia Rankine • Directed by Natalie Ibu



PROGRAMME

Share your reflections on social media and tag us using #TheWhiteCard

Preface to The White Card, by Claudia Rankine

One evening during a question-and-answer session, a white, middle aged man stood up. After movingly addressing my reading from *Citizen*, he asked me, “What can I do for you? How can I help you?” As I stood on stage regarding him, I wondered how to move his question away from me, my story, my body to the more relevant issues and dynamics regarding American history and white guilt. Teju Cole’s essay, “The White-Saviour Industrial Complex” came back to

me in that moment. Maybe it would have been better to use Cole’s words directly, to quote his extension of Hannah Arendt into the realm of whiteness: “The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm.” Or this: “The White Saviour Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.”

But in the moment, I decided to climb out from behind all my reading, references, and quotes and engage his question personally without the distancing scaffold of referential-speak. His question struck me as an age-old defensive shield against identifying with acts of racism at the hands of liberal, well-meaning white people, the kind he just listened to me read. His question did the almost imperceptible work of positioning him outside the problems *Citizen* interrogates, while maintaining his position of superiority relative to me in his act of offering to help me. He would help answer not only my problems but those of all Black people, which he only at the moment recognized but otherwise was not implicated in or touched by. He seemed oblivious to the realization that our problems as a society are dependent on his presence, despite my project of saying this in all the ways I know how.

The afterlife of white supremacy (to appropriate and flip on its head, Saidiya Hartman’s “the afterlife of slavery”) is all our problem. Cole writes, ‘All he sees is need, and he sees no need to reason out the need for the need.’ If he were to reason out the need for the need, he would understand he need not invite himself to the scene. He is already there. There was so much that could be said about the often-meaningless reparative largesse of whiteness in the face of human pain and suffering, but in the minutes we had for our exchange, I simply responded to the man,



“I think the question you should be asking is what you can do for you.”

He didn't appreciate my answer. From inside his theatre of noblesse oblige, which seems to come close to condescension but really exists in the depths of repression of American complicity with structural antiblack racism, rose an anger that I confess I didn't expect. “If that is how you answer questions,” he responded, “then no one will ask you anything.”

The germinal thought, the originating impulse, of *The White Card* came out of this man's question and his response to my response. In his imagination, Where did I go wrong? Was I initially intended to express gratitude for his interest? Were his feelings and the feelings of the audience in general my first priority? Was recognition of his likability a necessary gateway into his ability to apprehend my work? I really wanted to have the conversation he started. I didn't come all this way not to engage but as the affect theorist Lauren Berlant has stated, “What does it do to one's attachment to life to have constantly to navigate atmospheres of white humourlessness.”

It occurred to me after this incident that an audience member might read all the relevant books on racism, see all the documentaries and films, and know the “correct” phrases to mention, but in the moment of dialogue or confrontation retreat into a space of defensiveness, anger, silence, which is to say he might retreat into the comfort of control, which begins by putting me back in my imagined place. Perhaps any discussion of racism does not begin from a position of equality for those involved. Maybe the expectation is for the performance of something I as a black woman cannot see even as I object to its presence. Perhaps the only way to explore this known and yet invisible dynamic is to get in a room and act it out.

Theatre is by its very nature a space for and of encounter. The writing of *The White Card* was a way to test an imagined conversation regarding race and racism among strangers.

The dinner party as a social setting for the sharing of both space and conversation in the home of a white family seemed the benevolent, natural, if not exactly neutral, site. The characters have come together to consider the terms of an exchange of art, while they get to know one another. What brings everyone to the room is a desire to be seen and known, but what keeps them there is the complexity of our human desire to be understood.

This play could not have been written without the conversation and support of Catherine Barnett, Lauren Berlant, Allison Coudert, Diane Paulus and P. Carl. Thank you to David Dower and David Howse for commissioning the work, Diane Borger and Ryan Michael Sweeney for developing the work, and to ArtsEmerson and American Repertory Theater for directing and producing *The White Card*.

Claudia Rankine, Writer

Claudia Rankine is the author of six collections of poetry, including *Just Us: An American Conversation*, *Citizen: An American Lyric* and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*; three plays including *HELP*, which premiered in March of 2020 at The Shed, NYC, *The White Card*, which premiered in February 2018 (ArtsEmerson/ American Repertory Theater) and was published by Graywolf Press in 2019, and *Provenance of Beauty: A South Bronx Travelogue*; as well as numerous video collaborations. She is also the co-editor of several anthologies including *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (FENCE, 2015). In 2016, she co-founded The Racial Imaginary Institute (TRII). Among her numerous awards and honors, Rankine is the recipient of the Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry, the Poets & Writers' Jackson Poetry Prize, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Lannan Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, United States Artists, and the National Endowment of the Arts. Rankine teaches at Yale University as the Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry. She lives in New Haven, Connecticut.



Natalie Ibu

Joint Chief Executive and Artistic
Director at Northern Stage

I'm a Scottish Black woman in my late thirties, born into a mixed heritage family, which means that I was the only Black person on my street in the 1980s, in my school in the

1990s, in my family until the early 2000s and in my office in the 2010s. This means, for so long, I thought I was alone.

Then I read Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* – for me, a striking catalogue of microaggressions where I found community – where I realised it wasn't *just me*.

And that's what's so brilliant about Claudia's work – it shifts your perspective.

From the only one to one of many.

From "I didn't realise" to "how could it have been anything else?"

From ethnic minority to global majority.

I first read *The White Card* in 2018, and, sadly, it has only become more urgent. Ishmail Mohammed, the former CEO of The Market Theatre in Johannesburg, says: "artists are like the canary in the mine, they warn us of what's ahead," and Claudia has and is. Following the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in May 2020, we saw a passionate engagement with racial injustice. Black squares on Instagram, reading lists made and shared, pledges of solidarity declared, but the dynamic continued to smart.

Now, white people were ready to help us with the issue and consequences of being Black. But no one seemed to see (or want to see) whiteness. Into that discomfort steps *The White Card*.

The murder of Black men and women at the hands of police is not an American issue. In the UK, we have our own alarming history: Jay Abatan, Rolan Adams, Glynne Agard, Christopher Alaneme, Christopher Alder, Stainton Barrett, Sheku Bayoh, Daniel Blake, Meshack Brown, Bruce Bryan, Sharon Bubb, Kingsley Burrell, Rashan Charles, Kelso Cochrane, Smiley Culture, Edson Da Costa, Kester David, Abdi Dorre, Brian Douglas, Wayne Douglas, Mark Duggan, Joy Gardner, Cherry Groce, Akofa Hodasi, Cynthia Jarrett, Shiji Lapite, Stephen Lawrence, Deraye Lewis, Harold (aka Errol) McGowan, Jason McGowan, Michael Menson, Farhan Mire, Papa Mbaye Mody (aka Alioune Cisse),

Marlon Moran, Jimmy Mubenga, Hassan Musa, Donna O'Dwyer, Syden Pearson, Lee Phipps, Michael Power, Sarah Reed, Sean Rigg, Azelle Rodney, Paul Rosenberg, Ibrahima Sey, Derrick Shaw, Anthony Walker, Charles Wotten, Isaiah Young-Sam – and there are more, I'm sure of it.

If we are a country where a young Black girl is strip-searched at school,
- and we are.

Or a Black man can be stopped and searched simply for wearing a coat on a sunny day,
- and we are.

Then we are a country that needs to talk about the privilege of whiteness. We're a country that needs to talk about *The White Card*.

Natalie Ibu, Director

Natalie Ibu is Artistic Director and Joint Chief Executive of Northern Stage. Previously Artistic Director of tiata fahodzi (Dec 2014- 2020), the only Black-led theatre company in the UK with a sole focus on new work. During her time there Natalie increased the company's activity levels including seven productions in five years. Natalie revived tiata delights in a reimagined format as a talent development festival at Watford Palace Theatre, presented work during the summer festivals, brokered the company's first international collaboration, and opened up talent and career development pathways for African heritage individuals. For her Northern Stage debut, she directed Jim Cartwright's *Road*. For tiata fahodzi, Natalie's director credits include *i know all the secrets in my world* which played 12 venues in spring 2016, and Arinzé Kene's *good dog* which toured in spring 2017 and again in 2019 for a large eight-week midscale tour. Previously she was the Creative Producer for In Good Company, launching the regional artist development programme in the East Midlands for Derby Theatre, Embrace Arts Leicester, and Create Mansfield.

The Cast



Estella Daniels plays Charlotte. She is a talented actor, singer, and dancer. Nominated by YOU magazine as 2022 rising screen star, she has an extensive list of theatre and television credits. She recently appeared in the BBC1/Amazon hit *Chloe* and will feature in a recurring role for the ITV mini-series *Litvinenko*; produced and directed by Jim Field Smith. Some of their early work includes *Sinbad* (Sky 1) and the BBC's hit show *Death in Paradise*. Other screen credits include *Ashes to Ashes* (BBC); *Thorne* (SKY 1) and *Da Vinci's Demons* (BBC) by David S. Goyer (*Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, *Blade* franchise and *Man of Steel*). Her theatre credits include *Racing Demon* (Crucible Theatre); *Here's What She Said to Me* (Utopia Theatre/Crucible Theatre); debbie tucker green's BAFTA winning *random*. She headed the cast in Oladipo Abaluoage's *Iya Ile (The First Wife)* at Soho Theatre/Tiata Fahodzi; receiving rave reviews and a nomination for an Olivier Award; *Treasure Island* (Theatre Royal Haymarket). She has been a favourite of Edinburgh Festival, receiving rave reviews for her performance in Alice Birch's *Little on the Inside*, and has made several appearances at the London Arcola Theatre in *Hoard and Octagon*.



Christine Gomes takes over from Estella to play **Charlotte** for the latter part of the tour. Christine trained at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts (LAMDA). Theatre credits include *How to Survive an Apocalypse* (Finborough Theatre); *Romeo and Juliet* (Orange Tree Theatre); *The Merchant of Venice* (Stafford Festival); *Wendy and Peter Pan* (The Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh).



Nick Blakeley plays Eric. Nick is originally from the North East and trained at Bristol University and The Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. He is an associate artist with Encounter and has recently been developing his own work during residencies with Camden People's Theatre and artsdepot. Theatre credits include *The Claim* (Shoreditch Town Hall); *Twelfth Night* (Orange Tree); *I Heart Catherine Pistachio* (Soho Theatre/Yard Theatre); *Brideshead Revisited* (York Theatre Royal/UK Tour); *Hapgood* (Hampstead Theatre); *Comment Is Free* (The Old Vic); *The Last of the De Mullins* (Jermyn St Theatre); *Hard Feelings* (Finborough Theatre); *The Sunshine Boys* (Savoy Theatre); *13, A Woman Killed With Kindness* (National Theatre); and *24 Hour Plays* (The Old Vic). TV credits include *Belgravia* (ITV); *Summer of Rockets* (BBC); *Theresa Vs Boris: How May Became PM* (BBC); *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (CNN); *Doctors* (BBC); and *The Old Bailey* (BBC). Film includes *Northern Comfort* (Netop Films); *Goodbye Christopher Robin* (Fox Searchlight) and *Eyes and Prize* (Independent Film).



Matthew Pidgeon plays Charles. Theatre credits include *The Mirror and the Light* (Royal Shakespeare Company/Gielgud Theatre); *Bitter Wheat* (Garrick Theatre); *Local Hero* (The Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh); *This House* (Chichester/The Garrick/UK Tour); *Salome* (Royal Shakespeare Company); *The James Plays* (National Theatre of Scotland/UK and World Tour); *Wolf Hall & Bring Up the Bodies* (Royal Shakespeare Company/Aldwych Theatre/Broadway); *Edward II, This House* (National Theatre); *Midsummer* (Traverse Theatre/World Tour); *Much Ado About Nothing, The Mysteries* (Shakespeare's Globe); *Kyoto* (Traverse Theatre); *The Wonderful World of Dissocia, Realism, Caledonia* (National Theatre of Scotland); *The Lying Kind* (Royal Court); *The Cherry Orchard, The Wizard of Oz, Vanity Fair, Pinocchio, The Glass Menagerie* (The Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh). TV credits include *Life After Life, Crime, Taggart, Casualty, Holby City*. Film credits include *Mary Queen of Scots, Daphne, The Winslow Boy, State and Main, A Shot at Glory*. Radio credits include *'Tis Pity She's a Whore, Midsummer, Devastated Areas, Kaffir Lillies, The Black Sheep, Mary Stuart, The Cloths of Heaven, Kyoto*.



Kate plays Virginia. She trained at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Theatre credits include: *Emma* (UK Tour); *The First Man* (Jermyn Street Theatre); *David Copperfield, A Winter's Tale, Julius Caesar, The Bay At Nice, Sleeping Beauty* and title roles in *Nora (A Doll's House)* and *Miss Julie* (Mercury Theatre, Colchester); *Alarms And Excursions* (Chipping Norton); *In Extremis* (The Bridewell and Brighton Festival); *The Queen's Knickers* (Southbank Centre); *Lilies On The Land* (Fresh Glory UK Tour); *The Judgement Of Macbeth, Alice Through The Looking Glass* (Theatre Royal, Bath); *Peter Pan, Cinderella* (both for Duke's Theatre, Lancaster); *Sold* (Theatre 503); *The Importance Of Being Earnest* (GH Productions); *As You Like It* (Oxford Stage Company/Creation Theatre); *The Twelve Pound Look* and *The Browning Version* (Jill Freud and Co.); *Shaw Cornered* (Yvonne Arnaud and tour); *Hedda Gabler* (Acting With Insight); *Secrets* (Polka Theatre/Watershed UK Tour); *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe* (Royal Shakespeare Company). TV includes *Call the Midwife* (Series 4-6), *Casualty, The 4 O'Clock Club, Doctors, The Dumping Ground, Andy's Dinosaur Adventures, Man Like Mobeen, Coronation Street, Emmerdale, Pennyworth, Impact, Trying* and Danny Boyle's forthcoming *Pistol*. Film includes *Golden Years* (Moli Films); *The Ghost; Pride And Prejudice* (Working Title); *The First Man* (SOFF Productions); *Sanitarium* (Cat'n'Cage Pictures); *Waving At Trains* (Made Up North Productions). Radio and Audio includes: *The Rose and The Ring* and *The Dreaming Woman* (both for BBC Radio 4), *Ata Girl* and *Ata Girl 2* (Big Finish) which was a finalist in the US Audio Awards.

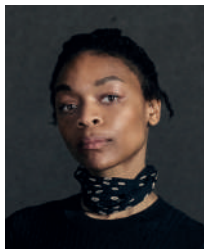


CJ Coleman plays Alex. CJ has recently graduated from Arts Ed and *The White Card* is his debut role. Whilst training he received the Sir John Gielgud Award and received a best duologue commendation at the BBC Carleton Hobbs Finals 2021.





The Creative Team



Debbie Duru, Set and Costume Designer

Debbie is a designer for performance spaces. Her work includes Designer for *Two Billion Beats* (Orange Tree); Set and Costume Designer for *The Forest Awakens/Code & Dagger* (Kiln Theatre); Associate Set Designer for *Get Up Stand Up! The Bob Marley Musical* (Lyric Theatre); Set and Costume Designer for *The Song Project* (Royal Court); *Cake* (Theatre Peckham); *Dagny wants to Dance* (Bureau of Silly Ideas); *Josephine* (Theatre Royal Bath); Associate Set Designer for *Dick Whittington* (National Theatre). Debbie was also part of the design collective for the *Living Newspaper* (Royal Court) and a Linbury Finalist for Stage Design 2019.



Roma Yagnik, Sound Designer

Roma is a UK based composer and sound designer working in theatre, film, and television. Her work for theatre has included Open Clasp Theatre Company's *Key Change* (Winner of the Carol Tambor Best of Edinburgh Award and New York Times Critics pick during its month-long run off-Broadway); and binaural sound design for Curious Monkey's immersive look at the looked after system *Leaving* as well as site-specific outdoor work including *Beautiful Thing* (Bradley Hemmings and Robby Graham for Greenwich + Docklands International Festival); *Freedom on the Tyne* (Tim Supple), Bradley Hemmings' closing ceremony of the *Great Exhibition of the North* on the banks of the Tyne and *The Taming of the Shrew* with Sprite Productions at Ripley Castle.



Rajiv Pattani, Lighting Designer

Rajiv graduated from LAMDA in 2014 with qualifications in Stage Management and Technical Theatre. Recent design work includes *Pilgrims* (Guildhall School of Music and Drama); *Sorry, You're Not a Winner* (Plainesplough Tour); *Dawaat* (Tara Theatre); *Straight White Men* (Southwark Playhouse); *Yellowfin* (Southwark Playhouse); *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* (Orange Tree); *Winners* (Theatre on the Downs, Wardrobe Ensemble); *Final Farewell* (Tara Theatre); *OUTSIDE* (Orange Tree); *Richard II* (LAMDA Autumn season); *Santi & Nas*, *Omelette*, *Heroine*, *Tiger Mum* (Vaults Festival 2020); *Hunger* (Arcola Studio 2); *Dirty Crusty* (Yard Theatre); *Dismantle This Room* (Jerwood Downstairs, Royal Court); *Wolfie* (Theatre503); *10* (Vaults Festival 2019); *Bullet Hole* (Park Theatre Park90); *Babylon Beyond Borders*, *Leave Taking*, *Ramona Tells Jim* (Bush Theatre); *Nassim* (Edinburgh Fringe First Winner 2017); *Roman Candle* (Theatre503, Manchester 53Two, Ivy Studio Greenside, Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2018).



Rachael Nanyonjo, Movement Director

Rachael's training includes BA Honours in Dance Studies (Roehampton University). MA in Choreography (Middlesex University)/ Choreography and Movement Direction credits include: *Purple Snowflakes & Titty Wanks* (Abbey Theatre, Royal Court Theatre); *Trouble In Mind* (National Theatre); *Love Reign* (The Young Vic); *Changing Destiny* (The Young Vic); *The Death Of A Black Man* (Hampstead Theatre); *Pigeon English* (Bristol School of Acting); *Cinderella* (Nottingham Playhouse); *CBeebies* (BBC); *Spine* (UK Tour); *In A Word* (The Young Vic); *Great Expectations* (National Youth Theatre), *Either* (Hampstead); *Two Trains Running* (ETT - Royal and Derngate); *American Dream* (The Young Vic); *Does My Bomb Look Big In This* (Soho Theatre/Tara Arts), *Babylon Beyond Borders* (Bush Theatre); *Macbeth* (Orange Tree); *The Jumper Factory* (The Young Vic, Bristol Old Vic); *Misty* (Trafalgar Studios); *Sleeping Beauty* (Theatre Royal Stratford East, nominated for the Black British Theatre Best Choreographer Award); *After It Rains* (National Youth Theatre); *Shebeen* (Nottingham Playhouse/Theatre Royal Stratford East); *Bernstein's Mass* (Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre); *Twilight* (Gate Theatre); *The Divide* (The Old Vic); *Cover My Tracks* (The Old Vic). Choreographer screen credits include *The Statistical Probability Of Love At First Sight* (dir. Vanessa Caswill, ACE Entertainment); *CBeebies: Christmas In Storyland* (dir. Geoff Coward, BBC); *Pirates* (dir. Reggie Yates, Hillbilly Films/BBC/BFI).



Eleanor Manners, Dialect Coach

Eleanor is a facilitator, theatre-maker, and voice coach. She trained at Rose Bruford College, Birmingham School of Acting, and The Arden School of Theatre. Most of her voice and dialect credits include plays utilising actors and accents from the African diaspora, along with some work on large scale musicals. Her directing credits include productions at Leeds Playhouse and Tutti Frutti. As a facilitator, her work is focused on Creative Engagement. Voice Credits include *seven methods of killing kylie jenner*, *Is God Is* (Royal Court); *Othello* (National Youth Theatre); *Searching for the Heart of Leeds*, *Jitney*, *Wendy & Peter Pan* (Leeds Playhouse); *Klippies* (The Young Vic); *Cake* (Theatre Peckham); *When this is Over* (Company Three); *Run it Back* (Talawa Theatre Company); *Love and Other Acts* (Donmar Warehouse); *White Noise* (The Bridge).



Wambui Hardcastle, Assistant Director, RTYDS

Wambui Hardcastle is a writer, director, and Creative Associate at Unfolding Theatre. Recent working relationships and training include Northern Stage Young Company, Live Theatre, Eclipse Theatre and City of Dreams.



Wabriya King, Production Dramatherapist

Wabriya graduated as an actress from the Oxford School of Drama in 2012 and qualified with an MA in Dramatherapy from the University of Roehampton in 2019. She is the Associate Dramatherapist at the Bush Theatre supporting staff and productions. Recent credits include *Black Love* (The Kiln); *Traplord* (Sadler's Wells x 180 Studios); *Unfinished Man, Samskara* (The Yard); *For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy, Is God Is, seven methods of killing kylie jenner* (Royal Court); *Red Pitch, Old Bridge, 10 Nights, Overflow, Pink Lemonade, Lava, The High Table* (Bush Theatre); *Rockets & Blue Lights* (National Theatre); *Can I Live?* (Complicite); *Get Up Stand Up! The Bob Marley Musical* (West End); *White Noise* (The Bridge); *Queens Of Sheba, Curious, Shuck N Jive, Typical* (Soho Theatre); *For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy* (Nouveau Riche/Boundless/New Diorama); *Love and Other Acts of Violence* (Donmar); *Blue/Orange* (Royal & Derngate, Northampton); *The Merchant of Venice, Romeo & Juliet* (Globe); *Little Scratch, The Death of a Black Man* (Hampstead); *Sessions, May Queen, Black Love* (Paines Plough); *846 Live* (Theatre Royal, Stratford East).

Cast

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|---------------------|-----------------|
| Charlotte | Estella Daniels |
| Charles | Matthew Pidgeon |
| Virginia | Kate Copeland |
| Alex | CJ Coleman |
| Eric | Nick Blakeley |
| Alternate Charlotte | Christine Gomes |

Creatives

| | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Writer | Claudia Rankine |
| Director | Natalie Ibu |
| Set & Costume Designer | Debbie Duru |
| Sound Designer | Roma Yagnik |
| Lighting Designer | Rajiv Pattani |
| Movement Director | Rachael Nanyonjo |
| Production Dramatherapist | Wabriya King |
| Dialect Coach | Eleanor Manners |
| Fight Director | Rachid Sabitri |
| Wardrobe Supervisor | Naomi Daley |
| Assistant Director (RTYDS) | Wambui Hardcastle |
| BSL Interpreter | Lauren Lister |
| Casting Director | Simone Perira Hind & Anna Dawson |
| Sensitivity Reader | Adam Lenson |
| Costume Maker | Yve Ngoo |

Production/Stage Management

| | |
|--------------------|--------------|
| Production Manager | Jerome Reid |
| DSM | Ferne Hudson |
| ASM | Erin Davis |

With thanks and gratitude to; our ensemble cast of Black women from across our community Christine Gomes, Joana Geronimo, Wambui Hardcastle and Jane Palmeira; the Black-owned brands, designers and makers from whom we have purchased costumes and to all the staff and technical team at Northern Stage.

Why Talk About Whiteness?

Emily Chiariello

A segment from the Teaching Tolerance Journal: Emily Chiariello, “Why Talk About Whiteness?” Teaching Tolerance 53 (Summer 2016)

Whiteness, History and Culture

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

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

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

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

Reconciling the meaning of white culture can be complicated by the fact that being white has not always meant what it means now. Whiteness—like all racial categories—is a social construct: Its meaning is culturally and historically contextual. The physical characteristics we now associate with whiteness have been artificially linked to power and privilege for the purpose of maintaining an unjust social hierarchy.

Read more online



And “Ethnicity became spice.”

Paula Akpan

Less than 24 hours before sitting down to write this, I was introduced to a new term through the work of UK-based feminist educator Dr Akanksha Mehta: “eating the other.”

Mehta paints a picture of a seminar she facilitated with university students, entitled “The Bodies of Others”, where Black and Brown students in the classroom shared, and mused over, their earliest experiences of encountering racism, while white students mostly listened on. Slowly, it became evident that only Black and Brown students were speaking.

After forty minutes of discussion, silence blanketed the room: there was a realisation that these painful and emotional reflections were being “consumed”, so to speak - raw and intimate experiences becoming potentially another anecdote for white students to refer to in passing. Mehta borrows from bell hooks, explaining that “ethnicity became spice.” The remaining fifteen minutes of the seminar were spent in silence.

Despite just coming across this particular phrase, it immediately chimed with me - a simple and brilliant abstract that captures the commodification of marginalised creators and their work. How their work - their art - is rarely engaged with on their terms, but rather, are shaped by the ever-present power dynamics between the artist and their audience.

We watch this unfurl in Claudia Rankine’s *The White Card*. We find ourselves in a living/dining room of an NYC loft with a middle-aged, art-collecting white married couple, Charles and Virginia. They’re about to host Charlotte, a Black woman artist, whose work they’re hoping to add to their collection - a collection where Charles notes that “not all the artists are African American, but all the work considers the violence against them.”

Whiteness, white people and the spectacle of Black death and suffering are all held up to the

light, carefully turned over and over again by Rankine. Perhaps the most striking element for me is how the violence of presumed white neutrality is presented to us - one that is all too familiar for Black and Brown people. Everything - art, legacies, critical contributions - is up for debate, consumed by and adjudicated over by white people without self-awareness or interiority.

It’s perhaps for this reason that, despite being a US-based play for a US-based audience, *The White Card* works so well in the UK. Despite a stomach-churning, gut-wrenching and life-extinguishing reign as the world’s premier colonising empire, Britain has managed to reinvent itself, at least on the global stage, as a progressive-but-not-too-progressive land with an imagined post-racial society.

With regards to its horrific history, this country breeds ignorance through its many institutional branches - as if it is overly emotional and unnecessary for Black and Brown people to refer to the horrors that both ruled and continue to rule their lives, those of their ancestors and undoubtedly those of their descendants.

Alongside tackling this schism head-on, *The White Card* powerfully brings commodification to the fore, beseeching non-Black people, but especially white people, to consider the following: how do you contribute to the commodification - and ultimate hollowing out - of Black art, Black bodies, Black life? When you seek to collect, hoard and gatekeep Black stories, ephemera, and cultural artefacts, who is it for? Us or you?



Paula Akpan is a journalist, historian and public speaker.

See the artwork online

The Artwork in the Play

The White Card references a variety of popular and culturally relevant visual artworks from artists known for their political and thoughtful artworks.

Find out more about the meaning of the art referenced here.



© Karen Petersen / Everett Collection
Jean-Michel Basquiat, New York, 1987.

Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014) by Robert Longo, 2014

Robert Longo's *Untitled (Ferguson Police August 13, 2014)* is a 10-ft wide charcoal drawing of a line of faceless cops, clad and helmeted in black, silhouetted against searchlights in a swirl of illuminated smoke. A powerful drawing, based on photographs taken on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, after 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot dead by a police officer there on 9 August 2014. Robert Longo is known for large-scale, hyper-realistic charcoal portraits that consider power, authority, and social unrest.

Defacement, The Death of Michael Stewart by Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1983

The Death of Michael Stewart, known as *Defacement*, is a painting by American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat in 1983. The artwork

is Basquiat's response to anti-Black racism and police brutality. It memorialises the death of artist Michael Stewart, who was beaten by New York City Transit Police for writing graffiti in the subway. After 13 days in a coma, Stewart died from his injuries on 28 September 1983.

Hands by Glenn Ligon, 1997

The *Hands* series is a body of work dedicated to the Million Man March (Washington D.C., October 1995). The event called for unity, solidarity, and endorsement of family values among African-American men. The piece is in two panels: one panel entirely black and the other comprised of raised hands, a gesture of solidarity. The entirely black panel represents silence giving visibility to all the voices of those absent from the march.

THE WHITE CARD

29 April-14 May

Northern Stage



18 May-21 May

HOME, Manchester

HOME

24 May-4 June

Leeds Playhouse



7 June-18 June

Birmingham Rep

the Rep

21 June-16 July

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