More than Two Places to Stand:
Tracing the Evolution and Effects of Standpoint Epistemology in Contemporary Social Justice Responses to Racially Salient Cultural Artifacts

by

Olivia Cristina Ordoñez

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Megan L. Sweeney, Chair
Associate Professor Aida Levy-Hussen
Associate Professor Ruby C. Tapia
Associate Professor M. Remi Yergeau

Olivia Cristina Ordoñez

oliviaor@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-8613-0907

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Dedication

To you, an invitation to dialogue.

Acknowledgements

For a long time, I was looking forward to writing the acknowledgements section more than the dissertation itself. “I’m going to thank the woman that does my eyebrows,” I told Bret Moore during our second year in the program. Now, as I stare down the prospect of properly thanking everyone who’s had a hand in shaping this project into the offering it has become, I worry that I won’t be equal to the task.

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Abstract

This dissertation tracks contemporary appeals to and uses of standpoint theory in an archive of popular late-20th-and-21st-century literary works, memoirs, museum exhibits, and public artworks that have been taken up as touchstone objects in contemporary conversations about interracial communication. Focusing on social media, blog, newspaper, and comments-section reactions to these works, I analyze the ways in which knowledge generated from creators' standpoints is offered to audiences and the subsequent ways in which particular audiences respond to these invitations with attempts at identification. I argue that responses to these cultural artifacts, specifically, and contemporary racial justice conversations, more generally, tend to rely on standpoint theory and on the evidence of lived experiences as a way to unearth marginalized experiences and make ethical appeals to their audiences. While speaking from one's standpoint may provide an important way to explore and validate experiences long ignored by our American institutions, I contend that doing so can also inhibit the cross-racial dialogue that I view as central to any serious attempt at building antiracist consciousness and communities.

In particular, I analyze Dana Schutz's painting, *Open Casket* (2016); Kara Walker's art installation, *A Subtlety* (2014); Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014); James Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew" (1962); Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015); and an interactive video game exhibit at the National Underground Railroad Freedom

Center. I highlight questions of identification and perspective taking, uses of a second-person "you" address, and objects that encourage imaginative role play—all of which invite audiences to imagine themselves in vastly different subject positions and, frequently, to center their own experiences in these explorations. Engaging with theories of identification and the resurgence of standpoint epistemology, I argue that textual and artistic strategies that encourage imaginative engagement with others unlike the self puts audiences in a valuable position to learn about others' experiences. At the same time, however, these strategies constrain opportunities for dialogic engagement with others' experiences when the experiences themselves are treated as unassailable truth rather than as entry points into a historico-cultural moment or conversation, and preventing engagement, as difference becomes sedimented as naturalized and unbridgeable. These standpoint testimonies also constrain opportunities for cross-racial dialogue when they encourage monolithic conceptions of identity that flatten differences among individuals within racial or intersectional identity-based groups.

Ultimately, I hope to accomplish three goals: 1) to assess, with an eye toward affordances and limitations, extant, socially prominent ways of engaging with Black art, with particular attention to intercultural interactions; 2) to illustrate how these methods shape and are shaped by currently available political responses to injustice; and 3) to encourage more dialogic modes of interaction across difference. Taking seriously the cultural objects that call their audiences in and have thus become major touchstones in current racial debates, I seek to contribute to the fields of Rhetoric and Pedagogy, in addition to African American literary and cultural studies, by illuminating possibilities for imagining varied futures and models for anti-racist work and social change and by elucidating how art makes possible new lives, affinities, and communities.

Chapter 1 Introduction: One Possible Beginning

In February 2019, I set out on a road trip through the American South to visit several immersive museums and exhibits dedicated to representing the experience of American slavery. It was the first of two such data-collecting trips for what I had originally conceived of as my "Museums Chapter," a grand, sweeping study of several of the most visited museums in the United States with exhibits on American slavery. I planned to analyze how these institutions position visitors with respect to the enslaved subjects whose experiences they claim to represent and how museums participate in historiography and mythmaking about the institution of slavery itself. I had yet to realize the impossibility of delivering on such a promise, the degree to which that ground had already been tread, and exactly what about these exhibits I found most salient in our present cultural moment.

As the first stop on my tour, I visited the Whitney Plantation Historic District, in St. John the Baptist Parish, Louisiana. Often touted as "the first slavery museum in America," the Whitney Plantation diverges from other plantation-based museums by highlighting the experiences of the enslaved individuals forced to live and work on the plantation (Amsden). Across the spacious grounds, visitors find life-sized sculptures of children, called "The Children of the Whitney." Each sculpture is connected to a real, historical individual enslaved at some point during their lifetime. Because not enough information exists to connect each statue with the story of an individual who lived on the Whitney Plantation, many of the stories are based on

testimonies that formerly enslaved individuals shared with the Federal Writers Project during the 1930s and early 1940s. As the website for the Whitney Plantation explains, "The visitors are introduced to the lives of the enslaved workers based on the recollections of those who endured, and who shared the stories of their lives as children in slavery" ("Children").

Despite the fact that the museum reports the origin of the stories as generally collected from "enslaved workers," several blogs and write-ups of the museum state that the Whitney is showcasing stories of people actually enslaved on their grounds, perhaps an indication of the visitor's desire for verisimilitude (Lee; "Stories of the South"). As Stephen Hanna, scholar of plantation museums, explains about what the Whitney is hoping to accomplish with these statutes, "The good plantations try to get people to buy into the lives of the owners. That's why people keep coming back to these places is you learn about these interesting people from history. So in order to talk about slavery and try to help people identify emotionally with the enslaved you have to be able to tell similar stories" ("Stories About the South"). The faces of the statues themselves also hint at this invitation toward identification: though their faces are clearly human, their features are under-defined, with empty eyes, often little peaks for noses, and few details that might help distinguish one individual's face from another's. As I stood in the Antioch Baptist Church on the Whitney Plantation, I was reminded of comics theorist Scott McCloud's explanation, in *Understanding Comics*, of efforts to create a sense of universality through simplification: "The more cartoony a face is, the more people it could be said to describe" (31). While the Whitney Plantation's statues allow for the possibility that each statue could represent any number of historically enslaved children, their lack of specificity also contributes to the

immersive experience of the plantation, inviting the visitor to identify with the subjects represented in the historic district.

Each visitor is also given a lanyard with an attached card that features one of the statues, the name of a formerly enslaved person, an excerpt from that person's narrative, and the source of the information. For example, I was given Albert Patterson, age 90, who is quoted as having said, "I remember our plantation was sold twice befo' de war. It was Sheiff's sale, de white peoples dey stand up on de porch an' de black men an' women an' children stand on de ground, an' de man he shout, 'How much am I offered o'planation an' fine men an' women?' Somebody would say so many thousand . . . an' after while one man buy it all." This very specific story contextualizes a single enslaved person's experience, but it is also a story given to the visitor, on a lanyard, to wear around their neck, as their own proof that they belong at the museum, that they have a story to carry. The typical individual ID card on a lanyard is replaced with an enslaved person's experience; the museum visitor is invited to trade their identity for that of another, with a visible gesture toward shared community and experience.

A few days after visiting the Whitney Museum, I visited the second site on my tour: Burritt On the Mountain, a historic park outside of Huntsville, Alabama, with a 1938 mansion belonging to the eponymous Dr. Burritt, and six 19th-century homes recreating an "authentic" picture "typical of life in the Cumberland Plateau" area of Alabama. At Burritt, I observed a lesson about the Underground Railroad, offered for elementary school students. In a classroom setting, the students were asked questions by Burritt historical interpreters, gauging what they knew and understood about the Civil War and providing some context for the Underground Railroad. Then, the students moved outside, where they received instructions on how to move

quietly and quickly between the structures on Burritt's vast grounds in order to evade capture (despite the fact that the re-enactment did not have any employees attempting to capture participants). Although every student who participates in such scenarios makes it to the last stop on the Underground Railroad, they begin their journey by drawing a strip of paper from the guide's hand to find out their fate. A different outcome is written on each strip: while some students make it safely to freedom, others are returned to the plantation, where their families have been whipped for knowing an escapee. Although the experience seemed lacking in nuance in many ways, I was shocked that the museum chose to emphasize the improbability of successful escape for participants at the end of the journey. Because so many museums, books, and movies I engaged with in researching this project had played fast and loose with the historical realities of the Underground Railroad, instead choosing to present a pat narrative about industrious enslaved people pulling themselves up by their "bootstraps," I was shocked to see a small museum, in the heart of Alabama, whose focus was not even on slavery, work to upset the prevailing cultural narrative that most attempts to escape by the Underground Railroad were successful. I appreciated Burritt On the Mountain's hands-on lesson for its willingness to take seriously that many enslaved people attempting escape were returned to the plantations they tried desperately to leave; that there were often consequences for escapees' kin; and that children, despite their young age, should be introduced to complicated historical legacies, rather than fed easy narratives that can serve to reduce guilt about slavery.

While these experiences were helpful for understanding the myriad ways cultural institutions across the country are currently representing and interpreting the history of African American enslavement, none has stuck with me quite as much as an interaction I had with my

road trip companion, Elisa. For much of the trip, I was joined by my high school best friend, a fellow queer Cuban-American woman whom I met while growing up in Miami, Florida. To this day, we try to travel together at least twice a year, and I was grateful she was willing to come along for a "work trip." Our path through the south allowed us to combine my research trip with Elisa's fandom, as a national tour by the podcast dynasty McElroy family intersected with several nights of our route. On one of these occasions, I accompanied Elisa to a live recording of *The Adventure Zone* (2/9/19), a popular Dungeons and Dragons role-play podcast hosted by brothers Justin, Travis, and Griffin McElroy, and their father, Clint. At the time, I had only the briefest knowledge of the show, so I was unfamiliar with the characters being represented by attendees in cosplay.

"Why are so many people dressed as an elf?" I asked. It's not that I was unfamiliar with cosplay, or costume play, a performance art in which participants style themselves as specific characters, but I had never seen so many people dress as the exact same character.

"Lup is an elf," Elisa said.

"Lup?"

"A character on the podcast, played by Griffin."

"Right. But we've hit, like, a critical mass here. Why are so many people dressed as the same elf? Is Lup the best character in the series?"

"Well, there are only two women in the series, and most of the people here are women, so I feel like it makes sense that they're dressed as one of the only women in the show."

"Okay, sure," I said, mostly willing to buy her explanation. "But you said there are two women. Is the other woman character awful?"

"No, she's great," Elisa said. "Lucretia is one of my favorite characters. But she's a Black woman, and you shouldn't dress up as a Black character if you're not Black."

On a different trip, with another person, on another day, maybe any other day of our friendship, I wouldn't have pressed, but before I could think better of it, I asked, "Do you really think that?"

Elisa paused a moment, considering. "I don't know," she said. "No? I don't think so? But so many people believe it. I don't want to be perceived as unable to listen to what other, more oppressed people are telling me."

My conversation with Elisa especially sticks with me, in part because of Elisa's own positioning as someone with a graduate degree in English Literature, and as someone I know to be incredibly thoughtful, interested in racial justice, and careful in her interactions. It sticks with me, too, because of how widespread the Lup cosplay was at the event, and how certain Elisa seemed about both the strength of the prohibition against cross-racial cosplay and what would be communicated if one failed to follow it. I remain struck by the fact that for Elisa, what was at stake was whether she was a good listener, capable of adjusting her behaviors based on what individuals who had experienced more oppression than she had suggested was the correct behavior. While there is a recent proliferation of narratives, novels, memoirs, shows, plays, classes, films, pop theory books, and self-help guides about anti-racism that explore the experiences of non-white individuals, there is also a real sense in which it is becoming more difficult to engage in dialogue about these experiences, and more difficult to know how to work toward long-lasting and substantive changes, especially across lines of racial difference.

*

As I previously mentioned, this project was originally conceived as a study of foundational American myths, such as the bootstraps-style myth of meritocracy, and the ways in which these myths have suffused the reconstruction of historical events and phenomena, such as the Underground Railroad. But after traveling my own recursive path through American texts and cultural institutions, my attention shifted to the vast array of places and registers in which people are engaging with histories of anti-Black racism and its legacies in the present, being invited to identify with racial and/or temporal others, and inching their ways toward interracial communication, as stilted and bifurcated as it may be. As I visited the museums on my route and collected the responses audiences were having to hugely popular antiracist texts, I became invested in taking seriously the possibility that art, by virtue of its creation and dissemination, shapes what kinds of activist responses are available to politically interested individuals. In this dissertation, I study contemporary touchstone texts, artworks, and cultural artifacts concerned with interracial interactions. I argue that responses to these cultural artifacts, specifically, and contemporary racial justice conversations, more generally, tend to rely on standpoint theory and on the evidence of lived experiences as a way to unearth marginalized experiences and make ethical appeals to their audiences. While speaking from one's standpoint or experience may provide an important way to explore and validate experiences long ignored by our American institutions, I contend that doing so can also inhibit the cross-racial dialogue that I view as central to any serious attempt at building antiracist consciousness and communities.

I acknowledge and take seriously the immense pain that centuries of anti-Black racial trauma has caused. In my view, these centuries of systemic and interpersonal racism have encouraged the present social-justice-informed cultural posture in which individuals are

encouraged to listen and receive information about others' experiences, remaining in the receptive posture for fear of invalidating a racially marginalized other's experiences. Indeed, racism circumscribes—and curtails—the avenues that individuals have open to them for responding to systemic injustice, meaning making, dialoguing, and being heard. Individuals have turned to standpoint theory, then, in part because it offers a way to counter the strictures that racism imposes upon the kinds of knowledges that are valued and accepted. Nevertheless, I argue that, especially when employed in its reductive form, standpoint theory, one of many tools we have developed to counter the ways in which these legacies of oppression haunt present day interactions and institutions, has also impeded varied attempts at conversation, cross-cultural interaction, and dialogue.

Standpoint epistemology was introduced in the academy in the 1980s, though its roots can be heard in early speeches such as Sojourner Truth's 1870 "Ain't I a Woman?", in which Truth links her embodied experiences to her knowledge of her own womanhood. As a theoretical framework, standpoint theory provides a justification for marginalized individuals to assert the value of their experiences and knowledge—indeed, to assert their experiences *as* knowledge—in the pursuit of meaning making, especially about subjects that impact these individuals' lives. For example, standpoint theorists would hold that feminist women have particular access to knowledge about marginalization along the axis of gender; therefore, such women's writings and voices are of particular importance for undoing the oppressive social structures that keep women subordinate to men. According to early standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding, not all women occupy a feminist standpoint and the word "standpoint" should not be used as a simple substitute for "point of view"; instead, thinking critically about oppression,

fighting for liberation, and consideration of how experiences are both situated and constructed are essential elements for generating a feminist standpoint (Harding, Hartsock). Standpoints can also be nuanced by intersectional identity categories; for example, in *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins argues that the Black feminist standpoint has been important to sociology in making visible how multiple forms of marginalization shape sociocultural life.

I also find Collins helpful for thinking about a necessary corollary to standpoint epistemology: if knowledge can be generated from a critical evaluation of one's experiences, and if this knowledge is meant to undo oppression within our institutions, then this knowledge can also be—must be—transmitted, or taught, to an other. As Collins explains in her 1986 article "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," critical Black feminist sociologists have the potential to "enrich" the field of sociology because the knowledge generated from their marginalized subject positions "may reveal aspects of reality obscured by more orthodox approaches" (515). Here, Collins offers that knowledge generated from an individual's standpoint is valued for its ability to be responsive to critical methods, to be shared and understood, and to unseat orthodoxies. Taking Collins's example seriously, I am interested not only in the knowledge generated from experience but also in the ends to which this knowledge is used and the varied effects of trying to teach others based on our experiences.

I am concerned by the contemporary resurgence of a reductive version of standpoint theory, one that values the evidence of lived experience to an extreme; this version of standpoint theory undergirds much present-day social justice discourse and attempts to communicate across lines of difference from the classroom to popular media. For instance, reductive forms of standpoint theory seem to inform *The Adventure Zone* fans' accepted orthodoxy about not

engaging in cross-racial cosplay at the risk of appearing unwilling to listen to racial others who claim that all cross-racial costume engagement is akin to blackface, irrespective of the intent or style in which the engagement occurs. Rather than opening up a space for dialogue between fans who might want to dress as Lucretia and individuals who have been mocked by blackface performances, the assertion of the latter group's lived experience constrains opportunities for dialogic engagement because their lived experience is elevated out of the realm of discourse and into the position of unassailable truth. Instead, if these experiences were still received as incredibly important but also as discursive offerings, they might serve as entry points to dialogue, as they would still require critical examination. While I don't endorse blackface performances, I do believe it would be valuable for participants and others involved to discuss the affordances and limitations of inhabiting the position of an other through cosplay and learn from one another's perspectives.

Some readers with long tenures in the academy, or who are particularly well-read in the history of feminist scholarship, may believe that the "standpoint debate" has long been settled. Indeed, I encountered this perspective early in my graduate career. When I shared in our Introduction to Feminist Theory class that I wanted to write my final paper on standpoint epistemology, my professor replied, "Standpoint? I thought we settled that in the nineties. Get back to me when you've read your history." She was right, at the time, that I hadn't yet been aware of the depth and breadth of the standpoint literature—I was only cursorily aware of the fact that the idea of a standpoint wasn't created on contemporary anti-racist blogs like *Gradient Lair*, and my research has been better for her encouragement. However, my professor was also missing the fact that standpoint theory continues to be extraordinarily influential, its tenets

silently undergirding everything from online social justice conversations to discussions in first-year college composition classrooms. In these contexts, bloggers, activists, and students often feel authorized to discuss their day-to-day experiences of sexism, racism, and classism, to make knowledge about these experiences, and to invoke their standpoints as they position themselves and enter into discursive spaces. While broadening the sphere of public discourse to make space for previously marginalized voices is a critically important intervention, I argue in this dissertation that the current prevalence of standpoint theory too often means that lived experiences are held up as incontrovertible evidence to support whatever the speaker wishes to demonstrate and the speaker's individual experience is then generalized to the entire group that the speaker claims to represent. Indeed, in our current political context, listeners are often encouraged to substitute individual experience for the experience of entire groups and listeners who occupy positions of relative racial, gender, and class privilege are encouraged to remain in a receptive posture as they absorb this knowledge. In this context, individual experience tends to function both as the ticket of entry into the conversation and as the shield that prohibits dialogic engagement across lines of difference. Such interactions thus mimic what theorist Paulo Freire calls the "banking" or transmission model of education, insofar as individuals learn about each other, and the other's racialized experiences, through the mere transmission of knowledge from an active, knowing subject to a passive recipient who is presumed to know nothing (Freire 72).

In this dissertation, I grapple with the fact that, over the last several decades, we have seen an increase in American venues for engaging in cross-cultural communications, from interactive museum exhibits to online social media platforms; at the same time, however, these opportunities to make meaning in dialogue with others unlike the self are often fraught and

impeded by the very tools created to increase dialogic engagement. Focusing on African American authors, African American literature, and representations of African American experiences, I ask: How have invitations to identify with others across lines of race and time been employed by authors, artists, and creators? How do creators, generating knowledge from their own situated standpoints, transmit said knowledge to their audiences? How, in turn, might audiences concerned with fighting anti-Black racism respond to these invitations to identify with an other's standpoint? What are the affordances and limitations of the generation of knowledge from experience? How has the reduction of standpoint epistemology to the idea of knowledge generated from experience without acknowledgement of its situated, contextual, and constructed nature served as an impediment to conversations across lines of racial difference?

In addressing these questions, I explore an archive of popular late-20th-and-21st-century literary works, memoirs, museum exhibits, and public artworks that have been taken up as touchstone objects in contemporary conversations about interracial communication. These objects include Dana Schutz's painting, *Open Casket* (2016); Kara Walker's art installation, *A Subtlety* (2014); Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014); James Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew" (1962); Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015); and an interactive video game exhibit at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. My orientation to the present and future moment is a conscious choice meant to signal my belief in the possibility of meaningful forms of social and legal change that might move toward the yet-undelivered promise of equality in America. By focusing on Black and African American experiences, I do not mean to suggest that only Black communities experience systemic and interpersonal racism in the United States. Rather, I focus on conversations about anti-Black

racism—inclusive of individuals who identify as Black, African American, and mixed race—because anti-Black racism in the United States has different roots, and a different historical trajectory, than other kinds of racism; delimiting my project in this manner allows me to produce claims that stem from this particular history.

Focusing on social media, blog, newspaper, and comments-section reactions to these works, I analyze the ways in which knowledge generated from creators' standpoints is offered to audiences and the subsequent ways in which particular audiences respond to these invitations with attempts at identification. With an eye toward the rhetorical effects of these creators' choices, I ask: How have my featured texts been taken up and used by their audiences—in ways creators have both anticipated and could not see coming? Where have these works traveled? How have audiences used them to open up or foreclose possibilities for genuine dialogue? By focusing on how these objects circulate in the contemporary moment and impinge on their audiences, I hope to think through the impact they are having on social justice communities presently trying to sort through vital issues related to racial justice. To this end, I analyze primarily everyday users, readers, and audience members' responses to my selected cultural objects, rather than those by traditional, academic literary critics. To any extent that these professional and academic critics do feature in my project, I focus on works of theirs that have appeared in popular magazines and newspapers: venues that are broadly accessible and frequently responded to by vernacular users.

By shifting the focus of analysis to daily users' responses, I am able to trace how everyday Americans are navigating the complexities of antiracism, social justice, and interactions across lines of difference. This orientation also helps position my project as one

primarily concerned with intimate relations: with conversations between individuals, in daily life, small classes of graduate students, sections of first-year college composition, and microinteractions on social networking sites, such as Twitter and Goodreads.

Two current trends are central to my analysis: creators' uses of a second-person "you" address and exhibits that encourage imaginative role play—both of which invite audiences to imagine themselves in vastly different subject positions and, frequently, to center their own experiences in these explorations. Engaging with theories of identification and the resurgence of standpoint epistemology, I argue that textual and artistic strategies that encourage imaginative engagement with others unlike the self put audiences in a valuable position to learn about others' experiences; at the same time, however, these strategies constrain opportunities for dialogic engagement with others' experiences when the experiences themselves are treated as unassailable truth rather than as entry points into a historico-cultural moment or conversation, preventing engagement as difference becomes sedimented as naturalized and unbridgeable. These standpoint testimonies also constrain opportunities for intimate, cross-racial dialogue when they encourage monolithic conceptions of identity that flatten differences between individuals within racial or intersectional identity-based groups.

In order to illustrate the resurgence of standpoint theory, and the ways in which this perspective can limit the kinds of cross-racial dialogue and interaction that I view as critical to moving out of this painfully bifurcated cultural moment, I turn to the recent focus on listening and argue that it has been viewed as something of a panacea for the festering silences that infect American racial discourse. Indeed, many women of color feminists argue that women of color have suffered not from a lack of a voice but from a lack of a listening ear (Anzaldúa). While I

agree that listening to the perspectives of marginalized others is crucial, I believe that first listening to the standpoint of others, then substituting that individual testimony for the experiences of an entire racial group, and finally amplifying that experience as representative of the entire group (as with retweets, reblogs, and reposts that occur on social media channels) both unproductively homogenizes conceptions of racial groups and permits white and non-Black individuals to abdicate their responsibility to actually act against racism. In her 2005 work, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, a frequently invoked and well-regarded text during this time when listening has been deemed crucial, feminist rhetorician Krista Ratcliffe encourages a posture of "rhetorical listening" when interacting with individuals across lines of cultural difference. According to Ratcliffe, rhetorical listening is "a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (17). It allows listeners to "cultivate conscious identifications in ways that promote productive communication" (25). Influenced by Kenneth Burke's cultural (rather than psychoanalytic) conception of identification, Ratcliffe helpfully takes identification to mean simply that one is able to be persuaded by another, which occurs through one's ability to recognize that someone is like the self or has an interest similar to that of the self. Ratcliffe also discusses the limits of identification, arguing that identifications may become "troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance" (47). While Burke's model fails to distinguish between conscious and unconscious identifications, Ratcliffe proposes that conscious identifications may function "as ethical and political choices" that bridge the lives and experiences of differently situated individuals (48). Building on Burke's claim that identification is necessary for persuasion to occur, Ratcliffe adds that "rhetorical listening may precede our conscious identifications," or, put

another way, that, after rhetorical listening, one might become persuaded by the other and choose to become aligned with their lives, experiences, goals, and/or embodiments (48). Attentive to the troubling history of using identification as a way to eradicate difference, Ratcliffe cogently articulates the limitations of Burke's conception as such: "In valorizing commonalities. . .[Burke's identification] does not provide a sufficient recognition of differences as a place for rhetorical exchanges and subsequent actions" (60). While commonalities, and seeing oneself in the other, are important components of persuasion and action, there must also be room for differences between self and other as spaces in which exchange can continue to occur.

In tracing the myriad contexts in which Americans are being invited to identify with others across cultural differences, I believe that listening, as described by Ratcliffe, is vital to have in one's toolbox of techniques and postures. However, listening, too, has its limits, and in this project I seek to trouble and expand the reliance on listening as a means by which individuals can "move across identity barriers" or effectively counter troubling silences about race. In addition to excluding the Deaf and hard of hearing community, the metaphor of listening provides few suggestions for how to proceed—for the "subsequent actions" Ratcliffe herself rightly identifies Burke as ignoring. Like Burke, then, Ratcliffe also fails to recognize difference as a space for "subsequent actions": after one has opened oneself to the information received from the other and has chosen to consciously be moved or changed by the other's offering. Listening as an end point, rather than a starting point, may encourage unproductive silences across the cultural differences that it seeks to bridge.

Focusing on one mode of rhetorical listening proffered in Ratcliffe's rich text, I highlight where she calls for "listening metonymically" during public debates. In metonymic listening,

listeners should "assume that a text or a person is associated with—but not necessarily representative of—an entire cultural group" in order to resist "a gendered and racialized silence that haunts U.S. public discourses" and in order to avoid the guilt, blame, denial, and defensiveness that have prevented individuals from productive cross-cultural communication (78, 79). To illustrate her concept, Ratcliffe dwells on the example of the short conversation, and missed opportunity for public debate, between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly in 1978, after Daly sent Lorde a copy of *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* and asked for comments. Lorde replied to Daly's request, suggesting that Daly represent African women as more agentive, thereby beginning a private correspondence between the two women. When Daly declined to make Lorde's suggested changes in her work, Lorde published her letter to Daly as an open letter in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1983). Later, Daly replied to Lorde in a revised introduction to *Gyn/Ecology*. According to Ratcliffe, "Although the two women agreed on feminist issues, they disagreed about Daly's scholarly method. Daly emphasized commonalities among all women; Lorde encouraged her to emphasize differences" (79). Though Lorde and Daly debated the issues privately, there was no public debate or dialogue, which reinforced what Ratcliffe calls a "dysfunctional silence," a longstanding, ongoing cultural desire to avoid talking "publicly and cross-culturally about how gender and race intersect" (79). When revisiting the debate between Lorde and Daly, a metonymic listener, then, should think about what each author has to offer and how it may move the conversation forward, recognizing both similarities and differences between individuals and groups, and practicing critique and accountability.

While Ratcliffe's description of this interaction may seem ideal, I suspect it is nearly impossible to carry out, because the movement from thinking of an individual to thinking of that individual as a member of an entire group inevitably invites flattening, making a singular experience stand in for a whole group's experience. In my view, it is impossible to "assume that a text or person is associated with—but not necessarily representative of—an entire cultural group" without flattening differences between group members and making a monolith of subjugated experiences. To her credit, Ratcliffe attempts to account for this flattening by distinguishing "listening metonymically" from "reading metaphorically," which she defines as problematically associating an individual with an entire cultural group (92). According to Ratcliffe, "Because metaphor assumes that two unlike objects share a substance that marks them for comparison, the trope of reading metaphorically assumes that a text or person shares substance with all other members of its/his/her associated cultural group" (92). Further, Ratcliffe clarifies that reading metaphorically "invites readers to assume that one member of a group represents (i.e., is practically identical to) all other members," thereby "invit[ing] readers to commence down the slippery slope to unfair generalizations and, worse, to stereotyping" (92). However, I argue that, in practice, these two forms of engagement are too similar, and both are ineffective tools for ending dysfunctional silences.

Readers and listeners are not well positioned to continually uphold the difference between assuming someone is "associated with" an entire cultural group but not "representative" of it, and Ratcliffe herself demonstrates the impossibility of walking this conceptual tightrope. To follow with the Lorde example, Ratcliffe suggests a person ask: "Do I understand Daly's desire for a transcultural and transhistorical method in *Gyn/Ecology*? Do I understand why Lorde was

so troubled by this method? What historical conditions, other than Lorde's and Daly's good intentions, were in play in this debate? Do I cite non-white feminists' texts only when I'm discussing race?" (97). While the first four questions seem helpful, because they deal with the specificity of Lorde and Daly's disagreement and prompt engagement that further understanding of a particular cultural moment, the fifth question illustrates some of the slippages invited by thinking of an individual as associated with an entire cultural group. In this example, metonymic listening provides the conceptual framework for substituting "Audre Lorde" and her multifaceted politics, project, and personhood with "non-white feminists"; here, Lorde's specific being is sublimated into an association with other, generalized people also marginalized by race.

Indeed, both metaphor and metonymy involve an association between the figurative word and what is described or encountered; in both, a single entity becomes representative of something else. The differences between the metaphors of reading and listening are also difficult to maintain. While reading may be associated with the consumption of something more static than sound (e.g., words on the page vs. the changing iterations of a spoken story), neither reading nor listening provides a clear guide for what to do, or how to act, after we listen. Finally, listening metonymically runs the risk of simplifying the vast possibilities of places, moments, and postures of identification into a one-to-one correspondence with identity, as it encourages us to think of the individuals and texts we interact with as associated with entire cultural groups.

While *Rhetorical Listenin*g ultimately encourages the receptive, listening party to remain in a passive posture, simply taking in the experiences of the other does not equip us for acting, or changing, or relating to others differently. Even if we listen well, in the ways that Ratcliffe proposes, remaining in the listening posture invites the reader to remain in a passive posture. As

my friend, Elisa, and her fellow podcast listeners demonstrate, social-justice-minded individuals are encountering myriad invitations to passivity that seem to promise, quite comfortingly, that without further engagement, without dialogue, there can be no violence, no wrongdoing, committed against the marginalized individuals to whom they are listening. But the comforts offered by passivity are false idols that instead reify essentialized notions of difference and keep us in unequal, siloed categories. In my view, we also need tools for and models of dialogic engagement that go beyond receiving. We need invitations to interaction, to questioning, to dialogue and engagement. Thus, when studying the artifacts and museums in my archive, I look for both the invitations to listen and to identify and also for the invitations to question and dialogue with texts, art works, exhibits, performances, and others from domains outside of one's own experiences.

To further illustrate the non-dialogic nature of present-day iterations of standpoint theory, I turn to its roots in feminist theorist Iris Marion Young's 1994 article, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought," which introduces the concepts of "asymmetrical reciprocity" and "wonder" as guides for approaching cross-cultural interactions. According to Young, "Each participant in a communication situation is distinguished by a particular history and social position that makes their relation asymmetrical" (341). Because of this asymmetricality, Young posits, individuals are incapable of adopting one another's standpoints. At the same time, Young encourages people to view this sharing of knowledge as a "gift," and to approach the other with "wonder" for the gift. Young writes:

> If you give me a gift, and I give you back the same gift, you are affronted. If I give you the same kind of thing that you have given me, this is uncreative; it does

> not take our relation further. If you treat your gift to me as the repayment of a debt owed, then this is too ungenerous, and endangers our bond. The gift is a unique offering. The only proper response is acceptance. The relation of offering and acceptance is asymmetrical; I do not return, I accept. If I later give you a gift, it is a new offering, with its own asymmetry. (355-6)

On the one hand, I do not agree with critics who accuse Young of suggesting that individuals cannot understand each other. In focusing on gift-giving, Young encourages exchange between differently positioned individuals meant to evoke dialogue across difference. On the other hand, I believe that Young's formulation of asymmetry encourages individuals to remain in receptive postures without any real ability to engage in dialogue. Moreover, her formulation precludes the kind of exchange she hopes to engender, as her conceptualization of asymmetricality fails to deliver on its promise of exchange. Young defines symmetry as equivalent to mirror sameness: "The mirroring evoked by the ideas of symmetry and reversibility suggests that we are able to understand one another bcause [sic] we are able to see ourselves reflected in the other people, and find that they see themselves reflected in us" (346). In her view, the "idea of a symmetry in our relation obscures the difference and particularity of the other position" (346). However, asymmetry alone does not discourage the fixity of positions Young seems to fear in the symmetrical encounter with the other. Even if I understand myself in asymmetrical relationship to the other with whom I am interacting, both myself and the other are still fixed in our positions, and the exclusive focus on the differences between our positions runs the risk of engendering a sense of unbridgeable, essentialized difference between the self and the other that encourages remaining in siloed identitarian positions. Thus, rather than engaging with the other as a complex

individual—as I would with someone I approached with symmetrical moral respect—I engage with the other as a fixed archetype or stand-in for a collective. Further, by encouraging the apprehension of the other with "wonder," Young may inadvertently encourage adopting a passive and potentially exoticizing construct that encourages the fixity of positionalities. I would suggest, instead, that "wonder" be supplanted with something like curiosity about the other, which implies more of an active desire to engage with and learn from, and about, the other. In my view, curiosity leaves open greater potential for engagement.

In my view, Young's discussion of gift giving also encourages a passive stance. When one is given a gift, she argues, one might want to return the offering with a gift of one's own, but rules about gift giving encourage the recipient to proceed cautiously. For example, while Young argues that it is not an "affront" to return the "gift" of knowledge offered from the other's standpoint with knowledge offered from one's own standpoint (whereas giving back a gift from the other's standpoint would be an affront), she views offering the same "kind" of gift—an individual, perspectival offering—as "uncreative," suggesting–despite her stated desire to encourage interactions—that a dialogue based on the mutual sharing of experiences does not further one's relationship with an other. In this reading, the remaining option for interaction across difference seems to be one that requires temporal distance between the offering and the response, which would preclude back-and-forth dialogue, similar to the temporal distance created by Ratcliffe's listening. This formulation mimics the present-day social justice wisdom that if one wants to be perceived as a good listener, then one must also receive the knowledge as a gift, effacing one's own questions or responses in the process.

Like Ratcliffe and Young, I believe that one's own story unfolds in relation to others; that no two people, no matter how similar, can fully occupy the same position; and that we can gain immensely valuable knowledge and information from our own and others' experiences—knowledge that, especially when coming from the lived experiences of marginalized individuals, has often been overlooked by official narratives and institutions and is thus vitally important to consider. At the same time, I reject the notion that remaining in a receptive listening posture, or adopting a self-effacing asymmetry in relation to the other, are positions from which we can engage in productive dialogue. Indeed, both frameworks encourage a fixity of positions. From these positions, we can only watch in wonder, listen, or witness, but we cannot dialogue, question, or challenge—we can barely even receive, because we cannot engage from within our sedimented roles. I worry that wonder functions more like the oft-criticized passive, consumptive gaze that enshrines static power dynamics. Instead, I am encouraging dialogue, the interactive nature of which is always shifting and changing, allowing for moments of unsettled racial hierarchies, challenges to unequal positionalities, and deep engagement with difference. In calling for such dialogue, I acknowledge the difficult tension between, on the one hand, respecting others' voices and giving space to marginalized others, and on the other hand, refusing engagement at all in the name of amplifying such voices. In the proscription to amplify voices of color, we run the risk of walling off the experiences of people of color such that their experiences are taken out of the realm of dialogue and elevated to a position that cannot be questioned or engaged. Too often, the demand to amplify voices of color can also inadvertently seem to require a sidelining of white voices and a discouragement of white engagement that, from my perspective, gives white people a pass, effectively excusing them

from taking responsibility for, and playing an active role in, dismantling racism and racist institutions. In my chapters, I thus explore the ways in which our current tools, hewn by standpoint logics, may encourage learning about others unlike ourselves but too often stop short of—or indeed hamper—our efforts to foster dialogue across lines of racial difference.

In my first chapter, I explore two popular charges prevalent in contemporary social justice discourses: first, that creating works about Black experiences should be the sole province of Black creators, and second, that the work of educating dominant-group individuals about marginalization should never fall to members of these marginalized communities, or—as Krista Ratcliffe might say—that dominant-group individuals need to "do their own race work" (8). In my view, these two tenets of contemporary social justice discourse often stand in unproductive tension. In order to illustrate this point, I begin by offering a reading of the controversy surrounding white artist Dana Schutz's expressionist painting, *Open Casket*, which led to calls for its removal from the 2016 *Whitney Biennial*—and even destruction—by art critics, lay viewers, and academics alike. I then discuss Black artist Kara Walker's public art installation, *A Subtlety*, arguing that even when viewers believe that artists have the "proper" identity to engage with particular subject matter, an artist's identity cannot guarantee particular audience responses, nor engagements with relevant social justice discourses. Instead, the received wisdom that possessing the relevant identity will necessarily produce liberatory or "properly" political art tends to limit both the range of subjects and tones through which Black artists may express themselves. In exploring the debates about Schutz and Walker, I trace the important interventions fostered by standpoint theory and its continuing appeal to particular social justice communities who embrace the idea that lived experience offers important evidence of one's experiences of

marginalization. At the same time, I argue that over-reliance on the evidence of experience can lead to essentialized views of Blackness that flatten important differences among individuals in Black communities. Moreover, the operating logics of standpoint theory can stifle Black creators, encourage racial siloing, and allow non-Black individuals to distance themselves from their responsibility to participate in challenging anti-racism.

In my second chapter, I return to the second-person address and its invitation to identification, focusing on Claudia Rankine's tremendously popular *Citizen: An American Lyric* and tracing the standpoint logics at work in the text. Rankine, who attended Walker's *Sugar Baby* exhibit in New York, expressed concern about Walker's exhibit, noting that because Walker "refus[ed] to contextualize or educate beyond what can be seen," Walker's work "must hold" the inappropriate, oftentimes racist reactions of its audience (qtd. in Berlant, 2014). Given that Rankine sees an educative potential in art, I adopt this frame for analyzing Rankine's own authorial choices in *Citizen*, highlighting the book's appeals to standpoint epistemology and its use of the second-person address to guide readers to particular logics and conclusions and to forestall unauthorized reactions to *Citizen*. Appreciating the popularity of *Citizen* as a teaching text, I also offer a rhetorical, critical pedagogical study of the testimonials of instructors who have used *Citizen* in the classroom. I argue that instructors' over-reliance on *Citizen*'s micropoems is also an over-reliance on standpoint theory, and thus on the evidence of experience. In turn, instructors and students are left with few opportunities to "talk back" to *Citizen*, which in turn encourages students and instructors to occupy the ossified and bifurcated us-them, victim-perpetrator roles that Rankine ostensibly wishes to overcome. As these teaching testimonies demonstrate, the reification of experience allows white instructors to remove

themselves from difficult conversations about race by claiming that they do not have the experience or authority to speak about such issues, despite their pedagogical, instructional roles. In this way, the powerful tool of standpoint theory actually inhibits, rather than encourages, dialogic engagement with racial hierarchies.

Building on the ways in which readers are invited to identify with the "you" in Rankine, and building on many readers' desire for a blueprint outlining how to create anti-racist communities, my third chapter explores the proliferation of the second-person, "you" address in Black life writing as an invitation to identify with the lives and experiences of Black authors. With a focus on James Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew" and its intellectual progeny, Ta-Nehisi Coates's letter to his teenage son, *Between the World and Me*, I argue that Baldwin and Coates both utilize the dual address of the public letter format to call readers in while simultaneously rhetorically privileging their own communities. I read Baldwin, Coates, and their readers' responses in order to highlight the discursive yield of invitations to dialogue engendered, in part, by the "you" address. Unlike Rankine, whose "you" is a generalized aggregation of many Black individuals' experiences, Baldwin and Coates write from their particular standpoints to particular individual family members. In response, readers are often more successfully called in by this address, feeling a moral tug to respond to the letter writers addressing them. However, despite these structural similarities between Baldwin and Coates, and the frequency with which they are linked in contemporary discourse, I argue that Baldwin and Coates express very different views about the kind of political, anti-racist changes that it is possible to make. Baldwin proposes that with deep, cross-cultural engagements, it may be possible (in an admittedly distant future) to realize the American promise of equality for all. Baldwin holds onto the possibility of dialogue

across difference, enabled by first listening to the perspective of the other and then responding to an invitation for discourse. Coates, on the other hand, uses the knowledge generated from his experience to suggest that only individuals that have lived his life and his experiences are ultimately able to understand him. Arguing that, across history, all societies have created oppressed groups to define themselves against, he thus takes a more individualist approach, suggesting that the actor is responsible only for their own futures and actions, foreclosing possibilities for change despite the dialogic invitation his letter makes to his readers. Indeed, despite Coates's rejection, many of his readers—from major news outlets like the *New York Times* and *The Atlantic* to reviews and book clubs on the social networking site Goodreads—read him against the grain, explicitly putting his work in conversation with Baldwin and others, and expressing that the text inspired them to act in ways that might build anti-racist communities. These readers demonstrate such a strong desire for guidance about how to enact anti-racist practices that they form their own communities and book clubs online, attempting to eschew Coates's message and grasping at connections between the text, their own lives, and their communities.

In my final chapter, I focus on "Escape to Freedom," a digital role play game at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, exploring role play as another kind of invitation for audiences to identify with an other. Role play is a foundational tool in the anti-racist arsenal; for decades, it has been viewed as an effective method for encouraging individuals to make social change. During the Civil Rights Movement, for example, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) used role plays as opportunities for volunteers to practice encountering individuals unlike themselves,

with radically different viewpoints and political goals, to teach volunteers the difficult skill of remaining committed to their own goals even when faced with challenges. Increasingly, museums and cultural institutions are adopting digital forms of role play to foster interracial and intercultural connections. Drawing on my own experience of playing "Escape to Freedom," I explore the rhetorical potential of role play to help us understand individuals separated from us by differences in race, class, gender, embodiment, or historical experience. At the same time, I probe the limits of such an experience, including the ways in which it may simplify historical realities, encourage an over-identification with the other, and allow the hosting institution to impose its values on participants. I argue that while some—or even many—of the role play experiences offered at American museums may seem simplistic or overly determined, they are also vitally important: for the vast majority of Americans who do not regularly encounter people racially, culturally, economically, socially, or physically unlike themselves, these role plays, in large and small museums alike, may be among the primary ways in which they are taught to think outside of their own frameworks. If taken seriously, role play opportunities may be a fertile avenue for developing individuals' imaginative capacity—a skill that, if effectively cultivated, may encourage the dismantling of racially oppressive structures.

Ultimately, I hope to accomplish three goals with this project: 1) to assess, with an eye toward affordances and limitations, extant, socially prominent ways of engaging with Black art, with particular attention to intercultural interactions; 2) to illustrate how these methods shape and are shaped by currently available political responses to injustice; and 3) to encourage more dialogic modes of interaction across difference. Taking seriously the cultural objects that call their audiences in and have thus become major touchstones in current racial debates, I seek to

contribute to the fields of Rhetoric and Pedagogy, in addition to African American literary and cultural studies, by illuminating possibilities for imagining varied futures and models for anti-racist work and social change, and by elucidating how art makes possible new lives, affinities, and communities. My focus on the ways in which art and its audiences effect change represents my conscious political orientation toward art and scholarship that see change as possible, Black life as vital, and all residents of America as bound up in a shared history and a shared future. While this orientation may be difficult to maintain at a time when new instances of state-sanctioned violence against Black individuals and communities become hashtags more quickly than newspapers can print headlines, I believe that we all share a responsibility to and for our countrymates across racial lines, including an acknowledgment of Black and white Americans' inextricable interconnectedness. Claiming this responsibility is a necessary response to the all-too-often precarious conditions of Black life.

Chapter 2 "Non-Black people super very welcome to help": The Role of Standpoint Theory in Contemporary Social Justice Responses to Art by Dana Schutz and Kara Walker

Every two years, New York City's Whitney Museum of Art hosts a celebration of contemporary art known as the Whitney Biennial. The biennial, which has its roots in the 1930s, is the longest-running celebration of American art; over time, it has become known as a "who's who" in the art world. Making it into the Whitney Biennial suggests one has made it as a working artist. At various points in its long tenure, and given its stature in the art world, the Whitney Biennial has been a place of protest, as artists and critics have been troubled by the lack of representation for women and racial minorities among the Biennial's featured artists. Attempting to respond to such critique, the curators of the 2017 biennial chose to curate the exhibition with an eye toward social justice. As the curators write, "The 2017 Whitney Biennial . . . arrives at a time rife with racial tensions, economic inequities, and polarizing politics. Throughout the exhibition, artists challenge us to consider how these realities affect our senses of self and community" (Lew and Locks).

Among the artists highlighted at the 2017 Whitney Biennial was non-realist painter Dana Schutz. Although Schutz had three paintings selected for the show, the reaction to Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016) greatly overshadowed any of her other contributions. *Open Casket* (Figure 1, below) depicts 14-year-old Emmett Till in his casket on the day of his funeral. Till, who was lynched in 1955 after allegedly making unwanted sexual advances towards a white woman in a

grocery store—the woman, Carolyn Bryant, later recanted her accusations—was displayed in his mutilated state at his funeral, because his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, wanted the world to see what had been done to her son. At Mobley's request, photographers captured both the funeral and close-ups of Till's corpse, which were published shortly afterward in *Jet Magazine*, a popular publication in the fifties with a largely Black readership. Due to many factors, including the brutality of the lynching, Till's age, and Mobley's choice to politicize her son's death, Till's lynching is often viewed as a watershed event in the Civil Rights Movement.



Figure 1. Schutz, Dana. *Open Casket*. Petzel Gallery, NY and Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, 2016. Photograph by Bill Orcutt.

In 2017, the public response to *Open Casket* was swift and loud. Other artists and critics called for the painting's removal from the show, protested in front of the painting itself, and even circulated petitions calling for the painting's destruction. Most of the criticism of Schutz's painting alleges that "the painting by a white artist represents nothing more than the exploitation of an excruciating and defining moment in African-American history" (Gibson). Hannah Black, a British conceptual artist, authored the most famous petition against *Open Casket* in which she made an "urgent recommendation that the painting be destroyed" (qtd. in Greenberger). Black's petition, circulated on her Facebook and signed by over thirty individuals, was originally open to signatories of all racial backgrounds, but after leaving the original post up for one day, Black re-posted the petition and clarified, "In response to some helpful criticism, I'm now only including Black co-signs. Non-Black people super very welcome to help get the painting destroyed tho in other ways" (qtd. in Greenberger). Black's own circle of influence pushed her to limit signatories to those in the Black community, indicating how widespread a narrow, identity-based model of political affiliation has become.

Black's petition suggests that Black artists and creators should bear full (and exclusive) responsibility for creating the art that engages with Black oppression. For more than a century, however, Black writers and artists have pushed back against the pressure to create explicitly anti-racist art, with Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison offering especially eloquent responses to such pressure. I find myself especially drawn to the terms Ellison lays out. In response to critic Irving Howe's 1963 "Black Boys and Native Sons," a defense of Richard Wright and a call to other Black artists to be more strident in their racial politics, Ellison pens "The World and the Jug," a forceful rejoinder in which he insists that his work be considered art,

rather than solely a political statement, that it be judged on its aesthetic merits rather than its militancy. Ellison argues that Black artists need not create the kind of politically engaged art that Howe calls for; creating beauty can itself constitute the political value of the work. At the same time, Ellison argues that fiction, and art more broadly, is capacious enough to house both aesthetic features and political engagements; a work need not sacrifice its beauty for its political power. Howe defends his position by admitting that he understands "literature and sociology are not one and the same" but "it is equally true that such statements hardly begin to cope with the problem of how a writer's own experience affects his desire to represent human affairs in a work of fiction" (qtd. in Ellison 110). Ellison elaborates, "Evidently Howe feels that unrelieved suffering is the only 'real' Negro experience, and that the true Negro writer must be ferocious"; one "unfamiliar with what Howe stands for would get the impression that when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell" (111). But it is not only critics who have this expectation for Black artists—Ellison also speaks to the widespread social pressure to reduce the conditions of Black life to Black suffering: "Some twelve years ago, a friend argued with me for hours that I could not possibly write a novel because my experience as a Negro had been too excruciating to allow me to achieve that psychological and emotional distance necessary to artistic creation. Since he 'knew' Negro experience better than I, I could not convince him that he might be wrong" (Ellison 111). While Howe seems less likely to deny that Ellison and Baldwin are able to produce works with artistic merit, he insists that they have a responsibility as Black artists to make protest the primary motive for their art. From Ellison's perspective, however, both Howe and Ellison's friend are guilty of essentializing Black life, creating a monolith of Black experiences, and strangling possibilities for Black expression. As an

alternative, Ellison pushes his readers to view Black artists as fully human and as constituted by more than their racial experiences, explaining that Howe's position assumes Black life is unrelentingly terrible, which flattens differences among Black individuals. Ellison is concerned that Howe's position:

> [L]eaves no room for the individual writer's unique experience. It leaves no room for that kind of intensity of personal anguish which compels the artist to seek relief by projecting it into the world in conjunction with other things; that anguish which might take the form of an acute sense of inferiority for one, homosexuality for another, an overwhelming sense of the absurdity of human life for still another. Nor does it leave room for the experience that might be caused by humiliation, by a harelip, by a stutter, by epilepsy—indeed, by any and everything in this life which plunges the talented individual into solitude while leaving him the will to transcend his condition through art. (130)

Here, Ellison argues that all of an artist's experiences may shape the kind of work she produces—an artist is impacted by her race but also by her sexuality, her (dis)ability, her class position. The insistence that all art by Black individuals must have the same relationship to power, and the same orientation to anti-racist protest, denies individuals their unique subjectivity and agency. In Howe's paradigm, Blackness becomes a condition to be dealt with to the exclusion of all other identity categories, experiences, and interests. Race is a one-size-fits-all, standard-issue straightjacket for anyone born non-white.

Ellison instead embraces the vitality of Black life and the multiplicity of Black experience while allowing the burden of anti-racist protest to be shared among many individuals;

this “division of labor” encourages different responses according to the strengths and desires of each person, and it recognizes the contingency and constructedness of identity (Ellison 142). Ellison also emphasizes the broad range of factors that construct an individual’s identity; race is constructed by a “concord of sensibilities,” influenced by a number of factors including skin color, class, gender, one’s cultural moment, and the attendant cultural factors impinging on that historical moment. In his formulation, Ellison pushes back against essentialism, urging Howe to take into account the full cadre of experiences that shape an individual’s identity and sensibility. Ellison also emphasizes the difference between “ancestors,” the influences an artist chooses to inform their work and seek inspiration from, and “relatives,” a group of individuals associated with the artist because of a common heritage, such as race. Accordingly, Ellison cites as relatives Wright and Langston Hughes, other Black writers whose work he is familiar with and with whom he is associated because of their shared racial identity, and he cites as ancestors Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky because they “appreciated the things of this earth which [he] love[s]” and because he shares with them common sentiments, kinds of experiences, and appreciation for their art forms (140). Thus, Ellison pushes back on the idea that Black artists operate in a monoracial vacuum, calling for a world in which an artist’s inspiration and chosen subject matter may be woven from a wide variety of influences and interests.

Two decades after Ellison and Howe engaged in this debate, feminist scholars began to argue that special consideration should be given to the lived experiences of marginalization endured by women, and this perspective coalesced into the so-called “feminist standpoint.” In the academy, standpoint theory gained ground with the publication of Nancy Hartsock’s

"Feminist Standpoint Theory" in 1983. Hartsock's article arose from her desire to make Marxist theory speak to the kinds of marginalization women endured because of their sex rather than their class. Philosophers of science also used feminist standpoint theory to broaden definitions of empiricism to include observations made from marginalized societal positions (Haraway; Harding). Black feminist scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins, used standpoint theory to argue for the inclusion of Black women in sociological research because their unique experiences of marginalization on the axes of both race and gender enabled them to offer "outsider within" knowledge unavailable from other locations (Collins, 1986). Even as scholars in the 1990s debated the usefulness of standpoint theory and the essentialized notions of identity on which it relied, I recognize the important role that standpoint theory played in fostering the inclusion of marginalized life experiences in the sciences. I also recognize that the desire to elevate marginalized voices motivates criticisms of Schutz, Howe's demands of Ellison, and the contemporary resurgence of standpoint theory.

Nevertheless, the charge that only Black individuals may speak to and about Black experience runs the risk of reifying a narrow, oppressive conception of Black life that recognizes only Black pain while at the same time pressuring all Black creators to produce art that comments on their sociopolitical status. This framework implies that Black individuals' experiences occur in a silo rather than in conversation with a range of influences that can be lived or merely read about, positive or negative, oppressive or freeing, chosen or imposed, and, importantly, different for every creator. Indeed, the stance also risks making a monolith of Black culture and experiences, producing an essentialized conception of Black life with few acceptable demonstrations of political consciousness. Additionally, presuming that Black identity

automatically and uniquely authorizes one to speak about Black experience suggests that somehow it is possible to remain in a single-race vacuum, as if we can totally isolate ourselves from differently raced others at a point in U.S. history when we are necessarily imbricated in a multiracial environment. As evident in the Ellison-Howe debate, while white artists may feel forbidden to produce art about Black trauma, Black artists may feel pressured to do so in order to conform to a narrow range of acceptable topics for Black art.

Inspired by Ellison's belief that an artist's "ancestors" are shaped by a wide variety of influences, I argue in this chapter that non-Black individuals are also negatively affected by anti-Black racism, and that recognizing this interconnectedness may help to loosen sedimented victim-perpetrator binaries and awaken more individuals to participate in the struggle for anti-racism. In the sections that follow, I introduce standpoint theory more thoroughly, including the important work scholars have done to increase marginalized individuals' access to knowledge-making claims and to recognize the lifeworlds of women, people of color, the queer community, and other marginalized groups as starting points for inquiry. I also trace several reasons why standpoint theory may be particularly appealing in modern social justice conversations, including because an appeal to one's standpoint seems to provide incontrovertible evidence that one's experiences of marginalization are real. Next, I explore how characterizing the debate about Schutz's *Open Casket* as a matter of realism versus abstraction obfuscates the cultural logics operating in the present moment. Indeed, critics of Schutz's work demonstrate an underlying concern with the identity of an artwork's creator, a belief seemingly born from an understandable fear that white artists' engagements with Black pain will necessarily produce shallow engagements with structural and interpersonal violence and perpetuate centuries-old

patterns by which white individuals profit from Black suffering. This fear leads critics like Hannah Black to conclude, even if implicitly, that an individual's identity should preclude engagement with particular topics and that racial identities and experiences can be siloed off from other intersecting axes of human identification. In order to push back against this conclusion, I illuminate some pitfalls of the over-reliance on standpoint theory, focusing on work by Kara Walker. Analyzing the reception of Walker's art, I demonstrate that having the "right" identity doesn't always ensure that readers will respond in accordance with authorial intention, nor does it necessarily increase engagement with pertinent social justice agendas. In examining Kara Walker, her critics, and Walker's responses to her critics, I challenge the narrative that being Black is a necessary and sufficient condition for producing anti-racist art and for engendering anti-racist responses among viewers. Although Walker inhabits the appropriate standpoint to create work about anti-Black racism, her work has been widely criticized as not liberatory enough—as revelling too much in shit and piss, in pain and twisted pleasures of plantation life. Illustrating how standpoint theory can create a narrow, essential view of Blackness and the attitudes a Black person should possess, critics have often rejected, simplified, or asked Walker to change her work in order to meet other people's standards for what her work should look like. Through my analyses of varied engagements with Kara Walker in this chapter and with Claudia Rankine's works in the next chapter, I hope to demonstrate that if we can trace the operating logics of standpoint theory and the kinds of conversations it enables and defers, we will be better positioned to resist its more stifling uses, which constrain Black creators, rely on the false promise of racial siloing, and encourage non-Black individuals to distance themselves from assuming shared responsibility for enacting anti-racism. Or, in the words of professor

emerita Margo Okazawa-Rey, founding member of the Combahee River Collective: "We need to get to another place where we say, 'Black Lives Matter,' and frame it as, 'This is a moment where we can deal with the forces affecting all of us.' 'This is a both/and moment.' That takes courage. That takes humility" (Okazawa-Rey, n.p.).

Standpoint Theory Takes Root

Standpoint theory can be said to have several different roots, as individuals and groups with various marginalized identities have searched for ways to articulate how their social location gives them particular insights into the workings of power. In its academic lineage, standpoint has Marxist beginnings. As articulated by Nancy Hartsock, standpoint theory (a term she coined) is meant to help demonstrate that class itself could not explain each of the ways in which women were oppressed (106). Building on Marx's assertion that "a correct vision of class society is available from only one of the two major class positions in capitalist society," Hartsock develops the theory that a "correct" view of gender relations and a correct organization of society is available only through a marginalized gender position. Importantly, Hartsock also argues that the "feminist standpoint" is a position that must be "earned" through particular engagements with social relations (107). Women with particular interests in maintaining the status quo do not adopt a feminist standpoint; rather, only those who engage with liberatory ideas and struggles are able to adopt a feminist standpoint.

Alongside Hartsock's conceptualization of a feminist standpoint is a simultaneous Black feminist lineage to standpoint theory that is often under explored. For example, in their 1977 statement, the Combahee River Collective asserts that race, sex, gender, and class hierarchies

coalesce into “interlocking” systems of oppression and that the “synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.” Further, as Black women, members of the Collective view “Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.” Imbricated in this statement is the belief that knowledge about, and from, the position of marginalized people’s lives can be liberatory for both members of that group and for other similarly oppressed peoples. Although the Combahee River Collective refers to their intervention as “identity politics,” I view standpoint epistemology as a necessary tenet of their articulation of identity politics—one they implicitly formulate by laying out a theory of interlocking oppressions and the experience-based knowledge created from one’s identity. In 1986, Patricia Hill Collins argued for a specifically Black feminist standpoint that would add to sociological knowledge because the interlocking oppressions of race and gender (along with class and sexuality) provided Black women with a particular vantage point that could make them “outsiders within” the field of sociology who could generate particular insights about how systemic oppression functions. Unlike many other standpoint theorists (such as Iris Marion Young), Collins argues that oppressed people’s knowledge is not more “correct” than anyone else’s knowledge; instead, Black women’s social location provides a unique position from which to analyze oppressive forces that may not be perceivable from other positions. In the early 1990s, debates raged about the status of the information derived from marginalized positions, as in the debate between Seyla Benhabib and Iris Marion Young that I discuss in Chapter Five. Scholars debated whether it is possible to inhabit the standpoint of another and whether one should always acquiesce to an other’s standpoint.

Despite its contested status, standpoint theory has had a lasting impact on the humanities and social sciences and on broader activist practices. In the philosophy of science, scholars such as Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Helen Longino have each articulated their own views on why "objectivity" is an impossible standard that relies on a socially distanced observer and privileges white men's perspectives as the only rational, disembodied voice (Haraway; Harding; Longino). Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" is perhaps the most influential concept to emerge from the debate about standpoint theory; today, Haraway's intervention is so widely accepted that it almost seems commonplace. In "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," Haraway argues that feminist "objectivity" actually means situated knowledges, and that "objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility" (582-3). Within this framework, we strengthen our analyses by acknowledging our limited locations and partial perspectives, recognizing our particular ways of seeing and interpreting the world, being explicit about our investments, and taking responsibility for what we can and cannot do with our particular frameworks. Haraway also acknowledges the broader debate about standpoint theory when she writes:

> Many currents in feminism attempt to theorize grounds for trusting especially the vantage points of the subjugated; there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful. Building on that suspicion, this essay is an argument for situated and embodied knowledges and an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims. Irresponsible means unable to be called into account. There is a premium

> on establishing the capacity to see from the peripheries and the depths. But here there also lies a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions. To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if we 'naturally' inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges. The positioning of the subjugated are not exempt from critical reexamination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation . . . The standpoints of the subjugated are not 'innocent' positions. (583-84)

Here, Haraway references one of the basic tenets of standpoint theory—that individuals in subjugated positions are particularly well positioned to explain how the systems of power operate—and she reiterates why this location is so desirable: namely, because white, cis, heterosexual men have set their perspective as the default, thereby making their standpoint unembodied, unlocatable, and irresponsible. Women, people of color, women of color, queer people, disabled people, and other marginalized groups do not have the privilege of claiming disembodied knowledge, as their subjugation is often mediated by their embodiment. Because of their social location, these marginalized groups are better positioned to account for their bodies, classes, genders, sexualities—and how these identity factors shape their knowledge—in their analyses of social hierarchies, in part because accounting for their bodies is something they have always had to do. At the same time, however, if a standpoint is constructed through critical interpretations and examinations, then knowledge generated from this standpoint must be open to reinterpretation, reexamination, and critique**,** or we risk essentializing marginalized groups and romanticizing subjugated knowledge.

As I will explore further, Haraway's concerns haunt present-day social justice discourse, in which reductive forms of standpoint theory treat marginalized perspectives as inviolate truths rather than as complex constructions of experience. But as Haraway sharply argues, pushing back against the romanticization of subjugated knowledges, marginalized individuals don't "naturally inhabit" oppositional standpoints; instead, a liberatory standpoint must be worked for through critical examination that teaches an individual to recognize their embodied locations. Building on Haraway's analysis, I argue that if a standpoint must be worked toward, through critical interpretation of one's own subject location and the ways in which identities are socioculturally constructed—if individuals who "naturally" inhabit particular subjugated locations must critically examine their locations in order to create knowledge that helps us see from the peripheries—then the knowledge that is generated can also be taught or passed on to dominant-identity individuals who are invited to think critically about these other perspectives. The key is for such individuals to acknowledge that their own subject positions might open or foreclose particular kinds of thinking or affect their willingness to engage with others unlike themselves.

The continuing appeal of standpoint theory seems to stem from the ways in which it enables an individual to voice their experiences, turn their experiences into claims about how the logics of power operate, and infuse these claims with the self-same credibility of their experiences. In a social interaction in which participants are primed to believe what others tell them about their experiences, they are also well positioned to extrapolate about an entire marginalized group based on the evidence of one person's experiences. It feels validating to be heard, and to be believed, especially about the consequences of oppression; validation makes

one's life visible when the effects of marginalization often render the individual invisible, unheard and unseen.

Standpoint theory also informs many activists' calls for "nothing about us without us," which signals their belief that representatives from subjugated groups should have a seat at the table when decisions are being made that affect them, as marginalized people are in the best position to speak to their own needs and the needs of their community and to articulate how they interact with the relevant power structure. Finally, an appeal to one's standpoint, which often becomes coextensive with an appeal to one's identity, allows an individual to insist on their own credibility in addressing a particular topic. The individual's identity suggests that they are capable of producing an informed, accurate statement about the community at hand. For instance, the Own Voices movement in book publishing designates books written by and about people from the marginalized group in question (Rosenfield). The Own Voices label is designed to guarantee the authenticity of the work while providing a way to direct monetary support toward authors who have traditionally struggled in the publishing industry.

While many critics viewed standpoint theory as outdated in the 1990s and in the first decades of the 21st century, its logic continues to undergird much contemporary social justice activism and writing, especially in online platforms. There are two important, lasting takeaways from the standpoint debates. First, listening to the other and creating knowledge about marginalization from the experiences of those living it are important tools for dismantling racial oppression. Second, identifying one's own subject position and acknowledging the impact that location has on the knowledge one generates allows for more responsible, honest scholarship and community participation.

At the same time, however, a persistent, reductionist form of standpoint theory evident in responses to art, literature, and other creative and political endeavors oversimplifies the important premise of the original intervention. This reductionist form of standpoint theory eschews intersectional understandings of identity in favor of a more essentialized formulation of an individual's standpoint that is *less* situated and *less* responsible for what it enables/disables; this notion of standpoint is viewed as congruent with one's identity rather than being understood as something that one struggles toward. Such a reductionist version of standpoint theory is evident in the debate—largely carried out on social media—about whether Dana Schutz should have painted *Open Casket*, particularly in the claims that because Schutz is not Black, she should not have represented Black pain because her experiences as a white woman foreclose the possibility that she can understand Mamie Till Mobley's pain; only another Black woman could understand such pain. With a more expansive understanding of standpoints, it might be possible to see how motherhood itself is a subjugated position from which subjugated knowledges have long been generated, and as such, Mobley and Schutz might connect on this level, even as other interlocking elements of their identities, such as race and class, encourage different kinds of relationships to the matrix of oppression.

Standpoint Theory and Public Criticism of Dana Schutz's *Open Casket*

In her petition to remove Schutz's painting, Black leans heavily on two lines of criticism: first, that Schutz is appropriating Black pain for commercial gain, and second, that Mobley's decision to showcase her son's mutilated body should only authorize realist representations and/or Black individuals' representations of Till's death. Black writes, "Through his mother's

courage, Till was made available to Black people as an inspiration and warning. Non-Black people must accept that they will never embody and cannot understand this gesture . . . Even if Schutz has not been gifted with any real sensitivity to history, if Black people are telling her that the painting has caused unnecessary hurt, she and you must accept the truth of this. The painting must go" (qtd. in Greenberger). "The painting must go" becomes a refrain throughout the petition, bracketing each paragraph. Given Black's interest in the ability of non-Black individuals to speak to or empathize with Black pain, it seems relevant to note that Hannah Black is not a Black American; given her British heritage, whatever racism Black has encountered in her life is not the same as the experiences of African Americans because historical events, differing policies regarding the transatlantic slave trade, vastly different geographies, and resultant cultural forces at work in the United States and in Great Britain have produced different experiences for Black individuals residing in each nation. Nonetheless, Black designates race as the factor that enables one individual to understand and share another individual's pain, emphasizing the essentialist strain running through contemporary articulations of identity-based political and social organizing.

In a less essentialist schema, one might recognize that any shared Black experiences are inevitably modified by factors such as ethnicity, ability, national origin, gender, age, sexual orientation, and economic status—to name just a few. Who decides which factors authorize one to speak to or for another's pain? Black's petition, written and publicized in the days immediately following the opening of the Whitney Biennial, shaped the resulting conversation around *Open Casket* and criticisms of Schutz. Christina Sharpe, scholar of African American literature and culture, was one of the signatories to Black's petition. In an interview with art critic

Siddhartha Mitter, Sharpe echoes each of Black's reasons for why the subject of Till should be off-limits to a white artist:

> I reject the idea that somehow the central question is that the artist needs protecting, as opposed to the issue that Hannah [Black] is centering, which is how images of Black suffering circulate for a certain kind of enjoyment and profit. We've seen that circulation over and over, in the history of the Whitney Biennial and the history of this country. I'm very interested in how the painting functions versus how the actual photographs of Emmett Till function. Mamie Till Mobley makes the decision, against much advice, to have those photographs of her son published. It was not mainstream media — or white media — that published those images. It was *Jet* magazine. And those images had nothing to do with white consciousness. They were for Black people, because *Jet* was a Black publication. They weren't meant to create empathy or shame or awareness from white viewers. They were meant to speak to and to move a Black audience. So Mamie Till refuses to have those images not be shown. And she says (this isn't a direct quote): Look at what they did to my son. This is my son. Look at what they did to him. She insists that the violence that he has been subject to be seen, unobscured. It seems to me that what Dana Schutz has done is to take that unobscured violence and make it abstract. Mamie Till wanted to make violence real. And that thing — white supremacy, violent abduction, murder — that Mamie Till wanted to make absolutely clear is abstracted in Schutz's work, and in her defense of the work.

Here, Sharpe's primary concern is who is allowed to look at Black pain and what kinds of engagement with Black pain are acceptable across lines of racial difference. Despite an obfuscating focus on the difference between realism and abstraction, the actual concern as identified by the petition, its signatories, and other protesters seems to be that Schutz might "speak to and move" a white audience, bringing Till's death to "white consciousness," and white viewers might enjoy, profit from, or pruriently observe Black suffering. Till's lynching might become, then, one of the spectacles Saidiya Hartman warns about: "reiterated" with "ease," "immur[ing] [sic] us to pain by virtue of their familiarity," and "reinforc[ing] the spectacular character of black suffering" (3).

What Sharpe's argument fails to acknowledge is that Mobley attempted to have the photographs published in any publication that would take them. For Mobley, it was important for as many people as possible to look at her son's body: "I think everybody needed to know what happened to Emmett Till" ("Mamie Till Mobley"). Her choice to have an open casket and an open funeral was another political act meant to invite any and all who cared about the murder of a 14-year-old boy to see what horrors white supremacy had wrought. During the funeral, Mobley explained, "Emmett Till's mutilated body would be on display for all to see. Fifty thousand people in Chicago saw Emmett Till's corpse with their own eyes" ("Mamie Till Mobley"). Of course, the fact that only *Jet*, a Black publication, ran the photographs speaks to what was acceptable to publish in mainstream media in 1955—which stories of Black individuals merited national attention, and how much violence and pain wrought by white supremacist mainstream media outlets were willing to turn their backs on. The fact that the photographs eventually found their home in *Jet* is a function of white supremacy, rather than a statement of an exclusive

political orientation by Mobley. Sharpe's claim that Mobley's decision to publish photographs of her son's body wasn't "meant to create empathy or shame or awareness from white viewers" but instead was "meant to speak to and to move a Black audience" also highlights the degree of control Schutz's critics believe an actor can have over their images and how their offerings will be received. Even if Mobley had meant to raise consciousness solely in the Black community—a proposition that seems almost perverse, given that no other group was better positioned to speak to the horrors visited upon Black individuals in the United States after Emancipation than the Black community itself—it would be impossible for her to control the dissemination of the photographs after their publication. Indeed, a more generous reading would assume that Mobley hoped—even knew—that the photographs of her son's disfigured body would spread far and wide, gathering enough attention to spark movement toward change.

A secondary thread in Sharpe's commentary is the suggestion that if Schutz had painted a realist representation of Till in his casket, then public outcry would have been less strong; by "tak[ing] that unobscured violence" and keeping it in its original format, Schutz would have been following Mobley's desires for her son's representation and people would not have responded so negatively to her work. However, according to Sharpe's own formulation, even if Schutz had adopted a realist form, she still would have been in violation of Mobley's supposed exclusive desire "to speak to and to move a Black audience." Furthermore, if Schutz had painted a realist depiction of Till in his casket, the reaction may have been just as negative (if not more), because Mobley already provided the public with a realist representation of her son's body, and because Schutz would likely be accused of profiting from Black pain.

Sharpe is in popular company in believing that realism can deliver a kind of truth that abstraction cannot. As scholar of African American literature and culture Phillip Brian Harper explains in *Abstractionist Aesthetics*, under the current (and long-standing) norms of artistic expression, realism is the "primary stake" in African American cultural engagement, belying the fact that "even the most realistic representation is precisely a representation, and that as such it necessarily exists at a distance from the social reality it is conventionally understood to reflect" (2). Harper's insight is similar to Haraway's argument that knowledges created from subjugated positions are also constructed, rather than naturally occurring, and thus do not exist outside of the realm of discourse and interpretation. Harper also reminds us that realism has been favored over abstraction because abstraction has been used to oppress Black people and communities, socially and politically. Harper writes that "abstraction has largely comprised a mode of genericization whereby the specificity of African American historical experience . . . has been precluded from the representational field" at the same time as it has also been the "cognitive mechanism by which persons of African descent were conceived as enslavable entities and commodity objects, and yet paradoxically denied the condition of disinterested personhood on which U.S.-governmental recognition has been based" (4). Thus, African American artists' resistance to abstraction is historically grounded and understandable even as realism is unable to deliver fully on its promises. Indeed, the belief in realism has long been converted into an expectation to create realist art, imposed on Black creators especially, from individuals who have risen to the level of what scholar Gene Andrew Jarrett would call a "dean," to individuals such as publishers, literary agents, and cultural critics who "wielded enough authority to dictate the critical and commercial conditions" for Black art. This expectation is visible, for example, in the demand for

verisimilitude in antebellum slave narratives. As Jarrett writes, the expectation that Black artists produce realist art about their experiences with racism "presumes and promotes an 'authentic' version of ethnic literature, in which literary representations of ethnicity must correlate with the ethnicity of their author(s). The cost of defying the essentialist paradigms of ethnic authenticity and realism, or the belief that these qualities are essential or required, is marginality or exclusion in the academic and cultural marketplaces" (5). Rather than opening doors for Black creators, or presenting an unmediated truth about anti-Black racism capable of stopping oppression in its tracks, this pressure has served to limit the opportunities available to Black artists, curtailing the subject matter considered appropriate for Black creators to make art about, and furthering the belief that Black experience is only Black pain.

In debates about Schutz's painting, the focus on abstraction provides an interesting insight into the philosophy undergirding critiques of Schutz: the belief that realism might provide unmediated access to the truth and, thus, that Mobley's actions in publicizing her son's death need no explaining or contextualizing; when a Black person speaks of their experiences, these experiences speak to an essential truth of Black experience that needs no interpretation. In their article for *The New Republic*, "The Case Against Dana Schutz," Josephine Livingstone and Lovia Gyarkye open with the question many posed but few directly asked: "Is Dana Schutz allowed to paint Emmett Till in his coffin?" The authors turn to the oft-repeated realism versus abstraction framing:

> In her painting, Schutz has smeared Till's face and made it unrecognizable, again. The streaks of paint crossing the canvas read like an aggressive rejoinder to Mamie Till Mobley's insistence that he be photographed. Mobley wanted those

> photographs to bear witness to the racist brutality inflicted on her son; instead, Schutz has disrespected that act of dignity, by defacing them with her own creative way of seeing . . . Where the photographs stood for a plain and universal photographic truth, Schutz has blurred the reality of Till's death, infusing it with subjectivity.

What does it mean to say that the photographs present "a plain and universal photographic truth"? Truth of what, and for whom? Indeed, despite Livingstone and Gyarkye's assertion that the photograph offers a "universal truth," they actually seem to be advocating for the opposite—for a non-universal, exclusively Black response to the photograph, by arguing that Schutz crossed a line in "infusing it with [her own] subjectivity." While championing the "universal" truths of Mobley's photographs, Livingstone and Gyarkye seem concerned that Schutz inappropriately attempts to universalize Till's experience, rather than seeing it as specific and thus unavailable as a subject for her art. This tension suggests that the debate is not about realism versus abstraction but about whether the creator has the correct identity to engage with the subject matter. If the photograph were, in fact, capable of imparting a universal truth, then the responses of every individual who looked at Till's corpse would be the same and there would be no room for artistic interpretation. However, history—and the decision of the white, mainstream press not to print the photographs when *Jet Magazine* did—suggests that despite one's best intentions, it is not possible to control how things will be received, nor is it possible to strictly curtail the spread of information such that it is only available to Black viewers or those deemed to have the proper identity or sensibilities. Sharpe, too, claims that "white supremacy, violent abduction, and murder" are all plainly visible on the surface of Emmett Till's funeral photos and

that an audience needs nothing more than the photos themselves to identify these critical issues. However, all that "goes without saying" is that a horrifically mutilated boy lies in his casket as a woman openly grieves him. Not even Mobley's maternal relationship to Till is visible without mediating context.

In my view, Livingstone and Gyarkye's argument makes a monolith of Black expression and Black culture. In their article, Livingstone and Gyarkye leave their readers with one final plea: "When Hannah Black and her co-signers call for the destruction of this painting, try not to interpret them as book-burners doing the work of censorship. Instead, hear their open letter as a call for silence inside a church. How will you hear the dead boy's voice, if you keep speaking over him?" This argument echoes an earlier line in which Livingstone and Gyarkye refer to Schutz's painting as demonstrating "not only a tone-deafness toward the history of [Till's] murder, but an ignorance of the history of white women's speech in that murder—the way it canceled out Till's own expression, with lethal intent." I highlight these passages because of their assumption that Emmett Till could somehow speak for himself. Despite the acknowledgement that Till's "own expression" was "canceled out," Livingstone and Gyarkye insist that Till's voice can be heard in death. But the very conditions that call for silence inside the church expose the lie that Till can speak at all. If Till could speak for himself, there would be no photographs of his corpse, no mutilated body, no horrific lynching, no pain suffered by a child from Chicago, no grieving mother crying hysterically over her son's open casket, no life stripped of its future, no white supremacist jury finding two murderers not guilty in hardly the time it takes to make a sandwich.

Livingstone and Gyarkye, Sharpe, and Black are able to condemn Schutz's choice to depict Till's funeral using expressionist painting techniques by positioning Mobley's response as the singularly appropriate response to Till's death, which they do by suggesting that Mobley and Till speak as one. Why is it more palatable to assume that Mobley speaks as Till, to collapse distinctions between a dead teenage boy and his grieving mother, to obliterate their individuality so that their experiences, lives, and upbringings make them the same than to accept Schutz's maternal identification with Mobley?

If Mobley speaks as Till, if their voices are inseparable from one another, then not only are Mobley's actions beyond reproach but they are also the only possible ethical response to a young Black boy's murder at the hands of white supremacists. In turn, this logic allows Schutz's critics to take her to task for violating Mobley's supposed mandate—implicitly issued while acting as Till's surrogate—that all representations of Till's death be realist. But this logic comes with a cost: inherent in critics' desire to conflate Mobley and Till's different perspectives is an unwillingness to acknowledge how Mobley purposefully manipulated the narrative of Till's death, which in turn depoliticizes her actions. In the scenario presumed by Schutz's critics, Mobley is taking the path of least resistance and is simply doing what her son would have wanted, instead of making a tremendous personal sacrifice, exposing herself and her intimate pain to public scrutiny, and choosing an agentive position in the struggle for civil rights. An appeal to Mobley, to what Till would have wanted, is ultimately a false appeal to authority. Appealing to Mobley allows Sharpe, Black, Livingstone, and Gyarkye, among others, to foreclose argument because a higher authority—in this case, a dead boy's mother and the dead boy himself, who speak as one—would allegedly deem the painting inappropriate. The specter of

Emmett Till, now resurrected to preside over this debate, makes it near impossible to brook disagreement with the calls for *Open Casket*'s destruction. I am arguing, however, that it's not enough to say that Mobley or Till wouldn't have wanted any white women to engage with the visual representations of Till's death. We can't know what Till would have wanted, and Mobley herself is the first to narrativize, to interpret the significance of Till's death for the public, to give the public access to read about, listen, see, and interpret her son's death. Such engagement is difficult to limit along a narrow classification like race; indeed, Mobley herself hoped to cast as wide a net as possible in publicizing her son's death, and she identified as a woman and as a mother, not just as a Black person.

In 1955, Mobley successfully drew her culture's attention to her son's death; the photographs reverberated across racial lines and had a much greater reach than *Jet's* typical readership. Nonetheless, Mobley's photographs cannot speak today the same way they did at the time of their publication. Photographs, videos, and live-streams of state-sanctioned violence against Black people permeate our contemporary cultural moment, and each subsequent viewing of Till's funeral photos hits a little differently from the first because they are circulated in a slightly different context and mediated by different cultural factors each time. With *Open Casket*, Schutz draws the national attention back to Till and shifts the conversation; her representation speaks in a different register from Mobley's authorized photographs, expanding the conversation about how individuals should engage with racism from positions of privilege, and posing new questions about coalitional identifications, audience, realism, abstraction, truth, and mediation.

The case of Dana Schutz and *Open Casket*, and the related discussion about Mamie Till Mobley's handling of her son's death, raise important questions about the identities of creators,

political actors, and audiences and the impact these identities have on the content and reception of a given work. In asking what beliefs undergird the claims that Schutz never should have produced *Open Casket* because she is a white woman, and what can be learned from the moments when these beliefs break down, I hope to challenge the belief that an artist in possession of the "correct" identity can ensure that the audience will respond in a particular desired way, no matter who they are. Put another way, I hope to challenge the persistent narrative that having a particular identity—in this case, Blackness—is a necessary and sufficient condition for producing anti-racist work and for viewing instances of Black pain with the appropriate level of understanding and empathy. If a Black artist had produced *Open Casket*, then critics might have felt more assured that her intentions in creating the piece were free of racism and that viewers witnessing the new piece would have the correct, anti-racist response to the depiction of Black suffering, given the work's provenance. Such beliefs are hardly limited to conversations about art; they come up in conversations about topics as widespread as young adult novel authorship and students' participation in classroom discussions (Woodson). But when racial difference is present as a mediating factor, other intersectional elements, such as gender, ability, sexuality, age, and nationalism tend to drop out of the conversation and cede to race as the defining element of identification, even though it is not clear that empathic imagination requires any criteria of demographic sameness at all.

During the same 2017 Whitney Biennial that featured *Open Casket*, the relative lack of response to Black artist Henry Taylor's non-realist depiction of Philando Castile's death, *THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH* (Figure 2, below), illustrates how race tends to obscure other intersectional identity factors when evaluating a creator's intentions.

Critics referred to Taylor's work as "groundbreaking," "open—a direct delivery system for the message," and "less gratuitous and more successful than ["Open Casket"]" (Sargent; Samet; Vartanian). Like Schutz, Taylor paints in a gestural style, with bright colors, expressionistic lines, drips of paint, and various other choices that make up an artistic reimagining of a historical occurrence. Taylor's painting is based on the video streamed to Facebook Live by Diamond Reynolds, Castile's girlfriend who was in the car when police officer Jeronimo Yanez fatally shot Castile (Saslow). Structurally, Mobley and Reynolds occupy quite similar positions, as both women chose to politicize the deaths of their loved ones at the hands of racist men. Schutz and Taylor also occupy similar positions, having chosen to create non-realist representations of Black death based on video-photographic evidence of a murder. Although Schutz's critics claim that she has not been "gifted with any particular sense of history" because she uses expressionist methods to represent a murder for which a photographic index exists, the overwhelmingly positive response to Taylor's choice to do the same suggests that a larger factor at play in the condemnation of Schutz's painting is her identity as a white woman.



Figure 2. Taylor, Henry. *THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH.* Whitney Museum of American Art, 2017.

I want to be clear that I do not believe Schutz's whiteness has cost her opportunities; on the contrary, her race has surely benefitted her most days of her life, in ways large and small. But if the goal of anti-racism is eradicating systemic and interpersonal race-based injustice, then our movements must do more than maintain hierarchies that cast people out based solely on identity. It may be the case that subtle differences between Schutz's and Taylor's respective styles make it clear that Taylor is a master where Schutz is a mere pretender to greatness; the finer points of their styles escape me. But I approach each of their works—and each of the works in this chapter—as a live object that impinges on narratives, activists, movements, and individuals. It is not my aim to take on the role of art historian or even art critic but instead to make apparent the lives these works have lived since their creation and dissemination and to trace their circulation in significant public conversations about racial justice.

In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to the example of Kara Walker to analyze how some of the tenets of standpoint theory similarly infuse reactions to Walker's art. I argue that many of these reactions ultimately reinforce essentialized notions of identity, leading to shallow understandings of how race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability structure social relations. I conclude that we need, instead, rich, intersectional, and situated knowledges to communicate and organize effectively across lines of difference.

The Limits of Standpoint Theory: When Having the "Right" Identity Doesn't Guarantee the "Right" Kind of Art

In 2013, Creative Time approached Kara Walker about collaborating on a public art installation to mark the closing of the Domino Sugar Refinery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Creative Time is a New York-based arts organization that focuses on site-specific public art exhibitions, with particular interest in vacant spaces that were once of some historical import. By 2014, the Domino Sugar Refinery had been abandoned for several years, and its demolition was scheduled for later that summer. Walker's artwork would provide one last opportunity for New York's residents, and those visiting the exhibit, to remember the history of the space before the former Domino Sugar factory was turned into a mixed-use development of condominiums and retail space, a demolition that would obscure the intricate history of race, labor, and capital that has haunted the sugar trade since its inception. Walker agreed to the collaboration, and in 2014, she produced *A Subtlety*, a massive sphinx-like sculpture that also bore resemblance to stereotypical "mammy" figures. Those familiar with Walker's work may be unsurprised to learn that *A Subtlety* received mixed reactions from its audience. Nonetheless, *A Subtlety* was

massively popular, drawing crowds by the thousands and attracting 130,554 visitors over the two-month span that the exhibit remained open.



Figure 3. Walker, Kara. *A Subtlety*. Photograph by Andrew Burton, Getty Images.

A Subtlety (Figure 3, above) was Walker's first fully public art work. Her sphinx, bearing one of her signature overwrought titles, was named in full "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant." 75 feet long and 35 feet tall, the sphinx was constructed using styrofoam, with a thick layer of sugar (donated by the Domino Sugar Company) serving as the outermost layer. In all, Walker used 162,000 pounds of sugar on the sphinx. In addition to the "sugar baby," Walker confected fifteen small-scale attendants to stand before her sphinx and guide the viewer from the entrance to the magnificent sculpture. These attendants were based on racist children's toys shaped like pickaninnies Walker saw—and purchased—on Internet-retailer Amazon's website (Sokol). Unlike the sphinx, which she created using white sugar, Walker

confected the sphinx's attendants out of unrefined, brown sugar, adding to the mimetic likeness between the statues and the toys on which they were based. Additionally, given that the attendants did not have a styrofoam core like the sphinx did, they were more prone to environmental damage; over the hot New York summer, the attendants melted, deformed, cracked, and puddled on the floor of the Domino Sugar factory.

In partnership with Creative Time, Walker also created a digital exhibition of the Sugar Baby, featuring user-generated content and images of the massive artwork. Throughout the exhibit space, audience members were encouraged to take photos of the sphinx and of their experiences of viewing the exhibit, with signs urging them to post their photos on various social media platforms using the hashtag #karawalkerdomino. Images featuring the hashtag and posted to sites such as Instagram would be uploaded to Creative Time's "Digital Sugar Baby," a website featuring a 3D model rendition of the sphinx created out of the audience's images from the exhibit. Thus, visitors to the website were able to get not only a 360-degree view of Walker's sculpture (Figure 4, below) but also zoom in on particular parts of the sphinx's body in order to see audience-generated photographs that roughly correlated with that body part (Figure 5, below). Walker and Creative Time also produced a curatorial statement and partnered with other artists and authors in order to create an entire digital exhibit, featuring historical context about sugar refining and other artworks, such as poems by Edwidge Danticat and Tracy K. Smith and a series of historical photos of sugar cane plantation workers in Jamaica. Given the controversial nature of the work, Walker's history of soliciting vocal reactions from her audience, and the prompts by Walker and Creative Time to digitally engage with *A Subtlety*, thousands of visitors, scholars, and commentators posted blog entries and thinkpieces dedicated to interpreting

everything from the meaning of *A Subtlety* to the insouciance and/or outright racism present in the audience on the day of the author's visit.

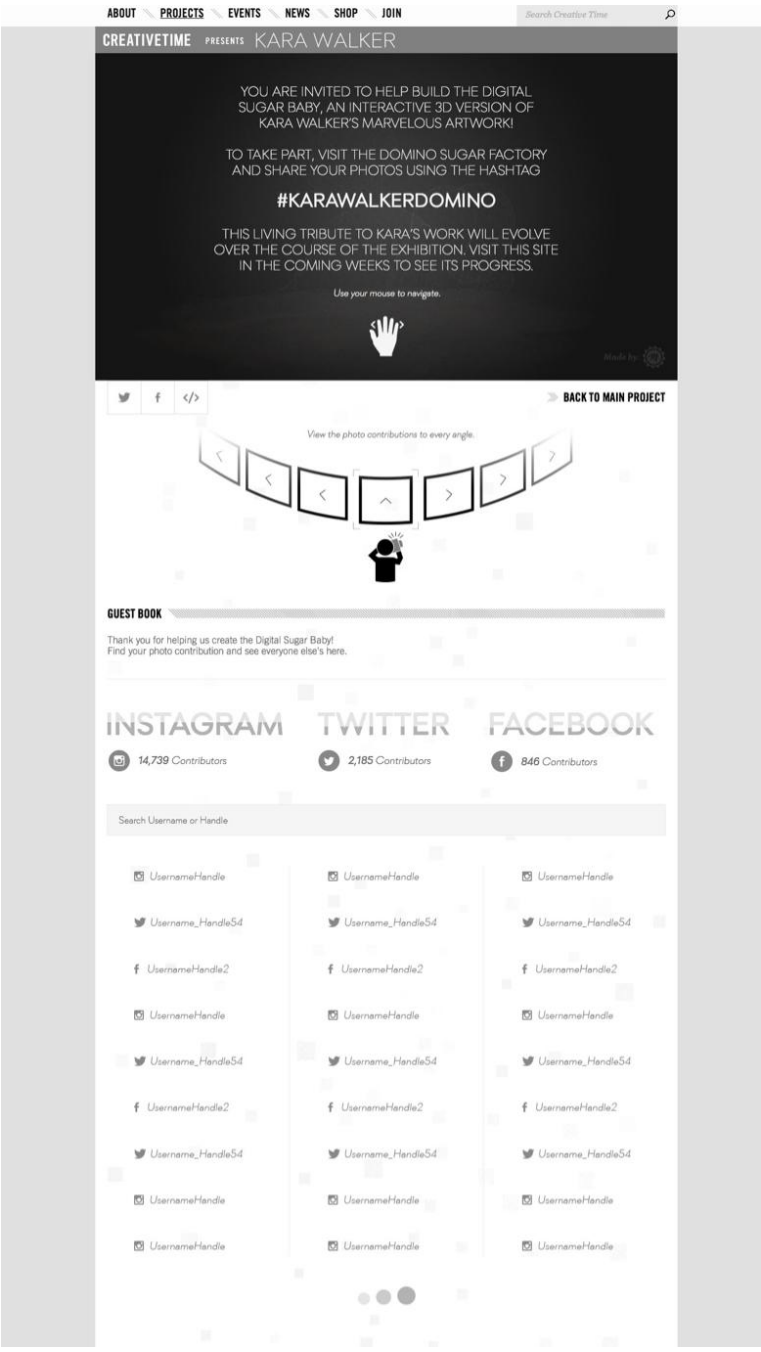


Figure 4. Screenshot of Creative Time website inviting participants to create a Digital Sugar Baby by taking photographs of the exhibit; posting the image on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook; and using the hashtag #KARAWALKERDOMINO. Photograph from *Behance*.

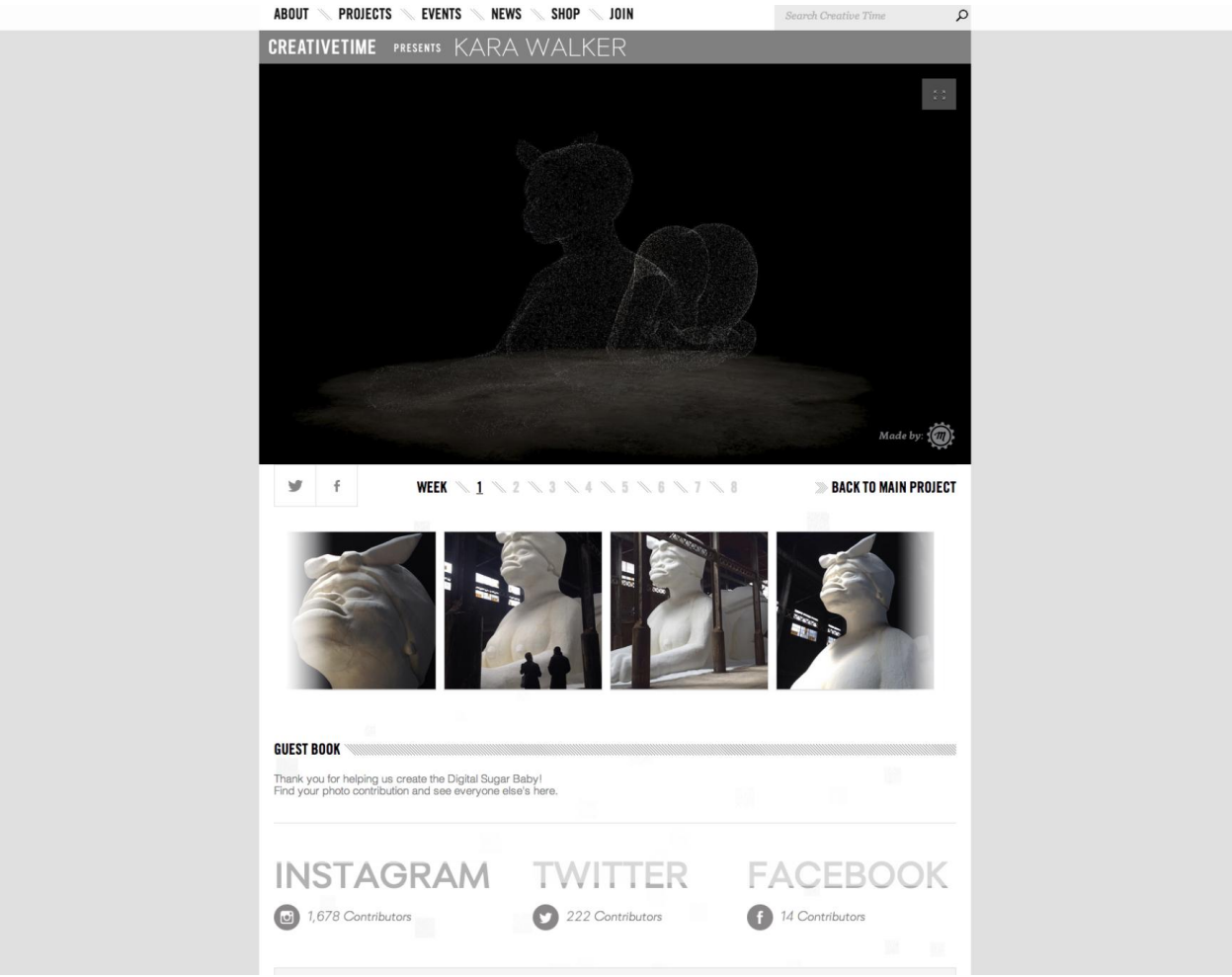


Figure 5. Example of visitor-submitted photographs of the Sugar Baby displayed when the website user highlights the sphinx's head region on the 3D model. Photograph from *Behance*.

This level of engagement with Walker's work is unsurprising given that Walker is one of the most well-recognized contemporary African American artists and a recipient of numerous awards. Walker's success began at a relatively early age, and her youth, along with her irreverent attitude toward her difficult subject matter, often made her a target of the more conservative factions of the Black art establishment (Pindell). In particular, Walker came under fire when she was granted a MacArthur Genius Award at age 27, becoming the second-youngest individual ever to receive a MacArthur fellowship, and the award was so controversial that petitions

circulated requesting that the MacArthur foundation rescind her fellowship (McKeon). Before the Sugar Baby, Walker's art was similar in tone but quite different in form. Walker is perhaps best known for her series of silhouettes, in which she inserts silhouettes of often-caricatured enslaved people into historical scenes, such as the *Harper's Magazine Pictorial History of the Civil War*. All Black, life-sized, and often placed against stark white backgrounds, Walker's silhouettes "annotate" the historical record.

Walker's critics, such as artists Howardena Pindell and Bettye Saar, fault her along two main lines. First, they argue that creating such work is irresponsible because white viewers may have their racist beliefs confirmed by Walker's art. Second, they argue that Walker is too fond of taboo subjects, like sex between masters and enslaved people, piss and shit, and infanticide; she reduces Black life to two-dimensional stereotypes, promoting racist beliefs about Black inferiority and sexual deviance (Pindell). Pindell, in particular, has been involved in criticisms of Walker that include petitions, open letters, critical books, and an entire blog called "karawalker-no-yes" where visitors were encouraged to share their true feelings about Walker and comment on her representations of race. Pindell's characterization of the art world is bifurcated along white-Black racial lines, and she argues that anyone who criticizes Walker meets a "hostile climate attempting to silence all those who question the manic intensity of the positive criticism of Kara Walker." With the help of publisher Cynthia Navaretta of Midmarch Arts Press, Pindell also explains that she established "a vital grapevine" through which people were contacting her "to vent their outrage at what appeared to be a manipulated effort to force a type of work, which humiliated the African American community, down our collective throats,

mocking any efforts for positive change" (Pindell). In Pindell's conception, art is either humiliating to the Black community or dedicated to fostering "positive" progress.

Of course, no artist's work is beyond reproach. My interest in introducing Walker's critics is not to refute or dismiss them, but instead to highlight how appeals to an essentialized conception of racial standpoint underwrite criticism of Walker. Narrowing in on what she finds so distressing about Walker's work, Pindell writes:

> To have a person of color give you those [stereotyped] images as if to say they agree with your imprinted gaze makes the work hypnotically enticing for whites. One is off the hook. No need to worry about racism (or remedies). This person of color appears to agree with the restricted gaze and the total lack of empathy taught by one's parents and enforced by white society at large and the media. (Pindell)

Though Walker's work can be said to comment on many different oppressions, her critics focus narrowly on race, assuming that Walker must mean to communicate about race first and second (or third, or fourth) about class, gender, or sexuality. Within this framework, race-based identifications are the most salient, and Blacks and whites possess diametrically opposed standpoints; there is no room for the various ways that one's embodiment, life, upbringing, and individual critical agency might mediate one's relationship to dominant structures of power. Furthermore, this framework suggests that white people who look at, and enjoy, Walker's art have suspect motives, want to have their racist beliefs confirmed, and respond uncritically to Walker's work. From my perspective, Pindell's stance is not only ungenerous to Walker but also to other "unruly" Black artists and white viewers, both of whom are caricatured as "helpless before [their] racial condition" (Ellison 137). The logics of standpoint theory undergird Pindell's

position: in arguing that white viewers are "hypnotically entic[ed]" by Walker's art because Walker serves as a co-signatory to their racist beliefs, Pindell suggests that even racists hope to find Black people to underwrite their specious claims. Standpoint theory has instantiated the expectation that one trot out an in-group member as evidence and as a representative of the race in order to make comments across racial lines, all but inviting stereotyping.

The continuing influence of standpoint theory is also evident in the fact that Walker's defenders frequently interpret her work through an essentialized conception of Black identity. In *The Indypendent magazine*, Nicholas Powers, professor of English at SUNY Old Westbury, expresses admiration for Walker's talent but also suggests that Black creators should assume responsibility for how their work might be interpreted by a white audience. Similarly, writing for Gawker, African American author Stephanye Watts records her responses to *A Subtlety* in "The Audacity of No Chill: Kara Walker in the Instagram Capital." Watts herself was in awe of Walker's work but horrified at the behavior of some of her fellow exhibit visitors. In the section that follows, I engage with Watts's and Powers's articles at length; after extensive research into responses to *A Subtlety*, I have found that Watt's article is typical of anti-racist reactions to Walker's work and is also taken up in numerous blog posts and popular media articles that respond to *A Subtlety*, with bloggers citing it as a must-read for those interested in understanding why the pilgrimage to view *A Subtlety* turned out to be a negative experience for many Black viewers (christineholland; Herman; Iverson). Watts ultimately proposes that the solution is to ensure that only certain people are allowed to look at Walker's art. I contend that this viewpoint comes from an oversimplified understanding of standpoint theory that circulates in popular

discourse today, forming a monolithic conception of Blackness based in the hope that artists will be able to control how their viewers will respond.

In "The Audacity of No Chill," Watts is centrally concerned with tracking two facets of the "Sugar Baby" experience: looking at Walker's sculpture itself and watching others look at Walker's work. Watts writes, "I knew going into this that the Black people in attendance would be in a completely different headspace than the non-Blacks. This show was telling an American story, but using our face." The "American story" Watts perceives in the exhibit is one in which the Sugar Baby represents an empowering, and entirely unironic, take on a long history of disempowering and subjugating Black women. Watts explicitly writes from her standpoint as a Black woman, and her positionality expressly shapes what she sees and how she analyzes what she is seeing; in addition, Watts generalizes her experience to other Black audience members. Within this framing, the differences between white and Black individuals is already insurmountable; Watts seems to concede to the troubling narrative that the experiences of Black individuals fall outside of the "American story"—as if a Black face cannot be the face of an American story, and as if all Black individuals have the same relationship to American history and identity. Watts also demonstrates how even within a self-proclaimed intersectional framework, race—and a narrow, white-Black racial framework—becomes the most salient identity factor, overriding different avenues for connection with others. About preparing to visit the exhibit, Watts writes: "I assumed the Domino Sugar Factory would smell like sweat and underpaid labor, so I was ready to whip out a SARS mask." The flippant response about the smell of "sweat and underpaid labor," which Watts proposes to mitigate with a respirator mask, an item that bears strong associations with anti-Asian bias, suggests that viewers should

prioritize their own comfort rather than engaging with intersectional identity factors, such as class, that might complicate, or make more uncomfortable, how we interact with oppressive institutions. In this sense, Watts's reaction is not unlike the disrespectful selfies posted by uncomfortable white viewers in front of the sugar baby.

Several of Walker's critics expressed concern about the number of non-Black visitors *A Subtlety* received and especially how a white-majority crowd negatively affected the viewing experience for Black visitors. Wondering why "so many white people" visited Walker's exhibit, Watts writes, "I couldn't help but wonder. Where did their interest lie? How were they explaining these sculptures to their children? . . . Hell, how were they explaining it to themselves? Is stopping by Domino just the current 'it' thing to do in NYC? Were they leaving with a better understanding of the existence of Black people in this country?" Here, Watts further emphasizes her belief that only individuals of oppressed classes should engage with art about oppression. Similarly to Pindell, Watts suggests that white viewers have suspect motives in their choice to attend the exhibit and that the exhibit should explain "the existence of Black people."

Powers espouses a similar viewpoint when he writes, "[*A Subtlety*] received glowing reviews on NPR's *All Things Considered* and the *New York Times.* I was curious but also felt a low alarm going off in the back of my head. In early June, I went to the exhibit. The anxiety increased when I saw the factory—in line, nearly everyone was white. The alarm rang louder." Powers suggests that any interest white viewers have in Black art must be predatory; it cannot be an interest in a shared history and a shared legacy of chattel slavery (the effects of which are borne unequally by white and Black communities).

The historical lens adopted by both Watts and Powers prevents simultaneous analysis of both white and Black power dynamics. In my view, a preferable framework would conceive of white and Black racial relations not as diametrically opposed but, rather, as inextricably entangled. Through such a framework, white interest in *A Subtlety* might be explained by the suggestion that the exhibit is meant to comment not only on Black victimization but also on the creation and perpetuation of the structures of victimization by the dominant white power establishment. Studying the inextricable intertwining of white and Black Americans' experiences is a valuable interpretive frame for understanding the complicated legacy of American race relations.

In this spirit, I turn toward Stephanye Watts's powerful response to visiting Walker's *A Subtlety* to illustrate how the experiences of white and Black visitors are linked and provide a window into the contemporary circulating logics of race relations. Feeling demoralized by her experience at the exhibit, Watts explains that she is:

> feeling super protective of Black artists. I want to put my performance artist hat on and shroud every piece of Black work in the world with a drape and a sign, reading 'For mature and reverent eyes only. Disrespect will not be tolerated.' As a people, we are discounted, ignored, and mistreated on a daily basis in this country. Can we at least protect that which holds our stories and our legacy or are we left powerless like our forefathers when massa was yelling for our mama's sweet lips and sugar tits? Oh.

Watts's approach is emotionally affecting and has real strengths in its ability to capture the visceral experiences involved in her trip to the exhibit, and I understand that Watts is emotionally

invested in Walker's reception and in responses to the Sugar Baby. For Watts, and others who expressed similar opinions, disrespect of the sphinx is disrespect of Black women's bodies, which have borne a disproportionate level of labor, pain, subjugation, scrutiny, and discipline for centuries. Watts conveys this investment effectively, through her description of her tears, screams, and willingness to engage in corrective behavior with patrons she perceives as dismissive or disrespectful. She also effectively links the sexualizing behavior of slave owners to the comments made by some of the exhibit's visitors, when she cites the catcalls for "sweet lips and sugar tits." Oppression is passed down, and the sexualization of Black women remains a salient circulating logic for understanding Black art and representations of Black women, as demonstrated by Walker's exhibit and by Watts's and Powers's interpretations of it.

At the same time, due to an oversimplified conception of standpoint theory and the kinds of claims it is possible to make from such a position, Watts is left with a framework that would exclude the artist herself from characterization as a proper Black subject. If Black art were to be covered and limited to "mature and reverent eyes only," then Walker herself would not be allowed to visit her own artwork because irreverence infuses every aspect of *A Subtlety*, from its recreation of racist Black toys to the 10-foot sugar vulva. Yet, through Watts's framework, "irreverence" falls outside of the realm of acceptable responses to oppression. Consequently, only Black individuals with an easily identifiable, oppositional relationship to dominant-white establishments are interpellated as good Black subjects. Despite Watts's defense of Walker, she effectively casts Walker out for her unruliness, similar to how Pindell's characterization of Walker excludes her from consideration as engaged in anti-racist art. Yet, because Watts and

Pindell assume that having a particular identity maps onto having the correct response to art and to oppression, Walker's irreverence is not legible through their framings.

Planning to make a final trip to the exhibit, Watts explains:

> I'm heading back to Domino this Friday as soon as it opens to hopefully have some time alone with 'A Subtlety.' I want to be able to love on her without any distraction. By July 8th, she will be apart [sic] of our memory's museum, but we are left with the knowledge that the woman she represents loved us. They prayed for us more than they prayed for themselves. They endured subjugation and hard labor knowing it would birth opportunity for us. We are the fruits of an unshaken tree that have no other option besides excellence. As I've said before, only white people can change white people. I hope that some of the offenders have an awakening on their own or via another viewer, but it's not my job to do it for them. (Watts)

According to Watts's understanding, Walker's sphinx is meant to represent a specific kind of woman who actually existed historically. Watts suggests that this historical woman is subjugated, pious, self-less, giving, hard-working, fertile, motherly, and focused entirely on future generations. Her view leaves no room for the actual historical women whose complex identities and locations fail to live up to all of these traits, no room for the women who willfully eschew them, and no room for the interpretation that Walker means to expose the various ways in which white representations of Black women have created a caricatured cartoon of a woman who is sexually available, submissive, and larger-than-life. Watts approaches *A Subtlety* as documentary, as unmediated fact rather than as an interpretation. Like the age-old debate, Watts paints Walker

as “helpless before [her] racial condition” and understands the piece as proper protest art, rather than as the much more complicated, layered commentary Walker seems to have intended. As Walker herself says, “I think that's what I'm always battling against with my work – part of me wants to resist the pull to be doing what's expected of me as a Black artist” (Barnett).

Watts also concludes that she “hope[s] that some of the offenders have an awakening on their own or via another viewer,” but she also notes that it’s “not [her] job to do it for them” (Watts). Here, Watts exemplifies the tension between wanting ignorant viewers to become educated, believing that individuals who have experienced racism are best positioned to be those educators, and reasonably not wanting to take responsibility for that education.

Both Watts’s and Powers’s frameworks suggest that an artist’s only options are total control of viewership or total powerlessness, when neither, of course, is accurate. After attending Walker’s exhibit several times, including visits to watch white viewers react to the piece, Powers returned with the “We Are Here” group. “We Are Here” was a group of Black women in the New York art scene who organized Black participants, wearing all white, to visit *A Subtlety* on a given day, in an effort to create a majority-Black space. Nadia Williams, one of the organizers, said that her interest in organizing “We Are Here” was “to have people of color fill the space in order to experience the artwork and engage in a dialogue that feels safe, healthy and productive. I’d like there to be a range of people, including audiences who wouldn’t normally go to a museum or a gallery. This moment is for us” (qtd. in Goodman). Williams’s response to *A Subtlety* fits the common pattern of drawing an us-them distinction between Black and white viewers of the piece; in addition, like Watts, Williams expresses the belief that a majority Black space would necessarily be one in which “safe, healthy, and productive” dialogue occurs as a

matter of course because racial identification outweighs all other interpersonal differences. The very existence of "We Are Here" suggests how deeply many African American viewers felt the pain of watching people interact in irreverent and disrespectful ways toward the Sugar Baby.

It is while visiting the exhibit with the "We Are Here" group that Powers loses his patience with white viewers and yells, "You are recreating the very racism this art is supposed to critique. Powers later claimed, "It wasn't my rage, it was our rage," implying that his experience of anger and rage was shared by all Black viewers that day, despite not necessarily knowing how anyone else felt. While he wasn't officially part of the We Are Here contingent, Powers explains:

> I was part of the collective mind . . . Again, we were seeing the sculptures from a historical vision, one that our lives are rooted in . . . I yelled that this was our history and that many of us were angry and sad that it was a site of pornographic jokes . . . It felt great to confront the 'white gaze,' the entitled buffoonery of the visitors. But why did we have to? Why did the organizers of We Are Here even have to do that work? Wasn't the job of Walker or at least of Creative Time's staff to curate a racially charged artwork? Yes, Walker has the freedom to express herself. Yes, Creative Time has the freedom to organize it. But what do you expect will happen if you put a giant sculpture of a nice Black woman, as a Mammy no less, in a public space? People are going to bring prejudices and racial entitlement into the space. Duh. Instead of challenging the racial power dynamics of white supremacy, Walker and Creative Time, in their naivety or arrogance, I don't know which, simply made the Domino Sugar Factory a safe place for it. Thanks for nothing, Ms. Walker! Days later, the We Are Here protest and my

> angry talk-back made a few articles, but the sad thing is that thousands of visitors are still seeing a sculpture that symbolizes the history of racial violence with no guidelines on how to interpret it.

Powers's reference to a "collective mind" and a "historical vision" underscore that he makes his claims from a Black standpoint—a position he theorizes as "rooted" in "our history," a history separate from white history. From this essentialist standpoint, differences among Black individuals are effaced in favor of a collective identity that assumes all Black individuals are similarly positioned with regards to dominant power structures. Because this standpoint cannot account for perspectival differences among Black individuals, Powers characterizes Walker as either naive or arrogant—she does not fit the monolithic standpoint. It is easy to understand why Powers, and others operating under similar frameworks, would believe that with differences effaced, proper contextualization or sufficient hand holding will lead viewers to the "correct" response to Walker's work. If there are only two orientations to power, each a mirror image of the other, then the truth about racism is easy to represent; Powers suggests that Walker should show Black individuals what it is like to be oppressed, confirm what they already know, and show white individuals what the Black experience of oppression is like, enlightening them about a perspective they are unable to see from their own positions. Indeed, Powers explains that before entering the exhibit, he was briefly encouraged that *A Subtlety* seemed to be properly contextualized. He noted that the full title of the piece is written on the side of the building, where visitors can hardly miss it, and that the title is itself a critique of the racism imbricated in the sugar industry and propagated at the very site of the exhibit. He also noted that informative news videos, reviews, and the accompanying "Digital Sugar Baby" all provide historical context

for Walker's work, which might help viewers to "actually see the painful history it represented." When he subsequently encountered viewers acting inappropriately, he doubled down on his insistence that creators are capable of possessing total control of viewers, implying that it was Walker and/or Creative Time's responsibility to "curate a racially charged artwork" such that a "safe place" is created. Like Watts, Powers ultimately suggests that the solution is to ensure only mature, reverent, and Black eyes are able to view *A Subtlety*.

Similarly, Watts argues that all anti-racist work by Black artists is wasted on whites and is appropriate only for victims of racism. If "only white people can change white people," then all Black art that seeks to build cross-racial coalitions, appealing to a shared humanity or shared experiences of marginalization along lines of gender, class, or sexuality, is useless. Through this framework, however, such works of art would speak to a much smaller audience than the author intended and be put to a much more narrow use than creators themselves might want. Indeed, Walker knowingly created a free, public art exhibition in a public space with a public arts organization; to suggest that she doesn't mean for her work to speak to anyone who might choose to enter the Domino Sugar Factory is to patronizingly protect Walker from a confrontation she is seemingly unafraid to have. Watts's perspective also raises the question of whether Walker could offer anything to a Black audience at all. Within Watts's framework, in which she presents Black identity as the same across all identity positions, then all audience members would already know what Walker was going to say, what she meant by it, and how it relates to a shared, universal history. I would argue that a more nuanced approach that appeals to a more individual, localized perspective would allow us to see that Walker, creating from a different perspective than anyone else is capable of producing from, has something to offer even

the Black members of her audience, including reflections on topics like racism and its history. Walker's irreverence might offer her Black viewers a way to think about racism in ways that deny white oppressors the ability to set the terms of the debate or allow for small moments of resistance and pleasure in otherwise dehumanizing circumstances.

Finally, Watts ignores the creator's desires, and their own self-characterizations, in championing a more easily assimilable, oppositional Black identity. Her perspective obfuscates Black artists who willingly take on educating white people, who do not believe that "offenders [will] have an awakening on their own," and it ignores the common plea to listen to what marginalized people have to say. Indeed, Watts paradoxically challenges the foundational premise of standpoint theory: if only white people can change white people, then standpoint theory cannot fulfill its purpose of opening up possibilities for learning about oppression and domination from the experiences of people in the oppressed classes. I am not arguing that all marginalized people should be asked to educate others; rather, I am arguing that we should respect the wishes, contributions, and experiences of those who, like Walker, put themselves in an educative role. After all, when Walker was asked, in an interview with PBS, "That sort of truth-telling must be exhausting. Do you ever question yourself: Why me?" she replied with a laugh, saying, "I never say, why me? I gave myself this job" (qtd. in Pindell).

Walker reasserts her own perspective in the creation of a film showcasing audience reactions to *A Subtlety.* The movie, titled *An Audience,* debuted in 2014 at the Sikkema Jenkins Gallery in New York, during "Afterword," a celebratory exhibit marking *A Subtlety*'s successful run. Unlike the very public exhibition of the Sugar Baby, Walker did not release *An Audience* publicly, except for a 5-minute trailer that circulated widely. Although Walker did not publicly

release *An Audience*, news and popular culture criticism sites like *Huffington Post*, *Gawker*, and *Vice* (which also hosted reactions to *A Subtlety*) each circulated the trailer for *An Audience* on their websites, and several outlets published Sikkema Jenkins Gallery viewers' reactions to Walker's film. One such reaction Alison Herman's article, "Kara Walker Knew People Would Take Dumb Selfies With 'A Subtlety,' and That Shouldn't Surprise Us," references both Powers's and Watts's critiques of Walker, arguing that Walker had a sense of her audience and knew they would react in a range of ways, some of them irreverent and/or inappropriate; critiques such as Powers's, which assume Walker was ignorant about how her work would be received by a broad range of viewers, are thus misdirected. Herman writes: "Appalling as some reactions to the installation were, those reactions were making Walker's point for her. The artist's awareness of that before, during, and after the exhibit's run only adds to the work's strength. All those selfies didn't detract from the impact of *A Subtlety*; they were playing right into Walker's expert hands." As Herman notes, some reactions to the Sugar Baby are inappropriate and racist. She rightly suggests that Walker, herself often irreverent and a keen critic of contemporary racial politics, would have anticipated these reactions to the sculpture, so they "play into [her] expert hands." Walker's film, which depicts audience members of all races, clearly underscores her belief that a wide swath of the Sugar Baby's audience would do strange, inappropriate, irreverent, or shocking things when confronted with the sphinx. As an artist, then, Walker is also interested not only in a racially expansive understanding of the varied reactions people would have but also in asking people to look at themselves and perhaps confront how warped all Americans are by the country's profound living legacy of racism.

Of *A Subtlety*, Claudia Rankine asks, "I sometimes wonder if Walker's intention is to redirect the Black gaze away from the pieces themselves and onto their white consumption?" Rankine poses a good question, but in both *An Audience*'s trailer and in the film as a whole, Walker seems particularly invested in demonstrating responses of Black viewers, and she all but ignores "white consumption" of the Sugar Baby. Despite white viewers' various inappropriate and amply chronicled responses to *A Subtlety*, Walker actually highlights Black viewers' irreverent reactions in the trailer for *An Audience*. Moreover, in the entire film, only two white visitors behave in ways that would have elicited reactions like those of Watts and Powers; meanwhile, the film depicts Black visitors rubbing the Sugar Baby's nipples, commenting on the foul smell of the Domino Sugar Factory, posing in mocking ways, making sexual gestures toward the sculpture's buttocks and vulva, tasting the sugar from which the sculpture is made, and generally experiencing the exhibition as a social event or tourist attraction rather than an emotionally powerful racial commentary. The camera also lingers on the signs lining the entrance to the exhibit that implore viewers to "share pictures on social media with #KARAWALKERDOMINO" because their "images will become part of the Digital Sugar Baby, a crowdsourced 3D sculpture pieced together from everyone's contributions" (*An Audience*). In an interview with Carolina Miranda from the *Los Angeles Times*, Walker herself commented on recording her audience:

> I put a giant 10-foot vagina in the world and people respond to giant 10-foot vaginas in the way that they do. It's not unexpected. Maybe I'm sick. Sometimes I get a sort of kick out of the hyper essay writing, that there's gotta be this way to sort of control human behavior. [But] human behavior is so mucky and violent

> and messed-up and inappropriate. It comes from there. It comes from responding to situations like that, and it pulls it out of an audience. I've got a lot of video footage of that [behavior]. I was spying.

With *A Subtlety*, individuals were primed, and in fact directly asked by an authorial figure, to take selfies and treat the exhibit socially, breaking traditional norms of a museum or gallery space, where loud socializing, posing, selfie-taking, and gesturing might be frowned upon. Walker asked her viewers to perform their reactions as an audience, and both the reactions to *A Subtlety* and the concurrent articles written about viewers' reactions become part of Walker's exhibit, demonstrating how artists and viewers collaborate to create the meaning of a piece of art. By turning the gaze back on the "mucky and violent and messed-up and inappropriate" responses individuals have toward her art, Walker also illuminates both the profoundly warping psychological effects of centuries of racial and gender oppression—on all involved—and also the resistance to this knowledge as a legitimate exercise of generating situated knowledge from one's experience. In creating art about these ugly responses to her work, Walker elicits forms of knowing and experiencing that are perverse, abject, warped, complex, ashamed, and shaming. While these forms of knowing may not be revelatory or liberatory in the ways that we have come to expect knowledge generated from marginalized individuals' standpoint to be, Walker reminds the audience that they are forms of knowing nonetheless, engaged and generated by victims and perpetrators alike and situated in the centuries of violent structural and interpersonal oppression that haunt American institutions and relations. Indeed, what Walker helps her reader see are the ways that structural racism and gender oppression have inexorably altered Americans' individual

psychologies and relations, asserting that these ugly places are exactly where we must be willing to go if we are going to make progress toward undoing systemic injustice.

Walker's Blackness can no more guarantee that she will produce proper protest art intent on progress than it can ensure that her viewers will react in a particular way to its display. But the standpoint logic that informs responses to Walker's work inspires hand-wringing among both critics and defenders, leaving Walker herself trapped in a dichotomy. For Pindell, and other critics like her, Walker's work is humiliating, its stereotyped images foreclose deep engagement, and Walker herself is an insufficiently reverent profiteer from Black suffering who must be cast out of respectable circles. For her critics, shunning Walker is important because the stakes seem so high: White viewers cannot be trusted to know how to look at, or engage with, Black art, and they will necessarily assume Walker means for her art to be interpreted literally, as documentary, which they will take as the excuse they've been waiting for to confirm their racist beliefs. For Watts and other defenders, Walker's work serves testimonial purposes, illustrating the horrors that Black people faced when enslaved and continue to face in the present moment; Walker herself is to be celebrated, but because her work deals with such delicate concepts, white viewers cannot be trusted to look properly at her art. For both groups, only certain people know how to look properly, and identity is circulated as the best proxy for assuring that someone knows how to look, a belief encouraged by some standpoint theorists' arguments that one can never see from another's standpoint. Both critics and defenders assume that an artist's identity and intentions can guarantee particular reactions from their audiences, and both express tremendous concern about how Walker's art will be received by a broad public of viewers, despite Walker's own work to destabilize these assumptions.

Conclusion

What Schutz and Walker and, importantly, the audience reception of works by these creators demonstrate is an intense desire to make right—to any extent that's possible—a history of wrongs, to get communication, redress, respect right the first time, and, when these things fail, to recoil from the perceived threat of injury by others unlike the self. For many, the consequences of getting it wrong feel disastrous. Respondents to each of these artists have asked for more attention to be paid to marginalized voices and to trust that marginalized people's lived experiences enable them to provide access to not-readily-available critiques of oppression. They have also sparked conversations about more equitable access to publishing channels and public platforms so that creators who have typically been left out of mainstream conversations might see their work, and the subjects they cover, more broadly recognized (Rosenfield, Woodson). In my research, I have seen people asking for stronger community norms about shunning racism, and racially marginalized people pleading with their white compatriots to take responsibility for their own educations, to shift the burden of explaining why things are hurtful off of those who are already hurt and carrying an unequal portion of the emotional and physical load.

Individuals have turned to standpoint theory to guide them through these treacherous waters. The original idea is now so widely accepted as to seem commonplace: individuals generate knowledge about their situated locations from their lives and experiences. In its simplest form, this idea is a rearticulation of empiricism that includes oppressed people's lives as fertile ground for the generation of knowledge about oppression. The move to include people's lives, and their experiences, as sites of knowledge has been important; research methods in fields such

as sociology were profoundly changed by early standpoint theorists like Patricia Hill Collins, who drew attention to Black women's unique standpoint. Standpoint theories also profoundly affected methods such as autoethnography, employed in several disciplines, as the theory helps to bolster the idea that researchers are capable of making meaningful contributions to knowledge not only from their observation of others but also from dedicated study of the fabric of their own lives. Standpoint theory is also another way to advocate for "nothing about us without us," as it reminds people that the individuals best positioned to know what communities need are the people who live and take part in those communities every day. And the reach of standpoint theory is broad; the approach weaves its way into conversations at every level, every time an individual mentions an identity category as the grounds from which they speak. As I'll explore further in the next chapter, today, these gestures are present in classroom discussions, traditional scholarship, activist conversations on sites such as Twitter, and the popular press, and they have helped to carve out conversational space for those who are most affected by the domination at hand. When marginalized people talk, those in relative positions of privilege may be more prone to listen and recognize their privilege in ways that they were previously unable to grasp.

As I have argued in this chapter, however, while standpoint has been, and will continue to be, an important tool for communication across difference, appeals to standpoint theory can hamper discussion across lines of difference. As responses to Kara Walker demonstrate, an individual's identity cannot guarantee that art with a particular message will be produced, nor that audience members will have any particular response to the creator's work. Certain iterations of standpoint flatten differences among marginalized people and instead offer essentialized

conceptions of identity that box marginalized people in, asking them to fall in line lest they be cast as unruly or somehow in bed with the white establishment.

As we continue to generate knowledge from our particular experiences, we must not lose sight of the situatedness of our knowledge and the discursiveness of all knowledge that is generated from our experiences. We should look for tools that encourage coalitional identifications, making room for differences among people of the same identity group, finding similarities while maintaining differences, and drumming up broad-based support for racial justice issues. We need to make room for more complex, intersectional, and layered forms of situated knowledge. Otherwise, both marginalized and privileged people are impoverished (though differently and unequally) by articulations of history and society that fail to account for the endlessly varied and complexly layered ways in which racial difference is constructed in particular historical moments and situations.

Chapter 3 Learning from the Other: Pedagogy, Responsibility, and the Reach of Standpoint Theory in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and Its Reception

In an interview with cultural studies scholar Lauren Berlant, poet Claudia Rankine describes her experience of visiting artist Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, her public exhibit at the Domino Sugar Factory. Rankine recounts:

> I was surrounded by people saying things like, 'I am not into the slavery thing right now' and taking selfies in front of the sculpture of the Black mammy sphinx, posing in ways to appear to be touching her breasts or cupping her buttocks. When [my friends and I] asked a group if they understood the significance and resonance of the piece, as it relates to slavery and the Black body, they told us they were immature. Good answer, and yet, my group felt injured and exhausted by the spectacle.

Rankine's experience is similar to that of the critics discussed in the previous chapter: Nicholas Powers, Stephanye Watts, the participants of "We Are Here," and many other Black viewers whose pilgrimages to the Domino Sugar Factory were marred by racist behaviors. Rankine's experience causes her to question Walker's role in preventing these kinds of reactions by viewers. "In a sense," Rankine explains, "the scandal of Walker's *A Subtlety*, to return to that, is its refusal to contextualize or educate beyond what can be seen. If you can't or won't do the math, then the space must hold your reactions too." Here, Rankine, seems to suggest that a creator should try to guide the audience, to educate them by providing sufficient context for the

work's creation, history, and structuring logics; in doing so, she positions Walker as refusing to provide any context, despite the work's lengthy title and the accompanying online exhibit. Rankine distances herself from Walker, whose Sugar Baby she characterizes as failing to provide enough context to prevent racist reactions such that it must hold space for these reactions.

Rankine's desire for an artist to provide all the context the audience needs to absorb her work is a useful lens through which to consider her own authorial choices in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, published the same year that Walker debuted the Sugar Baby. In this chapter, I trace how Rankine uses the second-person address to guide her readers, attempting to forestall undesired reactions to her work. I then discuss the underlying standpoint logics at work in *Citizen* and in the reception and circulation of the book. Rankine's standpoint as a woman of color contributes to her actual and perceived expertise about the lived experience of racism which, in turn, enables *Citizen* to provide what historian Joan Scott calls "the evidence of experience" (776). Though Scott never explicitly links the evidence of experience to standpoint theory, I put these two concepts into conversation because of standpoint theory's central claim that an individual's lived experiences are an important contributing factor to the knowledge the individual generates. I argue that Rankine wants her work to serve an educative function and that readers employ the text as such, evidenced by its popularity as a teaching text in college classrooms. Focusing on essays about the difficulty of teaching *Citizen*, I contend that relying on the evidence of experience, as standpoint theory encourages and as instructors and students sometimes struggle to do, can actually work against social justice aims. Often, when *Citizen* meets the modern classroom, an over-reliance on standpoint theory leads to an inability on the part of both instructors and students to speak back to Rankine; these classes rely on Rankine, her

thoughts and feelings, as the ultimate authority on truth. In Joan Scott's words, experience "becomes evidence for the fact of difference," rather than encouraging cultural critics and consumers to explore "how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world" (777). Within Rankine's framework, social relations become ossified; differences among Black individuals are flattened into a singular narrative, and *Citizen* comes to occupy a siloed position, as an incontrovertible testament to the contemporary American racial condition. Drawing on the experiences of various college instructors who have taught *Citizen* at both public and private universities, I contend that an over-reliance on standpoint theory sometimes allows white individuals to remove themselves from difficult conversations about race by claiming that they do not have the authority to speak about such an issue. When read in this way, I argue, *Citizen* inhibits rather than encourages engagement with the ideas and questions it presents.

Claudia Rankine's "You"

Citizen: An American Lyric is perhaps the most notable contemporary example of a work that includes addresses to the second-person. Indeed, *Citizen*'s most defining feature is its form: a central concern for both readers and critics of *Citizen* is the work's second-person address. Viewed through Rankine's implicit desire to ward off unwanted readings and reactions through sufficiently contextualizing a work for readers, the "you" can be read as a method of holding the reader—especially the white reader—by the hand, an attempt to ensure that they make all the stops along the way and arrive at Rankine's desired conclusion. The text seems to operate on the assumption that if Rankine leads her readers to the embodied stories of racism, then they will

have enough context to understand the daily, interpersonal instances of racism they encounter and participate in, the effects and harms of racism, and the ways in which relationships between victims and perpetrators of racism can obscure the systemic aspects of racism. This logic seems to be fueled by an entrenched belief, on the part of Rankine and her readers, that an individual's social location contributes to the knowledge they generate about oppression and domination; by creating knowledge from lived experiences, *Citizen* suggests, Rankine can teach readers—whom she often directly addresses as "you"—to see from the position of marginalized people.

Rankine's decision to forego the traditional lyric "I" in favor of a second-person address thus might be viewed as an attempt to dissociate the micro-stories of microaggressions from a particular, identifiable speaker. In *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, Robert Hariman and John Lucaites introduce the concept of the "individuated aggregate," which serves as a useful lens through which to view Rankine's method and project in *Citizen*. Writing about photojournalism and the subjects of iconic photojournalistic images, Hariman and Lucaites define the individuated aggregate as:

> [N]either individuals nor abstractions, neither everywoman and everyman nor specific persons with names and stories, neither unique characters nor a literary type. Such photographs leave most of personal life undisclosed, while they are as close as a photographer can get to collective behavior . . . The linguistic form of the individuated aggregate is metonymy: a reduction of a more general construct (such as "class") to a specific embodiment (such as an individual migrant worker). Such compositions have to be simultaneously personal and impersonal. They must suggest intensities of private life, but they cannot be so thoroughly

> personalized that they inhibit generalization. They depend on a thorough-going realism, but they motivate action in response to the general condition being represented rather than to the specific event of the picture. This combination of the individual impulse and social abstraction comes through an emotional response. Compassion, anger, joy, and all the rest of our emotions are activated by particulars yet are potentially boundless. Therefore, they provide precisely the means both for personal identification with the specific individual being represented and for assuming a broad field of action on the basis of that identification. (88-89)

Hariman and Lucaites identify a tension between individuation and generalization: the individuated aggregate must reduce a general concept to a specific, representative instantiation, but one not so specific that the connection to a general concept is subsumed by the particulars of the story. Hariman and Lucaites use the example of class, but in Rankine's case, the prototypical example is "race" or "racism." The individuated aggregate provides a way to think through how Rankine's use of the second-person standpoint might operate as the indirect address of a textual medium rather than as an embodied conversation between two speakers. Each of Rankine's micro-poems, particularly those in sections I, III, IV, and V, depends on "a thorough-going realism," using a specific story, often in a quotidian and common setting, to illustrate the consequences of microaggressions and daily instances of racism. The reader, then, is invited into metonymic substitution of a particular experience for the experience of an entire group.

Thinking of Rankine's explanations about the process she undertook to write the work, the comments she has made to distance herself from artists who don't share her desire to

contextualize, her question-and-answers sessions about *Citizen* at a number of universities, and the larger pedagogical apparatus that has emerged around *Citizen* (encouraged by Rankine herself), I believe the individuated aggregate is a useful way to imagine how Rankine hopes her work will act upon the reader. In writing *Citizen*, one part of Rankine's process included conducting interviews with friends and acquaintances, asking them to share stories about day-to-day instances of racism they had encountered. While some of the stories come from Rankine's own experience, many do not, and it is impossible to say which are personal to Rankine and which are stories that belong to others. Rankine's realist depictions individuate the stories: details including diagnosed illnesses, the color of a coat, particular stores, and specific tennis matches add to the reader's perception of these stories as having occurred in reality to actual people. At the same time, Rankine's choice to use the "you" pronoun aggregates the stories: experiences are deindividuated as they are stripped of the "I" pronoun, of names of speakers, and, in many cases, of genders. Thus, Rankine's "you" becomes an individuated aggregate, reducing the general construct of racism to the experiences of a specific addressee, represented in pronoun form, allowing for personalization without risking "inhibit[ing] generalization" (89). The individuated aggregate, created through the presentation of microaggression "snapshots," is the method through which Rankine prompts personal identification with the Black subjects of her micro-poems.

Rankine situates *Citizen* as an explicitly pedagogical project, meant to illustrate for her readers what "places to stand" exist in the struggle against racism (Rankine qtd. in Moore). Education is, of course, an integral tool in the creation of a national body of citizens, and throughout U.S. history, it has been a highly stratified and racialized project (Prendergast). In the

opening and closing stories of *Citizen*, Rankine brings the reader into moments of learning that highlight lessons about race and racism that Americans learn in and through daily life. In *Citizen*'s opening pages, Rankine uses a specific, individual experience to describe the process of digging into one's own past: "The route is associative: You smell good. You are twelve attending Sts. Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind you asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written" (5). With this example, Rankine sets *Citizen* in an educational space and suggests that personal experience is a site of knowledge that reflects, is shaped by, and can inform, American education practices. *Citizen*'s form (a book) and much of its content (personal experiences of racism) encapsulate the learning potential in these foundational educational elements and underscore the educative dimensions of racism itself: because we learn racism, Rankine suggests, we can unlearn it. Further, by turning to the past, Rankine in effect creates an individuated aggregate genealogy of racism made possible by learning from personal experience. The effect of the individuated aggregate, of the "you" in this anecdote, is to command the reader to action: the reader who is hailed by the "you" takes the associative route with the narrator. Similarly, *Citizen*'s final anecdote underscores the pedagogical imperative of the book. Rankine writes:

> I can hear the even breathing that creates passages to dreams. And yes, I want to interrupt to tell him her us you me I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending.
> Tell me a story, he says, wrapping his arms around me.
> Yesterday, I begin, I was waiting in the car for time to pass. A woman pulled in and started to park her car facing mine. Our eyes met and what passed passed as quickly as the look away. She backed up and parked on the other side of the lot. I could have followed her to worry my question but I had to go, I was expected on court, I grabbed my racket.
> The sunrise is slow and cloudy, dragging the light in, but barely.
> Did you win? he asks.
> It wasn't a match, I say. It was a lesson. (159)

The "I" does not know how to end what doesn't have an ending because *Citizen* does not have an ending: the conditions that make up the fabric of the book's construction do not have an ending, and Rankine's insistence that a tennis match could be "a lesson" suggests that the reader should not believe that their learning is finished as soon as they close the back cover of the book. Indeed, the "I" contrasts a "lesson," which aims to foster learning, with a "match," which aims to determine a winner and a loser, orthogonal to the project of education. Rankine "re-routes" the very American desire to see a winner and a loser—to see someone come out on top and someone below, to present exactly two places to stand—to the more complex scene of education, reminding the interlocutor (and the reader) that there are more roles than just "victim" and "perpetrator," winner and loser. Indeed, even as Rankine confirms her pedagogical aims, and the possibility of the reader having learned about the experience of racism through identification with the "you," her switch to "I" is also a reminder to the reader that identification can only ever be partial. Rankine does not end the book with a "you" address; instead, she chooses to remind the reader that "you" and "I" are separate entities, with different experiences, goals, and educations. "You" and "I" have shared the space of the book, and "I" has tried to teach "you" something, but now "you" must continue learning and begin acting without the help of "I."

Many readers respond to *Citizen* as a pedagogical text, one that intends to teach them something about racism from a racially marginalized perspective. As bestselling African American author Tayari Jones posted on *Twitter*, "You ever want to buy about a dozen copies of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and use them to hit people upside the head?" Jones's 2019 Tweet garnered 89 retweets and 758 likes and sparked numerous replies agreeing with the sentiment, with one respondent sharing that she sent out copies to people she hoped would be educated by it

(@tayari; @erikacarruth). Numerous readers also noted feeling a particularly deep connection to the narrator and a sense of identification with the experiences depicted in the microaggression poems. As KW Colyard (inaccurately) claims in her *Goodreads* review of *Citizen*, "The stories in *Citizen* are all told in the second person. Rankine's purpose, of course, is to put readers in the bodies that racism targets. Her poem strips white readers of their privilege . . . For many of us, *Citizen* will be the closest we ever get to experiencing every day [sic] racism." Colyard illustrates that some individuals feel they are asked to imagine themselves in the place of the "you," and several other comments echo this sentiment.

However, such reviews often overlook that Rankine's "you" does not have a fixed subject position throughout the text. Or perhaps, more accurately, reviews such as Colyard's demonstrate that the most powerful or impactful sections of *Citizen* are the ones that position readers as the victims of everyday racism. Indeed, as Colyard's review suggests, these sections may so powerfully affect readers that they imagine a fixed "you," where the "you" is always a Black victim of racism, despite the fact that Rankine hasn't written her book in this way. That Rankine's "you" shifts subject position often goes unrecognized. In the 300 most popular comments on *Goodreads*, in publicly posted responses for university common-reads programs, and in essays such as Evie Shockley and Roderick Ferguson's roundtable for *The LA Review of Books*, no mention is made of the "you" as speaking to/from different social positions. Thus, a large swath of readers is not learning from *Citizen* about multiple, shifting positions and identities; instead, these readers are learning about what it feels like to be the target of anti-Black racism in the contemporary United States from a narrow, particular, classed perspective that often goes unremarked as such.

The Trouble with the Evidence of Experience

In her 1991 article, "The Evidence of Experience," historian Joan Scott focuses on the drawbacks of using experiential evidence as the basis for historical claims, a framework that may be helpful for thinking through why so many of *Citizen*'s readers have become fixated on a reading that assumes a static "you." Though Scott doesn't explicitly link her concern to standpoint theory, I would argue that Scott is responding to the kinds of claims that standpoint theory authorizes and highlighting how generating knowledge from experience may affect conceptions of difference. Scott warns that using the evidence of experience encourages historians to "take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference." Scott is concerned about naturalizing difference because doing so engenders essentialist beliefs about differences between identity groups that ossify relations and close off possibilities for liberatory work, as it becomes difficult to justify how one will change what is essentially true. When "experience is taken as the origin of knowledge," Scott explains, "the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built" (777). Because "historians' rhetorical treatment of evidence and their use of it to falsify prevailing interpretations depends on a referential notion of evidence which denies that it is anything but a reflection of the real," individuals' subjective experiences come to be characterized as referential reflections of the real differences between individuals (776). Scott is further concerned about a referential notion of evidence because "when the evidence offered is the evidence of 'experience,' the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than

a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through?" (777). When a subject is appealing to what they have experienced in their own lives, then the evidence presented, and the conclusions drawn about what these experiences mean or testify to, can seem uncontestable. For Scott, scholarship that treats experiences as referential evidence and descriptions of the real world and that foregoes analyses of how experience, identity, and subjects are constructed reifies individual agency, obscuring larger, systemic power relations that importantly structure individuals' experiences. Indeed, as I quoted Scott earlier as saying, experience, when used as evidence, comes to represent the "fact of difference" rather than providing fertile ground for the exploration of how differences are constructed (777). Inspired by Scott, I want to emphasize the need to recognize that an individual's recollection of their own life experiences is not pure or uncontestable evidence; rather, it is inevitably shaped by the intersections of their identity categories and their own critical relationship to structures of power.

Though Rankine constructed *Citizen* from many voices and many different people's experiences, she translates many of these stories into a series of micro poems each addressed to a univocal "you." The "you" is organized and understood as a coherent subject solely through its experience of Black identity. Differences of gender, class, ability, illness, sexuality, profession, skin tone, and other situating factors are subsumed by experiences of racism, which testify to a singular, omnipresent anti-Black racism in contemporary America. In this case, Rankine becomes the "historian" who uses the evidence of experience to challenge prevailing notions of racial progress in America. The particular, located vision of Rankine's multiple interlocutors is condensed into one vision in a fixed, binary relationship to the reader: "you" and "I," self and other. The reader is invited to take the position of the other, a position that, as *Citizen*'s reception

demonstrates, illustrates for white and Black readers that their experiences are diametrically opposed, fixed in a relationship of perpetrator and victim across historical time. Non-Black readers of color are forgotten in the text's focus on the centrality of anti-Black racism in American culture. As this chapter will explore, such fixity explains, in part, many white students' sense that *Citizen* is not for or about them; the "you" refers to a Black subject, and as white readers, they are meant to listen without contributing, because this framework suggests that white and Black experiences are unbridgeable. Rankine's use of experience as evidence of real differences between individuals also helps to explain why students studying *Citizen* often seem reluctant to speak up and willing to place the full burden of representing an entire race on a single individual, in the form of the author. Rankine's implicit adoption of standpoint theory paints Black experience as monolithic such that a single (if composite) perspective can be viewed as representing the entirety of the race. Indeed, Citizen encourages readers to "listen metonymically," as Krista Ratcliffe might say, and substitute individual experiences for generalized knowledge about an entire group.

Treating experience as self-referential, unquestionable evidence of what race relations are "really" like enables readers to let Rankine's text "speak for itself." Describing students' experiences of reading *Citizen* in "Race, Reception, and Claudia Rankine's 'American Lyric,'" visual culture scholar Evie Shockley writes,

> What my Black Poetry students responded powerfully to in *Citizen*, in comparison to the many other works we studied together last semester, was an unmediated access to a recognizable truth. And though more sophisticated readers understand both "unmediated" and "truth" as contested terms, easily dismantled, the book's

> reception seems fundamentally linked to its perceived transparency — as exemplified in this headline from an Ontario, Canada newspaper: "'Citizen' — Claudia Rankine's Poetry Opens Window into Race."

Though post-structuralism has taught Shockley to gesture toward the contested status of terms such as truth and reality, she notes that even sophisticated readers experience *Citizen* as conveying transcendent truths. A framework that packages experience as unmediated evidence makes it especially tricky to push back on Rankine's text, because the critic is put in the position of contesting an individual's lived reality and discrediting the author's efforts to write about their life from their own perspective.

To this end, Shockley also discusses the powerful sense of identification many different Black readers experience when reading *Citizen*'s numerous instances of interpersonal racism, further increasing some readers' sense that Citizen describes some essential, immutable truth about Black/white race relations in the contemporary United States. Writing about Black readers' relationship to the "you," Shockley explains, "African-American readers, invited to identify with this 'You,' largely find ourselves slipping into a role all too familiar. By offering us the opportunity to read ourselves into this text as the second-person speaker and addressee of the slur, *Citizen* serves as witness to some of our most isolating moments and tends to affirm the subjective experience of many among us." Making an important gesture toward "subjective experience," Shockley describes that many different—and differently positioned—Black individuals experience Rankine's work as reproducing, or having captured, their experiences. Indeed, her suggestion that Black readers "sli[p] into a role" seems to suggest how effectively Rankine weaves together many different Black readers' unique, often isolating, experiences into

a single narrative voice. On the other hand, for white readers, "hailed by the text as a 'You'," Shockley proposes that there is a choice: "either identify as a Black you . . . or reject the invitation of the lyric-You and remain white-identified." Ultimately, Shockley argues that Rankine's second-person narration invites ("almost demand[s]") white readers to identify with Black subjects. I take seriously the powerful identification Shockley and others feel toward the instances described in *Citizen*, and I find helpful the way that Shockley draws attention to the essential Black/white binary encouraged by the text's form and through its invitations to readers. However, I am in search of more nuanced possibilities for self-positioning among readers of the text—ones that are less constricting, proscribed, or totalizing—because I understand Rankine's generalization of so many different Black experiences to be a primary driver of the belief that the text presents unmediated access to truth that, in turn, makes discussions of *Citizen* particularly difficult for many readers to engage in.

The limits of a standpoint perspective are also visible in descriptions of question-and-answer (Q & A) sessions with Rankine. On Twitter, user @billyrayb reported about a public reading of *Citizen*, "A white man asked Claudia Rankine what *he* could do for *her*. She responded with: 'I think the question you should be asking is what *you* can do for *you*." This kind of exchange seems to be a frequent occurrence for Rankine. After a reading at Eastern Michigan University, an older white gentleman asked Rankine much the same question. This time, Rankine apologized for her answer, stating that she knew the man would "think [her] ungrateful." Then, Rankine continued, "Asking [that question] means there are two places to stand, when really the entire system is corrupt . . . We must live in a world better than this." Paraphrasing the rest of Rankine's answer in her reporting on the event, Genevieve Moore notes

that Rankine talked about how "[a]sking how a white person can help acts as a buffer between people of color and white people. It insinuates that Black people have the solution to racism, that they just need a white person's help." Rankine's answer suggests that she does not view mere "listening" as a viable answer—after reading *Citizen*, white readers should choose to change themselves, to eradicate their own racism, to act in response to the corrupt system that Rankine describes. However, many of her readers, including instructors teaching the book, seem to struggle with the question of how and when to act given that Rankine's book offers little to no guidance. As I will explore further in this chapter, Kansas State University professor Emilia Phillips remains silent when teaching *Citizen,* suggesting that Rankine is the only voice capable of guiding students on the issues raised in the text. Tayari Jones and her respondents react similarly when they suggest buying a dozen copies of *Citizen* and hitting people with them as necessary, demonstrating a belief that Rankine's work offers a transparently available answer to racist conduct—it offers a behavioral corrective through the act of reading. Though the individuals who ask Rankine how they can help in Q & As are most often older white men, the silence that classroom instructors also often find in their classrooms suggests that more individuals are struggling with what to do after reading than are willing to ask the question during Q & A. Readers and instructors often fall into the trap of allowing *Citizen*'s constructed and differently positioned stories to speak without contextualization or analysis of their situatedness, a standpoint perspective that impedes both instructors and students from being able to think critically about what to do next.

Uses of and Responses to Rankine's *Citizen* as a Pedagogical Artifact

Rankine's *Citizen* has been embraced in the academy as a teaching text, and an impressive pedagogical apparatus has formed around the book. Several universities have posted teaching guides filled with additional readings and discussion questions to help facilitate classroom conversations about the work. Graywolf Press encouraged these responses by creating their own webpage and teaching guide, "*Citizen* in the Classroom: A Powerful Catalyst for Conversations about Race in America." The teaching guides I studied from Graywolf, Grand Valley State University, and St. Cloud State University, include questions specifically related to the book's second-person address. As the Grand Valley State University guide asks, "Why do you think that Rankine chooses to write in the second person? How does hearing 'you' feel?" Like *Citizen*, the discussion guides address readers in the second person and compel them to draw conclusions from their own experiences. The prevalence of these teaching guides suggests that *Citizen* has become a cultural touchstone for conversations across lines of difference in colleges, that subjective experience is now viewed as a model for understanding race relations, and that instructors sometimes struggle with how to approach the text.

For a less institutional voice in the debate about teaching *Citizen*, I turned to a symposium sponsored by the *Southern Humanities Review*, "Teaching *Citizen*: An SHR Online Symposium," which sought to bring "essays from the frontlines of the classroom" together in order to help readers, assumed to be teachers themselves, facilitate discussions of *Citizen*. The reference to "the front lines" explicitly militarizes racial conversations in the classroom, framing them as a battle. Of course, instructors are often ill-positioned or under-resourced, and the work of moderating conversations is never easy. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of "front lines" may also

serve to make instructors defensive or on-guard before class has even begun, and it may make students feel afraid to speak, lest they accidentally set off a grenade and cause injury during discussion. As University of Texas-Austin professor Lisa Olstein describes in her article for the symposium, "Notes on Failing," she was prepared for the discussion about *Citizen* to be halting and difficult, but her experiences were frustrating for reasons altogether different from those she had anticipated. Olstein describes students rendered silent by *Citizen*, unsure of how to begin or whether they should speak at all. From Olstein's perspective, "[T]here are no subjects or authors or methods or forms de facto not ours to read. Writing and reading are acts of empathy, imagination, invention, attempted and failed and imperfectly achieved communion." After her classroom discussion failed, she sought to understand students' reasoning for not engaging with the text and the questions this raised for her:

> POSTULATIONS
> It was proposed that, due to our make up, this was not our book to read. It was proposed that this was not a room in which the book should be discussed. It was proposed that fear of saying the wrong thing was adequate reason to say nothing.
> QUESTIONS
> Is what we may discuss defined by the ethnicities or orientations of who is in the room? Are we then not to read poems that represent identities (of others or voices/characters) not "represented" in the room? How would having a 'representative' alter our right to read and our practice of discussing? What about experience? Rape, loss of a child, grave illness, immigration? What about I'm not a fill-in-the-blank, so no thanks, no can do?

Here, Olstein reports that her students feared any kind of engagement with *Citizen*; they even suggested that they should not even be reading *Citizen*—let alone discussing it—because the class was composed of all white students. After this experience, Olstein posed questions to her students about the subsequent consequences of adopting their premises, such as what other kinds of identities, beyond race and ethnicity, students felt should close off the possibility for

inter-identity dialogue and connection. In posing these questions, Olstein seems to be struggling with her students' seeming unwillingness to be made uncomfortable, to push through and discuss difficult subject matter. But given the increasing prevalence of standpoint perspectives, Olstein's students may actually feel unable to read or discuss a work because they lack the "proper" identity. It seems that Olstein's students assume the proper reader of *Citizen* is a Black reader who has had experiences similar to those described in the text or whose standpoint would allow them to share similar experiences of being victimized by racism. At the same time, accepting this premise flattens differences among Black students, tokenizes them and requires that they serve as "representatives" of an entire racial group, essentializes the relationship between white and Black individuals as immutable, and thus lets white students off the hook for acknowledging, and accounting for, their own reactions to the text. Like so many readers before them, the students also demonstrate that even though Rankine writes the "you" from a shifting perspective, often as the victim of racism but sometimes as the perpetrator, the only experiences that readers recollect (even relatively savvy readers in humanities graduate programs) are those in which the "you" is a Black subject and victim of racism at the hands of a white perpetrator. Despite Rankine's varied uses of the "you" to represent various perspectives, *Citizen*'s readers overwhelmingly understand the work to be about two binary, diametrically, essentially opposed groups: Black victims and white perpetrators.

Olstein's experiences in the classroom raise questions endemic to the current era of social justice discourse, in which many individuals wonder whether they have a right to write, discuss, or read about particular topics when their identities do not line up with the presumed identities of the author or featured subjects. The idea that individuals with dominant identities should remain

silent in conversations that feature marginalized individuals is both popular and understandable. Marginalized individuals generate knowledge about oppression from their standpoint vis-a-vis the dominant power structure. Because—throughout history—decisions have been made for and about marginalized communities without their input, encouraging marginalized and affected people to speak first allows conversations to center the needs and concerns of the most vulnerable. However, as Olstein's students demonstrate, when a marginalized individual speaks from their standpoint, as Rankine is perceived to be doing in authoring *Citizen*, discussion is sometimes inhibited rather than opened up. As Olstein's recounting of her classroom experience suggests, this impediment may partially stem from a narrow definition of standpoint that forecloses the possibility of broad-based coalitions based on factors other than race, such as gender, parenthood, ability, citizenship, and various important factors that affect how an individual relates to other individuals and institutions (Cohen). Standpoint proponents may be wary of these broad-based coalitions for several reasons. They may fear that other experiences of oppression do not enable those groups to understand the specific experiences of Black individuals in the United States, or they may fear, based on historical occurrences, that coalitional thinking will drift toward centering the experiences of white individuals. Some may also believe that considerations of race-based oppression should be prioritized in social-justice-focused conversations. I would argue, however, that broad-based coalitions have great liberatory potential. As political scientist Cathy J. Cohen argues in her seminal article "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," "I envision a politics where one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades. I'm talking about a politics where the *non-normative* and *marginal* positions . . . is the basis for

progressive transformative coalition work," because this kind of coalition can "create a space in opposition to dominant norms," where multiple groups can join forces, each with a personal stake in the fight, and the group can become more powerful because of the union of its members (438).

Olstein's observation that "fear of saying the wrong thing was adequate reason to say nothing" also suggests that students are genuinely trying to do the right thing—in a classroom without a Black student, the students present did not feel qualified to speak about the topic. This fear is born of current norms in social justice conversations, where the idea of centering the voices of those most affected has come to mean that speaking about anti-Black racism from a white subject position could itself be viewed as a form of injury, violation, or violence against Black subjects. The students' reaction also demonstrates one of the weaknesses of the current standpoint paradigm: if individuals can only speak from their own narrow identities, then already overburdened marginalized individuals are the only ones who *can* educate others about their experiences, as illustrated when white readers turn to Rankine to solve anti-Black racism. Despite Olstein's students' desires to center the voices of marginalized individuals and remain silent when their voices would be unhelpful, their position leaves marginalized individuals carrying the burden of educating others and accedes to a view of education that reduces learning to the passive acceptance of others' experience-based perspectives. Olstein wonders whether her students would have been more willing to engage with even a single Black student present to educate them, to contribute to the classroom discussions, and to moderate appropriate thoughts or comments. Yet, this kind of facilitation is a lot to expect of a trained instructor who has chosen to be an educator, let alone a minoritized student attempting to pursue their own classroom

education. The claim that dominant-identity individuals should remain silent and listen can thus lead to an abdication of responsibility by those in privileged positions and an assumption that underrepresented individuals should bear the burden of educating others. As silence takes hold and students and instructors wonder what comes next, communication across lines of difference withers.

Some instructors, such as Traci Brimhall from Kansas State University and Emilia Phillips at Centenary College of New Jersey, lean into this discomfort in their classrooms. In "The Emptiness of Empathy: Towards a Pedagogy of Discomfort," Brimhall writes about reading *Citizen* because it makes her students uncomfortable and prevents them from resting solely on "comfortable" versions of empathy that don't "cost" them anything. In Brimhall's framework, if empathy is comfortable, then it is a form of "tourism," rather than a serious engagement with oppression and privilege. Though the discomfort is desirable to Brimhall, she does note that it makes opening up conversation particularly difficult. When they read *Citizen*, the first question that Brimhall asked her students was, "Which part of this book made you uncomfortable?" In response, she explains, "There was a lot of flipping through the book and silence. It was uncomfortable. 'The whole thing?' Someone answered, unsure. That's good, I thought. That's a start." From Brimhall's essay, however, it's not clear that her students were any better prepared, or more willing, to discuss *Citizen* than Olstein's students. Students are often hesitant, or unable, to get specific about what causes their discomfort. Brimhall's framework also centers the experiences of privileged and/or dominant-identity students in the classroom, who are made uncomfortable because empathy costs them something with regards to their privilege. I am left wondering about the impact of this enforced discomfort on marginalized-identity students,

whose experiences in the classroom and with their institution of higher education are often more fraught and tenuous than those of their more privileged peers. What comes after "discomfort"? I do not have answers to these questions, but I am arguing that students may be more willing to take a leap into difficult dialogues if we move beyond the prevailing cultural assumption that we can only participate in discussions if we share the identities of the author or of those whose experiences are featured in the text.

It's not only students but also instructors who sometimes choose silence when engaging with difficult subject matter. In "The Pedagogy of Listening: *Citizen* as Required," Phillips characterizes instructor silence as a positive after taking students on a field trip to one of Rankine's readings. During the reading, one of Phillips's students told her that he had been quiet because a friend of his—a Black Lives Matter activist and community organizer—had died. Of her experience at the reading, Phillips writes,

> Throughout Rankine's delivery, I found myself thinking again and again about my student's friend and the impact of that young man's life on his community. I began to wonder if the essay about race my student had turned in the previous semester had been encouraged by his friend . . . I also began to listen expectantly to Rankine with the hope that, in some way, she would speak directly to my student or at least seem to, in order to comfort him.

Though Phillips is ceding the floor to Rankine as an act of respect for her experiences and expertise, she also chooses to shift to Rankine the responsibility for responding to her grieving student, as if Rankine can "directly" address someone she doesn't even know is in the audience, as if she can speak to all Black experiences of grief and mourning, as if there is an essential

sameness to Black experience. Ultimately, Phillips "realized how much I was relying upon Rankine in terms of all my students' education, how much I wanted them to hear her voice and her words and not my own." Phillips's belief in Rankine's ability to speak to all students enables Phillips's own silence. She characterizes this silence as "giving up teaching for the moment in order to be taught, to sit beside my students in the same row of the theater, to see them listening and to listen myself." Listening is critical and can be an active process, necessary for understanding the perspectives of others, but listening may also tip into silence, especially in the absence of models of discussion, or when Rankine's text is asked to somehow speak for itself, or when instructors, meant to be discussion facilitators, choose to forego this responsibility. At present, as Olstein and Phillips's students demonstrate, if listening is the only tool students possess for engaging in conversations about differences in identities, then no conversation is possible in rooms where there are no Black individuals to bear the full burden of facilitating the conversation, and opportunities wither for furthering students' understanding of how power operates.

According to Phillips, the second-person address was a major topic for their students, who understood the "you" as creating an ethical imperative to listen to the voices and experiences of others. On this topic, Bethel College professor Siobhan Scarry writes, "Even students unfamiliar with poetry or the practice of close reading usually locate these deep operating principles of the book [such as second-person address] fairly quickly and it's a good place to start," indicating that this interpretation is likely available to many of *Citizen*'s readers. Many contemporary readers, including those unfamiliar with close reading and other analytic techniques, readily accept the idea that knowledge is generated from an individual's standpoint.

While this orientation makes the micropoem-anecdote chapters of *Citizen* broadly accessible, it might also inhibit these readers' abilities to substantively engage with its content.

Despite Rankine's desire to make clear that there is more than one place to stand, *Citizen*'s second-person address ("you" and "I"), its use of experience as evidence, and its implicit appeals to standpoint theory seem to create two places to stand in the fight against racism: victim or perpetrator. In my view, this binary stance makes it difficult to understand the systemic elements of racism and encourages readers to adopt an individualist understanding of the project of dismantling racism. Within this binary framework, as long as an individual is sufficiently able to scrape their interactions of microaggressions, implicit bias, and racist remarks, then they have done all they can do to end racism. From this perspective, it is difficult—nearly impossible—to see the insidious ways that racism structures not only each of our interactions but also our institutions, and the ways in which power is dynamic and interacts with the structuring logics of institutions, empowering some individuals in some contexts and others at other times. Thus, efforts to work for racial justice are impeded because the victim/perpetrator binary encouraged by the formal logic of the text is too static to adapt to these changing conditions.

Of course, Rankine herself rejects this framing, at public events and in the text: as we have seen, Rankine has, on more than one occasion, responded to well-meaning white audience members who ask how they can help by sharing her belief that "asking how you can help implies there are two places to stand, when really the entire system is corrupt" (qtd. in Moore). Unfortunately, Rankine's suggestion that white readers must also play a role in dismantling racism doesn't come across for most readers in the text, as the second-person address is read as

coming from a static, victim perspective. Indeed, although the experiences Rankine writes about belong to multiple people, their aggregation into a single perspective for the book condenses variously positioned people into one overarching voice that is heard as the definitive voice on experiencing racism. Thus, when readers turn to Rankine asking how they can help, they demonstrate that they are moved by the text, that they view the "you" address as having awoken a moral imperative to respond to the person hailing them—which, in actuality, might be any number of people whose stories Rankine tells, but is often presumed by readers to be Rankine herself.

This turn toward Rankine—letting her "speak for herself," asking how they can help—represents a success of the text in terms of its ability to awaken moral sentiment and reach readers who feel compelled to act after closing the book. And yet, although the text initially succeeds in this way, the victim/perpetrator dynamic, facilitated by the "you" address, ultimately seems to reign supreme for readers, encouraging them to view power as static. Moreover, because of the resurgent standpoint logics surrounding the text's writing and reception, readers are encouraged to believe that only some individuals (those who have experienced anti-Black racism as victims) are authorized to confront racism, even though standpoint theory is ultimately designed to expand individuals' knowledge and understanding of racism. The relationship engendered by the book's form and the context in which it circulates also create the unfair responsibility to have all the answers and to educate an entire nation that Rankine could never live up to and that she has reasonably rejected each time she has been asked about it at speaking engagements. By suggesting that only those who fit particular definitions of oppression can participate in knowledge-generation about that particular form of oppression, unnuanced

standpoint perspectives reinforce the idea that these same individuals are uniquely equipped to provide answers about how to proceed. This logic burdens oppressed people by forcing them into roles as educators and saviors while both absolving dominant-identity individuals of responsibility for thinking critically about how to rectify their wrongs and encouraging these individuals to believe that individual wrongdoing is where their responsibility for dismantling racism begins and ends. Indeed, because of the brilliantly seductive way in which Rankine creates intimacy between the narrator and the addressee, this tight perspective impedes readers' abilities to think critically about the structural dimensions of racism. Dominant-identity readers *should* feel responsible for addressing historical, structural, social, and political dimensions of racism, but *Citizen*'s ubiquity, together with its form, encourages a dissociation from the more diffuse yet perhaps even more impactful structural elements of racism. Indeed, *Citizen* creates a double bind: even as Rankine calls non-Black readers in, positioning them through the "you" address to identify with Black experiences of racism, she also inadvertently positions those same readers as insufficiently informed and insufficiently authorized to combat racism without the guidance of someone who has experienced anti-Black racism from a victim's perspective; indeed, Rankine suggests that knowing about racism and/or oppression from the perspective of a perpetrator, or from a shifting perspective depending on one's identity, is insufficient. By positioning such readers as outsiders and as separated from those who know about racism from personal experiences of victimhood, Rankine inadvertently gives dominant-identity readers a pass in terms of feeling responsible for changing the society of which they are a part.

As Claudia Rankine's own responses demonstrate, being put in the position of speaking for an entire race of people is exhausting, dehumanizing, and impossible—she is right to reject

this position. Yet I've tried to illustrate how her brilliant work, and the evidence of experience therein, inadvertently authorizes readers to turn to Rankine for answers rather than viewing themselves as equally empowered to challenge structures and practices of racism. The costs of turning toward a single voice are high—reducing the rich, varied experiences of an entire group of people to one person's experiences is suffocating both for the group and for the individual. This move also allows instructors, who have chosen, and trained for, the position of educators, to step back from this critically important educative role and instead attempt to make a single set of experiences—even experiences aggregated from multiple perspectives— speak for an entire group of people and also speak for themselves. Without facilitators to guide them away from this tendency, students, like most other readers of *Citizen*, remain stuck in the boxes into which they are placed by the text: victim or perpetrator. This positioning forecloses possibilities for dialogue that might allow us, as a society, to move beyond the current structures and patterns of racial aggression and concurrent racial injury. Readers thus struggle to know when and how to speak and what to take away from their engagements with others' experiences.

The Limits of Standpoint Theory in Public Discourse and Contemporary Social Justice Movements

The desire to invite cross-cultural identifications, to attempt to ensure a particular education and takeaway, is particularly resonant in the present moment, when the discourse about race has finally begun to center the experiences of marginalized individuals, and when, consequently, columnists as well as instructors and students may wonder if they should read *Citizen* at all, or may search for a representative in their ranks to lead the discussion. These

responses highlight widespread fears about getting the terms of the conversation about racial justice correct, and they demonstrate the cultural tendency to turn toward a Black author to be told what the correct terms are. These fears underscore the seriousness of the conversations and their high stakes: citizenship, the ability to form meaningful communities across racial lines, and a potential loss of public or community respect if the norms are violated. The fears of white readers, in particular, seem to stem from the practice of genuinely listening to Black Americans as they recount their experiences, feeling drawn in by the invitation to identify with others' pain, and not knowing how to proceed beyond listening.

While popular readings of *Citizen* contribute to the enshrinement of these practices in present-day social justice conversations, the issues raised in this chapter are hardly limited to discussions of Rankine's work. Indeed, in the summer of 2020, books such as Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be An Antiracis*t, Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race*, and Robin DeAngelo's *White Fragility* topped bestseller lists for months, demonstrating both a widespread commitment to listening to Black perspectives, changing one's habits, and interrogating one's own racist behaviors, and a narrowing focus on interpersonal interactions viewed through a victim/perpetrator binary. Preceding the meteoric rise to success of these books was a powerful wave of protests in response to the murder of George Floyd at the hands of then-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Millions of people took to the streets in cities such as Minneapolis; Louisville (where residents were also protesting the murder of Breonna Taylor in her home by local police); New York City; Chicago; Los Angeles; and Washington, DC, among others, to protest anti-Black racism in policing. Indeed, there were so many protests that hundreds of medical personnel and public health experts signed an open letter encouraging the public

demonstrations against systemic racism despite their occurrence during the COVID-19 pandemic because, as the letter notes, "White supremacy is a lethal public health issue that predates and contributes to COVID-19." The letter goes on to say:

> Black people are twice as likely to be killed by police compared to white people, but the effects of racism are far more pervasive. Black people suffer from dramatic health disparities in life expectancy, maternal and infant mortality, chronic medical conditions, and outcomes from acute illnesses . . . [The disparities] result from long-standing systems of oppression and bias which have subjected people of color to discrimination in the healthcare setting, decreased access to medical care and healthy food, unsafe working conditions, mass incarceration, exposure to pollution and noise, and the toxic effects of stress. Black people are also more likely to develop COVID-19. Black people with COVID-19 are diagnosed later in the disease course and have a higher rate of hospitalization, mechanical ventilation, and death. COVID-19 among Black patients is yet another lethal manifestation of white supremacy. In addressing demonstrations against white supremacy, our first statement must be one of unwavering support for those who would dismantle, uproot, or reform racist institutions. (qtd. in Simon)

I invoke this open letter to highlight several issues related to the substance of this chapter, including the letter's clear invocation of intersectional oppression and the ways in which anti-Black racism is manifest across every system and institution governing American life, from employment opportunities and neighborhood locations, to environmental pollutants and

healthcare disparities. The letter also makes clear that, in order to make the largest difference in the lives of Black people, we must focus on dismantling racist institutions themselves. However, despite this statement and the mass protests directed at the institution of law enforcement, many of the public conversations and responses to these protests displayed troubling standpoint logics and a focus on interpersonal causes of racism.

For instance, accompanying the in-person protests of George Floyd's murder, many people took to social media to express their solidarity, anger, and frustration. Feeling pressure to respond to national protests, music industry giants such as Spotify and Live Nation committed to pausing their normal operations in deference to protestors and to illustrate the debt the music industry owes to its Black artists. Eventually, this movement spread across the music industry, through use of the #TheShowMustBePaused hashtag, developed by Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang, two Black music marketing professionals (Coscarelli). However, as music artists as disparate as Rihanna, Quincy Jones, and The Rolling Stones began sharing the hashtag, fans transformed the very specific protest into something much broader: #BlackoutTuesday. Rather than a specific way to demonstrate that the music industry would be unable to function without Black artists, talent, and labor, #BlackoutTuesday became a way for individuals to demonstrate solidarity by posting a black square on their social media page. The black square was meant to represent silence on the part of the individual posting it, as if to say, "Today, I am not speaking, and instead I am listening to Black voices." Unfortunately, in part because of the algorithms that control which posts gain popularity on a given social media platform, the overwhelming flooding of Instagram and Facebook with black squares meant that the squares drowned out any other posts made on that day, by Black creators or otherwise (Coscarelli). In this way,

#BlackoutTuesday demonstrates the ways in which white allies are let off the hook in the present paradigm: by posting black squares, hundreds of thousands of people announced themselves as allies without actually having to take responsibility for disrupting and dismantling oppressive institutions. Furthermore, because of the preponderance of black squares, few-to-no Black voices were actually visible or audible on Blackout Tuesday—itself representative of the way that listening has become, in some instances, an invitation to silence and inaction.

At the same time, a popular spin-off of the black square emerged: an image of a white manicured hand linking pinkies with a Black manicured hand with the following text against a black background: "I understand that I will never understand. However, I stand." This image became so popular that individuals not only made it their profile picture on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter but also carried it on protest signs at marches, made YouTube videos about it, and even put it on t-shirts, stickers, and other consumer goods. Epitomizing the standpoint-run-amok ethos that undergirds many contemporary conversations about anti-Black racism, inside and outside of the classroom, the circulation of the "I understand that I will never understand. However, I stand" sentiment implies that there is an essentially unknowable wellspring of experience that is nevertheless necessary to have had in order to take meaningful political action against racism. It demonstrates the degree to which experience has become conflated with the authority to speak in particular circles. More troubling, perhaps, is the implication that without full identification with a very particular set of experiences, then one is doomed to get it "wrong" and therefore should not make contributions—a principle inimical to the idea of group decision making and deliberation that is necessary for robust activist groups and democracy alike. Instead, this image represents and furthers already-ossified categorizations

of perpetrator and victim roles that make it difficult to imagine, let alone fight for, a world in which systemic racism and its concurrent social hierarchy is meaningfully disrupted. In some instances, the image also circulated alongside the oft-quoted Desmond Tutu aphorism, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor" (@CarmellaWWE). These two sentiments in juxtaposition usefully encapsulate the double-bind of the current moment: allies feel pressured to eschew "silence," but there is also an overriding insistence that one's identity must line up perfectly with the oppressed identity in question in order to "understand" well enough to speak. If one takes seriously that displaying this image is indicative of a desire to take some action toward disrupting anti-Black racism, as I do, then one can also see how criticism of these individuals as only willing to put on a performance of allyship is perhaps unfair, given conflicting messages about the "right" thing to do. These displays of support also seem to demonstrate that this "inaction" is perhaps more fairly categorized as fear, an uncertainty about how to proceed, not a bad-faith expression of support but instead a belief that "the right thing" is to do nothing unless told to do something by someone in possession of the correct set of life experiences.

Indeed, I argue that both the response to Rankine and discourse on social media demonstrate an intense desire to communicate across lines of racial difference, to demonstrate commonalities in experiences, to accord others the respect they deserve, including demonstrating the appropriate respect for others' lived experiences, especially when their experiences have been marginalized by dominant power structures. In many ways, this current moment of hesitations, of difficult silences, of fearing speaking out of turn is an improvement over centuries of flagrant disregard for the lived experiences of racially minoritized peoples. And, of course, the

fear of saying the wrong thing makes sense, because the stakes are high: educators risk losing students who don't understand when and how to speak; institutions risk losing educators committed to teaching classes on thorny issues like race and ethnicity because student silence makes the classes feel too difficult to teach; and marginalized people continue to bear the burden of speaking for their identities, even when they try to step out of this role. In addition to the already increased vulnerabilities that marginalized individuals face in a white supremacist society, because the current paradigm for speaking across difference may overcompensate for centuries of speaking over racial others, non-Black individuals may be left with too few resources for thinking about, and acting on, their responsibility for dismantling not only interpersonal racism but also structural instantiations as well. In the current paradigm, non-marginalized individuals are allowed to choose the easier path of silence in the name of listening to a group of people labeled victims. In my view, we must find ways to continue the relatively recent project of listening to historically marginalized individuals—of taking seriously their testimonies, and their experiences of racism, in order to illuminate the nuances of lived oppression that will otherwise be missed, and to allow for self-determination for groups that have borne the brunt of oppression. However, we must do so without further calcifying unhelpful victim/perpetrator roles, essentializing minoritized experiences, and overburdening minoritized individuals.

Conclusion

As I think about teaching *Citizen* in future semesters, and what practices to enact that would dissolve these ossifications, I am also left with questions: How might we think about other

kinds of narratives, or other ways to illuminate the powerful manifestations of racism in our daily lives, in our actions, and in the things we experience? Rankine, of course, is not capable of doing all this work herself, but if readers and educators think of *Citizen*—or other works by Ta-Nehisi Coates, James Baldwin, Ibram Kendi, etc.—as *the* authoritative text on race, then how can we open our dialogical space up again so that other kinds of stories are tellable or audible, stories that might open up more expansive and necessary ways of thinking about structural racism? What kinds of practices might help to chip away at the calcifications in how we are presently discussing race and racism and allow for actual questions, actual dialogues, actual forays that move toward disruption and liberation?

Turning toward the original authors of early standpoint theory, remembering its intentions, may help us to navigate a middle path, in which marginalized individuals and their experiences remain critical to the work of anti-racism, reinforcing the value of dialogue and discussion, without falling into some of the traps discussed above. In her 1990 work *Black Feminist Thought,* sociologist Patricia Hill Collins reminds us, "The overarching matrix of domination houses multiple groups, each with varying experiences with penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives, situated knowledges, and, for clearly identifiable subordinate groups, subjugated knowledges" (234). Here, Collins reminds us of one of the ideas I think we must keep in mind as we have conversations about race and oppression: all knowledge is partial and situated, meaning that no one voice or perspective should be elevated to the level of objective, irrefutable truth. Indeed, Collins also stresses, "No one group has a clear angle of vision. No one group possesses the theory or methodology that allows it to discover the absolute 'truth' or, worse yet, proclaim its theories and methodologies as the universal norm evaluating

other groups' experiences" (234). With this principle in mind, we must adopt a posture of listening, of taking seriously, and also of being willing to contribute, or push back, on what we hear. Turning to any author, artist, or speaker as the single voice that can command us out of our current situation only reproduces the failures of traditional, oppressive, Western forms of knowledge that would elevate one perspective, one way of learning or creating knowledge, above all others, and therefore prevents us from making meaningful change to the current oppressive systems. As a reminder that all knowledge is partial and situated, I also suggest normalizing talking about *everyone*, as opposed to only subjugated groups, as having a standpoint and as having intersectional identities. Thinking of all individuals as having a standpoint could help to reinforce the idea that not all standpoints are critical; some individuals are not interested in, or have not yet begun, the work of thinking about their social locations through an anti-oppressive lens, and this is true for both dominant-identity and subjugated-identity folks, which in turn may serve as a reminder that no one individual should be positioned as having all the answers. Similarly, shifting norms around intersectional identities to encompass *everyone* serves as a reminder that all knowledge is partial and that the experiences shaped by one's identity can only provide a partial view of a given situation. As similarities and connections among differently located groups are discovered through the generation and transmission of knowledge gleaned along the axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, conversations about domination and oppression may be enriched, providing further opportunities for the creation of broad-based coalitions that can help disrupt violent systems of marginalization.

Finally, dialogue and true discussion should be cornerstones of the work of anti-racism. To this end, I again borrow from Collins, who advocates for empathy and dialogue as critical elements of a liberatory standpoint methodology, writing, "Dialogue is critical to the success of this epistemological approach, the type of dialogue. . . whereby power dynamics are fluid, everyone has a voice, but everyone must listen and respond to other voices in order to be allowed to remain in the community" (Collins "Black Feminist Thought" 238). As I read her, Collins would thus reject the "I understand that I will never understand. However, I stand" ethos, because doing so allows for some individuals to have a parasitic relationship to the community, in which they listen but do not respond. The insistence that one cannot understand ossifies power dynamics and leaves some individuals voiceless (even if it's precisely the group of individuals whose voices and experiences have historically occupied an out-sized role). As such, I suggest an encouragement of dialogue and discussion in which it is the norm that all present actively participate in some way. While participation could take many creative forms and should accommodate many forms of ability, those present in the discussion should be responding in some way, at some time. Having this kind of dialogue will require that we reframe the fear of "getting it wrong," of appearing clueless, as opportunities for growth and learning, as opportunities to demonstrate listening and a capacity to change for the next time.

Indeed, as a starting point for this work, Rankine's *Citizen* offers instructors an opportunity to diversify voices in the classroom, to help students engage with experiences unlike their own, and/or to see experiences that may be similar to their own reflected back in the classroom. If we choose to use *Citizen* as a teaching text, as I do, then it's incumbent upon us as instructors not to abdicate our responsibility to education and facilitation, even through difficult

conversations, discomfort, and tough silences. The next time I teach *Citizen*, I will make a concerted effort to dwell in the less-frequently-taught, abstract sections of the work, such as the scripts for Rankine's collaborative situation videos. By shifting to these chapters, I hope to destabilize readers' abilities to rest on identity—their own and that of others—as the primary vehicle for entry into *Citizen*'s pages. And, when teaching the more realist, micropoem sections of the work, I suggest that rather than allowing the evidence of experience to speak for itself, we acknowledge the multiplicity of perspectives contained in *Citizen*'s pages, within the single authorial "you," and indeed highlighting the limitations of the genre to speak for all Black individuals. Rankine's voice should be an important voice in the classroom, but so must our own as instructors, and that of our students as well, even if we all will, at some point, get it wrong. The stakes are too high to allow our fears of misstepping to keep us silent.

Chapter 4 "I am writing this letter to you to try to tell you something": Standpoint and Second-person Address in Open Letters By James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates

In 2015, conservative *New York Times* opinion columnist David Brooks responded to Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, an open letter to Coates's teenaged son, with a letter of his own. Brooks's open letter, addressed to Coates and titled "Listening to Ta-Nehisi Coates While White," begins with a discussion of Coates's strengths in which Brooks seems genuinely moved by what he calls Coates's "searing contribution to . . . public education." Brooks notes that the past year has been "an education for white people," citing the robust protests that emerged in the wake of police and other white supremacist violence against Black people in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charleston. He tells Coates that *Between the World and Me* is "a mind-altering account of the Black male experience" that "every conscientious American should read." As the letter continues, Brooks explores his concerns about Coates's rejection of "the American dream" and his own fears about whether he has "standing" to reply to Coates's personal, embodied memoir as a white person.

After publishing his letter, Brooks was summarily taken to task for displaying his white privilege and ignorance of American history, and for patronizing Coates (Chariton). Brooks's article was so widely panned that the term "David Brooks" was a national trending topic on Twitter the morning of its publication, with readers claiming, "David Brooks wrote something hella stupid must be a weekday," and "david brooks' opinions arent completely worthless. for

example: id definitely take david brooks' advice on where to shop for discount khakis" (Chariton; @jackmirkinson; @morningglory). Without a character limit, the comments section on the *New York Times* website allowed for more discussion between readers. Readers defended Coates, called Brooks out for his privilege, voiced agreements with Brooks, and, notably, commented on the importance of listening to one another across cultural and racial differences and allowing the other's perspective to influence one's position. As user RC writes, "This is good - people are talking, and I think honest discussion is a great place to be in the face of centuries of white supremacy and brutal racism. As a white person, I think it is time to listen, pause, and absorb what Black folks are saying; a time to just sit with whatever discomfort that brings up so that when I respond, it is not just to defend my own experience."

I find myself agreeing with RC, and RC's advice is in line with contemporary social justice conversations that suggest that privileged individuals listen to marginalized individuals and sit with their discomfort upon being made aware of their privilege (Brimhall). It is worth noting that Brooks himself claims to do just that after reading *Between the World and Me*. He explains that "the first obligation" when reading a work that engages with difference "is to sit with it, to make sure the testimony is respected and sinks in." After doing so, Brooks is left with questions: "Am I displaying my privilege if I disagree? Is my job just to respect your conclusions? Does a white person have standing to respond?" Brooks was persistently called out on Twitter by social-justice-minded readers for even asking these questions, though several of his readers express similar—or even more polarized—concerns about the possibility of ever productively communicating with individuals of a different race. Most of the reactions to Brooks's article implicitly or explicitly characterize his concerns as those of a patronizing

individual completely unwilling to recognize his privilege. However, such responses seem ungenerous, especially because Brooks acknowledges feeling changed and educated by Coates's book.

As Brooks does with Coates, I tried to imagine that my first obligation to Brooks is to "sit with" his article, to listen to his comments and let them "sink in." Despite my initial, knee jerk (negative) reaction, I have tried to listen to Brooks generously. When Brooks argues that Coates offered a "searing" contribution to white people's education about white supremacist violence, I take that as a serious offering—Brooks himself is educated, and changed, by *Between the World and Me*. When Brooks asks whether he has "standing" to reply to Coates, and whether it is his duty to simply agree with Coates, I take Brooks at his word that, despite what might be perceived as a cheeky or dismissive tone, Brooks is responding with pain and concern to a conversational landscape he no longer understands how to navigate.

It is clear that Brooks has internalized some teachings from contemporary social justice circles, including listening to "the testimony" and letting it sink in before responding, which many comments on Brooks's letter also recommend. But this strategy fails to account for what happens after the listening. What happens when individuals continue to disagree? Or is "letting it sink in" meant to be code for "sit in silence until you no longer disagree"? If it is not the dead-end of waiting for conversion, then it seems productive that Brooks writes a letter back to Coates. Feeling called in by Coates, he models Coates's letter writing and searches for a deliberative, interactional consideration of the difficult questions at hand.

Brooks is responsible for what rhetorician Krista Ratcliffe calls "doing [his] own race work" (8) and thus for understanding why Coates might not see the same freedom in "the

American dream" that Brooks himself does. He is also responsible for the harm he perpetuates by insisting that the American dream is open to all, without proper attention to the structural factors that have excluded minorities from enjoying the same access to public goods that propertied white men have enjoyed since the country's founding. I hold Brooks accountable for these injuries at the same time as I recognize his implicit concern that white people who are sympathetic to, but not fully involved with, racial justice activism are feeling shut out of mainstream conversations about this life-and-death issue. I recognize that by sharing his question in an open letter, on a public platform that enables discussions among readers, Brooks also opens space for individuals called in by Coates and/or Brooks to discuss what it means to listen, let testimony sink in, and potentially move closer together in envisioning what kinds of futures are possible. I worry that by only "calling out" Brooks, we forget that he has identified himself, already, as someone who has been called in and is asking for guidance. As those familiar with Brooks's work know, he is not always so receptive to positions he disagrees with, and he seems almost uniquely moved by Coates's letter. I therefore want to ask instead: How was he called in? What about Coates's open letter makes calling in, on a broad level, possible?

Years after responding to Coates, in 2019, Brooks wrote another take on social justice, a column on "call-out culture," the practice of using social media channels to bring attention to an individual's racism, misogyny, or other bigotry. His column expresses concern about the seeming unwillingness in activist circles to allow for "mistakes." Brooks does not mention himself as a target of "call-out culture," but it is safe to say that the Twitter response he experienced in 2015 constitutes a "call out" of Brooks by Internet social justice actors for his privilege and his alleged patronizing of Coates. In his 2019 column, Brooks seems much less willing to admit doubts

about his argument than he is in his reply to Coates. The Brooks who writes a letter to Coates is much more vulnerable than the Brooks purporting to expose the cruelties of call-out culture, suggesting that he is particularly unsure of his position in cross-racial conversations.

It is possible that Brooks had merely solidified his position in the four years between the two columns—that conversations about race had become so ossified and fractured that where Brooks had once been willing to admit to learning something, and to admit confusion about how to respond, he was now convinced the answer was really to cast the whole project out. But I also believe other interpretations remain open. Indeed, Brooks wrote another article in 2019 in which he responds to Coates's famous 2014 essay "The Case for Reparations," explaining that he had originally reacted with "mild disagreement" to Coates's piece, but in returning to the piece five years later, he has come to endorse the idea that African Americans should receive reparations for slavery. It seems, then, that Coates got through to Brooks in the years after Brooks first discovered Coates's writing, shaping how Brooks views the world and his interactions within it.

Regular readers—and critics—of Brooks also expressed surprise at his change of heart. As left-wing political columnist Tom Scocca writes, "David Brooks endorsed reparations. David Brooks—incurious, complacent, softly inflexible David Brooks—published an opinion column in the *New York Times* arguing that the United States is built on a deep moral fracture, that injustice against black people defines this country's past and present, and that there is no future without a proper reckoning. Racism, David Brooks (David Brooks!) wrote, is: 'the original sin that hardens that heart, separates Americans from one another and serves as a model and fuel for other injustices'" ("David Brooks Caught Up"). Scocca expresses his surprise in several ways, listing what he thinks of as the constitutive features of Brooks's public persona, in addition to the

exclamatory parenthetical aside, but the difference *is* shocking. The effect of Coates's writing—and the other thinkers and writers Coates prompted Brooks to explore—is clear in the uncharacteristic curiosity and reflection with which Brooks approaches Coates's writing.

In *Between the World and Me,* Coates writes in the second person, addressing the letter both to his son and to a broader audience made up of every "you" willing to engage him on his terms. In adopting the "you" address, he borrows from James Baldwin's 1962 letter to his own nephew James. In our current context, it's difficult to discuss Coates's *Between the World and Me* without talking about Baldwin's letter to his nephew. Indeed, the two open letters are often read in conjunction, as an original and a sequel. Despite their different intellectual lineages, readers (lay readers and public intellectuals like Toni Morrison) often approach Coates as Baldwin's direct successor (Holloway and Whitfield 303; Gilmore). Even when Coates's readers aren't explicitly dealing with Baldwin, his influence on Coates's readers is clear. As Scocca notes later in "David Brooks Caught Up," Brooks's explanation of why he endorses reparations—moral sin—sounds more like "the classic James Baldwin," espousing "thoughts on racism as our nation's deforming principle," and is quite distinct from Coates's own focus on material living conditions as the reason for adopting reparations.

In this chapter, I analyze James Baldwin's open letter to his nephew, Coates's *Between the World and Me*, and contemporary readers' engagement with the letters. I focus on the ways in which Baldwin and Coates, writing from their own standpoints, use the "you" address to call readers in while addressing and privileging their own family members. I argue that, unlike Claudia Rankine's generalized and aggregated "you" in *Citizen*, Baldwin and Coates each similarly use the "you" to speak from one particular standpoint and address a single, particular

person; their "you" acts as a moral appeal to readers to respond to their charges. This seemingly intimate address opens an educative space for audiences, in particular for non-Black readers who may not have experience with the lived reality of anti-Black racism, while at the same time allowing both authors to circumvent some of the difficult labor involved in calling out those same readers. Indeed, despite the authors' stated addressees, the didactic element of these open letters is not solely meant for in-group members but also for the broader audience that might learn from the offerings. The "you" address invites readers to identify with the addressees of the letters, helping to create cross-racial identifications for some readers, without needing an in-person or one-on-one conversation, as most call-in literature suggests as a best-practice (Mariposa).

Despite structural similarities in how Baldwin and Coates deploy the "you" address, the authors also differ from one another in critical ways. In reading Baldwin and Coates, I am especially attentive to the ways in which knowledge generated from an individual standpoint is transmitted to audiences. I am also interested in how Baldwin's and Coates's differing political orientations encourage different responses in their readers. As I argue, in "Letter to my Nephew," Baldwin presents his situated knowledge as an offering capable of changing the reader, as a beginning step toward reorienting their lives and political commitments. Baldwin offers his experiences in "Letter to My Nephew" with the belief that one can be changed by others' experiences, turning the reader away from their racial "innocence" or denial of culpability for the continued social ill of racism toward lives that recognize, and are responsive to, the interconnectedness of all Americans. Turning to Coates, I find a less productive offering for opening up cross-racial conversations. While Coates works to situate his knowledge in his

particular experiences, as he tries to share those experiences with his son and his reader, he makes clear that he also believes it is not possible to truly understand an other unless you have been in their exact position. Because this orientation would require an impossible conflation of self and other, Coates's letter closes off avenues for communication with all readers.

In reading Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew" and Coates's *Between the World and Me* in relation to each other, I also map how Coates's and Baldwin's open letters are being taken up and considered by a new generation of activists. Drawing on some online readers' own writings and reactions to these works, I illuminate the identifications that some readers forge with Baldwin's and Coates's texts and highlight how readers participate in a process of education about U.S. racial history and Black-white race relations while reading. In particular, I explore how readers read Coates against the grain, making *Between the World and Me* more dialogic, putting it in conversation with Baldwin, and struggling to find authorized possibilities for anti-racist collective action.

Although David Brooks is only one reader of Coates and Baldwin, he is still a reader like the other readers whose perspectives I bring to light in this chapter. Indeed, although Brooks is a special reader, with a huge platform in the United States's newspaper of record, he models how reading Coates's open letter has transformed his thinking. In response to Brooks, I offer that it is his responsibility, with his platform, to model dialogic and purposeful engagement with the texts he is moved and changed by. At the same time, I seek to analyze the ways in which Coates's orientation to the knowledge generated from his own standpoint impedes possibilities for dialogic engagement with his text. In turn, this contributes to the struggle Brooks and other readers explore about feeling stymied by what *Between the World and Me* ultimately offers.

To find other readers of these texts, I turned to the social networking site Goodreads, the largest network for readers online, in addition to blogs, Twitter, and discussion boards. I use readers' comments to trace the long-lasting effects of reading Baldwin and Coates on interested readers and the impact these works have on readers' understandings of the roles that race plays in their lives. In "'Words with Friends': Socially Networked Reading on 'Goodreads,'" Lisa Nakamura argues for the benefits of using Goodreads in order to study "reading culture 'in the world'" (241). Goodreads presents an opportunity to discover readers' consumption and engagement patterns because it "makes reading promiscuous, networked, and above all social" (243). I am concerned with the ways in which individual readers take up texts, the (often social) uses to which readers put these texts, and how they "promiscuous[ly]" yoke texts to their own purposes in ways authors would not authorize and may not have anticipated. As of 2019, Goodreads has 19 million users, meaning that 13 million users have joined the site since 2013 when Nakamura published her article, indicating that the site's popularity is only increasing. In turn, increased popularity means more reviews and interactions and more insight into how people read and what they think about the books they're reading. Like Nakamura, I find that readers on Goodreads are eager, generous, and deeply analytical, and they support their claims by quoting passages as evidence. I turned to Goodreads because it is a "vernacular platform for literary criticism and conversation . . . that is open to all, solving the problem of locked-down content that pay-to-read academic publishing reproduces" (Nakamura 243). However, it bears noting that the demographics of Goodreads' 90-million users are difficult to find. In broad strokes, I was able to confirm that a majority of the site's users are women from the United States.

Additionally, compared to the U.S. as a whole, a Goodreads user is "more likely to be aged under 35, have a grad school education and be ethnically Asian" (Slee).

Due to limitations of the Goodreads platform, a full accounting of reviews is impossible; the platform limits the user to the 300 most recent reviews, which can be the most recent reviews by date, the most recent reviews mentioning a particular keyword, or the most recent reviews of a particular rating (4 stars, 3 stars, etc.). By searching for reviews that put Coates and Baldwin into conversation with one another, I was able to narrow the sample and work within the 300-review limit that Goodreads imposes. My research revealed that Baldwin has come to represent, and be read as, the literary forefather of the intellectual tradition that produced Coates, meaning that readers often read into Baldwin's work political stances they first encountered in Coates. I also turn to blogs, Twitter, and discussion boards to trace the long-lasting effects of reading Baldwin and Coates on interested readers and the impact these works have on readers' understandings of the roles that race plays in their lives. While the readers in my sample are not a representative sample of all readers of Baldwin and Coates, they are important for my research because they have chosen to share their responses publicly and are thus influencing others' uptake of the texts.

Open Letters: Structural Similarities Between Baldwin and Coates and Invitations to Identify in Baldwin Use of Second-Person Address

James Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew" made its debut in *The Progressive* magazine's December 1962 issue. *The Progressive*, which remains in circulation today, is an American left-wing political magazine notable for a long history of pacifism, anti-McCarthyism, and civil

rights activism. The magazine was founded by Robert LaFollette, a white politician from Wisconsin who later served as governor and senator. The magazine remained in his family's control for much of the twentieth century. Although exact readership data is difficult to find, it would be fair to say that *The Progressive* brought major civil rights leaders, in the form of their words and articles, to a majority white audience. Its December 1962 issue focused on the Emancipation Proclamation. The cover reads: "Emancipation Proclamation 1863-1963: A Century of Struggle." Or, as Baldwin noted in his letter, "You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon" (10). In this issue, Baldwin's contribution appears alongside articles from Adlai Stevenson, Martin Luther King Jr., John Hope Franklin, and Paula Snelling, indicating that *The Progressive* solicited texts from a broad swath of both Black and white individuals with a multiplicity of interests, investments, and methods but a shared goal of achieving racial justice. For his contribution, Baldwin chose to write an open letter to his nephew and namesake, James. From the outset, Baldwin couches his letter in the language of love, history, familiarity, and familiality, all addressed in the second person and directed to the younger James. Published for national consumption, Baldwin's letter to his nephew also directly addresses every reader who sees themself as "you."

Similar to Baldwin, Coates also writes from his own particular, constructed standpoint to a specific individual (his son, Samori) described as having his own tastes, political beliefs, and orientations. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates locates himself as forged in Baltimore's streets, his father's Black-Panthers-filled bookshelves, and at Howard University (or, to Coates, "the Mecca"). At the same time, he acknowledges that his son has more economic power than he had; more faith in American institutions, such as the justice system; and less experience with

interpersonal racism. Coates thus believes his reader to be someone profoundly *unlike* himself. In *The Atlantic*, columnist and scholar Tressie McMillan Cottom goes so far as to argue that one of the defining aspects of *Between the World and Me* is that the book is addressed primarily to white readers, despite the letter's apparent address to Samori. The individualized Samori serves as a reasonable stand-in for one of Coates's readers, especially those with different economic, racial, social, and/or political backgrounds.

The simultaneous address to a specific individual or group, in addition to a large public audience, is a constitutive feature of the open letter. Emily Lordi, professor of African American Literature and Culture, has described this feature in Black-authored open letters as their "dual address." In "Between the World and the Addressee: Epistolary Nonfiction by Ta-Nehisi Coates and His Peers," Lordi argues that the dual address is what allows Black authors to address a primarily Black audience first and foremost and, secondarily, a white audience. According to Lordi, "Baldwin's letter-essay rhetorically privileged his nephew and namesake (with whom Black readers were invited to identify), while only indirectly acknowledging readers of the white liberal magazine *The Progressive*" (436). She supports her point by citing the following quote from Baldwin's letter: "I hear the chorus of the innocents screaming, 'No! This is not true! How *bitter* you are!'—but I am writing this letter to *you* to try to tell you something about how to handle *them*, for most of them do not yet really know that you exist" (qtd. in Lordi 436). For Lordi, this aside takes on the character of subordination, as Baldwin casts his white audience as the innocents screaming "how bitter you are!" Ultimately, Lordi argues, Baldwin influences so many future Black writers with the open letter form because it provides an ethical example of turning inward toward one's own racial community, a "kind of radical intimacy that might be

waged and staged in the belly of the American beast. To turn one's back on white supremacy was also to turn inward, toward Black love. . . Baldwin's open letter still, as I have suggested, models the literary creation of a defiant in-group intimacy, whereby one expects to be 'overheard' but refuses to be silenced" (437).

I am persuaded by Lordi's argument that Baldwin rhetorically privileges his nephew, and by extension, the Black community. It is the "you" address that enables the author to invite radical intimacy with their audience. Politically, it is also important to signal that one bears responsibility for the moral education of one's family, loved ones, and community, as Baldwin does in addressing the letter to James, a member of a younger generation.

However, I disagree with Lordi that it is possible to neatly separate out what is material intended for Baldwin's Black audience and material intended for his white audience; it is less clear to me than to Lordi that Baldwin intends for his text to be read as inviting Black readers to identify with the "you" and inviting white readers to see themselves as only the obliquely referenced "them." If this were the case, then why not publish in *Ebony* or *Jet*—popular, well-respected Black magazines with a history of political publication? Why choose *The Progressive* and its "white liberal audience"? In contrast to Lordi, I argue that Baldwin presents all readers with the opportunity to identify with the "you," as an affordance of a second-person address: by addressing the reader as "you," the author invites the reader to identify with the addressee.

This invitation to identification is of particular importance in a text such as Baldwin's letter, where the explicit addressee is a fellow in-group member and the audience can be presumed to be composed of majority out-group readers. Writing to a majority white audience

from his critically developed standpoint as a loving uncle and gay Black man, Baldwin privileges his audience with an opportunity to learn from, respond to, and be changed by his experiences about racial justice and oppression. In promoting and illustrating cross-cultural identification and intersectional alliances, I read Baldwin not only as inviting Black readers to identify with the "you" address but also as calling-in white readers who choose to identify with the "you" and disassociate themselves from "the chorus of innocents." By providing an example of what reactionary innocents, who refuse to acknowledge their history, complicity, and privilege, might say in response to his letter, Baldwin provides readers with an example of an attitude and behavioral process that readers may want to avoid. Some readers may recognize this cultural response as belonging to white mainstream culture and see themselves as within that culture—they may even recognize their own desire to dismiss Baldwin's letter as pure bitterness. But because they are presented with a different path, one that the "innocents" would not take, Baldwin allows for the possibility of his readers choosing differently and identifying with Baldwin's "you."

In moral philosophy, the second-person address represents a particular kind of ethical relationship. In *Moral Philosophy*, philosopher Stephen Darwall introduces the concept of "the second person standpoint"; he explores the relationship individuals enter into when one individual addresses another in the second person, and the reasons individuals have for complying with one another's demands in this relationship. When an individual exerts their authority to make requests of another individual in the second person, the addressee has a distinctive reason to comply: namely, they would possess the same authority if the roles were

reversed, and the address itself positions the addressee as accountable to the individual who addressed them and made their demand.

I am interested in the idea that when individuals are addressed as a "you" by a speaker, they are conditioned to understand themselves as in a relationship with the speaker, one in which demands are being placed on them, and by virtue of being interpersonally addressed, they might be held accountable for acting on such demands. Or, as Judith Butler might say, when the reader is addressed as a "you," they are "dispossessed" by the address, drawn into a relationality that highlights "ways of being for another or, indeed, by virtue of another" (Butler 19). Within this framework, Baldwin's readers are dispossessed as they each enter into a second personal standpoint with Baldwin from which they are responsible for hearing his pleas and may be made to feel responsible for acting. They are changed by being, and feeling themselves to be, the subjects of his address. Of course, not all readers will respond in the same way or hear themselves as individually called by Baldwin, but the Goodreads reviews suggest that some readers *do* feel called to the text and feel a particular, intimate relationship with Baldwin after he has addressed them.

The structural choices both Baldwin and Coates make to write the letter from their particular standpoints, to specified and individuated addressees, is markedly different from Claudia Rankine's structural choices in *Citizen*'s micropoems. Rankine collects experiences from multiple, differently situated individuals and then weaves them together into a single, authorial "you." In collapsing the different perspectives she is writing from, Rankine simultaneously speaks to a wide range of experiences and flattens differences between the ways that each individual speaker's positionality impacts their lived experiences. Rankine's authorial "you" is

thus often read as speaking to the experiences of all Black individuals in a way that can make engagement and dialogue with the text difficult. By contrast, because Baldwin and Coates intimately position themselves in individual relationship to their readers, responding to Baldwin and Coates much more approachable, or even necessary, action both because the stakes of responding to an individual experience are lower and because the reader is more effectively positioned as in a moral relationship with the speaker whom they are responsible for acknowledging.

This relationship is also different from how first and third person addresses operate because it brings readers more readily into the kind of position they are in when an interpersonal demand is made of them. It is in the second person that we imagine ourselves in relation to other beings to whom we are responsible and who are responsible to us, and in this mode we address these demands. Thus, readers' everyday lives prime them to read the "you" address as making requests of them and to consider complying—to consider themselves as morally responsible for listening to the demands being made. While Baldwin addresses both systemic and interpersonal racism, the "you" address functions to put at the heart of the conversation a specific, individual relationship (such as the one between Baldwin and the reader), particularizing the effects of—and responsibility within—the society-wide issue.

The didacticism Lordi characterizes as merely a byproduct of the form is an important, constitutive function of how the selected authors use the "you" address to educate their diverse audiences about anti-Black racism in America. According to Lordi, "The [open letter's] dual address requires writers to provide outside readers with information the recipient wouldn't need, which can result in awkward exposition" (437). Yet, if we take seriously the duality of the

address, the purported awkwardness is mitigated by the fact that a significant portion of the audience *does* need the information. Whether because Baldwin is educating a younger generation, or because his main audience is the majority white readers of *The Progressive*, Baldwin is preaching to an audience who is under-educated about his message, not solely to an in-group with a similar understanding of their life experiences.

For example, in "Letter to My Nephew," Baldwin writes:

> I know what the world has done to my brother and I know how narrowly he has survived it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it . . . these innocent and well-meaning people, your countrymen, have caused you to be born under conditions not very far removed from those described by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago. (5-6)

Here, Baldwin educates the audience about the effects of structural and historical racism on Black Americans. Baldwin's nephew, James, does not need explanation about the conditions and circumstances of his own birth, as he has lived in Harlem, in "a ghetto," his entire life. Instead, in this moment, Baldwin invites identification along more than just racial lines; with an appeal to Dickensian London, Baldwin both impressively critiques living conditions available to most Black people in America and introduces an intersectional framework illustrating that class disadvantages individuals of all races and ethnicities, forcing them to live in subhuman conditions. To identify with the "you," one need not have had the exact experiences described;

instead, one needs a willingness to position oneself along with the "you," as responsible to and willing to be educated by Baldwin's "I"—a willingness to redefine who is considered a "countryma[te]" and align oneself with the lives being destroyed rather than with "the authors of devastation" whose innocence "constitutes the crime" (5-6).

Throughout the letter, Baldwin lays out models for behavior that he believes his readers—James, a larger community of Black readers, and also non-Black readers—should adopt in the struggle. In addition to the turning toward Black love that Lordi has so elegantly and persuasively written about, Baldwin calls for a turning toward love more broadly, more inclusively: "There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatsoever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you.* The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it" (8). This instruction emphasizes Baldwin's repeated insistence that "you" know "whence you came"; without a robust historical understanding, it would be all too easy for both white and Black individuals to believe the vicious myths of Black inferiority. The challenge to love "the innocents" (a group separate from non-Black allies in anti-racism) may be difficult for some readers to swallow, a response Baldwin anticipates in characterizing it as a "really terrible thing" (8). Baldwin suggests that his letter should be taken up, should inform individuals' behavior and their orientations to the world and to each other. This kind of clarity about what he means, what he believes the stakes to be, and what kind of behaviors he believes are necessary

would not be communicated so clearly without the "you" address enticing the reader into an ethical relationship with the speaker.

Reader Responses to Baldwin's Address

Indeed, many readers report feeling changed, or called to further action, by Baldwin's "you" address. Looking at specific reviewers' responses, I argue that non-Black readers are called in by Baldwin's address, even though they are not the group the letter is ostensibly addressing, because the second-person address forges an ethical relationship between author and reader—one in which the reader comes to understand themselves as responsible to the narrator. One reader writes, "Brilliant book. Made me wince in places only because my conditioning was such that I had to recondition myself" (Alex Reads). Another reader states, "I challenge you to read this book if you think systemic racism or white privilege does not exist. Instead of just telling a story, Baldwin does his absolute best to help you realize what it's like to be on the receiving end of racism. It really broke me when I read this book" (Ceana Kim). Kim's use of the "you" address in her review hints at the impact the "you" address had on her as a reader. Though Kim describes her own experiences of reading ("it really broke me when I read this book"), she also explains that Baldwin helps "you" experience racist treatment. From this "broken" place, Kim and other similarly positioned readers can rebuild themselves in ways responsive to Black authors and activists' critiques of white supremacy. Through the second-person address, readers perceive themselves as being "taught empathy" by Baldwin and being reminded "not to forget the past but instead use it to prevent further pain and death and to hopefully have a better understanding of why we need to change things" (Ceana Kim). Other readers expressed similarly

profound and significant impacts on their lives, reporting that Baldwin "caused a major turning point in my life" and gave them "plenty to think about and, ideally, do to forestall the certain doom . . . that Baldwin seems to hold out a bit of hope can be averted" (Kommunia; Caitlin). As one reader named Tony Mercer puts it, "As a white reader, this letter and others like it, are a way for me to open my understanding to racial issues in America from the perspective of a loving relative. Rather than sweep issues of race away from the public consciousness, they need to be confronted and addressed, so as to not be destroyed by them. This letter is a tender way for me to gain understanding and insight" (Tony Mercer). Mercer details how the second-person standpoint acted on him as a reader, creating an imaginative space that felt welcoming, or "tender," as Darwall suggests a 1:1 second-person address operates, but also made him feel responsible for changing his perceptions, as one is responsible to "a loving relative." Mercer's response illustrates that Baldwin's effort to call readers in and ask them to love each other across lines of difference is an option available to readers who choose to identify with Baldwin's "you," to the point where some readers feel interpellated by the uncle/nephew dynamic.

Indeed, readers from a broad range of racial identifications claim profound perceptual shifts after being addressed by Baldwin. As Rene Anthony Ponce writes:

> I am a mixed race man, with backgrounds in Africa, Europe, and all the Americas. But for all intents and purposes, I am culturally white. At least I think so. I have not found myself consumed with the idea of race and the treatment of people in this country based on the color of their skin . . . Mr. Baldwin has opened my eyes, with words from 56 years ago, that not all is what I have thought it is. In our modern age of microaggressions, privilege, and other terms that border on

> banality due to overuse and vitriol, I find myself needing to revisit these words with grace. Do I have privilege? If so, does that matter and what should I do about it? How have I been looking at and treating my fellow Americans of a different color? Indeed, I don't even know how to ask some of these questions without fear that I am doing something wrong. But perhaps that too is a mistake. It is clear that I have a lot to learn, and Mr. Baldwin's book has spurred my interest and desire to learn as much as possible . . . now I must reconsider my reaction to 'Citizen.' There is a great outcry of pain and sadness in communities that I have been largely negligent toward. It is my duty to listen and act. (Rene Anthony Ponce)

For Ponce, reading Baldwin's address prompted him to reconsider his subject position and think through his specific embodiment and how he moves through the world. Moreover, through his second-person address, Baldwin invited Ponce to reconsider his negligence and his future conduct. Ponce now believes it is his duty to listen to what marginalized individuals have to say about their treatment and to act accordingly. Ponce's separate review of Rankine's *Citizen*, written prior to his review of Baldwin's text, presents a sharp contrast to his engagement with *The Fire Next Time*. In responding to Rankine's text, Ponce states that he is "a young man of mixed race . . . I am visibly not white" but then explains that he has "very rarely encountered racism"; according to Ponce, "looking at the United States through the lens of racism tends to make me think that one becomes trained to find it, especially where it doesn't actually exist, or at least find types and shadows of it." Ponce concludes, "I do not agree with the assumed severity of the divide [Rankine] makes present in every line. We are not the U.S. of 150 years ago, much less 50 years ago." Nonetheless, Ponce finishes his review by saying, "What I plan on taking

from this book is a chance to study the names of all the victims she has mentioned, and to pay my dues by learning as much as possible about their situation and what really, truly occurred." Thus, Ponce illustrates the ways in which Rankine's generalized "you" is often read as one that should be able to speak for all non-white individuals; when Ponce was unable to find himself in the broad range of experiences described, he closes himself off to the generalized elements of Rankine's offering. Instead, he describes how he is moved to "study the names of all the victims she has mentioned," indicating that he is persuaded that he owes "dues" and "learning" to individual victims of racism, in a way that he is unable to connect with a generalized story of racism when it does not match his own. In contrast, when he is hailed by Baldwin's address to an individual "you," Ponce is much more open to persuasion. He comes to identify his environment and embodiment as the reasons he has a more limited perspective on what kind of racism exists, no longer making himself the arbiter of what is or is not a valid claim of racist experiences. Baldwin's historical perspective, which Ponce makes sure to mention is 56 years old, seems to have altered his opinion on whether the United States is quite as far from the America of 50 years ago as he suggests in his *Citizen* review. While Ponce is only one reader, his reviews illustrate how a more individual address, in which a reader might imagine themselves in relationship with a single, specific speaker, places personal reactions and responsibilities on readers, potentially influencing their actions in the contemporary moment.

At the same time, the idea of accepting innocents with love flies in the face of several tenets of contemporary social justice movements. It is no surprise, then, that contemporary readers often choose to focus on "Letter to My Nephew" as a turning toward Black love and the Black community without addressing aspects of the letter that suggest Baldwin is charging an

entire generation of Black readers with loving ignorant, innocent white people. I do not characterize Baldwin's concept of love as uncomplicated, unconditional, or even as suggesting that "innocent whites'" behaviors themselves must be accepted; instead, I read Baldwin as arguing that Black individuals are charged with working toward the re-education of the innocents, a wholly necessary position but also one that is out-of-step with present-day social justice norms, in which individuals are expected to be able to do their own race work and provide their own racial educations. Baldwin's notion of love is, at its core, an inter-personal, collective vision that encourages readers to see their lives and futures as inextricably linked with one another's and to see themselves as responsible for the development of others' educations and characters. It is precisely because love is such a culturally saturated, universalizing term that Baldwin puts his faith in it as the experience, the sentiment, that can cut across American racial divides and work toward healing them. Indeed, in line with Lordi's argument about dual address, Baldwin's letter may operate differently for other readers who are themselves racial minorities or who easily identify with the "you" of this letter because they identify as minority subjects for reasons such as sexual orientation or disability. For such readers, Baldwin offers the possibility of a different kind of identificatory practice. As Jose Esteban Muñoz suggests in writing about a different work of art, "The public component helps one imagine a remade public sphere in which the minoritarian subject's eyes are no longer marginal" (23). The open, public address of Baldwin's letter, the rhetorical privileging of his nephew and by association a broader Black community, helps one imagine joining a political sphere in which Black love and Black relationships profoundly shape conversations, policies, and coalition-building efforts.

Coates's Use of the Second Person Address

While at times structurally similar to Baldwin's letter, Coates's subject position and political project differ explicitly from Baldwin's own. While Baldwin makes gestures toward the ways in which he has been shaped by a broad swath of forebears, Coates seems reluctant to name his intellectual forebears, working to distance himself from his predecessors. The only explicit reference to Baldwin at all is an attempt to sidestep comparisons to Baldwin. Referencing a trip to Paris, Coates writes, "I did not think much about Baldwin or Wright. I had not read Sartre nor Camus, and if I walked past Cafe de Flore or Les Deux Magots, I did not, then, take any particular notice" (111). Later in the same paragraph, Coates cites the only influence he acknowledges while in Paris: "I walked outside and melted into the city, like butter in the stew. In my mind, I heard Big Boi sing: 'I'm just a playa like that, my jeans was sharply creased./I got a fresh white t-shirt and my cap is slightly pointed East'" (111). Despite distancing himself, Coates actually creates a lineage of authors with whom he might be compared: Wright, Baldwin, Sartre, Camus, Big Boi. That he had not read Sartre and Camus at the time of his Paris trip seems to imply that he has since read them, and as his work itself demonstrates, Coates has been influenced by the existentialist movement. Like Ellison and Baldwin before him, Coates includes famous white authors in his intellectual heritage. Coates suggests, then, that he is not just a Black author capable of writing only protest novels and essays; he is his own man, with his own unique influence that is not too indebted to any individual or movement.

Despite Coates's distancing moves, he places an emphasis on Wright over Baldwin throughout the text, mentioning Wright in the title and epigraph, and his connection to Wright is in keeping with the intellectual history he builds throughout the work. In "The Year of Black

Memoir," Imani Perry, professor of African American studies, writes, "Ta-Nehisi Coates's work has been likened to James Baldwin, but he is the son of Richard Wright . . . That the book is a letter to his son makes readers think of Baldwin's letter to his nephew, but the comparison is not particularly apt."

Coates's history is more heavily influenced by Wright and the Black Panthers and other Black nationalist thinkers than by Baldwin. Coates writes lovingly of his father's extensive book collection, telling his son, "Your grandfather loved books . . . books about Black people, by Black people, for Black people spilling off shelves and out of the living room, boxed up in the basement" (34). As he explains, Coates cut his teeth on this library: "I read through all of Dad's books about the Panthers and his stash of old Party newspapers. I was attracted to their guns, because the guns seemed honest. The guns seemed to address this country, which invented the sheets that secured them with despotic police, in its primary language—violence. And I compared the Panthers to the heroes given to me by the schools, men and women who struck me as ridiculous and contrary to everything I knew" (34). Coates later doubles down on this position, writing about Black History Month, "it seemed that [February] could not pass without a series of films dedicated to the glories of being beaten on camera. . . . They seemed to love the men who raped them, the women who cursed them, love the children who spat on them, the terrorists that bombed them. Why are they showing this to us? Why were only our heroes nonviolent? I speak not of the morality of nonviolence, but of the sense that Blacks are in especial need of this morality" (34-5). Coates disengages from the lessons of the Freedom Riders because guns and violence seem more "honest" and more readily speak to his experiences of growing up in Baltimore. Coates's characterization also serves to distance him from Baldwin,

who preaches love as a necessary component of achieving racial equality. Coates here also acknowledges the power of reader reception: the project is essentially dead in the water if the addressee cannot see past the disparity in how white and Black historical heroes are (re)presented, chosen for veneration, and taught.

Unlike *The Fire Next Time*, which is primarily told in the second person, Coates's *Between the World and Me* also spends time in the realm of the "I," as Coates recounts his personal anecdotes and most formative moments. About the violence he witnessed in his Baltimore youth, and the privileges possessed by young white boys, who had more money and less fear for their bodies, Coates writes, "I felt in this a cosmic injustice, a profound cruelty, which infused an abiding, irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape. Do you ever feel the same need? Your life is so very different from my own. You still believe the injustice was Michael Brown. You have not yet grappled with your own myths and narratives and discovered plunder everywhere around us" (26). From this example, it is clear that Coates casts the reader as someone quite differently situated, and thus distant, from his own location. The effect of this distancing move is further delineation of Coates's imagined readers as either very young people, from backgrounds different from his own, or majority white readers, who might benefit from a pedagogical lesson in how to question one's innocence.

Where Baldwin uses the "you" to call readers in, to address them as if they already know the message he wishes to send, Coates rests more heavily on a rhetorical divide between teacher and student, ultimately creating an unbridgeable gap between himself and his readers. This is in contrast to Baldwin, who rhetorically addresses, and therefore creates, an educated, politically conscious and conscientious group, of which the reader may or may not actually be a part but

which they are invited to join through the "you" address. Baldwin distinguishes "you" from the individuals who reject his invitation and accuse him of bitterness. In this way, Baldwin positions himself and his reader in the same "relatively conscious" place from which they, as a group, are responsible for taking collective steps toward changing America. Coates, on the other hand, positions himself as fundamentally apart from his readers. The "I" of his text has struggled with the question of how to live free in a Black body, with rejection of the dream, and with the various myths propagated in America. The "you," on the other hand, has not yet struggled—has lived a different, more insulated life than Coates's "I." In this way, Coates's "you" is a distancing technique rather than a move toward calling in. His "you" might not have grappled with American myths yet, but Coates has, and he has concluded that, ultimately, the process of grappling was an internal, self-directed project.

Emphasizing primarily the differences between himself and the addressee, Coates's questions also take on an accusatory tone, faulting the reader for being in a different position than Coates himself is. After he asks, "Do you ever feel the same need [to escape the earth]?" Coates immediately goes on to imply that the reader must not feel the same need—and thus is more comfortable in America than he is, more naive, more complacent, more willing to accept the ways that the myths of America as a meritocracy and a land of liberty and justice for all perform cover-up work for the nation's profound, systemic injustices. Thus, in underscoring the important differences between himself and his readers, Coates positions the reader as a passive receptacle for his teachings; from their position as passive learners, Coates's readers are disempowered from engaging in dialogue with him given their profoundly unequal footing and the positioning of readers as having little of substance to offer the conversation.

This positioning creates a complicated bind in Coates's text: on the one hand, Coates, offering knowledge created from his standpoint—from his angle of vision, which white readers would not possess—means to teach his readers something about what they have been unable to see about Black male experience in America. This address, then, indicates that Coates believes readers can be changed, can adopt new orientations to the world, by reading his text. At the same time, Coates leaves open very limited orientations for his readers to have toward his text: in passively accepting Coates's teachings, the reader must either adopt Coates's position wholesale—in essence, adopt Coates's standpoint, an impossibility—or remain allied with "the Dreamers." But from either position, opportunities for dialogue is foreclosed: genuine back-and-forth with the self (or with someone positioned identically to the self) is not possible, because neither party would have anything to offer the other, and dialogue with someone radically other from the self is also not possible because each party's worldview and knowledge base is too disparate to reconcile. For example, by suggesting a causal link between "not yet grappl[ing] with" American "myths and narratives" and recognizing that the justice system itself is the injustice, Coates implies that fundamental truths about the nation and the world must be experienced and adopted in the same ways, and to the same degree, that he adopted them. This narrowing of possibilities for response plays out in readers' responses to the text, in which they express profound confusion about what kinds of interaction with, and responses to, Coates would be appropriate, as we saw with Brooks's genuine struggle to determine whether he should speak back to Coates.

Reader Responses to Coates

The reader, in an ethical relationship with Coates's "I," and responding to the dialogic nature of being addressed by a letter, is often left wanting to reply but is also caught between Coates's implication that his standpoint must be adopted and the simultaneous impossibility of ever fully inhabiting the position of another. Online readers often express deep uncertainty about how to deal with Coates's message, feeling a need to respond to him at the same time as they see few possibilities for dialogue. For example, the Clark Honors College at the University of Oregon started a blog for students in order to foster discussion about books chosen for the college's common reading program. In August 2016, students were given *Between the World and Me*, in addition to some optional reading suggestions, and they were prompted to respond to the following questions: "In reflecting on *Between the World and Me*, what points will stay with you? Did you find it to be optimistic? Pessimistic? Why so?" Overall, students at the University of Oregon expressed that they would never be able to understand what Coates faces in the world as he stares down the potential for disembodiment at the hands of the state and other actors. While Coates invites this reaction by positioning readers to either occupy his same stance (an impossible request) or be pushed out, many readers struggle with how to fold Coates's book into their future actions. For example, Oregon students expressed similar concerns as some Goodreads users, questioning whether Coates provides his readers with a way forward. One student writes:

> When I finished reading the book yesterday, I was puzzled. It had not ended like I expected. Instead of hopeful words of wisdom and encouragement, I was met with unanswered questions and personal frustration. . . . What was the point of the

> book if it didn't give the reader a direction to move forward? I still remember reading the last page and feeling like Ta-Nehisi Coates had left something out. Surely this couldn't be the end of the book. What must this generation do to change the institutionalized racism of our culture? . . . Eventually, I remembered there was a list of supplemental materials online and quickly scoured them to find answers. It wasn't until I read Michelle Alexander's book review for The New York Times [sic] that I started to feel less uneasy. I wasn't alone; she initially felt the same way I did about the book. Eventually, however, she came to understand that Coates didn't intend to answer all of our questions. Instead, he intentionally omitted giving us answers in order to force us to think for ourselves. This immediately resonated with me. It all made sense! After all, one of the major premises of the book was learning to question (and continually question) the world around you . . . the book had suddenly changed before my eyes. What was once dismal had transformed into a message of hope and faith in individual reflection. (Makenna Pennel)

Pennel's response is richly layered. It demonstrates that readers are often thinking about works in conversation with other works and are curious about others' responses. For Pennel, the process of reading and forming an opinion about texts involves reading beyond the original text and considering the work in context. Pennel also demonstrates the clear expectation of some readers in my research sample that Coates will provide a way forward. In doing so, Pennel echoes Perry, who finds that "Coates doesn't try to convince us of enough regarding how we ought to respond to the condition of Blackness under the thumb of American racism . . . What ought we to do

about it?" Perry herself concludes by expressing some frustration about Coates's work: "I know it is not fair to ask for a different book than the one he chose to write. The frustration I share should not be set at Coates's front door, but issued instead to those who have chosen to make the book a singular guidepost on race today. It doesn't respond to those most pressing questions of race and shouldn't be approached as if it did." Perry, then, also expresses frustration that Coates does not grapple with pressing questions about race, in addition to frustration at his reception as the ur-text on the contemporary Black experience.

Pennel, I argue, is caught in Coates's double-bind that positions readers both as empty vessels in need of his guidance and as moved to respond to him via the connection established between author and reader. As Pennel explains, "Coates didn't intend to answer all of our questions. Instead, he intentionally omitted giving us answers in order to force us to think for ourselves." While I agree that Coates, in part, wants his readers to "think for [them]selves," Pennel also positions Coates as the singular voice Perry is concerned he is becoming. In Pennel's engagement with *Between the World and Me*, she first charges Coates with speaking for Black America, a reaction encouraged by the form of the text, and then, from this position, with solving centuries-long problems facing the entire United States. Indeed, as explored in earlier chapters about Kara Walker's work, Coates, as a representative of an entire racial group, is similarly (and unfairly) tasked with providing solutions he is seemingly uninterested in providing and is also not actually capable of delivering on.

Further, Pennel illustrates how individualizing and isolating the experience of identifying with Coates's "you" can be, expressing relief that she was not "alone" when she finally discovered Alexander's review, confusion that there were no answers for her generation, and her

final realization that Coates meant for his readers to think for "[them]selves," providing hope in "individual reflection." Indeed, in her review of *Between the World and Me*, Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), writes that Coates has not "yet discovered for himself the answers to the questions that he poses." Derik Smith, professor of African American literature and culture, responds to Alexander by arguing that "close reading of the text actually suggests that Coates has an answer to the principle question he sets for himself, which is 'How do I live free in this black body?' His surprising and troubling answer is 'With hopelessness and privatized black nationalism'" (183). Smith implies that when readers, like Alexander, do not recognize Coates's individualist answers to the collective problem of racism, they might be inclined to view Coates as refusing to offer answers. While I am sympathetic to Smith's reading, I also believe that Coates offers his knowledge in such a way that suggests he believes that the kinds of learning and change that Baldwin seeks to encourage in his readers are not, in fact, possible.

Perhaps because Coates's vision, his "way forward," also pushes away readers whose experiences do not match Coates's own, some readers struggle to identify whether Coates offers a way forward at all; indeed, in his concluding passage, Coates writes, "I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves. And still I urge you to struggle. Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca. Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name. But do not struggle for the Dreamers. Hope for them. Pray for them, if you are so moved. But do not pin your struggle on their conversion." Here, Coates seems to be speaking directly to Baldwin, or at least a Baldwinian understanding of how to relate in the world. In a rare move for Coates, he

chooses to address his son as "Samori" rather than simply as "you," an implicit reminder to the reader that he is writing a letter to a particular subject and, thus, also invoking Baldwin's letter to his named nephew James. Additionally, while Coates offers reasons why his son should continue to struggle—his ancestors, his family, the Black community Coates found at Howard—these reasons to "struggle" are in opposition to Baldwin's belief that his nephew must "love"—and struggle for—the innocents. At best, the charge is an individualized one to struggle, learn, and grapple on their own toward an individualized future where, best case scenario, many people individually reject the false promises of American racism.

Despite these profound differences between Coates and Baldwin, many readers approach B*etween the World and Me* similarly to how they approach *The Fire Next Time*, looking for both texts to provide a learning experience. For instance, one of the most robust discussions about *Between the World and Me* on Goodreads was started by a reader searching for guidance because paratextual materials accompanying *Between the World and Me* promised something the reader ultimately felt Coates did not deliver on. Goodreads user Dana DesJardins asks, "The flyleaf posits that this book 'offers a transcendent vision for a way forward.' While Coates insists on self-interrogation, education, solidarity, and awareness as individual strategies, I did not find a 'transcendent way forward.' Some help please?" DesJardins's question itself is telling: because of the conventions of the genre, Coates is expected to provide "a way forward" for readers—so much so that his publisher promises this is the work the letter does, even if readers ultimately question whether the book achieves this goal.

Coates successfully conveys to a broad swath of readers his central message that "the Dream" is a toxic construct allowing for the perpetuation of systemic racism and that individuals

must learn to think outside of this construct if any "way forward" will be possible. Reader Robert Westbook replies to DesJardins's question, "I think his aim was most of all to throw a brutally honest illumination on the past (and most especially the present), so that we can attempt to formulate a way forward only after we've been honest with ourselves about what's going on, and the harmful delusions we've been living under." With 42 likes, Westbrook's comment is the "most liked," and in this context the most endorsed, view of Coates among Goodreads users participating in the discussion. Other readers provided similar understandings and goals. Claudine writes, "The 'transcendent way forward' is for Americans to realize the Dream does not exist. For this to happen, we have to accept that race is a social construct, not a reality. Race is a lie we've been fed for centuries."

At the same time, the Goodreads reviews indicate that some readers are not prepared to view such an individualist strategy as much of a step forward, wrenching Coates's words into a more collectivist reading. As user Bret Forkner replies, "any way forward requires that we awaken from the dream. This awakening is individual, but I think the way forward involves finding others who wish to awaken and creating a life and a world in which we can be awake together." In Forkner's reading, although individuals come to consciousness about racism on their own, no progress can be made until individuals reach out to others and forge coalitions. Many of Coates's readers buy into the idea of "the Dream" as a salient concept structuring—and poisoning—American life, but they also refuse his conclusion that an individual can only lean on themselves. Instead, as Fornker demonstrates, some readers take Coates's suggestion about individual awakening to mean that after one has a personal awakening, one must find others who have also become "awake" to the toxicity of the Dream and forge forward together.

This effect is consistent with Coates's messaging overall. As Coates writes, "If my life ended today, I would tell you it was a happy life--that I drew great joy from the study, from the struggle toward which I now urge you . . . The changes have awarded me a rapture that comes only when you can no longer be lied to, when you have rejected the dream. But even more, the changes have taught me how to best exploit that singular gift of study, to question what I see, then to question what I see after that, because the questions matter as much, perhaps more, than the answers" (105). In this excerpt, Coates provides his audience with the key to a happy life, which hinges on the "rapture" engendered by freedom from the Dream, lies, and other false promises made in America. Internal struggle and coming to consciousness, described as an individual process, are Coates's suggestions for living free and well. While I would agree with Coates that a continual questioning of the world and subsequent introspection is a significant part of what's necessary to have an antiracist orientation toward the world, I also believe that our question-asking must also be turned toward others, in order to invite those around us to contribute their knowledge and to grapple together toward answers to difficult, foundational problems. Indeed, without the continual shifting of position and generation of knowledge afforded by genuine dialogue, question-asking and introspection are unable to yield large-scale changes as selves and others are unable to be changed by one another and instead remain statically sealed off.

Conclusion

Overall, in my sample, I find a tremendous amount of intellectual curiosity and desire to construct anti-racist lives among online readers of Baldwin and Coates. This desire also seems

evident in the incredible popularity of Ibram Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* and Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race*, both works that purport to provide answers for how to forge anti-racist lives and how to be better, more respectful countrymates to racial others. Coates, Kendi, and Oluo each spent time atop the *New York Times* bestsellers list, both when their books were published and again in 2020, in the wake of Minnesotan Goerge Floyd's murder at the hands of police. These social networking sites demonstrate that thousands of people are doing the reading. They are responding to calls from individual authors and they are searching for instructions, how-tos, and what-to-do-nexts, and they are looking toward Black authors to guide them there.

Despite the widespread use of practices, such as the reductive forms of standpoint theory discussed in previous chapters, that increase ossifications in American culture around race and contribute to dysfunctional cultural silences around race, these reader responses suggest that a loud, large community is yearning for, and choosing to pursue an education about, ways to incorporate anti-racist changes into their lives. They are looking for answers about how to remediate the harmful effects of racism—they want this so badly that they read against the grain of Coates's text because they desire more of a roadmap, or collective sense of what to do, where to go next, and how to get there. What is lacking, however, appears to be examples for dialogic engagement that model ways in which to speak across lines of racial difference, to make knowledge from our situated, lived experiences, to share this knowledge, and to allow ourselves to change and be changed by our contact with the other.

However, because Coates is so often taken up in Baldwin's shadow, readers tend to insert their readings of Coates into Baldwin's vision of an America healed by collective action. Even if

individual readers themselves haven't read Baldwin, the professional readers whose criticisms and responses to Coates they interact with often mention Baldwin and construct a direct intellectual lineage from Baldwin to Coates. The result is a collective community turning toward each other for answers, even when Coates might have intended something different. In my view, it is exactly this turning toward one another and the struggle to communicate with one another that is needed in this moment.

In this chapter, I hope to have demonstrated some of the affordances of being invited by an author, addressing a specified you, to imaginatively occupy the standpoint of another; indeed, I offer this personalized, but limited, interaction across difference as one way to engage readers in beginning the process of viewing their worlds differently, to increase their capacities to imagine lives unlike their own, to become more awake to racial oppression and make changes in their lives to abate racism. Readers openly discuss having their minds changed by these texts and having their views of the world profoundly influenced by Baldwin and Coates, but this kind of engagement is not always possible when individuals do not feel charged to respond. Indeed, through this exploration of Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew" and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, I have demonstrated the ways that the "you" address calls some readers in, awakening their moral sentiment and expanding their capacity for imagining lives different from their own. In Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew" and Coates's *Between the World and Me*, the effect of a specific narrator addressing a specific reader as a "you" is a productive way to forge a relationship with readers in which the reader feels compelled to respond. In Baldwin's letter in particular, the you address, and the one-on-one feeling it engenders, appears productive for speaking across difference and fostering careful consideration.

Chapter 5 Imagining the Underground Railroad to Freedom: Role playing the Standpoint of Another and Constraints on Users' Imaginations in Contemporary History Museum Exhibits

Playing the Game: An Introduction

I've been asked whether I'm ready to run. I've left my brother and sister behind. I'm told I've been traveling smart, "mostly walking at night and hiding by day." I'm trying to make it just a little further under the cover of a rapidly retreating night sky, when I hear slave catchers and their dogs on my trail.

"What are you going to do now?" The guide asks me.

I've been here before, and my choices led to my one-way ticket back to the plantation I escaped from. My guide presents me with the same options he did last time: do I plan to "Climb a tree and hide," an option I now know holds no promise, "rub onion on the soles of my shoes," or "turn around and head south"?

I panic. I'm ready to give up. I tap the screen to tell my guide I'm planning to turn around and head south. In the moment between the tap and the updated screen reflecting my choice, I feel sure I've made the wrong choice again.

My guide offers surprising news. I've been granted a reprieve. "It might go against your gut," he explains, "but it's better than being trapped up a tree. You might just fool those slave catchers. Why would you be walking south if you were a runaway slave?" Not only did walking

south work, at least temporarily; the game has not interpreted me as wanting to give up on my pursuit of freedom. Suddenly, I'm reminded of how hungry I am. I'm faced with another choice, constrained to a series of options I can't imagine myself ever choosing.

I'm playing "Escape to Freedom" at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. Located on the water's edge of the Ohio River, the Freedom Center opened to visitors in 2002 and welcomes over 100,000 visitors each year ("Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Community Report"). Within their exhibits, the Freedom Center offers several immersive experiences about escaping slavery, dramatizing the process by which enslaved individuals left the United States and sought freedom in the Northern United States and Canada. "Escape to Freedom" is an interactive touchscreen-based role play game that asks visitors to imagine themselves from the standpoint of a "freedom-seeker" running away from a plantation in Maryland via the loosely connected resources of the so-called Underground Railroad. The game seeks to engage visitors' historical imaginations, expanding their ability to imagine what escape was like, what it would take to succeed, and how many would-be freedom-seekers are returned to the plantations from which they escaped.

Such digital role play offerings are increasingly popular at museums and cultural institutions. At the Freedom Center, over 50,000 visitors per year choose to pay an additional fee in order to experience a virtual reality simulation of Rosa Parks (Christopher Miller, email messages to the author, July 31, 2020). Here, visitors don a Samsung virtual reality headset, which brings them visually and aurally to the moment when Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat in 1955. The museum describes the experience as offering a "first person perspective" of

Parks's civil disobedience with the express purpose of "teach[ing] a new generation about the Civil Rights Movement" (Glavic and Johnson). Dr. Michael Battle, Executive Vice President and Provost of the Freedom Center, promises the experience will present visitors with the opportunity to "get to experience Rosa Parks' [sic] courageous act through her eyes and gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges and sacrifices of civil disobedience" (qtd. in Glavic and Johnson). From his perspective as one of the experience's designers, John Pilkinton claims that the Rosa Parks Experience "can give people in the present a connection to people and experiences from the past by using VR to create virtual worlds that add layers of details and emotions" (qtd. in Glavic and Johnson). Both Battle and Pilkinton suggest that the experience is explicitly pedagogical, meant to teach users about historical figures, movements, and social justice through emotional appeals, sensory immersion, and imagination. Similarly, in the "We the People" exhibit at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, visitors can use touchscreens to imagine themselves as Supreme Court justices reviewing the facts of landmark civil rights cases and deciding the cases for themselves ("The Story of We the People"). In Dallas, visitors to the George W. Bush Presidential Center are invited into the Decision Points Theater (which shares a name with Bush's memoir of his presidential years) in order to revisit some of the critical decisions Bush made during his presidency. Center visitors then "play the role of President and dive into the decision-making process" as they are invited to "[h]ear from presidential advisers and voice how you would act as President when faced with major crises such as Hurricane Katrina or the troop surge in Iraq" ("Permanent Exhibit: Critical Decisions"). Visitors can also engage in role play experiences in venues such as Colonial Williamsburg (Williamsburg, VA), Old Sturbridge Village (Sturbridge, MA), Monticello

(Charlottesville, VA), Burritt on the Mountain (Huntsville, AL), Flight to Freedom (Detroit, MI), and Conner Prairie (Fishers, IN).

Individuals are asked to imagine themselves across lines of difference on a near-daily basis, by entities both expected and unexpected. For instance, in June 2020, Peloton, the spin-bike-manufacturers-turned-app-and-all-around-home-fitness-brand, released a series of themed exercise videos to mark the occurrence of Juneteenth. While themed classes are nothing new for the platform, the choice of a historic theme, and the level of role play requested of participants, is much higher than during the app's more typical Disney- or pop-music themed classes. During one Juneteenth meditation, for example, viewers are asked to breathe in and visualize waiting for freedom, hold their breath for longer than usual in order to represent the two years enslaved people in Galveston, Texas waited to find out about their freedom, and finally exhale as they, like those who read the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865, are granted freedom (Peloton).

My incomplete list of the museums, living history exhibits, and digital platforms asking audiences to engage in historical role play demonstrates how pervasive this kind of imaginative experience is for people in the United States who choose to engage with American history. Indeed, American origin stories, myths the country tells about itself and its founding, American institutions, and foundational forms of American authority are made accessible in this very particular, constrained, and limited way to audiences at a wide variety of cultural institutions across the country. As such, institutions have great power in shaping Americans' orientations to these myths through their use of structured, imaginative historical role play. In this chapter, I hope to surface some of what is opened up, what is enabled, and what kinds of thinking and

emotional responses might be fostered by these role play experiences in which audiences are asked to briefly inhabit an other's standpoint. I also highlight what might be foreclosed by these simulations and experiences, including the kinds of nuances that are easily overlooked when too much of the focus is dedicated to immersion and the ways in which choices in how to frame the experience might make invisible particular historical realities or encourage over-identification. It is critical, I argue, to take these kinds of experiences seriously, because for the vast majority of the country's residents who do not regularly interact with people racially, culturally, economically, socially, or physically unlike themselves, these experiences offer opportunities to think outside themselves and develop the imaginative capacity to think, act, and speak in ways that would enable the disruption of oppressive systems. At the same time, these experiences are constrained by numerous factors, including the hosting institution's values; the narrative and interactive structures of game types; the consequences of gamifying historiography; and the expectations, desires, and idiosyncrasies of participants.

Given the centrality of standpoint theory to contemporary social justice debates, and given standpoint theorists' interest in the kinds of knowledge about the other that can(not) be gained through interaction and sustained engagement, I situate my analysis in relation to a 1990s debate between political theorists Seyla Benhabib and Iris Marion Young, offering their debate as one of the many ways that questions about imagining oneself as the other have plagued individuals both inside and outside of the academy. Benhabib and Young disagreed about the possibility of an individual taking the standpoint of the other, with Benhabib contending that it is possible and desirable to imagine the experiences of an other and Young arguing that all such efforts are necessarily an erasure of the lived experiences of others. Seeking a middle ground

between Benhabib and Young, I resurface this debate because of the broad popularity of imaginative role play invited by museums, cultural institutions, brands, and public figures. I want to closely examine the kinds of interactions across lines of difference that various scripted invitations to role play invite and foreclose. I also build on the work of rhetorical museum studies scholars, such as Lauren Obermark, who has also written about the Freedom Center, and rhetorician M. Elizabeth Weiser, in addition to the work of Scott Magelssen, a historian working at the intersections of museums and performance. Together, these varied perspectives demonstrate how cultural experiences can affect how individuals conceptualize themselves, their individual and shared histories, their communities, the lives of others, and our shared futures.

In making my case, I focus on the "Escape to Freedom" interactive role play exhibit at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. I detail my experiences of the game, providing a first-person account of what I was thinking while playing and how I learned to think like a historical other, as the game's choices made it clear that in my present-day incarnation, I never would have made it to freedom. I argue that the game offers a form of imaginative role play experience that invites users to occupy the role of a historical other, allowing users' decisions to substantively shape the outcome of the experience even as the possible set of decisions the user can make are constrained by the available options. The available options are set by the hosting institution, therefore leaving the user metaphorically "voiceless" but not "choiceless" in shaping their experience of the role play simulation. I argue that while the game succeeded in forcing me outside of my own imaginative realm and into that of the generalized historical freedom-seeker, the conclusions available to me were profoundly shaped by the values of the Freedom Center as an institution. Those values include freedom for all human

subjects—in my view, a worthwhile, if reductively presented, value to instill in visitors—as well as an appreciation for the "free state" of Ohio as opposed to the "slave state" of Kentucky, a juxtaposition that allows the museum to position Ohio as a gateway to freedom and celebrate Cincinnati as an important locus of historical tourism.

In order to think through the limitations of virtual, choice constrained role play experiences, I also invoke the Decision Points Theater (DPT) at the George W. Bush Presidential Center, arguing that participants in both "Escape to Freedom" and the Decision Points Theater are offered interpretations of history that advance each institution's respective values. In analyzing performance studies scholar Sarah Bay-Cheng's experiences in the DPT, I find the DPT to be structurally quite similar to my experiences of "Escape to Freedom." However, the constrained-choice, virtual role play of the DPT offers an interesting point of comparison with "Escape to Freedom" because my values are inimical to those inculcated by the Bush Presidential Center and, therefore, I am distressed by the Center's practices of distributing state propaganda, advancing Bush-style right-wing policies, and preserving a particular legacy of Bush and his presidency, with all the factual distortions that such a project entails. The DPT is a powerful reminder of the importance of the values of the hosting institution and whose standpoint the institution asks the visitor to occupy.

I rely heavily on the first person in this chapter in order to foreground that I am writing from my particular standpoint as a queer Latina who has worked to adopt an intersectional, anti-racist framework. My experiences of the Freedom Center are shaped by my interest in experiences that seek to expand individuals' imaginative capacities and by my role as a willing, compliant user of the Freedom Center's tools. My interpretation of the Freedom Center is also

informed by the fifteen other historical museums, sites, and experiences I visited and participated in as research for this chapter, including the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Museum in Niagara Falls, NY; the National Museums of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.; the Harriet Tubman homestead in Auburn, New York; and an embodied Underground Railroad escape simulation at Burritt on the Mountain in Huntsville, Alabama. Given my advanced training in the academic humanities, I am aware that I have access to analytical frameworks that shape my experiences and that may not be available to all visitors of the Freedom Center. For this reason and many others, my experiences do not fully account for the varied possibilities that emerge when unruly users resist the institution's offerings.

In exploring the Freedom Center, I also want to shift the focus of analysis away from the rhetoric of transportation and rhetorical education, as existing scholars of the museum have explored, toward the second-person invitation to role play and interpretation, to visitors invited to imagine and make meaning from the position of the museum's subjects, because *I imagine* that if we are to make progress toward a more racially, economically, and socially just nation, we will need to imagine ourselves, at least sometimes, as outside of our own lives, experiences, and contexts. For most of the nation, day-to-day life isn't providing sufficient contact with people substantially unlike ourselves to consider these perspectives as we make decisions. As guests across America visit the Freedom Center and similarly positioned museums that have increasingly invested in imaginative role play experiences (the Freedom Center alone has added at least two of of these experiences since Obermark finished her dissertation), they oftentimes arrive carrying the experiences of racially, economically, ably, and socially segregated acculturation with them, because the United States remains a deeply segregated nation. In these

museums, over a million visitors per year are being asked, with varying degrees of success and nuance, to imagine the lives of historical, racial, and economic others. What kinds of engagements with others do these experiences encourage? What kinds of imaginings do they foreclose? And how do the hosting institution's values affect these imaginative possibilities? These are the questions I seek to answer as I explore imaginative, immersive role play experiences at the Freedom Center. Ultimately, I argue that while these experiences are not presently dialogic, they could be augmented if museums were willing to facilitate debriefing activities for participants, such as dialogue or question-asking sessions between participants. Constrained-choice, imaginative role play experiences provide an opportunity to briefly leave ourselves and inhabit the position of an other, but without some facilitation, participants may imaginatively displace the other or over-identify with historical subjects. However, with guidance, participants could be encouraged to engage with one another and come to understand the process of relating to individuals across lines of difference as a profoundly social and dialogic process, which, in turn, may improve individuals' abilities to conceptualize the lives of others unlike themselves as worth living and defending, especially in places where participants have few opportunities for engagement across lines of differences in their daily lives.

Imagining Oneself as the Other: Theoretical Interventions

Over several years in the early 1990s, political theorists Seyla Benhabib and Iris Marion Young carried out a public debate about the possible usefulness of adopting the standpoint of an other in political contexts and contexts that involve speaking across differences in social position. In Benhabib's view, in order to demonstrate moral respect for the other, one must take

the standpoint of the other in a symmetrical, reciprocal relationship ("In Defense of Universalism" 187). Benhabib argues that the standpoint of the other is not knowable in the absence of the voice of the other—"taking the standpoint of the other" requires imaginative work that would move somewhere along the continuum from a completely generalized other (who does assume the particularities of an individual's social situatedness) to a concrete, particular other (with specific likes, dislikes, habits, histories, and needs) (180). Benhabib enjoins the reader to imagine a parent who tells a child not to hit a classmate but instead to imagine how the child would like it if they were in the position of the classmate. In this example, Benhabib illustrates the power of imaginative capacity to conjure other life experiences and bring an individual outside of their own relatively narrow position. At the same time, one's imaginative capacity is limited by the number and quality of experiences one has with others who are differently situated and unlike oneself.

Expressing concern about the limits of individuals' imaginative capacities, Young proposes that asking an individual to swap positions with an other in order to take their standpoint is neither possible nor desirable, as individuals are often too enmeshed in their own perspectives to truly understand the perspectives of another, and they tend to project themselves, their own privileges and particular histories, onto the situation. To illustrate her point, Young details the case of an Oregon-state public health program that planned to refund able-bodied individuals for some medical procedures while refusing to refund claims by disabled individuals for the same procedures (41). In order to justify support for their program, state health officials surveyed able-bodied Oregon residents and "asked them to put themselves in the situation of a person in a wheelchair, or a blind or deaf person," and a "majority of respondents said they

would rather be dead than wheelchair-bound [sic] or blind" (42). Although the program was discontinued because it was found to be in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Young rightly points out that the imaginative exercise involved in the story fails, in a majority of instances, to compel individuals to truly take into account the standpoint of the disabled other when imaginatively switching positions with them (42). Instead, respondents project their own able-bodied experiences, privileges, and prejudices onto disabled individuals, distorting disabled people's actual experiences with ableist fantasies about which lives are worth living. I believe Benhabib would agree with Young that this example represents a distortion of the perspective of the other, as Benhabib contends that the voice of the other is necessary for understanding the perspective of the other, and the voices of disabled Oregon residents were absent from both the policy creation and the survey soliciting its justification. Where Benhabib might disagree with Young is whether it would be possible to listen to others' perspectives sufficiently enough to be able to then responsibly represent these perspectives and make policy decisions that account for their subject positions and concordant needs. I do not claim to be able to settle the debate between Benhabib and Young, as neither was able to settle the debate when both were living, but I do consider it a model in communicative scholarship, and I find it is useful for thinking through the possibilities that imaginative role play experiences open up for participants.

Young and Benhabib agree on the necessity of taking the other's perspective into account in moral decision making, and they agree that the voice of the other is necessary to understand the perspective of the other. Here, I extend their argument into other scenes of speaking across difference, such as classroom discussions, student-instructor interactions, social media conversations, and museums and cultural institutions across the nation. During role play

activities hosted by museums, individuals are asked to imagine themselves as others distinct from themselves and to think about what consequences in decision making would follow if they shared the life experiences of such others. In this sense, I argue, such venues serve as potential training grounds for learning to take the position of the other.

Recent cross-disciplinary scholarship and cultural artifacts demonstrate widespread interest in how museums invite visitors to imagine the experiences of historically marginalized groups and concern about the possibility of othering already vulnerable populations over the course of this work (Dubey; Whitehead). In the field of museum studies, scholars are also investigating questions that have focused on participatory exhibits and the powerful potential of museums to inspire new identifications in their visitors. In her comprehensive study of national museums, *Museum Rhetoric: Building Civic Identity in National Spaces* (2017), rhetorician M. Elizabeth Weiser analyzes the possibilities for identification fostered by museums' special collections of "narrative, space, and object" and practices that allow "individuals to identify with collectives" such as the nation (4). Establishing her method as "rhetorical museology," Weiser suggests that through their collections and exhibits, national museums "select, reflect, and deflect the story the nation tells about itself" (6). According to Weiser, taking a rhetorical approach to the study of museums allows scholars to move away "from fruitless discussions of the 'truth' or 'bias' of museum exhibits into more useful discussions of how these exhibits craft a version of the past to promote values for the future and what that means for each visitor. The question is not whether or how museums shape the past story but why they do so in this way, at this time" (7).

Focusing more on the level of individual participants, other studies of museum exhibits have indirectly dealt with the profound opportunity museums present for imagining oneself in

the standpoint of the other. In *Simming*, historian Scott Magelssen explores participatory experiences at a range of cultural institutions, from living-history museums to military training camps. He defines simming as "simulated, immersive, and performative" experiences "in which participants played out a scripted or improvised narrative in order to gain or produce understandings of a situation and its context" (3). As opposed to virtual simulations, such as those in video games, Magelssen's simmings require live, three-dimensional, in situ simulations where people are asked to play a role in order to re-instantiate the past, bring into being the future, rehearse something, or engage in all three activities (5). One of Magelssen's case studies involves his experience with "Follow the North Star" at Conner Prairie, a living-history museum in Indiana, where museum visitors are invited back at night to role play as enslaved individuals escaping via the Underground Railroad (33). According to Magelssen, the experience "subjected us to a bruising evening of embodied history. No amount of reading or spectating, we found, promised the particular charge of this kind of learning. It was physiologically impressed on our bones and muscles as we knelt in abject submission before our racial betters, dashed from our pursuers, or huddled on the floor of a Quaker family's candlelit kitchen with a meager repast of cornbread and water" (33-4). For Magelssen, there is no more powerful way of learning than through embodied history; when he participated again in the "Follow the North Star" experience years later and discovered that the program had been modified in order to remove some of the more stressful and aggressive elements, Magelssen reported feeling that much had been lost and the experience was no longer as valuable (45-6). In a perplexing move meant to justify his particular experiences at Conner Prairie, Magelssen acknowledges research suggesting that adult museum goers learn best when they are comfortable, but based on his own individual experience,

he believes that individuals also need to be challenged, and therefore made to feel discomfort, in order to learn (43).

In advancing an argument based on his anecdotal experience, Magelssen both ignores extant research done on groups of museumgoers and collapses two very different kinds of discomfort: (1) the kind of discomfort that comes from not feeling safe in one's environment and fearing for one's own physical safety (i.e., the kind of discomfort happening at Conner Prairie, and the same kind of discomfort that museum studies researcher Marilyn Hood argues is detrimental to museumgoers' learning), and (2) the kind of discomfort that comes from trying to integrate new knowledge into our current understandings of the world. Indeed, the research Magelssen cites about adult museum learners suggests that infrequent museum goers may find even the institutional space of the museum itself uncomfortable enough to foreclose potential learning in the space, to say nothing of a more stressful, uncertain immersive experience (Hood 151). As such, while I agree with Magelssen's contention that some amount of discomfort is often a sign that challenging learning is happening, I question the necessity of verbal degradation, physical labor, and extreme stress in lessons about the Underground Railroad, and as I will discuss, I worry that this kind of experience might produce what rhetorician Lauren Obermark calls "dangerous over-identification," which "can result in a simplified understanding of historical and contemporary civic issues, an especially troubling result when identification is used for pedagogical purposes" (47).

Historical and immersive museums also make decisions about when, how, and how much to encourage visitors to explore the museum in a particular format, which in turn can have a profound impact on how visitors position themselves with respect to the museum's subject

matter. For example, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center suggests that the museum can be explored in any order, and the mobile app tour available to visitors supports this freeform exploration of the museum's exhibits, allowing visitors to tap "Walk Inside the Slave Pen" whenever they are ready to do so, rather than presenting materials in a particular order. This curatorial choice to encourage freeform exploration carries both risks and benefits. Furthermore, it stands in contrast to other museums focused on historical trauma and atrocities, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, both of which guide visitors through an enforced elevator trip to the "start" of their exhibitions to explore the museum in a particular order (Ellsworth). As Elizabeth Ellsworth argues in *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, and Pedagogy,* the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is particularly effective at staging a "powerful and compelling scene of pedagogical address" (51). The particular design of the museum, in which realist representations of the Holocaust are rejected and visitors are led through the "structural steel" building in a particular order, "creates a space of radical relationality by putting visitors' selves in relation to history not by collapsing the difference between now and then . . . but by insisting on displaying the *space of difference* between here and there, now and then, insider and outsider to the Holocaust" (52). In Ellsworth's interpretation, then, the Holocaust Memorial Museum successfully avoids reductive invitations to identification with historical subjects, rejecting the premise that individuals can ever fully inhabit an other's standpoint. Institutions creating spaces and exhibits that offer opportunities to learn about the experiences of marginalized others while also foregrounding the space of difference between visitors and actual historical subjects seems

to be a critical step toward learning how to act in ways that would benefit marginalized groups without believing that one can speak for them or fully inhabit their perspectives.

Additionally, Ellsworth's experience at the Holocaust Memorial Museum highlights the ways in which institutional values and curatorial choices coalesce in creating particular kinds of experiences for visitors. Museums that predetermine the route visitors must take through their exhibits tend to demonstrate a greater commitment to providing nuanced historical context for visitors than museums that rely on visitors' own knowledge base (however robust or paltry it may be) to dictate their experience of the issues being presented.

In contrast, museums that encourage visitors to take a more freeform approach to their exhibits appear to be more institutionally invested in allowing visitors to choose where they want to be and to form their own identifications with the subjects in particular sections of the museum. For example, when the Freedom Center employs the rhetoric of transportation, it asks visitors to transport *themselves* into the lives of others, from their modern perspectives and with their own biases and prejudices. In this scenario, visitors are limited to the imaginative frameworks and understandings they already have when they arrive at the museum,which may be full and deep or might be quite shallow. Visitors are especially likely to be anchored in their existing frameworks if they choose to visit the Slave Pen first, before visiting other educative, contextualizing sections of the museum that might help them to develop a more robust understanding of the particular needs, desires, and lifeworlds of historical others.

In "Rhetorics of Proximity," rhetorician Dennis Lynch offers an analysis of works by Cornel West and Temple Grandin, arguing that both authors teach us "how to live with obstinate bodies and irreducible complexity" by maintaining the differences between individuals when

communicating across difference, rather than assimilating them, and by working toward something new together (20). Most usefully for my purposes, Lynch draws a distinction between different kinds of responses to works by an other. As he writes, "If I am to move towards another, without displacing the other, I must displace myself" (17). According to Lynch, displacement of the self cannot happen immediately, magically, or overnight; instead, it occurs when one is willing to change one's living conditions (broadly conceived) in order to change or improve the conditions of an other (17). As Lynch acknowledges, "It is almost too simple to say, here, that—if blackness and whiteness are inextricably linked—we cannot change the conditions of blackness without changing the conditions of whiteness" (22). Nonetheless, for Lynch, to move toward an other without displacing the other, one must be willing to change oneself after contact with the other.

Lynch contrasts this idea with more traditional notions in which individuals imagine that by empathizing with others, they are changing only the people they are empathizing with, without reflection or impact on themselves. This traditional understanding of empathy is what Obermark and Iris Marion Young mark as problematic because it inadvertently invites individuals to supplant others' experiences with their own: In moving towards imagining the standpoint of the other, I displace the other's lived experiences with my own. This kind of displacement of the other might happen, for instance, when one does not know enough about the other to imagine their life as worth living (as Young discusses in the example of the Oregonian disability survey); when one does not have sufficient context and historical knowledge to recreate what the other's life might really have been like, such as when one believes that because they had an uncomfortable voluntary experience of being yelled at while visiting Conner Prairie

that they understand what being enslaved was like (as I fear can happen in Magelssen's example); or in texts, museums, and experiences that evacuate nuance of historical experience and ask individuals to make overly simplistic connections between past and present. I keep this distinction in mind throughout my analysis: which role play experiences, and why, provide opportunities for participants to move towards others by inviting them to displace themselves rather than displacing others? What conditions make moving toward the other more or less likely to happen?

Ultimately, although these museum studies scholars diverge at various points, they seem to share an important takeaway: namely, that it is critical that visitors be given opportunities to apply their learning. Magelssen, however, seems to approach the idea of visitors' learning from an under-theorized position. In *Simming*, he argues that an immersive experience is often educative, but if it does not provide learners with information about how to convert the lesson into practice in their own lives, then it "falls short" (306). Magelssen writes: "If engaging the representation gives the viewer some understanding of injustice in the past without an accompanying suggestion of how to approach its current consequences, we should reserve our approval" (307). I understand Magelssen to be saying that no matter how emotionally moving an experience is, if a participant doesn't continue thinking about the experience after leaving the museum, then what the museum hoped to impart is lost in transmission. However, I also find it important to keep in mind that it may not be possible, or sufficient, for visitors to be taught "some kind of understanding of injustice in the past" with an "accompanying suggestion of how to approach its current consequences" without oversimplifying the relationship between historical subjects and present-day museum visitors and, in that way, encouraging its own form

of over-identification that might promote the kinds of forgetting that Magelssen claims to want to avoid. Furthermore, while I might want to embrace the institution's values at some museums–such as the Holocaust Memorial Museum, which guides visitors to understand the scale of the atrocity, ways to prevent genocide in the present, and the impossibility of ever being "inside" the Holocaust or identifying with its survivors–I am also aware that, at another museum with different values, the takeaway might look more like political indoctrination or cultural appropriation. Additionally, unlike Magelssen, I am not invested in "reserving my approval" of any of these museum exhibits. I don't see it as my role to classify some exhibits as "good" and others as "bad." Rather, I wish to surface the ways in which museums' institutional values shape their exhibits and the kinds of experiences they offer, and I want to explore some of the alternate interpretive possibilities visitors might engage in that don't necessarily align with the museum's intended effects.

First, focusing on the Freedom Center, I analyze what they offer in the way of role play experiences, how such experiences invited me to develop my imaginative capacity, what shifted in my ability to imagine the life of an other, and how my experiences invited me to think about fostering community across lines of racial and cultural difference. At the same time, I analyze how the museum's institutional values profoundly shape not only the way in which they design the exhibit but also the kinds of experiences they want visitors to have, the kinds of historical identification or imagination they believe is possible or desirable to encourage in the visitor, and the takeaways they want visitors to leave the museum with. As I analyze the Freedom Center and its focus on "inclusive freedom," I contend that in advocating freedom for all in the present *and* in constructing a narrative in which Cincinnati, Ohio provided freedom for enslaved individuals

who escaped, the museum sacrifices representations of the vast majority of enslaved people who never even tried to escape, let alone succeeded; in so doing, the museum sacrifices the crucial opportunity to discuss small, quotidian forms of resistance.

Situating the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

I visited the National Underground Railroad in June 2019, on a road trip to several historic Underground Railroad sites, including Harriet Tubman's homestead in Auburn, New York and the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center in Niagara Falls, New York. Located in downtown Cincinnati, Ohio and tucked in alongside the city's football and baseball stadiums and its historic skyscrapers, the Freedom Center almost seems out of place. The museum's decidedly modernist aesthetic seems to announce that something different from the rest of Cincinnati happens within its walls. The Freedom Center is bordered by the busy Second Street on one side and the Ohio River on the other. From the Freedom Center, visitors can look across the water and see the museum's central themes on geographic display: on the opposite side of the river lies Kentucky, a former slave state, from which some enslaved individuals attempted escape, often by trying to cross the treacherous river into the free state of Ohio. Indeed, as the website claims, "Our physical location in downtown Cincinnati is just a few steps from the banks of the Ohio River, the great natural barrier that separated the slave states of the South from the free states of the North," making a claim as to the centrality and uniqueness of Cincinnati, Ohio in the nation's historical fight for equality ("Our History"). The museum makes several references to its location as well, and the museum's riverside location is also visible from the Freedom Center's Slave Pen exhibit, a nineteenth-century structure painstakingly brought to

the museum in order to provide visitors with an immersive experience inside the living quarters of enslaved people (Obermark 57-8).

The museum's founders envisioned the Freedom Center for over a decade before it was opened to the public in 2004. They imagined that it might serve as a "healing institution" that could help "promote dialogue so that Blacks and Whites experience more trust and mutual respect" ("National Underground RR Freedom Center"). Ed Rigaud, the museum's founder, claimed that he was not necessarily interested in the museum's ability to change individual minds but instead to bring people into dialogue and better understand each other's perspectives and standpoints ("National Underground RR Freedom Center"). The Freedom Center is exceedingly well reviewed on popular social media and travel recommendation sites, with a 4.5/5 star rating on TripAdviser and a 4.5/5 star rating on Yelp. Additionally, the museum has received grants from the Kellogg Foundation, a 2016 Award of Achievement from the Ohio Museums Association, and a 2020 "Travelers' Choice Award" from TripAdviser for receiving top marks in terms of service, quality, and experience provided by the museum. The museum explains its mission as follows: "To reveal stories of freedom's heroes, from the era of the Underground Railroad to contemporary times, challenging and inspiring everyone to take courageous steps for freedom today" ("Our History"). Thus, the museum is explicitly oriented towards helping visitors make connections between the past and present that would allow them to recognize modern-day inequities and take actions against these injustices. The museum's founders also describe their role as filling a void in the "nation's cultural heritage" ("Our History"). In the same paragraph, the museum suggests that this cultural void may have to do with conversations around freedom, invitations to liberatory action, and the history of the Underground Railroad:

"Rooted in the stories of the Underground Railroad, we illuminate the true meaning of inclusive freedom by presenting permanent and special exhibits that inspire, public programming that provokes dialogue and action, and educational resources that equip modern abolitionists" ("Our History"). I am interested in the museum's articulation of its own goals, in particular the language suggesting all of the ways in which the museum hopes to yield specific forms of liberatory actions, such as dialogue and abolition; however, I find that the museum, in its invitation to over-identification with its historical subjects, is unlikely to deliver on these goals. As the museum's own language suggests, the Freedom Center is not quite interested in traditional kinds of preservation—the museum, in fact, has few historical artifacts to preserve—but in storytelling, in resurfacing and retelling an old story for a new audience, crafting a particular narrative about the location of the museum as one central to the shared American value of freedom, for use by visitors in the contemporary moment, so that they may apply these values to their own lives.

Other scholarly visitors to the Freedom Center have noted the museum's unique location and its simplistic focus on the Underground Railroad, questioning the institution's ability to live up to its stated goals of "freedom" in the present (Obermark). In her dissertation, "Revising Rhetorical Education: Museums and Pedagogy," Lauren Obermark studies the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center as a site of rhetorical education, where visitors are taught about American history and encouraged to participate in present-day civic discourse (1). Focusing on two primary sections of the museum: the slave pen and the "Slavery Today" exhibit, Obermark explores the ways in which the Freedom Center encourages its visitors to identify with the freedom-seekers and abolitionists that the museum profiles. She argues that the Freedom

Center, and the Slave Pen exhibit in particular, encourage "dangerous over-identification" that Obermark is troubled by because she is concerned that it may lead visitors to believe they have fully understood slavery's impact on the enslaved, or lead them to appropriate slaves' experiences, without a concurrent mandate from the museum about how to make change in their present moments. Obermark finds that while museum-goers in her study have emotional responses to the museum and are "clearly impressed and moved during their visit, there is no indication that they will now 'take steps for freedom today,' as the [museum's] mission statement hopefully espouses" (69).

For Obermark, the over-identification fostered by the Slave Pen occurs in part through the museum's free audio tour, available at the time of Obermark's visit as an iPod recording but presently available via the museum's mobile app. Visitors enter the slave pen while the audio tour tells them what is known about the history of the structure, such as its estimated construction in the early 1800s, and invites them to imagine that they are enslaved people penned in by the structure (62). Through this immersive bodily experience, the Freedom Center suggests that "to look is not enough. To listen is not enough. The visitors must be transported from their realities and experience this history as if they were alive during it" (62-3). Obermark expresses concern that the experience encourages "trivialization or deflection," either undermining the significance and difficulties of enslaved peoples' experiences or failing to account for the embodied and political realities of enslavement, and thus distorting participants' understanding of slavery. Through the creation of easily identifiable, stock characters in the narrative of slavery, such as the helpless, young enslaved girl, the evil slave trader, and the hard-working enslaved man, visitors are "transport[ed]" to pre-Civil War America, encouraged to make connections

with over-simplified versions of people who lived at that time, and thus bridge the gap between present-day tourists and historical others: "Visitors are encouraged to adopt an uncomplicated identification: 'I've witnessed these people speaking. So I have felt the effects of slavery.' But this experience is generalized and oversimplified, once again creating an over-identification that works to persuade visitors to claim an intimacy with slavery that cannot exist" (66-7). Immersion experiences, similar to what historian Scott Magelssen experienced at Conner Prairie, can give the viewer a false sense of knowing what the historical event was "really" like, while the visitor is, in fact, still comfortably within the confines of a museum (or an outdoor simulation). The dangers of over-identification are compounded by the fact that visitors are not asked to critically engage with the experience; for Obermark, any identification without critical engagement—which she suggests might include "learning about historical and racial difference and being able to discuss it with others," especially in ways that prompt reflection and try to prevent participants from trivializing the experiences of enslaved people—cannot achieve the museum's goals of raising awareness and may lead, instead, to dangerous co-optation.

Though Obermark does not refer to it as such, it seems to me that the concept of catharsis, and its false promises, is useful here, as the museum experiences that Obermark describes position visitors both to believe they have experienced the realities of slavery through their immersive techniques and to quickly put the experience aside, leading them to believe they have fully encountered, processed, and dealt with the trauma of slavery in such a way that simply is not possible in such a short time period and in a scenario without sufficient stakes for the visitor. Like Obermark, who suggests that reflection and discussion with others are important dimensions of critically engaging with the historical experiences depicted at the Freedom Center,

trauma and testimony scholar Shoshana Felman and psychiatrist Dori Laub recommend that participants engage with a discussion facilitator in order to prevent silence, suppression, trivialization, dismissal, or premature catharsis, which risks foreclosing further engagement from the visitor if they believe that they have fully processed the historical phenomenon at hand (71-2).

When I visited the Freedom Center in June 2019, I had a very different experience of the slave pen from what Obermark describes. Housed in a bright room in the museum, with high ceilings and windows overlooking the river, the Slave Pen felt both familiar and wildly out of place. The room is reminiscent of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art's Temple of Dendur exhibit, in which the Ancient Egyptian temple is framed by bright floor-to-ceiling windows (and where I have spent several afternoons). Both exhibits present a study in contrasts: modernist architecture and historic artifacts together in one institutional space, made timeless by the stylistic juxtaposition. Without listening to the audio tour, I felt like the room was cavernous and the slave pen itself was empty. Nothing immediately indicated to me what the interior of the space might have looked like at the time of its use, nor even what its purpose was. Where would it have been located? What kinds of foliage, flora, or fauna would have surrounded it? How many people would have been forced inside? What labor was involved in its construction and who was responsible for it? Rather than feeling a sense of over-identification, I felt an unbridgeable distance, like the water between Ohio and Kentucky, for all I know about fjording streams. What was the museum even trying to persuade me of with the inclusion of this historical structure, except that it was worthy of preservation? Because I had little sense of what I was looking at and little opportunity to imagine myself as an other, I cite this example as a reminder

of the varied experiences possible within a single space and the importance, in some cases, of encouraging visitors to experience the space in a particular way (e.g., by handing out headsets to provide guidance).

My sense is that Obermark ultimately categorizes the Freedom Center as failing at the "persuasion of visitors—in this case to make them more aware" because her evaluations of the museum are ultimately tied to her astute observations about the ways in which the museum trivializes the experiences of formerly enslaved people. Indeed, my experience of the Freedom Center leads me to conclude that the museum trades historical accuracy for appeals to identification with fictionalized enslaved African Americans because it is invested in promoting diffuse notions of modern-day freedom. In other words, the Freedom Center may be succeeding at raising visitors' "awareness," but they are raising awareness more about contemporary issues of enslavement than about historical facts about slavery in the United States.

Further, in creating a culminating exhibit about present-day human rights violations within a museum otherwise focused on the historical institution of the Underground Railroad, the Freedom Center ultimately positions formerly enslaved people and their stories as fungible. By making an appeal that caring about the American institution slavery should also lead visitors to care about very different cases of slavery and human rights violations, the Freedom Center metonymically replaces one specific form of slavery with other, differently located instances of slavery. This "analogizing," as Yogita Goyal refers to similar appeals in her book *Runaway Genres*, in turn encourages unhelpful generalizations about slavery and individuals' lives, and presents modern-day human rights violations as inevitable because of the temporal collapse between present-day and historical enslavement (26).

Where Obermark finds reasons for hope that the museum can live up to its mission in the "Slavery Today" exhibit, which focuses on modern-day remnants of slavery, including working conditions in sweatshops and human trafficking, I find reason for pause and further critical inquiry. As Obermark explores, "Slavery Today" poses explicit questions to visitors about where they see the legacies of slavery in their current lives and provides information about advocacy groups working to end enslavement. As Obermark writes, "[V]isitors learn from civic involvement models (the featured advocacy groups) and then can try it themselves after this 'training' is complete; they reflect in writing about how they can get involved during their visit to the museum. Observing and analyzing this exhibit demonstrates that identification can be more effective and meaningful when rhetorical education enters the formula" (74). Here, Obermark introduces what she believes is missing from the majority of the museum: a space for visitors to reflect on their experiences at the museum and process them in such a way that they make connections to their own lives and possible changes they might make, including making "commitments," in the form of written statements, to work toward ending modern-day slavery (72-3).

Inspired by Obermark but more cautious about what kinds of connections it would be helpful to have visitors making to their own lives, I propose that what visitors most need would be a facilitated pedagogical experience that encourages them to maintain and understand differences between themselves and historical others. Contemporary visitors have so many opportunities and places where they are encouraged to take up another's standpoint that a more effective way to debrief the museum's invitations to imaginative role play might be through dialogues facilitated by museum staff that help visitors position themselves in terms of both

similarities and differences between themselves and historical others. In my view, enabling viewers to recognize similarities and differences between themselves and others is more important than asking visitors to make connections between their present-day actions and global human rights abuses, in the pursuit of an underexplored notion of "freedom."

Still, I acknowledge that the institution is meeting at least some of their goals, even if their goals are not my own; indeed, I take seriously that the Freedom Center, and spaces like it, are one of the major ways in which people in America encounter historical myths and American origin stories and are encouraged toward civic participation. These spaces thus perform important functions even if I also view them as insufficient for addressing our current fractious morass of misinformation, segregation, grievance, and broken political conversation.

"Escape to Freedom": Imagining Myself as a Historical Other at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

Tucked away in a corner of the permanent exhibit *ESCAPE! Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad*, far from the "Slave Pen," views of the water, or any natural light, I heard a voice asking whether I wanted to "make a run for freedom" or "stay here in Maryland and be a slave, maybe for the rest of your life." As I walked toward the voices, I saw several touch screens stacked on wooden boxes, accommodating several players on individual screens at once. When I engaged, I was met on a digital touchscreen by the face of an actor who would be my guide. The guide, whose responses were pre-recorded and limited based on the pre-populated choice I selected, enticed me closer.

"Now the Underground Railroad ain't easy. You've got to be strong. Make good choices. Even then, nothing's for sure. Most folks get caught, and that means a whooping or worse. But get to Canada, and you'll taste sweet freedom. I'll be nearby to help you along the way, and, lord willing, I'll see you at the end when you're done running to freedom."

At this point, I have a choice—stay, engage the video game, accept the invitation to interaction, or walk away. After choosing to stay, the actor set the scene: "Okay, now, your folks have been sold further down south. You're just sick wondering if your family might get split up even more. You know your little sister and your brother will go if you ask them to. What you gon' do?" The screen shifts to provide me with a set of choices, which my guide helps contextualize for me. The screen reads: "A. Keep your plans secret B. Let them come." But for each choice, I am provided more information about the historical situation than I would have known on my own. About whether or not to keep my plans a secret, my guide says, "You don't want [your siblings] harmed and you can travel faster alone," and about whether to bring them with me, the guide suggests, "Tell them what you're up to. Let them come if they wants to." As I take too long to decide, my guide prompts me, "Go on now, Make up your mind. They coming or ain't they?" increasing my feeling that there were real stakes to the game; I don't have all day to decide whether or not I am leaving alone, because the opportunities to escape will be slim, and being able to properly prepare for the number of people on the journey with me will be critical.

Keep your plans secret, I select.

I already feel bad about leaving my brother and sister behind, but my guide seems to validate my choices, as the screen changes to watercolor illustrations by Caldecott-award-winning artist E.B. Lewis. "Traveling alone is quicker," he says. "Most slaves

run by themselves or with one or two others. If you've gots nerve, you can go back for your brother and sister later, if they ain't been sold." I'm struck by this reminder, too—that because I decided not to take my siblings, for any number of reasons I may never see them again.

The screen shifts back to my guide, who faces the camera and gestures, seeming to speak directly to me, never breaking eye contact. "Now, you've been working it over and over in your mind, trying to decipher when the best time to run is," he says. "Finally you decide to leave in the spring, leave in the fall, or leave in the winter?"

Fall leaves would sound loud, crunching beneath my feet as I make my way further north, and the winter already seems like a bad idea, for so many reasons I can think of and many that I'm sure I'm not even aware of. I decide to leave in the spring.

My guide is cautiously optimistic. "You've got good weather on your side, plus lots of fruits and nuts to eat. But easy traveling for you means easing traveling for them slave catchers, too. You're going to be running hard," he says.

On the night of my escape, my guide tells me, "You've slipped out the cabin from the farm without being caught. Now it's time for you to head up north. But how are you going to know which way to run?" He has a few suggestions: "A. Go the direction the geese fly for the winter. B. Look for the Big Dipper, that big drinking gourd in the sky. C. Look at the moss on the trees, go the direction the moss grows."

I wonder what happens if I pick what seems like an obviously wrong choice, so I decide I'm going to go the direction the geese fly for the winter.

My guide is horrified. "Now hold on! Geese fly south for the winter. You could run into the Indian Nation, but that trip's a whole lot longer. Your best bet is traveling north."

Here, it seems I am granted amnesty by the game. Rather than end the simulation, the game implicitly asks me to learn from my choices and instead choose to travel north. I note, as I stand at the touchscreen, that I have not been given the option to travel further south, into Mexico, or toward the Pacific Northwest, as some enslaved people did (Little).

My journey begins again, and my guide is back. "You've been traveling smart, mostly walking by night and hiding by day. You're trying to make another mile or two before sunrise when you hear men and dogs coming. What you do now? Climb a tree and hide; if you've got it, rub onion on the soles of your shoes; or turn around and head south?"

I don't have an onion, I don't think, or I imagine I don't, because I, Olivia, don't like onions, and I know I won't head south, because I've learned from my mistake the last time. I decide to climb a tree and hide. Immediately, illustrated dogs appear on screen, barking up the base of the tree. Regretfully, my guide reports bad news: "You just wrote your ticket back to the cotton field. Those dogs track you down in your hiding place. When the slave catchers arrive, you've got no place to run."

Interestingly, the game doesn't stop, or kick me back to the beginning. I'm expected to continue learning on the fly from my previous mistakes, holding on to the lessons like fruits and nuts in my backpack to sustain me throughout my journey. It starts to become clear to me that acting only as myself, who I am in the present moment, won't get me to freedom. I need to rely on the wisdom and prompting of my guide to get there.

My guide reminds me to tend to bodily needs. "Well now, you're so hungry, you've been walking for days with no food. It's night time now, and you think you can steal a chicken or at

least a couple of ears of corn from that farmer over there. Are you gonna go after the food or stay undercover?"

Since he's prefaced this story with information about how hungry my character is, I decide to go after the food, even though I feel nervous about the choice. But I catch a break this time. As my guide explains, "You've got nerve and this time it paid off. You're lucky no one's seen you. Mighty lucky. You've got you some corn and some chicken. Now build a fire and hide until it burns down low. Then cook it up quick and eat on the run."

I'm learning how to role play, or what is expected of me in this role play, to play with historical imagination, to inhabit a character that is me and not-me. My guide asks me whether I'll take a smooth, dry path, or whether I'll travel by way of the river. I remember that the dogs have already smelled me (in fact, I've earned myself a ticket back to the plantation from the dogs already), so I choose to travel through the river, where I'll be able to wade if I hear dogs and lead them off my scent. Finally, I reach a farmhouse with a candle burning in the window. As my guide teaches me, under the guise of a reminder offered in the second-person address, "You've heard that means there are people here who will help you, but you're not sure if you can trust them. What are you going to do? Knock on the door or stay away, keep running alone?"

I am, after all, in an Underground Railroad museum, so I choose to take my chances; I already know the real me, the one who chose to climb a tree to avoid capture and who would be too afraid to interact with strangers, has been returned to enslavement. But I hesitate too long, thinking through my various roles. "Time's a-wasting," my guide says. "What you gonna do?"

I knock.

The door opens.

“You hold your breath,” the guide says, and I do.

But “folks say, ‘Come on in, make yourself at home.’ You’re at a station on the Underground Railroad.” I exhale. “This conductor will feed and hide you for a day or two. Then she’ll drive you to Philadelphia, hidden in the hay at the bottom of her wagon.” Not knowing whether the house shelters individuals friendly to my cause is a good reminder of the disconnectedness of the so-called Underground Railroad, the degree to which it was decentralized, dependent on word-of-mouth, and always full of risks.

In Philadelphia, my guide asks an important question. “You’re on free soil now. But are you free?”

I wonder if the game is intent on reminding me that I can’t be free until slavery itself is abolished, but my guide preempts me: “Your uncle lives here, and he’ll give you a place to stay. Should you settle down or keep going on to Canada?”

Again, I’m torn. But there isn’t time for hesitation. “Best be making up your mind now,” I’m reminded. I choose to stay.

This time, I’ve made the worst choice, one I’m not sure I can recover from. “You’re free for now, but it don’t last,” my guide says. The reprieve I was granted earlier, which allowed me to continue playing after I was caught by the dogs, has come to an end. “A year after you run comes a law saying slave hunters can come up to the North and take you back down south, and that’s just what happens. Before you know it, you’re back picking cotton, working harder than ever.”

The gestures to institutionalized factors, such as laws that permit remanding enslaved people to their owners, is a good reminder that my choices are constrained: by the game, by the

norms and laws of the time and place in which I'm making my decisions, by luck, by forces outside of my control.

Lost in thought, I'm interrupted by my guide's summational statement, ending the game with an overarching message about the importance of freedom for all, in all times. "You've got to be brave," he says, "you've got to find people who will help you, and most of all, you've got to keep on trying. Things are going to happen that you can't do nothing about. Sometimes good, sometimes bad. But if you make it to freedom, ain't it worth all the hard times? See, freedom is always worth fighting for. Don't ever forget that."

The Costs of Invoking Simplified Historical Narratives

In my role play experience, I realized that both too much intervention and not enough intervention from the museum could be barriers to imaginative role play in museum spaces. Here, I explore how these tensions manifest in the "Escape to Freedom" game, arguing that the ways in which the game encouraged me to engage with imagined historical others also foreclosed my ability to better imagine what these historical lives might have been like. In constraining the visitor to a pre-selected list of multiple choice options, the institution exposes its values and, thus, the ways in which it works to inculcate viewers with these same opinions.

I am critical of the Freedom Center's reliance on the Underground Railroad narrative; the limitations of the Underground Railroad narrative include both its over-represented status in narratives of enslavement and the kinds of stories that are possible to tell within the general confines of the narrative itself. Because the Freedom Center focalizes its messages and experiences through the myth of the Underground Railroad, participants' imaginations are more

likely to be limited to simplified, bootstraps-style myths that foreclose opportunities for visitors to think about more quotidian forms of resistance.

Writing about the Underground Railroad for the Public Broadcasting Service in 2013, Henry Louis Gates, scholar of African American literature and culture, argues, "Few institutions from the black past have attracted more attention recently from teachers, students, museum curators and the tourism industry than the Underground Railroad, one of the most venerable and philanthropic innovations in our ancestors' long and dreadful history in human bondage" (Gates). Gates spends the majority of the article "myth-busting" assumptions about the Underground Railroad, including those that vastly over-represent the number of slaves freed along its pathways. He suggests that the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center's estimate that 100,000 slaves were freed via the Underground Railroad is "quite optimistic," and, citing scholar John Michael Vlach, he argues that "the greatest number of fugitives were self-emancipating individuals who, upon reaching a point in their lives when they could no longer tolerate their captive status, finally just took off for what had to be a better place" (Gates). Despite the course correction Gates offers as part of his blog series surrounding the 2013 release of his PBS documentary *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*, the specter of the Underground Railroad continues to haunt contemporary racial discourse. In *The New Yorker,* Pulitzer-Prize-winning-journalist Kathryn Schulz suggests that the Underground Railroad's popularity can be partially attributed to the fact that "the stories of those who fled slavery and those who helped them to freedom are among the most moving in our nation's history." At the same time, she notes that the Underground Railroad provides a way to tap into the "bootstraps"-style myth of heroic individuals pulling themselves up from dire circumstances,

which is so central to America's founding principles (Schulz). But as Schulz clarifies, "Most runaways did not head north, and most slaves who sought their liberty did not run away. And then there is the largest and most important context, the one we least like to acknowledge: from the vast, vicious, legally permitted, fiercely defended enterprise that was American slavery, almost no one ever escaped at all" (Schulz).

Users engaging with "Escape to Freedom" are also prevented from full-throated participation in imagining lives different from the ones the Freedom Center imagined in creating the role play. This might limit an individual's sense of engagement with the message that "freedom is always worth fighting for," or their ability to develop critical thinking skills that they can apply to their own, modern-day contexts of fighting for justice. Users who do choose to engage the game fully must see it through to the end of their journey "North," where they can either find freedom in Canada or be returned to slavery if they choose to remain in Philadelphia; there is no meaningful way to choose returning to the plantation within the game play, even though the game suggests several factors (such as family and fear) that might encourage a user to give up their bid for freedom. The prevalence of narratives of "freedom-seeking" in general, appealed to by "Escape to Freedom," constrains imaginative role play to individuals who sought freedom—saying nothing of enslaved individuals who remained on the plantations without attempting to leave, and saying nothing of the lives they lived and the many daily, often quiet ways in which enslaved Americans exercised agency and practiced resistance. I wonder, then, what a substantive engagement with imagined, historical others who did not attempt to seek freedom by escaping from slavery might position individuals to (re)consider. Despite a persistent cultural interest in and valuation of vanishingly rare large-scale demonstrations of resistance, I

am thinking here of the myriad forms of "everyday resistance" oppressed peoples throughout time have engaged in, which anthropologist James C. Scott argues are the most common forms of resistance (Scott). These forms of resistance, which Scott refers to as "ordinary weapons," include "footdragging, dissimulation, false-compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth" (xvi). A simulation that asked visitors to engage in these ordinary forms of resistance would be novel, in terms of the current landscape of historical tourism; more accurate to historical experience; useful for fostering engagement with, and thoughts about, contemporary forms of resistance; and, perhaps, helpful for imagining oneself in the place of an other without displacing the lived realities of the other. In terms of fostering engagement with contemporary forms of resistance, if an experience cultivated an understanding of the reasons why individuals don't often engage in large-scale resistance, such as insurrection, leaving, fleeing, or fighting, and instead also fostered an understanding of small-scale resistance, then visitors might be more effectively able to consider, and fight for, the freedoms of those they think of as unlike themselves, whose motivations and desires seem antithetical to their own. I also believe this kind of activity could make available to visitors an understanding that a range of resistance is possible, from the large-scale, to the small-scale, to the micro. "Escape to Freedom" and many similar museum experiences like it represent only one kind of story about African American enslavement and resistance. While this story is a familiar, easy story for most Amerians to assimilate, it is worth remembering that this narrative is also more aspirational (representative of a supposed national character) than factual—it is an American myth and desired origin story rather than an accurate representation of history.

As the above scholarship demonstrates, numerous opportunities exist for the Freedom Center to have nuanced their presentation of the Underground Railroad and its users, and yet, as the Freedom Center's promotional material, other scholars' impressions of the museum, and my experiences all demonstrate, the museum has instead chosen to lean in to popular conceptions of the myth. For example, the Freedom Center demonstrates a persistent commitment to describing only enslaved people who dared to escape as "freedom seekers," rather than adopting a more encompassing and nuanced view that acknowledges the reasons why individuals might not have attempted an escape, or the micro ways in which enslaved people sought freedom in their day-to-day lives, enacting quotidian forms of resistance, including daydreams of freedom. Indeed, the Freedom Center emphasizes that it seeks to highlight "accounts of courage, perseverance and cooperation," in addition to "the brave and clever actions of men and women who resisted slavery," indicating that the museum perpetuates bootstraps-style fantasies about what kinds of escape from slavery were possible for enslaved people and, as an institution, only values the more heroic-seeming, but vanishingly rare, displays of resistance, at the expense of historical accuracy and respect for the vast majority of enslaved people who never ranaway but nonetheless might have engaged in micro-scale forms of resistance ("ESCAPE!"). By telling one particular kind of story, even one that on the surface purports not to be about slavery per se, the museum sometimes sediments conceptions of individuals as tied to their free/slave status, rather than focusing on more nuanced representations of the individuals profiled in the museum.

At the same time, the "Escape to Freedom" game allows some limited pushback against the museum's own inaccurate use of "strength and agency" to refer only to the rare individuals who succeeded in escape, in possibilities that make it clear that luck plays a role in whether an

individual successfully makes it to free states and, once there, is able to retain their freedom. In my role play, for example, though I chose to leave the plantation and demonstrated one form of agency in my decision to do so, through unfortunate luck, I was caught by dogs that sniffed me out up a tree in which I attempted to hide. Moreover, as an enslaved person, my "agency" was quite limited; I was forced to return to the plantation despite my numerous efforts to leave it behind. Of course, it is worth noting that the very framework of the game at all, in which a player must choose to leave as the only possible demonstration of strength or agency, is a narrative-building exercise that comes at the expense of the majority of enslaved people, who are entirely erased by a framework that values only the most obvious, near impossible, exercises of agency.

Indeed, I perceive the Freedom Center as challenging common American narratives that seek to free America from full responsibility for its involvement in the institution of slavery by positioning viewers to challenge some of the assumptions they may have held before entering the museum, through experiential learning. In its exhibits, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center doesn't adopt the Underground Railroad narrative wholesale: "Escape to Freedom" casts the only viable option for freedom as located in the "North." Unlike many other dichotomous north/south presentations, however, "Escape to Freedom" pushes the northern border further north than the Mason-Dixon line, pushing back against the distinctly American national narrative: individuals who choose to remain in Philadelphia in the simulation are informed that they are caught by slave hunters and returned to slavery, indicating that the only true guarantee of freedom was to escape into Canada. This fact moved me to rethink my previous assumptions about whether enslaved African Americans could truly have freedom anywhere in

the States, when they could be brought to non-slave states and still not be recognized as having personhood, still be expected to serve their masters, or seek freedom in the north only to be returned to their plantations due to the Fugitive Slave Law or bounty-hunters.

However, this idea, too, is an example of how the Freedom Center oversimplifies the historical narrative it tells, as several scholars have discussed the numerous ways in which Canada did not offer unfettered freedom for formerly enslaved people, including through virulent racism, national fear that the emerging state would become overpopulated by Black individuals, scarce labor opportunities, and poverty, to name just a few of the conditions so difficult that some formerly enslaved people even chose to cross the border again to return to the United States (Bakan 11). Interestingly, my research suggests that Canada also uses the Underground Railroad as a foundational national myth in order to establish a particular national character (Bakan). As Canadian Black studies scholar Katherine McKittrick explains, "The Underground Railroad continually historicizes a national self-image that obscures racism and colonialism through its ceaseless promotion of Canadian helpfulness, generosity, and adorable impartiality" (98-9). As such, Canadians use the mythical formulation of the Underground Railroad to make comparisons between themselves and the regressive United States, casting themselves as the land of freedom and opportunity for all, further emphasizing the limitations of this narrative to assist visitors in imagining specific, historical others and instead focusing on simplistic, national-scale values.

Concerns Regarding the Generation of User Interest

Like all role play scenarios, virtual, constrained-choice experiences require buy-in from their audiences. But while participating in "Escape to Freedom," without a live person there to negotiate the role play and to call individuals in, I wondered how many people stop to play "Escape to Freedom." Unfortunately, the museum does not have estimates of how many people engage with each portion of their exhibits, but while I was there, I witnessed two other people engaging with the game while I played through its multiple scenarios and endings, which was overall less than the number of people who walked through the room at the time. And of the visitors initially drawn in, I am curious how many people stay with it and play until they reach freedom or are sent back to the plantation. Furthermore, when compared to in-situ simming opportunities, the constraints on users may feel limiting or off-putting, failing to raise the user's sense of stakes sufficiently to get them to see the game through to its conclusion. Without engagement, the user's imaginative capacity is not expanded and the opportunities for information transmission are foreclosed.

As someone that did engage with the experience, I found it valuable, even after only a short time, as the guide's corrective advice provided historical information that sharpened my ability to imagine generalized historical escapees. Indeed, "Escape to Freedom" provided me with opportunities to take in new historical information to better inform my choices and flesh out my ability to imagine myself in my role. Even though the choices offered to me were proscribed in advance, the availability of forked paths and the opportunity to start over engaged and challenged me in high-level thinking, providing opportunities for me to apply my new knowledge.

At the same time, as a user, I had no real way to depart from the particular story that "Escape to Freedom" wanted to tell, and I was limited in my historical imagination to the narrow scenario presented to me, as the game constrained my full-throated participation in determining the outcome of the experience, presenting me with a virtual, constrained-choice experience. For instance, even when I was caught by dogs earlier in the game and told that my bid for freedom would have ended at that moment, the game continued to offer me an opportunity to play, in order to continue role playing as a freedom-seeker, as the game reminded me that (a simplistic understanding of) freedom is always worth fighting for. Ultimately, the curating institution (in this case, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center) represents its institutional values—centered around the idea that freedom seekers' lives are of particular importance and worthy of celebration—by constraining the game play in such a way that the user must continually choose options in line with the institution's values and mission.

However, I also note that "Escape to Freedom" didn't have any of the overwhelming emotional or physical immediacy that Scott Magelssen describes experiencing while at Conner Prairie's "Follow the North Star" in situ simulation (Magelssen 43). For my part, I had mixed feelings about this lack of immersiveness: for one, I worried that for users who require greater levels of immersion in order to become interested, "Escape to Freedom" and other constrained-choice, virtual role play experiences may not appeal. I also wondered if my general lack of familiarity with video games kept me feeling distanced from the game and its content, as I felt very self-conscious about the speed at which I was progressing through the game and had concerns about whether I was doing it correctly; a user with more video game familiarity is likely to have a different experience of the game than I did. At the same time, given the

reservations I felt reading about Magelssen's more immersive experience at "Follow the North Star," including that exhibit's false promises of accuracy and encouragement of over-identification, I also believe that the distance and lack of immediacy I experienced when engaging in a more constrained role play scenario was more in line with my values, as I was invested in learning about historical others through the video game without collapsing differences between my social location and that of a person escaping their enslavement.

Thus, the effects and potential value of of virtual, constrained-choice experiences depend on the values the curating institution works to instill in visitors through the experience; willingness of users to engage and be engaged; and contextual factors in how the experiences are developed and implemented, including the choice of historical narratives to draw upon in these simulations.

The Stakes of Imparting Institutional Values

Turning toward the Decision Points Theater, where visitors are invited to take the standpoint of George W. Bush at key moments in his presidential career, I explore my concerns about the effects of denying visitors the opportunity to meaningfully object to the harms they are being asked to cause in the role play scenario. From my perspective, as someone trying to identify the tools that might help us cross entrenched social, political, and racial lines in order to forge a more just nation, when the values visitors are asked to practice are ones that encourage further division, racial hierarchies, and white saviorism, the dangers of denying visitors a voice with which to object becomes more clear. Accordingly, the values of the presenting institution

must be central to any of our analyses of these increasingly popular immersive role play experiences.

Though I have not visited the "Decision Points Theater" in the George W. Bush Presidential Library, Sarah Bay-Cheng suggests that it is a clear example of constrained-choice, virtual role play. I offer the Decision Points Theater as an important case in which the values of the institution—to promote pro-Bush propaganda, and recirculate "images central to the Bush mythos" (519)—are much more controversial than the Freedom Center's ultimate message that all individuals deserve freedom; in this sense, the stakes of leaving participants voiceless are increased when the values of the institution are tied to one particular political perspective. As with the Freedom Center's "Escape to Freedom," visitors' choices are constrained to a predetermined multiple choice list of possible scenarios. In the Decision Points Theater, visitors become "the decider," and are asked to vote on which of the following major events of the Bush presidency they want the opportunity to address decide for themselves: the Iraq invasion; Hurricane Katrina; "the surge of additional troops into Iraq"; or the response to the financial crisis (520). After the audience chooses a decision point, players "have seven minutes to review the available evidence, hear from 'experts' and 'advisors,' and render a decision" (522). Similar to the urgency induced by the questions and reminders offered by guides in "Escape to Freedom," the Decision Points Theater uses a flashing-timer at the ten-second mark, reminding the audience that their time is up. By implicitly highlighting that Bush himself did not have unlimited time during which to make his decisions, the Presidential Center provides a built-in pretext for poor decision-making and thus "harness[es] the power of digital historiography . . . to deploy history in service to an ideological agenda" (522-3). I borrow Bay-Cheng's phrase here

because it illuminates what is at issue in constrained-choice, virtual role play experiences, in which museums provide pedagogical reinforcement of their own ideological values. From Bay-Cheng's perspective, however, while the facts presented "are skewed," "there is little that is overtly coercive" about the Decision Points Theater, and audience members regularly disagree with the choices made by the president, selecting an option different from how Bush chose to respond from a proscribed list (525). By contrast, I argue that it is at least somewhat coercive, even if it is not "overt[ly]" so, to constrain visitors' choices to an available list; indeed, the Decision Points Theater manipulates its audience by not offering visitors the opportunity to respond to Hurricane Katrina by "helping" or "rescuing" victims, nor does it offer visitors a choice to never have invaded Iraq (525). Further, no matter what choices the audience members select, a video of President Bush plays, explaining the choice he made (523), suggesting that Bush's choice was the only truly available choice at the time.

Thus, in constraining the options visitors can choose from, encouraging them toward particular outcomes, and defending some choices over others, the museum constrains visitors' imaginations to options in line with their institutional values. The Bush Presidential Library makes clear that it still under-values the lives destroyed and lost during the Hurricane Katrina emergency and, in preventing the visitor from choosing an option so far from Bush's own response, such as "helping" those affected, the library suggests to its audience that the only viable options are the ones Bush himself selected. As Bay-Chang argues, "These changes within the imaginative exercise of the counterfactual instill a sense of autonomy and control, even as they lead us inevitably to the same conclusions . . . This digital theatre environment creates an experience of history as paradoxically both malleable and inevitable" (525). As such, the

consequences of the deliberation are that "rather than considering the implications of the historical narrative itself, one can get caught up in the process of deciding, in the performance of decision-making" (526).

Unlike Bay-Cheng, I don't see it as paradoxical that these museum experiences both present history as inevitable and invite participants to imagine changing historical events; instead, I see the institution as making rhetorical choices. By giving audience members an illusion of control while maintaining that history, and the present-moment it leads up to, is inevitable, the museum depicts the nation as always already constituted, as driving from the Founding Fathers to the "War On Terror" with manifest destiny, at the same time as it acknowledges that individual-level buy-in in the present is necessary for preserving national myths and values. While "Escape to Freedom" presents users with an opportunity to question whether America is ultimately capable of providing opportunities for freedom, no such moderation exists in the Decision Points Theater, and visitors are presented with massive loss of life caused by interventionist wars, poor responses to natural disasters, and disregard for marginalized lives. Indeed, when constrained-choice, virtual role play experiences encourage visitors to inhabit the standpoint of another, especially of a powerful other such as a former U.S. President, users may be encouraged to believe that history unfolds inevitably and that our individual choices cannot improve the lives of others. Overall, this may strengthen users' visions of a world in which no one is accountable to anyone and in which marginalized groups continue to be subjugated. Taking the perspective of an unquestionably agentic figure might also make users less likely to recognize marginalized knowledge and less curious about whether other "deciders" and their experiences are missing from the room.

Conclusion

Overall, constrained-choice, virtual role play experiences present an important opportunity for imaginative role play, and their implementation at high-traffic museums and cultural institutions that have invested in their interactive and digital exhibits makes understanding their uses and contours a critical element not only in studies of public pedagogy but also in studies of civic engagement more broadly. Imaginative role play has the potential to help participants practice for civil disobedience, learn about the lives of others unlike themselves, increase their knowledge of historical events, and dream of more free and equitable futures. As only one kind of imaginative role play, constrained-choice, virtual role play experiences present users with a constrained set of options from which they must choose in order to participate. This constraint, applied by the institution creating and housing the experience, limits participants to the conceptual space provided by the designing institution. From my perspective, constraints on role play are crucial, but the potential benefit of the constraints is always dependent on the values of the institutions. For example, from my perspective as someone deeply invested in disrupting oppressive structures, working toward an equitable society, and fostering dialogue across lines of difference, constraints on role-play experiences may be productively used to discourage participants from over-identification with historical subjects, to acknowledge that not all experiences are reproducible, and to allow visitors to practice thinking outside themselves and imagine the lives of marginalized others as valuable, a skill that may itself help to develop the prosocial, pro-democratic civic values I view as important to a functioning society. In other cases, such as at the George W. Bush Presidential

Library, where the institution endorses and encourages identification with one particular political perspective, I also see the limitations of constraining visitors' voices and participation, forcing visitors to play out a narrower, less imaginatively stimulating set of experiences. Even in cases like that of "Escape to Freedom" at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, where the institution's values of freedom for all are critical to bringing about a more equitable society, the constraints imposed on the visitor's choices within the simulation make imagining some kinds of lives different from the visitor's own more difficult than imagining others; as a visitor, I found it easy to imagine a generalized historical freedom-seeker with the museum's help—what motivated them, how they escaped, and the unlikelihood of said escape, despite dominant cultural narratives suggesting that escape was available to all enslaved people. At the same time, the lives of individuals who did not seek escape—but who should have been granted freedom nonetheless—remained entirely opaque to me.

Invitations to imagine oneself inhabiting another's experience also have a long history in non-virtual realms of political organizing. In 2013, when the Supreme Court of the United States effectively gutted the Voting Rights Act, Representative John Lewis, former chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and original Freedom Rider, invited the justices of the Court to "come walk a mile in my shoes," to see what he had seen, to experience his experiences, and to know that history could, in fact, repeat itself—arguing, implicitly, that if the justices had seen the things he had seen, if his standpoint were available to them, they would not have voted the way they did, because they would know how catastrophic the effects of their decision could be (qtd. in Specker). Earlier in his life, Lewis also participated in and organized role play efforts with SNCC during the Civil Rights Movement. These trainings, organized by

SNCC and CORE (Congress on Racial Equality), prepared protestors to encounter individuals unlike themselves, with goals inimical to their own, and prepared them for the difficult work of remaining committed to their own goals when faced with these challenges (Bloch; Sheehan; Oppenheimer). What the Peloton, Lewis, SNCC, and CORE role play trainings demonstrate, then, is tremendous faith in the ability of imagining oneself as an other in order to better understand and navigate the difficult world and make social change. While Lewis is speaking about his own experiences and is asking his audience to identify with his particular, situated standpoint, the Peloton instructor asks participants to step into an ungrounded, imagined standpoint, not necessarily based on any particular historical other's experiences. If we take seriously examples like John Lewis's invitation to his audience to imagine themselves on the Birmingham Bridge as he marched for the right to vote, it becomes clear that Americans are frequently being asked to do this kind of imaginative work as we work through a national conversation about race. As such, we better position ourselves to productively engage in these imaginative endeavors by understanding their affordances and limitations and by offering more opportunities that push users out of the comfort of their own perspectives and allow for substantive engagements across lines of difference that approximate, with respect, the experiences of marginalized others. It is my belief that, were this kind of role play successful, individuals would be more likely to consider the wide-ranging potential impact of their decisions—at PTA meetings, in the voting booth, in neighborhood association meetings, or in hiring decisions—on the lives of marginalized others.

I return now to Seyla Benhabib and Iris Marion Young's debate about the possibility of an individual taking the standpoint of the other in order to understand how one's actions and

choices affect others unlike oneself. In exploring the problems that arise when individuals are asked to put themselves in the shoes of an other without substantial understanding of what the other's life is like, what they value, and how they differ from the individual, Young persuasively argues that an individual is not immediately, as a matter of course, imbued with the imaginative capacity to switch standpoints with an other, and that attempting to take the standpoint of the other without dialoguing with the other can have disastrous consequences. At the same time, like Benhabib, I believe that if "[n]orms of justice for the collectivity can only be established through the widest possible participation of all involved and concerned," then "hypothetical reasoning" on the part of the other "is both inevitable and necessary" (184 "In Defense"). As Benhabib argues:

> A lot of the time we face situations of moral conflict or choice in which we cannot resort to a real dialogue, but must act, take a stance here and now. We must engage then in a hypothetical moral conversation with others whom our actions and positions will affect. Dialogical ethics urges us, whenever and however possible, to seek dialogue with the other who will be affected by my actions and choices, but there are circumstances when I must be able to choose and act even without such dialogue. (184)

With Facebook and other social media platforms providing opportunities for users to imagine the lives of others, we have only become more entangled with our friends, neighbors, countrymates, and fellow global inhabitants since Benhabib and Young carried out their debate in the 1990s.

Given our inextricable interconnectedness, I offer an example from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as an illustration of both the commonplace, everyday, unavoidable

instances in which individuals engage in Benhabib's hypothetical conversations with others and the potential costs of failing to accurately represent for oneself the position of the other in this imagining. Since 2020, we have often been asked to wear masks when entering businesses, attending classes, participating in campus activities, grocery shopping—anywhere we might come into contact with others. Mask-wearing is encouraged not necessarily to protect ourselves but in order to protect vulnerable others whom we might unknowingly infect while asymptomatic. Still, some individuals refuse to wear masks. Of course, individuals refuse mask wearing for various reasons, but because some are positioned in such a way that they are unlikely to suffer the worst of the disease's effects—perhaps they are young, or of sound and healthy body, or have access to plentiful financial resources—they assume that others are similarly invulnerable. Because they cannot see the effects of wearing a mask, or the negative effects of the disease, they extrapolate their own experiences to others (Wallace-Wells). These individuals, unable to imagine the needs of others and how their daily choices can affect them, fail at hypothetical reasoning about others. Because our choices can significantly affect the lives of others, I believe that in the absence of opportunities for dialogue, we would better position individuals in their hypothetical reasoning by providing them with the conceptual tools necessary to expand their imaginative capacities and deeply, critically engage with others differently positioned from themselves. While this work is being done to varying degrees at cultural institutions like historical and national museums, at least in terms of navigating historical or cultural otherness, I believe that the conceptual skills of perspective-taking, question-asking, and imagining robust lives unlike our own can be transferred to responsible citizenship in a

multiracial democracy. Experimenting with a method to foster question-asking in virtual role play scenarios would be an interesting, productive next-step for these museums.

If the best we can hope to achieve in imagining the desires and needs of others is what rhetorician Dennis Lynch might characterize as role play scenarios in which we displace the self rather than displacing the other, then constrained-choice, virtual role play experiences are one way to accomplish this goal. As "Escape to Freedom" demonstrates, the constraints placed on the game's user ask them to step outside themselves, rather than simply stepping into another's shoes without changing anything about their own perspectives. Unlike a more freeform role-play experience, in which users are not necessarily asked to put aside what they would do based on their own lives to date, in order to successfully navigate an "Escape to Freedom," visitors must be willing to learn from historical examples and integrate new knowledge from individuals with experiences profoundly unlike their own. As our lives are ever-more entangled and dependent on the actions of others, I encourage continued careful attention to the instances of imaginative role play individuals are asked to perform on a daily basis, by various cultural institutions, and the kinds of lives these experiences help us imagine and the kinds of possible lives they foreclose.

Chapter 6 Coda

As I wrap-up my doctoral studies, I am also in my final semester of a Master of Social Work program at the University of Michigan School of Social Work. For my final field placement, I work as a school-social-worker-in-training at an elementary school outside of Detroit. At this school, all teachers are expected to conduct a daily Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) lesson in the classroom, and the district has made clear that when they tour the school, they will be looking for "evidence of SEL" on the walls—in the posters teachers choose, the bulletin boards we decorate, the student work chosen for display. Accordingly, each week, I receive new requests in my email inbox from teachers asking if I am able to stop by and deliver classroom-based lessons meant to instruct their students on issues such as perspective taking, understanding other people, getting along, diverse identities, and navigating friendships with differently situated individuals.

While in recent years, schools have increasingly characterized "social emotional learning" as foundational skills that can be taught and that children must learn in schools, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have brought this discussion to a fever pitch. This year, many children returned to classrooms without having had meaningful social interactions with peer-aged individuals in over a year, and students have struggled to process the grief, death, and loss of the past 18 months. As defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization dedicated to advancing the cause of evidence-based social

and emotional learning in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade education, social emotional learning (SEL) is "the process through which all young people and adults acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" ("Fundamentals of SEL"). In short, the idea is that we teach children empathy to help them understand what their friends, neighbors, and teachers might be feeling, to cultivate their willingness to engage with classmates who don't interact the same ways they do, and to increase their resilience.

One of the main ways we are encouraged to teach this curriculum is by asking children to "stand in another's shoes." To this end, an oft-recommended book for teaching empathy to young children is *Stand In My Shoes* (2013), by Dr. Bob Sornson. There is precedent for the recommendation that we use books to intervene in children's emotional development: books have been used for their healing or transformative potential for nearly as long as they have existed; in fact, some evolutionary theorists even believe that "human beings developed the way they did because they learned to tell stories in order to offer instruction to their young, first orally, then in writing, and eventually also in print" (Beauvais and Nikolajeva 1). However, the idea of "bibliotherapy" did not emerge until the 1800s, when prisons in the United States began using the Bible and other religious tracts as "central to the rehabilitation of prisoners" (Sweeney 28). By the mid-nineteenth century, many prisons across the U.S. had begun to allow secular texts, to open libraries for use by incarcerated persons, and to adopt "reading as a method of treatment" in order to "foster prisoners' conformity to disciplinary and social norms" (28). As Megan Sweeney, scholar of Afroamerican and African studies, notes in *Reading Is My Window*,

penal authorities "not only sought to control what prisoners read; they often sought to control who prisoners would become" (28). Children are oftentimes painted similarly, as individuals whose moral development is at stake and must be monitored by caretakers and other moral authorities to ensure their proper development and functioning in society. Indeed, today bibliotherapy is a recognized therapeutic modality employed in schools, community mental health centers, and private practices, with a booming industry of books, workshops, classes, and blogs dedicated to teaching practitioners how to employ bibliotherapy with clients (Karges-Bone).

I mention bibliotherapy for two reasons. First, whether authors intend for their books to be used in this way or not, books continue to be a critical tool through which individuals, sometimes spurred by institutions such as public schools and universities, are encouraged to develop their moral characters, heal their injuries, and receive critical socialization. In the United States, as racism is cast as a "social ill," books are an important, readily available way in which people, as readers and writers, attempt to convey the harms of racism; work through personal and societal traumas; and adopt productive stances that encourage anti-oppressive actions. Second, I mention bibliotherapy in order to convey how widespread the educative view of literature is and to further highlight cultural beliefs in the power of books, cultural objects, and artifacts to provide models for appropriate social behaviors, including in contexts like inter-racial communication.

Bob Sornson's *Stand In My Shoes* is one such entry into the bibliotherapeutic space. When the reader meets Emily, *Stand In My Shoes*'s protagonist, she is barging into her older sister's room while her sister is studying for a test. After the interruption, Emily's sister asks her

to have empathy, explaining, “Empathy is when you understand how someone is feeling because you can imagine what it’s like to be them or stand in their shoes” (5). For the rest of the story, Emily tries to imagine how the people around her are feeling and acts accordingly, noticing when people look sad, when people are kind to her, and when others around her get hurt. One of the people Emily interacts with is her teacher, Mrs. Fitch. Emily notices that Mrs. Fitch, a Black woman, has been crying. Emily asks her teacher if anything is wrong, and Mrs. Fitch tells her that her dog died. For the first (and only) time in the book, Emily replies, “I’m not sure how you feel, but it has to hurt” (13). In every other interaction in the book, all of which occur with people depicted as being of Emily’s same race, she has a near-uncanny ability to intuit what they must be feeling. When her father spills coffee grinds before work, for example, the expression on his face conveys to Emily that he is “not very happy,” teaching children to guess what others are feeling from their facial expressions. Emily is then able to guess that her father must be in a hurry (7). Emily’s father confirms he has a big presentation at work and is running late, so Emily offers to clean up the coffee for him so her father can dash out the door. Although Emily is too young to have ever had an office job, she is depicted as understanding the morning grind, all because she understood the unhappy expression on her father’s face. By contrast, although Emily also understood the expression on her teacher’s face as indicating that Mrs. Fitch was very sad, Emily is unable to make a further inference and is presented as being unable to understand what her Black teacher is feeling when her pet dies.

As I reflect on using *Stand In My Shoes* as a bibliotherapeutic entry, I find it stark and obvious—perhaps even othering, when considered in the context of how Emily treats all other people with whom she interacts—that *Stand In My Shoes* presents the gap between Emily and

Mrs. Fitch, a Black woman, as so profound as to warrant an entirely different method of communication and empathy than Emily engages in with the book's other characters. At first, I found myself wishing that Sornson had portrayed Emily as treating Mrs. Fitch the same way she treated everyone else in the book. But upon reflection, I realized that the reason I wanted Emily to treat Mrs. Fitch the way she had treated the book's other characters was for the appearance of equality among all the characters. Without thinking about which of Emily's tactics I agreed with, I felt myself tense up while reading the book because I was afraid of what it meant that Emily was treating Mrs. Fitch differently from the other characters with whom she is learning to empathize.

On the other hand, after a moment of reflection, I realized that I think Emily is right to ask Mrs. Fitch what is wrong; in this scene, Emily models a moment of working toward an identification across lines of racial difference. Indeed, I appreciate the invitation to dialogue Emily offers her teacher, and I would like to see more instructors model question-asking and curiosity for their audiences. I am skeptical that most people, let alone a young child with a vastly more narrow set of life experiences than most adults, can intuit what others are feeling or why they are upset. After all, as I've learned in my MSW program, a vast segment of couples' therapists see "mind-reading" as one of the most detrimental interpersonal relationship behaviors; these therapists suggest asking questions about, rather than assuming, how one's partner is feeling (Bloom and Bloom; Bremner; Karantzas; Weiner-Davis). In this sense, Emily models a behavior that allows her to begin to understand what is wrong with her teacher and is then able to calibrate her response to her teacher's pain appropriately, thereby deepening her relationship with her teacher and helping her teacher feel a little less sad, even momentarily.

Because Emily asks, Mrs. Fitch is able to experience the pleasure of being seen: Emily has few preconceived notions about Mrs. Fitch and instead sees what Mrs. Fitch wants her to see in that moment. Mrs. Fitch, for a moment, is not alone.

If I were rewriting *Stand In My Shoes*, I would have Emily model question-asking with all different kinds of people. Emily would try hard not to make assumptions about people, because Emily's life experiences are limited and she has so much to learn from generating conversation with the people around her. When Emily's father spills his coffee before work, Emily would ask how he feels, because Emily doesn't yet know what it is to worry that your boss will be upset that you are late; with her sister, when Emily interrupts her studying, Emily would ask her what she needs Emily to do differently next time, because Emily doesn't yet know what it means to cram for a final; and with Mrs. Fitch, Emily would ask, as she already does, what it is that is making her sad. While I find it helpful that Sornson has Emily ask Mrs. Fitch how she is feeling, I would change Emily's response. After Emily and Mrs. Fitch discuss how Mrs. Fitch is feeling in response to her dog's death, I would have Emily thank her teacher for sharing, ask how she can help her teacher, and reiterate for herself that she has learned from her experience. Unlike Sornson, I do not want to imply that no amount of dialogue between Emily and Mrs. Fitch is enough to build a communicative, understanding bridge between one another. Emily has not had Mrs. Fitch's experiences, but Emily has felt sadness, and she has both a starting point for understanding how some people need support when feeling sad *and* the toolset to use her voice to ask Mrs. Fitch what she, in particular, needs when she is feeling sad. In each of these scenarios, Emily can mark similarities and differences between herself and her interlocutors: she may not have had the same experiences as they have, but she can learn how to

be a better family, friend, and community member to those around by being willing to respond in ways *they* suggest would be helpful, even if that differs from Emily's own preferences. As performance theorist Peggy Phelan writes to her own students in the conclusion of *Unmarked* (1993), "*It is in the attempt to walk (and live) on the rackety bridge between self and other—and not in the attempt to arrive at one side or the other— that we discover real hope*" (174, emphasis in original). In this vein, and addressing my own students, I would also change the book's title to "Stand on the Bridge with Me." While I appreciate Emily's journey to learn about the people around her, and to increase her empathy, self-awareness, listening, and social skills, I would move away from a metaphor that suggests, even temporarily, that we must stand in another's shoes, supplanting their position with ours. I wish to keep open turning toward, dialoguing with, responding to, and being changed by the other as the skills most critical to pass on to our children.

As I have advocated in this dissertation, the invitation to dialogue should extend beyond the counseling room or isolated incidents in children's books; asking questions, especially of each other, about each other, with each other is a necessary condition of living with others unlike the self. By asking others about their experiences, rather than making assumptions that may be based on totalizing narratives about similarly situated individuals, we are able to forge a new way forward—one that treats the other as an equal in imagining, and forging, the journey toward an antiracist world.

As I have also explored, and experienced, oftentimes fear prevents individuals from meaningfully engaging across lines of difference. Indeed, even I, with my stated commitments, briefly wished for Emily to make assumptions about her teacher, as she had about racial in-group

members throughout the book; in chapter 2, University of Texas at Austin professor Lisa Olstein wishes that a single Black student were enrolled in her class because she feels unequal to the task of guiding her students through difficult conversations about race and racism in America, despite her pedagogical training, her specializations in "poetry" and "poetic prose," and her stated desire to produce an anti-racist classroom ("Lisa Olstein"). In Olstein's counterfactual, if this imagined Black student were to speak, then Olstein would be able to demonstrate her ability to listen, her recognition that she supposedly does not have the experiences necessary to speak knowledgeably about racism but does demonstrate she has accepted the wisdom that she should listen, even if it means abdicating her instructional duty in favor of burdening an already marginalized student. This framework, where evidence generated from an individual's standpoint or the evidence of experience, serves as unassailable truth and where listening boxes out other possible responses, encourages well-meaning individuals like Olstein to make assumptions about entire cultural groups before asking questions. Such positions are similarly encouraged by theories such as Krista Ratcliffe's "rhetorical listening" or Iris Marion Young's "asymmetrical reciprocity." What each of these approaches shares is an effort to respect differences between individuals, often involving substantial differences in power, that inadvertently serves as an impediment to engagement across lines of difference. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, I am skeptical that such strategies can engender dialogue across difference; indeed, I believe that they often lead to well-intentioned but unbridgeable silence and stagnation, which can allow individuals with structural power, such as a white classroom instructor, to abdicate their duties under the pretense of bestowing moral respect on a marginalized other.

By focusing on the ways in which particular iterations of standpoint theory can serve as an impediment to meaningful interactions across lines of racial difference, I do not mean to suggest that there is no place for generating knowledge from our experiences. Instead, I seek to demonstrate that the sole, or even primary, reliance on this kind of evidence can encourage a dysfunctional silence between potential interlocutors that prevents the kinds of engagements, and confrontations, that I view as necessary for dismantling white supremacy. A sequel to this dissertation might involve reader interviews, which could illuminate the kinds of practices, or changes, that reading and engaging with touchstone anti-racist cultural objects may or may not engender in readers' lives. Such information might then allow me to devise pedagogical interventions. Ultimately, however, I chose to focus on my particular archive of frequently taught texts and public exhibitions because of the way they were woven through my daily experiences: in class, as an instructor, I struggled to get students to engage critically with Rankine's *Citizen* because, as the students expressed to me, they felt it was not possible to speak back to someone's experiences; as a friend, I watched a deeply caring, politically active Latina woman abdicate her voice for fear of being characterized as unwilling to listen to other racially marginalized individuals; as a student myself, I watched a professor ask a Black student to participate more vocally during class discussions about Baldwin. Diagnosing the suffocating prevalence of standpoint run amok felt vital to my continued ability to participate in meaningful, active, liberatory conversations in and outside of the academy.

Nevertheless, I take seriously Iris Marion Young's caution when she argues, "When people obey the injunction to put themselves in the position of others, they too often put themselves, with their own particular experiences and privileges, in the positions they see the

others in. When privileged people put themselves in the position of those who are less privileged, the assumptions derived from their privilege often allow them to unknowingly misrepresent the others' situation" (Young 171). Young aptly illustrates the dangers of believing that we know what others would want when she describes the aforementioned 1990s survey finding that the majority of able-bodied Oregonians would vote to deny healthcare coverage to disabled people because they would rather die than become blind or wheelchair users. As Young illustrates, the able-bodied life experiences of these survey participants have prevented them from being able to imagine disabled lives as valuable, worth living, or even desirable. As such, "Nothing about us without us" is an important practice that I would like to see more organizations adopt to ensure that the perspectives of those who live outside of the median life experience in the United States will help to shape more accessible, inclusive experiences in schools, museums, universities, and other cultural institutions. Along with better representation for marginalized individuals, dialogue and deliberation should follow, as only through asking what people need, learning which needs are and are not being met, and having the (sometimes difficult) iterative conversations that allow us to write better, more inclusive policy will we make the changes necessary toward actually creating equitable institutions.

However, in the same piece, Young asks, "If the best expression of moral respect is willingness to listen to others express their needs and perspectives . . . then why do we need the idea that moral respect requires being able to imagine oneself in the position of others?" For Young, it is neither possible nor desirable to imagine what the other might want (Stavro 141). As I bring this dissertation to a close, I wish to offer the beginning of an answer to Young's question, to offer this dissertation as a meditation on why we still need to be able to imagine ourselves in

the position of others. After all, directly interacting with others differently situated from ourselves is frequently not possible. Indeed, as Olstein experienced, even in a diverse state university like the University of Texas at Austin, sometimes college classrooms are racially homogenous. And if our college classrooms lack diversity, our neighborhoods may be even worse. According to the Brookings Institute, a majority of Americans live in racially segregated neighborhoods (Loh, et al.). As Tracey Hadden Loh, Christopher Coes, and Becca Buthe write for Brookings, our present-day housing conditions have led to the "unprecedented isolation of low-income people of color." The suburbanization of America has produced several realities that help maintain modern American segregation: (1) "The vast majority of white people live in suburbs," (2) "those who can afford [single-family] homes do not see or share space with households outside their real estate market bracket," and (3) "white people and people of color largely do not live in the same suburbs" (Loh, et al.). Taken together, and considered alongside the fact that school districts are determined geographically, the vast majority of Americans spend their days in racially and economically homogeneous neighborhoods, send their kids to racially and economically homogeneous schools, and rarely interact outside of these geographic, racial, and economic conditions. From my own experience, while the elementary school where I am placed is overwhelmingly non-white, it is not diverse. Over 80% of my students share a race and class background. While an analysis and revision of American school integration and busing policies falls outside the scope of this dissertation, it is vital to acknowledge that most Americans could spend their entire lives interacting with individuals situated similarly to themselves.

As such, I view books, movies, exhibits, and other cultural objects as critically important to introducing people to the lives and experiences of others unlike themselves. Together with

these objects, we must be prepared to both acknowledge the importance of learning about others' experiences and the skills necessary to question, speak back, and dialogue with these differently situated others. At the heart of this dissertation is the hope that with a better sense of the affordances and limitations of particular strategies for making connections across lines of racial difference, it is possible to interrupt the idea that no amount of dialogue between differently situated individuals could lead to greater understanding between them. While the best expression of moral respect may be the willingness to listen to others express their needs and perspectives, the conferral of moral respect must also require being able to imagine the position of the other. The present residential, geographical, and economic segregation of the United States indicates that without concerted education about others' perspectives, U.S. residents may remain blissfully ignorant about experiences different from their own. And, as Young herself would acknowledge, this kind of ignorance can further disadvantage marginalized people when others lack the imaginative capacity to value their lives. While imaginative role-play and experiencing others' lives through texts and cultural objects cannot be our only tool, they offer important ways to begin to move past this moment of dysfunctional silence if we couple them with strongly developed question-asking and analysis skills that position us to view others as individuals rather than as representatives of entire cultural groups.

Alas, I'm not a children's book author, but as a social worker and an educator, I will continually strive to generate dialogue with and between my students. To do this, I will use bibliotherapy with children in my practice, appreciating the power of storytelling to illustrate the wealth and depth of experiences different from our own. I will incorporate "own voices" texts, and I will teach students to ask questions, learning to position themselves in relationship to

others in ways that encourage marking both similarities and differences, affinities and aversions. I will demonstrate the importance of speaking from our experiences, while also acknowledging that our experiences are limited and they are our own—they do not generalize to entire identity groups, and we can never occupy the exact space of an other, even very similarly situated others. And I will utilize imaginative role play, hoping to pass along the skill of perspective taking. Even if we can never fully know or understand an other, even one with whom we have interacted, the bone-deep knowledge that others have experiences different from our own, and that their lives are as valuable as our own, may just be enough to encourage students to support policies that empower others, to recognize their own limitations, to respect, to listen, to question, and to deliberate.

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