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THE RACIAL IMAGINARY:
WRITERS ON RACE IN THE LIFE OF THE MIND

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**WRITERS ON RACE
IN THE LIFE OF THE MIND**

EDS. CLAUDIA RANKINE, BETH LOFFREDA, AND MAX KING CAP

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Kate Clark, **Pray** (detail), 2012 *With a nod to myths that tell of gods who appeared as and/or consorted with animals, Kate Clark's sculptures cut to the taxonomic quick to claim us all as subjects in the Kingdom of Animalia.* msc

INTRODUCTION

BETH LOFFREDA
& CLAUDIA RANKINE

The Racial Imaginary project began in March 2011, when Claudia composed an open letter about race and the creative imagination that she placed on a website¹ and invited others to respond to however they wished. If they sent a response, it was posted on the website. The notion of an open letter carried in its name a starting point for the form of these responses: personal, intimate meditations, like letters, that would nevertheless be available to an audience of more than one. Over time, Claudia invited Beth to join her in assembling the following set of compositions; and Claudia invited Max to seek out a corresponding assemblage of visual artists. This book gathers up a representative collection of what we received.

The Racial Imaginary found its start in a few intuitions. We are all, no matter how little we like it, the bearers of unwanted and often shunned memory, of a history whose infiltrations are at times so stealthy we can pretend otherwise, and at times so loud we can't hear much of anything else. We're still there—there differently than those before us, but there, otherwise known as here. And that matters for writers. That's the first intuition. The second one is that it seems a lot of us here when asked to talk about race are most comfortable, or least uncomfortable, talking about it in the language of scandal. We're all a little relieved by scandal. It's so satisfying, so clear, so easy. The wronged. The evildoers. The undeserving. The shady. The good intentions and the cynical manipulations. The righteous side taking, the head shaking. Scandal is such a help-

¹ http://www.newmediapoets.com/claudia_rankine/open/open.html

ful, such a relieving distraction. There are times when scandal feels like the sun that race revolves around. And so it is hard to reel conversations about race back from the heavy gravitational pull of where we so often prefer them to be.

There are a few other common languages for race that we'd like to evade, too. One is the sentimental, which rather than polarize, as scandal does, smudges. The other is even simpler: the past tense. Because if we're not scandalized or sentimental about race, we're often jaded instead. This, again? Didn't we wear this out already? Hasn't enough been said, haven't enough already said it? We don't want to substitute the jaded for the shocked, nor the sentimental for the jaded. Especially when it comes to writing. This collection is founded on the idea that it's worth trying to write about race, again—in particular that something valuable happens when an individual writer reflects on race in the making of creative work. Writing could be said to rest on the faith that there is something of value in witnessing an individual mind speaking in and to its ordinary history. This never stops. And it's not that the individual expression is, because of its individuality and expressiveness, sacred, beyond questioning. We're all disagreeing in one way or another in this collection. As editors we're not seeking agreement or consensus. But we believe in the beauty and importance of an individual writer speaking in and to her history with as

I met an other

much depth and seriousness as she can muster, especially when that history doesn't present it-self as an otherwise-sayable event. And since race is one of the prime ways history thrives in us, it matters that each writer says her own thing.

This collection then is best approached as a document. A moment in time, here. A series of moments in a series of individual creative lives, a collective transcript of people who were, in this time in this place, moved to respond to a question. Much can be gleaned from its incompleteness, its absences, the detectable pressures on both what is here and what is not, and for those reasons too we present it to you as a document. Something to investigate, to both trust and question. We feel the absences and the pressures ourselves very much, and we at times felt some editorial impulses regarding balance, representation, that we ended up rejecting. Rather than round out the collection, whatever that might mean, we've as much as possible left it unretouched—an instance, a demonstration, of a question asked and then answered, however imperfectly or incompletely.

As we wrote this introduction, Claudia and Beth read, individually and together, writers who have deeply shaped our own view of this thing we're calling the racial imaginary, and who can be heard in what follows: Fred Moten, Lauren Berlant, Robin D. G. Kelley, Judith Butler, Toni Morrison, and most of all James Baldwin. They

and it was hard!

helped us to see more clearly the literary moment the writing in this collection partially documents, and two intertwined things about that moment in particular. One is that in our moment, writing about race has its own set of literary and intellectual conventions that we writers sometimes use and sometimes struggle to reinvent. The other is that certain assumptions about craft and aesthetics can and do warp the conversation among writers about race. These two matters typically appear in a complex, troubled embrace.

Here are a few of the tropes you would likely encounter if you started looking at writers writing about race these days. One: I met an other and it was hard! That is lightly said, but that is the essence of the trope: the anxious, entangling encounters with others that happen before anyone even makes it to the page, and that appear there primarily as an occasion for the writer to encounter her own feelings. Another: I needed to travel to see race, I went to Africa or to Asia or to the American South or to Central America—wherever I would consider not-home—to look at race, as if it now mainly can be found in a sort of wildlife preserve separate from ordinary, everyday experience. Another: race is racism. And lastly: the enduring American thing of seeing race solely as a white and black affair, of considering anti-black racism to be the scene where the real race stuff goes down. Which is accompanied by the trope of the discount: the one that fails

to extend to other people of color an authentic fullness of experience, a myopia that renders them in the terms of the “not really.”

The matter of craft comes up clearly when we encounter the various tropes that white writers take recourse to repeatedly when race is on the table. These tropes are typically heartfelt; but their repetition should be taken as a sign. Here’s one: “The imagination is a free space, and I have the right to imagine from the point of view of anyone I want—it is against the nature of art itself to place limits on who or what I can imagine.” This language of rights is as extraordinary as it is popular, and it is striking to see how many white writers in particular conceive of race and the creative imagination as the question of whether they feel they are permitted to write a character, or a voice, or a persona, “of color.” This is a decoy whose lusciousness is evident in the frequency with which it is chased. The decoy itself points to the whiteness of whiteness—that to write race would be to write “color,” to write an other.

But to argue that the imagination is or can be somehow free of race—that it’s the one region of self or experience that is free of race—and that I have a right to imagine whoever I want, and that it damages and deforms my art to set limits on my imagination—acts as if the imagination is not part of me, is not created by the same web of history and culture that made “me.” So to say, as a white writer, that I have a right to write

. . . the scene of race taking up

about whoever I want, including writing from the point of view of characters of color—that I have a right of access and that my artistry is harmed if I am told I cannot do so—is to make a mistake. It is to begin the conversation in the wrong place. It is the wrong place because, for one, it mistakes critical response for prohibition (we’ve all heard the inflationary rhetoric of scandalized whiteness). But it is also a mistake because our imaginations are creatures as limited as we ourselves are. They are not some special, uninfiltated realm that transcends the messy realities of our lives and minds. To think of creativity in terms of transcendence is itself specific and partial—a lovely dream perhaps, but an inhuman one.

It is not only white writers who make a prize of transcendence, of course. Many writers of all backgrounds see the imagination as ahistorical, as a generative place where race doesn’t and shouldn’t enter, a space for bodies to transcend the legislative, the economic—transcend the stuff that doesn’t lend itself much poetry. In this view the imagination is postracial, a posthistorical and postpolitical utopia. Some writers of color, in the tradition of previous writers like Countee Cullen (a sly and complicated tradition, we acknowledge), don’t want to have race dirtying up the primacy of the imaginative work; want the merits of the work made free by more neutral standards. To bring up race for these writers

is to inch close to the anxious space of affirmative action, the scarring qualifieds.

So everyone is here.

Transcendence is unevenly distributed and experienced, however. White writers often begin from a place where transcendence is a given—one already has access to all, one already is permitted to inhabit all, to address all. The crisis comes when one’s access is questioned. For writers of color, transcendence can feel like a distant and elusive thing, because writers of color often begin from the place of being addressed, and accessed. To be a person of color in a racist culture is to be always addressable, as Judith Butler has argued, and to be addressable means one is always within stigma’s reach. So one’s imagination is influenced by the recognition of the need to account for this situation—even in the imagination, one feels accountable, one feels one must counter. So a writer of color may be fueled by the desire to exit that place of addressability. At the same time one may wish to write of race. And again at the same time one may wish to do any or all of these things inside a set of literary institutions that expect and even reward certain predictable performances of race. There can be a comfort, a place to hole up, a place to rest, found in that performance—that is, if that performance conforms. But even if it conforms, the performance returns the writer of color to an addressability that at any moment may become

residence in the creative act.

violent rather than safe—may become violent if the performance steps outside or beyond those comforting conformities, or even if the performance stays within them. Because the favor of largely white-run literary institutions is founded on an original, if obscured, amassment of racial power: they can always remind you you're a guest.

What we seek to detect in these examples above is the presence of a more general situation, the scene of race taking up residence in the creative act. This is what we mean by a racial imaginary, an unlyrical term, but then its lack of music is fitting. One way to know you're in the presence of—in possession of, possessed by—a racial imaginary is to see if the boundaries of one's imaginative sympathy line up, again and again, with the lines drawn by power. If the imaginative sympathy of a white writer, for example, shuts off at the edge of whiteness. This is not to say that the only solution would be to extend the imagination into other identities, that the white writer to be antiracist must write from the point of view of characters of color. It's to say that a white writer's work could also think about, expose, that racial dynamic. That what white artists might do is not imaginatively inhabit the other because that is their right as artists, but instead embody and examine the interior landscape that wishes to speak of rights, that wishes to move freely and unbounded across time, space, and

lines of power, that wishes to inhabit whomever it chooses. Or that wishes to absent from view whomever it chooses.

It should also conversely not be assumed that it is easy or natural to write scenarios or characters whose race matches (whatever that might mean) one's own. This is the trap that writers of color in particular still must negotiate; it's the place where "write what you know" becomes plantational in effect.

We acknowledge that every act of imaginative sympathy inevitably has limits. Perhaps a way to expand those limits is not only to write from the perspective of a racial other but instead to inhabit, as intensely as possible, the moment in which the imagination's sympathy encounters its limit. To see what that shows you that you have not yet seen. Or: to realize one might also make strange what seems obvious, nearby, close.

Are we saying Asian writers can't write Latino characters? That white writers can't write black characters? That no one can write from a different racial other's point of view? We're saying we'd like to change the terms of that conversation, to think about creativity and the imagination without employing the language of rights and the sometimes concealing terms of craft. To ask some first-principle questions instead. So, not: can I write from another's point of view? But instead: to ask why and what for, not just if and how? What is the charisma of what I feel

She meant

estranged from, and why might I wish to enter and inhabit it. To speak not in terms of prohibition and rights, but desire. To ask what we think we know, and how we might undermine our own sense of authority. To not simply assume that the most private, interior, emotional spaces of existence—the spaces that are supposed to be the proper material of the lyric and the fictive—are most available for lyric and fictive rendering because they are somehow beyond race. To not assume that the presence of race deforms the creative act, renders the creative act sadly earthbound. We are ourselves earthbound. And race is one of the things that binds us there.

Crucial in what we're saying above is that we don't want to talk only of writing across racial divides. For we wish to also unsettle the assumption that it is easy or simple to write what one "is." Why might I assume it is easy to write what is nearest to me? How do I know what that is—and what do I miss when I keep familiar things familiar? It should be difficult to write what one knows—and if it is too easy, it is worth asking if that is because one is reproducing conventions and assumptions rewarded by the marketplaces of literature. And here again the racial preferences—the particular plots, the particular characters, the particular scenarios and personae—favored by literary institutions put special pressure on writers of color, threaten to deform what such

a writer is assumed to know and expected to produce.

The essays gathered here unveil race's operations in the act of creativity and in the institutions that support such acts. One thing they show is how race enters writing, the making of art, as a structure of feeling, as something that structures feelings in the moment of encounter, that lays down tracks of affection and repulsion, rage and hurt, desire and ache. These essays show as well that these tracks don't only occur in the making of art; they also occur (sometimes viciously, sometimes hazily) in the reception of creative work. Here we are again: we've made this thing and we've sent it out into the world for recognition—and because what we've made is in essence a field of human experience created for other humans, the field and its maker and its readers are thus subject all over again to race and its infiltrations. In that moment arise all sorts of possible hearings and mishearings, all kinds of address and redress.

For example: In that moment, writers and readers of color may feel profound and mutual anxieties that all people of color are about to be locked in, locked down, by the representation at hand, no matter who wrote it. But especially if a white writer wrote it. This anxiety is fueled by the fact that racism, in its very daily-ness, in its very variety of expression, isn't fixed. It's there, and then it's not, and then it's there

well.

again. One is always doing the math: Was it there? Was it not? What just happened? Did I hear what I thought I heard? Should I let it go? Am I making too much of it? Racism often does its ugly work by not manifesting itself clearly and indisputably, and by undermining one's own ability to feel certain of exactly what forces are in play. This happens in reading as it does everywhere else. In a sense, it doubles-down the force of race—you feel it, you feel the injury, the racist address, and then you question yourself for feeling it. You wonder if you've made your own prison.

Another example: white writers can get explosively angry when asked to recognize that their racial imaginings might not be perfect—when asked to recognize that their imagination is not entirely their own—and in particular when confronted with that fact by a person of color questioning something they wrote. And the target of that anger is usually the person of color who shared with them this fact. The white writer feels injured in this moment—misunderstood and wounded—and believes it is the reader, the person of color, who has dealt the injury. This is how the white mind tends to racial “wounds”—it makes a mistake about who or what has dealt the injury. For it is not the reader of color who deals the injury. It is whiteness itself. To reconstruct the reader of color as the aggressor is one way that whiteness reasserts

its power in its moment of crisis. It has been exposed—it must now perform weakness, helplessness, it must pretend to innocence, to harmless and undefended and shocked innocence, in order to reveal the reader of color as motivated by unsavory, irrational, aggressive, political, or subjective tendencies that have lashed out at the innocent and harmed him (this is how the race card trope works to disqualify the reader bold enough to call up race where it might not be wanted: the trope enacts its dismissiveness by characterizing any mention of race as irresponsible, an injection of race “where it doesn't belong” when in fact it inheres whether it's called up or not). The white writer was taken by surprise by this attack—how could she have seen it coming? She meant well—surely this inoculates her against any charges. The attack was unfair. And so we must rally to the victim. And thus whiteness goes only briefly contested. This repositioning appears to cleanse whiteness of its power, of its aggression—for who can't hear the aggression in “I have a right of access to whomever I wish?”—and says of whiteness instead “I have been unfairly characterized and misunderstood, I have been assassinated by someone whose motivations are political and who is thus disqualified from the human endeavor that is art making.” Thus the wound is paraded for all to witness, and whiteness gathers to itself again its abiding centrality, its authority, its rights. Its sanity.

It's messy, and it's

What the white writer might realize instead, in this moment of crisis, is that she may well be an injured party—but the injury was dealt long before. The injury is her whiteness. By saying “injury” we do not mean to erase from view all the benefits and privileges that whiteness endows; we do not mean to invite an unwarranted sympathy. But we do think white people in America tend to suffer an anxiety (and many have written of this, James Baldwin most powerfully of all): they know that they are white, but they must not know what they know. They know that they are white, but they cannot know that such a thing has social meaning; they know that they are white, but they must not know that their whiteness accrues power. They must not call it whiteness for to do so would be to acknowledge its force. They must instead feel themselves to be individuals upon whom nothing has acted. That’s the injury, that their whiteness has veiled from them their own power to wound, has cut down their sympathy to a smaller size, has persuaded them that their imagination is uninflected, uninfiltrated. It has made them unknowing. Which is one reason why white people take recourse to innocence: I did not mean to do any harm. Or: I wanted to imagine you—isn’t that good of me, haven’t others said that was good of me to try? Or: I’m writing about people; they just happen to be white. Or: If I cared about politics, I would write a manifesto—what I’m trying to do is make art. Or: I

have a right to imagine whatever I want. Or: I don’t see color. Or: we’re all human beings.

Part of the mistake the white writer makes is that she confounds the invitation to witness her inevitable racial subjectivity with a stigmatizing charge of racism that must be rebutted at all costs. The white writer, in the moment of crisis, typically cannot tell the difference. What a white person could know instead is this: her whiteness limits *her* imagination—not her reader’s after the fact. A deep awareness of this knowledge could indeed expand the limits—not transcend them, but expand them, make more room for the imagination. A good thing.

For one source of creativity lies in the fact that each individual is essentially strange. There is a deep strangeness, an alterity, in the individual human mind, a portion of ourselves that we never fully comprehend—and this is what writing taps, or is at least one of writing’s sources, one of its engines. This might explain the enigma of writing for so many of us, that the writing so often seems to know more than we do, that we are ‘behind’ the writing (“behind it” in that we make it, but also “behind it” in the sense that we can’t catch up with what it knows and reveals, that it is out ahead of us driven by energies in our possession but not entirely in our deliberate control). This essential strangeness, this unknowability, is a creative resource, perhaps the creative resource, the wellspring of art that shows us things we did

going to stay messy.

not know but that are somehow inevitable and true—true to a reality or a knowledge we don't yet possess, yet find in the moment of encounter possible, something we accept the fundamental being of even if its nature shocks or startles or repulses or unsettles us (Donald Barthelme's strange object covered in fur can only break your heart if you have accepted, in the instant of encounter, its essential being, even if you have not yet comprehended its strangeness, its otherness). But while it might be mystifying how creative impulses and decisions emerge from somewhere within, that doesn't mean we must make a fetish of that mysteriousness. For that unknowable portion of the human mind is also a domain of culture—a place crossed up by culture and history, where the conditions into which we were born have had their effect. Part of what is unknowable within us, at least until we investigate it, is the structuring of our very feelings and thoughts by what preceded us and is not our own, yet conditions our experience nonetheless. So the location of a writer's strangeness is also the seat of history. A writer's imagination is also the place where a racial imaginary—conceived before she came into being yet deeply lodged in her own mind—takes up its residence. And the disentangling and harnessing of these things is the writer's endless and unfinishable but not fruitless task. Another way of saying this: the writer's essential strangeness is her greatest resource, yet she must also be

in skeptical tension with her own inclinations. Because those inclinations are in part an inheritance from a racial imaginary that both is and is not hers.

We want to acknowledge that we have fallen into one of the very traps we mentioned at the start—we are having a hard time talking about race separate from racism. Indeed, we're not sure if we can or find it believable to imagine otherwise, imagine a time when or a fashion in which race outruns its birth in racism and becomes some kind of neutral, unfanged category. And we want to acknowledge too: this is a nasty business. We should not pretend that our experiences of race are otherwise. As we write, as the writers collected here write, as we read one other, the internal tumult is unavoidable. It might be soft or it might be loud, but it'll be made up of some admixture of shame, guilt, loathing, opportunism, anxiety, irritation, dismissal, self-hatred, pain, hope, affection, and other even less nameable energies. The particular chemistry may differ depending upon one's idiosyncratic mix of personal history and social location. For some it is nothing short of an assault, an assault no less painful because it is routine, an ordinary effect of negotiating a life in a world of people largely comfortable watching the assault go on, or at least willing to ignore its existence. It's messy, and it's going to stay messy. Which is the condition from which we start.

What we want to avoid at all costs is something that feels nearly impossible to evade in daily speech: an opposition between writing that accounts for race (and here we could also speak of gender, sexuality, other enmeshments of the body in time) and writing that is “universal.” If we continue to think of the “universal” as better-than, as the pinnacle, we will always discount writing that doesn’t look universal because it accounts for race or some other demeaned category. The universal is a fantasy. But we are captive, still, to a sensibility that champions the universal while simultaneously defining the universal, still, as white. We are captive, still, to a style of championing literature that says work by writers of color succeeds when a white person can nevertheless relate to it—that it “transcends” its category. To say this book by a writer of color is great because it transcends its particularity to say something “human” (and we’ve all read that review, maybe even written it ourselves) is to reveal the racist underpinning quite clearly: such a claim begins from the stance that people of color are not human, only achieve the human in certain circumstances. We don’t wish to build camps. And we know there is no language that is not loaded. But we could try to say, for example, not that good writing is good because it achieves the universal, but perhaps instead that in the presence of good writing a reader is given some-

thing to know. Something is brought into being that might otherwise not be known, something is doubly witnessed.

What we mean by a racial imaginary is something we all recognize quite easily: the way our culture has imagined over and over again the narrative opportunities, the feelings and attributes and situations, the subjects and metaphors and forms and voices, available both to characters of different races and their authors. The racial imaginary changes over time, in part because artists get into tension with it, challenge it, alter its availabilities. Sometimes it changes very rapidly, as in our own lifetimes. But it has yet to disappear. Pretending it is not there—not there in imagined time and space, in lived time and space, in legislative time and space—will not hurry it out of existence. Instead our imaginings might test our inheritances, to make way for a time when such inheritances no longer ensnare us. But we are creatures of this moment, not that one.

Beth Loffreda
Claudia Rankine

FLOATING CURRENCY

MAX KING CAP

The depiction of social and racial identity has long been attended by equivocality—a recipe of complex motivations of fetishism and degradation, exoticized beauty and reflective distancing. For the viewer these multiple readings are available when considering ethnographic portraiture such as the romanticized paintings of Native Americans by George Catlin and Karl Bodmer, the sentimental photographs by Edward Curtis, the voyeuristic Orientalism of Ingres and Delacroix, and the vulgar prurience in depictions of Saartjie Baartman—also known as *The Hottentot Venus*. What was once presented as analytically accurate now more often seems farcically corrupt, while appropriation of the image of the other has remained a common, if not entirely acceptable, practice. The compulsion to represent the other, and the drive to commandeer the other's representation of the self, remains. Unfortunately, also remaining is the comparison to the supreme exemplar, the troubling gold standard against which all racial appearance and cultural custom has been measured.

Whiteness, but not just any Whiteness, an admixture of Western and Northern European appearance, custom, and taste, remains the standard being replicated or struggled against. The tragedy of post-colonialism is that whiteness remained even in its absence to haunt the self-image of the natives, imprinting a comparative hallmark by which the savage will always know his inferiority. The greatest attributable accomplishment of this criterion is convincing the rest of the world that it wanted to be White. A subcategory within this accomplishment is a deprecation of any other metric. Thus “Black is Beautiful” becomes the Wankel engine, and “La Raza”, Betamax.

That is the Quentin

This makes cultural appropriation a one-way street. When done by a member of dominant Western culture it is innovation, when done by others it is merely assimilation. Darius Rucker, the Black former frontman of the '90s band, *Hootie & the Blowfish*, has now, appropriately, embraced country music. Yet latter-day White minstrel/artist Joe Scanlan is lauded as an icon of ingenuity for masquerading as a Black woman; he has been rewarded with inclusion in the hallowed Whitney Biennial (Tyler Perry must be seething). These are acts of self-portraiture in which both artists embody another persona that contradicts their cis-race and cis-gender expectations. They seem to be equal portrayals of themselves as the other, but some selves are more equal than others.

Such antics demonstrate we are far from being a post racial, post misogynist society. On the contrary, we seem to be so entrenched in divisive tactics that we are no longer even able to consider value in contemplation and revision. We accept every new piece of information and contort it to our biases until they become bulwarks, impenetrable and permanent.

The artists included in this volume are siege engines against such intractability. They employ the varied strategies of satire, history, drama, documentary, revelation, inversion, and incongruity. They expressly do not use the de-meaning tools of caricature, stereotype, fetish-

ization, deprecation, aspersion, or chauvinism. The artist Liz Cohen's photography places the artist herself in unexpected roles that demand the code-switching intelligence of the viewer to decipher, while Edgar Endress examines the responses of those whose identities have long been dishonored. Race and gender identity are explored by EJ Hill, and the historicism of John Leaños reverses the *George Washington slept here* motif. Both Nery Gabriel Lemus and Charles McGill notate experiential alienage but Amis Motevalli and Dread Scott answer back with immersive revelation. Alice Shaw and Kyungmi Shin revisit genderized portraiture with chilling poise; Ian Weaver and Jay Wolke unscramble tradition, history, and exclusion.

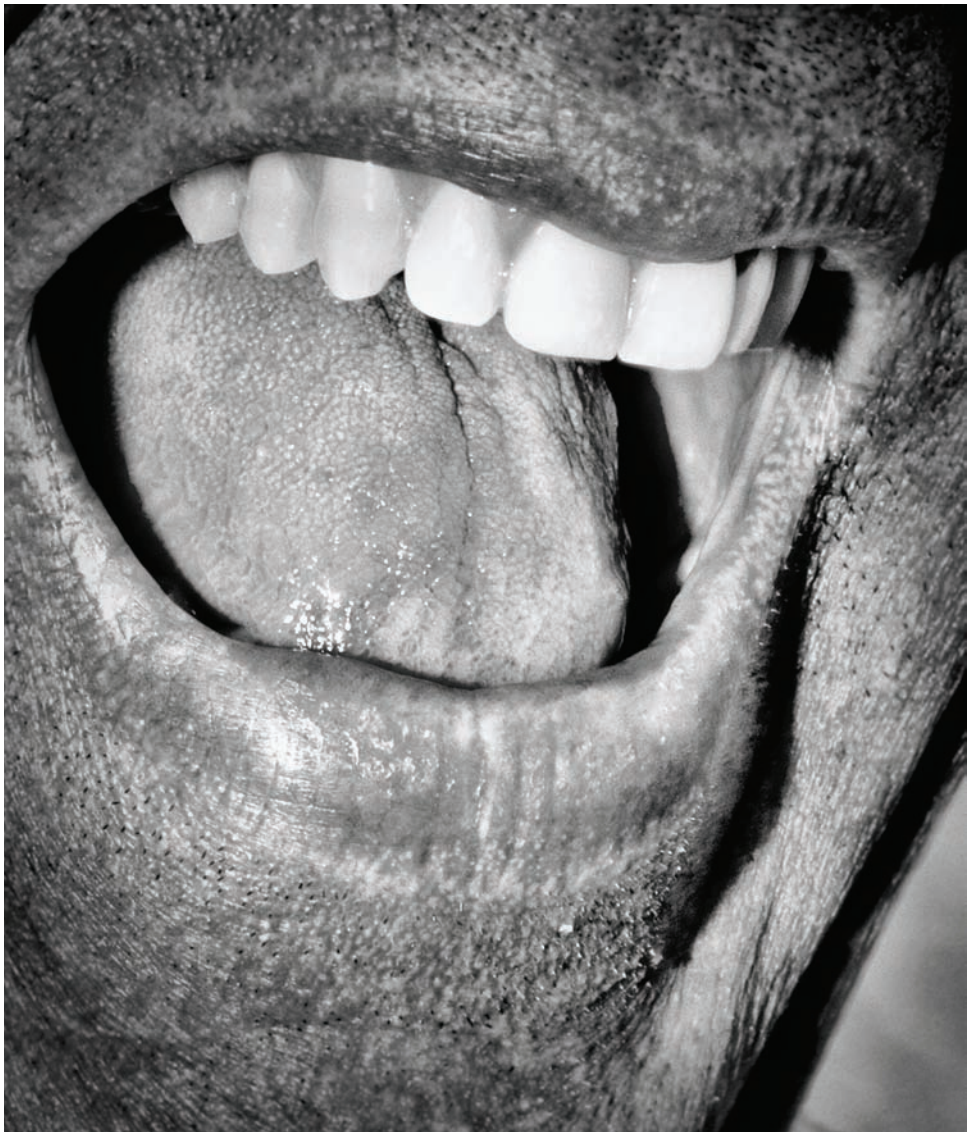
These canny artists represent a primer on the representation of identity in art. They remember that identity is neither prescriptive nor proscriptive; it doesn't dictate or disallow, so they avoid using predictable characterizations. That is the Quentin Tarantino trap. His penchant for fetishization is formulaic, cursory, and salacious. The artists in this volume also demonstrate that while the iconography of White Westernism may be a universal language, it is not universally emulated. Its application is the artistic version of, "I believe we will be greeted as liberators." When crossing identity boundaries they remember this mnemonic: Approach with respect, come correct.

Tarantino trap.

These artists don't say that you cannot make cogent commentary on sensitive issues, just keep in mind—this is going on your permanent record. You may think you are damned clever right now but wait even just a couple of years and see how things have changed. Your poignant commentary on gender relations now just looks like rampant sexism, with a soupçon of homophobia. What you publish, exhibit, and perform is like a tattoo; you've seen the pitfalls in that practice. Use intelligence, research, and humble reflection to avoid marking yourself with humiliating regret.

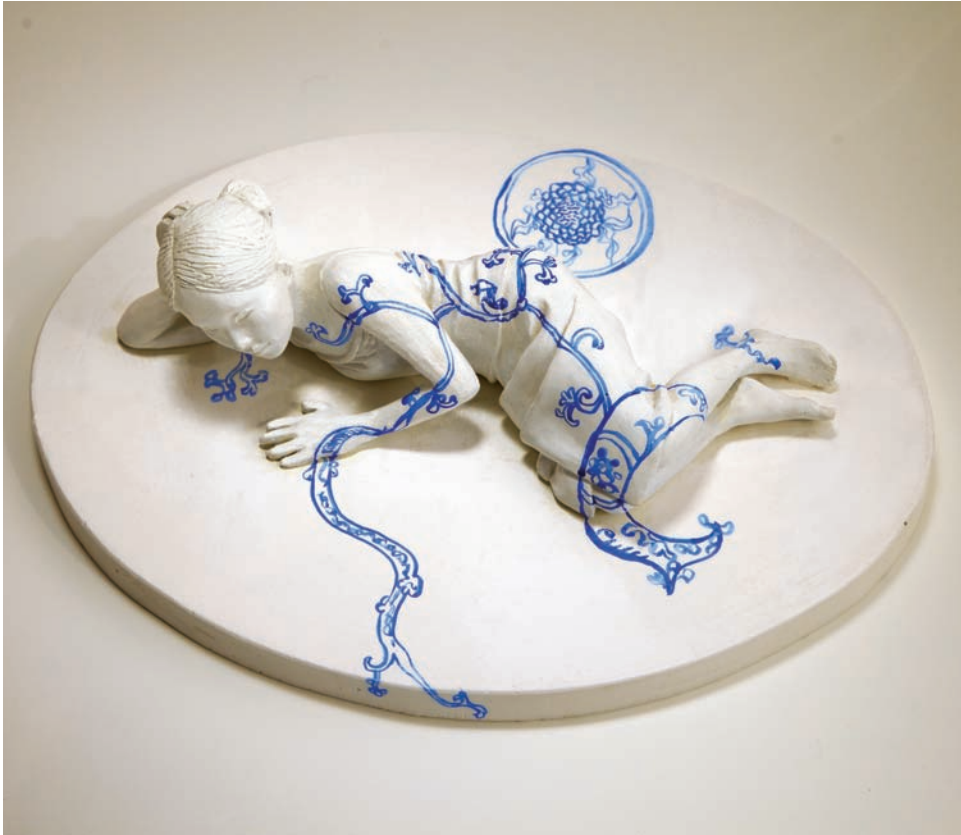
Happily addicted to our multiple afflictions of inequality—uneven applications of the law, dismissive misogyny, rapacious mercantilism, gender bigotry—we as a nation can hardly expect that a more enlightened practice of identity representation in art can reform our jaundiced inclinations. We are encamped—us against them. Our relentless virtue is exhausting, while their hatred seems to invigorate. What choice do we have? These artists bring choices.

Max King Cap



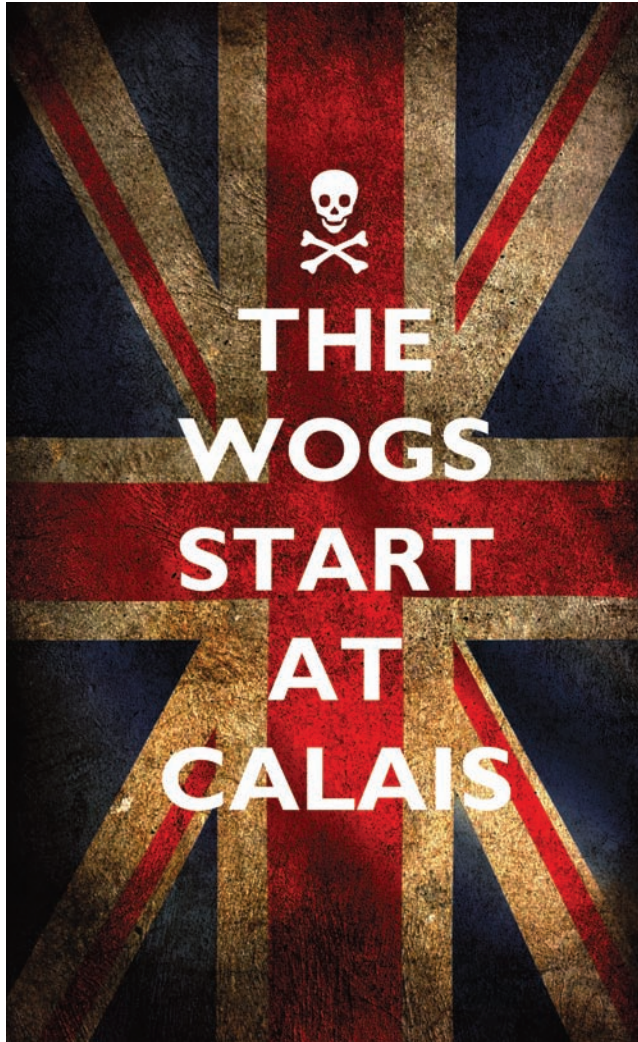
Mark Peterson,
from **Political Theatre**, 2014

Figureheads have the immediate singularity of theatrical stock characters—the fool, the miser, the boor—and these masks are what we most often see. They embody our fears, ambitions, and antipathies. MKC



Kyungmi Shin, **Chinoiserie**, 2003

In this sculptural self-portrait the artist embodies the undifferentiated Asianess common in western characterizations, and the intra-Asian biases that deliver a more refined sting. MKC



(textist), **The Wogs**, 2014

The phrase, employed in a parliamentary debate on British citizenship for colonial subjects, was used as a rebuke to those who thought them inferior despite their exemplary war service—the jibe was aimed sarcastically at Winston Churchill. It has since become an ultra-right rallying cry for those nostalgic for “Fortress Britain.” МКС



EJ Hill, This is an Imaginary Border, 2009

In taping a border dividing the city of Chicago into north and south sides, the performance artist demarcates the traditional racial partition of the city—where African American housing concentration has changed little in forty years. MKC

Photos: Jessica Hoekstra