

## Cheryl Harris “Whiteness as Property” Continued: Discussion Questions

### Diversity initiatives:

According to Cheryl Harris’s essay *Whiteness as Property* (1993) and from her 2014 keynote lecture (at the Seventh Annual Symposium on Critical Race Studies) reappraising the initial publication, what is the doctrine of neutrality in constitutional law? How has the idea of a color-blind society served both racist *and* anti-racist ideologies? Why does Harris say that Affirmative Action was in the ‘cross-hairs’ of both liberal and conservative politicians in the 1990s?

According to Cheryl Harris’s essay *Whiteness as Property* and from the 2014 lecture, what is/was the reasoning behind the idea that we live in a post-racial society and how does post-racial ideology function? Discuss the example Harris offers of President Obama as the prize currency of the political economy of post-racialism.

What are examples of diversity initiatives in the art industry? See the **Handout** below and/or provide your own examples. Why might museums and galleries decide to enact diversity initiatives? How do diversity initiatives function in museums vs. commercial galleries vs. non-profit institutions?

Describe the various goals for the different forms of diversity initiatives included on the **Handout**. How are diversity initiatives successful or unsuccessful? Why or why not? Why do contradictions arise between inclusion and fairness?

What are your predictions for more recent diversity initiatives such as *Say It Loud* at Christie’s? Can diversity initiatives *with contractual obligations* make the art industry more inclusive or fairer to non-white arts workers?

### Questions for White artists:

According to Harris’s story about her grandmother Alma, what does being racialized as White describe? Does Whiteness mean other things to you as an artist other than describing a relation of power?

The artist Paul Mpagi Sepuya recently encouraged White artists to rewrite their artist statements to include the word “Whiteness.” Why? Sepuya writes: “ON REPEAT--TODAY IS A GOOD DAY FOR EVERY WHITE ARTIST TO REWRITE YOUR ARTIST STATEMENT INCLUDING THE WORD “WHITENESS” UP TO YOU TO DECIDE WHAT DO WITH IT.”

Questions for White artists: in what ways does your work address whiteness? What might including “whiteness” in your artist statement accomplish? What if any would be the point of following through on Sepuya’s invitation one year ago versus today? What would happen if an artist were to use the invitation to show solidarity with the status quo of an overwhelmingly white art industry or white supremacy, in general?

Given the definition above of whiteness as a relation of power, why must white artists (and white people in general) “make space,” “step aside,” or otherwise put their aspirations on hold to fight for Black liberation? Can you provide concrete examples of how you have done this work of decentering yourself?

### Wealth and Racial Structures

Why does Harris describe the 2008 financial crisis as a threat to White status property? How might Harris’s analysis of the post-2008 bailouts for banks or the transfer of public resources to private corporations inform our understanding of the art market?

What kinds of barriers to entry are there for ordinary people to participate in the buying and selling of art (other than the obvious barrier of high prices)?

What steps can arts workers take to break from reliance on extreme wealth? What are the effects of reliance on galleries for income or success? Furthermore, how can galleries adopt new strategies that do the same? For example, have you or anyone you know benefited from W.A.G.E. certified employment?

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### Examples of 3 kinds of “Diversity Initiatives”

Below are recent examples of different forms diversity initiatives have taken in the art industry:

1. Statements on inclusivity, diversity, and non-discrimination are often found in the language of jobs advertised on the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) website:

<https://careers.newschool.edu/postings/19042>. Or, attempts at showing movement towards making substantive change to address structural inequity often share formulas similar to the ‘diversity plan’ recently released by the Guggenheim Museum:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/17/arts/design/guggenheim-diversity-plan-racism.html>.

2. In the wake of the global protests in defense of Black lives, the Corporate Social Responsibility program at Christie’s auction house responded with the following event. Please read the “**Overview**” of *Say It Loud*, a private sale held online by the auction house (31-July – 21 August) and this analysis of the sale by art journalist Eileen Kinsella <https://news.artnet.com/market/say-loud-show-christies-1901685>.

“Christie’s is proud to announce its first exhibition solely dedicated to the promotion and empowerment of Black art entitled *SAY IT LOUD (I’m Black and I’m Proud)* in partnership with acclaimed curator Destinee Ross-Sutton. The exhibition presents the works of 22 international young, emerging and mid-career Black artists who each explore the notion of self through different lenses. Incorporating deeply personal aspects of their immediate environment, elements of the past, utopian premises, spirituality and digital avenues, each of these artists use their mediums as guiding forces to construct images of identity whether it be their own, that of a society, or that of an overlooked community- in order to empower voices that have traditionally been silenced. As these artists play upon perception, they live in their own self-constructed worlds, urging us to confront systemically taught notions of Blackness, and have the difficult and healing conversations necessary to move our society forward.”

3. In Darla Migan’s recent review of *ecofeminism(s)*, an exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery that opened in June and will open again in September, she writes: “The maintenance and materialization of an enduring white supremacist capitalist art world relies on a willfully ignorant brand of “strategic essentialism.” While tagging on hyphenated descriptors to identify the non-white ethnicities of some of the artists in *ecofeminism(s)* appears to show off the diversity of the artists’ identities, its actual function is to shield against accusations of a too-close proximity to white purity (already a dangerous and violently enforced ideological fiction). More importantly and beyond considerations of the realities of the current structures of the art market, the curatorial framework of *ecofeminism(s)* continues to rely on a racist art historical methodology insofar as its elitist form of re-envisioned canonization follows a received notion of cultural essentialism that is at worst necessarily anti-Black, or, at best, leaves Black lives exposed to the inheritances of degradation and neglect at the intersections of our capitalist, state-sanctioned or extrajudicial, ecological, and patriarchal violence.” *Brown’s a Color, Black is Not: ecofeminism(s)’s Anti-Intersectional Feminism and the Use and Abuse of Diversity*, (Brooklyn Rail, July/August, 2020). See the full review here: <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/07/artseen/Browns-a-Color-Black-is-Not-ecofeminismss-Anti-Intersectional-Feminism-and-the-Use-and-Abuse-of-Diversity>.

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