

From Flint, MICHIGAN to Your Front Door:



Tracing the Roots of
Racism in America



A Story and Lesson Plan Addressing Race and Racism

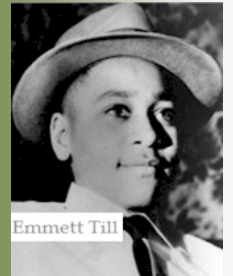
TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

This lesson plan uses excerpts from the story “From Flint, Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism in America” by professional storyteller La’Ron Williams to inspire conversation among students about the issues of institutional racism, living in two cultures at once, and claiming one’s own history and culture. This story and lesson plan address the White, Euro-centrism of our history and culture and the use of story to challenge that mono-cultural understanding of history.

While this lesson plan addresses race and racism, this is not a comprehensive lesson plan. Teachers who have not studied the issues of race and racism or who have not addressed these topics with classes before may want to read one or more of the resources recommended below to help prepare for this lesson. Teachers are encouraged to set up and maintain firm rules for respectful conversation during this lesson, to plan for future lessons about this topic, and to encourage student questions while being clear that not all questions about race and racism will be answered or even discussed during this lesson.

If discussion grows heated at any point, resist the impulse to squelch conversation or to find an easy answer; remind students they must be respectful of one another as they have the conversation since the issue of racism is older and deeper than anyone in the classroom and no one there is personally responsible for the way our society works. That, however, does not mean we are not responsible to try to change it. Remind students, too, that no one gets to speak for a whole group. In other words, no student should represent his or her experience as representative of his or her entire race, and students should not ask another to speak for his or her race. For a more introductory lesson plan, see “We All Have a Race: Addressing Race and Racism” on the RaceBridges for Schools website (www.racebridges.net/schools).

This lesson plan can be taught during two, 40-minute class periods or during a single period of a block schedule. This lesson would also work well as an after school activity or even as part of an anti-racism training done for faculty members during an in-service day.



Emmett Till



You may complete this lesson by having students read or listen to the entire version of “From Flint, Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism in America” for homework. To listen to and/or read the story, have students go to www.racebridges.net/schools, click on “Lesson Plans,” and then choose “From Flint, Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism in America.” There they will find audio and text excerpts of the story. Be sure that students have computer access at home to do this.

RECOMMENDED METHOD: *Although this will take more time, the best way to complete this lesson plan is to listen to the excerpts in class, stopping after each excerpt to allow students to answer questions and discuss their responses to the story.*

GRADE LEVEL: Grades 9-12.

PURPOSE

- To expose students to some of the history of African Americans in the twentieth century through a personal story.
- To address institutional, as well as personal, racism.
- To highlight the non-pathological, non-victimized side of African-American life.
- To help students understand how our present situation of race relations and racism is related to our past.

OUTCOMES

By the end of this lesson, each student will

- Be familiar with the concept of institutional racism and of the white, Eurocentrism of our culture
- Understand how the history of race in America shapes the current situation of race in America
- Understand how “nice,” well-meaning people in schools and the media can present biased information
- Respond to the issues and themes of the story
- Relate their own experience to the story

MATERIALS

- Teacher Instructions and Lesson Plan
- Handout #1: Excerpts from “From Flint, MI to Your Front Door : Tracing the Roots of Racism in America” by La’Ron Williams
- Handout #2: Discussion Questions

LESSON PLAN

Day One:

1. Introduction and Summary of “From Flint, Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism in America” (10 minutes)
2. Excerpt #1 and Pair Share (12 minutes)
3. Excerpt #2 and Pair Share (15 minutes)
4. Fast Wrap Up (3 minutes)



Day Two:

1. Review and Introduction to Excerpts 3 and 4 (5 minutes)
2. Excerpt #3 and Pair Share (10 minutes)
3. Excerpt #4 and Small Group discussion (15 minutes)
4. Class Discussion and Wrap Up (10 minutes)

LESSON PLAN

Note to Teachers

This is meant to be a two-day lesson plan, although it easily could be extended further. Many issues are raised by the story “From Flint, Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism in America,” and the discussion questions and activities in this lesson plan are meant as a beginning to a longer conversation. There are multiple ways to expand this lesson plan to cover one or more of the themes in greater detail. Some suggestions for extension of the lesson are made at the end of the lesson plan, and you should feel free to expand this lesson on your own as well.

The following issues are raised in this story and should be addressed:

- Many of the stories that we hear in classrooms and in the media are either of White Europeans or are told and interpreted by White Europeans. There are many more stories of and voices in American life than those we are used to hearing; we need to hear all of our stories and all of our voices.
- Traditionally “outsider” voices have stories to tell that may help all of us understand our history better.
- Because our educational system and media have been shaped by the dominant culture, many of us accept White experience as the “norm” and believe other experiences (Black, Latino, Asian, etc.) are unusual, even deviant. This, of course, can also extend to the dominant experience as male, heterosexual, able bodied, and middle class.
- This dominant perspective means that many of us are not even aware of our own “bias”; without intending to, we make assumptions about what is “normal” and “abnormal.”
- Often the story that gets told of African-American experience is one of victimhood and pathology; Williams tells the story of a Black community that nurtures and supports its people even in the face of racial threat and oppression.
- We are individuals who can make individual decisions, yet we live in a historically conditioned environment. Historical decisions and events shape our present reality.
- Because of our historically shaped reality, we must look at systems and institutions, not only personal decisions and actions, when examining and seeking to oppose injustice.



If you want to delve deeper into the above issues, see the list of resources for more information.

The first day of this lesson will consist primarily of listening to and/or reading the first two parts of the story since they are somewhat long; there is more time available during the second class period for discussion and activities. This could also be made a three-day lesson plan to allow more time for class discussion.

DAY ONE

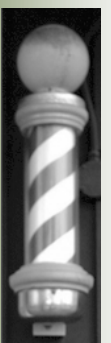
1. INTRODUCTION (10 minutes)

Introduce your students to the story “From Flint, Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism in America.” Explain that they will have the chance to discuss each of the excerpts after listening to or reading them.

Today we’re going to begin listening to [and/or reading] excerpts from the story “From Flint, Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism in America” by La’Ron Williams, an African-American storyteller who grew up in Flint, Michigan and is a storyteller today. In this story, Williams describes what it was like to grow up in “two Americas”: his own warm, loving, all-Black community where he felt safe and the world of television and school, which were shaped by White expectations and assumptions.

While he moves between the two worlds, Williams is aware that not everything translates. He did not feel alienated from the White world, since he trusted the media presentation of Whites—that they were heroic and wise, at least on the television shows he watched. But he also knew that there were dangers in that world, which he learned after such experiences as seeing a picture of Emmett Till, a black boy killed in the South; being mistreated by an older, white boy; learning about the way factory owners in Flint pitted white and black owners against one another to keep wages low; and feeling alienated in school by well-meaning teachers who, assuming their white culture was the norm, sent the message that Williams’ culture was somehow “less than” or wrong. Williams shares his struggle to bring together his experience of “two worlds”: his home and neighborhood, which were primarily Black, and the world brought to him by television and at his school, both dominated by white figures, stories, and assumptions.

Williams uses his personal experiences to get at larger issues in American history and culture. He examines how teachers with good intentions can send the message to their students that their culture doesn’t count and how television shows that represent the white experience as normal and people of other races as flat caricatures project a false, distorted version of reality. But that distorted version of reality is how many of us end up viewing our own worlds. In this story, Williams also looks at how larger social forces influence us when he describes the role factory owners, realtors, and bankers played in creating suspicion and enmity between Whites and Blacks at the time, which has had long-ranging consequences for us and our society.



Today, we will listen to [and/or read] the first two of four excerpts from this story. After each excerpt, you will have the chance to share briefly your reactions and thoughts. Tomorrow, we will finish the last two excerpts of the story, and we will end with an opportunity to share your own experiences.

2. EXCERPT #1 & PAIR SHARE (12 minutes)

I'm going to give you a handout with an excerpt from "From Flint, Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism in America" and a handout with discussion questions. We will listen to the story aloud and you can follow along if you like. After we listen, I will ask you to jot down a few of your thoughts and then share them with a partner.

Hand out the excerpts and discussion questions; play excerpt #1. Give students one minute to respond to the questions associated with the excerpt (they should choose the ones they find most interesting). Then ask them to pair up with someone to discuss their answers; each person should take 30 seconds to share his or her answer. Ask a few pairs to share their answers with the class; take no more than 1-2 minutes for this. Be sure to keep students moving so that there is time to get to the next excerpt.

3. EXCERPT #2 & PAIR SHARE (15 minutes)

Play excerpt #2. Give students one minute to answer the questions associated with the excerpt (again allowing them to choose the ones that attract them). Then ask them to pair up with someone to discuss their answers; each person should take 30 seconds to share his or her answer.

4. CLASS WRAP UP (3 minutes)

Have pairs share their reactions to the excerpts with one another and then with the whole class.

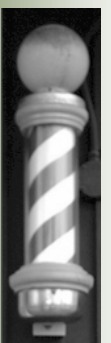
DAY TWO

1. REVIEW & INTRODUCTION TO EXCERPTS #3 & #4 (5 minutes)

Review with students what you heard, read, and discussed yesterday. Consider having a student summarize the class to include students who were absent during the lesson and to get everyone "on the same page" for the second half of the lesson. Let students know that they will listen to two more excerpts and have more time for small group and whole class discussion and that they will have the opportunity to share experiences of their own that relate to the story "From Flint, Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism in America."

2. EXCERPT #2 & PAIR SHARE (10 minutes)

Make sure students have the discussion questions from the day before; if they don't, hand out more. Play excerpt #3. Allow students two minutes to answer the questions associated with this excerpt. Then ask them to pair up with someone to discuss their answers; each person should take 30 seconds to share his or her answer. Have some pairs share their responses.



3. EXCERPT #4 & SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION (15-18 minutes)

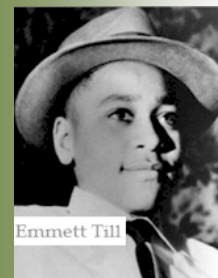
Listen to the final excerpt and then ask pairs to join another pair to make a group of four. You may need to have one group of six if there is not an even number of pairs. Ask students to identify a time keeper for this activity to make sure they do not exceed 15 minutes of discussion.

4. CLASS DISCUSSION & WRAP UP (7-10 minutes)

Call students back together and have each group share one major concept, impression, or feeling that they will take away from the story and their discussion. Students may share their own personal experiences. Consider asking students to do some writing on this topic for homework or extending the lesson with one of the ideas below.

Lesson Extension Ideas

1. Ask students to keep a log while watching television for the next week. They should note details of the show, such as the name and genre (comedy, reality, drama, music video, etc) and the day, time, and channel on which it appeared. Students should then track how characters of different races are portrayed. Are the characters complex or flat? Do we learn about their backgrounds? What kinds of jobs do they have? How are they portrayed (responsible, lazy, loudmouthed, sexy, partyer, etc.)? Are we meant to admire or judge them? Have students share their logs and then lead a discussion of how characters of different races are portrayed and hypothesize about why they are portrayed differently. Speculate about the effect that seeing characters of different races portrayed in these ways might affect viewers of different races differently.
2. Have students learn the history of the Emmett Till story, focusing especially on the different reactions of the White and Black communities to the murder. Learn about how quickly the men who murdered Till were acquitted by an all-White jury and about how this tragedy directly impacted the Civil Rights movement. Assign different groups of students to research different parts of the story and bring it all together in a class presentation.
3. Read one or more chapters from *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* or *Why Are All the Black Kids sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* and hold further discussion or have students write book reviews or position papers about what they read. Both books contain chapters that stand alone if you don't have time to read the whole book.
4. Ask students to spend a week consciously referring to every White person they mention in conversation as "White." For example, "My favorite White actor is Brad Pitt," "My best friend, who is White . . .," and "My White family . . ." Discuss as a class why it is we don't usually refer to White people by their race (unless we live in a community that is entirely of another race and rarely interact with Whites) but we do usually identify the race of people who are of color. Discuss how it felt to identify White people by their race.
5. Buy a copy of the curriculum *Kaleidoscope: Valuing Difference and Creating Inclusion* and teach diversity in a more in-depth way.
6. Watch one of the videos listed in the resource list and discuss it in class.



Resources

Books

Kivel, Paul. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. Philadelphia, New Society, 1996. Written by a white man and primarily for a white audience but useful for people of all backgrounds.

Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Touchstone, 1996. Loewen critiques the way that history has been taught in American classrooms, focusing on its bland, Eurocentric bias. He urges educators to focus on real, diverse stories that make up our history. Eye opening for teachers and students alike.

O'Halloran, Susan. *Kaleidoscope: Valuing Difference & Creating Inclusion*. Available at www.susanohalloran.com. A two-level curriculum for schools about diversity, race and dealing with difference. O'Halloran approaches diversity, race, and racism in a way that makes an often intimidating subject approachable and even fun. O'Halloran avoids blame and empowers students to uncover their own biases and to recognize institutional racism and to work for both personal and societal change.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. Written by a professor of psychology for a diverse audience. Focuses specifically on race, racism, and the construction of racial identity among adolescents.

Videos

Berhaag, Bertram (Producer/Director). *The Complete Blue Eyed*. Available at www.newsreel.org. This edition contains multiple versions of the "blue-eyed/brown-eyed" experiment that demonstrates how swiftly prejudice affects people. Originally used with grade school students, this exercise has been used with adults with the same results. This edition comes with a facilitator's guide. 93 minutes total; can be watched in shorter segments.

King, George. (Producer/Director). *Goin' to Chicago*. 1994. Available at www.newsreel.org. This video chronicles the great migration of African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North and West after WWII. Also covers the experience of African Americans in Chicago once they got there.

Lucasiewicz, M. (Producer). *True Colors*. Northbrook, IL: MTI Film & Video, 1991. An ABC video with Diane Sawyer that follows two discrimination testers, one black and one white, as they look for jobs and housing and try to buy a car. A good look at institutional racism. 19 minutes.

Nelson, Stanley (Producer/Director). *The Murder of Emmett Till*. 2003. Available at www.pbs.org. A documentary about Emmett Till, the ensuing trial, and further consequences of his murder. The PBS web site also has a series of resources and a teacher guide to accompany the video. 60 minutes.



Reid, F. (Producer/Director). *Skin Deep: College Students Confront Racism*. San Francisco, CA: Resolution/California Newsreel, 1995. Available at www.newsreel.org. Examines a multi-racial group of students discussing race and racism; demonstrates the possibility of changing attitudes through dialogue. 53 minutes.

Tiggs, Marlon (Producer/Director). *Coior Adjustment*. 1991. Available at www.newsreel.org. A follow up to his first video, *Ethnic Notions*, about racial stereotypes in American culture. This video traces 40 years of race relations through the lens of prime time entertainment, scrutinizing television's racial myths and stereotypes. 88 minutes.

Organizations

Teaching Tolerance. www.teachingtolerance.org. Started by the Southern Poverty Law Center, it provides teachers with free educational materials that promote respect for differences and appreciation of diversity in the classroom and beyond.

Facing History and Ourselves. www.facing.org. This organization has a series of publications and trainings around issues of bias. There is a series of four lesson plans on the murder of Emmett Till.

If you would like to read other stories written by La'Ron Williams or engage him to perform at your school, e-mail him at larontalk@aol.com.

Notes to Teachers:

Any part of this activity could be expanded and extended, but all of the activities are necessary to include in order for the lesson to work.

The **bolded** text can be read out aloud and followed word for word; however, you may want to read over the material a few times so that you are comfortable putting these ideas into your own words, in the way in which you normally talk to your students.



From Flint, MICHIGAN to Your Front Door:



Tracing the Roots of Racism in America



Handout #1: Story Excerpts

Excerpt 1: Part One

The year was 1955, and if you were a Black child living on the south side of Flint, Michigan—like I was—and you needed a haircut—like I often did, *the* place to go was a place called Chappy’s Barbershop on Clifford Street just north of Kennelworth.

Chappy’s was owned by a man named John Chapman, but all the grown-ups in the neighborhood just called him “Chappy,” and in the old African-American tradition of paying respect for grownups, all the kids like me called him “**MR.** Chappy.”

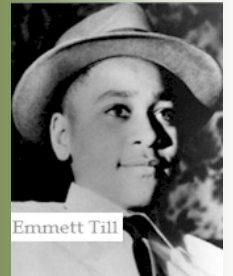
Going down to Chappy’s was like going to one of those old-fashioned traveling medicine shows. All the kids loved him, because he was like part comedian, part medical doctor, and part magician all rolled into one. All the kids loved him, ‘cause he was just about the same size *they* were—about *this* tall . . . And he had the smoothest, brightest, shiniest bald head most of us had ever seen; look like he screwed it off and polished it, and screwed it back on every day before comin’ in to work.

All around the walls of the barbershop, Chappy had shelves and shelves and shelves where he kept about a million little glass jars filled with all kinds of lotions and potions, some stuff that looked like dried up monkey feet and strange lookin’ vegetables, plant roots, and stuff. And he even had his own language! If you did something he didn’t like, he would ball up his fists, look at you and say, “You better straighten up before I come over there and go upside ya *con-sarn!*”

I had no idea what a “con-sarn” was, but I knew I didn’t want him comin’ over and “goin’ upside” mine, so I was always a very good little boy whenever I went into Chappy’s.

It was never quiet at Chappy’s. Somebody was always talkin’. You know what I mean: barbershop talk, street talk, trash talk . . . And Chappy always had the radio playin’—what we today call “Doo-Wop” music—and when you first walked in the door, that music and talk would hit you and wrap around you like a big ol’ blanket. You know what I mean? And Chappy would poke you in the ribs and he would say, “Poo-poop”—that was another one of his words—and he would hand you a stick of horehound or peppermint candy.

Now *all* of that stuff was fun, but *the* most amazing thing about goin’ down to Chappy’s is that at the end of every haircut—it didn’t matter whether you were a great big 250 pound



man or a tiny little boy—at the end of every haircut, Chappy would reach up onto one of those shelves, take down one of those *mystery* bottles of fluid, pour this strong smelling green stuff all over your head, light a match, touch that match to your head, and—POOF!—set your hair on fire!

It's true! You think I'm makin' that up, but it's true! And on any given day of the week, you could see all the fathers and mothers in the neighborhood just lined up at the door to bring their little kids in to let this crazy man light up their heads!

But remember, Chappy was *magic*. And the incredible thing is that nobody ever did get burned, 'cause he would somehow wave that fire around your head and then touch it and—*whhh!*—blow it out, and touch it and—*whhh!*—blow it out, touch it and blow it out, and nobody ever even got singed.

Since Chappy's was just a few blocks from my house, sometimes my father would take me and my older brother over there, drop us off, and let us walk back home all by ourselves. To me, those were good times. I liked those times, 'cause it made me feel like I was a real big boy, you know, like I could really take care of myself. And that's how I was feeling one day, at the end of the summer, in the year 1955.

At the end of the summer, in 1955, I was four years old, sittin' there in Chappy's Barbershop on a hot, hot, hot Saturday afternoon—the kind of hot that's so hot it makes grownups sleepy—and I was lookin' over at the table where Chappy kept the newspapers, and the magazines, and the candy, like I always did, when I saw this picture on the front cover of *Jet* magazine. It was the sort of thing that, if you're only four years old, you don't know what it is you're lookin' at. But I must have kept on lookin', because the grownups started talkin' about it. They said that it was a photograph, a photograph of a dead boy's body. The body of a boy named Emmett Till.

I was four years old. It was the year before I even started Kindergarten, and I saw him lying there. He had one eye gouged out, his skull had been bashed in, he had two bullet holes in his head, and his face was swollen up like some kind of giant sponge from hanging for days upside down in the waters of the Tallahatchie River.

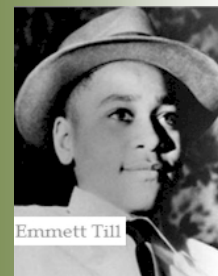
Do you all know about Emmett Till? Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old Black boy who went down from Chicago to a place called Money, Mississippi to visit his Uncle, and he was dragged out of bed in the middle of the night and brutally beaten and killed by two White men, because he supposedly whistled at, or winked at, or said something flirtatious to a White female store clerk.

In my mind, when I was lookin' at that picture, it might just as well have been goin' on right then. 'Cause in the same second that I was lookin' at the picture and hearin' those barbershop men talkin' about what had happened to Emmet Till, I saw *myself* dead and beat up like he was. I saw myself lookin' at myself—**dead**. I saw that Emmett Till's skin was brown like my skin was—I mean brown like everybody's in Chappy's Barbershop—and I knew in a split minute why this horrible thing had happened to him. Remember, I was only



four years old, but I had already heard this kind of thing talked about a thousand times, and I could hear a voice inside my head. It was my grandmother's voice, speakin' almost in slow motion, as she gave the answer that she always gave whenever she was mad or frustrated with the shape of the world in which she was livin'. I could hear her say it: **"White Folks Hate Colored Folks!"**

That picture scared me so much that all the way home from Chappy's I held on to my older brother's hand. I didn't feel like a big boy. I was scared. I couldn't get that picture out of my mind. I couldn't get my grandmother's words out of my mind: **"White Folks Hate Colored Folks!"** But there was something else inside of me, too. I mean, I couldn't get rid of the feeling that what my grandmother said must be at least a little bit wrong. I mean, I might have been only four years old, but I knew *lots* of White folks! I had known White folks all my life! Practically every time I looked at a book or magazine I saw White folks. Whenever we went downtown, we were surrounded by White folks. When I went to the hospital or the clinic for shots, all the nurses and doctors were White. The people on all the boxes and cans of food in my kitchen were White. At church, Jesus and all the angels were always White. Santa Claus was White, my toy soldiers were White. And, on top of that, I had White folks comin' right into my house every single day. Yeah! They came in through a kind of a window that, in 1955, was even more magic than Chappy! I didn't just know White folks, I got the official story about White folks, 'cause I got it through Television!



Excerpt 2: Part Two

Television was still a new thing back then. I know that's hard to believe these days, when you see one practically everywhere you go, even in the waiting room at the airport, but back then, almost nobody in my neighborhood had a TV set. My family was one of the first families to get one, and people from three and four blocks away would come over to our house just to see what the thing *looked like*. And I don't mean they would stop by to catch a show. I mean, they would come over just to look at it *turned off*.

But when it *was* turned on! Awhhhh . . . We'd all sit in front of it with our mouths hanging open, soaking up every word and every picture. We'd sit in front of it with our mouths hanging open, while it burned up our heads, just like Chappy did. It burned up our heads with the stuff that it taught us about life.

Back then, there was no such thing as a re-run. Every show was new, and I watched as many of them as I could: Variety Shows and Comedy Shows and Kids' Shows and Westerns. Morning shows and afternoon shows, and—and—and on Friday nights, when there was no school the next day, I'd stay up watchin' late shows until the shows stopped and there was nothin' on but this thing they called the "test pattern"!

But my favorite program of all was a kind of a Sci-Fi program called *Commando Cody: Sky Marshall of the Universe!* He wore a black mask and a black suit called a rocket suit, which was a leather jacket with two bullet-shaped tanks on the back and a set of control dials in the front, and all he had to do was to turn those control dials, take a good running start, jump into the air, and—whooooosshh!—he could fly! He could fly! And it didn't look all fake like a lot of special effects back then. He really was flying! And I . . . I . . .

"White Folks Hate Colored Folks!" . . . But Commando Cody was White. So were Superman, and the Lone Ranger, and Howdy Doody, and . . . and . . . and . . . Miss Marjorie from *Ding Dong School*. Practically everybody on TV was White!

But these were *nice* White people with *nice* families who lived in *nice* neighborhoods. Their fathers always knew best and wore nice suits and didn't come home all factory-dirty like my father did, and *their* mothers were always dressed in high heels and pearls, and I couldn't help but feel that my grandmother must be at least a little bit wrong.

These TV white people could even afford to hire Black servants and maids. If anything, it was the Black servants and maids who were the ones who looked silly. I mean, they never had last names or families of their own. And they always made a mess out of everything they put their hands on. They didn't act at all like the real life Black people I knew but, well, they were on TV, and, just like today, TV was more real than real life. TV was magic!

The real life Black people I knew lived with me, and all around me, in a part of the city called "Elm Park," Elm Park was jam-full of people, and most of those people were factory workers like my parents. I'll let you in on a little secret: it was no accident that they all were there. They literally got called to come in the middle of World War II at a time when those



factories were desperate to find enough people to work. They didn't have enough people because, historically, they had given most of their jobs to male, European immigrants, and with immigration slowed down by the war, and with a lot of those people going off to fight, they turned to Blacks and women to fill those jobs.

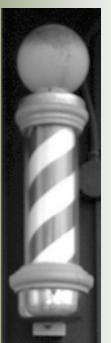
You know what they did? They ran ads in traditionally Black newspapers like the *Michigan Chronicle* and the *Chicago Defender*, and they passed out leaflets and things throughout the South and put out the message by word of mouth that there was good work up north, and it spread like crazy. I mean, millions of Black people in places like Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia just jumped at the chance to get away from the poverty and Jim-Crow segregation of the South.

It worked! When they got up north, most of those people found jobs. But they also found a situation that, in a lot of ways, was just as segregated as life had been in the places they left behind. 'Cause when those people got to cities like Flint, Detroit, Cleveland, Gary, or Chicago, they found that they were forced to live only in certain parts town. And they were kept there through mob violence, through bomb threats, through beatings and harassment at the hands of the police, and through the use of something called a restrictive covenant, which was an agreement signed by White property owners promising that they would sell or rent to Black people only within those confined areas, and that they would keep everything outside of those areas White.

It didn't take long for those factories to realize that they had a good thing going, 'cause even after all the jobs were filled, they just kept on running those ads, and they kept spreadin' the word that there was good work to be had. That way, with many more people than there were jobs, they could play folks off against each other. They would fire people in huge numbers, and then hire a different bunch. Then, they would fire that bunch, and re-hire the ones they'd fired before. That way, they could pay those people as little as possible, and they could keep a steady surplus of workers who didn't complain because they thought they were just "lucky" to have a job.

The factory owners and their company executives made a bunch of money. And the landlords and property owners made a bunch of money, too, because as more and more people came north, and as those set-aside "Ghetto" areas got more and more crowded, they soon realized they could charge higher and higher rents on places that they didn't even have to take care of because they literally had a captive clientele. They subdivided houses into apartments, and one apartment into two or three, and they sometimes even rented the same room at full cost to more than one person at a time. They called that "renting by the shift."

A lot of those landlords and real estate agents would sign those restrictive covenants and then break them by buying a house or apartment in an all-White neighborhood near a Black area and then moving a Black family into that house. That was called "blockbusting" and it gave the landlords even more money because they would then deliberately go around raising White fears of a Black "invasion" and offering to buy White people's homes at a "reasonable" price before it was "too late." That way, they could re-sell those same houses to Black people at a tremendous profit, and change whole neighborhoods from White to Black.



When my parents moved with me and my brother into Elm Park, we moved into one of those “changing” neighborhoods. At one time, it had been an all-White area, but now only a few White families were left. I don’t know if my parents knew it then, but they were on the tail end of a blockbusting wave.

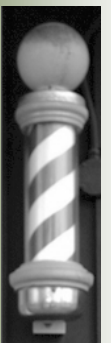
By the time I was eight years old, within about five blocks of my house, I knew every square inch of Elm Park. I knew whose yards I could run through and whose fences I could sit on. I knew all the best climbing trees, and I knew the fastest way to climb every single one of those trees. I knew where to catch crayfish down at the lake and I even knew all the times of day when a train would come by on the tracks just a half a block from my front door. I knew all the families who had kids, and I knew all the families who didn’t. Elm park was filled with people, and by the time I was eight, not only were most of those people factory workers, but because of greedy real estate owners, almost all of those people were Black.

A lot of the time, at the end of the day, the grown-ups on my street would get together and carry on a tradition that was started a long time before any of us was born. They would gather on my family’s front porch and they would talk and tell stories about their lives. It didn’t matter that these people were tired from a hard day’s work or that they were “just” factory workers. They found the time to give to each other at least a tiny bit of the respect that wasn’t given to them by the larger society. On that porch, they coped with their fears and the harshness of their lives and they shared their joys and their good times.

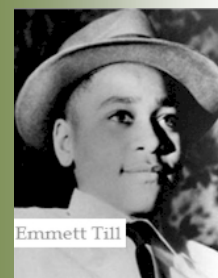
Mr. Puckett would usually be the one to start out. He’d say, “Ya’ll know what I had fuh suppah last night? Three chicken feet, some neckbone soup, and a wish sammich. Ya’ll know what a ‘wish sammich is, right? That’s where you take two pieces of bread, put ‘em together, and wish you had some meat! Ha, Ha, Ha!”

Those people helped me to see that I wasn’t the only one whose mother used a nickel’s worth of salt pork to flavor two or three meals. Of course, I didn’t think about it; I didn’t think about it at all, but they surrounded me in a community of support, and they passed on to me the tradition of survival that had been passed on to them. We were *nothing* like the Black characters on the TV. We didn’t mess up everything we touched. We made meals out of table scraps, and inspiration out of misery. We didn’t live without families, we were one big family. All of those adults were my parents and my teachers and my counselors and my mentors, and they offered to me their most positive lessons. I wasn’t taught—or held back—by any single person; I had a bunch of options to choose from. And it was in one of those porch-talking sessions that somebody gave me an important lesson to counter my grandmother’s understandable bitterness. The grown-ups were all talking and I heard somebody say it. Somebody said what she always said: “**White Folks Hate Colored Folks!**”

But then, from the other side of the porch came the response: “Wait a minute . . . Don’t you see how that’s a hateful thing to say, too? Don’t no *all* White folks hate no *all* Colored folks, and the ones that do . . . well, you don’t have to stoop to bein’ hateful like them. Don’t you ever be hateful like that. You be better than that.”



Do you see? The people on that porch reminded me over and over again to remember to keep my heart open to life's most positive lessons, rather than allow myself to be dragged down by the bitterness others threw at me. And we *all* took guidance from the freedom struggles that were going on in the places they had left. Today, we call it the Civil Rights movement, but it was always much more than that. It was a drive, led by people who looked like us, to open up this society, to make it live up to the best of the ideals on which it was founded, and to be more democratic and inclusive of everybody who lived here. I didn't know it *then*, but I know now that during those "porch-talkin'" times, I was being given something that was like a great big gift. And it was a gift that, later in life, I would be able to pass on to others.



Excerpt 3: Part Three

Well, the fall of 1959 was when I went into the third grade. My teacher that year was a woman named Mrs. Paris. Mrs. Paris was the first White teacher that I had ever had, and as soon as I walked into her classroom, images of Emmett Till together with my grandmother's words came flooding back to me: **"White Folks Hate Colored Folks."** Now, I knew that wasn't true for every White person, but I still wondered: "What if Mrs. Paris turned out to be one of those hateful kinds of White people, like the ones who killed Emmet Till?"

Well, Mrs. Paris taught us a lot of good, useful stuff in the third grade. She taught us English folk songs, and she taught us long division. She taught us a lot about a White man named Jacob Smith, who she said was "the first permanent resident ever to live in the territory that would become the state of Michigan," and she taught us that the Indians here made canoes out of the bark of trees. She taught us that policemen were "our friends" and that if we ever got lost, we should just ask one of them for help. And every single day she had us say the *Pledge of Allegiance*: ". . . with liberty and justice for all." Mrs. Paris seemed to be a very kind, caring, concerned and normal person, and it made me think again that my grandmother must be at least a little bit wrong.

Well, I remember one time when the whole third grade class was working on painting a huge, banner mural painting to illustrate a story that Mrs. Paris had read to us. We drew it out first, and then we were going to paint the parts that we drew. Well, I was a pretty good artist, so I finished drawing my part of the banner before anybody else. So Mrs. Paris came over and gave me a bunch of cups of paint that she had mixed up and labeled before class. I picked up one of the cups and I started to paint one of the people in my part of the banner. But before I could get very far, one of the few White students in the class stopped me. She said: "You're not supposed to use *brown* to color history people!"

For a second, I just stood there confused; I didn't know what she meant but before I could do anything, she said something again. She said, "Mrs. Paris, he's using the wrong color!" All the heads in the class turned to look at Mrs. Paris when she came over. She didn't say a word. She just picked up a different cup of paint and she handed it to me. Then, she turned and went over to help somebody else. I turned the cup around and read the label. The label said "flesh."

Okay. I mean, it's not that I didn't know what "flesh"-colored paint was. I'd used "flesh"-colored paint and "flesh"-colored crayons hundreds of times before that. I didn't mind using them. I mean, I knew that it wasn't the color of *my* flesh, but it *was* the color of Commando Cody. I didn't mind using it. In the past, in my other classes, with my Black teachers, sometimes I colored people that color, and sometimes I colored people the color I was, and nobody had ever said a word about it. I didn't mind using it! It's just that this time, with this teacher, for the first time, I felt wrong *not* to color somebody that color.

Well, as that year went on, there were a lot more incidents like that one. There were times when my White classmates seemed to know what Mrs. Paris was talking about when no one else in class would; times when we'd sing songs from our music books and *they* all mysteriously seemed to know the words in advance. At home, I sang pop songs by the



Drifters and the Shirelles, and traditional spirituals and gospel tunes. I knew all of those words by heart—still do—but somehow none of those songs ever seemed to make it into our school music books! I mean, I didn't mind that I didn't know the school stuff sometimes. It's just that all of a sudden, in the third grade, I became aware of how bad I felt.

I couldn't put it into words *then*, but I know *now* that without even trying to, without meaning to, Mrs. Paris was teaching the Black children in her classes to be ashamed of themselves and the way they did things. Just by using the school books and lesson plans in the way they were intended to be used she was teaching all the Black students to feel inferior. But what's even more important is that she was teaching my White classmates a lesson, too, because at the same time that *we* were learning shame, *they* were learning superiority. Only, none of us thought of it that way. I didn't, they didn't, Mrs. Paris didn't. It had been going on all of our lives, but by never naming it, by never talking about it, it was to them, to all of us, simply normal, standard; just like TV, a kind of "official" story.

It was because of programs like *Father Knows Best* that I "knew" what the suburbs looked like. It was because of TV Westerns like *The Lone Ranger* that I "knew" what "Indians" talked like—"How!" TV, and movies, and my schoolbooks, and Mrs. Paris gave me the "official story" of a society that was rooted in White culture and promoted an almost exclusively White, European point of view. But in a way, I was lucky because even at age eight, I knew something was wrong, because when it came to what TV and the media and Mrs. Paris did or didn't say about Black people, I knew they didn't even come close to matching the reality I was living.

But what if I had been one of my White classmates? What if my flesh at least came close to matching the "flesh" of the paint Mrs. Paris mixed? What if a Johnson's Band Aid didn't stand out like a glaring beacon of miscoloration when I stuck it on my arm? What if I sang the same songs at home that I sang at school and saw printed in my songbooks? What if almost everything about *my* life said that I was just *normal*, that I was the *standard*? And what if *all that* were reinforced by the structure of my living arrangements? What if I never heard or saw another point of view?



Excerpt 4: Part Four

Well, one day, in the middle of the winter, I had stayed after class to help Mrs. Paris clean the erasers or something. I must have been about 15 minutes later than the other kids; when I left the classroom, the school was deserted and distressingly quiet. It was a cold, snowy day with a lot of wind, so I decided to leave the building through the doors on the side closest to my house rather than walk all the way around outside.

I was sitting on the floor of the lobby for the west end doors, putting my boots on, when a sixth-grade boy, a member of the school safety patrol, came walking in through the door. This boy was probably about eleven or twelve, but to my eight-year-old eyes down near the floor, he looked big enough to be a grown-up. He had on his bright, red-orange safety patrol belt but it wasn't fastened. He had red hair almost as bright as the belt.

For a minute, in my mind, I felt *safe*—you know, *protected*—because here was another kid in this big, empty school building. Here was the safety patrol. It was like having the police, the boy scouts, and superman, all rolled into one. So I looked up at him and smiled a kind of “thank-you-for-being-a-patrol-boy-and-looking-out-for-us-little-kids” kind of smile. When he looked me straight in the eye, pulled his bare hand back, swung at me as hard as he could, and said, “You Black Nigg—!” **WHAP!**

I don't know if he finished the word. I only felt the heat of his slap across my face. I had never seen this boy before in my life. Even then, I didn't see him walk into the school. It was like he came out of nowhere and went right back. For a second, I just sat there. Then I put on my boots, got up, and walked home. I didn't cry. I didn't even tell anybody because I guess, in a strange way, given the world I knew I lived in, I *expected* this to happen. And I guess, in a way, I felt lucky. I mean, Emmett Till was *dead!*

For years, even when I didn't want to, I had held in my mind an image of the people who killed him. I saw them as huge, horrible monsters with wild looks in their eyes. But now—this boy?

Well, I wish I had been more aware of the situation then. I mean, this boy lived somewhere close by. Close enough to go to my school. Somewhere in *my* neighborhood. But even though he lived *where* I lived, he didn't live *the way* that I lived. Think about it: what stories do you suppose *he* had heard growing up during the times of Blockbusting? Did he hear that Black people were invading? That they were stealing his home? Was his father or mother fired in one of those waves of factory layoffs, and did he blame those layoffs on the mass of Black workers who had been called to come in to take factory jobs?

What thoughts do you suppose this boy had when *he* watched Commando Cody? Did he ever think, “It's a shame the way they've left all the people of color out of the future. Where are *they?*” Or did he just accept it as the natural order of things, without thinking about it at all?

This boy was on the school safety patrol. He was probably what most adults would think of as a “good” kid and Mrs. Paris was a “good” teacher, but it's likely that to them, they were



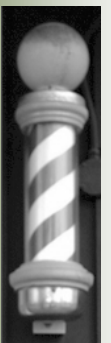
“standard,” while I was “other.” They were “people.” I was “Black people.” It’s likely that to them there was little to be learned from me or the struggles of people like me.

But what if that boy had been able to sit on my porch with me and to hear those people from my block talking? What if he could get to a place where he could know and *understand* the history of blockbusting? What if he could be moved to *care* about the story of Emmett Till?

Well, four years later, I was in the seventh grade, and I was the only Black student in my English class. The teacher had given us an assignment to write a paper about something she called “the Beatles.” Everybody else in class was laughing and having a good time and they seemed to know what the teacher was talking about. I thought it was a joke and wondered why she wanted us to do a paper about insects. Everybody was in a good mood. But when I raised my hand and I asked, “What kind of *beetles*?” everybody had an even bigger laugh—at my expense.

The teacher told me, in a very condescending tone, that it was alright for me to write on any subject I chose, as long as I did a good job.

So I wrote about Emmett Till. My teacher and classmates had never heard of him.



From Flint, MICHIGAN to Your Front Door:



Tracing the Roots of Racism in America



Handout #2: Discussion Questions

Directions

After listening to each excerpt, take a minute to read the following questions and write down your reactions. You may not have time to address all the questions; focus on those that grab your attention. Then share your answers with a partner.

Excerpt #1

La’Ron’s childhood was warm and magical—the magic of going to Chappy’s and being surrounded by caring adults and the magic of television bringing white people right into his living room. But there were some disturbing elements as well, which he learned from his grandmother’s repeated refrain that “white folks hate colored folks!” and from seeing the gruesome picture of Emmett Till.



- How do you make sense of those different images and ideas? Was there anything in this excerpt that surprised you?
- If you know the story of Emmett Till, how did you learn it?
- If you don’t know the story of Emmett Till, why do you think you never heard about it?
- What is your reaction to the story of Emmett Till? How do you think your reaction relates to your race?
- What do you think it was like to grow up Black in an all-Black community but then to be surrounded by whiteness in the media, on product labels, in church and other places? When have you been “the other” in a situation, where you couldn’t assume that the norms of your own racial group were the norms of the racial group you were in? What did that feel like? Did you have to make adjustments to the group that was not your own?
- The murder of Emmett Till had a huge effect on race relations in America. Have there been incidents during your lifetime that have impacted race relations? How did different races react to the incident? How do you relate those reactions to institutional racism?

Excerpt #2

La’Ron learned a lot of lessons from the television programs he watched. Some of what he learned didn’t fit with what he knew, while other things he accepted as true. La’Ron also shares the history of his community: how Black people were enticed to move north for jobs, how realtors and landlords took advantage of this immigration for their own advantage, and how factory owners pitted Black and White workers against one another to keep wages low. Even though his Black neighbors had to struggle to make ends meet and to live well in this unfair system, they passed on many good lessons to La’Ron.

- What did you learn from this excerpt?
- What stereotypes were presented on the television shows La’Ron was watching? What stereotypes are you aware of in the television shows, videos, and movies that you watch?
- How did La’Ron’s family and neighbors challenge those stereotypes? How do you personally react to La’Ron’s grandmother’s statement “White Folks HATE Colored Folks”? How might La’Ron’s experience support or challenge that statement?
- How did the actions of factory owners, realtors, and landlords affect the way that La’Ron’s community lived? How might those actions still be affecting the way neighborhoods and communities are today?



Excerpt #3

La’Ron has experiences in the third grade that make clear to him that there is a difference between his home life and his school life. Suddenly, it seems that White children know more about what is going on in the classroom than he does. There are “right” ways to do things that affirm White culture and ignore Black culture and experience. La’Ron now feels bad that he is unaware of some of the things White kids know. He knew some of the lessons he was learning in school and from television didn’t fit with his own experience. But now, as an adult, La’Ron wonders about his White classmates: since they didn’t have an experience that challenged what they were learning in school or on T.V., did they just think that their lives were “normal” and “right” without wondering about the experience of other cultures?

- What in this excerpt surprised you? What was mentioned here that you haven’t thought about before?
- Some of what Mrs. Paris, La’Ron’s third-grade teacher, taught was standard for the time but clearly had a bias. What would La’Ron, or any child of color, find ironic or confusing about the way she taught the history of Michigan, or about her lessons on policemen, or about having children recite the Pledge of Allegiance?
- Have you ever thought about the problem of having a crayon or paint labeled “flesh”? Or about the color band-aids? What other products exist that assume people are White?
- What would it be like to go to school and not have any of the stories or songs be familiar to you but seem well-known to other students? Does this still happen today? Has it ever happened to you? Which groups of students might feel left out?
- Are there things that were taught at your grade school or are taught at your school now that treat one group’s experience as “normal” or that leave out the experience of another group?
- How are we all harmed by not getting the story of *all* of our students?



Excerpt #4: For this final excerpt you and your conversation partner should join with another pair to discuss any of the following questions that interest you. Assign one of you as a timekeeper so that you finish in 15 minutes.

La'ron has a shocking experience with an older boy who insults and hits him out of the blue, yet La'Ron says he "expected this to happen." He wonders what lessons this boy has learned, what stories he has heard that would make him hostile toward an African-American boy. La'Ron wonders, too, if the white people at school, people who were "good" people, thought of themselves as "standard" and "normal" while thinking of La'Ron and other Black people as "other" or as a sub-class of people. La'Ron ends his story with another experience of being "locked out" of a classroom experience that assumes that White knowledge and experience is universal and standard. He responds this time by sharing the story of Emmett Till, a story from his own community that is unknown in the White world.

- Why is La'Ron unsurprised by the patrol guard's abuse?
- How might the actions of factory owners exploiting race to keep wages low and realtors and landlords using "block busting" to make a profit have affected the patrol boy? What "lessons" have you learned from adults that influences the way you see people of other races?
- Why don't La'Ron's fellow students and teacher know the story of Emmett Till? Is there a story from your own race or culture that you were surprised to learn was not known by people of other races or cultures?
- What assumptions are made in your school, by teachers or students, that privilege one culture and lock out another culture?
- What in this final excerpt or in the story overall surprised you?
- What will you take away from this story?
- This story makes clear the assumption by Whites and White culture that the "White way" is the normal or right way. In what ways do you assume that the norms of the dominant culture are natural or normal? Consider standards of beauty, appropriate behavior in business situations, correct ways to interact with friends, etc.
- What in this story would you like to learn more about?

