

Snowflakes or Rare White People

by Dustin Chinn
directed by Gabriel Harrell



Study Guide
Written and Compiled by
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Snowflakes, Or Rare White People

<p>Title of Lesson: Intro to Museum Culture</p> <p>Materials, technology, resources, guest speakers: <i>For the teacher:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer with access to Youtube • Projector, connected to aforementioned computer • Pre-assessment (video, synopsis, and about the play) • Formative Assessment (Worksheet and viewing the play) • Summative Assessment (articles and essay) <p><i>For the students:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pen/pencil • Paper • Pre-assessment (video, synopsis, and about the play) • Formative Assessment (Worksheet) • Summative Assessment (articles and essay) 	<p>Instructor’s Name:</p> <p>Class:</p> <p>Grade Level:</p> <p>Date(s) of Plan:</p>
<p>General description of lesson</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This lesson will engage students’ critical thinking skills and address English Language Arts and Literacy standards by using various media to answer the question, “What is the role of museums in today’s society?” 	
<p>Content Standard(s)/Competency(ies) and Benchmarks/Indicators <i>Taken from the Massachusetts Department of Education.</i></p> <p>Standard: [RCA-H.11-12] - Reading in History and Social Science (Grades 11-12)</p> <p>Benchmark/indicator(s)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RCA-H.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole. • RCA-H.11-12.6 Evaluate authors’ differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors’ claims, reasoning, and evidence. • RCA-H.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats 	<p>Assessments <i>How do you plan to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pre-assess: Think, Pair, Share using a clip from the movie <i>Black Panther</i>, the synopsis and “about the play” section of this lesson. (Synopsis and “about the play” attached) <p style="text-align: center;">Find the clip here: https://youtu.be/Z2KJxdvckEk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formatively assess: Worksheet (attached) and viewing <i>Snowflakes, or Rare White People</i> - Summative: Essay Prompt using two articles “Genocide, Colonialism, and Museums” and “How a Museum Reckons with Black Pain”(attached), the <i>Black Panther</i> clip, and the production of

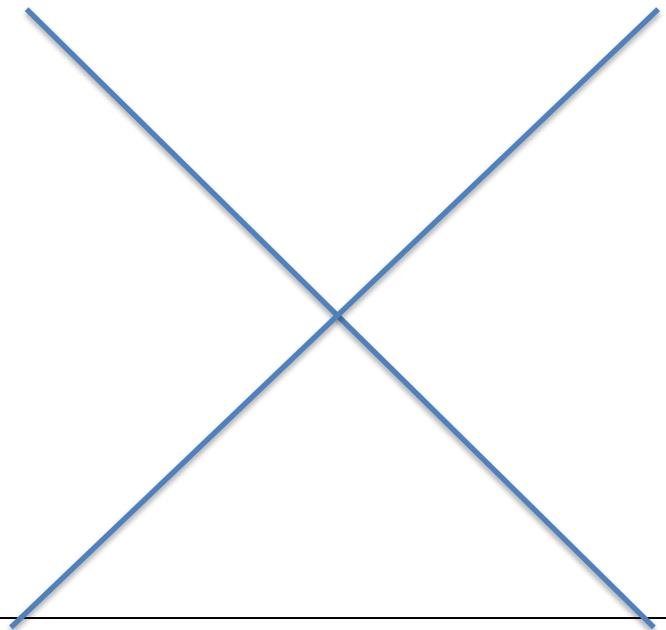
and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Standard: [RCA-H.9-10] - Reading in History and Social Science (Grades 9-10)

Benchmark/indicator(s)

- RCA-H.9-10.1
Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
- RCA-H.9-10.8
Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.
- RCA-H.9-10.9
Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

Snowflakes, or Rare White People as sources to support a thesis.



Instructional Delivery

- Pre-Assessment (before seeing the show; approx. 30 minutes)
 1. Introduce the concept of “museum culture” by showing the clip from Marvel’s *Black Panther*.
 2. Pass out the synopsis and “about the play” sections.
 3. (Think, Pair, Share) Based on the video clip, the synopsis, about the play, and prior knowledge of museums, have students write for 5-10 minutes on this central question: “What is the role of museums in society?”
 4. Students partner with a nearby classmate, sharing their ideas and answers to the question.
 5. Students volunteer to share their thoughts with the entire class.
- Formative Assessment (seeing the show; show is approx. 80 minutes; worksheet 15-20 minutes)
 1. Before seeing the show, pass out the formative assessment, which assesses for using text based evidence (the performance) to support or refute the ideas shared in the pre-assessment.
 2. Instruct students to watch the play thinking about the questions posed in the formative assessment.
 3. View *Snowflakes, or Rare White People*; students fill out the worksheet.
- Summative Assessment (after seeing the show, approx. 30 minutes-possible multiple day project)
 1. Pass out the articles “Genocide, Colonialism, and Museums” and “How a Museum Reckons with Black Pain. Students should carefully read each article.
 2. Repeat the Think, Pair, Share. Based on the video clip from *Black Panther*, viewing the play *Snowflakes, or Rare White People*, and the two new articles, have students write for 5-10 minutes on the central question: “What is the role of museums in society?” Students can then partner with a classmate to share ideas, then volunteer to share with the entire class.
 3. **(OPTIONAL ASSESSMENT; CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH WRITING)**
Instruct students to write an essay using the clip from *Black Panther*, the play *Snowflakes, or Rare White People*, and the two articles mentioned above as sources to support a thesis on the role of museums in society.

Differentiation:

- Both the Formative Assessment and the Summative Assessment could be completed within small, assigned groups.
- Both articles in the Summative Assessment are available online (which has clickable links, too)
 1. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/09/national-museum-of-african-american-history-and-culture-smithsonian/501356/>
 2. <http://www.museumcenter.org/the-curious-curator/2018/2/22/genocide-colonialism-and-museums>
- The third part of the Summative Assessment can be an option for the class or for specific students. Ideally the second round of Think, Pair, Share in the Summative Assessment would help spark ideas that the students would then use to write a critical essay.

Attachments

Attach materials created for the

- **Synopsis of *Snowflakes, or Rare White People***
- **About the Play**
- ***Snowflakes, or Rare White People* worksheet**
- **Article “Genocide, Colonialism, and Museums”**
- **Article “How a Museum Reckons with Black Pain”**

SNOWFLAKES, OR RARE WHITE PEOPLE

BY DUSTIN CHINN



PHOTO CREDIT: YOUTUBE

SYNOPSIS

It's the late 23rd century, and Caucasian (white) people are a dying breed. Among the last two whites, Benedict and Meghan, are moved from their conservation habitat to a museum exhibit in the Hall of Caucasian Peoples at the Museum of Natural History. Aided by a sympathetic museum worker, Rigoberto, they escape their habitat, and flea for freedom.

Everywhere they go, their latent "Caucasity," or whiteness, grows stronger, leaving a trail of micro and macroaggressions in their wake. Following close behind are the lead curator of the Caucasian Studies wing and the chief warden of the U.S. Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Ethnic Preservation. Eventually, they lead Benedict and Meghan into a trap, desperately hoping to halt the dangerous escalation of Caucasity and to preserve the ideal of American homogeneity.

ABOUT THE PLAY

Snowflakes, or Rare White People was conceived and written by Dustin Chinn, a NYC based Asian-American playwright.



Dustin Chinn, playwright

Inspired by childhood trips to the American Museum of Natural History's Hall of Asian Peoples, Chinn envisioned a world where white people are the minority. Spurred by the results of the 2016 election, Chinn continued working on *Snowflakes* where the play made its way to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

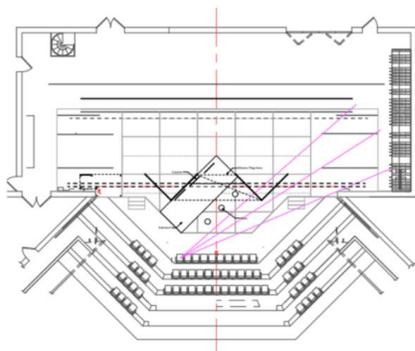
Last year, *Snowflakes* was chosen to be a part of the theater department's Play Lab, which works with playwrights to stage readings of plays that are in development. The success of that reading prompted director Gabriel Harrell to propose *Snowflakes* to be a UMass mainstage production, which you will be seeing.

Taking the world of the play from a reading to a full-fledged production has posed an interesting challenge: How do you use the elements of production (costumes, lights, sound, set, props, acting, etc.) to stage a futurist comedy about a topical, divisive, current-day problem? One of the answers we've come to as a production team is to ground the play in the racist, patriarchal, colonial ideals of museum culture.

To confront its own history, museum culture today is undergoing a radical change. In museums across the United States (and worldwide), exhibits are beginning to question the role of the museum in the preservation of culture and dissemination of information. Acknowledging their troublesome past has allowed museums to reach out to new communities and to contribute to the ongoing, nationwide dialogue about racism and colonialism.



Costume Design by Emma Hollows



Set Design by Xinyuan Li

Snowflakes complicates the dialogue by envisioning a future where society hasn't escaped the racist, colonial ideals, but flipped them. Through this play, and the content included in this packet, the production team is really asking the question, "What is the role of the museum in today's society," and (applying the question more broadly) "Will there ever really be a post-racial, post-colonial world?"

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

SNOWFLAKES, OR RARE WHITE PEOPLE

BY DUSTIN CHINN

Directions: After seeing *Snowflakes, or Rare White People*, answer the questions below.

1. Are Benedict and Meghan likable characters? Why or why not?
2. Why does the character Rigoberto eventually regret helping Benedict and Meghan?
3. In what ways is this portrayal of the 23rd century like our world today? How is it different? How does it compare to other versions of the future (i.e. *Star Trek*, *Black Mirror*, *The Jetsons*, *1984*, *Alien*, *Avatar*, *Planet of the Apes*, *WALL-E*, etc.)?

MUSEUM CENTER AT 5 S P POINTS

February 22, 2018

Genocide, Colonialism, and Museums

The Black Panther hype continues and I want to highlight one very important scene in the movie (minor spoilers ahead).

The reaction at the end of this video was mine. I nearly jumped up and applauded in the movie theater, but didn't because I'm a decent person and didn't want to ruin anyone else's experience.

Here's the thing, all of my fields have a dirty history. I have a BA in Archaeology, an MA in Anthropology, and I work as a museum curator. Our work is historically built on racism, colonialism, theft, and genocide. We were grave-robbers. We were colonists. We claimed it was our divine right to subjugate and oppress other cultures and take their things for our own education and study. We even took people, putting them in our human zoos to gawk at.

Doesn't help that I'm white. But I'll leave that for another day.

When I talk about we, I'm referring to those traditionally of my profession - the anthropologists and historians. As archaeologists we dug up African countrysides and left nothing but holes in the ground as we carted off their greatest treasures to our museums. As anthropologists we used human samples to make determinations about racial differences (which, to the surprise of no one, suggested that whites were the superior race). As curators, we put those relics from other nations behind glass and profited off them while those nations suffered.

I know after those paragraphs, I've lost half of my readers. So, to the remaining two who are still here, I want to tell you how we should move forward.

From here on, this is my opinion. It is not an opinion that Europeans and Americans profited off exploitation of other cultures. But I do have an opinion on how I believe museums should move forward.

1. Negotiate the return of items. It's a lot of work to put items back in the hands of their rightful owners, but we've taken steps towards it in the past. [NAGPRA](#) has helped negotiate the return of Native American burial artifacts to the Native American tribes to which they belong. This process would involve reaching across the aisle to negotiate with other countries. It would be a long, drawn-out, diplomatic process, but it would facilitate new bonds and partnerships. But what about OUR museums? Won't they be empty? In this beautiful day and age, there are items called replicas. It's amazing what we can do nowadays. And, really, with 3-D printing, this could be a fantastic method of replacing returned items.
2. Negotiate the proper transfer of ownership. Many of the places the Western World has ripped items from are still struggling from the legacy of that colonialism. In most cases, the Western World stole the items, did not pay a fair price for them, or took advantage of a less-privileged nation. So what do we do? We go back, and we decide how to handle this past. We can offer a fair and final price. We can accept these items as a gift or donation from another nation (if the nation offers the item as a gift) and label it as such. We can offer a donation for our continued use of the item. We could offer a percentage of the profits we make off the item. No matter which way it is decided to be placed in our care, we should be making amends and we should be consulting the peoples these items were taken from.

Yes, it is a complicated process. It will be painful acknowledging the dark past of anthropology. It will not be financially in our best interests. So why do it? Because it's the right thing to do. (How much did you love Black Panther?)

TELLING THE STORY OF THE [OCOEE REGION](#)

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CULTURE

How a Museum Reckons With Black Pain

The Smithsonian's new memorial of African American history and culture is at once triumphant and crushing.

VANN R. NEWKIRK II

SEP 23, 2016



A woman passes a display depicting the Mexico Olympic protest at the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. KEVIN LAMARQUE / REUTERS

I should not be here.

By the cold universal logic of statistics, none of us should; each of the near-7-billion lives on Earth is a mathematical fluke. But as an American black person, albeit as a free person with a fairly full complement of civil rights, I've always been aware of the especially immense unlikelihood of my own existence. For four centuries, most people who look like me and the vast majority of the people who gave rise to my own flesh and blood have been killed, crushed, or disenfranchised under the torture rack of white supremacy and racial injustice. As police violence, voting rights, and Donald Trump's promises of Big Racism dominate our political conversations, and as protests and riots roil the streets of my birthplace of Charlotte, I'm reminded that I may be thanking my lucky stars a bit too soon.

Black history is usually portrayed as the opposite of unlikely. Even the most well-meaning and well-sourced books and films that make up most of America's black history canon tend toward a view of an inevitable journey to progress that is all swelling strings and sepia photographs: a series of still images from slavery to marches on Washington to freezing inaugural processions down the National Mall. The problem with that approach is that it's hard to reconcile the musculature and endurance of the racism that black people still endure with the idea that freedom is their *destiny*.

A trip through the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which will be unveiled this weekend to the public in a suitable pageant of pomp and circumstance, should disabuse visitors of that notion. The British architect David Adjaye and museum director Lonnie Bunch, along with a small army of curators and contributors, attempted a monumental task. The history exhibit of the Smithsonian's new memorial of blackness is triumphant and crushing at once, both a celebration of how far black people have come in an ongoing struggle for equality, and a reminder of the near impossibility of that struggle. The structure of the exhibit is described by the *Washington Post* art and architecture critic Philip Kennicott:

History has been mostly relegated to a large, subterranean chamber, where small galleries are connected by ramps leading up from the lowest level, devoted to the origins of the Atlantic slave trade, the Colonial era, the antebellum South, the Civil War and its immediate aftermath. The underground placement of the history exhibit is probably better described as a purposefully subversive use of space, rather than relegation. After an initial walk down a stairwell framed by a mural of the triumphs of black history—the photos of Muhammad Ali and Barack Obama and Martin Luther King, Jr. that most people expect—viewers are essentially deposited into the bowels of the slave ships that stole so many souls from the African coasts. Hushed, claustrophobic halls display the worst of the bloody origins of slavery and detail how the slaves who were lucky—or unlucky—enough to survive the trip below the decks could only expect to live an average of seven years after being sold into plantations.

The resulting climb up through history is a barrage of information and an assault on the senses, an intentional juxtaposition of promise with sorrow. At one point, after walking past a proud depiction of a black Revolutionary Patriot, viewers encounter an huge multi-story exhibit embossed with the most famous words of the Declaration of Independence: *All men are created equal*. Standing underneath those words like Damocles under his sword is a statue of the framer Thomas Jefferson. Beside him is a pile of bricks representing the Monticello, with each brick representing one enslaved human that built it.

The Washington Monument rises behind the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Kevin Lamarque / Reuters

The descent and ascent achieve an effect similar to Dante's harrowing journey in *Inferno*, and the walk upwards through Reconstruction, Redemption, the civil-rights movement, and into the present day is a reminder of the constant push and pull of horror and protest. Black towns that don't exist anymore and black neighborhoods that were burned down are memorialized alongside the works of Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. DuBois. One exhibit features the names of lynching victims, a soul-rending litany that feels even more awful because of the names themselves. How many freedmen renamed themselves as Freemans or after Founding Fathers in aspiration only to be killed? At least a few George Washingtons show up on the list.

In his review, Kennicott found this setup “at times overwhelming” and criticized the density of information on display and the tendency toward front-loading visual images near the present-day exhibits. My experience was that these are necessary features, rather than shortcomings of the museum. Many viewers—even those of us who are black—know less about the truth of black history than they do natural history or even how airplanes work. Any amount of information beyond the textbook clichés will probably overwhelm. The mission of the exhibits seems not to always be to “clarify and teach,” as Kennicott hopes, but to impress upon viewers just how much they don’t know, and how deeply the grand conspiracy of white supremacy runs. That explains the emphasis on media-heavy exhibits for episodes nearer the present: So much black history has been systematically destroyed and denied chronicle by that conspiracy, that the curators emphasize its richness where they can.

The walk up through history doesn’t end with the election of President Barack Obama, which is usually seen as a kind of bookend on a tidy narrative of black American progress, but with interactives showing the rise of Black Lives Matter and the injustices that movement now faces. Given the structure of the exhibits below, that arrangement is predictable. Revolutions are displayed beside counter-revolutions, and protests beside the atrocities that sparked them. Even if the museum does take the civil-rights movement’s core mantra of “We shall overcome” seriously, the exhibits appear to interpret that song as a call to action instead of as pure prophecy.

To me, the museum’s subversion of the inevitability of progress complicates the critique of “respectability politics” leveled by the *Guardian* columnist Steven Thrasher. He characterized the museum as a “project of U.S. Nationalism” that is at odds with modern black activist sensibilities of blackness on its own terms. To (perhaps unfairly) condense Thrasher’s points, he wonders why such a big project on the National Mall to be scrutinized under the white gaze is even necessary, and if it will advance an unquestioning view of American nationalism and patriotism that has often shortchanged black people even as it claimed to help them.

Slave shackles are seen in a display case at the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Kevin Lamarque / Reuters
My sense is that the National Museum of African American History of Culture actually muddles and undermines the interracial narrative of progress that undergirds the American nationalist project. Placement on the National Mall could be fairly read as begging for a seat at the master’s table, as Thrasher seems to believe. Or it could be a statement that *the table is ours because we built it*. The oft-quoted phrase used in museum opening events that “black history is American history” could be interpreted as a plea—or as a declaration of ownership.

That declaration is to me another reinforcement of just how unlikely blackness is, and of how much pain has been inflicted to keep America’s racial order and wipe out the resistance that persists. And it’s also a reminder of just what U.S. history is: not just a long march toward progress, but also a constant war against it. Thrasher asks, “What good to African Americans, I have to wonder, is a museum dedicated to us, when we are getting shot in the street daily?” The NMAAHC’s answer is probably best summed by Public Enemy, who is featured in the history exhibit and will participate in opening ceremonies: to show that “it takes a nation of millions to hold us back.”

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.