

## **PREFACE TO *THE WHITE CARD***

One evening during a question-and-answer session, a white, middle-aged man stood up. After movingly addressing my reading from *Citizen*, he asked me, "What can I do for you? How can I help you?" As I stood on stage regarding him, I wondered how to move his question away from me, my story, my body to the more relevant issue and dynamics regarding American history and white guilt. Teju Cole's essay "The White-Savior Industrial Complex" came back to me in that moment. Maybe it would have been better to use Cole's words directly, to quote his extension of Hannah Arendt into the realm of whiteness. "The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm." Or this: "The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege."

But in the moment, I decided to climb out from behind all my reading, references, and quotes and engage his question personally without distancing scaffold of referential-speak. His question struck me as an age-old defensive shield against identifying with acts of racism at the hands of liberal, well-meaning white people, the kind he had just listened to me read. His question did the almost-imperceptible work of positioning him outside the problems *Citizen* interrogates, while maintaining his position of superiority relative to me in his act of offering to help me. He would help answer not only my problems but those of all black people, which he only at that moment recognized but otherwise was not implicated in or touched by. He seemed oblivious to the realization that our problems as a society are dependent on his presence, despite my project of saying this in all the ways I know how.

The afterlife of white supremacy (to appropriate and flip on its head Saidiya Hartman's "the afterlife of slavery") is all our problem. Cole writes, "All he sees is need, and he sees no need to reason out the need for the need." If he were to reason out the need for the need, he would understand he need not invite himself to the scene. He is already there. There was so much that could be said about the often-meaningless reparative largesse of whiteness in the face of human pain and suffering, but in the minutes we had for our exchange, I simply responded to the man, "I think the question you should be asking is what *you* can do for *you*."

He didn't appreciate my answer.

From inside his theater of noblesse oblige, which seems to come close to condescension but really exists in the depths of repression of American

complicity with structural antiblack racism, rose in anger that I confess I didn't expect. "If that is how you answer questions," he responded, "then no one will ask you anything."

The germinal thought, the originating impulse, of *The White Card* came out of this man's question and his response to my response. In his imagination, Where did I go wrong? Was I initially intended to express my gratitude for his interest? Were his feelings and the feelings of the audience in general my first priority? Was recognition of his likability a necessary gateway into his ability to apprehend my work? I really wanted to have the conversation he started. I didn't come all this way not to engage but as the affect theorist Lauren Berlant has stated "What does it do to one's attachment to life to have constantly to navigate atmospheres of white humorlessness."

It occurred to me after this incident that an audience member might read all the relevant books on racism, see all the documentaries and films, and know the "correct" phrases to mention, but in the moment of dialogue or confrontation retreat into a space of defensiveness, anger, silence, which is to say he might retreat into the comfort of control, which begins by putting me back in my imagined place. Perhaps any discussion of racism does not begin from a position of equality for those involved. Maybe the expectation is for the performance of something I as a black woman cannot see even as I object to its presence. Perhaps the only way to explore this known and yet invisible dynamic is to get in a room and act it out.

Theater is by its very nature a space for and of encounter. The writing of *The White Card* was a way to test an imagined conversation regarding race and racism among strangers. The dinner party as a social setting for the sharing of both space and conversation in the home of a white family seemed the benevolent, natural, if not exactly neutral, site. The characters have come together to consider the terms of an exchange of art, while they get to know one another. What brings everyone to the room is a desire to be seen and known, but what keeps them there is the complexity of our human desire to be understood.

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