



The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind

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"To think of creativity in terms of transcendence is itself specific and partial—a lovely dream perhaps, but an inhuman one.

"It is not only white writers who make a prize of transcendence, of course. Many writers of all backgrounds see the imagination as ahistorical, as a generative place where race doesn't and shouldn't enter, a place of bodies that transcend the legislative, the economic—in other words, transcend the stuff that doesn't lend itself much poetry. In this view the imagination is postracial, a posthistorical and postpolitical utopia. . . . To bring up race for these writers is to inch close to the anxious space of affirmative action, the scarring qualifieds.

"So everyone is here."—Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda, from the introduction

In 2011, a poem published in a national magazine by a popular white male poet made use of a black female body. A conversation ensued, and ended. Claudia Rankine subsequently created Open Letter, a web forum for writers to relate the effects and affects of racial difference and to explore art's failure, thus far, to adequately imagine.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, **Claudia Rankine** is author and editor of more than six collections of poetry and poetics. She is a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and a professor of English at Pomona College.

Beth Loffreda is author of *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-gay Murder*. She directs the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Wyoming.

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