

DISCOVERY GUIDE

# The Niceties

Geva  
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19/20 SEASON

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## Dear Educators,

On the right you'll most likely recognize one of the more famous and iconic paintings in American history – Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. It has become a foundational representation of what comprises the American psyche, and encapsulates much of what its people love about this country. It shows a forward-looking group of rugged individuals overcoming the elements, fortified by sheer determination in their quest for victory, being guided by the most indomitable of leaders. The image, in essence, tells you all you need to know about the resolve of this young country. Generations of students have grown up with this painting firmly planted in their memories as they developed their opinions about their homeland. And yet, closer inspection points out any number of inconsistencies. While some of them are fairly innocuous, such as the fact that the crossing took place in the middle of the night as opposed to at dawn, as depicted, others are a bit more troubling – including the point that the American flag seen in the painting did not actually exist until a year after the event took place. Such is the tension between myth-making and historical accuracy. A more detailed look at the painting can be found at <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-iconic-american-history-painting-facts-wrong>.



Historical research abounds with such reexaminations of what were once accepted facts – sometimes to confirm them, and other times to look at them critically under a new set of criteria. It is exactly at this intersection where we find ourselves in *The Niceties*. Zoe, a college junior, is advancing a new interpretation of the American Revolution that her esteemed professor, Janine, is reluctant to accept.

**JANINE: I'm afraid you're in for quite a substantial rewrite. Your argument is fundamentally unsound.**

**ZOE: Unsound?**

**JANINE: "A successful American Revolution was only possible because of the existence of slavery."**

**ZOE: Yes.**

**JANINE: Yes?**

**ZOE: Yes**

It is a simple enough premise and yet, within that sequence of "yes's" exists the beginning of a conversation between Janine and Zoe that will include race, class, privilege, the weight of activism, historical scholarship, teaching methodologies, and decolonized curriculums in classrooms – all of which are touched on in the following pages. Not unlike the icebergs peeking out of the Delaware in Leutze's painting, there is much more to explore beyond the bounds of this guide. Janine and Zoe's debate also makes its way towards discussions of feminism and trigger warnings.

*The Niceties* is an exhilarating story that pulls no punches and offers no easy answers, and we thank you for choosing to share it with your students. We're sure they will see versions of themselves in this play, and we cannot wait for them to witness this conversation. In order to continue and deepen the conversations begun in the in-classroom Geva Discovery Workshops, we hope that you'll be able to stay for the 20-minute cast talkback following the performance. It will, we're certain, be a fantastic way to enhance the dialogues they'll have as they leave the theatre.

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The following documents and resources are available at  
[www.GevaTheatre.org/engage-learn/programs-for-students/](http://www.GevaTheatre.org/engage-learn/programs-for-students/):

- College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for high school audiences
- A PDF version of this guide
- Works cited
- Additional content and discussion questions
- Theatre etiquette guide for students
- Student Matinee policies for educators

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- **Geffen Playhouse** – Jennifer Zakkai ("Background at the Forefront," "Interview with Richard Newman," and "The Toll of Activism")
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- **Portland Stage** – Kate Baskerville ("From the Playwright")

**ZOE: "It's easier to be pro-equality when there's a subjugated minority in your midst."**

## Background at the Forefront

### Synopsis

Zoe Reed, a 20-year-old African American college student, is meeting with Janine Bosko, a white American history professor of Polish descent in her early 60s, to discuss Zoe's paper on the American Revolution. When Zoe raises a compelling point about the unaddressed role of slavery at that time, she is frustrated by Janine's limited view of history, her lack of awareness and concern about racial inequities, and her condescension as a teacher. Janine, in turn, is put off by Zoe's attachment to feelings over facts, and her choice to engage in activism instead of the rigorous research that Janine believes would ensure Zoe's success in school and in a career. Fueled by their inability to hear each other, their argument escalates into hostilities that have unexpected consequences for them both.

### Janine and Zoe: "Let them both be people"

In the stage directions for *The Niceties*, Burgess offers that both Janine and Zoe "can be noble. Both of them can be charming. Both of them can be petulant, snotty, arrogant, overwhelmed, and immature. Let them both be people." To this end, she cautions directors and actors that they should "resist the temptation to think of only one of [the characters] as the mouthpiece for the truth." It is, Burgess noted in a 2018 *Boston Globe* interview, one of the advantages of having a controversial conversation take place on stage as opposed to participating in one directly. "You're not personally being attacked," she says, "and you don't have to think of a next thing to say. So you can actually hear the entire conversation and just let it wash over you. Which means that you can finally hear ideas that would be too painful to hear if they were being said at you."



Eleanor Burgess

**Eleanor Burgess** Eleanor Burgess's work has been produced at Manhattan Theatre Club, McCarter Theatre Center, Huntington Theatre Company, Alliance Theatre, Merrimack Repertory Theatre, the Contemporary American Theater Festival, Portland Stage Company, and Centenary Stage. Her work has also been developed with The New Group, New York Theatre Workshop, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Salt Lake Acting Company, the Lark Play Development Center, and the Kennedy Center/NNPN MFA Playwrights Workshop.

She's been a member of Page 73's writers' group Interstate, and The Civilians' R&D Group, and was the recipient of the Alliance/Keneda National Graduate Playwriting Award, an EST/Sloan commission, a Huntington Playwriting Fellowship, a Keen Teens Commission, and the Susan Glaspell Award for Women Playwrights. She grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts, studied history at Yale College, and recently completed the M.F.A. in Dramatic Writing at NYU/Tisch

### The Company of *The Niceties*



Jordan Baker-Kilner  
(Janine Bosko)



Cindy de la Cruz  
(Zoe Reed)



Nicole A. Watson  
(Director)

### From the Playwright: "Question everything, but also learn everything"

Eleanor Burgess emphasizes that the play is, at its core, a series of questions designed to provoke thought and reflection but not to offer any easy or simple answers. "What is the story of America?" she asks, "What has happened in this country? What is this country supposed to be? What has it never been?" *The Niceties*, she offers, should "shake people's beliefs – that's what we're supposed to do in the theatre." Below, Burgess addresses her initial impulses for writing the play, some of the larger topics in the story, and what she hopes students will take away from their experience with it.

### On the origins of the play

*The Niceties* was originally inspired by an incident that happened at Yale in the fall of 2015 – when the school's administration sent an e-mail cautioning students against wearing 'racially or ethnically offensive Halloween costumes' – and the conversations

and arguments that cropped up in its wake. I became obsessed with how dysfunctional those conversations were, and with how deep the divisions in this seemingly unified community really ran. I didn't know what to think, and when I don't know what to think, I start writing to try to find out."

**ZOE:** "It takes work to not be a bad person. You know that, right? You can't just be the least bad person in a lineup and call yourself good."



Bulletin board at Yale University in 2015

## On the importance of history in *The Nicties*

“I used to be a high school history teacher, including teaching APUSH (Advanced Placement United States History), so a lot of the big themes and ideas were very intuitive and familiar for me, but I wanted to dig deeper into them. I tend to be fascinated by the interaction between individuals and grand world-historical forces. The year when we’re born shapes so much about our lives in ways that we can’t quite grasp or control. I’m interested in the ways we try to change and shape the world, even as the world much more powerfully changes and shapes us.”

## On setting the play in 2016

“One thing I like about the timing of the play is that the characters on stage don’t know what’s coming in this country, and we in the audience know very well. We know the consequences of a white woman failing to win over people who aren’t white, and the consequences of a woman in her 60s failing to win over a millennial. We also know more than they do about how far Americans are willing to go to defend their beliefs and their understanding of race in America. There is a dramatic irony present in the play – we have a fear of where the conversation is going that neither of them knows or sees. We also know how much they’re going to lose and how dangerous the world is going to get for both of them.”

## On telling this story in 2019 and finding common ground

“We’re living this story now, as a country. We’re in the middle of a multi-directional, 360-million-direction conversation about the kind of country we live in, what kind of country it should be, about who has been left out, and who needs to be heard. I think we are often navigating that conversation badly. It’s not easy to face the possibility that parts of how you understand the world are wrong, or that you’ve been part of something imperfect. It’s not easy to speak with patience or optimism to people who disagree with you. It’s not easy to find common ground. It’s emotionally draining and intellectually demanding, and very difficult to be part of those conversations. It hurts, and it’s terrifying.”

## On the relevance of *The Nicties* for students

“I hope that this is the start of a million conversations. For some students, hopefully, this is a jumping off point to think about what they’ve been taught about this country, what they haven’t been taught, and what they want to learn more about. For other students, I hope they think about how we talk to each other, and ask themselves how we ought to handle disagreements, whether in intimate conversations or in society as a whole. For others, I hope they will think about how to make change – how do we even figure out which changes we want to make? How do we get other people on our side? How do we balance pragmatism and idealism? Is Janine right to support gradual change through compromise? Or is Zoe right to insist on rapid, radical changes? I want students to want to know more. Question everything, but also learn everything. Get in conversations. Stay in conversations. The real work begins once the curtain goes down, and the work is up to the audience. I hope that students feel inspired to learn and engage more, and to wade into some tough conversations with both confidence and empathy.”

## “Technological Savages”: Power Structures and The Generational Divide in *The Nicties*

“Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.” — George Orwell

Janine and Zoe both identify with progressive politics and see themselves as activists who fight the status quo while seeking equality and justice in a world dominated by straight white men. Their worldviews, however, do not always align. Janine is in her 60s, white, a lesbian, and a member of the academic elite. Zoe is a 20-year-old young black woman and university student who is also actively engaging in social justice movements. Among their many differences, their ages create an undeniable intergenerational chasm.

While many of Janine’s battles – such as breaking the glass ceiling of academia or fighting for the legalization of her same-sex marriage – have been hard-fought, she is arguably on firmer ground due, in large part, to her position of power and privilege. As she optimistically looks forward, believing Hillary Clinton will become the first female president of the United States, Janine seems somewhat out of touch with the struggles of groups of people with whom she does not identify. Zoe knows that her own fight is just beginning. From black men being shot in their own backyards, to mass incarceration, and the everyday indignities of racial microaggressions experienced by students across her campus, she sees the world as largely unfair. Zoe knows that she has “one of the best lives in history ever,” as she readily admits, and yet feels she is weak when it comes to her own advocacy work.

**JANINE:** “There is a role for patience, for tolerance. For staying in a conversation with people you disagree with.”

**ZOE:** “We’ve been nice and patient for 400 years, and I’m not happy with the results.”

**ZOE: You use your intelligence to critique and belittle people who have less power than you. Like your comments on my paper. You think that's helpful? To take a person who's trying to put forward an underrepresented point of view, and to criticize them until they feel like they might as well just give up because you'll never understand?**

The generational divide between Janine and Zoe exists not only on a personal level, but also underpins their academic relationship. The structure of the student-teacher relationship, at its foundation, requires a desire by the student to learn, and a willingness by the teacher to share their knowledge. “Students,” says playwright Eleanor Burgess, “have to believe that there are things that they don’t know and things that someone else can help them know more about.” But what power dynamics develop when professors are framed as academic experts, whose knowledge and approval are presented as necessities, if students are to succeed? Does being considered an “expert” position a professor to serve as a gateway to a student’s success, or a barrier to their growth?

While Zoe argues that her efforts to give a voice to a very underrepresented population in traditional histories of the American Revolution falls outside of the standard criteria of historical scholarship – the same kind of critical analysis upon which her professor has based her career – she is also resistant to Janine’s reasoning that the support of a well-respected historian, such as herself, would serve as notice to the larger scholastic community that Zoe has talent and skill that should be taken seriously. “A good grade from me,” Janine offers, “is a signal to my colleagues, this young woman has all the skills you’re looking for in a historian.” She continues by appealing to Zoe’s stated plans to use her education to serve her community, and telling her that there would be a “very real difference between you and your less elitely educated peers. An ability to see nuance. An ability to serve the world in a way others can’t.”

In her efforts to stay informed about daily events, Zoe has developed considerable internet research skills and uses the technological tools available to her with ease. From Netflix to Google to various social media platforms, she is savvy about the use of multiple media and communication outlets. Zoe has also lived her young adult life conscious of her lack of privacy. She knows that Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat tell her story and she operates deliberately with that knowledge, thinking carefully about what she believes and says, with the goal of presenting a carefully curated image. Janine’s life has not been dominated by social media or crafting her online presence. Instead, she believes in the power of personal relationships and her own network of support, and is unimpressed with Zoe’s internet-heavy concept of scholarship. While Janine slights young people as “technological savages,” she confesses that she struggles to follow the technology that Zoe so easily navigates.

With more than 40 years between their frames of reference, communication between Janine and Zoe continues to break down. Janine contests that the speed to which language is changing leaves many, especially people of her generation, out of the conversation. Adding to the widening distance between them is the anger young people like Zoe feel when their elders are ignorant, insensitive, or unknowingly inappropriate. Janine’s insistence that some political maneuvering is important to long-term career success and attempts to impress upon Zoe the importance of accepting consequences and making connections with those in power only further frustrates Zoe, who has no interests in what she perceives as bowing to the oppressive institutional structures that, she believes, need to be dismantled.



A fact-checking guide for online resources developed for students at Santa Clara University in 2017

### Interview with Richard Newman: “The questions are as important as the answers”

When thinking of the American Revolution, many Americans envision such acts as white colonists seeking freedom from the British monarchy, Thomas Jefferson crafting the Declaration of Independence, and George Washington winning the Revolutionary War. The complete picture of this period is more complex. Often left out, for example, are the millions of Native Americans who were forcibly removed from their land, the slaves who were transported from Africa and became 20% of the population by the 1770s, and women. When Zoe declines to join Janine in idealizing the

Founding Fathers, she gives voice to those whose forced servitude made the establishment and expansion of the United States possible. She points out that she would have been a slave during the time of the Continental Congress and that George Washington – along with many other Founding Fathers – owned slaves, a fact only passingly acknowledged by her professor.

While *The Niceties* is a work of fiction, it is heavily informed by Eleanor Burgess’s background as a history teacher, as well as

**JANINE: “I understand your work perfectly, it’s just flawed work and it doesn’t deserve an A and it won’t get one.”**



Richard Newman

the experiences of those currently teaching American history in high school and college classrooms. Richard Newman is a Professor of History at the Rochester Institute of Technology and currently teaches a number American history classes. We asked him to reflect on his reading of *The Niceties* and the parallels to his own classroom conversations regarding race, class, research methodology, and teaching in the ever-changing environment of a university campus. Below are Professor Newman's answers.

**Does *The Niceties* ring true for you, and, if so, in what ways? Have you taken part in similar conversations? Have they been constructive?**

*The Niceties* rings true for a host of reasons. We are in a moment of historical upheaval where Americans are re-considering the way that history frames current conversations about race, class, gender, and societal change. Those conversations have made their way into my classes



Student protestors at the University of La Verne, California in 2019

as students are much more likely to challenge their professors' assumptions, especially on topics relating to race and social justice. I have had several students in recent years ask me challenging questions about the way I teach certain topics and what alternate approaches we might use in class to understand oppressed peoples' experiences. Of course, the conversation between Janine and Zoe is far more heated and explosive than anything I have ever encountered – that is just not my experience at all. However, the broader tenor of the play – two characters trying to navigate histories of race that they, themselves, are not liberated from – is quite familiar.

The big take-away for me is that constructive dialogue remains the best way to navigate through difficult conversations. *The Niceties* reminds me that hearing what others have to say and trying to learn from it is more critical today than ever. For professors, as well as students, that means listening to a wider set of voices and thinking more deeply about race as a lived experience in America. That means talking with students about how they are experiencing the class. What other topics and themes should we be covering in our classes and why? What readings would make class more inclusive? Can we look at history in a different way? The questions are as important as the answers.

**Have you developed any new approaches to how you teach American history? If so, what types of changes have you seen in the discourse amongst your students and colleagues?**

Reading the play pushed me to expand the topics, themes, and people we consider in all of my American history courses. For instance, in a class on Rochester Reformers, we looked not only at

famous figures like Frederick Douglass, but also at less celebrated people who illuminate the experiences of African Americans in Rochester before the Civil War. One amazing figure we studied was an African American woman named Phoebe Rey who helped launch the school desegregation struggle in Rochester in the 1840s. Frederick Douglass joined the movement she started. Similarly, in my 19th century history classes, I have tried to expand students' understanding of ethnicity and immigration after the Civil War, particularly in the southwest and west. This has meant learning more about issues I'm not a scholarly specialist in – such as the Chinese experience in America – which allows me to better address a diverse student population today.

In both cases, I have thought a lot about Zoe's challenge in the play: is Janine truly prepared for today's students? Am I truly prepared to stand in front of a diverse class of students? Like Janine, I was trained for one type of educational world and teaching environment, but have found that nearly everything has changed – from the cost of college to the omnipresence of social media on campus. The best way to deal with that changing world is not to dig in one's heels, but to learn from students, colleagues, and others. Creating more inclusive classes is only the start of that process.

**What are your thoughts on Janine's contention that "it will always be harder to write a really excellent paper about black history than about white history," and, conversely, Zoe's argument that in order to rectify the situation, new types of methodology will need to be considered? How would that methodology be developed?**

On a basic level, both characters are right: there are more printed historical sources available for what we might call "white history," than "black history," compelling us to innovate new approaches to the study of African American history. Janine's contention is oversimplified and problematic on a couple of levels. It suggests that all one needs are sources to offer an insightful analysis of the past. Janine is also wrong to imply that there simply aren't enough resources on the black past. We are living in a Golden Age of study on African and African American history, with more archival resources, digitized documents, and books available than ever before. Janine's response reveals her inability to really listen to Zoe's concerns. She's resting on her laurels as a scholarly specialist who was trained in one way and has not had the time – or won't make the time – to think about updating her research and teaching to address all of her students' needs.

In terms of methodology, Zoe's response is powerful because it flows from discussions that many scholars – particularly African American professors and graduate students – have been having about race, history and memory in American society. For instance, the book *Slavery at Sea* by Sowande' M. Mustakeem asks us to reconsider the way we conceptualize the Middle Passage – the forcible trans-Atlantic crossing of millions of African people to the Americas. Using everything from ship logs to survivors' memories, she shows that terror and violence were continually used by slave traders to condition captive Africans into accepting their enslaved status – which Africans consistently rebelled against. Like Mustakeem, many

**JANINE:** "The entire point of a university is the idea of expertise. We are people who refuse to go with our feelings, our guts. We look at the evidence. And by doing that, we drive back ignorance."

scholars are now going beyond traditional sources (mainly books and manuscripts) to study the emotions, psychology, and feelings of marginalized people in history. And that is a really powerful thing for our students to understand.

Zoe also risks simplifying parts of the past. I'm quite sympathetic to Janine's argument that history is complex. The American conversation on race has been around since the nation's founding era – we cannot say that Civil Rights only came into the nation's focus in the 20th century. This reminds us that history cannot be reduced to aphorisms or easy generalization.

**What conversations have you had with your students regarding the use of the internet in gathering information for a project or paper, and the need to soundly verify that information in order to present the strongest argument possible?**

This is a perennial issue. The internet is not just a resource to many students but an authority – if it's online, they think, it must be right. I am very sympathetic to Janine. What is an authoritative source? How do you verify information online? What are the perils of social media? My students understand the problems associated with the internet, but we also take note of the internet's positive impact on contemporary history writing. The work of younger scholars who have been trained on digital tools is really important. By working to integrate social media and digital scholarship into their research and writing, these scholars have offered us new ways to understand the past. The work of Harvard scholar Vincent Brown, for example, focuses on slave rebellion during the American Revolution. He has created a wonderful web resource ("Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760-61" – <http://revolt.axismaps.com/>) which includes digital histories, maps, and documents relating to a famous series of slave uprisings in British Jamaica in the early 1760s. This website shows that black uprising was an omnipresent threat to slaveholding regimes and that



Harvard College students protesting gun violence in the fall of 2018

we cannot simply write off the internet as bad for history writing. It is a great tool for history writing – one whose benefits may outweigh the pitfalls.

**In a 2015 article for *The Atlantic* ("The Problem with History Classes") Michael Conway makes the case for the use of historiography as a potential way to create a more inclusive approach to teach history. What are your thoughts regarding this approach?**

Conway's *Atlantic* essay is part of a broader conversation about diversifying, expanding, and even decolonizing academic curricula. The essential question it broaches is for us to consider how we can restructure our curriculum to better serve the needs of a diverse student population. Teaching historiography is one way to broaden the curriculum because it shows that there have always been diverse perspectives among scholars about how to portray the American past among scholars. Another approach is to focus on new narratives that retell American history from diverse perspectives. For instance, Erica Armstrong Dunbar's book *Never Caught* is about Ona Judge, an enslaved woman who ran away from George Washington in the 1790s and remained free even after he tried to re-capture her in New England. It sheds critical light on race and slavery in the founding era. Another example is Gordon Chang's book, *The Ghosts of Gold Mountain*, about Chinese immigrants' experiences building the Trans-Continental Railroad – it is exhilarating because it offers a completely new perspective on the laying of a massive railroad system in the American west, which was an iconic moment in American history. There are so many great narrative histories that allow us to meditate on key moments in America's past. For me, these new and gripping histories offer the best way to create dialogues about diversity in the American past, and its meaning for the future.

**What is Historiography?** Historiography is the study of the writing of history, especially the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources. It also focuses on the selection of details from materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination. The term historiography also refers to the theory and history of historical writing. Think about an important historical event. Research the various ways about which it has been written and discussed. Where is there agreement amongst the sources? Where do they diverge? What do you think accounts for those differences?

## A Decolonized Syllabus: "The higher you go, the whiter it gets"

**ZOE: We demand a decolonized curriculum.**

**JANINE: A - what?**

**ZOE: A curriculum that doesn't assume everybody needs to read *Beowulf*. And doesn't assume that the people who made the laws are more important than the people who suffered under them.**

Over the course of their conversations, Zoe introduces the idea of Janine decolonizing her syllabi for future classes – as well as it becoming a university-wide policy. A decolonized syllabus is, in essence, one that prominently features the works of writers, scholars, historians, and novelists from largely marginalized populations rather than the work of white males of European descent, who have historically made up an overwhelmingly high percentage of college curriculums.

**ZOE: "You're excluding the people who couldn't leave evidence behind. People who couldn't write. Anyone without money, or an education. Anyone with no possessions for historians to dig up."**



Latinx writer, artist, and educator Yvette DeChavez is a vocal proponent of a decolonized syllabus, and has written at length about the ways that educators may want to reconsider their approaches in classrooms. While some authors and educators, such as writer Joanna Williams, contend that “the decolonize movement is colonizing more and more areas of life [and introducing] an uncritical disdain for the past as a censorious, intolerant approach to the present,” DeChavez disagrees. “One of the great things about literature,” she says, “is that it cultivates our critical thinking. Given what’s going on in this country, a literature class that shows us the perspectives of the very people who are erased, called criminals, “illegal,” or worthless seems pretty important – a chance for people to think more critically about what they see in the world and the stereotypes they’ve grown up hearing. If students are able to hear a different version of the story, one straight from the source, perhaps their worldviews might shift in a direction that means indigenous and black and brown people will no longer have to fight for their basic human rights.”

In an April 2019 interview with *The Hellebore*, DeChavez expanded on her position. Below is an edited version of that conversation.

**In what ways do you think students, faculty, and administration can contribute to an inclusive and equitable environment with education?**

I think the entire institution of academia sees white as the default, because the institution itself is largely made up of white people. The higher you go, the whiter it gets. I think it would require a process of unlearning, rethinking, and listening to BIPOCs (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) as they try to explain why things feel so unwelcoming and hostile. I think faculty and administrations are in a position of power, which means it’s up to them to do the work of making themselves better, of holding themselves accountable. The tools are everywhere and absolutely available – it’s up to them to make use of them.

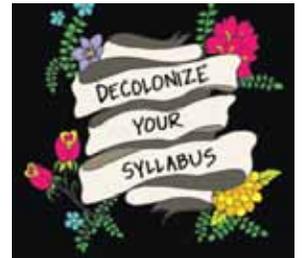
**How have you used your platform to challenge prejudice and discrimination within academia?**

As a literature instructor, one of the most important aspects of my job is teaching critical thinking skills. Critical thinking and challenging prejudice and discrimination go hand-in-hand. So, basically, it’s my job to use my platform in this way.

**What situation sparked the #DecolonizeYourSyllabus initiative? What conversations and actions do you hope will occur because of this initiative?**

Last year I held a post-doctoral position and, just before classes began, I received an email from a professor with some power in the department who decided that the reading list for my American Novel class was too “ethnic” and that I needed to add white men to the syllabus, particularly because it was an American Lit class and not an “Ethnic American” lit class, as they phrased it. They also added that it would make me look better on the job market.

It’s no secret that most of us spend our years in higher education reading text after text by white men, and look at where that’s gotten us. It becomes the only perspective we’re given, and it starts to feel like the only one that matters. I believe that this is detrimental to students. White students never have to consider the perspectives of indigenous and POC Americans. Indigenous and POC students feel like their perspectives aren’t important. The cycle goes on and on and on – we reinforce and perpetuate the system.



A popular t-shirt design by Yvette DeChavez



Book titles commonly found on high school and college reading lists

I also want to add – and this is really important to point out – this is a radical call for change. I’m not saying “DIVERSIFY your syllabus,” I’m saying “DECOLONIZE.” And that’s the part that upsets a lot of people. Yes, I actually mean that, in order to truly shake things up, you should primarily teach indigenous and POC texts. I’m not calling for people to sprinkle in more works by indigenous and POC writers; I’m calling for them to make these voices the dominant ones in their classroom.

Some people try to say things like, “Well, you know it’s impossible to change things from inside the institution, right?” And, sure, I get that. But at the same time, shouldn’t we try? What is the alternative when this is the system under which we operate? For me, decolonizing your syllabus is a step towards something good, something better.

**How can English departments across universities nationwide create a literary canon that represents the students they teach?**

The canon is a funky thing, right? I mean, it’s constantly evolving and the concept itself feels a little outdated to me, particularly given the way the internet is changing how we access works. I’m not sure how I feel about the concept of the canon anymore. I mean, I do think Toni Morrison is One of the Greats, but have you ever read Kiese Laymon? How about Yesika Salgado, who really got her career going

**ZOE:** “I don’t think I can be complicit in one more generation of American leaders learning that if they get 5% better than their parents, then they can keep running the world.”

thanks to social media? Their work is changing people's lives, and I doubt most would consider them canonical. I think we should really be thinking about how white professors are going to do the work of finding materials by indigenous and POC writers rather than insisting we all read *The Old Man and the Sea*. Everyone wants to diversify, but no one wants to put in the work or pay people to do the work for them.

### Do you have any literature or poetry recommendations for our readers?

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*. I've read this book four or five times, and it gets more painful every time, but, it's something you have to read. Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*. I'd also recommend Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*, Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*, and Ingrid Rojas Contreras's *Fruit of the Drunken Tree*.

## Discovering Our Shared Humanity

**JANINE: No, it's not fair that you have to prove your humanity to people who get to withhold their help, and quibble, and disagree, and offend, while you're fighting for your dignity, for your life. It's infuriating. But it works.**



Cartoon from a 2017 *Psychology Today* article

A 2017 *Psychology Today* article by Jason Jay and Gabriel Grant entitled “Holiday Conversations in a Polarized World” describes a scenario that may seem familiar to many of us: the avoidance of a politically-charged conversation with someone with whom we strongly disagree, particularly if they are a friend or family

member. Many people, the authors observe, “approach these difficult conversations with the following trade-off: either stay quiet about the issue and keep the peace in the relationship/family, or charge forward with the issue even if the relationship becomes collateral damage. Neither of these options is appealing. Worse, neither works.”

“Profound breakthroughs occur,” continue Jay and Gabriel, “when people abandon choosing between the relationship and their cause. Instead, they choose to explore the possibility of standing for both. Building the relationship and sharing about what matters are inseparable. They are one in the same.”

Taking more of a big-picture point of view, Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, the authors of “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy” in *American Behavioral Scientist*, note that while “political polarization benefits democracy by mobilizing political participation, simplifying political choice for voters, and strengthening political parties,” more extreme levels of it threaten “both governability and social cohesion, and, in turn, support for democracy in advanced and developing democracies alike.” McCoy, Rahman, and Somer cite the “paralysis and gridlock followed by the election of an inexperienced populist in the United States, and the surprises reflected in the victory of the Brexit vote (for England to withdraw from the European Union)” as just a few examples of the threats to a functional democracy posed by excessive political opposition.

And yet, not entering into those difficult conversations – all the while acknowledging the strongly held convictions that differ from your own, and the deeply held values that underpin them – only exacerbates the problem. In a November 2016 article for *The Huffington Post*, “How to Have a Conversation with the Politically Polarized,” lawyer and mediator Douglas E. Noll offers a series of steps to approach such a discussion. These steps are listed below.

**First**, you have to maintain a mature perspective no matter how inflammatory and rigid the other person might be. If you can't maintain maturity, don't have the conversation.

**Second**, do not expect, or even try, to change the other person's opinion, especially with the facts. Research shows that deeply-embedded beliefs are reinforced by dopamine released when confronted with evidence that contradicts the belief. In other words, polarized people strengthen their beliefs when challenged with contradictory information.

**Third**, logic and reasoning don't apply in this conversation, so do not rely on the other person using any kind of critical thinking skills to understand your perspective. Political polarization is purely emotional and is based on fear, anger, frustration, and anxiety. You cannot confront an emotional issue with logic and expect a civil conversation.

**Fourth**, use framing to find common ground. Framing is the technique of asking questions in a way that changes perspective. Rather than confront a strongly held belief, reframe the conversation away from that belief. The questions should be neutral and seek understanding. They should cause the other person to reflect instead of react.

**Fifth**, if reframing is not working, try finding out what is under the polarizing position. You do this by asking a simple question: “If X occurred, what would be all the good things that would happen to you?”

**Sixth**, if the other person becomes agitated or emotional, you might consider affect labeling to de-escalate the situation. Affect labeling is, essentially, ignoring the words. Focus on the emotions. State the emotions to the individual using a direct “you” statement such as, “You are angry” or “You are frustrated.”

**JANINE: “People may not always be able to agree. But we can believe that another person feels the way they say they do. And that they have reasons for feeling that way.”**

“Having a conversation around politically charged topics,” continues Noll, “is hard work. You have to keep the mindset of curiosity and compassion without being patronizing or condescending. You have to truly wish to engage the other person. Be non-reactive, non-judgmental, and non-critical for as long as possible. When you sense that you are losing your center, close out the conversation as gracefully and politely as possible. If enough of us committed to engaging with politically polarized people, no matter what their

beliefs, using some of these skills, an opening for dialogue might arise. We might slowly reverse the discourse from anger and hatred to an honest examination of our shared values.”

There are, of course, many ways to approach a difficult conversation, and Noll’s steps may not necessarily be the appropriate ones for a given situation. Many other methods for handling a sensitive or potentially volatile discussion can be found online and in print.

## “I will have no joy”: The Toll of Activism

In a 2018 piece in the *New York Times*, journalist John Eligon wrote about the mental, physical, and financial toll experienced by many social activists in an article titled, “They push. They protest. And many activists, privately, suffer as a result.” The article notes that over the past few years, a number of young and prominent protestors have died due to suicide, homicide, and natural causes. “With each fallen comrade,” Eligon writes, “activists are left to ponder their own mortality and whether the many pressures of the movement contributed to the shortened lives of their colleagues. Along with the long hours, constant confrontation, and frequent heartbreak they experience, they work for little or no pay, and sometimes struggle for basic needs like food and shelter. An essential part of activism these days, those on the front lines say, is ensuring that they and their comrades work through all the stress, whether it’s with meditation, therapy, or just taking breaks from the struggle.”



A protestor following the election of Donald Trump in 2016

In *The Niceties*, Zoe shares the stresses she is experiencing as a result of her own activism – stresses that sound similar to some of those mentioned in the article. “I have been carrying your share of history,” she tells Janine, “as well as mine, and I need you to take your half. I can’t carry it all anymore. I will get exhausted and go crazy. I will have no joy.” In a study conducted on campus racial climates, university professors Daniel Solórzano, Manuel Ceja, and Tara Yosso describe how students of color can feel both invisible and negatively regarded at predominantly white universities, and subtle insults based on racial stereotypes (known as microaggressions) are often directed at them. “Racial microaggressions,” they note, “in both academic and social spaces have real consequences, the most obvious of which are the resulting negative racial climate and African American students’ struggles with feelings of self-doubt and frustration, as well as isolation. This means that the African American students on the campuses studied must strive to maintain good academic standing while negotiating the conflicts arising from disparaging perceptions of them and their group of origin. Additionally, they must navigate through a myriad of pejorative

racial stereotypes that fuel the creation and perpetuation of racial microaggressions. The sense of discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion resulting from racial microaggressions left some African American students in our study despondent, and made them feel that they could not perform well academically.” As you watch *The Niceties*, note, for example, Zoe’s frustration as Janine makes off-hand remarks and jokes that Zoe finds disturbing, as well as Janine’s refusal to acknowledge the injury. Janine’s unwillingness to recognize the impact of her words on Zoe is an illustration of a growing debate regarding the differences between impact and intent.

“The overall message in all of these conversations,” says writer and communications consultant Melanie Tannenbaum, “is that when someone does something hurtful or offensive to another person, the perpetrator’s intent is not what’s most important when gauging the appropriateness of an action – in fact, many would say that it is inherently privileged to redirect the focus of a conversation to the perpetrator’s (presumably harmless) intentions, rather than focusing on the feelings and experiences of the person who has been harmed.”

While Janine is an established member, in many ways, of the system against which Zoe is fighting, she has also had to advocate for her rights. As a woman in an academic discipline that, until relatively recently, was largely dominated by males, Janine spent many years establishing her credentials – a process that included paving the way for generations of women that followed her. “You know women *fought* to go here,” she tells Zoe, “we *knew* this place was valuable, and special, and we *fought* to be a part of it.” Janine’s battles extended well into her professional years as she sought to develop a strong professional reputation. As a lesbian, Janine also had to contend with a society that was frequently hostile to her desire to live a fulfilling personal life. In “The Secret History of Gay Marriage,” Salon.com journalist Karen M. Dunak writes that, “throughout American history, same-sex relationships often were shrouded in secrecy [and existed in a] subculture in which their desires and lifestyles were accepted, but mainstream American culture marked homosexuality as deviant. While most gay men and lesbians kept their homosexuality a secret, communities could be found through the knowledge of certain codes and behaviors, despite the antagonism of general society.” In an attempt to reach Zoe on a more personal level, Janine shares a painful early memory which echoes Dunak’s observation:



Same-sex marriage supporters outside of the Supreme Court in 2015

**ZOE:** “It’s not an extracurricular. It’s not, like, marching band. I don’t do this for fun.”

**JANINE:** Do you know how I found out that lesbianism existed? How I found out there was a word for what I was? I found out from a nun who was in the process of telling my class that it was something that got you sent to hell. The birth of my own identity came in the very moment when someone called my identity vile. I didn't have a chance to take one second of happiness from the fact that there was a word for it.

Janine notes that this revelation came when she was ten years old but that her same-sex marriage was only upheld by a Supreme Court decision in 2016. "I know what it's like," she tells Zoe, "to be missing from the history books. I have had to fight for things too."

## "There is nothing coincidental": Designing *The Niceties*

In the stage directions for *The Niceties*, Eleanor Burgess depicts Janine's office in the following way:

*An office at an elite northeastern college. There's a stately, antique mahogany desk. There's a high wall of bookcases, filled with an overwhelming number of books. There are a few framed images from revolutionary movements: a Lech Walesa / Solidarity poster, a painting of the tennis court oath, a photo of Emiliano Zapata, a photo of Nelson Mandela in a Springbok uniform, and a portrait of George Washington.*



Set model for *The Niceties* by scenic designer Mariana Sanchez

This description served as the blueprint for director Nicole A. Watson and scenic designer Mariana Sanchez to determine the best way to bring to life the professor's office, and what it should communicate about her. Burgess's stage directions give some concrete examples

of what we'll find in the office, while the rest is left to the discretion of Watson and Sanchez. They started with the size of Janine's space. After considering smaller and more cramped quarters, they settled on a large, open layout that would, says Sanchez, "bring the weight of history and knowledge to the room – we wanted to illustrate what the scale of these stories represents for Janine and Zoe." Consider, for example, the sheer volume of books on Janine's shelves and, by extension, the "weight of history," as eluded to by Sanchez.

After determining the basic footprint of the office, Watson and Sanchez next had to decide on the best way to express Janine's personality through such things as keepsakes and mementos – they are the items that give a room a sense of texture and, more importantly, give us clues about the person who inhabits the area. While examining their options, the director and designer developed a set of parameters to help guide them through the process. "Nicole and I discussed that, although this is Janine's office, it is part of a

bigger institution that is under the control of other people." offers Sanchez. "She has been there for a long time, but it is still not entirely her space – it is still run by a traditional and patriarchal society," namely, the university's administration.

Next, Watson and Sanchez decided to separate the pieces into two groups – the first were those objects that are part of what they labeled the "permanent and traditional world," such as office furniture and other items essential to a functioning workspace. The second group is comprised of Janine's personal effects – family photos, her diplomas, curios that she has collected during her travels, and wall hangings that give us additional glimpses into Janine's personal and political philosophies. Each of these two groups, says Sanchez, contributed to the positive tension of "finding the sweet spot between a tangible, recognizable world, and one that is trying to push those boundaries into a metaphor."

Aside from the taking into account the practical needs of designing Janine's office, Sanchez also notes that she and Watson were keenly aware of their role as storytellers and the need to honor "the responsibility of the narrative we tell ourselves through generations and its impact. We hope the play leaves students with an openness to discuss some of these subjects, and to understand that Janine and Zoe can be both right and wrong at the same time."

Sanchez also hopes that students will approach the set as a bit of a puzzle to be examined from a number of different angles. "Reflect on just about any piece of art," she offers, "and how much of it has been thought out – there is nothing coincidental." Consider, for example, how much time Janine spends in her office, and how much effort she has invested in making it a comfortable place to be. Or, conversely, think about Zoe's point of view – is entering the room an intimidating experience for her? Is this her first visit to the office, or has she been here before? "Try to recognize all of the clues embedded in the set," proposes Sanchez. The more you notice, she suggests, the better you'll understand Janine and Zoe, and the complexities of their relationship.

**Janine's Office: The Research** Examine the accompanying research images that were consulted during the design process for *The Niceties*. Note which elements were incorporated into the final scenic design. Why do you think these elements were used? What do they help us to learn about the story? Think about other approaches the designer may have considered for the creation of the set, and how you might have designed Janine's workspace.



**JANINE:** "Go find some books. Big heavy books made of paper. It's not always that easy, you can't always type a couple words in a box and know everything there is to know, sometimes you really have to work to get at the truth."



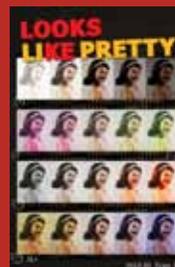
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