

#GetFreeWrites: Writing Prompts on Police Brutality and Racist Violence The Dark Noise Collective

The purpose of this document is to serve as a tool for educators and artists. We recognize the difficult times that we find ourselves in, and the utility of poetry and writing in helping to work through emotions and processing of the world around us. This resource emerged from conversations among the Dark Noise Collective following the murders of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Korryn Gaines and many others by police during the summer of 2016. We asked how we could leverage our position as a group of young artists of color to strengthen the fight to create a world in which our communities can live free of fear and state violence. We drew on our experiences as teaching artists, and our emphasis as educators on making our classrooms spaces where students can openly discuss issues of inequality and social injustice. We hope this collection of prompts and poems will add to the conversation around these issues and provide further avenues of expression for people navigating the violences that Black, Brown, and Indigenous people face in America and abroad at the hands of police brutality, military, and other terrorist organizations.

This document includes: 1) Writing prompts to help explore issues of police brutality and racist violence. 2) A list of additional poems and classroom resources that explore these same issues.

See also our [Call for Necessary Craft and Practice](#) and our [How Writers Can Join The Fight Against Police Brutality](#).

Writing Prompts:

**FIRST
TIME**

Make a list of first interactions with systems of violence/oppression (e.g., first time being stopped by the police, first time crossing the border, first time someone called you a terrorist). Choose one. What did you learn in this moment? What did you not yet understand? Read Nate Marshall's poem "[When the Officer Caught Me](#)" and reflect especially on the turn at the end. Think about how these experiences shape the way we interact with the world. Then tell the story of that first time.

IMAGINING YOUR HEAVEN

We can't build new worlds unless we can imagine them. Take a moment to think about all the things that bring you joy. They can be small, or large. No answer is right or wrong. Now think of all the things you think are causing you and the world pain. Listen to Jamila Woods' song "[Heavn](#)" and reflect on how heaven is being defined in the song. Read Danez Smith's poem "[Summer Somewhere](#)" and think about the alternate world they are creating in their poems. Write a poem that explores your own idea of heaven on Earth, and how you can arrive there.

A WORLD WITH NO POLICE

Make a list of all the systems or institutions that you feel like contribute to oppression: police, military, etc. What would the world be like without them? What other structures could we put in place instead? Read/ listen to Franny Choi's [Field Trip To the Museum of Human History](#) . Write your own poem that explores a world without these institutions, or explores a world where these institutions are considered archaic.

CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE PASSED

Think about the names of people who are no longer with us who you wish you could talk to. Activists, leaders, elders, people who have been murdered by police. Write down their names. Take your time. Pick one person on that list. Think about the questions that you want to ask them, or things that you wish you could say to them. Think about how you would want to spend a day with them. Read Diamond Sharp's poem "[Ms Hansberry and Whiskey](#)". Write your own poem exploring the questions you have for the person you want to talk to, or how you would spend your day with them. Or, write a letter to them.

HE X

Hexing people is an important way to get out anger and frustration. Make a list of specific people who have been agents of police terror or global brutality. This list can be wide-ranging, from small micro aggressions to larger perpetrators (i.e., people who say “all lives matter” to the police officers who arrest non violent protestors to George Zimmerman). Pick one of those people on your list. Read Martin Espada’s poem “ [For the Jim Crow Restaurant in Cambridge Massachusetts Where My Cousin Esteban was Forbidden To Wait Tables Because He Wears Dreadlocks.](#) ” Write your own hex poem, cursing that person.

SHIELD OF ARMOR

Make a list of all the things you need to protect yourself. All the small routines you do throughout the day that are necessary for your existence. Think about all the people you want to protect. Listen to Jamila Wood’s [Blk Girl Soldier](#) . Think about the song as a shield of armor, as a protection anthem against police brutality and the violence of white supremacy. Then read Angel Nafis’ poem [Gravity](#) . What’s the straw in the poem? The micro aggressions that pile up? What’s the camel’s back? How does Angel protect herself in the second section? Write a poem that serves as a shield or celebration for you or people you care about.

CHAN T

Making a chant or mantra can be a powerful act of resistance, and can build a healing space for people, as well as mobilize for social change. Check out some of these chants listed on the [Ferguson Response Network’s Website](#) . Write your own chant that addresses issues of social inequality, police brutality, and global terror.

INTRODUCTIO NS

Often, police officers patrolling particular neighborhoods are not members of the communities they police and know nothing about the people living there. When police officers or the U.S. military commit violence against people, the media never fully represents

their humanity. Write a poem in which you introduce yourself in your own terms. Introduce your family, your friends, your community. What are the things that the police (or the military, media, politicians, etc.) *should* know about you, but would never think to ask? What would it take for a cop to see you or someone you love as human? What, if anything, would change if they viewed everyone they met this way?

darknoisecollective@gmail.com | www.darknoisetour.com | @teamdarknoise

WRAPPING THE BODIES

How do we remember and honor the dead? What forms of grieving have been passed down to you through your family or culture? What ways of mourning has society forced upon you? Which have you created for yourself? Read Fatimah Asghar's poem "[For Peshawar](#)" and think about the various ways the speaker engages with grief. What are the challenges of mourning victims whose names you may never know? Write a poem in which you speak to or about the victims of a violence that feels close to you; remember to treat them with great care.

SELF-CARE WARFARE

Audre Lorde said, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Make a list of things you use to take care of yourself, to pamper yourself or to make yourself feel beautiful. Make a list of activities you do to make yourself feel good, things you might do to unwind after a stressful day, things your family or friend group uses to heal themselves and each other. Read "[Ode to Shea Butter](#)" by Angel Nafis and "[Twerking as A Radical Form of Self-Healing](#)" by Danez Smith. Notice the way these authors describe these objects/activities. Write a poem in which you write a praise poem to your method of self-care or healing.

I FEEL MOST COLORED WHEN

Make a list of identities you hold (this could be your race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) Watch V Bozeman's video for "[Race Jones](#)" and read the lyrics aloud afterwards. Discuss the video and how it relates to the lyrics. Which lyrics stood out to you? Are there parts where the speaker seems prideful of their identity? Are there parts where the speaker seems ashamed of their identity? Look at [Glenn Ligon's piece](#) inspired by Zora Neale Hurston's quote: "*I feel most colored when I'm thrown against a sharp white background.*" Read

[Morgan Parker's elegy of the same title](#) . Discuss which lines stood out to you. Do you see any similarities between the poem and the song/video? Brainstorm as a group times when you feel “most [any aspect of your identity].” Write a poem using “I feel most _____ when...” as your starting line, talking about the various situations or experiences that make you feel that part of your identity the most. **OR** For an added challenge, create an alter ego character that is the most _____ version of yourself (similar to what V Bozeman did in her video “Race Jones”). Write a poem about that aspect of your identity in the voice of your alter ego.

A SMALL NEEDFUL FACT

In Ross Gay's poem “[A Small Needful Fact](#)” , we are given a small fact about Eric Garner. Launching off this idea of a small, but poignant fact, make a list of people you care about or issues/topics that you want to address. For each item on your list, think of one fact about that person or thing. Now, for either one or as many articles from your list as possible, write a poem (or series of poems) that only contain that 1 fact. Think about how what single fact says something larger about its topic. This could

darknoisecollective@gmail.com | www.darknoisetour.com | [@teamdarknoise](https://twitter.com/teamdarknoise)

also be used to write poems about objects (what is 1 fact about your neighborhood? What is 1 fact about a taser?) or an event (1 fact about your birth? 1 fact about the trial for Emmett Till's murderers).

Additional Poems & Classroom Resources

- Poetry Collections
 - [Winter Tangerine's "Hand's Up Don't Shoot" Issue](#)
 - [17 Poems To Read When The World Is Too Much- Buzzfeed](#)
 - [#BlackPoetsSpeakOut](#) Tumblr Page, Hashtag and Videos
 - [Poetry About Police Violence](#) by Project NIA

- Poems ○ [Mad Libs: Black Death Edition](#) by Charlotte

Abotsi

- [When I Think of Tamir Rice While Driving](#) by Reginald Dwayne Betts
- [Catching Copper](#) by Natalie Diaz
- [Imagine the Angels of Bread](#) by Martín Espada
- [Principles](#) by Danez Smith
- [Dear White America](#) by Danez Smith
- [Allowables](#) by Nikki Giovanni
- [No Country For Black Boys](#) by Joy Priest
- [Self Portrait in A Yellow Dress](#) by Safia Elhillo
- [For The Record](#) by Audre Lorde
- [4/30/92 For Rodney King](#) by Lucille Clifton
- [Poem about My Rights](#) by June Jordan
- [Memorandum](#) by Cortney Lamar Charleston
- [New Rule](#) by Tariq Luthun
- [The Gun Joke](#) by Jamaal May
- [Between The State Sanctioned Murder of Your Son and Mine](#) by Tafisha Edwards
- [a question of rain](#) by Jayson Smith
- [My Dad Asks “How Come Black Folks Can’t Just Write About Flowers”](#) by Aziza

Barnes

- [_____ my loved blacknesses & some blacknesses I knew](#) by Khadijah Queen
- [Vry Blk](#) by Jamila Woods featuring Noname
- [Ghazal for White Hen Pantry](#) by Jamila Woods
- [Things Only A Black Mother Can Prepare You For](#) by Nicole Homer

● Classroom

Resources

- [#FergusonSyllabus](#) : Discussion questions, activities & materials for talking and teaching about police violence created by Mariam Kaba in response to the hashtag started by Georgetown University professor Dr. Marcia Chatelain

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- [How to Teach Kids About What's Happening in Ferguson](#) : *Atlantic* article with list of links and reading materials around race and Ferguson