



R.A.P. Lessons: Bridging Race, Arts, and Placemaking

Wednesday, January 16, 2019, at 6 p.m., Wallis Annenberg Hall

A NOTE FROM CHRIS JOHNSON

Question Bridge began as an example of engaged art, but has found a place for itself in our culture that none of the artistic development team could have imagined.

As soon as *Question Bridge: Black Males* was first exhibited, teachers began asking if there was a way to bring the substance of the themes presented in the 3-hour museum version into their classrooms. They felt that seeing Black men talk so honestly and openly about the issues involved would make it much easier for them to engage their students in meaningful conversations about race, identity, and inclusion. I've seen this effect myself. Students are mesmerized by the men's faces and voices.

What we did was simply offer African American men of all class backgrounds and ages an opportunity to ask a question of another Black man who they envisioned as being very different from themselves. The answers provide the varied substance of the project.

To support teachers, we created *Question Bridge* curricular tools, distilling the content from the larger project into six independent modules that contain very short excerpts from the installation and providing Teaching Guides, Student Workbooks, and an introductory document, all in downloadable pdf formats. These are also posted at questionbridge.com.

The Question Bridge Education Initiative is the next step. I founded the non-profit organization to seek partnerships with schools that would be willing to experiment with these curricular tools in their classrooms and provide us with feedback.

Thank you for sharing *Question Bridge* at USC. I look forward to hearing your thoughts, and let's collaborate.

Sincerely,
Chris

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- R.A.P. Lessons: Bridging Race, Arts, and Placemaking is a six-week video exhibition throughout Wallis Annenberg Hall, with accompanying panel discussions and other live events.
- It is inspired by *Question Bridge: Black Males*, a transmedia project that uses video to facilitate a conversation among Black men from diverse backgrounds.
- *Question Bridge: Black Males* grew out of a project started in 1996 by Chris Johnson, and has developed in collaboration with Hank Willis Thomas, Bayeté Ross Smith, and Kamal Sinclair.
- Chris Johnson is a photographic and video artist, curator, and writer who teaches at the California College of the Arts. His work has been exhibited in galleries and museums including the Smithsonian Museum and the Oakland Museum of California.
- Hank Willis Thomas is a conceptual artist whose work is in the public collections of MoMA, the Guggenheim, and the Whitney, among other institutions. He is one of the artists behind *For Freedoms*, a platform for art and civic engagement.
- Taj Frazier is an associate professor at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, and director of the Institute for Diversity and Empowerment at Annenberg (IDEA).

“By creating an identity container (e.g., ‘Black’ and ‘Male’), then creating a way of releasing the diversity of identities and thought within that container, we can break the container. *Question Bridge* makes it more difficult to say, ‘Black Males are’” —questionbridge.com

QUESTION BRIDGE: BLACK MALES

Question Bridge: Black Males is a transmedia project that uses video to facilitate a dialogue among Black men of different ages and backgrounds about Black male identity—both how it is experienced and how it is perceived. The project aims to both stimulate connections and understanding among Black men, and to highlight the diversity of thought and identity in the Black male population, a diversity that is rarely represented in American media. The project has been shared as a three-hour, five-channel video-art installation in museums as well as via an interactive website (www.questionbridge.com), a mobile app, live community events, and curriculum for high-school and college students. The creators of the project chose the form of a “question bridge” to “create honest expression and healing dialogue among members of a particular group.”

Question Bridge: Black Males began in 1996, when Chris Johnson found himself looking for a way to start a conversation about class and generational divisions among in San Diego’s African American community. A decade later, artist Hank Willis Thomas approached Johnson about doing a similar project focused specifically on Black men. Thomas and Johnson then collaborated with artists Bayeté Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair to record more than 1,600 question-and-answer videos from over 160 men in nine U.S. cities.

In 2012, *Question Bridge: Black Males* premiered as a documentary-style video-art installation in the Sundance Film Festival’s New Frontier program. It has since been exhibited in more than 30 museums, festivals, and institutions.

Question Bridge: Black Males is in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts and Culture, and the Oakland Museum of California Art.

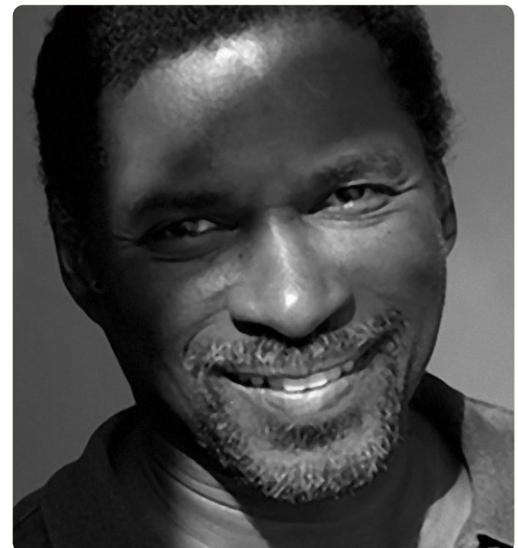
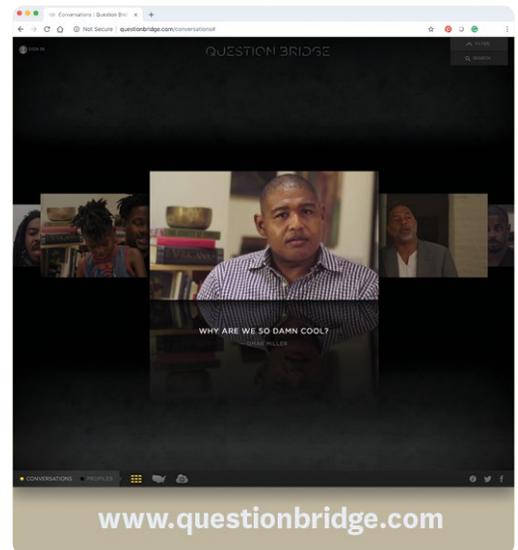
WHAT IS A QUESTION BRIDGE?

A question bridge is a media-facilitated dialogue among a group of people within a demographic. Its core methodology is this: on video, a member of the group asks a significant question of another member of the group whom they feel is different from themselves. The participants generate question-and-answer videos as well as an identity map, a group-generated illustration of self-described identity tags within a single demographic.

SO HOW DOES IT WORK?

First, one person looks into a camera and asks a question, as if they are speaking directly to another person. Then, another person responds to that question, also looking directly into a camera. This creates a question-answer exchange that is free of some of the stresses of face-to-face dialogue, allowing people to engage in difficult conversations in a format that can also be shared with the public.

To create the identity map, each participant creates a profile using tag words to describe his own identity. These identity tags are synthesized into a map that illustrates how a diverse group of people within a demographic describe themselves. The idea is to deconstruct singular or reductive views of the demographic group and instead show how complex, dynamic, and multifaceted the group is.



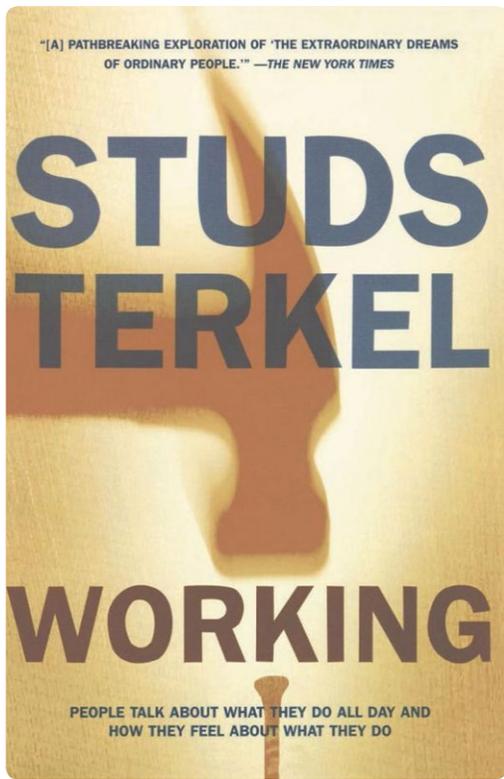
Chris Johnson

TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

Transmedia storytelling is a way of telling a single story across multiple platforms. *Question Bridge* is a transmedia project because it can be experienced in multiple forms—as an installation in a museum or gallery, via an interactive website and mobile app, in community discussions, and as educational curriculum.



Covers of *Interview* (magazine) — displayed in the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA.



QUESTIONS, CONVERSATIONS, AND INTERVIEWS AS ART

Interviews and dialogues have been used throughout art and history for investigation, reflection, and illumination. A few examples:

Studs Terkel’s *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, a selection of edited interviews published in 1974

Andy Warhol’s *Interview* magazine, founded in 1969, which often featured unedited or creatively edited interviews with artists

The *Azolla Story* (circa 2010), which used creative text-based dialogue to create and highlight an interdependent, multiracial community for queer and trans disabled people of color

The Nobel Prize–winning work of Svetlana Alexievich, multi-voiced narrative collages composed of oral histories from Soviet and post-Soviet experience

R.A.P.: RACE, ARTS, AND PLACEMAKING

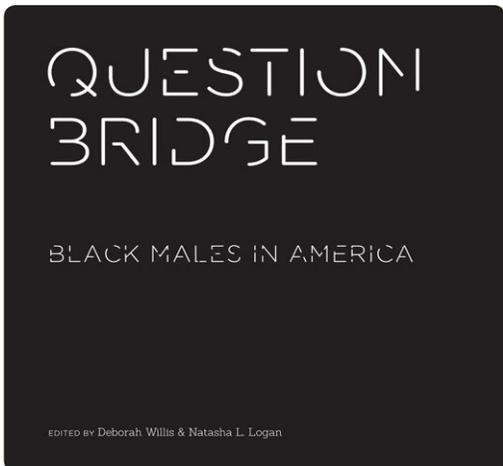
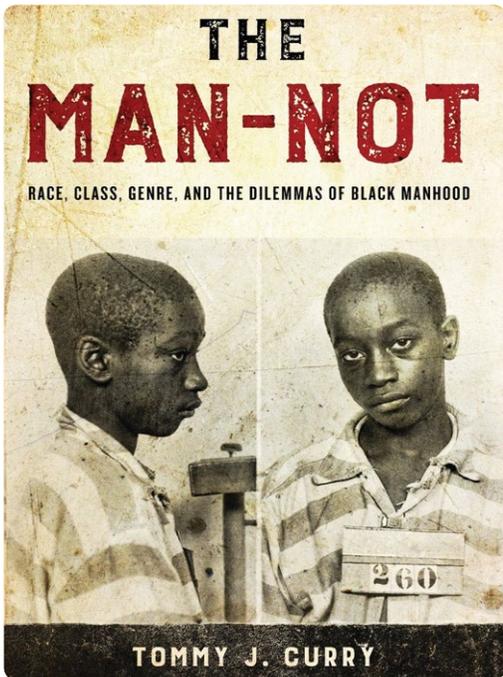
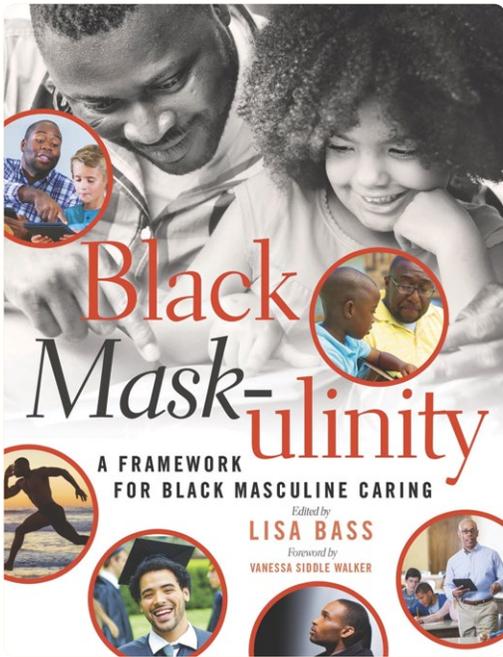
R.A.P. is an interdisciplinary research collaborative that connects the work of USC faculty who are looking at the ways grassroots placemakers of color are claiming urban space, and whose research asks questions such as, how might we disrupt an intractable pattern in which public- and private-sector investments intended to redevelop the city often result in disproportionately displacing low-income communities of color? How do we conceptualize and reimagine related topics such as placemaking, community engagement, infrastructure design, and the integration of emerging media platforms into space in a manner that defies displacement? How can this conversation be expanded beyond the university?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- ⦿ What kind of question bridge are you inspired to create as part of this R.A.P. project? What theme do you want to explore? With whom? What question will you start with?
- ⦿ Why do you think the creators of *Question Bridge: Black Males* were motivated to redefine Black male identity?
- ⦿ The creators of *Question Bridge: Black Males* ask, “How do we create equitable environments of inclusion in a diverse society, both within and between identity groups?” How do you think a question bridge contributes to this aim?
- ⦿ Why do you think the creators have positioned *Question Bridge: Black Males* as art (e.g., displaying it in museums)? What might be different if it were positioned as journalism, activism, or academic research? Or is it/ can it be all of these things?

IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT

- ⦿ The interactive *Question Bridge: Black Males* website questionbridge.com/conversations
- ⦿ R.A.P.: The Race, Arts, and Placemaking Initiative at USC slab.today/2016/09/rap/
- ⦿ The Institute for Diversity and Empowerment at Annenberg (IDEA) annenberg.usc.edu/research/idea



DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

CHRISTAL YOUNG of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about the exhibition and this evening's event. Those with a call number (e.g., books) are physical items which you can find in our campus libraries. Those without a call number (e.g. journal articles and databases) are electronic resources, which you can access through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at libraries.usc.edu.

BOOKS

- Bass, Lisa. *Black Mask-Ulinity: A Framework for Black Masculine Caring*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2016.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: LC2717 .B564 2016
- Curry, Tommy J. *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2017.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: E185.86 .C986 2017
- Tyler, Kenneth Maurice. *Identity and African American Men: Exploring the Content of Our Characterization*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: E185.625 .T95 2014
- Willis, Deborah, Natasha L. Logan, and Chris Johnson. *Question Bridge: Black Males in America*. First edition. New York, N.Y: Aperture Foundation, 2015.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: E185.625 .Q42 2015

ARTICLES

- Bush, Lawson. "Am I a Man?: A Literature Review Engaging the Sociohistorical Dynamics of Black Manhood in the United States." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 23, no. 1 (April 1, 1999): 49-57.
- Gaylord-Harden, Noni K., Barbarin Oscar, Patrick H. Tolan, and Velma McBride Murry. "Understanding Development of African American Boys and Young Men: Moving from Risks to Positive Youth Development." *American Psychologist* 73, no. 6 (September 2018): 753-767.
- Ikard, David. "Boys to Men: Getting Personal About Black Manhood, Sexuality, and Empowerment." *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 2, no. 1 (2013): 59-73.
- Murphy, James J. "Lessons learned from examining how African American males experience developing a sense of masculinity." PhD diss., Capella University, 2017.

DATABASES

Diversity Studies Collection
 Gender: Identity and Social Change
 GenderWatch

JOURNALS

Journal of Men's Studies
Men and Masculinities
The Western Journal of Black Studies

VIDEO

- B. Mya. *Afraid of Dark: Exploring Black Masculinity*. Brooklyn, NY: Shoot Films, Not People Productions, 2014.
LEAVEY LIBRARY: LVLDVD 11368 (available at the circulation desk)
- *I Am A Man: Black Masculinity in America*. Directed by Byron Hurt. Media Education Foundation, 2006.