

Redlining and Greenlining:

Olivia Robinson Investigates Root Causes of Racial Inequity

Diane Kuthy



Near and Far Enemies: Shade, Olivia Robinson, 2015.
Electronic quilt. 18 feet × 8 feet.

In the past 2 years a series of confrontations—beginning with reactions to Michael Brown’s death in Ferguson, Missouri—has made the issue of police violence toward African Americans visible to a wide public across the country (Fausset & Robertson, 2016). The growing frustration and public outcry over police violence makes it imperative to ask: What has allowed us to live in a country where Black lives have not really mattered and what will it take to change this reality? This instructional resource introduces arts-based research undertaken by artist Olivia Robinson to document, discover, and exemplify the root causes of Baltimore’s uprising in April 2015 in the aftermath of the death of Freddie Gray in police custody.

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Baltimore's current problems can be traced to a deeply entrenched system of interlocking racial inequities that is grounded in the history of the places we live and work (Pietila, 2010). Racially segregated spaces have historically skewed opportunity and life chances along race lines; space has been one of the primary ways racial meaning has been constructed, teaching what places—and by extension who and what—matter (Lipsitz, 2011).

Olivia Robinson investigates the legacy of *redlining* in Baltimore, one of a myriad of legal and extralegal strategies used to create racially segregated neighborhoods in Baltimore. Baltimore is notorious for enacting the first law in American history in 1910 that prohibited Blacks from moving into White residential blocks and vice versa. In 1917, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down that segregationist law, Baltimore was the first city to create restrictive covenants (private agreements) that barred Blacks and Jews from certain neighborhoods (Pietila, 2010). Although Baltimore has a particular history of racial inequity shaped by social and political life in our city, similar patterns recur throughout the United States. This resource is offered to young researchers from 5th grade through college and their art teachers as inspiration to ask questions and discover answers about the places where they live in order to imagine and design new ways to create communities that are just.

This resource includes:

- A biography of Baltimore artist Olivia Robinson;
- Information about the Baltimore uprising;
- An introduction to redlining;
- Visual culture materials that provide historical context;
- Web-based resources for further exploration of Baltimore and the context of 2015; and
- Discussion questions that are aligned with the National Visual Arts Standards.

Olivia Robinson

Olivia Robinson is a multimedia artist whose work spans video, installation, research, and community activism. Robinson investigates issues of justice, identity, community, transformation, and history. Olivia is a member of Luminous Intervention, a Baltimore-based activist artist group that collaborates with multiple grassroots organizations to use light as a medium for bringing attention to important topics in Baltimore. Olivia also belongs to “Art-part’heid: Bridging The Gap of Disparities in the

Baltimore Arts Scene,” a group that seeks to unearth and transform race-based inequity in the arts through gatherings, performances, and zine making. Robinson lives in Baltimore and Pittsburgh and teaches at the Maryland Institute College of Art (Robinson, n.d.).

Uprising

In April 2015, Baltimore was at the center of national media attention with continuous coverage of the riots or unrest by youth labeled *thugs* that ensued after the death of Freddie Gray from a spinal injury in police custody. Baltimoreans prefer the term *uprising* for the welling up of collective rage, trauma, and public outcry resulting from continued public disinvestment and violence directed against Baltimore's poor Black communities, as well as for the reflection, self-determined action, and community healing that followed. Sandtown-Winchester, the neighborhood where Gray grew up and was arrested, has the highest rate of incarceration in the state of Maryland and one of the lowest life expectancies.

Protests began on April 18, while 25-year-old Gray was still fighting for his life and continued after his death the next day. Massive marches and vigils by thousands of Baltimore citizens persisted throughout the week. Young people, activists, and religious groups led the effort to speak out about the deeply problematic conditions in their neighborhoods including entrenched poverty, lack of economic opportunity, substandard housing, ineffective schools, mass incarceration, White supremacy, and racism.

On April 27, the day of Gray's funeral, the rumor of a *purge* circulated among high school students through social media. Unfortunately, city officials handled the threat poorly by halting public transportation after school in part of the city. At dismissal, crowds of displaced students faced roads blocked by lines of police in riot gear, which increased fear and tension. The situation erupted into chaos and multiple instances of property damage. Throughout the night, communities worked together to quell the violence and then began to rebuild the city the next day. For almost a week Baltimore City imposed a curfew from 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m., and the governor called in the National Guard to enforce it. The public outcry continued through nonviolent protests and community led conversations.

The Baltimore uprising brought to the surface racially based inequities that have been brewing for a long time; this forced citizens to unearth root causes and collectively reflect on what

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the legacies of discrimination and segregation mean for our city's future. One area of recent focus in Baltimore and across the nation is the historic racism embedded in public and private housing policies.

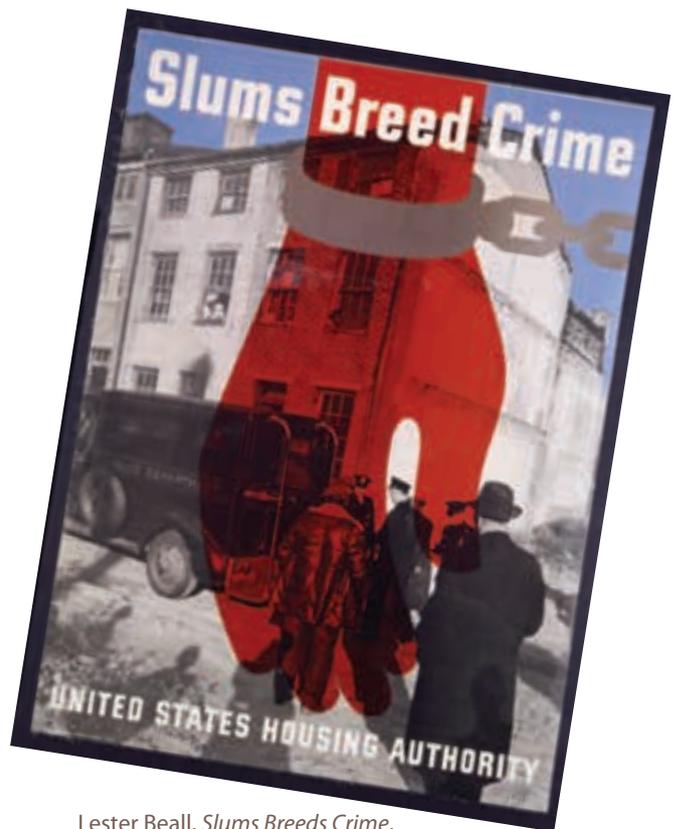
History of Redlining and Greenlining

During the 1930s, the housing market of the United States was recovering from the Great Depression. In an effort to prevent foreclosures and to stimulate home ownership and employment in the construction sector the federal government enacted the National Housing Act of 1934, which established the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). The FHA insured private mortgages, enabling low interest rates and reducing the down payment required to buy a home. In 1935, the FHA enlisted The Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) to create "residential security maps" for Baltimore and 238 other cities; these maps indicated perceived levels of real-estate investment security for mortgage underwriting (Coates, 2014; Lipsitz, 2011; Pietilla, 2010).

The maps were used to support public and private lending practices that created a pattern of disinvestment in Black and Brown neighborhoods while simultaneously buttressing investment in White communities. Neighborhoods deemed "desirable" and given preferential lending status were coded green or blue and were typically affluent suburbs on the outskirts of cities or older White Christian neighborhoods within the city limits. In Baltimore, yellow was the code for "declining" neighborhoods with Jewish or newly immigrated residents. African American neighborhoods were demarcated in red and labeled "hazardous"

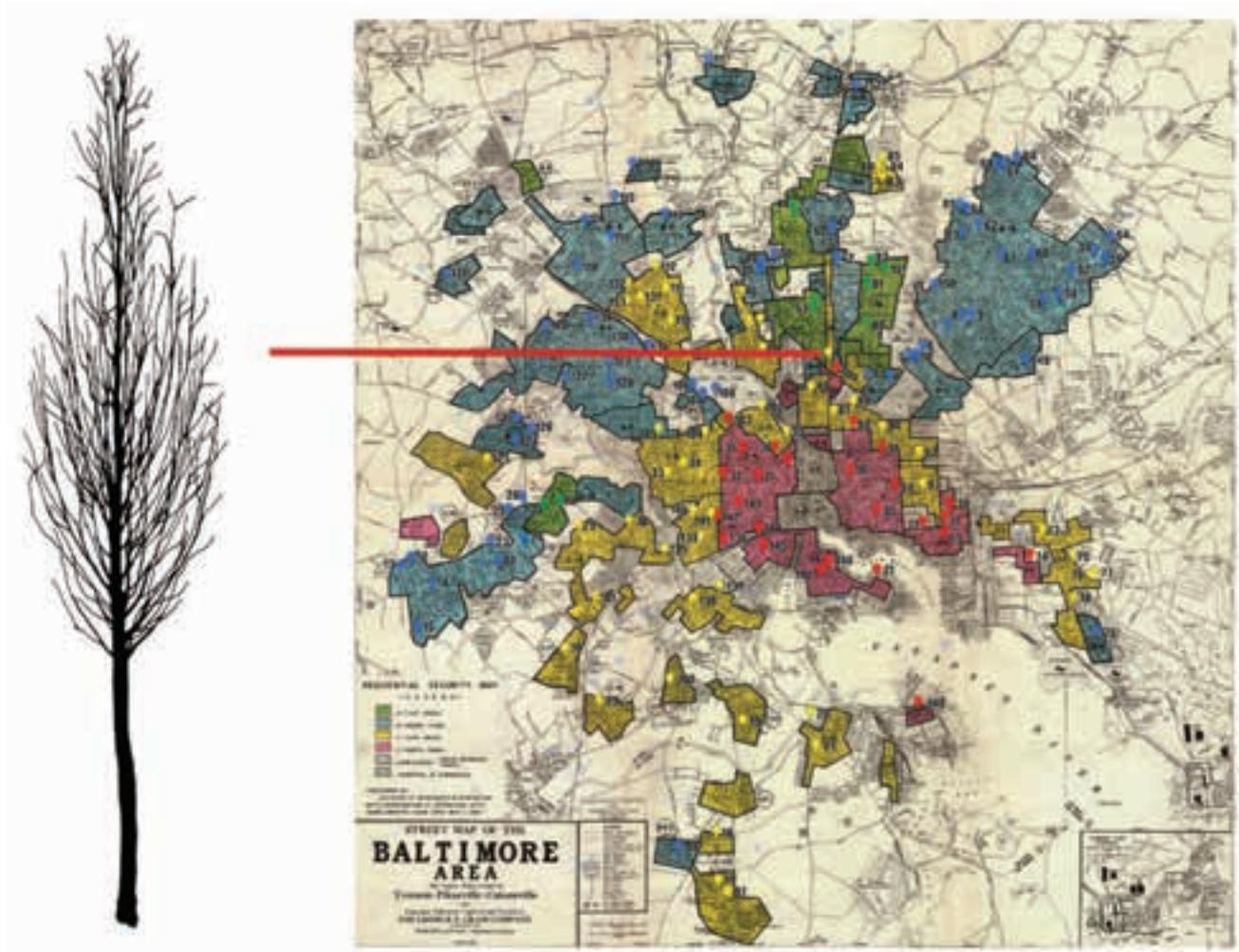
for investment. Chicago neighborhoods with Mexican immigrants were also coded red, the lowest status for investment (Baltimore had no statistically significant population of Mexicans when the maps were created) (Pietilla, 2010). This practice of demarcating areas for disinvestment (i.e., "redlining") institutionalized racism and segregation within the housing industry.

The GI bill of 1944 had a provision that hypothetically guaranteed mortgages to all returning veterans. In reality, the bill further widened the racial wealth gap as it worked in tandem with redlining because private companies issuing mortgages to returning soldiers used the same "residential security maps." Between 1945 and 1959, during the halcyon days of the post-World War II housing boom, African Americans received fewer than 2% of all federally insured home loans (Hanchett, 2000, p. 4). Instead of accumulating wealth through home ownership, African American communities deteriorated and lost value. We might expect that inequities started by overt discrimination in the past would become less important over time because of improved race relations. However, precisely the opposite is true: assets that appreciate in value and are transferred over generations increase in value over time (Lipsitz, 2011). These policies have a legacy of far reaching effects in both the public and private sectors of Baltimore and its suburbs, for example: racial disparities in health care,



Lester Beall, *Slums Breeds Crime*, United States Housing Authority, 1941. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/93509010.

Sheldon-Claire Company Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.



Baltimore's 1937 residential security map, adapted by Olivia Robinson, with tree #1 and location numbers.
Graphic design by Brockett Horne.

access to healthy food, incarceration, resources allotted for schools, and public infrastructure investment such as the privileging of the suburban highway system at the expense of the city's public transportation.

Blockbusting, slum clearance, urban renewal, contract lending, and restrictive covenants are among the many other housing policies and practices in the 20th century that created racially segregated spaces, propelled consumption and investment in segregated White communities, and engendered fear and disinvestment in neighborhoods occupied by people of color. Visual culture played a major role in making racially segregated neighborhoods seem natural. Television and magazines helped represent and solidify the suburban ideals of tranquil tree-lined streets filled with happy, White, affluent families while denoting urban neighborhoods occupied by Black and Brown families as “dangerous,” unattractive, and filled with crime. Contrast Lester Beall's *Slums Breed Crime* (1941) commissioned by the United States Housing Authority and a poster from the Sheldon Claire's series, *This is America, Keep it Free* (1942) to consider how each may have shaped people's ideas about the future of neighborhoods and the people that live in them.

Near and Far Enemies: Shade

For the past 5 years Olivia Robinson has been researching race and racism in the United States. As part of her arts-based research she began a series of electronic quilts titled *Near and Far Enemies*. Olivia Robinson's (2015) *Near and Far Enemies: Shade*, the first quilt in the series, maps the relationship between the legacy of racist housing policies of the 1930s and Baltimore's present day tree canopy. *Shade* is inspired by Dr. Mindy Fullilove's (2005) observation that the largest trees of a city grow in neighborhoods today that were areas of increased funding 80 years ago. According to Fullilove's theory, the green and blue areas would typically contain larger, older growth trees or trees that offer more shade, while the yellow and red areas would generally be home to smaller trees. To examine this connection in Baltimore, Robinson and Jesse Stiles designed a simple computer program to randomly select 150 places within the zones of a 1937 “residential security map.” For several years, Robinson went to the locations and made detailed drawings of trees found there. Most locations had trees but some did not. Seventy-five of the completed drawings were then digitally transferred in long rows at the top and bottom of the quilt. In the center, tiny colored light-emitting diode (LED) lights function as



Near and Far Enemies: Shade (details), Olivia Robinson, 2015.

pins plotting the tree locations on a simplified version of the 1937 map. Though imbedded electronics and conductive thread stitches, each pin lights up simultaneously with the corresponding tree.

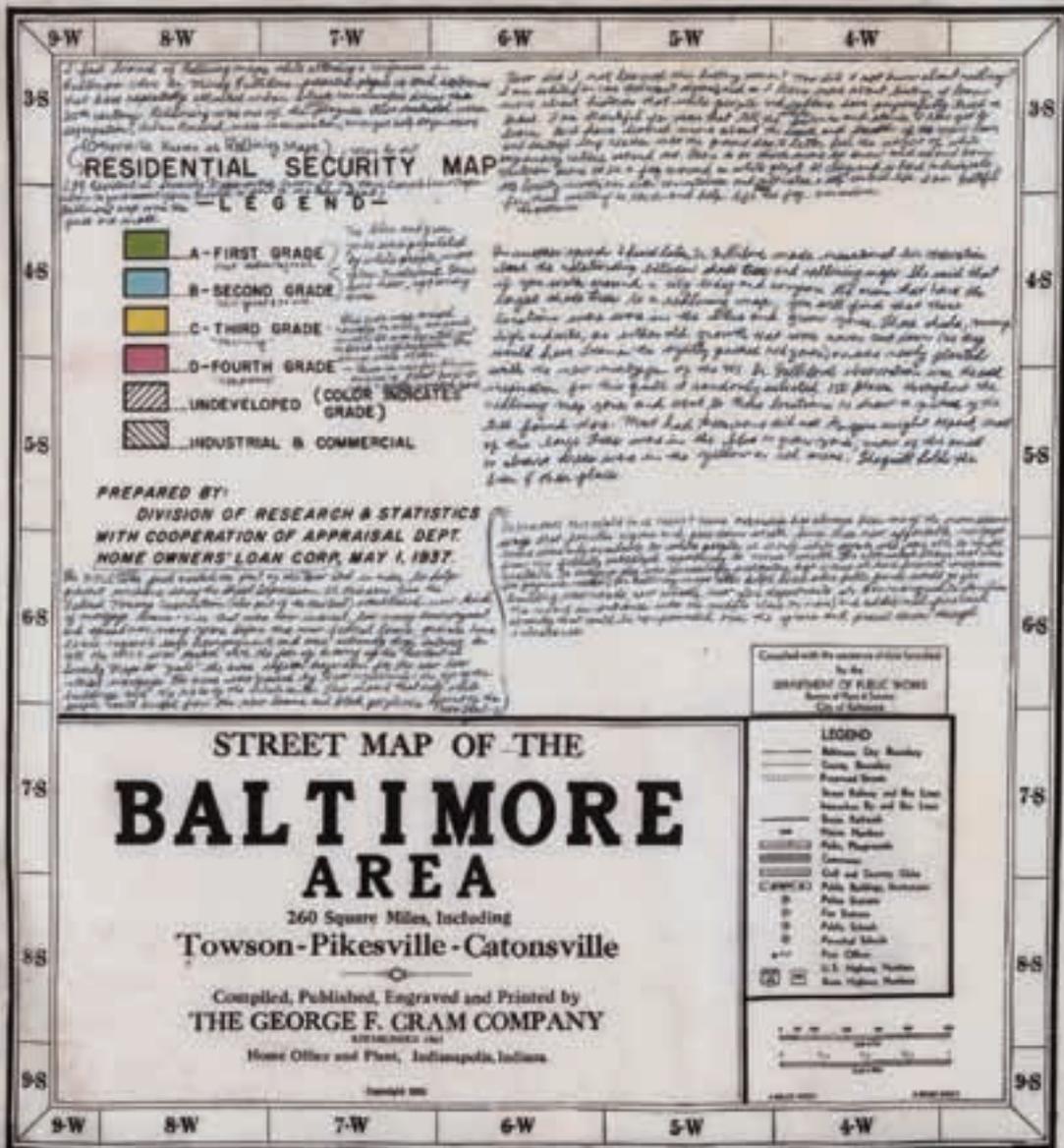
The barely visible multiple curvy and overlapping stitched paths that animate the connections form something reminiscent of a tree's root ball. Robinson explains her thinking: "The roots of all the trees are interdependent and wrapped up... the extra

benefit of some and the denial of benefit to others are intertwined" (personal communication, July 1, 2016). *Shade* is Robinson's first hand-quilted work. The media seems appropriate because quilts are domestic objects and they have a long history. Robinson ruminates, "in theory, we can wrap ourselves up in a quilt, much like we are wrapped in a swaddle of racist structures" (personal communication, July 1, 2016).



The quilt series' title refers to the concept of near and far enemies as related to compassion, one of the Four Divine Emotions in Buddhism. The far enemy of compassion is its opposite: cruelty. In contrast, a near enemy is confused with and sometimes mistaken for one of the Divine Emotions. Compassion's near enemy is pity. Robinson states that, "As White Americans it is often easy for us to spot racism and then distance ourselves from

racially based cruelty. However it takes vigilance to combat more subtle forms of racism. An example is our tendency towards being ahistorical as a collective group, such as when we forget or bury histories that reveal how racist laws and policies of yesterday continue to inequitably benefit white people (as a group) today" (personal communication, July 1, 2016).



Annotated legend for a street map of the Baltimore area, Olivia Robinson, 2015.

Robinson annotated, enlarged, and then reproduced the map's legend in fabric, which she exhibits next to the quilt to help viewers understand the history of redlining and her research process. In her notes on the legend Robinson queries, "How did I not learn this history sooner? I am white... and as I learn more about history, I learn about histories that white people and culture have purposefully tried to erase."

Too often the dominant culture focuses on how racism has adversely affected communities of color rather than how White communities were subsidized by the same policies and practices. In Olivia Robinson's quilt, the evidence of investment in White neighborhoods and evidence of disinvestment in Black communities through racist housing practices are considered in the same space or conceptual frame. ■

Web-Based Resources for Further Investigation

- Evidence matters: Transforming knowledge into housing and community development policy (Introduced last year in all Baltimore County Public schools). Retrieved from www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/em/EM_Newsletter_spring_2014.pdf
- Luminous intervention, an activist collective. Retrieved from <http://luminousintervention.org>
- A map of Baltimore shows how its current poverty rates reflect the legacy of redlining. Retrieved from www.citylab.com/politics/2015/04/after-nearly-a-century-redlining-still-divides-baltimore/391982
- Olivia Robinson's website. Retrieved from <http://oliviatorobinson.com>
- Olivia Robinson's 150 tree drawing. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0BzpwG5Kx8wRRVlrcFRMYmYzNjA>
- Preserving the Baltimore Uprising 2015 Project. Retrieved from <http://baltimoreuprising2015.org>
- Redlining segment of Race and the Power of Illusion. Retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmMs8eQP4T0
- Why is this the only place in Portland I see Black people? *Teaching young children about redlining.* Retrieved from www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/27_01/27_01_johnson.shtml

Standards Connections

► Creating

Why did Olivia Robinson choose to randomly select the locations of the trees to draw? Why do you think she drew them on location rather than take photos? What objects, artifacts, or spaces would you like to research or redesign in relation to the history of race in your community?

► Presenting

Since the Uprising, Olivia Robinson's *Near and Far Enemies: Shade* has been exhibited near Baltimore individually and in the context of other people's work. If you were a curator what audience would you be interested in reaching by exhibiting Robinson's work and why? How would you contextualize or interpret *Shade* for that audience? What other voices do you think might be important to include?

► Responding

Closely look at the text and images of *This is America, Keep it Free!* and *Slums Breed Crime*. Who is missing? Who is Free? What messages does each convey about what places and people are important? Free? Dangerous? Safe? Discuss how these examples of visual culture provide historic context for *Near and Far Enemies: Shade*. What visual culture would you like to research in relation to public and private housing policies in your community?

► Connecting

You have learned about "redlining" through investigating Olivia Robinson's artwork. What do you think "greenlining" refers to in the title of this article? Discuss how redlining and greenlining are interconnected. What artistic decisions did Robinson make to emphasize their connection? Robinson created a root ball form with stitches to signify that all the roots of the trees are interdependent. What might the roots symbolize? The trees? How does the legacy of these policies and practices affect your community today?

National Visual Arts Standards

www.arteducators.org/research/national-standards

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