

Blanche Cleans Up:

Blanche White is a character created by Barbara Neely, award-winning author of multicultural detective fiction. While Neely's books make for entertaining reading, her underlying purpose is to interrogate larger crimes—social, political and environmental. In the case of *Blanche Cleans Up*, one of the targets is environmental racism, specifically lead poisoning in poor urban areas. Like most African American literature, Neely uses her narrative to initiate dialogue on difficult topics, topics for which there are no “simple” answers to questions mired in a history of disparity. Nor are the questions restricted to the African American community.

In fact, from its origins in the 18th-century, African American literature was intended to engage pedagogy in the public sphere, creating works that interrogate inequality. For this reason, *Blanche Cleans Up* is included in ENG 208: Womanism/Feminism, a course designed to examine the racial history of the women's movement in America. It has also been selected as the text for the Timbuktu Book Discussion, sponsored by the Black Studies Program, as well as participate in Pedagogy for the Public Sphere, sponsored by the Office of Civic Engagement.

While the recent events in Flint, Michigan have occupied headlines, lead poisoning has been an historic issue in urban areas. Its effects emanate not only from water; chips of lead paint are often ingested by infants, improper removal of lead paint creates lead dust that pollutes the air, as well as infiltrates the ground and ground water.

Most noticeably, damage from lead poisoning focuses on learning disabilities. However, in terms of pedagogy, however, *preventing* the effects from lead crosses a range of disciplines. As an interdisciplinary course, ENG 208 attracts students from a wide range of disciplines. As part of the curriculum, students in ENG 208 will participate in beyond-the-text activities, conducting research projects that not only explore the ramifications of lead poisoning but also the ways in which their chosen disciplines address the problems and prevention of lead poisoning. The chance to participate in the Pedagogy in the Public Sphere project will give students the opportunity to share their findings with a larger, public audience.