

Destructive Engagement

By Gary Phillips

Illustrated by Brenda Chi

Curriculum developed by Kate Kesner



OVERVIEW
Quick-Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade-Level Appropriateness	* 14+/9 th +
Genre/s	* Personal essay * Historical nonfiction
Length	1,462 words (5-minute read)
Content Advisories	* Racial violence * Descriptions of people rioting * References to alcohol
One-Sentence Summary	A Los Angeles writer reflects on how the Rodney King Riots changed his city.
Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	<p>Topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Urban Los Angeles vs. suburban Simi Valley * Media coverage of the Rodney King Riots * Contemporary L.A. neighborhoods * Racial injustice * Segregation * Gun violence * Police brutality * Race relations * Illness <p>Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Intersectionality of race, class, and gender * Resiliency in communities of color * Fighting white supremacy * Anti-Apartheid Movement * White flight * Violence * Family
Historic Events/Time Periods for Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Watts Riots: 1965 * Muhammad Ali vs. Joe Frazier II: 1974 * Soon Ja Du case: 1991 * Rodney King Riots: 1992 * South African Apartheid: 1948 to 1990s
Complementary Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Song: “Keep Ya Head Up” by Tupac Shakur (clean version) * Autobiography: <i>Long Walk to Freedom</i> by Nelson Mandela
Author & Artist Information	<p>Gary Phillips is a writer and a community organizer based in Los Angeles.</p> <p>Brenda Chi is an illustrator based in Los Angeles.</p>

<p>Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)</p>	<p>Grades 9-10 Common Core Standards:</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.8 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.A CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.C</p>
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Author Biography

Gary Phillips is the son of a mechanic and a librarian. He has been a community organizer on issues such as police abuse and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. He served as a union representative, ran a nonprofit to begin better race relations after the 1992 LA civil unrest, and is the state director of a political action committee. Phillips has published some 20 novels and 65 short stories, has edited a number of anthologies, and has written several graphic novels. He has also been a story editor on *Snowfall*, a FX Network television show about crack and the CIA in 1980s South Central where he grew up.

Artist Biography

Brenda Chi creates work about music, pop culture, and her identity as an Asian American woman. She tries to make work that sheds a different light about AAPI, mental health, and breaking stereotypes with personal stories. She also dabbles in the local gallery scene here and there, as well as sells her zines and art in local L.A. stores, art fairs and conventions.

She is published in *New Frontiers: The Many Worlds of George Takei* as a comic writer and artist. She's been featured on NBC News' Asian America, Asian American ComiCon, and in the Sing Tao Newspaper.

SYNOPSIS

A Los Angeles resident, Gary Phillips, follows the trial of Rodney King versus the LAPD after the unjustified beating of King. After the cops' acquittal, unrest grows around Phillips as the city riots. Phillips decides to stay and guard his house after his wife and kids seek shelter at a neighbor's home in the Valley.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic

15-Minute Journaling Activity:

Option One: Describe your neighborhood. Which people are friends? What do you see happening on your street on the weekdays? Weekends? Are there shops close by, or are there mostly houses? What are the landmarks you use to tell you are home?

Option Two: Which news outlets do you and your family watch or read, if any? Find a recent story. Do you feel like it was covered *objectively* (in a way not influenced by personal feelings or opinions) or *subjectively* (in a way that is based on personal feelings and opinions)? Why?

Try to determine the news outlet's point of view. What words reveal the point of view? How do you know? Cite the news story.

Main Ideas

10-Minute Journaling Activity:

At some points in your life, you may feel more like an observer than a participant. When were these times for you? How did you feel? How do you think the people involved felt?

Follow-up Journaling:

Re-read what you just wrote. Were there times in your life when you wish you would have stepped in as a participant? Are there times you wish you had not stepped in at all?

Passage-Specific Themes

Small-Group Discussion:

Read the following passages from Philip's "Destructive Engagement" and *Long Walk to Freedom* by anti-apartheid activist and former South African president Nelson Mandela. Discuss the questions below in small groups.

From "Destructive Engagement":

"Over some Cuban food and a few beers we kicked it as to how in the fifteen months since he'd last seen LA, the city seemed to be fraying more. Not from the edges, but from the center outwards. He also reflected that JoBurg was not so different than the city of lost angels: Whites ensconced behind high walls shrouded in webs of electronic security, a growing chasm between those who want and can get and those who go wanting, an exploited immigrant labor force, and recession and crime at an all-time high."

Yet like the promise of a shiny mansion on a distant hill, the allure of the coming economic boom seduces both cities: JoBurg positioning itself to become one of the centers of finance capital, which will infuse the whole of southern Africa; and Los Angeles waiting to reap the rewards as the center of Pacific Rim finance.”

From *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela:

Nelson Mandela, the great freedom fighter of South Africa’s apartheid system fought tooth and nail for equality for all people in racist South Africa. Blacks were uneducated, could not own land, and were forced to carry passes classifying them and barring them from many public facilities. Any political

opposition was silenced by “banning orders,” designed to confine a person to his house—making them prisoners in their own home. After serving about 38 years in prison he was released as the government collapsed and true multicultural democracy in South Africa finally began to blossom. This is his story of a typical incident that he experienced before his arrest. As one of the first black lawyers of South Africa, he bought a car.

On my way down to Thaba ‘Nchu I passed through Kroonstad, a conservative Free State town about 120 miles south of Johannesburg. I was driving up a hill and saw two white boys ahead of me on bicycles. My driving was still a bit unsteady, and I came too close to them, one of whom suddenly made a turn without signalling and we collided. He was knocked off his bicycle and was groaning when I got out of the car to help him. He had his arms out, indicating that I should pick him up, but just as I was about to do so, a white truck driver yelled for me not to touch the boy. The truck driver scared the child, who then dropped his arms as though he did not want me to pick him up. The boy was not badly hurt, and the truck driver took him to the police station, which was close by. The local police arrived a short time later, and the white sergeant took one look at me and said, “Kaffer,jy sal kak vandag!” (Kaffir, you will shit today!) I was shaken by the incident and the violence of his words, but I told him in no uncertain terms that I would not, and certainly would not just because a policeman had told me to. At this, the sergeant took out his notebook to record my particulars. Afrikaans policemen were surprised if a black man could speak English, much less answer back.

After I identified myself, he turned to the car, which he proceeded to ransack. From under the floor mat he pulled out a copy of the left-wing weekly, *The Guardian*, which I had hidden immediately after the accident. He looked at the title, and like a pirate with his booty cried, “ My word, we’ve caught a communist!”

Four hours later he returned . . . “What is your name?”

“Mandela,” I said.

“No, the first one,” he said. I told him.

“Nelson,” the sergeant said, as if he were talking to a boy, “I want to help you resume your journey. But if you are going to be difficult with me I will have no alternative but to be difficult with you and lock you up for the night.” That brought me down to Earth and I consented to everything.

I resumed my journey late that night, and the next morning I was travelling through the district of Excelsior when my car ground to a halt. I had run out of petrol. I walked to a nearby farmhouse and explained in English to an elderly white lady that I would like to buy some petrol. As she was closing the door, she said, “I don’t have any petrol for you.” I tramped two miles to the next farm, and chastened by my unsuccessful first effort, tried a different approach. I asked to see the farmer, and when he appeared I assumed a humble demeanour, “My baas has run out of petrol,” I said. (Baas, the Afrikaans word for boss or master, signifies subservience.) Friendly and helpful, the farmer helped me.

Small Group Discussion:

In a piece of writing, tone is the writer's attitude. How does the impersonal tone of the first passage compare to the personal one in the second passage? How do you think the authors used their points of view to impact their audiences?

Optional: Small groups share out with the whole class.

Follow-up Creative Writing Exercise (15 minutes):

Write about a moment when you were treated unfairly. Include sensory details: what did you see, hear, smell, and feel? Now, write about the same moment as if you were a journalist, writing only the facts.

Optional: Share your writing with a partner.

Universal Themes

In partners, discuss the following questions:

- How can different people have very different experiences in the same place (ex: Gary versus the rioters)?
- How can different people have very similar experiences in different places (ex: Los Angeles and South Africa)?

10-Minute Journaling Activity:

Describe a time when you felt connected to someone you had never met or felt disconnected from someone right next to you. Why do you think you felt that way?

Key Vocabulary

Definitions are context-dependent. Make sure any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
grassroots	coup	white flight
looting	bourgeoisie	sequestered
think tank	acquittal	immolated
forewoman	verdict	ensconced
conviction	riddle of violence	appellate court
liberator	Pacific Rim	travails

Vocabulary Activity Options

In small groups, answer the following questions:

1. What does the word “grassroots” make you think of? Draw a picture to show your thinking. After reading the definition, explain how the meaning of the word relates to the image you drew.
 - What are some examples of grassroots organizing? How does grassroots organizing compare to leader-focused activism? Which do you think is more effective? Why?
2. Research the term “white flight.” Cite reliable sources, like the *LA Times*, *New York Times*, and .org websites. Work as a team to write a 100-word definition of white flight. Do you think similar processes are happening today? How do you know? What effects does white flight have on communities in Los Angeles?

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. How are Johannesburg and Los Angeles compared in the text? Cite the text. Why do you think Philips compares the two? Discuss.
2. Do you think Philips did the right thing by guarding his house? What do you think you would do if you thought your home was in danger due to civil unrest? Discuss.
3. Why do you think Philips listed the “two personal things that happened” to him after the unrest?
4. Whose perspective are we missing in “Destructive Engagement”? What perspectives would you like to see represented in the story? Why?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. In “Destructive Engagement,” Phillips uses personification—the technique of making non-human things sound human—to create an urgent tone. Find two examples in the text. How do they affect the story? How would the story be different if Phillips didn’t personify?
2. How do different groups in the story respond to the Rodney King trial? Do you think there is a “correct” way to respond? Cite the text.
3. How does Philips respond to the riots? How do you think his intersectional identity (race, class, gender, ability, etc.) affects how he responds? Refer to the text.

** Optional: In a two-page essay, respond to the following question: If you had been living in LA during the Rodney King Riots, how do you think you and your family would have responded? Consider your family’s race, class, gender, ability, and more.

Bonus: Discuss your response to question three in pairs or small groups. Share your essay with a partner. How is your response similar to and/or different from your peer’s response?

4. Phillips uses a detached tone throughout his story. How do you think the story would change if he told it in a more personal way? How might you have told the story? Refer to the text.

Writing Exercises

Narrative

In “Destructive Engagement,” Phillips describes making an important moral decision, to stay and protect his house, risking conflict and possibly violence with rioters.

In approximately 500 words, describe a time when you made an urgent decision. What put you in that situation? What did you have to lose? What did you ultimately decide and why?

Descriptive

In the story, the setting of Los Angeles is vital. It becomes almost a character in the story. Now you are going to write a three-page descriptive short story.

First, imagine your setting. Choose a place, real or imagined. How does it look? How does the place make you feel? Use sensory details.

Next, imagine a character. You can write about anyone—yourself, the main character of your favorite book or TV show, or an original character. What does the person look like? What is their personality? If this person were placed in the setting you imagined, how would they react? What would they do?

Finally, introduce a second character to interact with the first. How might this new character start a conversation with your original character? What might the two characters do together?

Analysis

In “Destructive Engagement,” Phillips refers to the riots as a good backdrop for his later mystery novel. Good stories often include conflict, which can be how characters grow.

In a 500-word analysis, respond to the following prompt:

What conflicts were occurring during the Rodney King Riots, both for Phillips’ family and the larger population of Los Angeles? Cite the text. Are similar struggles happening today? What do you think needs to happen for these conflicts to be resolved? You may wish to briefly research, using reliable sources.

Complementary Text Option

[Listen to](#) and read the lyrics excerpted from rapper Tupac Shakur’s 1993 song, “Keep Ya Head Up.” Tupac dedicated this song to 15-year-old Latash Harlins, a black girl who was shot by a Korean liquor store owner in Los Angeles right before Rodney King’s trial. Her death, as well as the light sentencing of the shop’s owner, contributed to civil unrest during the Rodney King Riots.

Little somethin' for my godson Elijah
And a little girl named Corinne
Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice
I say the darker the flesh then, the deeper the roots
I give a holler to my sisters on welfare
Tupac cares, if don't nobody else care
And uhh, I know they like to beat ya down a lot
When you come around the block, brothas clown a lot
But please don't cry, dry your eyes, never let up

Forgive but don't forget, girl keep your head up
And when he tells you you ain't nuttin', don't believe him
And if he can't learn to love you, you should leave him
'cause sista you don't need him

Writing Exercise

Write a poem or song verse to someone you love or respect. What would you tell them in hard times? Include sensory details.

Bonus: Practice reading the poem or song verse in a loud and clear voice. Create an audio recording of yourself reading your work using a phone audio message or the app [Vocaroo.com](https://www.vocaroo.com). Share your audio recording with your teacher.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

In “Destructive Engagement,” Phillips is an observer of rather than a participant in the Rodney King Riots. He becomes involved only to protect his house.

Four-Minute Quick Write:

How do you think the story would change if rioters had broken into Phillips’ house? What do you think would have happened and why? Cite the text.

Follow Up Activity:

In pairs or in small groups, write an alternative ending to the story in which rioters attempt to break into Phillips house. What happens next?

Optional: Read your alternative endings aloud to the class.

Classroom Activity Two

Working in groups of three, each group member will write a paragraph from the perspective of one of these three people: a member of the Philips’ family, a rioter, and a shopkeeper near the riots. In 10 minutes, write a paragraph from the point of view of one of these people. How do you feel about the riots?

Share out with your group. How are your paragraphs similar and different? Why?

Follow-up Discussion: Did any perspective surprise you? Say why or why not?

Home Activity

Interview a family member or a friend about how the Black Lives Matter Movement has influenced their daily lives. Did they choose to participate in in-person protests? Why or why not? What other ways might they have protested racial injustice and police brutality?

Optional: If the person was living in Los Angeles during the 1992 Rodney King Riots, how did the riots impact their lives?

Record your interview or write a transcript to share with your teacher.

Bonus: In a 5-minute quickwrite, respond to the following question: How do you think the Rodney King Riots and the George Floyd protests were similar or different?

Guest Speaker

Option One: Invite the author, Gary Phillips, to speak to the class about his story and his experience as a mystery writer. Ask him to lead a writing workshop.

Option Two: Invite the artist, Brenda Chi, to speak to the class about her artistic inspiration and process. Ask her to lead an art workshop.

Note: *Locavore Lit LA* helps coordinate and facilitate virtual and pre-recorded author and artist visits during the pandemic.

Field Trip

Onsite or Virtual Activity:

Visit the current exhibitions at the California African American Museum (600 State Drive, L.A.) or visit the online page for the museum's [2017 exhibit, *No Justice, No Peace*](#).

How did the exhibit you explored change your understanding of "Destructive Engagement" and/or the diversity of the African American experience in Los Angeles. What most surprised you or interested you? Why?

Follow-up 10-Minute Writing Activity:

If you were to write a piece about the riots (a story or a screenplay, for example) which characters would you include? What aspects of the riots would you explore? What images would you focus on? What would you want audiences to understand from your art?

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

This story and its exercises are appropriate for 9th-12th grade. Ninth- and tenth-grade standards are cited.

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Vocabulary Activity OptionsCCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4

Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grades 9-10 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.A

Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word's position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.C

Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, or its etymology.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.8

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Post-Reading Class Discussion OptionsCCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A

Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Text-Dependent Question OptionsCCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.3

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

Writing Exercise OptionsCCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B

Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Complementary Reading TextCCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5

Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.