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M.F.A. Creative Writing Portfolio

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The Black Hole: Exhuming the Makings of Black Femininity in Jesmyn Ward’s Men We Reaped

Abstract
Jesmyn Ward’s memoir, Men We Reaped, promises to resurrect the harrowing stories of five black men in the rural South to elucidate the black male experience in the 21st century US. But, equally compelling is the story that resists telling about the making of black femininity in the US. In order to excavate this narrative, I return to the abyss of the black hole whose “specter would follow [Ward] for [her] entire life.” In the quotidian space of the woods behind her home, which simultaneously function as the community dump and a makeshift playground, Ward comes to recognize the degeneracy of black womanhood in the pervasive blackness within the man-made ditch that terrorizes her imagination. In leaving this pre-symbolic space, the cleaved demarcation between childhood and the salient peril of womanhood reify when Ward sees her own (gendered) abhorrence mirrored in the eyes of her brother. The black hole comes to represent an amalgamation of racial terror and sexual violence. With the black hole passage, I hope to demonstrate how reading against the grain can provide insight into the formations of black female subjectivity and complicate our imaginings of American racial anxiety centered in the performance of black masculinity.

Intro (The Black Hole)

“Black Women’s sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a “void” or empty space that is simultaneously ever visible (exposed) and invisible and where black women’s bodies are always already colonized.”

-Evelynn Hammonds, Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality
Joshua looked through the screen and it was as if he saw me clearly with my soapy hands, my wrinkled fingers, my jaw grinding with frustration and self-abasement, and he hated me.

-Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped*

*He hated me.* I had not expected Jesmyn Ward to express this sentiment about her brother, Joshua, as she journeyed into the space of his death in her memoir *Men We Reaped.* This moment occurs between the yard and the house during the children’s burgeoning adolescence. Joshua stood in the yard looking on at Ward in the kitchen through the screened window and hate is what she remembers seeing in his eyes. Ward’s feeling is so fleeting, so effortless, that a cursory reading may inappropriately ascribe it to a moment of adolescent egocentrism, as the emotion does not resurface elsewhere in the narrative. And yet, revisiting these words, Ward’s response rings with no less truth. *He hated me.* Ward does not recant her statement and as this moment forms the end of a chapter it is not discussed in further detail. How, then, can we make sense of this moment, of the abhorrence in Joshua’s eyes?

Buried in the middle of the book, between the deaths of Charles Joseph Martin and Ronald Wayne Lizana, in a small clearing cut in a wild tangle of Mississippi woods, there is a grave. Perhaps even more haunting than its shrouded existence is the fact that it is empty. Square, dark, and waiting, standing on its crumbling edge a thirteen-year-old Jesmyn Ward is able to place herself there. Its dim recesses take on a symbolic importance for Ward as the black hole comes to be a “physical representation of all the hatred and loathing and sorrow [she]
carried inside, the dark embodiment of all the times in Gulfport when [she] had been terrorized or sexually threatened” (Ward, 181).

Contrary to popular belief, a black hole is not empty, but dense and pregnant with matter. A black hole, as defined by NASA, is a great amount of matter pressed into a finite amount of space (NASA). The result is a gravitational field so strong that not even light can escape it. The many silences existing around Black female sexuality enable its expression as a black hole to Ward. Like the black hole, the black female body is a meeting ground of innumerable convergences⁴. The black female body is weighted by countless cultural and political investments as it emphasizes what is most important and stable² by reflecting what is not. These multifarious investments render black women invariably public and unprotected. “No matter what the truth of her individual life,” any black woman could find herself exposed and characterized in racist sexual terms” (Hammonds).

The deafening weight of these meanings imposed on the black female body causes black women to collapse. They retreat into themselves, taking refuge in silence and invisibility. They combat the readily available image of the sexually immoral black female body by disappearing themselves. This self-imposed sexual invisibility allows black women to garner greater respect, justice, and opportunity (Higginbotham, 915 via Hammonds). It also makes black female sexualities difficult to locate.

The presence of a black hole can only be inferred by detecting the black hole’s effect on other matter nearby: the radioactive emittance of stars torn by the black hole’s accretion (NASA). Evelyn Hammonds suggests that in order to identify black female sexualities “we

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¹ Spillers
² Patterson pg 46
need to develop reading strategies that allow us to make visible the distorting and productive effects these sexualities produce in relation to more visible sexualities” (Hammonds, 139). For Ward’s memoir, this means examining the hyper visible sexualities of the men in her narrative in order to glean an understanding of her own.

I return to this grave, to this black hole in the earth to understand just how Ward could feel that her brother hated her and it could be true. In this book of the dead, this grave represents a beginning; this earthly void births Ward into a symbolic order. Similar to the piercing cries of Frederick Douglas’s Aunt Hester, the black hole becomes the “blood stained gate,” the entrance to a dreaded consciousness of ownership of a corporeal schema fraught with routinized violence, sexual trauma, racial terror, and unmitigated pain. “Someone had dug into the earth, made a cellar, and then covered it over with two-by-fours before strewing pine straw to camouflage it” (Ward, 150). The response for thirteen-year-old Ward is visceral; she turns to her brother and says, “run” (Ward, 151).

Outdoors

In order to understand how a hole in the earth can assail a thirteen-year-old girl, we have to have a better understanding of its location. The surrounds of Mississippi play a prominent role in Ward’s memoir. A review of the memoir from The Guardian goes as far to name the Mississippi gulf coast as a “central character in the book” (The Guardian). The black hole exists in the Mississippi underbrush outside of Ward’s home in Orange Grove; her first home without her father’s presence in the household. Ward’s mother puts her father out of their home when she

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3 Sharpe
4 Spillers? Fanon?
learns of his latest infidelity. Ward’s mother catches her father at the home of the other woman and tells him to bring the car home “and once he did that, she said, he could get the fuck out” (Ward, 148). When he arrives at their home, Ward’s mother bars his entry, meeting her father at the door with his belongings in a garbage bag. She shoves them in his hands and tells him to go.

The door as a construct is the point of access to the domestic space. The doorway is a space of liminality, as it exists between the domestic space and the uncultivated wild. The doorway is the threshold between the civil and uncivilized worlds. The home comes to be a space providing containment, security and community while the outdoors is unknown, ripe with possibility and fear.

DeLisle was once called Wolf Town before it was “partially tamed” by white settlers (Ward, 9). Ward implies that part of the taming of the land and domestication of the community has always included a careful observance of racial boundaries. The reinforcement of racial boundaries is often directly tied to the unification of a community and security of the colony. Laura Ann Stoler describes a similar fear of miscegenation during colonial rule in Java, Indonesia in which white “middle-class morality, manliness, and motherhood were seen as endangered by the related fears of ‘degeneration’ and miscegenation in scientifically construed racist beliefs” (Stoler, 62). Because “men were considered more susceptible to moral turpitude than were women,” women were held responsible for the immoral states of men (Stoler, 71). This positioned colonized women, made sexually available because of proximity and caste, as responsible for the physical, moral, and mental degeneration of white males (Stoler, 46). Power was thought to rest in the maintenance of a white biological boundary and violent action was frequently employed to protect a community from sexual threats that lurked outside of those it protected.
White settlers in Wolf Town faced similar sexual anxieties over maintenance of racial boundaries. Ward describes DeLisle as littered with the bodies of family members who deigned to marry outside of their race and class (Ward, 10). These individuals openly pursuing relationships incomprehensible to North American colonial dynamics became a threat to white supremacy. As such, they were torn from the civilized domesticity of the white community into the anarchy existing outside of it where their death warranted little justification.

Outdoors can also be linked to a fear of degeneracy within the black community. In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the threat of being put outdoors, being without kinship ties or property because of circumstances beyond an individual’s control or negligence, was “an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing [the] metaphysical condition” of blackness (Morrison, 17). Morrison expresses that the concept of black personhood existing in the periphery remained bearable because it was an abstraction; there remained a possibility of transcendence because marginality, at least of class, was not concrete. But being put outdoors reified a peripheral existence comparable to death within the black community. In the outdoors there existed objectionable disorder that threatened to disrupt the power dynamic of the community.

Outdoors is where many of the men in Ward’s narrative find themselves, not by negligence or ill-fated circumstance, but by choice. Ward cites the sexual revolution of the 1960s as reasoning for this change as men began to divorce their wives and “former husbands had relationships with other women and married them and then left them also, perhaps searching for a sense of freedom or a sense of power that being a Black man in the South denied them” (Ward, 84). Hortense Spillers describes the violent theft of the black body during the transatlantic slave trade as allowing both “the female body and the male body [to] become a
territory of cultural and political maneuver,” disrupting the continuation of African culture by imposing these cultural and political meaning (Spillers, 67). “The captive body translates…sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general ‘powerlessness’ resonating through various centers of human and social meaning” (Spillers, 67). The “Negro Family”\(^5\) then becomes a pathological construction of colonization. Existence outside of the pathological “Negro Family” is a realistic route to power for black males because it is existence outside of the New-World conscriptions\(^6\).

Performing racial masculinity can be read as a form of resistance, as Lisa Marie Cacho outlines. Strategies that subtly subvert exploitation or artistic approaches to reclaim and redecorate public space are often mislabeled as deviance (Cacho, 162). Living outside the logics of the white heteronormativity depathologizes nonnormative racial masculinities, thus empowering black males. “My father has always worn his dreams on the outside,” Ward says, “[…] he was forever in love with the promise of the horizon: the girls he cheated with, fell in love with, one after another, all corporeal telescopes to another reality” (Ward, 146). The demonstration of black masculinity draws on the black female body as a chess piece, a pawn facilitating a display of strength and power through reproductive prowess. The black male’s accumulation of the black female body through sexual encounters presents possibility of “another reality” in which the black male is desired, if not respected. Black masculine power is only possible outdoors, outside of the heteronormative domestic structure. Ironically though, the behavior that can be read as depathologizing black men promotes the pathology of matriarchy\(^7\) amongst their communities.

\(^5\) Moynihan
\(^6\) Spillers “new world conscriptions”
\(^7\) Spillers (pathology of matriarchy)
As black men venture outside of the domestic space to realize power, black women slip into their absence, assuming the role of sole provider of the household. “My mother buried her dreams,” Ward continues, “[…] the suggestion of that dream lived on in her conception of my father. It’s part of why she loved him so long and so consistently, and it is part of the reason it hurt her so to meet him at the door” (Ward, 146-147). While Ward’s father recognizes power outdoors, Ward’s mother recognizes power within the domestic space, more specifically, within the heteronormative domestic structure. Ward points out that both of her parents were raised in households without fathers and that neither of them wanted this for their children (Ward, 131). Ward’s mother dreams of escaping the pathology of black matriarchy. She overlooks Ward’s father’s transgressions until she realizes that she is already heading a matrifocal household: “there were things that needed to be done and she was the only person who could do them” (Ward, 146). Despite Ward’s father’s presence in the household as relatively ornamental, Ward’s mother still feels as though she has failed when she puts him outdoors because she is surrendering to the pathology of black matriarchy.

Ward can be read as deriving a sense of power from the outdoors space. As a female child, Ward recognizes the domestic space of the home is limiting. In the privacy of the pines behind her great-aunt’s house, Ward finds the freedom to reenact the narratives from her books. Named for its rule by childish whim and desire, Kidsland provides a clear delineation between the jurisdiction of the matrifocal home and the possibility of female childhood in the woods.

Ward implies that one of the books that inspired her to create Kidsland was Bridge to Terabithia (Ward, 88). Bridge to Terabithia tells the story of an adolescent boy, Jess, who is continuously alienated by what his family and classmates consider displays of femininity. He suppresses all artistic desires until he meets Leslie, a girl who disrupts the fragility of gendered
play in a rural southern school by crossing over to the boys’ side of the playground and beating them all at a footrace. Leslie and Jess become fast friends and develop a fantasyland in the woods where they can forget the world and live in their imagination. In the woods, the children are free and possess the courage to pursue the monsters that get the better of them in real life. The children are attracted to the woods in this story because they present a space free of gender restrictions. The outdoors space is compelling to Ward for similar reasons.

Kidsland is significant because Ward saw it as a “first step [toward] doing something momentous, to becoming one of those girls in the books” (Ward, 88). In her nuclear family, Ward sees femininity as being confined to the home. The world of women is limited to the debasement of constant labor: “[…] the women I knew were working even when they weren’t at work […] there was no time for them to relax and just be” (Ward, 88). In books, Ward first learns of the possibility that her gender could be capable of something more. She discovers that girls can be “strong and smart and creative and foolish enough to fight dragons, to run away from home to live in museums, to become child spies, to make new friends and build secret gardens” (Ward, 85). While strength, cunning, and creativity may not be concepts that seem novel to expressions of femininity as Ward has known them in her family, foolishness is. Ward’s matrifocal home is maintained with methodical precision. There is little waste; everything from washing clothes to cooking meals becomes an exercise in thrift. Foolishness can only be afforded by the men in Ward’s family because nonnormative expressions of black manhood are always deviant and always incomprehensible [within the heteronormative domestic structure]. Kidsland is significant because it establishes a space outside the home of revolt from the matriarchal responsibility. In the woods Jesmyn can indulge in the enchantment of self-interested foolish play.
Run

It is Ward’s inability to successfully perform matriarchal responsibilities that lead her and her brother, Joshua, to find the black hole. With her father gone, Ward’s mother offloads some of the burden of her role as the matriarch onto Ward as she is the eldest female child. Ward is made responsible for a majority of cleaning and caring for her brother and sisters in the afterschool afternoons. Ward’s struggle to inhabit the responsibilities of the matriarch is signified in her repeatedly losing or forgetting her house key causing her and her brother and sisters to be locked out of their home. When the children are locked out of the home, they turn to the woods where Ward finds that she “[derived] a certain pleasure out of [their] scrappy self-imposed exile from the house” (Ward, 149).

The woods surrounding Ward’s home without her father in Orange Grove function simultaneously as a community dump and playground. When Ward locks herself out of the house, she and her brother and sisters take pleasure playing on a mattress in the underbrush. The mattress is a domestic symbol tossed out of the domestic space. In the woods, its use is inverted; an object used for rest becomes an object of play as Ward and her siblings bounce and flip from its springs. While the children derive pleasure from the anarchy of the woods, they also seemingly provide a safe space for the children to inhabit gendered responsibilities without repercussion. Ward writes that Joshua found the hole when “he’d been off exploring” while she and her sisters were “weaving flowers into rings and necklaces” (Ward, 148) on an occasion where she had once again locked them all out of the house. Here, Ward and Joshua are both engaged in activities that are essentially childish renderings of gender expectation. Ward is engaged in the domestic act of production while Joshua is exploring, a wandering that blooms
into the rootlessness of black manhood that eventually leads to his death. In inhabiting these
gender responsibilities in the woods, the children come to recognize the outdoors as an
aggressively gendered space.

Leaning over Joshua’s back so that she may hold it in full view, Ward is immediately
frightened by the black hole’s construction which is “too large an undertaking for skinny little
kids with knees like doorknobs, shirtless boys whose ribs you could count when they rode their
bikes through the streets” (Ward, 151). The idea of a boy digging in the woods is bearable to
Ward because of her ability to rein them into a domestic space. Boys have knees small, round,
and familiar as doorknobs. Their ribs can be counted beneath their skin. A boy can be contained
and is therefore nonthreatening. The black hole resonates with maleness in that it is too large a
feat to be accomplished by a boy. It required “planning” which is frightening because the woods
have previously been an anarchic space for Ward (151). The black hole is male management of
a space Ward had previously considered uncultivated. Ward is confronted with the idea that
outdoors is not a safe space for her because there is a lurking threat she had not previously
considered: man.

Ward grabs her sister and takes off running. She stops only when she realizes that Josh
stood behind, “still at the mouth of the hole” (151). Where Ward recognizes danger, Joshua
recognizes opportunity. Outdoors, masculinity is enacted without rhyme, reason, or remorse;
there is a hole in the woods and it was not created by a child. Joshua can be read as sharing
Ward’s terror when he asks, “you don’t want to go down in it,” and Ward can “tell by the way he
said it that he hadn’t gone down in it yet” (151). Joshua is not interested in play; rather, he is
interested in conquering this space. The black hole presents a challenge of what it means to be a
black male existing outdoors: unafraid. We see Josh posit strength later on in the memoir when
he begins selling drugs to help his father. Ward asks him, “you ain’t scared,” and when he
doesn’t answer she realizes that he knew something that she didn’t (211).

**Thomas**

Between the first and second visit to the hole, Thomas, a boy from her neighborhood, nearly
sexually assaults Ward. Ward is initially paralyzed and unable to fight off Thomas’ advances.
What allows her to regain her voice and the ability to fight back are the watching eyes of her
sisters. Realizing that she has two dependents in the room, she begins to take action. Ward
writes that she “scooped Charine up under her armpits and swung her to [her] waist. [Charine]
had given [Ward] [her] voice back” (Ward, 156). Wearing the weight of Charine on her hip,
Ward finds the courage to fight back. She is surprised at the anger she is able to summon to
remove Thomas from her home. Assuming matriarchal responsibilities allow Ward to purport
strength. This strength can be maintained as long as the doors are locked, as long as no external
threat can make its way into the domestic space. The door buckles and shudders with the weight
of the Thomas attempting to reenter. When he returns home, Joshua asks why the doors are
locked. Ward points at the shuddering door and answers “Him” (157). The pronoun “Him”
allows Thomas to become the disembodied sexual terror loping around the edges of her home:

“He wouldn’t come into the yard, but he would roam the edges of the fence, the woods at
the back of the house, scream, *I know you hear me talking to you. You hear me talking to
you. And then: I see you.* When he said this, I thought he meant that he saw all the
misery in me, saw that I deserved to be treated this way by a boy, any boy, all boys,
everyone, and I believed him.” (157)
Ward could easily identify Thomas here, but she doesn’t. The ambiguity is important, as Thomas becomes a boy, then any boy, then everyone. The incidents of sexual invasion become numerous and enacted by all. I invoke Donette Francis’ use of “scenes of subjection” to understand how these cumulative incidents of violence against black females can be overlooked. Scenes of subjection mark quotidian incidents in narratives where the black female body is violated through sexual, physical, or psychological assaults (Francis, 12). “Because these spaces can also function as clandestine sites, they become abject spaces hidden from public view […] The potentially abject nature of these spaces makes it that much easier to silence stories of violence committed against females” (Francis, 12). It is important to add here that black women are frequently complicit in the silencing of their own violence in order to gain psychic space (Higginbotham via Hammond). Ward’s silencing becomes her retreat indoors, into the domestic space in which she has power and control, albeit limiting. The disembodiment of Thomas’ screams gives the woods the voice. His call becomes the pervading darkness of the black hole.

**Return to the Black Hole**

Similar to Frederick Douglass and Aunt Hester’s scream, the black hole becomes the “blood stained gate,” the entrance into a symbolic order for Ward. “First [Douglass] was born. Then he was born into the significance of being born a slave, born into the symbolic universe of slavery” (Sharpe, 7). This scene in which Douglas witnesses his aunt’s rape at the hands of his slave master rearticulates the everyday trauma of what it means for a white person, regardless of age or sex, to have the right to demand anything of the black body. The foundation of freedom in the United States was defined “through an other’s body legally and otherwise being made to wear
unfreedom and to serve as a placeholder for access to the freedoms that are denied the black subject” (Sharpe, 15). Where Douglas is born into the symbolic significance of the slave through the scream of Aunt Hester, the black hole enables Ward’s birth into the significance of what it means to be a black woman.

Again, Ward shirks her matriarchal responsibilities, leaving her sisters unsupervised at home to return to the hole alone with Joshua:

“I didn’t fully understand that it had taken on a symbolic importance for me, a physical representation of all the hatred and loathing and sorrow I carried inside, the dark embodiment of all the times in Gulfport when I had been terrorized or sexually threatened. I didn’t understand that it had become an omen for me. When Joshua and I got there, we found the plywood that had covered the top of the cellar gone, so what remained was a large, open ditch lined with pine straw, perfectly square and dark. Somehow it was even more awful to see the dim recesses of that man-made hole, and my response was visceral. I felt as if I were down in it, as if my world had shrunk to its confines: the pine straw pricking my legs and arms, the walls a cavern around me, tall as a line of trees, the sky itself obscured. I couldn’t escape it. Its specter would follow me my entire life. Joshua and I stared into its maw without talking, and then left. I wonder if he felt something as well, standing there on the crumbling edge of that awful hole, of the awful future we would bear.” (Ward, 181)

The black hole embodies Ward’s scenes of subjection. In its dim recesses, she recognizes a reproduction of an amalgamation of sexual violence and terror. Ward also recognizes that the black hole is her future. In the same way that Frederick Douglass realizes that the “fate of Ester
might be [his] next,” Ward realizes that she is powerless in escaping the black hole. Already, she sees herself down in its confines, the sky now obscured by the reality of…

When Ward returns to the house, she does not yet recognize her difference until she sees herself in Joshua’s eyes. I quote the passage at some length below:

“The house was messy. I was grateful that at least Nerissa and Charine hadn’t broken anything. I set Nerissa and Charine to small tasks, picking up their toys in the living room, while I washed dishes. Joshua was outside in the backyard. I walked to the window with wet and soapy hands to talk to him.

‘Josh,’ I said, ‘you need to come inside and take out the trash.’

‘All right,’ he said.

I washed a sink full of cups and moved on to bowls. He still wasn’t inside. I walked to the window again.

‘Josh!’ I said. I was frustrated: I felt the weight of being a child with adult responsibilities. I was inadequate. I was failing. My brother stood out in the yard, peering into the dark of the house. He wasn’t looking up at me, and I realized that he and I were the same height now. His hair was a sandy brown in the sun he squinted against, and his black T-shirt was fitted on his frame, pulled so by the way he was gaining weight at eleven. Joshua looked through the screen and it was as if he saw me clearly with my soapy hands, my wrinkled fingers, my jaw grinding with frustration and self-abasement, and he hated me. Both of us on the cusp of adulthood, and this is how my brother and I understood what it meant to be a woman: working, dour, full of worry. What it meant to be a man: resentful, angry, wanting life to be everything but what it was.” (Ward, 181-182)
While Ward’s black hole exists outside of the domestic space, Joshua’s black hole exists within it. In Joshua’s eyes, Ward sees herself in the dark of the house, her jaw demonstrating a begrudging restraint of the body that composes the wrinkled hands so that they may continue to engage in domestic work. The violent silencing of the mouth, demonstrating a maternally imposed discipline. His gaze locates her firmly within the social pathology of the matriarchy. The square doorframe of the house becomes the entryway to Joshua’s own abyss, the dark embodiment of his own terror. Through Joshua’s gaze, Ward is able to locate herself down inside the black hole, inside the politics of the white gaze, inside the boundaries of constrained existence, inside the mouth of the colonizer. She is fixed. Transported inside the political re-scripting of black womanhood, she becomes incomprehensible to him. In her brother’s eyes, Ward sees clearly: “he hated me.”

The re-scripting of the gaze enables the subject to be swallowed by a past, inducting them into a long tradition of white erasure and re-scripting of black history and culture (Nielsen, 366). Ward’s narration of the past from inside the black hole introduces the idea that the future is fixed as well. As she recounts the moment at the black hole’s edge, she sees it now as foreshadowing of the “awful future” she and Joshua would bear. Joshua’s exploring eventually becomes the rootlessness that leads to his death. Ward’s domestic production becomes the retrieval of the black male body from outdoors, from a space of incomprehensibility, from the anarchy of the world outside our own into some semblance of order. In his death, Ward is finally able to bring Joshua inside.
Works Cited


Excerpts from *The Complex*

Chapter 2

Crouched on the curb of 7957 beneath a golden pool of lamplight, Angie concentrated on lifting the asphalt from beneath the gravel with a broken twig. No matter how devout she was in her daily vigil, she always missed it. Angie could never seem to catch the precise moment when the sun tilted its yellow head back and the streets’ dull orange hue became the artificial glow of bulbs. What she did know was that the one underneath 7952 had begun to blink slowly sometime last week. She couldn’t remember a time where the ones under 7954 and 7961 had ever been on.

Angie hadn’t always sat around thinking about streetlights, but she was twelve now and her mama had the night shift at the new Wal-Mart off route one. Staying out late wasn’t testing anyone anymore and Angie decided that if her mama could stay out as long as she wanted, so would she. Until the fast girls snuck off with boys under dead street lamps and around the shaded corners of buildings so they could let them slide their hands underneath their shirts to feel the burgeoning tips of adolescence. Until the darkness removed all distinction from the faces in front of her so that everyone was the same comforting uniform shade of black. Night gave Sequoia Court a new meaning. Every noise and shape accentuated. A discreet giggle echoed into exuberant laughter. A baby’s shadow could easily scale one of the five-story buildings. Grown men who had been idle all day stood around the basketball court near 7961 shaking the chain-link fence, bargaining with squeaking sneakers, “Pick it up! Pick it up!”

The edge of the day worn off and dulled, night outdoors in Sequoia Court gave birth to new life. Angie preferred it to Marquis’ furtive smoking in the bathroom because, even though she wasn’t home, it was still very much Mama’s house with the striped ceramic plates hanging
on the walls and the hung class photos staring back quizzically. Or the green glow that radiated
from Calvin’s TV in their shared room as he pushed buttons signaling distant virtual explosions
until well after she fell asleep. Being out on the street after dark usually brought with it a
thrilling expansiveness, but today was different. The summer heat lingering still in early October
presented itself as a wall and though that usually bought everyone outside to escape the closeness
of the heat indoors, today it seemed as if folks were doing their best to ignore it. Because of the
fight, Angie was certain. Because earlier that evening Monet had swung on his mama and
embarrassed himself and everybody else by association. It was surprising, the explosive fight
blooming bright and unexpected from the wound of a small and familiar disagreement that Angie
had seen in her own home between her mama and Marquis. What made less sense than the fight
was that none of her neighbors waited around to talk about it, to make the event small by
embellishing it as if it were truly a story and not something lived. The fight seemed to have
driven everyone the opposite way, turning inside early instead of out. Without the squeals of
children and conversation of neighbors, Sequoia Court was injected with an unusual stillness.
The strange silence flattening the complex was unsettling. Stillness was new, something Angie
wasn’t sure what to do with yet so after Lauren was called in by her grandmother, Angie had
separated herself from Abrianna and Bri to wait once again for the predictability of streetlights.

Angie firmly believed that witnessing the division between night and day would hold
some answer about night’s mystery but she always seemed to miss it. Something else inevitably
stole her attention. Even now, it wasn’t until the shadow of Abrianna’s breasts rippled into the
wattage that she realized she’d missed it again. They weren’t quite breasts yet, but definitely tits:
round and shocking. In the lamplight Abrianna’s distorted shadow made them larger and more
shapely, like balloons pressed underneath her shirt, rising, extending themselves toward Angie
making the contrast of her smooth shadowy figure all the more flat. Angie lifted her eyes from their shadow, stared up at them and asked, “What you want?”

Abrianna crossed her arms self-consciously over her chest. Her pouting lips shined with the watermelon glitter gloss she bought at the corner store with the wrinkled dollar she’d found on the playground last week. By the way she’d been rolling it on every minute since, Angie could tell that Abrianna thought she was cute but it just made her mouth look greasy as if she’d just finished eating.

“We was coming to tell you what we just saw down in the woods, but if you gon act like that then I guess never mind.”

“You just did tell me though,” Angie said, waving Abrianna away as she wished she could the memory of Monet screaming, sprinting down into them earlier.

“It ain’t Monet neither,” Abrianna’s little sister, Bri, offered. She was standing alongside Abrianna with her arms drawn across her chest to match her older sister’s. Angie wasn’t surprised to see Bri standing there with her sister. Bri hovered and followed Abrianna everywhere so that when Angie and Abrianna had become friends, somehow Angie had gotten Bri too. Angie was, however, surprised to hear Bri speaking up. Bri was usually silent, Angie had always thought, in an attempt to remain as inoffensive as a younger sibling tagging along could possibly be. But watching them standing there in outfits of dissimilar shades of pink it occurred to Angie that even though they were without a mama to call them in from the stillness, together they seemed complete, filling each other up like the yellow and blue that go into making green.
“It don’t matter, Bri, cause don’t nobody go down there unless they smoking. And if this is about Marquis, then I don’t care.” Angie waved them both off along with a cloud of gnats drifting toward the spill of yellow light.

“It ain’t Marquis neither,” one of them said, but Angie wasn’t looking making it hard to tell who. She was staring up at the warm globe of the street lamp. In the silence its buzzing was audible, the electric hum singeing and Angie suddenly found herself wanting to be anywhere else but there. She snapped the twig she was holding and cleaned her palms on the front of her denim skirt as she stood, ready to go wherever they would lead her.

Abrianna smiled a big greasy smile. “Come on,” she said, throwing the words over her shoulder as she skipped ahead, “I’ll show you.

It was hard for Angie to recognize what she was supposed to be seeing down there at first until Bri pointed it out. Something large near the stream, stooped low like a bush. Except moving. It crawled along the edge of the water, rooting around the discarded cans and bottles that sifted down there. Angie believed that the thing down there was an animal and hardened herself to run, but then a piece of something gold caught light and suddenly she could make out the form of a slender wrist, an arm reaching out from the mass of fur. It was a woman—a woman in a winter coat rooting through the trash near the stream. She was talking to herself low and fast, the words tangling together without rhythm or pause to give them shape and meaning. Once Angie understood that it was a woman down there in the darkness, she could make out the glisten of sweat moving down her face, the knotted hair that could only be a wig, stiff on her head.

“Who’s that? Y'all know?”
Abrianna and Bri remained silent. They were crouched down with Angie in the ivy at the edge of the woods as if the effort it took to watch the woman filled everything in them, keeping them from hearing or thinking about anything else. Angie hated few things more than being ignored so she decided to bypass her friends by speaking to the woman directly. She stood, cupping her hands over her mouth, “Hey!” Her voice bumped against the brick wall of the building behind them before fading into the trees. The woman didn’t look up and, more than slightly embarrassed, Angie slowly crouched back down into the weeds. A vague fear hovered above her as she watched the woman pick things up, speak to them, and toss them back into the trees. This is stupid, she thought attempting to push it away.

“Hey this is stupid,” Angie said aloud, but neither Abrianna nor Bri so much as flinched in acknowledgment. Angie stood, ready to leave, not caring if either one of them followed, and as she did she saw the lip gloss leaning out of the tight side pocket of Abrianna’s jeans. It was easy enough to remove it without Abrianna noticing. Angie tucked the tiny glass vial into the pocket of her skirt and slipped away. The feel of the cool glass against her thigh through the cloth pocket was relief from the heat curtained around her. The sweet scent of watermelon rippled through the silence as she cut through the grass around the playground. Angie stomped through the clover, enjoying the weight of it with each step when a sharp pain shot low in her stomach.

*Shit.*
Chapter 8

Mrs. Beverly was waiting out on the porch fanning the flies from in front of her face as she flipped through a circular while Nadine was in the kitchen making black tea with cream and a few dollops of Jack Daniels. It was just after 5:30 and Nadine had been unusually fussy over preparations for Mrs. Beverly’s visit since Lauren had stepped into the house. She had aligned the saltine crackers they would share carefully in a pinwheel on a dinner plate that she wouldn’t let Lauren touch. She had traded the coffee mugs they usually drank out of for daintier glass tea cups with mismatched saucers. It was Mrs. Beverly’s first visit since Brittany had returned and from the way she was carrying on, Lauren could tell that Nadine was nervous about what Mrs. Beverly would have to say. Nadine wanted to hear the news, find out if Brittany was in it. Since Brittany had come back, she was rarely ever in the house before 11p.m. Right then, she was likely off somewhere with Rel again and Nadine was shooing Lauren out of the kitchen.

Nadine never cared if Lauren saw her drink, but today, she minded her hovering.

“Go get started on your homework, Lauren.” Nadine turned her broad backside to shield the cups but Lauren still saw her slide some extra whiskey in the cup meant for Mrs. Beverly.

“Uh-uh! I know that’s not all for Mrs. Bev!”

“Hush up and go do your work!” Nadine said through clenched teeth.

Nadine was on edge, had been ever since Brittany came home and kept leaving so Lauren didn’t push it any further. Nadine picked up the tray of things with her gnarled fingers and moved through the living room to begin the balancing act of opening the screen door with her blue slipper. The hole in the toe snagged on the door frame pulling the slipper off and Nadine
scowled. Mrs. Beverly, completely absorbed by the buy one get one brand name cereals, didn't notice. Lauren snorted out a laughed.

"Lauren, make yourself useful and come get this door," Nadine snapped.

Lauren walked over and slid it open easily and Nadine breezed through it without another word to her.

"You’re welcome," Lauren said, sliding the screen shut. She propped herself up on the edge of the couch where she could easily keep track of the conversation beyond the balcony door and put her long division homework in front of her. She pulled out a sheet of loose leaf and scribbled her name along the top right hand corner, chewed on the tip of the eraser and watched Nadine outside with Mrs. Beverly.

"Hi, how you?" Mrs. Beverly said to Nadine. She ran all her words together when she spoke as if even this she couldn't wait to get out. Her funny way of greeting people had always amused Lauren.

"Mrs. Bev," Lauren had asked her once before, "why you always saying 'hi' like that?" and Mrs. Beverly had told her that it was how folks greeted each other in Maryland. Having never lived outside of Sequoia Court, Lauren was always curious about the stories of how other folks got there. The Maryland way of greeting was the only piece of something Lauren recognized as being bought with Mrs. Beverly from whatever life she had before to Sequoia Court. Mrs. Beverly lived alone and from what Lauren could tell, she didn’t have any children. She talked so much about everyone else that she never seemed to have time to tell anything about herself. How she ended up in Sequoia Court was a mystery.
Nadine sat down next to her at the plastic patio table. It was once white but now it had yellowed with age from sitting outdoors. The patio set Nadine had gotten at Goodwill, something to remind her of the wrap around porch she’d left behind in Fredericksburg.

From behind the glass balcony door, Lauren watched Nadine brush some leaves and dirt out of her cushioned chair that didn't match the table before she sat down.

"Sure is warm out for October," Mrs. Beverly said.

Nadine grunted in agreement, smoothing out the folds of her shapeless house dress like a patient in a waiting room. Mrs. Beverly turned back to the circular and flipped through a few more pages with much interest. She was stalling. Nadine pursed her lips and picked stray pieces of lint from between flowers on her dress.

Lauren knew without it ever having been said that these visits were the best part of of Nadine's week. Nadine would dress up more carefully for Mrs. Beverly's visits than she did when going to the doctor or the grocery store. She would sweep the porch, straighten up the living room, even though she never invited Mrs. Beverly into it, making sure that she upheld a certain kind of appearance from behind the glass. Nadine cared what Mrs. Beverly thought of her. She didn’t want her business spread amongst the rest.

Mrs. Beverly was good people but she would tell things to almost anybody who would listen. Her silence was unnerving; Lauren had never heard her go this long without speaking. When Mrs. Beverly finished the circular she sighed and Lauren perked up, smashing her homework beneath her elbow as she strained to hear but instead of speaking, Mrs. Beverly took a sip of her tea and grimaced.

“Strong today, huh?”
Nadine snatched a look over her shoulder at Lauren and Lauren pushed her nose down close to her page and slowly wrote down a few numbers. “Well, it’s been a long week.”

“Who you tellin?”

There was another pause as Mrs. Beverly picked up a few crackers. Nadine always put out snacks for Mrs. Beverly's visits, and Mrs. Beverly always attempted politeness when eating them. Lauren could tell that she made an effort to chew and swallow slow but she usually ended up eating everything by herself anyway.

“You seen that boy’s face,” Mrs. Beverly said between chews, knowing that Nadine hadn't left the house all week.

“Boy?”

“Mmhmm, the one that made a mess of himself in front of the entire complex.”

Nadine stared off in the direction of the playground. "Still sore? Still swollen?"

"Still purple under the eyes. His mama got him good."

Nadine and Mrs. Beverly had been friends so long that they now spoke in a kind of shorthand. Lauren usually only caught pieces of their conversation. It took effort to glean meaning. They were talking about Monet.

"A damn shame," Mrs. Beverly said, and Lauren couldn’t tell by the way she said it who Mrs. Beverly thought the shame belonged to, Monet or his mama?

"How's Brittany holding up?" Mrs. Beverly asked, her fingers stirring around in the plate of crackers.

Nadine made a slurping noise with the tea that Lauren was sure Nadine would have scolded her for if she had done it herself.

"I'm sure you seen more of her than me," Nadine countered.
Mrs. Beverly said nothing, chewing on one cracker as she held one waiting to her lips.

"Nothing’s changed much. Still won't sit still."

Nadine was hesitant, Lauren could tell, to put their business out, to reveal what she knew before Mrs. Beverly had spoken about what she was aware of. The first rule of their gossip was to never speak ill of kin. Nadine swatted something away from her ear and Lauren fidgeted in her seat, trying to lean in closer without being observed as doing so.

"Seen her with Rel," Mrs. Beverly said, taking a sip from her mug. "Becoming good friends, I suppose."

"How's that?" Nadine said, and Lauren winced at the eagerness in her voice. Nadine raised her mug to her lips. "Whose boy is he?"

"Nuh uh," Mrs. Beverly said, "He don't live in the court. He from the trailer parks. Works here, if you get my drift."

Nadine scowled.

"As far as I can tell," Mrs. Beverly added, her hands skittering around in the plate with the crackers.

Nadine dropped her cup on the table with a clatter. She snatched the plate of crackers away from Mrs. Beverly to pull some store mailers off the table from underneath them. Nadine ripped open the mailer and began whipping through the pages. Each turn slapped the air.

"Not in my house," Nadine said. "I won't stand for it."

Growing up under Nadine’s thumb had made Lauren afraid of a lot of things. She never took the trash out after the sun set because she was worried about who she would come across there. She didn’t speak to her neighbors on the second floor because she was scared, without being given
reason, of the Rottweiler they kept. But Lauren’s greatest fear was Nadine leaving. Despite what she had promised, now that Brittany was home Lauren watched Nadine more carefully for signs that she might abandon them both for Petersburg.

Nadine hadn’t wanted to leave it in the first place but when she found out Brittany had had a baby she came down to Virginia to be with her. The reason why she threw Brittany out of the house in Petersburg, Lauren knew well. When she would throw fits of her own, Nadine would remind Lauren, as a way of warning her against similar behavior, what had happened.

"Lord knows," Nadine would begin, "I ain't the easiest person to live with. I have my faults like everyone else but I was good to that girl. Fifteen years under my roof. Fifteen years of meals and linens and your mama was the most ungrateful thing. Never heard a 'thank you' or a 'please' in fifteen years. Can you imagine? Wanting me to get excited about her school work and new shades of lip gloss when I ain't heard a 'thank you' for nothing I done in fifteen years?"

Nadine would pause then, staring at Lauren directly because this was something she wanted her to remember.

"I come home early one afternoon from running to the store, and here she is in the house when she should have been in school. Fifteen years old and I caught her in my house having relations with the Darcy boy. In my bed. Of all the places in that house, in my bed! Like she wanted me to know it..." Nadine said trailing off. She stared at the shuttered blinds closing off the balcony. "But that was Brittany. She was always trouble. Not anything like Scooter. That boy was so quiet he didn't even scream when the four-wheeler landed on top of him." She shook her head, as if to free herself from the thought of it. "I'm trying to raise you better than that Lauren. If you wanna follow in your mother's footsteps, I might as well turn back for Petersburg now."
Nadine talked about Petersburg all the time, stretching Lauren's imagination of the place to something grand. There was a wraparound porch with wicker chairs for Nadine and her late husband, Jacob. There was a yard opening out in front with a rolling hill of grass. Out back there was a coop for the chickens where Nadine got the fresh eggs, the ones whose taste she still couldn't get out of her mind to this day, and a tangle of trees of course with roots wildly arching out of the ground and snaking around surreptitiously beneath the leaves. Lauren asked Nadine many times to go—she didn't see why they couldn't at least visit the house that Nadine had spoken of for all these years but Nadine always spoke about it as if the area wouldn't suit Lauren. Nadine made it seem that there was something about Lauren intrinsically that made her not ready or quite right for Petersburg. Nadine was closed on the subject. If she went, she would go alone. It was a world reserved entirely for herself, and Lauren was certain that Nadine wanted to keep it that way.

The more Brittany acted up, the better chances were of Nadine sticking around as far as Lauren was concerned, but Lauren had rarely ever seen Nadine this anxious. Brittany seemed to have an entirely different way of getting under Nadine’s skin.

When the conversation out on the balcony lulled, Lauren put her homework to the side, deciding to go through her mother’s things again. It brought her comfort to be able to handle Brittany’s things, to know all the objects that she’d brought along with her. It wasn’t hard for Lauren to get her hands on Brittany’s stuff, the two-bedroom apartment affording little privacy. There was Nadine’s room and Lauren’s room. Never any extra space for a returning Brittany so Brittany slept on the couch, a pull out that she was always sleeping in too long on for Nadine's comfort. Brittany stayed in the living room but she kept her backpack, her single traveling bag of things, in Lauren's room. It was a dingy nylon blue thing with threads coming loose at the
Lauren had gone through the bag several times before. She did it every evening now, reaching into the pockets and moving her hands over each item so that they were committed to memory. Bus tokens, underwear, restaurant napkins, a depleted tube of deodorant. She laid them each out on the floor. They were ordinary unremarkable items but because they were Brittany’s they took on a hallowed significance.
The Complex is a novel that has been living in my head for over two years now. The idea for the novel first came to me as a response to Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye considering the following question in regards to her character Pecola: what happens to a black female child when she cannot be afforded the opportunity to break? From there, the three main characters in my project were born.

Moving the ideas onto paper proved to be quite a challenge throughout this process. This project works at unraveling a community mystery to answer the aforementioned question that I feel as though I am very much still searching for the answer to. This project does not have a linear shape and as I began writing, I realized that neither would my writing process. I wrote scenes as they came to me and focused on piecing them together for coherence last. This made it extremely challenging (sorry Amina!) for readers to follow the story line to be able to give me useful feedback. I spent a lot of time fighting my intuitive process with this project rather than writing. It was definitely difficult, but Evelina Galang went through her archives and was able to help me understand that the process for every novel is different. With Evelina's encouragement and Amina's deadlines, I slowly but surely began to stitch the moments in my narrative together into the larger project you see before you today.

Much of the narrative was inspired by pondering events witnessed during my childhood growing up in Alexandria, Virginia. I chose to write about three girls instead of one because I wanted to demonstrate the nuances of class and colorism that affect a child's social standing, upbringing, and their perception of themselves.

I foresee this novel being somewhere around 250-300 pages and I am still in the process of completing it. I would be lying if I said I wasn't happy to be done with this
project. Somewhere in the writing process, I feel as though I lost the focus of the project (even if it was always hazy at best), and the writing began to feel false. I need some space to decide what will happen next with this work. My next steps will be to finish writing it and then to step back to look at what is happening. I think this story was one that I needed to write to learn more about who I am as a writer but mainly, to get it out of my system. I'm not sure if this story is one that I will be pushing out into the world but I am eternally grateful to everyone who has had a hand in helping me through this process.
Annotated Bibliography

This has got to be my favorite collection of essays by Baldwin. Baldwin easily breaks down the psyche of white guilt, sensuality, and white imagination. This text examines the consequences of racial injustice for the individual and the body politic.

The lives of a group of disparate individuals intersect in this novel to weave a tale about desire, loss, and the inexplicable inner workings of the human heart.

I really enjoyed this collection of narrative post-modern poems. Berman’s poetic lens presents the world in a way that is surreal, yet accessible and remarkably precise. These poems are conversational in tone which makes Berman’s ruminations accessible easily teachable to undergraduates.

These stories reveal the lives of immigrant families haunted by lost loves. The most notable work in the collection was the novella “Hunger” in which two girls are pitted against one another in a struggle for their father’s affection as they grapple with mastering the violin. The collection deals with war, desire, family, and the immigrant struggle to attain the American dream.

A strange novel about societal morals and violence committed against women. Coetzee begins by introducing the reader to a professor seducing a student into having an affair. This violent act in alignment with our societal structure is then complicated when the protagonist leaves the city to live in the country with his daughter who is raped by a group of black men. In the countryside, the rules are completely different and the protagonist’s relationship with his daughter fissures when he is not able to understand this. I think it’s interesting what Coetzee has done in this novel to enable the reader to see the complex web of morals and values that we as humans create. What may be problematic, however, is the way that he has gone about doing so; are there societies in South Africa where the rape of a white woman by black men would go unpunished? This aspect of the novel felt contrived. It’s hard to believe that this plot point wasn’t created to elicit the emotions from the reader that Coetzee desired.

This novel is a series of vignettes that present the angst felt by a housewife in the 1930s. Mrs. Bridge struggles to find fulfilment in her easy, although admittedly empty, life. The short vignettes give the story a momentum that makes it a quick read, but often I found myself as bored as Mrs. Bridge with this book, as I waited for a climax that would never come. The tension and conflict does not build in the way that a traditional novel would. This novel seems to function more as a collage than anything else. Issues of class and race are commented on.

This collection of short stories was introduced to me in Jaswinder’s practicum ENG 209 course. I think having students read from this collection was great, as Capó Crucet is the
child of Cuban immigrants and much of the work explores an identifiable Miami. I did feel that at times the characters slipped into uncomfortable caricatures that did not satisfactorily investigate the mechanics of the world that creates them.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Claire of the Sea Light*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013. Print. Donette Francis introduced me to this novel in class during the discussion about intimacy. One of the most notable things about this novel was its use of radio to disrupt the dominant narrative concerning black female sexuality. The radio enables female characters in this narrative to disseminate their stories to the community without disruption and effectively create a charismatic persona. The act of creating the broadcast becomes performative as the host must anticipate the questions and responses of the audience when the piece finally airs.

de la Paz, Oliver. *Names Above Houses*. Carbondale. Southern Illinois University Press, 2001. Print. A wonderful collection of prose poems following Fidelito in his quest to learn how to fly. The collection is broken into three sections that appropriately chart his family’s perseverance in their quest to attain the American dream. I love how this collection examines a surrealist concept that metaphorically speaks to a larger quest for freedom.

Díaz, Junot. *This Is How You Lose Her*. New York: Riverhead, 2012. Print. My favorite work by Diaz as it explores love and relationships through the constraints of black (Afro Caribbean) masculinity. Diaz is unflinching as he lays bare the infinite longing and inevitable weakness of the human heart. The voice Yunior returns in this collection and dominates most of the stories.

Evans, Danielle. *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*. New York: Riverhead, 2010. Print. This is Danielle Evan’s first collection recommended to me by Patricia Engel, and my favorite story by far was “Virgins”. This story tells the tale of two girls who attempt to negotiate their sexuality in a world that views black bodies as always already sexual. Evans is a Northern Virginia native so it was interesting to see how she embodied this landscape in her work.

Fitten, Marc. *Valeria’s Last Stand: A Novel*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009. Print. I have mixed feelings about this novel. On the one hand, I liked that it explored a cast of middle-age characters and I was intrigued by the plot as it was one I had never seen before. On the other hand, I felt like there was a lot of narrative distance in this story, which made me uncomfortable. One of the reasons for this may have been because the story was being told like a folktale with all characters having job titles for names (ex. “the potter”). Another reason for this may have been because this American author was writing about subjects completely removed from him.

Foucault, Michel. "Panopticism." *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon, 1977. 195. Print. Foucault’s panopticon describes a machine that dissociates the see/being seen dyad by inducing the subject into a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. This ensures that surveillance is permanent in its effects even if it is discontinuous in its action as it renders the actual exercise of power unnecessary as the subject assumes responsibility for the constraints of power thus becoming the principle of his own subjection.

Gives a great definition of the term sexual citizenship. The sexual citizenship of black females illuminates the subtle ways in which sexual violence becomes normalized through rites of passage or dismissed as unnoteworthy, quotidian occurrence.

Gautier, Amina. *Now We Will Be Happy*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. Print. This collection of stories is about Afro-Puerto Ricans, U.S.-mainland-born Puerto Ricans, and displaced native Puerto Ricans who are living between spaces while attempting to navigate the unique culture that defines their identity. Crossing boundaries of comfort, culture, language, race, and tradition in unexpected ways, these characters struggle valiantly and doggedly to reconcile their fantasies of happiness with the realities of their existence.


Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men*. New York: Perennial Library, 1990. Print. Hurston’s collection of folk tales was the first of its kind as it committed oral stories often told in southern black communities to print. Hurston seamlessly weaves in and out of the folk tales told by different individuals giving the reader a narrative experience akin to eavesdropping on an ongoing communal conversation.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1990. Print. This novel is an emotionally satisfying multifaceted love story. Hurston explores romantic love, love of community, but ultimately, its Janie discovering the importance of love of the self that propels the novel forward. This novel is a classic and a great summer read.

Iromuanya, Julie. *Mr. and Mrs. Doctor: A Novel*. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 2015. Print. A novel about a marriage begun from an outrageous lie. A Nigerian couple living in Nebraska struggles to make a life together as they balance their many secrets and untruths. This book was often hilarious, but the depictions of African Americans was off putting and ultimately enough to make me not want to revisit it.

Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage*. New York: Atheneum, 1990. Print. This novel is a wild tale of adventure about a free black man working on a slave ship, which not only carries the cargo of enslaved Africans but also an African God. Mutiny soon breaks out on the ship as the captain loses control of a situation he does not grasp the gravity of. This book had a good balance between the interplay of the comedic and the serious. The depictions of sickness, mutiny, and other violence was often very gruesome.

This collection of short stories is unified by their meditation on life in the District of Columbia. I love how nuanced each character is because of Jones’ rich detail. Each story in this collection seems essential to painting an accurate depiction of life in this place and forming a cohesive narrative, which I often find is very rare in short story collections. This collection was Jones’ debut work, and this is also very inspiring.

In this novel, Larsen explores what it means to be “mixed” in the Western world. The narrative features intriguing autobiographical parallels with Larsen’s own life.

This book was startling/disturbing/strange. Set in South Africa, this novel examines the damaging effects of HIV on family and community. It is broken into two sections: the first in which the protagonist contracts HIV from his wife who was having an affair, and the second in which the protagonist knowingly infects hundreds of other people. The second half is titled “The Book of the Dead” and is written in the voice of the protagonist’s AIDS virus, which is demonic and haunting as itcatalogues all the deaths that it is able to secure as the protagonist spreads the virus. An interesting read that was difficult to unpack without some knowledge of the politics surrounding HIV in South Africa.

This novel explores one of the ideas ignited by the black power movement that black people should remove themselves from the rest of America and create their own society. Morrison turns the political on its head by having her characters enact the same violence that they were once fleeing from. This novel is riveting for its strangeness and magical realism.

In this book, Morrison takes up a critical examination of black presence in traditional, established literature to complicate our understanding of blackness informs the work of white writers. This book was the first of its kind to challenge the prevalent idea that African Americans have had no bearing impact on canonical American texts.

Another fabulous novel by Morrison. One of my favorite things about this story was the African American folk tale “Ibo Landing Myth” interwoven into her narrative. The myth states that captive Igbos flew from slavery to return to their African homeland. This novel is rich in its depictions of southern landscapes.

*Sula* tells the story of black woman misaligned with the community she belongs to because she refuses to adhere to its narrow definitions of womanhood. Morrison drops breadcrumbs for the reader in the two main character’s childhoods to reveal how each girl will be shaped in adulthood. The largest factors impacting their very different trajectories are their relationships with their mothers and the death of Chicken.

This novel was the first of its kind in its aim to explore a black community through the lens of a black female child. The story begins with the devastation of Pecola’s pregnancy and then moves backwards to unravel the events that led up to this. Morrison brings the reader multiple points of view through captivating stylistic innovations.
Gloria Naylor weaves together the stories of seven women living in Brewster Place, a bleak inner-city sanctuary, creating a powerful, moving portrait of the strengths, struggles, and hopes of black women in America. Her remarkable sense of community and history makes *The Women of Brewster Place* a contemporary classic—and a touching and unforgettable read.

A profoundly moving story of family, secrets, and longing. Set in the 1970s, a Chinese American family plagued by racial and gender inequality pits all their hopes and desires on their favorite middle child, Lydia. When Lydia’s body is found floating in the neighborhood lake, the family begins to fall apart. Each member isolates themselves in an attempt to piece together the events of her death alone.

This slave narrative reveals the gripping tale of Solomon Northup, a man born free in New York and later captured and sold into slavery. Because this story was narrated to a white abolitionist who committed it to print, it is interesting to see where the writer took liberty with the narrative.

This narrative circles a single tragic event exploring the many possibilities that could have led up to a well-known car crash. I love the way Oates approached this subject stylistically, and I think that this cyclical narrative was the only way that this story could have been told. The second half of the book begins to falter as new points of view are taken on and the mechanics of the emotional flux of dread and anticipation that the reader experiences begins to become transparent.

A collection about family ties in the south that examines weighty subjects such as aging and sibling rivalry. I love the humor that is threaded throughout this collection and I really enjoyed seeing older protagonists who refuse to let the passage of time make them victims.

This collection of stories and novellas is enthralling because of the way that Pancake landscapes emotion. My favorite stories were “Sugar’s Up” and “In Such Light” because of the delicate way that they handle the main character’s internal conflict and how this internal conflict manifests into exterior problems. This collection does an excellent job of examining the POV of groups of people that are often neglected in literature: the elderly, the disabled, and the impoverished.

This section introduces Orlando Patterson’s concept of social death which he defines as being marked by an original indelible defect which weights endlessly upon the slave’s destiny. Social death employs two contradictory principles: marginality and integration; the socially dead exist on the hem of society as an institutionalized outcast.

A communal community narrative surrounding the mysterious disappearance of a childhood friend. Rumors, divergent suspicions, and tantalizing what-ifs form create an unparalleled narrative experience akin to peering into a kaleidoscope. I felt that the second half of this novel began to lag, as outlandish caricatures stepped into the narrative and the communal voice began to splinter as the novel came to its inconclusive end.


After reading the short story in Russell’s collection *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* that inspired *Swamplandia!*, I decided to pick up this novel. The novel fulfills the promise of the short story introducing elements of magical realism in the beautiful landscape of the Florida Everglades. Where the narrative fell flat for me was when the voice of Ava’s big brother was brought in to describe what was happening on the mainland. The elaborate descriptions that made *Swamplandia!* so enticing, gave the mainland a falseness that imbalanced the narrative as it made the reader conscious of the mechanics of Russell’s storytelling.


This story is moving and brilliantly told on all accounts. The narrative takes the reader on a circuitous journey to understand how each member of the Sai family is affected by the loss of their father. Selasi really experiments with style and form in this novel, demonstrating her extraordinary talent. The writing is rhythmic and elegant to tell the story of enigmatic family.


This is an essential essay discussing the effect of the African diasporic plight on the black body. Spillers discusses how horrors of slavery created a hieroglyphics of the flesh whose disjunctures became hidden to cultural seeing by skin color.


This essay examines the concept of flesh and its transformative ability to evade the logics of gaze through touch. Touch has the potential to disrupt and decenter gaze as the only mode of knowing and understanding the self as the flesh serves as a platform for imagining aspects of the self in more concretely epidermal terms. Experiencing the self through epidermal knowing of others is a way in which reflexivity of thought is constructed.


An epistolary novel told primarily from the point of view of Celie, about her life as a child bride living in the south. One of the things I love most about this novel is how Celie’s diction becomes fuller and more nuanced over time as she gains experience and education. The narrative is written in African American Vernacular English that aids in establishing the strong voice of the main character.


Jesmyn Ward’s memoir, *Men We Reaped*, promises to resurrect the harrowing stories of five black men living in New Orleans and coastal Mississippi to elucidate the confluence of a history of racism, poverty, and deprivation of economic power on the black male experience in the 21st century US. But equally compelling is the story that resists telling about the making of black femininity in the US. In order to unearth this narrative, I returned to the abyss of the memoir’s black hole scenes whose specter Ward identifies as
following her for her entire life. The black hole becomes Ward’s monster, inciting an all-consuming sense of dread as she lays awake at night believing her feelings are a deserved misery. Her sense of abandonment by her father becomes locatable in the black hole, as his infidelity to her mother had recently resulted in his absence.

Taking place in the twelve days leading up to and just after Hurricane Katrina’s landfall, the story follows fifteen-year-old Esch, a girl living in a black, impoverished, and predominantly male community on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.