Final Portfolio

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From his bed, Alfonse could feel them coming. Starting in his bones, the pounding of hooves rattled his ribs, knocking like bare fists against wood. He heard the animals slow to a canter and fought to wake while the torches outside his home filled his bedroom with light. Three shot gun blasts fired in succession disrupted his resting family. The first boom announced their arrival. The second summoned the man of the house on outside. And the third – a warning shot.

Alfonse’s wife, Sabine, leapt out of the sheets, planted herself on the hardwood, and stared at her husband. A scarf, wrapped tightly around her head, was knotted in the middle. As her husband, he knew each time she stopped and grabbed her abdomen or placed her hand on her lower back, the pain, a tiny river stone within her, was being knocked back and forth between her organs. The ovary immediately rocketing it along to the kidney which pitched it to the lung so that no one part of her body had to hold the pain for too long or cope with it alone. Just before she had gone to bed, the pebble had been slung to her head where it burrowed between the eyes. Instead of just hurting something terrible in one place, the compression disseminated the pain making her swat away the fog to reach her thoughts. “Brother what they want? What we do?” Sabine said, loosening the tie with one hand.

She wasn’t the only one still hurting.

“Go to the children.” The cobbler rose, took time to pull on yesterday’s trousers and shirt, and slid his feet into hard bottomed slippers. His mère, Cleophine, met him in the hall, with his children who they knew to keep quiet. John Albert, the oldest boy, pressed his lips together and
kept while the youngest and softest hearted, Earl Robert, stifled hiccups. Alfonse, nodded towards the closet, before opening the front door to step outside where the men and their horses and their guns and their rope awaited him.

With light feet, Albert ran towards the hall closest just like he had practiced with his père the summer Albert turned ten.

“You getting to be a man now,” his père had said as he pushed the bullets down into the magazine. Alfonse’s hands had moved so quickly the bullets clack-clack-clacked up against each other as they slid down. He then handed the gun to his son who struggled to wrap his fingers around it.

Sabine reached out to snatch the child back, but his quick legs outpaced the length of her arm and her fingers couldn’t hold onto his sleep shirt. The eldest slid out a wooden panel in the wall and retrieved the concealed rifle just as he had practiced with his father.

“Somebody come, remember it’s in here.”

“Yes, père,” Albert had nodded.

“They ain’t come for us yet, but you know who I’m talkin’ about don’t you.”

“Yes, père,” he had repeated, arms shaking as he shouldered the rifle.

“No matter what happens to me when they come, don’t you leave your post.”

“My post?” Albert had then followed his father’s fingers with his eyes as the man pointed at the four walls of the main room. Alfonse then walked and bounced lightly on a creaky floorboard.
“This your house more than it is mine. Show me where them other one’s at.” And John Albert walked around the room tapping a half dozen or so boards with his foot, lifting the pressure after each plank let out a moan. “Don’t let them hear you in here. Don’t let them hear anyone else in here either.”

Sabine’s eyes glanced from her son who was clearly exercising a practiced drill to her belle-mère who pretended not to notice Albert’s actions by consoling little Robert. Albert returned to his post in the middle of the room, and signaled for his family to stay in the hallway. Sabine stepped forward and opened her mouth, but Cleo grabbed her wrist in a firm grip before she could speak out or move further. “Stay by me,” said the matriarch with a loosened, single braid draped over her shoulder and papier-mâché skin the color of eggshells.

Albert turned his head to look at his mother and shook it left to right. *No.* The child’s gesture warned. *Do not move or speak.*

And she listened.

The horses whinnied and some backed up at Alfonse’s apparition on the porch. No matter how hard he tried, the trembling in his pinky would not stop, so he pulled his hands behind his back, placing his right wrist in the palm of his left hand. Alfonse, the man, scanned his eyes across the row of haints, unable to make out any of the masked facial features. He noticed the sign of human life beneath them with the rise and fall of the sheet as each Klansman breathed in and out, in and out, in and out.

“You can’t speak, boy?”
“How can I help you?” The velvet tone of Alfonse’s voice leaving his throat betrayed the bobbing of his Adam’s apple like a buoy in the gulf.

“All the fellas were ‘round and we decided it was time to come by and pay you a visit.” A splash of water and a bird’s squawk was heard out in the distance as something landed its next meal.

Alfonse slowly removed the safety from his mouth and rolled the words like bullets into the chamber of his throat. “I’m sure I saw some of you in today. If not in my shop, then in passin’. Surely, you could’ve said, ‘Hi,’ then.” His pulse throbbed against his ear drums. Every noise inside his body fought its way out. He swallowed and took air in through his nose slowly. The only thing louder than his insides was the whir of bugs, insects, and amphibians chirping and croaking a symphony.

“What’s that now boy?” rocketed out of the Grand Giant in a ratta-tat-tat of stumbling Cajun vowels. The man hopped off his horse and seemed to trip over his words as his feet landed with a thud and his knees buckled forcing him to swing his ass in momentum in order to push his hips up and the rest of his body into an upright position. The men looked around and lumbered their way down to the ground were they squatted, shook, and grabbed themselves. The cuffs of their pants hit just above the knobs of their ankles. Years of being torn up and stitched, torn and stitched, torn and stitched, had left each hem hovering. Their shoes, and their socks, some darned, exposed beneath. Several times a week, the cobbler pretended not to notice the heels where patches had been added or newly seamed big toes where there was a flagrant change in the stitching pattern from wives too tired and too hopeless to take care with their sewing the way they used to. It seemed as though the times had ran nearly everybody down, except for the Grand Giant and Alfonse whose business tripled almost immediately after the crash.
The moon showed the creases in the shoes of a man Alfonse knew was Walt. Earlier that day, Walt stood in front of the feed store with Henri, rocking back and forth back and forth from his heels to the tips of his toes, bending his shoes in half as the two discussed this and that. Ever since the country had lost its footing, Alfonse had resoled Walt’s shoes and the shoes of Walt’s eldest son, Joseph, who imitated his father and rocked as well. Over time, their shoes would lose shape, eventually forming a lopsided V, and would need repair, not because the soles were run down, but in an effort to straighten the vamp of the shoe out.

Alfonse knew he was firing another bullet of his own across the yard “Walt. I haven’t seen you since before the blackberries were harvested. It must be about time to give those feet of yours a new resting place don’t you think?” Walt couldn’t afford new shoes and all of the other men standing beside their horses were also privy to this information because neither could they. The only men present that night that could afford new shoes, clothes, and comfortably settle their debts were the Grand Giant and Alfonse.

The price of cotton and cane had plummeted and stayed below the bottom since the market in New York fell out from beneath itself. They needed repairs instead of replacements and either way the dilemma shook, Alfonse was the only man in town to see for both. The times had changed the tide and it was the men going to Alfonse for credit when they had been raised expecting the opposite. They nodded courteously when retrieving their shoes, but never met Alfonse’s gaze. Not in his shop, at the square in town, nor on the road out. While the clothes of their boys grew ragged and thin from multiple washings, Albert and Robert always dressed smartly and arrived to mass each Sunday bathed and starched, laced up in buffed dress shoes. Jealousy curled into an acidic fury in every White man’s stomach whenever the LeDay’s walked down the center aisle and sat in their family pew. Bile raced up their throats and burned the roof
of their mouths, while Sabine, the best dressed in church, spat on her thumb to wipe nonexistent crumbs from her boys’ faces.

Experiencing a night terror at the hands of a dozen identical hooded faces meant not knowing the next day who your attacker was the night before. On the road into town or circling the promenade the day after each ride, questions and whispered guesses floated in and out of the wooden slats of homes and wrapped themselves around crops in the field. The latent paranoia hovered like a swarm of bees over an assailant hiding beneath the bayou’s water where it waited for an answer to emerge. Unlike precocious children who eventually came up for air, the identities of the Klansmen did not.

It was Alfonse they wanted to buzz with trepidation the next time he kneeled down in front of them and their offspring, slipping off and on their shoes, measuring their feet. They may have had to pay him, they may have had to see him to keep the soles of their feet clean, but at least Alfonse had to kneel to service them. During these times when people were reduced to trade and barter like pilgrims teetering on the precipice of cannibalism, the cobbler was more necessary than meat. For rice was a filler that stuck to the bowels and gravy, the lubricate, made it slide down easy. But exposed toes through talking shoes and wet arches in mud caked socks were enough to make a man run off and leave his family for dryer land and fewer burdens.

Walt did not move, but every other sheeted man, including the Grand Giant, pivoted their bodies around to look directly at Walt from wherever each of them stood in the semicircle. Walt grappled with his footing as the dirt began to slide out from beneath the soles of his stripped boots and everyone looked on as he began to wobble and teeter from where he stood.
Alfonse brought his hands out from behind his back and tucked them into his pockets before moving a few paces forward to the edge of the last porch step.

The Grand Giant reasserted their presence and the fact that they had the numbers and the weapons by taking the noose in his hand, threading his wrist through it, and then throwing it around in a circle through the air. The loop’s shadow casted wide, dark circular reflections across the bare dirt in the firelight.

The man with the twirling noose did not have creased shoes, tattered laces, or worn soles. He bought two fresh pairs every three months, one black, one brown.

“I’ll be open for business tomorrow,” the cobbler said, locking away his verbal ammunition by placing the safety back on his mouth. “Why don’t you and the boy come see me then.”

The Grand Giant was not done firing verbal shots and aimed the opening of the barrel that was his mouth directly at those sealed within the house. “Speakin’ of kin. How’s your wife them doin’? You know. With the baby gone ‘n all…”

Alfonse’s first thought was of Sabine and the stone between her eyes. He prayed she hadn’t heard those words. And that if she had, that the river rock wouldn’t fling from its nook and out of her mouth in the form of a cry because he could feel the layer of sadness he carried within him, like silt at the floor of the bayou’s bank, frenzy and swirl. Every so often, whenever he thought the grief had finally settled, a memory would kick up the sediment, uprooting his grief. It still rises unpredictably within him in a sudden bout of diarrhea, keeping him up in the outhouse’s dark all night, or as a coughing fit so rapturous, the horses take over, and lead him home out of daily habit.
This time, the mention of his girl, his only girl, whose name had not been spoken, since the day she died surged through him like electricity. Triggering every nerve in each of his limbs and momentarily seizing his brain with an indescribable madness by nearly driving him to saying to hell with it all and challenging each of the men to a fair fight one by one. He wanted to leap over each of the steps his sons helped him nail and paint and single out the biggest in size of the bunch. He wanted to clench both of his fists and raise them to just below each of his eyes. Placing them in position to parry their bullets with his left fist leading the right in quick, disorienting jabs, he wanted to find each Klansmen’s pressure point with one hard cross to the jaw and watch them fold into a heap of dirty laundry. But before his feet could leave the ground and his arms fly in flails, the sound of Robert’s sniffing just a few minutes ago and the solid square feeling of his son’s shoulders just turning the corner out of childhood kept his fingers weaved at the base of his back and his jaw clenched tight.

“Thomas,” Alfonse said, addressing the Grand Giant directly, “Your latest order has come in. I’ll be open same time as always…” The cobbler removed one hand from a pocket and shifted his feet so that one leg was broken in a little bit more than the other. He had made sure to project his voice when he said, “Thomas.” To feel a vibration in his sternum and the soft tuh-tuh-tuh of the “T” chime like a cymbal against the bones in his ear. He hoped he had found the round of the “o” and the hum of the “m” thereafter somewhere deep within his diaphragm ending the “uhs” at the end of the Grand Giant’s name with emphasis. He wanted his boys back inside to hear every syllable and let each one enter their minds through their ears so they could become implanted in the part of their brains containing the power to alter the family’s future through the historical memory he prayed he was creating in that moment. He wanted them to hear the Grand Giant’s name “Tom-muhs”, to repeat the Grand Giant’s name in order to paste its separate parts
together, conjuring a murky picture of the man’s face into clarity. He wanted them to place a face to the name in order to construct an identity for the man behind the hood so that they would never know the paranoia. The paranoia of never knowing one way or another which mass of cells forming in flesh and bone in the daylight took the fleeting, intangible forms of haints in the night.

He had broken one of Robert’s fears just last month. Sabine had complained the boy was too old to be in their bed and Robert insisted the creaking floorboards were ghosts, not the house settling. Alfonse had waited until night, until everyone was asleep to wake his son. “Come with me,” he had whispered. They had passed through the front room, crossed the porch, took each step and entered the woods. The little boy in long johns shivered and clung to the backs of his father’s legs as they stood in a clearing near the river.

“Why you shakin’, boy? This your playground in the daytime ain’t it? Don’t you let your brother to tend them chores while you spend all day hidden in these trees?”

“Yes, sir,” Robert could not lie, but kept his face pressed against his père’s hamstrings, his arms wrapped around the trunks that were his père’s legs, his small palms pressed into the man’s quads.

“Then what you scared for?”

“It’s dark.”

“Where’s your climbing tree?”

Robert didn’t raise his head but had raised and extended his arm towards an oak with sturdy branches spread out wide in all directions.
“And the river?”

“That’s easy père,” Robert quivered. “We can both hear that.”

“So then why you scared when the floors creak? You know where the boards are?”

“Because it’s dark.”

“Where’d you bury that tobacco tin? I got somethin’ for you.”

The boy looked up and Alfonse could see the whites of the child’s eyes in the moonlight.

“What is it?”

“You have to get the tin first…”

Robert glanced at his climbing tree, walked towards the river, and then bounded off into the shrubs, shaking some dried leaves to the ground.

“Didn’t look like you were scared to go in there,” Alfonse remarked once the boy had returned with the metal box in hand.

Robert shrugged.

Alfonse took the tin from the boy, popped the top off, reached in his pocket, and placed something concealed by his fist inside the boy’s treasure box. Placing the top back on, he spoke these words before handing it back, “You can’t fear in the dark what you know is there in the light.”

The boy kneeled before his father on the earth carpeted with dried leaves where he opened the box and found a pocket knife. Robert ran his fingers over the smooth handle in the moon’s glow before looking up at his father with a toothless grin.
“Just remember whatever’s in the dark can’t see you neither,” Alfonse turned back towards the house. Robert followed, but diverged from his father’s path upon entering to sleep in his own bed.

Behind him, Alfonse heard the whine of the front door being pushed open and turned around to see the light from a lamp bleeding out onto the porch. Sabine had heard the Grand Giant’s name from within the house. The name brought his face to memory in her eyes triggering the words she had overheard in the general store the other day in her ears. Alfonse could hear the click of guns to his back as the lamp emerged first held by his wife’s delicate hand leading up her arm to reveal her body as she moved to stand on the porch beside him. She was barefoot and holding a jar of something in the other hand. Inside the house, her muscles had taken over, quads pulling knees to bend and flex calves lifting feet just as lightly as Albert’s across the floor over the soft spots towards a cabinet in the kitchen.

“Get back here, girl,” Cleo had hissed after her. “We s’posed to be still.”

Sabine’s mind was blank as her hands thought for her, parting the spices in the cabinet until fingertips rested on something glass, covered in sticky reside. The jar had been pushed to the back of the cabinet hidden behind boxes of baking soda and bags of flower. Every time her eyes passed over the brown liquid inside or the bow her belle-mère had lovingly wrapped around the metal cap, the pain would resurface making her remember all over again. She palmed the brew and fled out the door with Cleo’s eyes burning holes into her back. “She’s gonna get us all killed,” the old woman had grumbled triggering the return of Robert’s sobs.
Alfonse shot Sabine a bug eyed stare and locked his jaw; a look she knew asked her, “What the hell are you doing?”

She met his gaze and slowly, carefully, mouthed the words, “I. Got. This.”

He followed her with his eyes, observing her body float off the steps in her white nightgown. The Grand Giant looked at her with the corner of his mouth tucked back into the pocket of his cheek.

“Your baby, she’s one and not crawlin’ yet, is that right?” She tried to still her quivering lip as the shotguns and rifles surrounding the two all pointed at her.

Thomas gazed back at her, but said nothing.

“I overheard your wife in the square the other day talkin’ about she’s so small because she can’t keep nothin’ down. Is that so?” His eyes kept drifting to a spot just above her own. She reached up and pulled a tail in the bow of her scarf sending hair tumbling down in waves about her face and shoulders.

The Grand Giant brought his eyes to meet hers.

“Well this here in this jar As… Asfidity,” she said choking on the name of the tea. “My belle-mère makes it for all the babies in the family. We give it to them when they born to settle they stomach. I’m sure this’ll do the trick.” Handing the jar over, she bowed her head slightly and turned her back. Alfonse could see the quake in her eyelids and the wobble in her ankles as she climbed back up the steps, but her back was rod straight and her beautiful swan-like neck just as graceful as ever. He did not dare look at her as she passed, waited for the sound of the door closing between them before addressing the men again.
“Let me know how that concoction work out. I’m sure my wife has more and if she don’t, my mother can make some. The next time ya’ll need me, ya’ll know where to find me.”

The Grand Giant grunted and then chuckled before turning his back on Alfonse and mounting his horse, cradling the jar in the crook of his bent arm like a swaddled infant.

“Come on, boys,” he said. “That’s enough fun for one night.”

“Huh?” Walt asked before looking around at the other men who all began to fiddle with their weapons and grumble lowly. “I didn’t get out of the bed in the middle of the night for no show.”

Fearing his wife’s stunt was too good to be true; Alfonse remained still on the porch, his mind logging every detail, his eyes spotting every movement.

“Yeah, me neither,” one man hooted before repositioning his gun.

The men began to rustle, but Thomas only slid forward on his horse and wrapped the reigns tighter around his free wrist.

“If you got places to be then we can finish the job.” A man standing next to Walt reached over to yank the nose off of their leaders’ lap. Thomas lost his balance jerking the horse out of the man’s reach, nearly dropping the jar in his arm.

“Goddammit, look what you almost made me do!” he roared and rode the horse out between Alfonse and the Klan and turned to address his men. “I said that’s enough fun for one fucking night!” He let loose of the reigns to throw the noose down to the floor where the force of it thudded and kicked up a ring of dust. The men did not move but stared on at their leader.
“Well, let’s get on then!” They stood stunned and he waited, watching them, until one by one they mounted their horses and fell in line trailing off behind each other

Alfonse stood there on his porch until the rhythmic sound of galloping horses grew fainter and fainter, until he could no longer see the torches’ lights down path. His hands steadied and his breaths deepened without force. He turned towards the door, grasped the knob in his hand and halted. With all the drilling, rehearsing, and practicing he did with his boys, the patriarch had never anticipated what he’d say to them on a night light this.

A pitch black room with white eyes hovering in the dark met him upon opening the door. He heard the strike of a match, the sizzle of wick catching fire, and saw the glow of light fill the room as Alfonse’s mère placed the chimney on the burner. In that moment, Alfonse felt like a child excited to see his mother after a rough day of school all over again. Her single, gray braid neatly replaited and wrapped around her head like a crown, framed the face that although had aged, still possessed the hazel eyes and smile of the woman who did all the cooking for months on end after grief had imprisoned his wife in bed.
Village Stories in Other Forms

Whenever I travel to a new place, whether it is in the U.S. or abroad, I set out to find the locals first and foremost. If one really wants to get to understand the culture of a city or country they are not from, if one really wants to know what it is like to be a citizen or resident of that place, then they need to find the people who are from that community. While participating in the Callaloo Workshop in Oxford, England, I was fairly unhappy the first few days. The city was beautiful and my AirBnB hosts, wonderful, but I had no grasp of what Oxford was about. Because I was staying in a college town during the summer, mainly tourists like myself filled the streets. Whenever I was lost and asked for directions, whomever I asked for help was just as confused as I was. It was like being stuck in a real-life Disneyland with no rides. One morning halfway through the workshop, I was up early and decided to ride my rented bike around the town before class. I turned down random streets without any expectations of going to any one place and stumbled upon the farmer’s market. I locked my bike and walked through the alleys while the vendors where still setting up and heard accents that were nothing like the front desk workers in the Oxford buildings. The fish monger talked dirty to the butcher while the vegetable vendor complained to another vendor about stealing his boxes. I had finally found where the people were and once that happened, my entire outlook of the city changed. This is a long anecdote to explain what Susan Muaddi Darraj does in her short story collection, A Curious
Land. She uses the locals and descendants of one place to unveil the story of the culture and history of a people living in a small Christian, Palestinian community.

This short story collection is linked through characters that are related, are neighbors, or are just people others have heard about through gossip. Regardless of whether or not every character in the story knows each other or not, they are inextricably linked to each other through a place called, Tel al-Hilou. Unlike the images we see of Palestine on the news which paints a picture of the longstanding strife between Muslims and Jews, consistently leaning towards favoring Israel due to U.S. International Relations, Tel al-Hilou is a Christian town. Darraj seeks to show a different side of Palestine through this place, through its people, and their simple desire just to live and live happily. The reader sees this in a mother’s sacrificial decision to send her daughter away to avoid a life of domestic violence in “The Journey Home,” and it is a universally relatable one. Who, in modern day society, does not desire happiness, if not for themselves, then most certainly for their children? In stories such as this, the reader forgets that they are reading about a highly controversial place called Palestine and focuses in on the people living there. Darraj knows it is the only way for anyone to truly understand where she is from.

While not all of the stories are directly linked since Darraj is mapping out a place, not necessarily a family, there are characters that fade in and out/or remain consistent adding an overall cohesiveness to the collection. Radwan is seen as a secondary character in “Abu Sufayan” where the reader knows he accidentally killed a child. This incident paralyzes this small, sleepy town and grief turns to rage that bleeds out of mouths and eyes in the form of revenge. Darraj strategically selects which characters will and will not be recycled, and in this instance, she understands that the story of what happens to a boy who is rescued and sent away to a foreign country is too important a story to leave out. With this in mind, she resurfaces this
plotline later on in the book when we see Radwan as an old man with a grown son who has taken on the name of his savior, Abu Sufayan. Darraj reprises this character in “The Fall” where he is yet again a minor character, but not a silent one. It is in this text, with Radwan as an older man with many years to reflect on the tragedy that we learn about how he has coped with the pain in another country with another life. He has never forgotten about the incident, never forgotten about his home, and has lived all his life believing his punishment is coming. This is a more poignant and complicated story than the more obvious one of retelling what happened that day in the tall grass. As readers, Darraj doesn’t reveal to us until later that the narrator mapping out this town, its history, and its migration patterns is Salma, the granddaughter of the original Abu Sufayan. A girl as wise as her predecessors who thought, “All those stories I’d heard from my grandparents… our village was changing… a village book would record this history for everyone to know” (179).

The line above is one of the few lines I highlighted while reading this text and the only one I’ve quoted because it is the line that reveals everything. If this novel were to have a physical shape, it’d be the shape of Tel al-Hilou in the form of a map and the houses the people lived in and or fled from throughout the years. This statement brought me back to my own grandparents’ house in Compton, C.A. and the feeling of entering a different land whenever I visited Louisiana. A story I am working on for *Marguerite* entitled “Night Terrors” came directly from a night of storytelling with my grandmother, only the cobbler was a Blacksmith and I was too young to remember most of the details. The one detail that did remain implanted in my brain is that my great-grandfather stood up to the Klan and won. These stories also largely take place in the same village, Lake Charles, L.A. These stories are also about the people born in and from this town and their descendants who are now scattered across California due to the Great Migration.
Growing up, I thought there were millions of Creoles because many had settled in South Los Angeles and it is not uncommon to encounter a Black person born in LA with a French last name who mispronounces certain words the same way I do. I and these people share village stories.

When I initially began to brew the idea of *Marguerite*, I’d figured I’d tell the story through the family struggling with the grief and loss of her death. However, having grown up in a small place myself and remembering how a kidnapping had crippled my own community, I know that one family’s tragedy is not isolated to themselves, it impacts the entire village for centuries to come, at home and abroad. With this in mind, the short story collection form of *Marguerite* would also be a collection of village stories focusing on Lake Charles, L.A., but also drifting out to Los Angeles where many Creoles settled and even to San Francisco where I had a great aunt who hated the heat and kept on driving north until she found a place cool enough. Upon her death, her family sold her Victorian for nearly a million dollars, and her drug addict son squandered all of it – a village story telling what one risks in branching out of their small town in search of more. I struggled with creating a trajectory and order for the short stories when I was thinking of only focusing on the family. At what point is the focus so small that the narration feels more like wheels spinning than actual movement in any one direction? However, if I take the same approach as Darraj, and tell the story of a village, a time, and the incident that generations before and after would think back to and feel as if it were their own tragedy, then I would be telling a larger story about community and connection, revealing the rules of that place, most importantly, the people who lived and are from there.

I think back to the image I sketched of the shattered glass splintering out from one, central point of impact. Marguerite’s death is that impact, similar to how the death of a great uncle I’ve never met, named James, haunted my grandfather 85 years up to his death at 89 and
wrapped itself around the identity of his namesake, my Uncle James, who is the only boy in that
generation of the family whose name does not start with the letter “R”. When I asked my mother
why, she whispered the story quickly and moved on because that is what people do when
tragedies strike. They push them down, but don’t forget them, bury them deep but carry them
always – *Marguerite* as a short story collection will be the story of my village.
Annotated Bibliography

**Southern Fiction**

While the majority of my short story collection is set in Southern California, the LeDay family are still southern people at heart. I read a variety of fiction set in the south written by southern writers in varying locations. Comparing similarities in conflict across disparate locations in varying time periods enabled me to identify centralized struggles and questions plaguing people who are born into and identify strongly with southern identity. With Ward and Laymon, the slow drip of nothing to do compounded by the urgency or everyday situations in the lives of characters not ready to face them gave me the premise for “Flesh and Bone” in which Teddy LeDay, the narrator, spends the Fourth of July trying to break the news of her unwed pregnancy to her family. While nothing is happening. Everything is happening.

Along with the southern stillness, movement out of necessity still imposes itself on many of the protagonists in southern literature. An attachment to home and family anchor these characters while social unrest and the promise of opportunity call them elsewhere. In both the cases of *Leaving Atlanta* by Tayari Jones and *Another Brooklyn* by Jacqueline Ward, these child narrators find themselves ripped from the south due to things out of their control. Whether it be a string of child murders or the deconstruction of a family unit. I placed the predicament of being forced to leave due to outside circumstances on the women in *Souls to Keep*, all whom leave at varying times to follow their husbands, finding themselves in varying stages of Californian discontent as a result.


**Family Dynamics**

*Souls to Keep* is a collection of linked short stories following a family’s journey through shifting locations, time periods, and cultural adaptations. Each story features a different family member as the protagonist with their internal and external conflicts uniquely tailored to the family’s dynamic and their role in the family whether it be gender or generationally based. Family dynamics are very complex in the sense that people who quite possibly wouldn’t be friends if they weren’t related and bonded for life and loved by one another unconditionally because of it. The often contradictory intricacies of love between relatives is underscored in Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*, where the protagonists fights through trauma and a deeply religious mother to live her life as a lesbian in Africa. While her mother is often the villain in this
book, forcing her child to pray and punishing her for who she loves, at the end of the day, the mother loves her daughter and does not turn her back on her. In my work, no matter how hard family fights or how shameful a member behaves, no one is going anywhere and if one of them needs their rent paid, somehow some way somebody will scrape the money together.

*We Were Animals* also shows the unbreakable bond of family through three brothers who play together, get in trouble together, and become the adults of the family when their parents aren’t together. As the middle child of five daughters, I greatly value and am enamored with the idea of being born into a web of people who will catch you when you fall whether you like it or not. These themes of sibling relationships are explored in nearly every story in the collection, however, “Nobody’s Jr.” in which an orphaned little boy named, Jr., fights to be accepted into the LeDay family by taking a whoopin’ with the LeDay boys reflects the innate human desire and necessity for lifelong, unconditional connection to others.


**Linked Short Stories**

In my opinion, a linked short story collection is the best of both worlds, straddling the border between short stories in a novel. In a linked collection, a writer can start completely over again with each story – new plots, new conflicts, new settings, new time periods. However, a writer doesn’t have to throw everything that came before that story away. All of the history beginning with slavery and the formation of Louisiana Creoles as a people and the adoption of Miracle’s grandfather, Jr., into the LeDay family alongside his decision to move with his older brother John Albert to Los Angeles brings Miracle to 1970’s Compton. Miracle is a first-generation Californian who eats at burger stands and crushes on boys in shiny cars, but she is also a soft-spoken southern girl, and a White passing, Black woman, who like her ancestors, must find her niche and fight for it in South Los Angeles in order to survive. Junot Díaz’s collection’s protagonist, Yunior, also retraces his family history in order to figure out why he’s a sucio. While separate, the stories are strategically organized introducing us to a philandering young man, backtracking to show why he is the way he is by the middle, only for him to hit rock bottom at the end when his questionable bedroom practices leave him heartbroken.

*A Curious Land* was the foundational inspiration for my collection. Susan Muaddi Darraj calls this collection a novel in stories. It is precisely the overarching storyline linking all these stories together across generations and family’s which intrigued me the most. I knew the family of her book inside and out by the end of it. I knew where they came from, how they got to where they are now, and also why they were the way they were. From a structural point of view, I was
impressed with the way Darraj would plant a seed in one story and then provide an answer to that seed in another story by the end. For instance, Salma is a barren, unmarried Auntie often dismissed and overlooked by the community because of it. However, when her story finally appears towards the end of the text, we learn she is so much more. She is a woman who has known a love so real and full, she doesn’t need to achieve meaningless cultural markers in order to prove her rightful place in womanhood. I attempted the same in my thesis across multiple stories and characters, however, placed a strong focus on this with Earl Robert, the youngest LeDay brother. In “Flesh and Bone”, he is uncharacteristically attitudinal, however, we will come to learn through his wife, Faye’s story in “Sundown Syndrome”, the attitude in Flesh and Bone were the beginning, undiagnosed stages of dementia.


**Interpersonal Journey’s**

Plot may be one of the most important features of fiction because it moves the story along, limiting the chances for the reader to get bored. However, plot also moves the protagonist along, forcing him/her/them to become entangled in circumstances they would never set foot in without the writer’s hand strategically making life difficult for them. These obstacles push protagonists out of their comfort zones forcing them to grow as people, discovering aspects of themselves they are either too afraid to face or that were buried so deep within, the character didn’t even know these capabilities, wants, or needs existed. Mayumi, the protagonist in Jennifer Tseng’s novel lived a quiet and peaceful life on a New England island as a librarian. Her perception of herself is permanently altered when she begins an illicit affair with an underaged man. This push from the writer forward into taboo territory allows Mayumi to get real with herself. I used Mayumi’s journey as inspiration for Faye, Earl Robert’s wife, to nearly throw everything away all to feel like a woman again. Overwhelmed and burnt out caring for her husband suffering from dementia, she strongly considers and comes dangerously close to having an affair with her priest. One that would’ve ruined not only the priest’s life, but most importantly her relationship with God which is the only thing keeping her together.

Instead of following Odysseus, the hero, Atwood’s novel focuses on his wife Penelope and the trials she had to endure and overcome while he was away. Split between her storyline and interjections from the chorus, Atwood tells a side of myth many fail to take into consideration. This approach encouraged me to look at the stories I wrote for my thesis and ask myself, “Who is silenced? How can I give them a voice?” And then, I did, giving sound to Faye’s sister, Ines, and John Albert’s wife in the short story, “Ines.” After being seen in an earlier short story as a take no mess woman, the weaknesses and doubt swirling within Ines come to the surface in her story which is set at her husband’s repast. With the love of her life gone, she expects to be destroyed with sadness, but instead feels a strange peace, saddling her with conflicted feelings of guilt and freedom at finally being able to live life along for the first time in her life – at last.


Dennis-Benn, Nicole Y. *Here Comes the Sun*. Liverlight. 2016.


Fitten, Marc. *Valeria’s Last Stand*. Bloomsbury USA. 2009.


**Novella Structure**

Too long to be considered a short story and too short to be considered a novel, Novella’s are often overlooked as the unwanted stepchild of literature. In my opinion, Novella’s hold the best of both worlds within its form: a centralizing conflict occurs rocketing the narrator into chaos nearly immediately like a short story while the complexities of that conflict and its resolution requires the lengthier plot of a novel. If a short story is a cake pop and the novel is an entire cake, then the novella is the perfect slice. *Ruins* by Achy Obejas, set during the Special Period, uses a seemingly inconsequential event as the catalyst for the novel’s plot. The main character finds a magnificent piece of glass in the rubble of a fallen building and quickly discovers he can make a living off the glass he finds. This launches him into a journey calling his morals into question, his loyalty to the floundering revolution, as well as his own ethnic identity.

The idea of a small event being the central catalyst of the plot inspired my protagonist, Tyrell, in what will become a novella, “Like Hell”. In “Like Hell”, Tyrell has come to New Orleans for the first time with his friends. While his friends think they are there to party, Tyrell is actually there to find a place to spread his aunt, Ines’ ashes, and along the way will discover that his mother, Miracle, who abandoned him as a preteen has been living there in one of his aunt’s properties the whole time. Through his journey, he will come to realize he has outgrown his friends he thought would always be brothers and will struggle to fall in love with the perfect woman for him because of his unresolved relationship with his mother. Like the narrator in Jenny Offill’s, *Department of Speculation*, he will come to realize he is not the person he thought he was and the life he had was an alternate reality mired in secrecy.

Racial Identity

One of my biggest goals with the short story collection is to challenge the long-held beliefs of African Americans and or Black people in general as a monolithic culture. Indeed, within the United States there are different types of Black with distinct cultures contain variations in speaking, mannerisms, music, dress, and most importantly food. The racialization of Black people and racist viewpoints are the main culprits of the monolith Black myth, however, as time progresses and more Black voices are heard, our divisions in cultural and commonalities birthing from Africa, suffusing through the institution of slavery, and grounded in the constant recreation of the ways in which to discriminate. My stories are identifiably Black, and specifically discuss the type of Black originating in Louisiana. For these reasons, they discuss both worlds and the line between most of us toe to survive. Blackass by A. Igoni Barrett, Furo Wariboko struggles to find a job in modern day Lagos as a Black man, and then he wakes up White with one catch, his rear is still Black. Being White sends Furo into an identity crisis where he runs from home believing he can become a whole new, happier person only to realize deep down inside, he will always be his same old self.

The themes of this text surrounding the connections between home and identity directly correlate with the push and pull my characters experience between California and their native Louisiana. Researching the line of demarcation in other time periods is equally important and Kindred does this speculatively, rocketing the main character back and forth between two disparate centuries forcing her to change her behavior and how she navigates her surroundings depending on which one she wakes in. Octavia Butler’s most successful novel juxtaposes two drastically different time periods against each other – the days of slavery and the 1970’s. Dana, a modern Black woman living in Los Angeles with her White husband, is suddenly and unexpectedly called back to the home of her family’s slave owners and ancestors to save the family line. Being Creole also entails digging through and tracing back histories to uncover troubling ancestors and beliefs. Examining the character development of Dana through conflict enabled me to strategically use the decision-making as a tool to develop my own characters.
Migrant Stories

Based upon the stories I heard from my grandparents and great aunts and uncles growing up, transitioning from Louisiana to Southern California sounded like the equivalent of changing countries. They had to assimilate in order to survive and thrive. My grandmother’s maiden name is Simien, yet I have cousins named Simon. This is because half of her family decided to change their last name in order to sound more American once they arrived in the Golden State. As a Miami resident, I’ve noticed many Cuban immigrants and Cuban Americans have done a similar thing, their legs straightening out into splits as they try to keep a foot in each land. Continuing her exploration of Miami, Crucet’s protagonist Lizet follows the yellow brick road out of Hialeah to an Ivy League level school in New York where the foreign environment quickly changes how she identifies and expresses her life. Her return home is met with questions and strange stares. Lizet’s characterization and storyline mirrors, Teddy, a character in “Flesh and Bone” who dares to leave home and make something of herself only to return home a stranger and a failure.

Sometimes the divide is big and clear, a river separating two lands like in the novel, The Farming of Bones. Danticat explores the divide between two countries and cultures occupying the same island, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. A Haitian woman named, Amabelle, navigates the tension between these two countries and the ensuing massacre threatening her life when she finds herself on the wrong side of the border in Dominican Republic territory. Examining how Danticat delineated the differences and similarities between these two cultures in locations helped me navigate how to approach the exact same challenge with my thesis concept. Only the divide between lands, cultures, and people is not always so clear. Oftentimes in America, the demarcation is so hazy people aren’t always sure what they dislike about the other or why, they just know that they should and so they do. Each of my characters in one way or another, imperfect as they are, participate in this unnecessary act of exclusion. The elders often the excluders even though they are the ones who’ve lived through Jim Crow. The church ladies in “Ines”, judging Tyrell for how he chooses to respect the dead. And while she hasn’t been judged yet, Teddy knowing she is living up to her reputation as the disappointment by showing up on her family’s doorstep, single and pregnant.


