

### In Between

I was born and raised in New York City for and I consider it an honor to be constantly surrounded by various cultures and ideas. I believe that the city teaches me something different everyday even if I've lived here all my life. I grew up speaking both Chinese and English, but took a few French courses, but unfortunately forgot most of it. Therefore, I found great appreciation for reading Ta Nehisi Coates's experience learning French in *Between the World and Me* as I have been in a similar position where I didn't think French was helpful at first, but after learning it, my life has changed as French is widely spoken across the world. Therefore, the French culture has inspired me so much through its effortless fashion, sophisticated dishes, and Romantic Literature.

I journal outside of writing papers for classes which allows me to free write and express my inner thoughts. My interests outside of writing include learning Chinese traditional dishes from my mother, reading, writing poetry, and exploring different parts of the city through ethnic restaurants. Recently, I've learned how to cook, "Tang Yuan" which is a traditional sticky rice flour Chinese soup cooked during the lunar new year. The process is tedious as it requires rolling dough into rice balls, steaming it, cutting vegetables, and stirring it intermittently over two hours. It is important to learn how to make this dish as it is ceremonial for my family because the glutinous sticky soup means a full stomach to satisfy the rest of the year.

*In Between*

You are in the in between

As *they* call it.

Not fully Chinese nor fully Black

But a mixed result.

And as you grow you will learn how to use chopsticks and speak Chinese

You will also learn the struggle of your paternal great-grandmother, a lovechild of a white slave owner and a Black woman.

And you will wonder why that woman was staring with a disgusted look on her face in Red

Lobster

and even at Tony's dim sum parlor.

But don't ever question your place in society because of you skin color.

Don't ever think that you're an outcast just because you have curly hair or dark yellow skin.

And don't ever question whether you're "too Black" to be Chinese or "too Chinese" to be Black.

Because you're both.

They'll tell you, little girl, to keep your mouth closed or you seem too eager, too loud.

They'll tell you, little boy, to play *only* with trucks and never with barbies or else, that'll get people thinking.

They'll tell you, little girl, to wait till marriage, to give yourself away or else you're "impure."

They'll tell you, little boy, to get as many names on the roster so you can be "the man."

They'll tell you both that you're not Black enough or chinese enough or even American enough.

They'll tell you all of this, but you don't have to listen.

This is a letter to my niece and nephew who are part Chinese and African-American living in Maryland. Both readings heavily inspired me because as I felt a personal connection with the micro-level situations that both authors faced. I faced a similar encounter as Baldwin's with the racist waiter who did not serve him at the airport when I went out to dinner in Charleston and the waiter questioned us on why my brother-in-law married an Asian woman. I remember feeling taken back and angry because there were kids present and he was asking an offensive and rhetorical question. My brother-in-law gave him a shrug and \$0 with a smiley face on the receipt. I don't believe that one incident from a white guy is indicative that all white people are racist, but there is a possibility that there will be cases similar to this one that can be said by anyone of any race.

Although, my niece and nephew are toddlers and haven't been to school yet, I want them to know that there is a possibility that they will be questioned about their race and family, but I never want them to feel ostracized about the way they look from either Chinese, Black, or even White communities. The poem also highlights the issue of sexuality and gender norms such as barbie dolls are for girls and toy trucks are for boys. There is a social stigma attached to kids toys. Since I'm also concerned about how women are taught at a young age to cross their legs, not speak unless told to, and to not take up space, I didn't want my niece to be taught that women

are not capable of such things as men. I also wanted to tell my nephew that it is ok to play with barbie dolls and that isn't definitive of his gender.

I love Instagram poetry and although that sounds very modern and social-media related, I find that it has allowed me to follow a community of artistic poets and implement similar styles and inspirations into my own writing. I didn't find Instagram poetry through Instagram. Instead, I stumbled upon a book at a local Barnes and Nobles by the name of *'Milk and Honey'* by Rupi Kaur. It's a collection of poems separated into three chapters, *"Loving, Breaking, and Healing."* Just seeing that in the table of contents made me feel like this book was going to carry me sequentially while being able to relate to the emotions that are tied with each section. For example, when I was feeling sad or conflicted, I'd flip to the *Breaking* section because I felt most connected to a specific poem about self love. One line in particular that hit home was, "Loneliness is a sign that you are in desperate need of yourself" (Kaur, 2018). This spoke volumes to me since I have never picked up a collection of poems that were sectioned the way Kaur did it and also writing short yet impactful poems.

After reading *Milk and Honey*, shortly enough I was on the lookout of poems similar to Kaur's structure. I came across beautiful books and poets since such as R.H Sin, Samantha Holmes, Caroline Kaufman, Alicia Cook, among many others. I decided to write a poem much like Kaur's poem, *'Living a Balanced Life'* where she talks about the challenges of all-or-nothing thinking. Similarly to hers, I followed the syntax and structure by comparing two opposites such as saying, "I cry in tears of joy or in deep melancholy." Having done this was fun for me and actually made me feel that much more connected because I applied Kaur's poetic style to my own. I also followed the same punctuational style as Kaur by not capitalizing my "I's" in order to

feel less formal to read for me and hopefully the reader. So here is one of the poems that I decided to imitate after reading Kaur's poem. I was so inspired by Kaur's style that I wrote a poem on race, identity, and sexuality called *Black and White* and *In Between* which followed the theme of speaking to my biracial nephew and niece.

*Black and White*

i don't know why the simplest things are the hardest to let go.  
 maybe it's because i don't want to.  
 i feel everything or nothing all.  
 i eat too much or too little.  
 i cry in tears of joy or in deep melancholy.  
 i stride in confidence or i wallow in my thoughts when alone.  
 i feel memories creep up at midnight, but i am reminded of the outcome.  
 i want to feel again, but then i realize how much of a risk that is.  
 i want to forget most things, but here i am still remembering to forget.

Virginity is a complex concept because it is opened to different interpretations on what determines if someone is a virgin or not. According to Planned Parenthood, "A virgin is someone who's never had sex. But people define "sex" and "losing virginity" in many different ways." In other words, losing one's virginity is subjective as one may believe it is when two people engage in intercourse while others believe that oral sex or anal penetration may constitute as losing one's virginity or "purity." The State Press's, *It's Time to Rethink the Social Construction of "Virginity"* argues, "Virginity is treated as a commodity that can be lost. It is conceptual and a social construction." In other words, it's built on the belief that it defines a woman's worth. In

connection to *The Patience Stone*, we see that the girl declares to men that blood is linked to pride with men that is if they killed their opponents in wars and if they have sex with virgins almost as if it's a conquest. I stumbled upon this article after and was intrigued with how blood and virginity were depicted through women then in *The Patience Stone*.

The concept of virginity is tethered to religious beliefs such as in Christianity and Catholicism, it is considered premarital sex as unholy and a sin and specifically towards women since Christians cherish Virgin Mary. In Islam, Atiq Rahimi, author of *The Patience Stone* depicts the Islamic view on virginity through the importance of blood which then leads us to the tradition where a newlywed wife must stain her white dress with her blood on their wedding night. The dress is then casted out to the public eye as a form of a solidified marriage since the woman bled from intercourse.

*The Patience Stone* is set in Afghanistan during war which causes a man to suffer a bullet injury and is accompanied by a woman who offers her tenderness and compassion despite not doing these things in the past ten years. *The Patience Stone* highlights the issue of how a virgin's blood is idolized yet blood from menstruation is seen as disgusting. Rahimi writes, "I have never understood why for you men, pride is so much linked to blood." (43). As the female protagonist's husband remains in a coma, his wife expresses her disdain on how men link blood to being powerful. When she was a virgin, her blood was considered a victory for the husband because he is "taking" something sacred from her. This is a difference type of "pride" unlike conquering wars, as men conquering their virgin wives was a rite of passage and subscribes to the Islamic belief on premarital sex. However, in contrast to the positive association to a virgin's blood, menstrual blood was grotesque to men. The wife gets her revenge by wiping the blood on her

husband's beard and declaring, "You were born of this blood. It is cleaner than the blood of your own body." (44). In this situation, the roles are reversed in which the girl holds power over her husband who cannot interject which reminds her of all the times he's put her down and made her feel voiceless. She takes pleasure in that she has power over him in contrast to the time he raped her when she was asleep. "You were born of this blood" indicates he was conceived from a female's womb, and now he lays injured with a bullet in his neck, his blood will never be regarded as more important than a woman as it is females who give life.

In terms of style, Rahimi uses metaphor to describe the horror of a sick patient, but also to contrast it with the beauty and tenderness his significant other provides. On the outside, there is a traumatic warzone occurring, but inside is intimate and loving which contrasts the heavy outside world and the lightness of being. In Italo Calvino's, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* he retells the legend of Charlemagne's love for a young maiden that after her death, he swears by her ring, that was hidden under her tongue, and becomes a necrophilic by accompanying her. In Charlemagne's story, the driving force of actions for all characters in the story is the ring since people were concerned with his sovereign that the archbishop, Turpin, casted the ring into Lake Constance. Thus, Charlemagne devoted his life to the lake. Calvino argues "The moment the object appears in a narrative, it is charged with a special force and becomes like the pole of a magnetic field" (23). And when I first saw the title *The Patience Stone* I had a feeling that the story was going to revolve around an object similarly to Charlemagne's story. The stone itself is a myth about a stone that's called Syngue Sabour that people turn to during times of peril and search for hope and good fortune. The stone seems to be the driving force in the story as it

symbolizes hope and relief for women who are placed in a traumatic war zone where they must look after their husbands.

Another literary trope would be symbolism as her comatose lover acts as the stone, inanimate and absorbent to her desires, secrets, and troubles. Due to the Taliban rule that overtook Afghanistan, women were considered less than men which meant denial to education, career opportunities, healthcare, or even basic human rights. Their voice in society was non-existent, but in Rahimi's story, he captures their faces through a female heroine who takes care of her lover, but expresses everything she felt because he could not argue since he was in a comatose state.

Entering Early 20th century Egypt, Nawal Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Female Doctor* discusses Saadawi's struggles growing up as an oppressed Afghan woman under the dictator, Anwar Sadat. After reading *Memoirs of a Female Doctor* and watching Professor Keefer's inspiring and thought-provoking interview with Nawal El Saadawi, I found that this reading resonated with me in comparison to the other readings because I feel strongly about women's rights and education. What was compelling about the story was that she rejected the idea that women weren't allowed access to education or the freedom of expression and confronts the issues of class and gender in Egypt. She rebels against the gender norm that her mother tried to instill in her by writing, "My brother played, jumped around and turned somersaults, whereas if I ever sat down and allowed my skirt to ride as much as a centimetre up my thighs, my mother would pierce me with a glance like an animal immobilizing its prey and I would cover up those shameful parts of my body."(53). As early as the age of nine, Saadawi felt that she lacked freedom and privileges of her brother because she was born a female. And if she were to do the



same activities as her brother, her mother would shame her because she would look unwholesome and not feminine.

The book is written in first person and inspired by Nawal's experiences in a small village, Kafra Tahla. During the time, what it meant to be a woman was being a wife and raising children, but Saadawi had different plans. Saadawi wanted to prove to others that she was capable of achieving the success and admiration as her brother, if not more. She writes, "I was going to show my mother that I was more intelligent than my brother, than the man she wanted me to wear the cream dress for, than any man." Saadawi competes with her brother as it's possible that they praise males more than females in not only family dynamics, but in society. It seems that a woman's achievements can never equal or surpass a man's. And the only expectation of her is to wear nice dresses to please men who try to court her. She wants to fight against this expectation and prove that she can offer more than looks and that her intellect is just as promising, if not more, than her brother or any man that is seen above her.

Saadawi rebels against her mother's rules by wearing the cream dress her mother asks her to wear which then her mother tells her to "smooth your eyebrows then." She takes any chance to go against what her mother says which could be the reason of their shaky relationships. And as she got older, her perseverance prevailed as she felt all women deserve access to education and jobs. Saadawi did go to prison due to her beliefs and it reminded me of a lot of other human activists such as, Nelson Mandela who also spent most of his life incarcerated who fought

against the Apartheid. Nonetheless, Nawal expressed the importance of how integrated knowledge was true knowledge in an interview with Dr. Keefer. She studied not just medicine, but religion, politics, history, and economics to be a good doctor. When Nawal made it one of her life goals to become a doctor, she wasn't only to saving peoples' lives, but show that other women can meet the same success as her despite the challenges of not being "good enough" to male counterparts. She paved a way for others especially in the of political and female restrictions during mid-20th century Egypt.

Clitorectomy is a process in which a woman's clitoris is surgically removed for abstinence and religious reasons. This process is also known as "genital mutilation" but due to the negative connotation, this practice is commonly referred to female circumcision adjacent to male circumcision. According to *History of Circumcision*, "it is a ritual or customary practice among tribal societies (mostly in Africa) and some Islamic communities. Secondly it is a medical intervention, justified by Victorian (and, in the USA, some twentieth century) doctors in exactly the same way as they rationalised circumcision of boys: to deter masturbation, to treat obscure nervous disorders such as hysteria, neurasthenia and epilepsy, and thereby to promote health." That is to say, there were numerous medical and religious reasons as to why clitorectomy was practiced in majority of Muslim and African countries. However human activist, Nawal Saadawi, writes about female circumcision having a midwife remove her clitoris using a razor blade at the age of seven. Saadawi says in the *Independent*, "I lay in a pool of blood. After a few days, the bleeding stopped, and the daya [midwife] peered between my thighs and said, 'All is well. The wound has healed, thanks be to God.' But the pain was there, like an abscess in my flesh."

(Roberts 2011). Physically the pain has been healed, yet when Saadawi performed the procedure, it had physically and psychologically impacted her health. Unfortunately, this was the norm for women in Saadawi's time and even today where female circumcision remains in some parts of Africa and Singapore. This procedure not only affected Saadawi's life but also her practice in medicine when she became a doctor. She learned more about the psychological trauma on clitorrectomy since the removal of the clitoris essentially was the removal of sexual pleasure. Other negative effects include severe pain, urinary problems, depression, genital scarring, and increase birth-risk complications.

Also speaking on female empowerment, *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou and *For Women who are Too "Difficult" to Love* by Warsan Shire are written by African-American female poets that compares and contrasts the difference regarding themes of female empowerment, self-love, and race. Maya Angelou was one of the most influential writers, poets, and Civil rights activists. She fought and raised awareness on the struggles of racism and sexism through her literary works and will continue to inspire many writers to do the same. In her poem, *Still I Rise* honors the struggle of overcoming sexism and prejudices. Other themes in this poem include, racism, social injustice, and female empowerment. For example, the fifth verse reads, "You may shoot me with your words, You may cut me with your eyes, You may kill me with your hatefulness, But still, like air, I'll rise." (Angelou). With the use of similes and repetition throughout the poem, this stanza is a response to the unjust killings or even micro-level racism that African-Americans face. The "cutting of the eyes" could symbolize the hateful glares or disdain because of the color of her skin. And the "killing with hatefulness" could be shootings or otherwise known as hate crimes. When Angelou writes, "Does my haughtiness offend you? Does

my sassiness upset you?” it represents the domineering behavior that is often used against people of color. The “sassiness” is also a symbol of how women must subscribe to gender roles such as being docile and tight-lipped otherwise, she would be labeled a “nagging wife” or “bitch.” Angelou argues against these gender stereotypes because they veer from what is expected of a woman that has been socially constructed.

In *‘For Women Who Are ‘Difficult’ to Love* Warsan Shire discusses the difficulties for women as they navigate their way through romance and self love. Shire is a writer and poet originally born in Kenya but moved to Great Britain. Ever since I read this poem, I’ve been following her work every since because she highlighted very good points about the struggles of womanhood, heartbreak, and self-love. The poem is written in second person and it’s about a girl who loves a man who expects more from her. He expects her to be more feminine and to hold her tongue to avoid confrontations. The initial thing I noticed was the title of the poem. There’s a bit of sarcasm as the word, “difficult” is in quotations since the poem is about the societal expectations of women and how they should love. Those who are not able to reciprocate or show love to women claim that women are “difficult” to love and they make women believe that. Therefore, this is letter to women who feel as if they are doing something wrong in spite of the fact that it has more to do with the other person who is treating them badly.

My favorite line is, “closed your mouth more, tried to be softer, prettier, less volatile, less awake.” (Shire). These are all examples of how women are supposed to act docile, submissive, and respectful in the presence of men otherwise, she’d be seen as bothersome, not lady-like, and even a bitch. And my second favorite line that follows is, “You can’t make homes out of humans.” This part resonated with me the most as it’s written so simple, yet it speaks

volumes on wanting certain people to stay in your life, when they don't want it. Both of these poems are extremely powerful and beautiful in that they discuss oppression in society whether it be race or gender. Both of these poems tie in with *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* and *The Patience Stone* because of similar themes of oppression and social injustice.

Another poem that shares similar themes to Maya Angelou and Warsan Shire's work is Elizabeth Bishop's *One Art*. This style of this poem is a villanelle structured with emotional grief. One suggestion of this poem is that Bishop attempts to distance herself from pain which is a skill we should master at some point in time. Instead of introducing the poem with wrestling serious issues, Bishop starts light with the misplacement of minor items such as, her mother's watch and house keys which elicits two items we lose or misplace. The poem then ventures into more serious loss that speaks volumes on grief. The abstract of pain could refer to many things for instance, loss, grief, heart-break, depression, physical pain, mental illness, stress, etc. Bishop's personal life, she suffered a few losses such as, her father who passed when she Bishop was eight months old, her mother died in an asylum after losing her husband, and then her husband commits suicide.

Given that death surrounded Bishop for most of her life, the narrator loses insignificant possessions that hold less, if not not any, emotional value which then he/she dwells upon. Yet on the other hand, losing those items is nothing compared to losing something or someone they might've regarded as their world. Which brings me to the next point on voice. Bishop uses objects, the keys and watch are possessions that could be regarded as trivial as to other real life issues at hand. The narration of the poem seems to be Bishop's voice which starts with a positive or relaxed tone, but grows melancholic or less careless towards the end.

The structure of this plot moves as a villanelle with possibly an iambic pentameter. In the sixth stanza, she writes, “Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident the art of losing’s not too hard to master though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.” Bishop conveys a message that even as painful loss is, we survive and we learn more about ourselves and what we’re capable of handling. The “art” that she is referring to is a skill we learn to acquire when we are faced with troubles that are out of our control. *One Art* is an emotionally charged poem that teaches readers that we should accept things that will not stay even as badly as we want it. I’ve chosen this piece as it is connected to female writers in 20th century literature theme that I’ve chosen for my midterm. Bishop lived a tragic life that she spent a lot of the time lonely. Nonetheless, her artistry has shown that an independent woman can break the mold of gender roles during the early 20th century. She continues to be one of the pillars in contemporary literature.

Toni Morrison is another female activist and author of the Early 20th century 's who wrote novels that discussed the social injustices brought upon women and the Black community., *Playing In The Dark* is a literary criticism where Morrison talks about the difficulties as a woman of color writing in a racialized world and her struggle to not write in the way that would hint at “racial superiority.” Morrison then makes the fishbowl analogy that is to say she saw the transparency of the structure that maintained everything as a symbol of invisibility and normalization of whiteness that exclude “others” that being people of color. She also addresses the fact that whiteness dominates America and leaves little room for stories of Black people who gets misrepresented from Western views. These representations are depicted as sexualized terms such as “jungle fever.” She states that the term African like are how white people objectify

African culture which then results cultural stereotypes that affects black people all over the world and how people perceive them. The green lawn, blue skies, and big house with an outdoor pool are all part of the social construct that everybody can achieve this dream when in reality the dream is to rise above our struggles that society has placed us in the first place based on how we look. The rose garden symbolize beauty and flourish of dreams yet in the Winter, they wither which shows how momentary beauty is and it's illusion that captivates us, but cannot sustain life.

Toni Morrison also wrote the famous novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which tells the harrowing experiences of racism in the US. It tells the story of a young female, Pecola, during the Great Depression and the extreme lengths women had to go for money such as sex work. Morrison depicts sex for prostitutes as a physical act rather than an emotional one. Morrison writes, "These women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use." (Morrison 2019). The prostitutes do not see their bodies as sanctuaries of their own, but rather temples for other men to come and go as they please. Therefore, prostitutes did not associate sex with romance or tenderness simply because they have been scorned after they have been raped and tossed aside. They use sex to make ends meet, but they despised the men who paid for it. In contrast to this line, Geraldine has a erotic moment when a tissue slipped between her legs that made her wonder what it would feel like to have her husband inside her. It reads, "As the delight grew, she had to stop in the street, hold her thighs together to contain it." In other words, the tissue that slid between her legs was more pleasurable when she was alone opposite of when she was with her husband. Linking this back to sexuality, women were expected to have sex for two reasons which was to please their husbands and to raise a family. However, Geraldine's incident in *The Bluest Eye* depicted how female

masturbation was normal and should not be a taboo subject as women are capable of pleasuring themselves without the presence of men.

Moving into contemporary African American literature, Ta Nehisi Coates is a novelist who expresses his deep concern for Black people in America like how Toni Morrison expresses her concern for women of color. Ta Nehisi Coates's *'Between the World and Me'* discusses the racial complications of contemporary American society and becomes a guide on what it means to be Black in America. He starts off by writing a letter to his teenage son, Samori about the violence, gang activity, and fear that impacted his upbringing in West Baltimore. When Coates speaks of education, it really resonated with me because he says he believes that school does not teach kids to be curious, it instead expects compliance. Coates explains to his son that education is extremely important for Black people because not only are they fighting against the stereotype that Black people are dangerous, but also it acknowledges their rights, and the history behind the suppression of Black people including education. Ta Nehisi Coates's defines the American dream as a socially constructed facade that did not apply to people of color. He uses the classic cliches of the white picket fence, green lawns, and barbecue grills that everybody inherently strives for, but in reality it is unrealistic. He states, "It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. I wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket." This is not to infer that he's bitter about this world, but this portrayal of American life ignores the world in which poverty, crime, and shootings of black men is a common sight.

Coates defines racism as not the father but rather a child of race which ultimately is a construct built in America that is destructive as it is false. Some of the issues raised in the book



were not the first time I heard of it because my relatives dealt with this on a day to day basis due to an interracial marriage. It's crazy because I never experienced what my brother-in-law faced which was to be interrogated when he was just simply sitting in the car. He recalled feeling threatened and anxious because he quotes, "never want to become a statistic." He also grew up in a rough part of Bronx and recalled having to attain a solid exterior at an early age which speaks to Coates's quote about how gangs ran the streets. I really enjoyed reading this book as it speaks on historic and modern systemic racism in the United States told from personal past experiences. Coates expresses how Black men are pressured to be with Black women or else they are straying from their race and considered "white-washed."

In James Baldwin's *Fire Next Time*, he is concerned with race and identity of Black Americans who must seek to rise above the occasion rather than lead a life with hatred and racism as they and their ancestors have faced in America. In James Baldwin's, *Fire Next Time*, Baldwin starts with a letter to his young nephew, James, that the moment a black person is brought into this world, he will be taught not only by white people but also his family like his grandfather, that Black people are under white suppression. By doing this, Baldwin hopes to address the historical injustices and let his nephew to not aim for the acceptance from white people, but the acceptance that this is the world. His dream is that America does not lead with hate as hate has become a divergence from equality that he hopes that any person of any color strive for. Baldwin encourages, "I am very much concerned that American Negroes achieve their freedom here in the United States. But I am also concerned for their dignity, for the health of their souls, and must oppose any attempt that Negroes may make to do to others what has

been done to them.” In order to progress, Black people should lead with love as hard as it is due to ongoing racism and the history of slavery in the US.

Baldwin writes a letter to his nephew and tells him, “This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*.” He is acknowledging that it could be something as little as silence or claiming “innocent” to commit and perpetuate a destructive crime that causes suffering in this country. And the “ghetto” as he mentions it would define a black person’s worth according to the innocence where they are taught this is their *only* world.

Mitchell Jackson is an author and professor at NYU who wrote *Survival Math* which is a collection of stories and experiences of African Americans. Jackson was inspired by Baldwin’s work and included a quote by him in his foreword to distinguish the importance of Black culture and racism that continues to exist in America. Jackson was raised by a single mother in Portland, Oregon where his youth included selling drugs in order to make a living which then led to his arrest. He brings attention to troubling issues such as racism, class, and gang/drug activity. One of the first things I noticed about the book was how Jackson poked fun at the title ‘*Notes on an All American Family*’ despite the harsh reality of struggling with poverty, negative stigmas of Black people, and growing up in an environment where drugs and prostitution was the norm. The idea of the “American dream” comes up a lot because it’s an unrealistic construct that tries to convince people to work their entire life to reach this dream. And we’ve seen this in Ta-Nehisi Coates’s, *Between the World and Me* where he used to believe in the “dream” despite the

circumstances he grew up under. He realized the dream was a conjured up fantasy that did not apply to people of color or those who lacked access to privilege.

Fortunately, I had the opportunity to take Professor Jackson's writing workshop in my last semester and the course discussed a lot about race, the hero's journey, and the reasons we choose the words we choose. For example, Professor Jackson advised, "if you're going to describe the color or description of an object, make sure that there is a reason behind it. If the car is blue, why is it blue? Otherwise, leave it out." I thought this was interesting because when I came across the "evergreen Lexus" I reflected back on his quote. He was also very adamant about the title by suggesting that it should hint at the story and I think the title for this book does just that. I really enjoyed reading because first, I've learned a lot from his class and to be able to read his book and learn more about his life was exciting and inspiring. And also I think it reinforces the themes of what we've read before (Baldwin/Coates) in regards of turbulent youth, drugs, identity, race, and the "American dream." However, I was happy to have read a book from an SPS faculty and feel personally connected to the piece.

Jackson writes, "We wheeled onto Canal Street, where hordes milled the sidewalks and traffic stuttered like I'd seldom seen, where at a light, a dude waded between bumpers and demoed an electric bubble gun. My driver motored up Avenue of the Americas in a derby of drivers and turned on West Third and again on MacDougal Street, and in a twinkling, we reached what would be my new home."

Jackson's dream is similar to Ta-Nehisi Coates experience of visiting New York City when he saw a vast amount of diversity flooding the streets. In Jackson's experience he sees the evolution and diversity of people and environment in Canal and MacDougal street. In his ride, he

sees the hustle of drivers and pedestrians as they move from Canal to Avenue of Americas, and then to MacDougal which shows how interconnected the city is. Here is a picture of one NYU Stern building as Jackson proves that even if you were born in an area where you're destined to not achieve great things, you can and will achieve it and fight the social stigma on race. Jackson also wrote about his experience in another book, *The Residue Years* precedent to *Survival Math*. He is living proof that people can reach their dreams if they put in the effort and courage to do so. The second image of a Chinese pagoda styled building on Canal street that recounts the time Jackson stuck in the hustle bustle of traffic when he ventured on his exodus from Portland to New York.





*The Great Gatsby* has a different approach to the dream than Coates, Baldwin, and Jackson although racism was prominent in the roaring 20's. This dream existed at a time when early immigrants came to the US in hope for a better life for themselves and future generations. This made me reflect on how the American Dream and immigration differ in the wake of the immigration policies today. However, I also watched the two versions of *The Great Gatsby*

movies. In the 2013 version, the actors are wearing crystal/diamond-embroidered flapper dresses/ tuxedos and it also starts with Tom Buchanan playing polo in a vast green lawn/garden. I felt that the grand parties/gluttonous foods/flowing alcohol were depicted as tangible at least for Gatsby and elitists. However, attaining something abstract like Daisy's love/affection was far more elusive than anything else for Gatsby. I would agree that this frivolous mania/objects of the Jazz age digresses from the things that matter such as happiness, romance, etc. Perhaps, the definition of happiness is subjective, but Fitzgerald may have tried to communicate that materialism is a distraction from real-life problems.

The comparison of the the costumes used in Baz Luhrmann's film to a fruit tart exemplify the luxury of fashion of the 1920's and the jewel-like fruits desserts that satisfy our hunger. Both pictures are pretty to look at and they symbolize wealth, yet the fruit tart isn't exactly a healthy dish and the dresses are used for aesthetic and sexual reasons. The dresses jewels and feathers were made attract men and allow women to swing openly as they drank alcohol and smoke cigarettes which are associated with sex and freedom. Fruit tarts are expensive than the average vanilla cake because it is topped creamy thick sweet filling and decorated with glistening fruits. We usually eat these fancy type of dessert during celebrations or house parties when we entertain guests such as wearing pretty flapper dresses in the roaring 20's to accentuate a woman's beauty and physique. These comparisons are quite similar because they exhibit the glamorous life of being draped in beautiful vintage fabric and consuming delicious carbs. Ironically, Daisy Buchanan doesn't show sign of obesity yet this might change over the course of time as the old saying goes, "beauty fades."

Prior to marrying Tom Buchanan, Daisy had a romantic liaison with Jay Gatsby which could indicate that Daisy was not a virgin when she was married. In Christian and Catholic belief, it was highly expected of women to not engage in sexual intercourse before marriage yet during the early 20's, women were liberated through their actions such as attending wild parties, drank a lot of alcohol, smoked cigarettes, and pleased men. Daisy was young and her artificial world was redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year, summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life in new tunes.

Then there's Daisy Buchanan, depicted as an indecisive woman who can be perceived as air-headed. She is described as innocent and superficial wife who turns a left cheek to her husband's infidelity and relies on materialistic items for happiness and reputation. Her beauty matches that of lavish gifts and pretty flowers that depict the ignorance on focusing only on looks and money/possessions. The mansions and pool parties are pretty to look at, but what is it like when the party's over and Gatsby is left with loneliness because of Daisy's absence?

However, they were still objectified as it was rare to see a woman wear trousers since that was a masculine clothing item. Comparing the women in the roaring 20's to the oppressed women in Egypt, they were free in showing their skin and sexuality, meanwhile Afghan women had to wear hijabs that covered every inch of their body except their eyes. Both women of



different cultures were still oppressed by men.





“Gatsby believed in Green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter-tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther...” The green light at the end of Daisy’s dock is a prominent symbol of the Gatsby’s undying love for

Daisy which represents the literal geographical distance between and her intangible love that is closely associated with his idea of the American dream, which is to win her love. Although Gatsby held lavish parties in his mansion and attained large amounts of money from over the counter grain alcohol sales, he's still missing the integral puzzle piece to the "perfect life" which is Daisy. Fitzgerald uses Daisy's dock as a symbol of her intangible love that no money in the world can buy. In Nick's eyes, he sees the green light as hope to the early settlers who arrived to America to achieve the idyllic life.

The dream in Gatsby is wealth and beauty yet moving into contemporary literature on race, *The Woman Warrior* is a novel by Maxine Hong Kingston that tells the experiences of a Chinese American girl learning about her cultural roots through the stories of the women in her life. Kingston does not only talk about her journey to finding her identity, but also the women in her family like her no name aunt and her mother. Her no name aunt was introduced in the beginning of the book and she is described as a troubled and looked down upon woman in the family. Kingston's mother came to America in the 1940's, allowing her to experience the differences and similarities on how women are treated in America and China.

She struggles to approach traditional Chinese tradition while maintaining her American identity. In my response to *The Woman Warrior*, I stated that "*Racism exists to this very day and it's interesting to see what it was like for Kingston being that she was a Chinese American who saw the experiences of immigrants living in America.*" I chose this quote because racism is very much alive in America and whenever Kingston's recalled racist accounts, it sounded similar to what I've experienced. For example when she was working at an art supply store, her boss would

use the racist term, "N-yellow." This was equally as rude and it reminded me when my dad and I were called, "chinks" by an old man when we mistakenly skipped him on the Home Depot check out line. These racist and derogatory terms unfortunately still haunt Asian/Asian Americans.

Although the book is written by a Chinese American, I relate it to Nawal Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Female Doctor* as it shared themes of female empowerment, medical practice, and oppression from the government. Similar to Saadawi, Maxine learns about the hardships that the women in her family line faced such as her nameless aunt. When I read that Brave Orchid became a doctor in Canton before moving to the US in hopes for a bright future for her kids, it bared a striking resemblance to Nawal Saadawi's female protagonist who fought against Egyptian rule to break the gender stereotypes.

In terms of style, both books are written as memoirs that tells the harrowing experiences of their struggles under male authority. For Saadawi, it was the fight to excel in the medical field and as a woman in a small town, Kafr Tahla. She wanted to be seen as equals to her brother and rebuked the gender norms that her mother tried to instill in her at an early age. In comparison to Maxine's journey, Maxine was raised in America, but her life was influenced by the perilous events that plagued the women in her family line. Despite the misogynistic views that dominated Communist China where her mother lived through, Brave Orchid is considered a strong individualist and is called, "Shaman" because of her practice in medicine. Her role impacted

much of the book through her storytelling that inspires yet terrified Maxine. After reading *Woman Warrior*, I connected to my own because I often wonder about where I come from and their traditions versus where I was born. This is also known as bi-cultural identity. We all don't choose a lifestyle we are born into and we spent the rest of our lives trying to find out who we are. In Kingston's journey, she remembers being a young girl approaching puberty and trying to understand the disparity of the expectations of womanhood. My grandmother would tell me that education at my age was not an option and what was expected of me were household duties and marriage. This is shocking to me because when I heard stories about how she didn't even get to finish primary school, I didn't realize how lucky I am to go get an education.

*Farewell to Manzanar* is similar a memoir that tells the journey of a young Japanese American woman who is relocated to a concentration camp, Manzanar, during World War II. In terms of structure, I thought it was interesting how Houston introduces the readers to a chronological timeline starting with the history of Japanese immigration to the US in the mid 1800's. Then followed with laws that prevented Japanese immigrants from owning land in California such as the Alien Land bill. And then the attack of Pearl Harbor which then led to internment camps where people of Japanese ancestry were removed from the West coast to inland camps. I thought this was a nice introduction especially since I struggle with remembering dates and events of history.

Since this book is a memoir, when I compared it to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, I found that both memoirs shared themes such as, coming-of-age,

discrimination, identity, and femininity. For Wakatsuki, she explores her youth once she leaves Manzanar and struggles to find acceptance from others and within herself. Family was a huge theme that impacted Wakatsuki because the relocation of their lives had flipped their lives upside down and negatively affected their relationships with one another. Stress caused her parents to fight and led to abuse, but after Wakatsuki's brother has a baby, the family reunites. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston values her mother's storytelling to appreciate the strength and endurance of women in China who resisted the sexist ideas of patriarchy that reigned China for the longest time.

When I read *Farewell to Manzanar* the first time I felt empathetic because hearing the story of a young girl being forced into a concentration camp reminded me of the Holocaust when Jewish people were forced into camps and unfortunately murdered in massive numbers. It was unfortunate to see how Japanese Americans were negatively affected by the war and that the US was at war with the country of their roots. I could imagine that there was a conflicting feeling between being a proud US citizen when Pearl Harbor and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki took place. It's interesting to see how both works approach what it means to be Asian American as Kingston tries to keep her Chinese traditions, such as the strong belief of filial piety in China vs the freedom to explore one's youth in Western culture.

In *Farewell to Manzanar*, Wakatsuki spent most of her life feeling like she didn't fit in because of the way she looked and the way she was born was a disadvantage because she and her family would always be looked at as "outsiders." I related this back to my intellectual biography to discuss how I could identify with both stories because growing up, I remembered flipping

through magazines and wondering why there were a handful, if not any, Asian actors casted in Hollywood. The most famous reference would be Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee, but that became a stereotype where people would say, “all Asians look the same.” This was ten years ago, but it is starting to take shape now with the release of the book turned movie, *Crazy Rich Asians* which was the first film to cast all Asians in spite of Hollywood’s “yellowface.”

*Crazy Rich Asians* is a contemporary novel by Kevin Kwan which became a famous movie that casted all Asians. This was a breakthrough for Asian Americans in literature and in the movie industry as it showcased how Asians have been marginalized in the past century. It was a delight to read *Crazy Rich Asians* especially after reading a series of books by Asian Americans such as, Maxine Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar*. Kwan’s novel is about a young Asian American woman marrying into a rich Singaporean family inspired by his experiences growing up in Singapore. Although the plotline takes place in Singapore, the novel has a contemporary attitude in merging Asian and American culture to the global audience.

Since Kingston’s and Wakatsuki’s work were set during the mid and late 1900’s, Kwan’s modern take highlights the not so luxurious side of money and reputation such as how Astrid felt the need to hide her lavish investments from her unfaithful husband because she didn’t want him to feel less than. This also brings up the theme of masculinity since there is an unfortunate stereotype for Asian men depicted in Western culture. In contrast to how Asian women are exoticized or docile, Asian men are viewed as either “nerdy” or not assertive. Both *The Woman Warrior* and *Farewell to Manzanar* approach the American dream as means of embracing one’s heritage and American roots. It was less about money and fame and more about

the struggles that people and women of color had to face during the mid 1900's when Asians face discrimination due to World War II.

The concept of the “dream” in *Crazy Rich Asians* as according to Kwan, the dream consisted of driving expensive cars, owning beautiful jewelry, and being draped in rich fabric that only elites can afford. *Crazy Rich Asians* tells the story of rich elites of Singapore today which is modern compared to Kingston and Wakatsuki yet the dream of the elites strikingly resembles the one of Gatsby where people were concerned about reputation and materialism. For Rachel Chu, it meant understanding that she was marrying into a rich family, but also recognizing her Chinese heritage and her academic success despite traditional Chinese values of obeying patriarchal order. Kwan writes, “Being twenty-nine, she was by Chinese standards well into old-maid territory, and even though her busybody relatives were perpetually trying to set her up, she had spent the better part of her twenties focused on getting through grad school, finishing her dissertation, and jump-starting her career in academia.”(Kwan 2018). Gender in China have viewed women as less than to men since they could not carry the honorable surname like sons do.

For Rachel, her relatives pressure her to find a mate despite the fact that she was more concerned about school than finding someone during her twenties. This perpetuates the belief that in China, women were expected to be married before they reached thirty or else they're considered old. Again, this subscribes to patriarchal ideology as women are seen as useless if they don't tend to their husbands and children's' needs. Instead of conforming, Rachel goes in a different direction by immersing herself into academia and creating a strong educational



background to be able to stand strong on her own. She is an example of how women should not rely on a man for success because women can have their own.

In Chinese culture and possibly to other Asian cultures, the American dream for immigrants was coming to the United States for a better life for them and the next generations. That statement seems broad, so to give an example would be my grandmother who immigrated from Communist China to the US in the 1940's, during the beginning of World War II. She and my grandfather opened up a laundromat business in Chinatown until my grandfather passed away and she had to raise three kids on her own. Being a widowed mother of three was hard enough, but she knew she had to run a business and make sure that they were made ends meet. This goes to show, that women are capable of enduring one of life's hardship because the "dream" or "goal" is for my father and aunts to have a stable life. It all worked out eventually, but looking at the dream to my grandmother was like the dream to not only Asian immigrants, but immigrants from all over the world. In modern day, the "dream" of success still exists today, however another "dream" has also been stereotyped for Asians such as, "becoming a successful doctor, lawyer, or accountant." Asians are typically being viewed as either "nerdy" or "studious" which has a positive connotation, but it still is a stereotype.



This is the classic “Chinese American” styled meal served at a suburban all-you-can-eat buffet. Not to knock business owners for trying to make a living, but this is not considered authentic Chinese food, yet it carries the iconic types of food such as, egg drop soup, california rolls, snap peas, and lo mein. These foods are often considered food with high MSG levels which also adds to the danger that it is a buffet, so there is no limit according to the customers. The

closest thing to being healthy is the hot tea. When we think of Asian food, we think of the American styled general Tso's chicken or lo-mein, but those are American styled Chinese food and not considered authentic. The food at the buffet is cheap and endless, but it is gluttonous which then contributes to the growing obesity rate in the America.





Here is an image of healthy greens in contrast to the glutinous and fast meal that is ready at our fingertips. Since the vegetables are about to be cooked, this depicts how feel good food needs time to prepare and effort. These bowls of vegetables and tofu was a vegetarian custom that Chinese people feast on during the Lunar new year since it is encouraged to start the new year with a conscious diet and wholesome attitude. The greens are usually either boiled as a soup

and/or sauteed in garlic and a little salt. This showed me that it takes time to learn how to cook a healthy meal and learn the dish that has been passed down by family generations. I take pride in learning these dishes as it is a part of my culture and in order to keep it alive, I have to learn it and teach my nephew and niece when they get older.

Growing up Chinese American, I often read books by authors who shared similar experiences as me such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*. Both are novels by Asian American women who share their experiences growing up in America in vastly different ways, but ultimately share themes of gender and sexuality. Maxine learned about the struggles the women in her family faced such as the one-child policy and of her "no-name aunt" who was slut-shamed to where she killed her newborn and herself after straying in her marriage. Sexuality has often been a tricky dynamic for women as we face opposing sides of embracing our sexuality as much as men, but not being "too open" about our sexual relations. Asian women are often depicted as soft, docile, and submissive and the opposite of that is exotic and promiscuous.

In Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, Wang Lung marries an "unattractive" slave, O-Lan, who does the housework, but does not arouse him. She is a strong woman of three kids yet Wang Lung doesn't show any affection and strays from his marriage with a concubine, Lotus. O-Lan is deeply hurt by Wang Lung's affair yet she symbolizes the "soft" woman that acted as the rubberband of the household meanwhile, Lotus had bound feet, which was idolized in China, yet never worked a day in her life. She was represented as a sex object for him to explore his lust, but that kind of flame burns out quickly. It wasn't until then Wang Lung appreciated O-Lan for her devotion and willpower to him and the family. Either way, *The Good Earth* brings up the

topic of female oppression in both O-Lan and Lotus's shoes as they fall onto either ends of the spectrum of being submissive or carnal. Therefore, *The Good Earth* is just one example of how femininity in Asian culture was a double-edged sword much like today's slut-shaming and Me Too movement. Nonetheless, this contributed to the previous books written by Asian Americans who expressed their experiences growing up and struggling with racism and misogyny in America.

After reading literature ranging from as early as the classic *The Great Gatsby* to contemporary books on race such as *Between the World and Me* and *Crazy Rich Asians*. I found that these books have helped contribute my understanding and relationship to marginalized writers in past and in contemporary literature. Although the books that I have read were written in different time periods yet they all related to one another for example, James Baldwin was a pinnacle in African American literature during the mid 1960's yet I connected his interpretation of the American Dream to Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* which highlighted the recognition of accepting one's heritage and American culture. Having read these life-changing book, It prompted new ideas that related to my experience as an Asian American writer. Therefore, it inspired me to write poems such as *In Between* that regarded racism and sexism as a daily struggle, but these books prove that people of color or women can excel in literature and in the world regardless of the struggles we have faced and continue to face.

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