

Literature in the Time of COVID-19 by Emily Nadal

It's 5:00 pm on a Friday evening. Normally, this would be the highlight of my week. After work, I would probably be headed to an event with friends, or home to Chinese take-out and a movie. But on this Friday, I almost forget what day it is. 5:00 pm means little. Today was just like the day before. It was just like the week before. The whole month has been just like this Friday. We welcomed the year 2020 with the death of the legendary Kobe Bryant, threats of World War III, but the icing on the cake has been COVID-19 dominating our world. Forcing us into isolation and stripping us of our routine joys and momentous milestones, not to mention the health and lives of thousands, it completely flipped the world upside down in a matter of weeks. In my regular life, I am a 27-year-old park ranger.

What started out as a summer internship turned into a seasonal career and finally, three years ago, I became a permanent employee. Most of my job is revolved around storytelling. For much of the day, I work to bridge connections between visitors and resources. Depending on who I am



presenting to, my talk may sound different and feel different because I have to read my audience and try to gauge their interests. I'm also conscious of the story I am telling, making sure to communicate it with as many points of views as I can. In my new life, the one where COVID-19 exists, I am rethinking a lot of things, and how stories are told is

pretty high up on the list. It also resonates with how I rethink the literature of the 20th century.

In Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, our narrator, Little Dog, and his family struggle with their identities as Asian American immigrants in a country that never really feels like their own. This sense of being an outlier often led Little Dog to harbor feelings of invisibility- "I was seen—I who had seldom been seen by anyone. I who was taught, by you, to be invisible in order to be safe" (Vuong). This sentiment is something that many immigrants to the United States often feel, heightened by acts such as racism and discrimination. When the COVID-19 virus was first observed, the epicenter became Wuhan, China. Soon after news broke, across the globe and in the U.S., hate crimes against Asians increased. Still, months into the midst of the pandemic, with dozens of countries effected and the U.S. now becoming the global COVID epicenter, Asian Americans are still facing hate due to the virus. In fact, a special hotline was set up to collect reports of these acts and in the mere weeks it has been in place, more than 1,000 calls have been placed. What happens when you no longer become



invisible because of your race, like Little Dog, but highly visible and susceptible to attack? Just as Little Dog's mother and grandmother had to answer for the Vietnam war, so do the thousands of Asian Americans now have to answer for the Coronavirus.

In times of crisis, people often look for a scapegoat. There must be someone to take the blame, someone to direct their misplaced feelings of anger, sadness, or loss, and unfortunately, people of color are far too often the ones unwillingly answering to the call.

Little Dog expresses these feelings through the form of a letter to his mother, otherwise known as epistolary writing. Since the content is not directed at the reader/audience but rather to his mother, I felt as though I was peeking into a personal relationship. This style also allowed Vuong to not have to explain cultural or intimate references. Though he does sometimes, there are moments in the book that feel like a soft secret between him and his mother or grandmother and the reader does not have to know all these details. This style opened up a view of a culture that Vuong didn't need to explain or translate. While he was not writing, necessarily, for an American audience, there was no pressure to dissect differences and code switch. Because of this, the reader is able to get a more genuine look at culture rather than an altered one.

James Baldwin also utilizes this method of writing in his essay *The Fire Next Time*. Similar to Vuong, Baldwin applies epistolary writing to highlight the minority experience in America. In contrast to each other though, Baldwin speaks to the hyper visibility of Black people in America. He gives us examples of how it feels to stick out amongst neighbors, discriminated because of your skin or experience violence from being seen too much.

I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it and I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it” (Baldwin).

Vuong, however, highlights quite the opposite, the feeling of being so different, it makes you feel unnoticed, moving through the world as if you do not exist. This leads to situations where it was hard for him, his mother and grandmother to get what they needed, to feel heard or to just continue without a hassle.

Not seeing the tails, you waved to the man behind the counter, holding hands, as you searched the blocks of marbled flesh in the glass case. When he asked if he could help, you paused for too long before saying, in Vietnamese, “Duoi bo. Anh co duoi bo khong?” His eyes flicked over our faces and asked again, leaning closer. Lan’s hand twitched in my grip. Floundering, you placed your index finger at the small of your back, turned slightly, so the man could see your backside, then wiggled your finger while making mooing sounds. With your other hand, you made a pair of horns above your head...But he only laughed, his hand over his mouth at first, then louder, booming...A middle aged woman, carrying a box of Lucky Charms, shuffled past us, suppressing a smile...The store was closing. One of them asked again, head lowered, sincere. But we turned from them. We abandoned the oxtail, the bun bo hue. You grabbed a loaf of Wonder Bread and a jar of mayonnaise. None of us spoke as we checked out, our words suddenly wrong everywhere, even in our mouths. (Vuong)

During the pandemic, lockdown orders have been in place throughout most of the country for the betterment of the people. In New York City, the epicenter of the outbreak in the U.S., these restrictions are being enforced by the New York Police Department.

Whereas Little Dog’s race may have made him a target by his fellow citizens, being Black during the pandemic has made people targets for the NYPD. Recently, numerous videos have surfaced showing the



disparities by which officers are enforcing the social distancing and mask wearing rules. In one video, a man is punched in the face by a police officer for not social distancing, in another a young mother with a toddler is thrown to the ground on a subway platform for not wearing a mask. Meanwhile, their white neighbors are sun bathing in Central Park sans masks and distance. During extremely stressful conditions, like living through a pandemic, it's hard to remember Baldwin's advice, and to try to understand their side and not stoop down to their level, but it does illuminate the relevancy some 50 years later.

When Jesmyn Ward was seeking contributors for her book *The Fire This Time*, she wanted essays on race in America yesterday, today and tomorrow. What I found most compelling were two essays that utilized the past in order to understand how we got to where we are now. As a National Park Ranger, the sites that I protect have some historical or cultural significance to our country, and in my daily life I often use these histories and significance as a mirror to reflect on the tensions of today. It makes it more applicable to the visitor and suddenly the story doesn't seem so ancient or far away, we are constantly reminded that we are only separated from most events by a few generations.

In her essay "Lonely in America" Wendy S. Walters is taken on a journey, driven by her own desire for connection, that leads her to a revelation about the mistreatment of Black lives (and deaths) in America. Throughout the essay, Walters weaves in the story of slavery in New England, more specifically, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. "According to a series of articles by Paul Davis running that same week in the Providence Journal, Newport was a hugely significant port in the North Atlantic Slave Trade, and from 1725 to 1807 more than a thousand trips were made to Africa in which

more than a hundred thousand men, women and children were forced into slavery in the West Indies and throughout the American colonies” (Ward). Bits of historical information like this are scattered all throughout the story, often sandwiched in between events of the current day and Walters’ own thoughts and emotions. Take for example this paragraph where Walters draws a memory and connects it to a fact:

A white woman with a backpack was taking pictures of the scant stones. She told me she teaches courses on American graveyards at a school in Connecticut. Pointing to one of the graves, she said, He must have been loved by his family because stones were very expensive back then. I wanted to say, so were the people. And then I remembered reading an inventory from the estate of Joseph Sherburne, whose house has been preserved at the Strawberry Banke Museum. The linens were listed as worth forty dollars while the African woman who washed and pressed them had a line-item value of fifty dollars” (Ward).

Walters has a talent for telling us a history in a way where we do not even realize we are learning one. She is experiencing a moment while simultaneously teaching us a piece of the past. In the end, Walters concludes with details on her findings from the trip- the descriptions of the African bodies, decayed and partially destroyed, buried beneath an intersection, faded simply into a practical part of the city’s infrastructure. An analogy, she alludes to, to the treatment of Black people today.

Similar to Walters’ style of writing, Honoree Fanonne Jeffers draws us into the biography of Phillis Wheatley in her essay “‘The Dear Pledges of Our Love’: A Defense of Phillis Weatley’s Husband.” Like Walters, Jeffers takes a little-known story and turns it into a journey of discovery and asks the reader to consider the viewpoint though which we have been told the tale of the celebrated, formerly enslaved, African author. Though both authors utilize the technique of connecting their own stories to those of the past, the way they do this differentiates. Whereas Walters frequently goes back and forth in time and space, Jeffers tends to tell more biographically, only inserting herself when

necessary, especially in the middle of the essay. Take for example this paragraph “As a white woman of the nineteenth century Odell fits in perfectly with her era, too. It doesn’t take much speculation to deduce that she believed Peters to be an uppity Negro. He was a black man who had the nerve to possess high self-esteem, who cajoled Wheatly away from her white friends...” (Ward). Though the tone of the passage is conversational, what Jeffers is doing here is different than Walters. This information is given to us without a memory connected to it, much like how Walter writes. Though both authors are on a search or investigation of some kind (Walters for the burial ground, Jeffers for information about Wheatly’s husband), Jeffers is making a case in her writing, attempting to sway the reader into seeing a different side of things, a persuasive essay if you must. Walters, on the other hand, is uncovering truths, and relating them to today. After discovering information, both writers exude some disappointment in their revelations. Walters is uneasy because of a sheer lack of respect for the remains of enslaved Africans and Jeffers ends on a frustrated note that most of her case is based on assumptions, again having to succumb to a white woman’s version of history (and perception of black men). There is an air of being defeated at the end of both texts, but also signs of hope and encouragement. Walters concludes her essay “And we must know deep in our bones and in our hearts that if the ancestors could survive the Middle Passage, we can survive anything” (Ward). Jeffers concludes her essay with “Maybe he was a tender lover and they laughed and cried and clutched. The words they spoke after their passion were to be believed, even though they came from the mouths of the black folk” (Ward). Both endings leave us with a hope for the future and reconciliation of the past. Similarly, while dealing with a new virus with so many unknowns, many find comfort in answers from the past. We are hardly experiencing our first rodeo when it

comes to battling a deadly viruses. Causing the death of nearly one-third of the world's population, the culprit in 1918 was the H1N1 influenza virus. There are many similarities

between 1918 influenza's lot like COVID-spread rapidly, when in public, importantly, we we thought about safety, and how we go about normal life.



and now-symptoms are a 19's, the virus masks were worn and most changed the way our health and

Using history as a means to describe the present is something that both writers do so eloquently. This tool can be an incredibly powerful way of storytelling and connecting place to time and self. This talent is something that I try to foster in my own work, and it's often difficult because of the matters I deal with. Each day, I give tours of some of country's most important and historical places, but it also brings up the trouble of how we view history, through what lens. Though it's easy to make connections to historical figure's wondrous feats, it proves more difficult to get people to care about their more human sides, the side that made mistakes and wasn't all good. The truth is hardly ever comforting, and it has become my duty to tell it, making sure that visitors are digested the full story, not just the nicely packaged one. Like Walters and Jeffers understand, histories, though sometimes painful, are so much a part of us. I use history as an example by finding a balance in the good but never omitting the bad, because the bad is also of the puzzle, and we can't be whole without it.



Though being a park ranger has been quite an experience and has brought me to discover new things about the country, the world and myself, I feel a strong urge to go elsewhere. Recently, I've become fond of journalism. There is an intersection between what I do as a park ranger and storytelling and the type of journalism I am interested in which is long-form narrative journalism. This interest led me to a summer internship

last year with WNYC, working on a podcast called Death, Sex and Money. I fell in love with the work, the opportunity to tell stories through a different medium and the ability to be more creative. During this internship, I was tasked with carrying out an initiative set forth by WNYC. I went through the archive of episodes of the show tallied up the race and gender of the guests. WNYC asked all of their productions to do this because they were realizing most of the guests or ‘experts’ on topics being brought on were male and/or white.

This created a disconnect between listeners and producers as well as a bias for only one type of story. This realization allowed me to reflect on appearance in media, and



how representation is necessary in order to draw deeper and more meaningful connections.

Toni Morrison allowed us to see the effects of lack of representation through her novel *The Bluest Eye*. All throughout the novel, Morrison exhibits subtle racism and classism stemming from European beauty standards portrayed in America. One main character who deeply struggles with this is Pecola. Many of the reader’s initial introductions to Pecola Breedlove and her family are described with some variation of the word “ugly”, by the family themselves or by other characters. Pecola’s mother demonstrates to the reader how deep this internalization of ugliness is during a scene at her job. Mrs. Breedlove works for a white family and though usually seen as harsh and

cold throughout the novel, we see a different side of the matriarch when her daughter stops by her mother's job one day:

It may have been nervousness, awkwardness, but the pan tilted under Pecola's fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs, and the burn must have been painful, for The Bluest Eye she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. "Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you... work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor." Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread. The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it." She went to the sink and turned tap water on a fresh towel. Over her shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple. "Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up" (Morrison).

Pecola had just accidentally dropped a pie on the table and her mother reacts violently toward her, hitting her and using harsh language to reprimand her daughter. Though, when it came to consoling the little white girl, Polly, Mrs. Breedlove's demeanor changed. Suddenly, she was comforting, and displays tenderness and affection toward the girl.

Throughout the whole story, Pecola doesn't get much comfort from anyone. Instead, she is fed ideas of ugliness, self-hatred, and yearns for pretty blue eyes in order to be liked by society, but most importantly, her own family. The ideas of white beauty standards are strong throughout the novel and multiple characters are plagued by ideas of what beauty is and the heavy heart knowing because of their black skin, it will never be achieved but nevertheless, trying their best to adhere to it. This, in essence, is what's so heartbreaking about the interaction between Pecola and her mother. Mrs. Breedlove is sympathizing with the terror of the white child more than the pain of her black child. She is, as she has been conditioned to do, pleasing the white child and imposing harm

on the black child. She is elevating the status of the white child all the meanwhile diminishing that of the black child, her own black child at that. Mrs. Breedlove cannot take all of the fault for this. These ideas were imbedded into her most likely from the day she was born and her status at her workplace only confirmed her place in society. This self-hate was projected onto Pecola and displayed through sensitivity for whiteness and bitterness for blackness.

As opposed to Ward's *The Fire This Time*, which shows us the consequences of what happens when the world sees you as different, Morrison shows us what happens when you view yourself that way. The ideas of self-hate are what sets apart Morrison's novel from others because it displays quiet and arguably more detrimental racism. When someone makes fun of Afro-centric features or use of Ebonics, those are not always seen as racist or rooted in racism and go unnoticed or unchecked. It's a lot tougher to speak up in the face of indirect racism. There are parts that may be overlooked as just normal because we are so used to them being around, comfortable with them, because they are accepted forms of racism. When Pecola speaks on her admiration for Shirley Temple, some may see it as cute or sweet, when really Morrison is telling us that this is an example self-loathing, stemming from decades of being told that white people are superior to black people. Morrison's book, though telling of its time, can also speak to us today in a way that Ward's didn't. It shows us how to not take off-handed comments for face value, to look deeper at the root of actions, words and

accepted behaviors and make sure we are not regurgitating hate in a more attractive way.

Putting the European beauty standard on a pedestal has many more consequences than just who gets to be on the cover a magazine. There are deeply rooted biases that come out of this, especially when it comes to medicine. Black mothers, for example, have the highest childbirth mortality rates in the country. African Americans far often receive sub-par care when compared to their white counterparts. Their pain is usually believed to be not as severe, their cries for help are often ignored and medication is usually not administered equally compared to white people with the same ailments.

COVID-19 has exemplified these healthcare disparities. Black and Latino communities have some of the highest rates of infection throughout the country, and when care is urgently needed, there have been stories of shortness of breath being chocked up to anxiety or refusal of testing. In life or death situations, Pecola unfortunately may have been right, maybe it is more beneficial to have blue eyes.



In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we can understand the importance of considering the narrator. Set in the late 19th century, the story chronicles the travels of an English seaman in Africa, seeking adventure and later a meeting with the famed Mr. Kurtz. Throughout the journey, Marlow, our narrator, is struck by different aspects of what he is witnessing in Africa, the results of imperialism, though the this is not a term

he uses. African men are being brutalized and put to work for the ‘Company’ which he is also employed, and there is a sense that Marlow is having trouble with the morality of the situation. This is evident in several passages throughout the story such as this one:

It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity— like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend (Conrad).

There is a lot going on in this scene. Marlow is looking upon the African men and feeling a sort of kinship to them. Englishmen, and much of the Western world, regarded Africans as less than human. This idea spawned the justification for acts like slavery and are the basis of racism, all of which we see distinctly in the novel. For Marlow to see a relation to the men, through no other way but just as another human being, hints to us that he is facing a moral dilemma, one in which what he has been told his whole life might be wrong.

More than that, we see a term we have become familiar with in *The Bluest Eye*: ugly. Though Marlow is using the term not so much in a way to describe physical features but actions, we can see how Europeans viewed Black people- as ugly. Their customs, rituals, communication- ugly. It’s not a far cry to see, through Marlow’s descriptions of Africans, how Pecola would understand her impression of ugliness.

Ugliness goes hand in hand with the idea of the savage, something Marlow perpetuates throughout the book. Throughout history, we see the savage portrayed around the world, as Europeans conquered much of it, they began to label the other as the “savage” or those in need of civilization. Labeling someone as savage allows for moral obligation to impose your own way of life on them, force them into your

traditions, customs, language, religion, much like what Marlow sees happening. Yet as the story progresses, Marlow begins to understand that a culture exists within the “savages”, separate from that which was imposed by Europeans. “The others had an alert, naturally interested expression; but their faces were essentially quiet, even those of the one or two who grinned as they hauled at the chain. Several exchanged short, grunting phrases, which seemed to settle the matter to their satisfaction” (Conrad).

There are plenty of moments throughout the book where we see evidence of African culture, like the one above. Though Marlow calls their language “grunting”, we understand it to be more than that. Marlow is preserving the idea of the savage using this word choice. Because they aren’t speaking English, for example, he believes their language is barbaric, not complex, reduced to just grunting noises and the like. This strips Africans of their basic rite of humanity, the very thing that sets us apart from other mammals- our use of complicated language.

Marlow’s retelling of his travels is parallel to media coverage today. Marlow is taking his perception of a situation and regurgitating it back to eager listeners. They only know what he



tells them, unable to see for themselves. His opinions and reactions become theirs. This is why it’s so important to not practice confirmation bias when getting news. Far too

often, we only search for ideas that we already agree with, ones that sway the way we like and things become one-sided. As a storyteller, not having bias is necessary, but also really hard to exhibit, because they are so engrained in us. As a journalist, I am learning to work to make sure I am reading both reports- the one that I probably don't. When the whole country is relying on the decisions and briefings of our local, state and federal governments, tuning into media is crucial, but we must also be mindful of where we are getting our information from.

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver brings us again to the Congo, this time through the eyes of the Price family women and girls: Orleanna, Rachel, Leah, Adah and Ruth May. The story follows the lives of the family as they adjust to their new reality- uprooted from their home in Georgia to the Congo by way of a missionary trip. Patriarch Nathan's ego and self-fulfilling prophecy keeps the family there longer than expected, which creates life-changing, and life- shattering events, including the death of youngest sister Ruth May from a snake bite. "Mother went back inside and returned with the shrouded body in her arms. Gently she laid Ruth May out on the table, spending a long time arranging her arms and legs within the sheer cloth. The shade of the mango stretched all the way across the yard, and I realized it must be afternoon, a fact that surprised me. I looked at several familiar things, one at a time: a striped green mango lying in the grass; my own hand; our dining table. All these things seemed like objects I hadn't seen before. I looked at the table and forced my mind to accept the words "This is my dead sister." But Ruth May was shrouded in so many misty layers of mosquito netting I could barely make out any semblance of a dead child inside. She looked more like a billowy cloud that could rise right up through the trees, whenever Mother finally let her go" (Kingsolver).



Ruth May's death isn't the only loss that occurs in the novel. Orleanna loses her husband when she decides to leave him to go back to Georgia, Adah loses her sense of kinship to her mother after her mother leaves her fend for herself, Rachel loses her life in America life after marrying and staying in Africa, and we though we aren't quite sure what happens to Nathan, it is

assumed that he loses his life.

When Ruth May dies, the whole village mourns the loss of life during a ceremony where her small body lays on top of the kitchen table outside. Ruth May's friends, the village children, approach and chant *mother may I?* a line from the game Ruth May taught them. The grieving for Ruth May was intentional and welcomed. It's what we do when someone dies, we honor them with a ceremony, or sing their praises. It's what many families and friends are doing now, after the deaths of thousands of loved ones due to COVID-19. But what about Rachel or Adah? They, too, experienced a loss. What is the proper display for their emotions? How do we grieve our losses that aren't deaths during a time when we are surrounded by so much of it? I was supposed to graduate this semester. I looked forward to sitting amongst my classmates at Yankee Stadium clad in purple and tossing my cap in the air. And though NYU supposes there will be a future date for the ceremony, let's face it, it can't and won't be the same. It's sad to think about, but there is also an overwhelming feeling of guilt. I still have an income, I still have my

health, my family members still have their health. I should be feeling grateful. There are plenty more things to grieve too: lost proms, missed birthday celebrations and weddings, no hugs and kisses for new babies and no hugs and kisses for last goodbyes. Grieving, no matter the reason, is okay. A loss is a loss.

Though I'm sure there were some losses Leah faced, when I think of her, I am reminded of all her gains. Leah remained in Africa after her mother departed. She married a local boy, had children and made a life in the place that was supposed to be just a memory for her. Leah

gained the acceptance she sought for much of her childhood, she was able to choose her family and her home, and stand tall in her values. Leah reminds me of what I have gained during a



time where it's so easy to focus on losses and 'could bes'. I've never spent so much time with my family, I have gotten really into cooking and I've saved money from not attending so many events (ha!). Others, too, have learned a hobby or gotten to know their neighbors better (from afar) or finally finished that long overdue project. Silver linings are have been good distractions.

Adah, unlike her sisters, did not have to mourn the loss of her native home. She returned to the U.S. and went on to study medicine, eventually taking a career in medical research. She defied her father's conservative, feminine standards for the women of her family: working in medicine, never marrying and never bearing children.

This resistance to feminine standards is a major theme in Nawal El-Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. Becoming a doctor was a deliberate choice made by Saadawi in order to upend the standards expected of her from society and by her family.

Medicine was a terrifying thing. It inspired respect, even veneration in my mother, father and brother...I would become a doctor then, study medicine, wear shiny steel rimmed spectacles, make my eyes move at a terrifying speed behind them and make fingers strong and pointed to hold the dreadful long sharp needle. I'd make my mother tremble with fright and look at me reverently. I'd make my brother terrified and my father beg for help. I'd prove to nature that I could overcome the disadvantages of the frail body she clothed me in, with its shameful parts both inside and out (El-Saadawi).

Yet there are other times throughout the novel that we see El-Saadawi struggle in her decision and still consider conformity.

Why had I bounded up the ladder of my profession instead of drinking from the cup of life sip by sip or savouring my time in small mouthfuls?... Why had I rebelled against history and laws and tradition and raged because science hadn't discovered the secret of living protoplasm?...What do you want? You rebelled against everything and refused to live a woman's life (El-Saadawi).

When the author later comes on to become a medical student, she faces the bodies of a dead man and woman, through which she realizes that both are essentially the same, despite what her mother and society had been telling her her whole life. The body of the dead woman in particular is what strikes a nerve in the author. This woman, who much like her, had her body hidden, devalued, and used for the sole purpose of pleasing a man, was now laying there lifeless, the standards seemed worthless, the beliefs meaningless.

And the long shiny hair that my mother had plagued me with- woman's crowning glory which she carries on her head and wastes half her life arranging, shining and dyeing- fell into the filthy bin along with the other unwanted bodily matter and scraps of flesh (El-Saadawi).

These revelations from the author, that femininity and masculinity were defined by society rather than by science, did not stop the lingering feelings of doubt that she struggled with throughout her life. Both personally and professionally, the author challenged the norms for women in the workplace, wives in a marriage and girls in their youth. In my own life, as a park ranger, I understand the domination of men in a field just as the author does. The National Park Service's roots stem from the military; the first park rangers were actually soldiers! This history came to define the workforce in the century since the creation of the service. Most park rangers are male, as many folks in environmental or scientific jobs are. Just like El-Saadawi's body always felt regulated, for decades, in the rare circumstance that

women were employed as park rangers, their uniforms were always different than a man's. In the 1970s, for example, women park rangers had to wear mini dresses and thigh high boots! Though a few generations have passed since the time of separate uniforms, even today, I still feel the effects of knowing I work in a stereotypical man's job. Our uniforms are



just not designed for a woman's body. They often look misshaped or fitting in the wrong places for women, whereas men seldom have fitting issues. Our culture has yet to find a balance between equality and adaptation. It seems there is always an all or nothing, when in reality life is more grey. Yes, we would like the same uniform, but we also would like them to be made to fit us! El-Saadawi's memoir reminds us of the ways women face

the tense pull between that all or nothing approach and the attempt to carve an identity separate from that in relation to a man.

As a medical professional, it took El-Saadawi seeing the dead bodies lying on the table in front of her, ready to cut into, to understand the sameness that connects us. The COVID-19 pandemic has only illustrated this fact. No matter your sex, race, ethnicity, religion or socioeconomic status, the virus has effected everyone in some way. The virus does not discriminate with whom it affects, rather, it is society which determines who gets protected, how well they are protected and how well they are treated. While we may all end up on a table at the end, our road there can look vastly different dependent on so many societal factors.

When the end comes, where do we spend eternity? One man's heaven is another man's hell. In *No Exit*, Jean Paul Satre brilliantly gives the reader a taste of hell that makes burning and torture seem favorable. In the play, our characters, Garcin, Estelle and Inez are trapped together in a windowless, exit-less, and entertainment-less room. All they have are some couches, a mantle with a bronze sculpture sitting on it and each other. The theme of appearance is prevalent throughout the play.

GARCIN: ...No mirrors, I notice. No windows. Only to be expected. And nothing breakable. But damn it all, they might have left me my toothbrush!

VALET: That's good! So you haven't yet got over your- what-do-you-call-it?— sense of human dignity? Excuse my smiling.

Though in hell, Garcin is still consumed by ideas of keeping up grooming standards.

This scene reminds us of how much these standards are ingrained in us, so deeply rooted that even though trapped for eternity in a room with little else but his thoughts, the need for clean teeth is still in the forefront of his mind. As we live through a global

pandemic, similarly, we are facing life and death situations, yet there are people who still make it a fact to primp themselves, to stay home. This idea raises the question, however, of who we are doing these hygiene routines for, others or ourselves?

In *No Exit*, hell took away reflections of self. The two women in the play, Inez and Estelle, represent mirror images of each other. Their personalities, both in life and death, represent two different femininities.



ESTELLE: I feel so queer. Don't you ever get taken that way? When I can't see myself, I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist. I pat myself just to make sure, but it doesn't help much.

INEZ: You're lucky. I'm always conscious of myself—in my mind. Painfully conscious.

ESTELLE: Ah yes, in your mind. But everything that goes in one's head is so vague, isn't it? It makes one want to sleep. I've six big mirrors in my bedroom. There they are. I can see them. But they don't see me. They're reflecting the carpet, the settee, the window—but how empty it is, a glass in which I'm absent! When I talked to people I always made sure there was one nearby in which I could see myself. I watched myself talking. And somehow it kept me alert, seeing myself as the others saw me...

Estelle needed to constantly see herself in order to validate her existence. She wanted to see how she appeared to others, never content with seeing the world through her own eyes. Estelle's vanity followed her to hell, so much so that her version of it was a place where she was trapped without being able to view her own appearance. This is where Inez comes. She offers Estelle the opportunity to use her own eyes as a mirror.

INEZ: Sit down. Come closer. Closer. Look into my eyes. What do you see?

ESTELLE: Oh, I'm there! But so tiny I can't see myself properly.

INEZ: But I can. Every inch of you. Now ask me questions. I'll be as candid as any looking-glass.

In this moment, Estelle was so desperate to see herself that she ironically resorted to looking in the eyes of someone else. But through the eyes, she can only see herself so small, her perception is small. Inez, however, can see all of her, clearly and in full frame. She holds the power to control her outward appearance, guiding her as she applies her lipstick, Estelle entrusting her with her looks.

ESTELLE: My reflection in the glass never did that; of course, I knew it so well. Like something I had tamed...I'm going to smile, and my smile will sink down into your pupils, and heaven knows what it will become.

Estelle's reflection and perception of herself was so skewed that it was difficult for her to accept that other's may see her differently. She took pride in her appearance, made sure that what she put out into the world was seen as perfection, nothing less.

INEZ: There...You know the way they catch larks—with a mirror? I'm your lark-mirror, my dear, and you can't escape me...There isn't any pimple, not a trace of one. So what about it? Suppose the mirror started telling lies? Or suppose I covered my eyes—as he is doing—and refused to look at you, all that loveliness of yours would be wasted on the desert air.

Inez acting as a mirror, one that Estelle couldn't possibly manipulate, created a paradox for Estelle. She wanted desperately for others to see her in ways that she could control. What Inez showed her is that you do not control the way others see you. The mirror holds the power in the situation, not the person. Inez controlled what she told of Estelle's looks. One minute she complimented them, the next she told her she had a pimple. Estelle's emotions were dependent on Inez's opinions. In the end however, the only judgement Estelle really craved was that of Garcin, the other man in the room. She primped herself only to seek his validation, and in turn her confirm her existence and worth.

ESTELLE: But I wish he'd notice me too.

Garcin, on the other hand, was less consumed by his own appearance upon realizing that his human dignity was gone and was more frenzied by his legacy, his appearance after death. He desperately sought affirmation from his colleagues that he died courageously, rather than cowardly.

GARCIN: If I face death courageously, I'll prove I am no coward.

Garcin rattles the question around continuously, attempting to not only convince himself, but his hell-mates that he made the courageous choice, that his legacy will be positive, rather than one of embarrassment. Garcin is pulled between getting affirmation of his courageousness from the frantic, attention seeking Estelle to facing a mirror, the brutally honest Inez, who makes him answer the real questions, and do more in-depth reflection.

Both Garcin and Estelle attempt to leave their hell, Estelle following Garcin's initial leave once he came to face difficult truths about himself. The stakes are high once Garcin realizes that his memory is gone from earth forever, something he understands after a back and forth with Inez. When the doors are opened, and he can walk right out, he chooses not to. Instead, choosing to live with the discontent with his true self in the form of Inez and the blind worshipping of Estelle rather than the brutal unknown.

GARCIN: Will night never come?

INEZ: Never.

GARCIN: You will always see me?

INEZ: Always.

Garcin's hell is staring into himself, without the luxury of darkness to conceal it.

Estelle's hell is the opposite, the inability to see herself without her own influence. And

Inez is the mirror that reflects this.

For many families, being trapped inside for months may feel a little like hell. Similar to Garcin, Inez, and Estelle, many are confined to small spaces now with people that may make face your own insecurities or test your sanity. Space is vital to the human experience, and when that is limited, it can often cause clashes between people. Much like Garcin, Inez and Estelle acted as mirrors for each other, you don't have to go to hell to experience something similar in real life.



Facing your true self is something that our narrator experiences in *Soul Mountain* as well. Throughout the novel, readers are taken along on a journey with our unnamed narrator, searching for the illustrious *Lingshan*, or Soul Mountain. Through his travels, he finds himself living and learning amongst desolate mountain communities, a fresh experience of the fierce natural world and a challenge to find answers about his existence. The book is frequently written in the rare second person narrative which allows the reader to feel as though they are the character in the story and moving through the experience, though the author does experiment with narrative fluidity. Combined with the teachings of Daoism and embedded with traditional Chinese mythology, the story is rich with lessons that extend universally, ones that are even more useful considering the context of a global pandemic.

The core reason our narrator is on this spiritual journey is because he was misdiagnosed with lung cancer. Initially, his doctor found a mass in his lungs, the same doctor who diagnosed his father with the same disease. He trusted his doctor's

judgement and prepared himself for his untimely death. After the initial shock of the circumstances, the narrator learns that he was misdiagnosed, and he did not have lung cancer. He was healthy and would go on living for more years. With this information, he embarks on his journey, feeling a new appreciation for life but also seeking a deeper meaning from it: “Death was playing a joke on me but now that I’ve escaped the demon wall, I am secretly rejoicing. Life for me once again has a wonderful freshness. I should have left those contaminated surroundings long ago and returned to nature to look for this authentic life” (Xingjian 11). The narrator’s renewed look at life echoes our current situation in the midst of a global pandemic. As the whole world faces our current reality of living with a deadly virus, and any sense of normal life taken away from us, where simple joys are found in unlikely places, there is also a rebirth. Once we are allowed to leave our houses, gather again, hug our friends or celebrate birthday parties, I hope we see these experiences through a new lens, much like the narrator finds a new appreciation in life’s little magic after standing at the brink of it.

Our narrator sees much of life through new eyes, but most profoundly, nature. The book has several sections devoted to describing the natural world. The importance placed on nature and its beauty is a common theme seen throughout the novel. There are dozens of passages that exhibit the “...red and yellow flowers, and the plants with strings of white flowers are sesame” (Xingjian 316) or “bright red tallow trees” (Xingjian 113). The imagery used shows us how the narrator is seeing nature as the core of life, its vibrancy gives us meaning and fuel. Yet there are other points throughout where the narrator also sees nature as not only a mighty force for beauty but representing death as well- “Up ahead and down below are huge dead trees which have been snapped by the assault of the elements” (Xingjian 59). The narrator is in between a feeling of a deep

appreciation of beauty with an underlying feeling of sadness that comes with it. With the greatness of life comes the realization of death, another theme prevalent throughout the book. This complexity is what drives the narrator to seek meaning in his existence because of the innate beauty of the simple nature of just being alive. How does he make the most of this opportunity?

In his quest through the many isolated mountainous villages, the narrator is met with a few forest rangers with stories of their own. Naturally, these parts of the novel interested me, as a park ranger myself. As someone who has also worked in public lands, the wisdom, experience and knowledge omitted by the rangers was relatable and appealing. Each act as guides for the narrator to discover more about himself and the world through the natural world around him and the stories they hold. This is not unlike my work in the park service, especially when I consider my time working in one of the greatest natural wonders of our country in Yellowstone. Similar to the rangers in *Soul Mountain*, I form connections between humans and the natural spaces. If nature helped the narrator understand life and death, then it only makes sense he remarked “You are really living the life of an immortal” to the forest ranger. One never really dies when in nature, we become so apart of it and eventually become it.

Not only does the narrator find beauty and appreciation for nature, he finds in his curious relationship with “she”. Throughout the novel, we are not so certain is “she” is one person or even who “she” is. Yet the narrator brings her up many times throughout, with varying interactions. Sometimes it’s a shared smile, sometimes a nostalgic memory, other times she represents pain and sadness. What can be deduced from this is “she” takes many forms, meant to be an omniscient feminine figure in order for us to understand the narrator in the context of and in relation to women. This changing

feminine presence is reminiscent of *The Poisonwood Bible* where we are told the story through four female perspectives. Though we are not hearing the first person female voice, like in *The Poisonwood Bible*, the inclusion of the narrator's quest to understand is important to note. Whereas in *The Poisonwood Bible*, we never hear the effect of 5 women's stories and struggles on the male characters, in *Soul Mountain* it becomes a central focal point as the narrator struggles with not only empathy for "she" but a deep consideration of it.

Soul Mountain is less about a journey to find something and more about the discoveries along the way. In the end, our narrator never really does find his "I", his theoretical destination. But by the end, we have already experienced so much with the character: numerous communities and landscapes, people and lessons, realizations and memories. The mountain he was climbing in the end was that of his own self, he had found it the whole time. During the time of the pandemic, my only hope is that we come out of this with a better understanding of how to move forward and greater appreciation for the small things in life, the same way our narrator felt along his journey.

When I worked in Yellowstone, it took me a while to adjust to the elevation. As a New Yorker who has lived my whole life barely above sea level, it was a stark contrast to suddenly find myself in the mountainous terrain struggling to breathe. During a weekend backpacking trip in the park up a 10,000+ foot mountain, I thought I would die. The air was thin, the incline was steep and I couldn't imagine ever reaching the top. The further I got, the more I wanted to turn around because it seemed impossible. While reading *Soul Mountain*, so much of that experience was evident in our narrator's journey. Though sometimes the mountains we climb are metaphorical,

the analogy is pretty spot on- climbing a mountain teaches you lessons that can be applied toward daily life.

What brought me to Yellowstone in the first place was heartache. I was devastated by a break up and decided the best thing to do was to get far away from my comfort zone in New York City. What brings people back to nature, sometimes, is an extreme life change. What we are seeking from nature may differ, be it peace, solitude, entertainment, challenge, etc. In this way, *Soul Mountain* became more relatable. Where the narrator was drawn to the great outdoors after a dramatic turn of events, those same extreme emotions are what brought me to Yellowstone's doorstep. "...after being diagnosed with lung cancer by the doctor, all I could do every day was go to the park on the outskirts of the city...I could then be alone, in peace and quiet..." (Xingjian 69). It seems that for most people, when facing extenuating circumstances in life, nature calls us to heal.

Along my journey up the mountain, I felt like I couldn't continue many times. I constantly wanted to give up. My body was in pain, my chest was tight and the path seemed endless. Luckily, I wasn't alone. Had I been by myself, I would've turned around before I was halfway through. I had support, colleagues and friends who became my guides and cheerleaders, my motivation and strength. One in particular stayed behind with me every time I had to pause for a breath (which was pretty frequent), refill my water bottle from his own stash or share his granola bar. Dan was able to push me, literally and figuratively, all the way to the top. I relied on him to get through and in *Soul Mountain*, it's evident that our narrator also finds guides along the way. "My peasant guide who came into the mountain with me hears my yells and comes running out with his hacking knife in his hand. Traumatized, I can't talk but just keep yelping, swaying

the hurricane lamp and pointing. He also immediately begins yelping and takes the hurricane lamp from my hand...Going back into the cave, I am so agitated that I can't get back to sleep, and he is tossing and turning too. So I ask him to tell me some stories about the mountains." Having these people along his journey showed the narrator how important the journey itself was. Similarly, I had Dan to take my mind off the destination and bask in the way up. We laughed, I cried, and I relished each vantage point or small distraction. Eventually, I stopped thinking so much about how much farther I had to go and began to appreciate where I was.

Once at the top, after a whole day of climbing, it was windy, chilly and exhilarating. I felt accomplished, grateful for not giving up and began to catch my breath. After the hard work, I started to think about why people hike. Why do people out themselves through this almost torture-like activity when they don't have to? When I wanted to give up, I kept telling myself I would never do something like this again. But when I got to the top, it felt worth it,



and I already thought about what other hikes I wanted to complete. What I realized at the top of the mountain that the summit wasn't the only reward. Yes, the vista was stunning and the cool air felt nice. Yet just as fast as I got there, I was already headed down. So are people really hiking for 10 minutes of a view? Probably not. The path is the

prize. This is what the narrator found when he arrived at *Soul Mountain* as well. “I could of course think maybe there is no meaning at all in this blinking eye, but its significance could lie precisely in its not having meaning. There are no miracles. God is saying this, saying this insatiable being, me. Then what else is there to seek? I ask of him.” There were no answers sitting at Soul Mountain, or with God, for the narrator to acquire, but he needed that goal in order to find them along the way.

A back to nature approach attracts us for many different reasons. Just as the narrator was pulled by a yearning for connection to a ‘hometown’, a history, a connection, a story, many of us can relate to that same metaphorical homecoming. Nature is powerful, dangerous, beautiful and delicate all at once. Mountains can be seen as the most conquering of all. When we consider the ultimate challenge, we don’t think of sailing every ocean or walking every desert. We want to climb every mountain. Some mountains are literal, like mine in Yellowstone, but others are more symbolic. Climbing a mountain means defeating our most authoritative competitor, one that can take us out by just existing. When we defeat it, we feel empowered, worthy and with more respect for the inanimate resource that could easily dominate us. We all have obstacles to overcome, and once we do, it’s important we take away a lesson from them. So no matter the mountain, it’s important to always reflect on the wisdom gained.

The human body is so malleable, constantly adapting to or undergoing change, whether through gains or through decay. This is a theme prevalent in Franz Kafka’s short story *Metamorphosis*, albeit a drastic, fictionalized version. Our main character, Gregor, wakes up one day horrified to see that he has somehow turned into an insect. The result of which causes a ripple effect of damage- his family is disgusted by him, he loses his job, he is forced into isolation and has to adjust to a new body. Gregor’s

experience becomes increasingly more harrowing, eventually leading to his hearing his family discuss the burden he brings on them and wishing death upon him so that they can be free of the trouble he brings. Gregor goes to his room and dies. The family is relieved and moves on with their life.

Gregor's experience echoes that of folks who face serious, debilitating illness. His transformation into a bug is fitting, for the way people often view people who are seriously ill, as a parasite, or vermin. When my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer a few years ago, her body began to break down fast- she lost weight, she lost her hair, her eyes bled from treatment, and she had swollen lymph nodes on her body that bulged out. I was scared to look at her and because of that, I often avoided seeing her. Similarly, Gregor's family was often terrified, initially, of even catching sight of him "She did not see him straight away, but when she did notice him under the couch - he had to be somewhere, for God's sake, he couldn't have flown away - she was so shocked that she lost control of herself and slammed the door shut again from outside" (Kafka). Though his sister would look after his basic needs, food and cleanliness, she could not bear to see him. Gregor would hide under the couch or under a sheet to avoid her while she went about helping him. Gregor's mother on the other hand, had more trouble with his transformation. She struggled with holding out hope that the son she knew would return, refusing to accept his new circumstances. This is something I too experienced with my grandmother. I wanted to wait until she was better or healed to see her. I held out on the hope that her normalcy would return. Gregor's mother was also outright petrified by her son's condition, which often caused her to faint or become seriously ill at the sight of him "...and before she even realised it was Gregor that she saw screamed: "Oh God, oh God!" Arms outstretched, she fell onto the couch as if she had given up

everything and stayed there immobile” (Kafka). This reaction of shock and bewilderment is too familiar to me. When I finally did see my grandma, one day in the hospital, I could not stay in the room very long, or bring myself to hug her. Though I did not have a fainting spell or scream with fear, there was an invisible divide made up of fear between us that prevented me from going closer.

Gregor’s family had frequent talks about how the new Gregor, the insect one, was no longer their son/brother. They felt they were caring for an illusion of what was. “You've got to get rid of the idea that that's Gregor. We've only harmed ourselves by believing it for so long. How can that be Gregor? If it were Gregor he would have seen long ago that it's not possible for human beings to live with an animal like that and he would have gone of his own free will. We wouldn't have a brother any more, then, but we could carry on with our lives and remember him with respect” (Kafka). This heartbreaking realization is something that a lot of people who are chronically ill often deal with. Though it was still Gregor living inside the body of a bug, his family could not see that, they only saw the unattractive vermin in front of them who made more trouble for the family. In my own family’s case, the difficulty was also evident. My mom cared for my grandmother endlessly. She took her to her appointments, cleaned her, administered medicine, shopped for her, etc. She had to take time off work, gave up her weekends and free time, and endured a huge emotional toll in the process. There were days where I know she felt that my grandmother was a burden, and yearned for the time where she would be free. These feelings are complicated and taboo. Though we may adore our loved ones, caring for an ill person is taxing on the mind and body. Gregor’s family shows us how this plays out. Gregor eventually realizes the best thing he can do for his family is die. “He thought back of his family with emotion and love. If it was

possible, he felt that he must go away even more strongly than his sister. He remained in this state of empty and peaceful rumination until he heard the clock tower strike three in the morning. He watched as it slowly began to get light everywhere outside the window too. Then, without his willing it, his head sank down completely, and his last breath flowed weakly from his nostrils” (Kafka).

Though my grandma is now in remission from cancer, I can empathize with the emotions that were brought up by Gregor’s family. From the outside, they could easily be seen as mean, heartless or unsympathetic. Certainly while reading, I also initially saw them as such. Yet after reflection, I realized that I too exhibited those same feelings as the Samsa family and desperately yearned for relief. The effect of illness on not only the person experiencing it, but the caregiver as well, is distressing. It forces you into considerations that were inconceivable before. Luckily, the relief came for my family when my grandma showed signs of recovery. Though she is better, she isn’t the same as she was pre-illness. I, too, had to accept her new being and let go of the one I had before. A new normal, if you will.

Gregor also personifies the appreciation for healthy bodies. When the threat of a deadly virus is constantly looming, each day we wake up not infected, not struggling to breathe or feeling like *vermin*, is a day to exhale. A classmate of mine shared that she

tested positive for COVID-19 during a recent Zoom class. She expressed feelings of sadness, the loneliness that comes with isolation, and as if she had transformed into a dangerous threat overnight. I immediately thought of Gregor's experience and how he shared similar emotions. Caregivers during the time of COVID-19 struggle to look after sick family members while also cautious of becoming infected themselves.

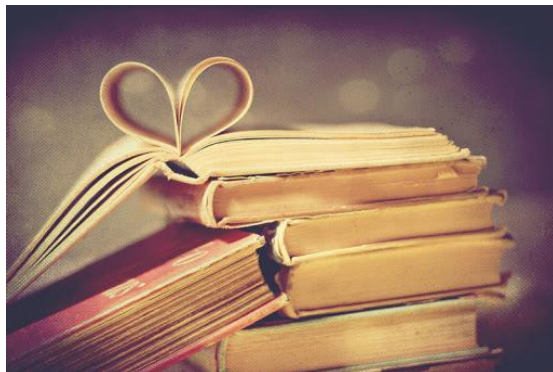


Our bodies are constantly changing, and this was apparent as well in the movie *Love in the Time of Cholera*. There was a profound scene at the end where two former lovers find themselves together again, after 50+ years and now in their 70s. As the two shared an intimate experience, I thought about the way we view older bodies and love. In one scene, *Fermina* undresses and exposes her aged body to *Florentino* (who ironically just ended a relationship with a much younger woman). Embarrassed at first, she finds comfortability after Florentino fully accepts and embraces the woman standing in front of him. As a society, we tend to outcast the old and the ill, not deeming them worthy of love and intimacy. Just as Gregor's family found it hard to love the unpleasant bug he had become, there is some intersection between aging and illness. The body is

imperfect, and often old age and illness exemplify this fact. But there is also amazing beauty in those forms. Old age shows us our body's resilience and illness shows our body's adaptability. Viewing it like this makes the beauty of bodies that much clearer.



COVID-19 has done a lot to the world in a short amount of time. It has killed thousands, unemployed millions and uprooted almost everyone. It has also made us rethink how we view the world around us- who we spend our time with, what's important to us and not taking for granted a healthy body. It has forced us to learn to grieve unexpected circumstances and accept loss, and put us on a journey to better understand ourselves. It has also illuminated the inequalities that exist in so many facets of our world- who is getting the virus, who is getting treated, who is dying. It has also allowed us to reconsider the art we are viewing and using to get us through this time, including literature. Though many of our characters are living in a different time period, or a fantastical setting, their stories and messages are relevant, their stories are relatable. If there is one thing we can all use during a time of so many unknowns and uncertainties, it's art and literature.



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