

Jeffery Richmond

20th Century Writers with Professor Keefer

5-19-20

From Pain to Prosperity

Spring 2020: I was a junior in the School of Professional Studies majoring in Sports Management and Physical Therapy. My route towards my major choices have served as the culmination of a variety of events in my life. As a first generation American, I grew up in a lifestyle that was far from typical. Both of my parents emigrated from Jamaica as young adults, and as a result, I was fully immersed in Jamaican culture from a young age. However, this would strongly contrast the American culture I was encapsulated by amongst my peers, thus giving me incredible insight as to how both cultures operate. This has allowed me to form a rather unique outlook on the world, as I have firsthand experience in observing first-world and third-world cultures, different socioeconomic classes, and a genuine understanding of the (Western) assimilation process.

As a child I was fascinated by sports, particularly baseball, basketball, and mixed martial arts. I engaged in these sports proficiently as a child, and for a significant portion of my life I believed I was going to become a professional in one of these sports. This aspiration came to an abrupt end during my sophomore year of high school, as I was deemed medically ineligible to play sports due to my severe scoliosis. During my senior year of high school, I underwent a spinal fusion on nearly my entire spine. This led to many complications afterwards, most notably my contraction of Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS). GBS is a rare syndrome in which your immune system mistakes your nervous system for a virus, therefore attacking it. As a result, I was paralyzed from my waist down for roughly three months. It is during this time period that

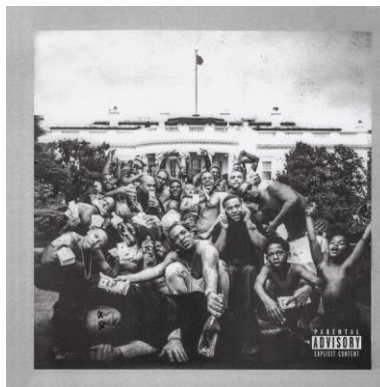
my ability to preserve was truly tested, as for the second time in less than four months I was fighting for my life. It was during my rehabilitation process that I realized physical therapy was another one of my strongest passions, and it was because of a Doctor in Physical Therapy that I am still here today. I had gone to three different emergency rooms within a week, and each of hospital was unable to discern what was the cause of my paralysis. It was spreading rapidly, as it took just over a week for the paralysis to “grow” from my feet to just under my bellybutton. Had I not met with my physical therapist, there was a 100% chance (according to multiple doctors) that I would have passed away within another week. It is because of my physical therapist that I am truly dedicated to both of my majors, and I hope to start a sports medicine business in the near future.



While most of my hobbies are sports centric, I do have a variety of other interests. I love traveling the world, as I believe it is imperative to observe as many different cultures as you can. I particularly enjoy traveling to countries rich in history, and some of my favorite countries to visit have included Italy, Spain, and Mexico. I have a trip planned to Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, and Dubai in the summer, and I am extremely eager to learn as much as I can about those societies. Perhaps my two biggest interests aside from these two hobbies are my engagement with hip-hop

and rap and high-fashion and streetwear. Growing up in New York, I was often surrounded by music. My father has over 50,000 cd's of both rap and reggae, and my grandfather developed his own in-home theatre to listen to classical music. As a result, I believe I have a keen sense for different sounds, and a profound interest in lyricism. I believe music is one of the most beautiful forms of self-expression, as is fashion. To me fashion is an incredible representation of oneself, as often times the outfits I choose to wear are a reflection of the way I am feeling that day. I have always believed I could have majored in either of these two arts in conjunction with sports, and I look forward to pursuing some type of activities with those arts in the near future.

As a young black man, I have experienced racial subjugation throughout my entire life. This led to my passion for reading works of black writers, most notably Ta-Nehisi Coates (whom I had the pleasure of meeting thanks to NYU two years ago), Martin Luther King, Malcom X, and Marcus Garvey. In fact, I found it incredible that *Between the World and Me* was one of the required readings, as I believe it is a piece that resonates with many minorities, regardless of skin color. It also demonstrates how prevalent racism is in our society, even though the years of slavery and Jim Crow laws have long been abolished. It is for this reason that I strongly prefer both non-fiction and historical writing.



I find this introductory assignment to be one of personal sentiment for me, as there is a quote from *Between the World and Me* that I recall discussing with my mother a few years ago.

Coates states that “race is the child of racism, not the father.” I find this quote to almost be powerful beyond words. In my own personal opinion, there is only one race, the human race. We are all people, who all share the same basic characteristics that make us human. Skin pigment, language, religion (or lack thereof), and location are merely beautiful traits that make us all unique. If we could all accept that we’re all the same but different, I feel as if it would make the world a much more wholesome environment. However, the world isn’t like this, and potentially minute discrepancies have become huge differences (yet another reason we are all unique). However, it is the designation of these differences that makes global literature so fascinating to me. It is incredible to observe how everyone’s unique experiences can develop into different styles, methods, and rhetoric. I am genuinely excited to see what this course has to offer, and I look forward to reading works from all across the globe.

I find it very interesting that in *Between the World and Me*, Coates states that he did not think about Baldwin when he visited Paris. Coates’ writing style makes it increasingly evident that Baldwin’s work was an integral facet of his development. While Coates’ book is aimed towards his son Samori and Baldwin’s letter is directed to his nephew James, the motifs implemented in both works are eerily similar. What I find to be very powerful is how *Between the World and Me* came out roughly fifty years after Baldwin’s letter, yet the calls for racial cognizance remain ever-present in their writing. In the black community, African American subjugation has become synonymous with American history to an extent unlike any other. Baldwin and Coates share the same goals, principles, and concepts that they’d like to evoke in the black youth, albeit in different ways. In Coates’ novel he states that “in America, the injury is not in being born with darker skin, with fuller lips, with a broader nose, but in everything that happens after.” In Baldwin’s letter, he tells James that “you were born where you were born and

faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits to your ambition were thus expected to be settled. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity and in as many ways as possible that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence. You were expected to make peace with mediocrity.”

The theses are the same, yet the way they are explained is different.



The most powerful word in both pieces is the word you. You, a word that can be both ambiguous and direct, and in the case of both authors’ writing, a word that cuts deep, particularly when read through the eyes of a young black man himself. The word you resonates inexplicably powerfully for me because I *am* a young black man. I am the son of a black man, who is the son of a black man, who is the son of a black man. We all lived different lives, yet one constant remained painfully similar, the blatantly obvious notion that we were destined to fail the second we were put on this planet. It is a sentiment that is experienced across a multitude of different races in a multitude of different places. It is a sentiment that until you have truly experienced it, you will just never understand. It is a sentiment that is accentuated by the word you. When you, the young black male living in America, read about the pain you’re expected to suffer just for being a young black male living in America, that alone is already trauma. It is a trauma I feel, my

cousins feel, my best friends feel. It is a trauma James Baldwin felt, and a trauma Ta-Nehisi Coates still feels. But it is that same trauma that makes or breaks a young black male in America.

“Take your pain and make champagne with it.” – Pop Smoke



These pieces from both Coates and Baldwin remind me of a life-threatening interaction I had during my freshman year here at NYU. It was roughly 3:30 in the morning on a Saturday, and I was walking home (Lipton Hall) from a friend's house. Given that it was very cold outside and I was exhausted, I decided that I would cut through Washington Square Park instead of walking all the way down West 4th St to Washington Square West. I was still new to the city, and given that the gates were closed, I figured it was acceptable to go in the park. Almost instantly, I was called upon by a police officer. He asked me where I was going, and when I explained to him that I was a student at New York University he looked rather skeptical. “I’m not so sure you go there”, he said. Unbelievable. Absolutely unbelievable. I cautiously informed the officer that I was certainly a student at the school, yet he still didn’t believe me. He then asked me if I could open my backpack, and when I refused he asked me if it was because I had something to hide. I asserted to the officer that it was not that I had anything to hide, but instead I had not conducted any suspicious activity that warranted being searched. I then told the officer I was going to reach into my wallet to get my I.D., making sure to slowly reach into my pocket while making eye contact with the officer. When I finally pulled out my wallet and showed him my NYU I.D. with

a Lipton Hall sticker on it, the officer looked remarkably disappointed. I vividly remember exclaiming that “not all black people are drug dealers you fucking asshole” while walking away trembling, still unsure of whether or not he would call me back, but confident I had asserted my innocence. I still remember him coldly saying “I hope I don’t see you around boy”, as I walked away, almost daring me to turn around and re-instigate the situation. You and boy, two words that have become synonymous with the black man. Two words that have stood the test of time as the quickest way to incite anger in a black man without using the blatantly racist word “nigger”. When will the hatred end?

It is this hatred that remains fuel for me to excel to the best of my abilities. It is this hatred and pain that I will use to make champagne. I know one day this champagne I speak of will be the best of its kind, and as I overlook the skyline sitting from my penthouse, I will finally have a true feeling of empowerment, fulfillment, and success. And when that day comes, I will raise a toast to the officer that doubted me.



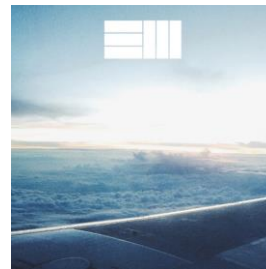
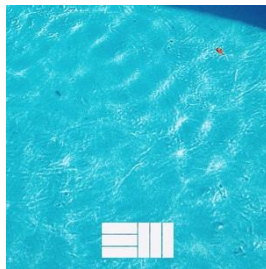
Jesmyn Ward’s *The Fire This Time* is a series of pieces from a variety of renowned authors of color. Each unique piece serves as an exemplar reminder of the trials, tribulations, and aspects of daily life that are engrained in black history. Ward’s personal introduction is quite powerful, and it is within the first two paragraphs of this opening piece that the reader is already introduced to the pain and hopelessness often felt within the black community. Ward speaks of the news of the killing of Trayvon Martin, a young teen, who like many others, had their beautiful lives cut short by the premise of prejudice. Upon reading this, I too was brought back to

the time when I heard the news. I recall my mother sitting me down, once again, to emphasize the importance of having an understanding of how my skin color automatically grouped me into a subsection of society, one that is unforgiving and will belittle me at all costs necessary. My mind then shifted to March of 2015. I was accompanying my high school basketball team to a trip to upstate to Lake Mary, Florida, and along the way we passed through Sanford. I remember sitting in the coach bus gazing out the window, and every time I made eye contact with a white person in their respective vehicle, I wondered if they had the same hatred and angst at my presence as George Zimmerman did while harassing and soon after killing an innocent young man. I wondered if the same thing were to happen to me if I were to step outside the bus right then. I wondered if my white teammates had any idea where we were, and why it was so important. But most of all, I wondered why the hell everyone kept bothering me and trying to get my attention as I stared out the window. It almost hurt at first that they would never understand, then again how could they. Losing Trayvon felt so real, more real than any incident that had occurred before in my generation. Perhaps it was because of the constant media involvement. Perhaps it was because of the protests. Perhaps it was because it was at that very moment, I understood that nothing was truly guaranteed when you're black.

Ward's introduction resonates in a way many others cannot evoke. While pain is transferrable through writing, it is the presumption of the future pain that makes this pain so great. It is the undeniable fact that this *will* occur again. It is not a matter of if, it is a matter of when, and it will always be a matter of why, but we'll most likely never know why. Aside from this introduction, I found two of the epistolary pieces to have extreme personal sentiment.

Mitchell S. Jackson's "Composite Pops" is quite compelling to me for a multitude of reasons. The first thing that strikes me are the vast similarities between myself and my former

professor here at NYU. Professor Jackson was my Writing 2 teacher during my second semester of freshman year, and I profoundly recall him discussing how severely his father's inactiveness in his life helped him develop as a person. This anthological piece is quite sentimental to me as I finally had a greater understanding of how the other male figures in his life provided him with the sense of fatherhood he didn't directly receive from his biological father. Like professor Jackson, I am a black male who has not had the greatest relationship with his father. I know I'm not the first kid to have this problem, and I can guarantee I'm not the last. However, like Jackson I was surrounded by many older male figures that provided me with a sense of fatherhood, particularly my father's father, my oldest uncle (my father is the oldest of nine brothers) and my endless list of older cousins.



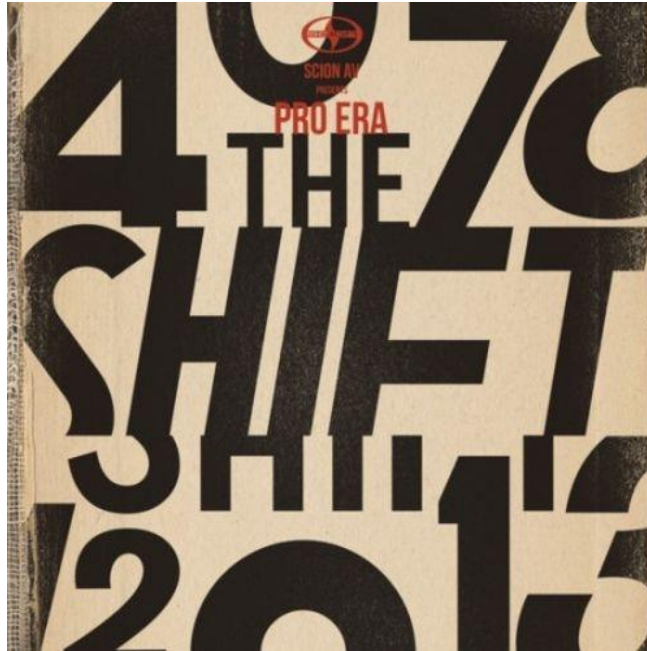
While I found the entire passage to be oddly familiar (in an all too familiar way) to my upbringing, I found that my most memorable excerpt of this writing was the scene in which Mitchell's father is teaching him to swim. After nearly drowning, Jackson refers to his lesson learned with the powerful statement "Troubled water or not, you best learn to swim. 'Cause when your young-ass get to drowning, I may not be moved to rescue." Upon reading this, I was instantly brought back to a time around five or six, when my father and I had visited Jamaica together. It was the first time I'd been to the ocean, and I could vividly remember my dad talking about how much he enjoyed swimming in the ocean and the lakes in Jamaica as a kid. However, I was no older than six, and being from New York, there weren't many places you could learn to

swim at that age, at least not without paying for it. So here we are, me and my dad, and I'm at an endless abyss where darkness lies beyond the eyes' discernible reach, yet all I can focus on is trying to figure out why I can clearly see my reflection in the ocean when I thought water was blue. I look to my right as my father graciously dives into this unknown clear liquid that tastes really funny (I hadn't recalled trying regular saltwater that young) and he disappears. I start to panic as the seconds go by - one second Mississippi turns into two which turns into three. And just before I can count four Mississippi's there he is, shooting out of the water like a superhero. He encourages me to get in, and I have no choice but to listen. I take two giant steps and jump, and before I know it I'm being moved by this odd physical force with such great power and such disregard for anything you can do to try and stop it. Panic sets in and I start to freeze. I see a figure standing over me, and it's making hand gestures and sounds, but I just can't make out what they mean. Finally, and I mean finally, my father drags me out of the water, almost deliberately, kind of like he was burdened with rescuing a drowning kid (his child) by accident. After pulling me out of the water he yells at me and asks me how I don't know how to swim. Me. A six-year-old. A child who's never voluntarily swam a day in his life. Somehow, it's my fault. It's always my fault. He tells me that I'm going to learn to swim right now, and he literally meant right now. I crash back into the clear, funny-tasting liquid that I'm told is water but sure as hell doesn't look, taste, or move like it; water isn't supposed to be stronger than you, it's water. It didn't take long for me to figure out you need to hold your breath underwater. It didn't take long for me to learn the ocean burns your eyes if you keep them open. It didn't take me long to realize the only way to move was to push yourself through the water. Somehow, by dropping me in the ocean, my father taught me how to swim. It wasn't until later that day that I asked him why he dropped me in the ocean. To this point I was convinced that he hated me, why else would a man

throw his kid into some overwhelming force without teaching him how to navigate it first. “A quitter would’ve drowned. A fighter will fight to survive. You were raised to be one of them, and you damn sure better not be the quitter.”

“What Baldwin understood is that to be black in America is to have the demand for dignity be at absolute odds with the national anthem.” (Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah). When people first think of the national anthem, America is often referred to as “the land of the free, and the home of the brave.” I truly wonder how many people have taken the time to truly dissect The Star-Spangled Banner. I wonder how many people know that the poet, Francis Scott Key, owned a massive slave plantation in Maryland. I wonder how many people are aware that Key had an extremely tight bond with President Andrew Jackson, one of the most notoriously racist men ever step foot inside the oval office. I wonder how many people know that the third stanza of our National Anthem reads “no refugee could save the hireling and slave, from the terror or flight, or the gloom of the grave, and the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave, o’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah subtly identifies a point that many choose to leave unacknowledged: our nation’s history, although great, is deeply rooted in systematic racism and hatred. It is hatred that us present-day black know, yet remains unfathomable and almost incomprehensible to even imagine the degree and extremity in which our ancestors suffered. It is a hatred acknowledged by Baldwin and Coates alike. It is a hatred acknowledged by every single black person that has experienced some form of racism ever. Unfortunately, it is a hatred that runs far too deep in our history and remains all too familiar. It is a hatred I hope to see abolished. It is the hatred that fuels me today. I strongly commend Ghansah for incorporating this statement into her piece, “The Weight”, as this sentiment remains the source of motivation for many future generations of people of color alike.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a fascinating story of (amongst other things) a black girl who struggles with a sense of identity due to two factors: "being a minority in caste and class" (17). The life of a black girl, particularly in the late 1940's was a painstaking tribulation that remains unequivocal in the present-day United States. One particular facet of this novel that I find extremely relatable is that of the sense of beauty and belongingness.



When I was 12 years old, my mother and I moved from Yonkers, New York to Boca Raton, Florida. My life in New York was, to say the least, the complete opposite of what I would soon experience in the "sunshine state". Until my move, I had gone to a public school nearby, and as a result, I had been exposed to a plethora of races, religions, and social classes. At the time I thought this was normal for every school, but upon entering private school in Florida it was rather easy to see that this was not the case. I vividly remember my first day of 7th grade. I wasn't particularly excited, mostly because my summer break had begun in June, yet I had to start school in August because Florida schools begin and end a month earlier than the New York public schools. The next thing that truly irked me was the uniform. I had never been forced to

wear a uniform in public school, and Florida was way too hot to be wearing a suit every day. Yet my mother urged me to try to make the most of it, so for her sake I tried to be positive. I recall walking into my first class, English 7 Honors with Ms. Goss. Upon opening the door to the class, everyone, literally everyone stared at me. The whole room went silent, and I could feel every set of eyes analyzing me from top to bottom. Finally, Ms. Goss broke the awkward silence by asking me if I was in the right classroom. I remember the instant sense of pain and anguish rushing through my body, wondering how I had already been ostracized and the first bell of 7th grade hadn't even rung yet. I sharply turned to my right, making direct eye contact with my teacher. "Is this Ms. Goss' English 7 Honors class?" I asked. Ms. Goss looked completely shocked, momentarily paralyzed by my seemingly innocent question that was delivered with such an aggressive tone. After she said yes, I asserted my position by exclaiming that I was in the right class and sat in the very first desk right in the front of the classroom. I remember sitting down hearing the little giggles and whispers about what the new black boy just said to the teacher in front of everybody. I remember all the eyes, still looking at me cautiously, trying to examine whether or not I'd be a potential friend or foe. I remember feeling completely ostracized, wondering why on earth would my mother take me away from home and put me in a school where I'd be the only black student for the foreseeable future. It was a feeling of hopelessness, one that stuck with me extremely intensely for the remainder of the year.

The next few weeks at private school were quite odd for me. At first it was very obvious that kids thought I was straight out of the hood. Not only was I the only black kid, but I had a heavy New York accent, was significantly more athletic than the rest of the kids in my grade, and I wouldn't take shit from anybody. It only took 3 weeks for me to get into my first fist fight there, and to be completely honest I only started the fight to let the rest of the school know that I

wasn't going to come here and let everybody run over me. Soon afterwards, when other kids started realizing I wasn't actually a bad kid, they began to ask me a lot of questions. The most notable that I can still remember was an instance where a group of girls ran up to me asking if they could touch my hair and then being overjoyed by the texture when I let them touch it. It was there that I realized they weren't actually afraid of me; I was just different. I wasn't different in a bad way, it was just that these sheltered children hadn't been exposed to minorities, especially on a daily basis. Likewise, I had never been around exclusively white people on a daily basis as well. I soon realized that not all white people had blonde hair and blue eyes. Not all white people have pale skin that burns easily. Most importantly, I realized that not all white people hate me. I wish I could say the same for the characters in *The Bluest Eye*.

I believe one particular passage accentuates this unfortunate sentiment, and it occurs on page 17. "There is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition. Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with—probably because it was abstract. But the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter—like the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead. Dead doesn't change, and outdoors is here to stay." (*Morrison 17*)

This paragraph encompasses all of the feelings evoked in me when I first had to go to school. In fact, for a long time, this was how I felt about Florida. My only sense of warmth and welcoming was in my home, where I could take solace in knowing that I wasn't the minority.

There were countless times where I faked being sick or injured just so I wouldn't have to feel alone when I was surrounded by a sea of white faces, with eyes seemingly watching my move. It felt eerily similar to the billboard of eyes in *The Great Gatsby*, yet everyone was a billboard, each with their own set of eyes silently judging me from a distance. The eyes and the outdoors became synonymous, accentuating the feeling or lack thereof of belongingness. I eventually learned that I had to embrace the outdoors, I had to embrace the eyes that were watching me. I needed to be those eyes. When people stared at me, I began to stare back. When people challenged me, I challenged back. I believe both the outdoors and the eyes were the deciding factors that would make or break me, and I knew I couldn't let what I assumed were other people's predetermined perceptions of me identify who I would be as a person. It became a source of confidence, one I would use to propel myself into what I hope has made me a person that has the unique ability to empathize and converse with people of all races, minorities, and classes. I have seen both sides of the racial and social castes, and I believe the only way to truly become successful is to understand how one can portray themselves beyond what their physical or monetary status says, it was who you are as an individual that truly matters. This quote allowed me to reminisce on a portion of my life I rarely acknowledge, one that undeniably shaped me as the person I am today, and I am truly grateful for that.

“Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place” - Chinua Achebe

Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" provides a unique perspective on the fascination of African culture as an epicenter of inhumanness while explicating such fascination with Africans as human beings. Deeply rooted in what I would ascertain as blatant racism supplemented with

unbeknownst curiosity, Conrad details a journey to “a place of darkness”, one where the well-established, proper, Western way of living Conrad is familiar with in London is starkly contrasted by a region deeply-rooted in primal behaviors, one Chinua Achebe refers to as “ a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.” It is imperative for the reader to understand that the rhetoric of the (Conrad’s) book is the result of the narrator using predetermined notions of the unknown that are further accentuated upon his long-last arrival. I have found that one passage in particular emphasizes this notion, and it is quickly identified on page 7 of the novel.

“Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There’s no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination—you know, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate.” In this excerpt, Marlow is referring to what he believes an imperial Roman would have thought upon arrival at the Thames River. However, I find a significantly deeper sentiment in this excerpt, one I believe would align with the likes of Coates, Baldwin, and surely Achebe as well.



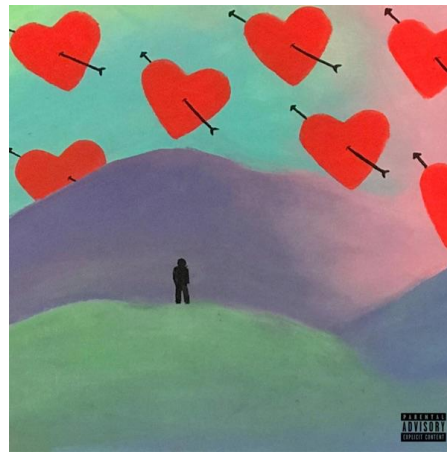
In order to truly understand the gravity of this quote, I believe it must be analyzed on a sentence by sentence basis, as each line evokes emotions relative to both the past, present, and future history of Africans and African Americans in Western society. Upon reading the first line of the excerpt, I wonder how many Westerners have had that same notion once setting foot in Africa. When we (Westerners) think of Africa today, I wonder what the first images or words are that come to mind. I can say with a fair amount of certainty that the first words I think of are lack of infrastructure, dilapidation, nature, violence, and pain. The first images that come to my mind are that of the African safaris, Kony 2012, and the movies *Beast of No Nation* and *Blood Diamond*. Throughout history Africa has been portrayed as a beautiful nation with gorgeous landscape that has been decimated by centuries of misfortune. Somehow the continent richest in minerals, ores, and natural resources remains an area of poverty, humility, and yet somehow, unforgiveness. I can vividly imagine Marlow stepping foot along the shores of the Thames River, marveling at how a place so beautiful can somehow be so desolate. Yet I wonder if Marlow, like most of the Westerners from his generation, ever took the time to truly examine the complexities of their intertwining with African history which has undeniably led to such savagery. It appears as if they are genuinely convinced that Africans are beasts by destiny, almost as if they (Africans) are closer relatives to the Neanderthals than they (Westerners) could possibly be. It is as if the natives were primordial beings that were somehow blessed with Western appearance, eager with the opportunity to assimilate into “greater society” yet hindered by “all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men”. Achebe refers to this as blatant ignorance, an ignorance that would undoubtedly be identified by the likes of James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates. This ignorance is what has led to the systematic subjugation of people of color for hundreds, if not thousands of years. It is the same

ignorance Coates speaks of to his son, and the same ignorance Baldwin foreshadows for his nephew.

“There’s no initiation either into such mysteries.” This sentence furthers the claim that Africans are beasts by nature. It is a predetermined outcome to be an African beast, much like the lions that roam the safaris or the sharks that roam the seas. The African human has the same mysterious bewildering nature, “he has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable.” *And*, it is because of this mysterious bewildering and detestable nature that Marlow states “a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him”. I find Conrad’s use of fascination to be a description of the African man’s psyche. I would be eager to know what esteemed authors such as Toni Morrison and F. Scott Fitzgerald would think of the use of fascination, as fascination is deeply rooted in plots of both *The Bluest Eye* and *The Great Gatsby*. However, in this case, this fascination leads to “the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate”. Each of the sentiments identified in that quote are ever-present in the black community. Each of these sentiments has been explicitly identified by black artists across all forms of art. Each of these sentiments has shaped the course of black history. Each of these sentiments can never be forgotten when you’re black.

Death in Venice details a profound, forbidden “love” story that exposes the true dangers of both the heart, and infectious disease. Gustave von Aschenbach, an elder-aged writer, has found himself amongst the streets of Venice, finally obtaining the time to travel he had been bereft of during his career and had been longing for for quite some time. He is the primordial example of cognizance, always using his eyes and senses as his ideal travel guide while leaving his mind free to do what it does best: observe, gather information, and formulate rather intricate and insightful conclusions. These conclusions would in turn serve as inspiration towards his next

piece(s) of writing, albeit the productive summer he longs for soon turns into a longingness filled with sexual undertones.



Upon checking into his hotel in Venice “as he sat there dreaming thus, deep, deep into the void, suddenly the margin line of the shore was cut by a human form. He gathered up his gaze and withdrew it from the illimitable, and lo, it was the lovely boy who crossed his vision coming from the left along the sand. He was barefoot, ready for wading, the slender legs uncovered above the knee, and moved slowly, yet with such a proud, light tread as to make it seem he had never worn shoes.” (*Mann 61*) Gustave is clearly fascinated with the physical specimen that is this boy, to which “a feeling of delicacy, a qualm, almost like a sense of shame, made Aschenbach turn away as though he had not seen, he felt unwilling to take advantage of having been, by chance, privy to this passionate reaction. But he was in truth both moved and exhilarated—that is to say, he was delighted.” (*Mann 63*) He develops a keen fondness for this young boy, Tadzio, and as the plot develops, Aschenbach’s fascination for the boy develops into an obsession.

As the story progresses, so too does Gustave’s sexual desires for the boy. He begins to follow Tadzio as he traverses the city, yet never actually talks to him. As he continues to follow him, he accentuates his risk of contracting cholera, a dangerous epidemic rapidly infecting the

population of Venice. Aschenbach refuses to let this risk deter him, continuing to pursue Tadzio at will. However, his negligence soon becomes the epitome of his downfall, as Gustave becomes gravely ill from the infectious disease. The book ends with Gustave succumbing to his grave illness, dying in a rather trivial manner. The book emphasizes the grave danger that is presented by highly infectious diseases, and I chose to comment on Mann's piece because the hazards of infectious diseases have become all too familiar to me.

Last week, I was given quite unfathomable news. My older cousin Milton, who is now 55, was administered to an emergency room in Miami with a 103-degree fever, an array of aches and pains, shortness of breath, and the disturbing sense that his body was become more and more dilapidated by the hour. Just a few days ago, he was official diagnosed with COVID-19, popularly known as the Coronavirus. I find this troubling for a plethora of reasons.

Growing up, Milton was one not only one of my favorite people, but a tremendous role model. He served as a member of the Jamaican Defense Force, owned multiple businesses, and became a self-made millionaire. He was the perfect example of the American dream, albeit he carried out most of his dream in his home country of Jamaica. If you could look up perfectly sculpted man on Google, Milton would be the first image that popped up. Whenever he walked into a room everyone's face would light up, he was always the man of the party. It almost seemed like he had an aura of invincibility around him, my first childhood version of Superman. Surely nothing bad could happen to him.

Suddenly in the summer of 2013 Milton's health began to rapidly deteriorate. He began to lose tens of pounds in just a matter of weeks, and the once 185-pound man with less than 10 percent body fat weighed just over 100 pounds, with his muscles atrophying exponentially. He was constantly in pain, ran high fevers, and had incredible gastrointestinal issues. Milton had

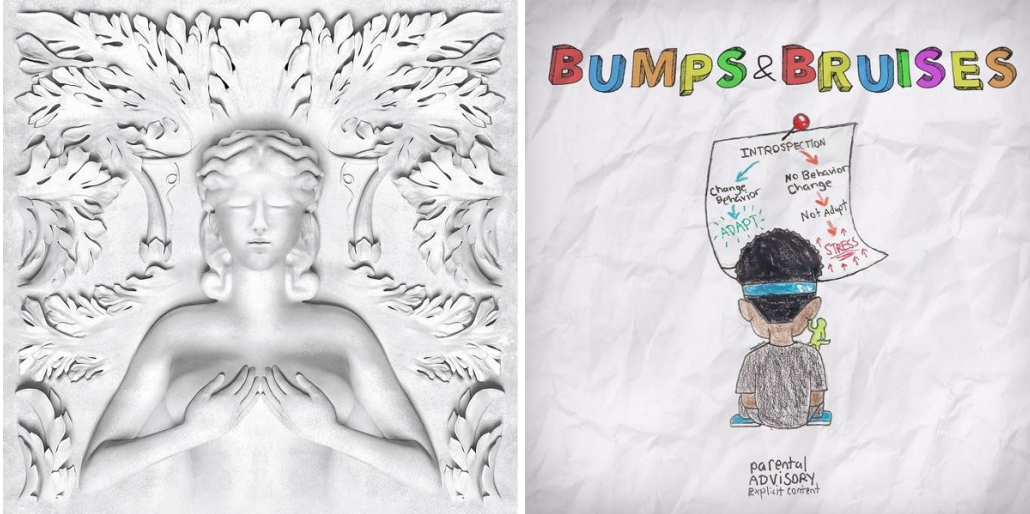
Chikungunya. Chikungunya is a devastating virus that arises from a mosquito bite and is found predominantly in third-world countries. Milton was admitted into the ICU, and for months we didn't know whether or not he would live. Milton has suffered from complications from this virus ever since, and it wasn't until 2018 that he finally began to regain weight and redevelop an appetite. Milton's five-year battle with Chikungunya was an arduous one, yet being the Superman he is, I wasn't surprised in the slightest that he'd pull through.

Fast forward to today. Like (hopefully) everyone else in our family, Milton had been self-quarantining. He literally had not left his house in weeks. Yet somehow, some way, the Coronavirus made its way inside his home, and now the man I once called Superman is looking more and more like he's met his Kryptonite. Every day when I wake up now, I have to check my WhatsApp to find out whether or not my cousin is still alive. Even then it still doesn't feel like that's enough, because this virus is so deadly that anything can take a turn for the worst in an instant. It is a feeling I know eerily too well. It is a feeling my mother knows eerily too well. It is a feeling Milton already knows, so for him to have to go through such a traumatizing battle for his life yet again is devastating to say the least. It is moments like this where I truly question a lot of things. I am not a religious person for a multitude of reasons, yet I wonder why in times like this I often find myself either questioning or acknowledging the existence of God. I've never believed in God, yet I questioned why he would do such an unfathomable thing to my cousin when he contracted Chikungunya. I questioned God when I found out my mother had breast cancer and had to have emergency surgery. I questioned God when I myself was fighting for my life with Guillain-Barre Syndrome and was paralyzed from the waist down. And now, once again, I have to question why God would make a person like Milton, who's been nothing but a genuine, loving, and down to earth person, the embodiment of what a good human being should

be, is spending what could be his final days without the support of his family next to him as he fights this virus alone. It is a painful feeling to not know whether or not I'll see my cousin again. It is a painful feeling to know that the last time he had texted me before this I saw the text and internally responded instead of acknowledging him right then and there. It is a painful feeling to not be able to tell him I love him and remind him that we were supposed to be playing Uno and Scrabble; just last month I told him we'd be able to spend spring break catching up. It is a painful feeling to see my mother look absolutely hopeless, *again*. It is a painful feeling to have to wake up every day already prepared to hear some of the worst news of my life. It is a painful feeling to think why him; why a person who's done nothing but good have nothing but pain, suffering, and incredibly difficult obstacles to overcome over the past seven years. No one deserves to go through anything like this, but especially not Milton.



I strongly urge everyone to understand the severity of this virus. Please, if not for your own safety, think of your loved ones. Social distancing is the only way to stop the spread of this disease, and if we continue to downplay its effects, hundreds of thousands of people, will die. To the younger generation, just because we will not be as sick does not mean the people we care about will not. This virus does not discriminate, and it affects nearly everyone differently. To my cousin Milton, you have been in my thoughts nearly every second of every day. I love you, and I hope you get well soon.



Memoirs of a Woman Doctor is an autobiographical piece by Nawal el Saadawi that depicts her transition from a young, helpless, girl to an empowered medical professional. It examines the complexities of social oppression, particularly in a region notoriously defined by its social and religious caste system that remains ever-present in modern culture.

The narrator, el Saadawi, begins the piece as a confused child. She is unsure of herself, particularly because of the mere fact that she is female. She even goes as far as to say that “I hated being female” and that “God favored boys in everything.” (*el Saadawi 3*) As she gets older, she begins to see the pressures placed on women in Egyptian society. She receives increasing coercion from her mother to pursue the tradition life for an Egyptian woman: find a nice husband and stay at home to raise a family. Yet Nawal is able to identify that from a rather young age that this is not her destiny, and instead she decides to create her own destiny and pursue her own dreams of happiness, success, and self-fulfillment. She finds this in her natural gravitation towards a career in the sciences and decides to pursue a career as a medical doctor.

El Saadawi faces a plethora of obstacles. She is the only female in her class, oftentimes leading to a sense of exclusion, magnification, and belittlement, yet her bold character allows her to preserve and overcome all challenges she is presented with. She is even presented with a

potential suitor who would fit her family's ideal depiction of a customary life, yet she drowns herself in medicine as a form of escapism. As the narrative continues, it becomes increasingly clear to el Saadawi that outside forces will remain just that, and it is her, and only her than can truly embody the self-fulfillment she truly desires. Her ability to overcome such distinctly discriminatory challenges is remarkable, more so demonstrating her ability to use her own self-definition as the basis for which she controls her own life narrative. She understands the role sex, longing for sex, and sexual identity plays in her society, yet she does not allow it to truly define who she is as a person. Nawal el Saadawi serves as an exceptional demonstration of not only what a woman can accomplish, but the power of the mind itself.

Perhaps the reason why I feel el Saadawi's is so personable is because of the many correlations between the narrator's life story and that of my mother. Born on April 22, 1970, Michelle Marie Thompson was delivered in a small home birthing center in Saint Andrews, a large parish just outside of Kingston, Jamaica's capital city. Her mother, Doreen, was a stay-at-home parent, while her father Clive owned a popular and successful construction business. At first, life was fairly easy for Michelle and her older siblings Wayne and Andrea. Michelle's daily routine was fairly simple: wake up and walk a mile to Catholic school, attend all of her classes, stay for afterschool and prayer, and then wait for her father to pick her up. Afterwards, she was free to do what she pleased. One day, while watching Wayne race motorcycles with one of his best friends, she witnessed a life-threatening crash between her brother and his counterpart, prompting the eight-year-old girl to rush to his side and instinctively administer pressure to her brother's multiple lacerations. It was after this one potential tragedy that Michelle decided she wanted to be a doctor; she took great pride in being able to help others in need. Soon afterwards,

it became her life goal to attend the University of the West Indies, considered at the time to be the premier medical school in not just Jamaica, but all of the Caribbean.

“Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place” - Chinua Achebe

All of this changed in 1982, when the ongoing violent tensions between the Jamaican Labor Party (JLP) and the People’s Nation Party (PNP) had escalated to the point where Clive felt it was no longer safe for him and his family. It had become so dangerous in Kingston that during traffic stops gangsters would ask you if you were in favor of the of JLP or the PNP, and if your answer was incorrect, you and whoever you were with would be murdered on the spot, no negotiations. By the summer of 1982, the entire Thompson family moved to White Plains, New York.

Upon her emigration to the United States, Michelle was instantly introduced to the incredible racial subjugation that is deeply rooted in this country’s origin, further supplemented by her forced assimilation process. Her introduction to life in poverty was a stark contrast of the comforting, easygoing life she had in Jamaica. Her father had been forced to abandon his construction company and immediately move to the United States without selling his home, as it had become increasingly clear that the longer they spent in Jamaica, the more they faced imminent danger. Within months, everyone in the household was responsible for ascertaining some type of financial compensation to keep the family afloat, and by 13 Michelle was already running paper routes, babysitting, and working part-time as a nearby dental assistant. In school she was incredibly alienated, mostly for her “intriguing” foreign accent, British spelling methods, and difficulty transitioning from the metric system to the American mathematical

styles. Furthermore, she was often ridiculed for her fair skin and “gorilla arms”, as her mother was mulatto and her father was half Indian. However, this never deterred Michelle from her goal of becoming a doctor, and she utilized the ever-increasing belittlement as a profound source of motivation. By the end of her senior year of high school, Michelle graduated amongst the top of her class; yet her parents’ financial situation forced her attend CUNY Albany, as they could not afford to send her to schools such as NYU, Columbia, and Syracuse, prestigious universities that she was accepted to, yet not on a full scholarship. After graduating from CUNY Albany, Michelle was accepted into the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, one of the most prestigious medical schools in the country and the site where she would face her greatest challenge yet.

Upon entering medical school, it became noticeably evident to Michelle that many men found her attractive. Her pursuers ranged from all grades, however one teacher in particular demonstrated a perturbing fondness for her. After failing one of her first exams in school, Michelle asked her teacher to meet with her to go over her incorrect answers. During their meeting, the professor made clear and direct sexual advances towards my mother, threatening to fail her if she did not satisfy him sexually. Horrified, and disgusted, she used this as further motivation to excel in her studies, prompting her to dedicate even more time to her craft, and avoiding that monster at all costs. Her perseverance throughout her trials and tribulations were remarkably admirable, as like her high school and undergraduate careers, Michelle graduated at the top of her class. Today my mother is the assistant medical director at Vitas Healthcare, the largest hospice and end-of-life care company in the entire United States. She has received endless awards and acknowledgments in her 23 years as a doctor, owns a private practice in New York, and will be establishing another private practice in Florida within the coming months. She has also become a stage three Reiki instructor. In addition to that, by the end of the year she will

be establishing a vegan-restaurant that utilizes special needs employees and plans on breaking ground for a K-12 school for an orphanage in Honduras by 2021.

The reason I have chosen to write a biography of my mother as my personal connection with *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* is because I believe both my mother and Nawal el Saadawi demonstrate the unique characteristics of strength, determination, and perseverance that I believe can only be found in women of color who have experienced extreme subjugation throughout their lifetime. They both made endless sacrifices geared towards their ultimate goal of becoming a medical professional. This in turn has resulted in my mother being able to provide for me to the best of her abilities, something that I am extremely appreciative for and cannot be understated. She is one of the strongest driving forces in my life that has propelled me to try to be not only the best student I can be, but the best person I can be. She has served as an exceptional basis in which I believe the foundation of my unwavering perseverance and distaste for complacency arises. It is because of her that I have had the blessed opportunities that have been provided for me, and being able to demonstrate my appreciativeness for all she's done for me in a written format is the least I can do. Mom, thank you for everything you've done, everything you're doing, and everything you will continue to do. I love you.



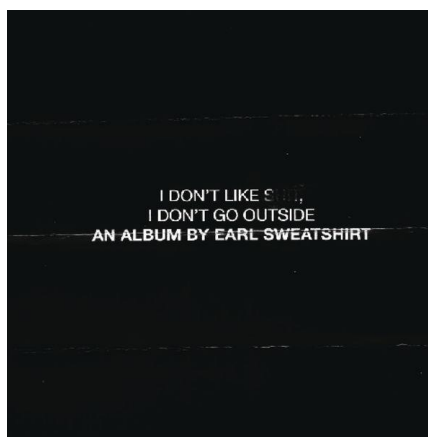
Jean Paul Sartre's, *Huis Clos* is one-act play detailing the effects of confinement on the state of the human mind. The three main characters, Garcin, Estelle, and Inez, are all initially portrayed as independent thinkers with powerful minds. However, as the play progresses, the lack of mental stimulation supplemented by limitation to one small room creates a sense of perturbed anticipation that ultimately results in the demise of the characters' psyches. Sartre is able to subtly play with the human subconscious (for his characters), as he delves into the oftentimes misunderstood and potentially ambiguous concepts of free will and independence.

As human beings mature into adults, they often undergo a series of experiences that are deeply rooted in the formation of their cognitive decisions. Psychology has effectually demonstrated that prior events, whether good or bad, can leave lasting mental impressions that in return dictate the experiencer's actions when faced with a circumstance that reminds them of this past experience. In other words, we do what we want to do, when we want to do it. We are able to make conscious scenario-benefit analyses, and therefore determine if the positives of doing something outweigh its negatives, resulting in action or inaction. As a result, as we get older, we have more *will* to do as we please. However, humans are also notorious for having extreme difficulty deciding a course of action when given limited space and an undesignated set of rules or regulations that one must follow in accordance. This, in turn, leaves the person subject to one's own dislikes, desires, and most notably, delirium (disorientation). Such is the case in *Huis Clos*.

At the climax of the play, Garcin has become completely overwhelmed. The environment has rendered him incredibly unstable, and "anything, anything would be better than this agony of mind, this creeping pain that gnaws and fumbles and caresses one and never hurts quite enough". The longer one is bereft of order and physical freedom, the more time is spent between one and

one's thoughts. "There were days when you peered into yourself, into the secret places of your heart, and what you saw there made you faint with horror. And then, next day, you didn't know what to make of it, you couldn't interpret the horror you had glimpsed the day before." As free physical will was taken, free mental will was overbearing.

Given the state of the world during this global pandemic, forced solitude amongst families has become increasingly prevalent. Families such as mine, which consists of four people who live in completely different environments, have been forced into cohabitation. At first, it seemed as if this would be a rather easy quarantine to navigate, as we had spent countless family vacations, excursions, and events, together throughout my entire life. Within a week it became very noticeable that taking people with different lifestyle habits and mandatorily putting them under one roof could bring about intense moments of emotion. In other words, we have created our own torture chamber. Otherwise regularly minute instances such as who is responsible for what dishes in the sink have turned from trivial matters into full blown arguments. Discrepancies over the volume of the television, which used to be the smallest of conversations, now results in inter-family warfare with exchanges of either directly aggressive or passive aggressive "pleasantries."



In essence, the Coronavirus has turned every house into Sartre's *No Exit*. As the known dangers roam the outdoors, the unknown dangers of prolonged captivity are challenging the mindsets of children, parents, and grandparents alike. As we struggle to find internal calming methods, we are further challenged by the lack of personal space, almost creating a necessity for social distancing within the home as well (in order to maintain sanity). We are experiencing an unforeseen status quo, one which must be treaded lightly. We are all going to argue with our families; we are all going to desperately want to go outside and socialize; we are all going to want to have our space to ourselves. We must put this in the backseat for the time being, and understand the gravity of the global phenomenon that is occurring that is before our eyes. One day we will have our exit.



At the beginning of *Soul Mountain*, the narrator is provided with the earth-shattering news that he has lung cancer, and death is evident. This brings me back to what is undoubtedly the greatest challenge I have faced in my life. In December of 2016, I had a spinal fusion on roughly my entire back. Given that I had experienced multiple severe injuries in the past, I took on the situation with unwavering bravado. I anticipated the surgery being difficult, but believed

all that I had overcome in the past had prepared me to endure whatever pain and recovery would await me follow afterwards. What I truly experienced ended up being agony I would never wish on my greatest enemy.

I still remember waking up in stiffening pain. As I turned to left to gather my surroundings, the stiffening pain exploded into stabbing pain that felt like my limbs where being pulled from the center outwards. It was in this moment that I realized that I was not prepared for this surgery at all. The pain was excruciating, and little did I know I would come to a point where I would've done anything to feel that level of pain, and not what followed shortly after.

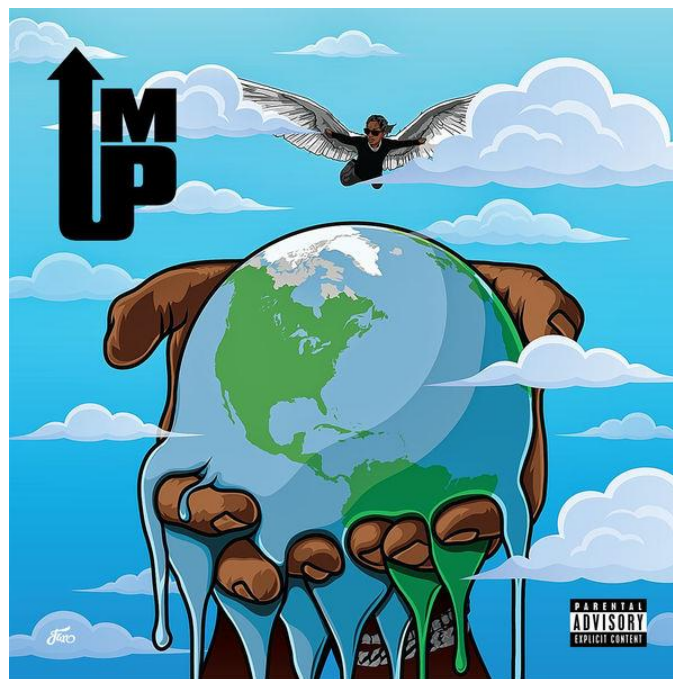
Within three days of my surgery, I was discharged from the hospital and sent home with a prescription for Oxycodone. Not only did I suffer from adverse reactions from Oxycodone, but it also did nothing to mitigate the pain of the surgery. I went into a severe flu-like state, my skin turned grey, and I lost roughly 15 pounds in a week. To make matters worse, when I was brought back to the emergency children's hospital where the surgery took place, the admissions initially denied me as I had turned 18 years old in between my discharge and attempted readmission, and they cited my coming of legal adult status. It was not until my orthopedic surgeon vouched that this was the best location to handle my sickness that I was able to reenter the hospital. Once there, my suffering only increased. At first, the pain management specialist accused me of being a drug addict pleading for stronger narcotics. Her irresponsible negligence led to the continuation of my prescription of Oxycodone, and for the next three days she watched unsympathetically as my family and I pleaded with her to change my prescription. She cited that all I needed was a stronger dosage, yet each dosage resulted in me feeling sicker. She then decided to give me Oxycontin and said that its combination with Tylenol would minimize the sicknesses I was experiencing. Well, she was still wrong. By the end of the second week, I had lost 25 pounds and

was watching my body wither away at the irresponsibility of a poorly trained medical professional. It wasn't until my mother threatened to report her for malpractice that I was given a different prescription. I had not only lost weight, developed incredible digestion issues, fought near-death fever temperatures, and most notably, experienced **no** pain relief that I was given a new prescription. I had felt the full pain of a spinal fusion for 18 days, a pain so indescribable that I still feel phantom pains randomly. It also resulted in some areas of my back being permanently numb, an issue that challenges me on a daily. Even as I am writing this commentary, I find myself feeling discomfort as I attempt to transcribe my feelings to writing.

A month after my horrors with prescription medicine, I was again found myself in the hospital, this time with debilitating stomach issues. After a plethora of tests, it was discovered that I had contracted *C. Diff*. *C. Diff* is a fairly common gastrointestinal disease that if left untreated can become life-threatening. By the time I had been diagnosed, the doctors described my stomach as being flipped upside down. Once again, I was bedridden for another two weeks, wondering if and when my body was going to recover.

Three weeks after I recovered from *C. Diff* I finally returned to school. On the first Friday of going back to school I went to our varsity soccer game. While sitting on the bleachers, I noticed my left foot was going numb. I brushed it off, thinking it was merely nerve aggravation from sitting without back support for so long. By Monday, I was paralyzed in both legs. Every day the paralysis would get worse, followed by my legs steadily becoming numb. I was rushed to various emergency rooms, each time being told by doctors that they were unable to discern what was causing my paralysis. As the days went by, so to did my hope. I was particularly nerved by the sight of my mother, as her confusion about my ailment worried me greatly. After nearly a week, I was starting to come to terms with the very likely realization that I was going to die. It

seemed as if there was no hope in sight, and the little strength I had left was being used to write final letters to various members of my family. After multiple emergency room attempts. I visited my physical therapist. After doing her prognostic tests, she told me I had Guillain Barre Syndrome, and needed to inform the doctors immediately. Had it not been for her, I surely would've died within a week, as by the time the medicine made it from Germany, I was fully paralyzed from my abdomen down. Had she not diagnosed me in time, I would have suffered shutdowns in either my lungs or heart, which would have led to the inevitable loss of oxygen or blood to my brain, leaving me brain-dead.



As Xingjian brilliantly stated, “Death was playing a joke on me but now that I’ve escaped the demon wall, I am secretly rejoicing.” Likewise, I was given a new lease on life, a blessing in disguise, or a divine intervention (whatever you’d like to call it). It is for that reason that I have been on my own quest to find Soul Mountain. Growing up I had never been spiritual, a sentiment I explained thoroughly regarding *Death in Venice*. I used to notice that I only turned to an out-of-body or omnipotent being during great times of turmoil and was very curious to get to the source

of why I had become that way. My mother, who was raised Catholic, has spent the past decade devoting a lot of her spare time towards embracing her spirituality and connection with the universe. I too mimic her ways now as I traverse through life, trying to extract the clearest and strongest sentiments from my daily experiences, from interactions as trivial as playing with my dog to extreme dilemmas such as my cousins battle with Coronavirus.

The strongest sentiment I received from *Soul Mountain* is the importance of gratitude. We oftentimes say we are grateful for things, but that gratefulness is often temporary; yet things to be grateful for are always surrounding us. One particular practice I have found to help with this is a daily activity my mother literally calls gratitude. Once a day, I pick up my gratitude rock (mine is a rose quartz), and state 10 things I am grateful for, no matter the magnitude. It is through simple routines like this that I am given a better understanding of how fragile life can be, and how being appreciative of even the smallest facets of daily life can create a more balance and wholesome perception of what surrounds us. It is imperative to not get too high or too low on things in your life and accentuate the importance of being in touch with oneself and one's true values. In this age of technology it is increasingly difficult to separate the fine line between private life and public life, as nearly everything is posted on social media. The lack of cognizance has become the status quo, and our generation in particular has become so entrenched in the overvaluation of likes, comments, and followers that true desires have become seemingly nonexistent. People are more concerned with others perceptions of themselves than they are with their actual wellbeing. I am not saying we are being grateful for the wrong reasons; what I am merely trying to denote is that we must appreciate things from a more minute level to garner even greater appreciation for the magnificent pleasures life brings us. It is easy to forget that it is equally as easy to be blessed with joys of life as it is to be robbed of them.



I challenge both my classmates and any who end up reading this piece to find their Soul Mountain. Every person goes through a unique journey in their life, and whether or not you choose to openly acknowledge it, everyone's life journey involves finding out who they truly are. Many people put up a façade of self-acknowledgment, instead dedicating their focus on creating an image they hope is accepted by those around them. It is here where a loss of being in tune with oneself arises, and I feel as if now more than ever we are being provided with the sacred opportunity to truly determine who we are as individuals. Although these circumstances are less than fortunate, the status quo does allow for a plethora of time that can be dedicated towards gathering a better understanding of oneself physically, spiritually, emotionally, or otherwise.

It is also important to note that for many of us our journey is just beginning. We are approaching the final chapters towards the systematic preparation for the rest of our life; we must use this time sparingly. During this time we can separate what is unimportant from what is genuinely meaningful to us. We can begin taking the proper steps to bettering ourselves, assuring that we are in the best frame in all aspects. Now is the perfect time to truly embark on our lifelong hike.

At first read, I would not be surprised if many of you shrug this off. Believe me, I spent most of my life believing that all the things my mother would preach to me was utter nonsense. I used to ridicule her for believing in healing touch and spending so much time meditating. However, it is not until I underwent my near-death experiences that I was truly able to grasp the crux of what she had spent all the years trying to instill in me. It is just now that I am able to acknowledge the incredible maturation and self-actualization journey my mother has been embarking on. In a way, it almost seems as if it occurred in the snap of a finger. When I look at my mother now, I see a shell of the shy, always to herself, almost confused in a sense woman. I now see an aura of confidence, unyielding determination, and the ability to command respect from every room she enters. I know my mother has not reached the peak of her Soul Mountain, yet she's ascending rapidly. I strive to reach that level of serenity, a state I believe is will come to those who are patient. I am eager to finally begin my journey to my Soul Mountain, and I hope you are as well.

Franz's Kafka's *Metamorphosis* depicts the incredibly spontaneous event of a man, Gregor Samsa, who awakens to discover that he has transformed into a "horrible vermin". While the entire story itself is fascinating, I believe there are factions that resonate extremely well with the most challenging course of my life.

After having my spinal fusion, I remember having one initial task that was particularly more difficult than all of my other exercises. This action was getting up from bed. I vividly remember hating this therapeutic exercise significantly more than all of the others because of the moving parts involved. First of all, the exercise was already very challenging because it required me to move from laying on my back or stomach to my side. Doing so was extremely painful, as not only did the physical movement of changing direction require the contraction of all of my

lumbar and thoracic muscles, but it also made all of my weight rest on one side. This created immense pressure on my lungs, thus restricting my capacity to breathe, almost as if I was drowning. Given that these exercises were also being conducted just days after my spinal fusion, the innate pain of the surgery, further exasperated by the simulation of drowning, created an all-around dreadful experience. After finally getting to my side, the physical therapist would then instruct me to use my core muscles to try to bring myself up sideways, as if I was going up in a 3 o'clock to 12 o'clock position. This too increased my pain as the contractions of my abdominal muscles also caused my pain to be greater.

My physical therapist would come twice a day (9 in the morning and 4 in the afternoon), and every day she saved this exercise for last (knowing it was my most difficult and painful task). So here we are on my third day in the hospital. It's 3:55. I recall the feeling of the uncertainty developing, flowing through my veins with every beat, the butterflies in my stomach hardening, and a wave of anxiety crashing on me. I began to hyperventilate, already anticipating the inability to breathe and the insurmountable pain that would be added to already excruciating amount I was currently in. 3:59 comes. I am now drenched in sweat, my legs shaking with nervousness. As I lie on my back, I can feel the tears bubbling on the surface of my eye finally dropping, fully victim to gravity's omnipotence. My p.t. walks in, bursting with excitement and anticipation, and it crushes me. We begin the exercises, and everything is going as expected. The initial exercises were difficult, yet manageable; but in the back of my mind all I can think about is having to get up and turn to my side. We do a couple more exercises, and finally it's here. I start on my stomach, as instructed, and prepare to turn to my side. When the time comes to do so, freeze. I remember a feeling of coldness in my body, as if my subconscious was shutting

everything off before I even gave it an attempt. My family tried to console me, but it only made things exponentially worse.



To be completely honest, this is actually the first time I have revisited that day since it happened. I spent the rest of the day in a complete shock, overwhelmed by anxiety attack that required extra medical attention. When rereading *Metamorphosis*, I found a scene in the first part of the book fairly reminiscent of my experience with post-surgery therapy.

In this scene, Gregor, who has only recently discovered his bodily transformation, is tasked with getting himself out of bed. As he makes multiple attempts to raise his upper body, his inability to do so creates increasing frustration for Mr. Samsa. With each unwavering attempt being rendered unsuccessful, Gregor became increasingly unsatisfied with the status quo. As Kafka states, “It took just as much effort to get back to where he had been earlier, but when he lay there sighing, and was once more watching his legs as they struggled against each other even harder than before, if that was possible, he could think of no way of bringing peace and order to this chaos. He told himself once more that it was not possible for him to stay in bed and that the most sensible thing to do would be to get free of it in whatever way he could at whatever sacrifice. At the same time, though, he did not forget to remind himself that calm consideration was much better than rushing to desperate conclusions.” I feel as if this quote deeply embodies

my mindset during a very trying period of my time. I think that by reading this quote when applied to an entirely different scenario, it allowed me to take a step back and think about how far I have come since that time.

As the story continues, Gregor becomes more comfortable in his own skin per say. He begins to traverse up and down his room as a way of easing his mind, signaling his acceptance of his situation. While the remainder of the story doesn't end up particularly fortunate, I was able to take away the importance of time as a theme or motif from the literature. It takes time for people to become comfortable with who they are, particularly when it comes to physical appearance. In essence, there is a point in the plot that accentuates that happiness comes from within, and self-acceptance is imperative. It is this sentiment that I have found to be a lasting message from the reading.

As the semester is coming to a close, the time for reflection is among us. The unprecedented nature of our world's status quo has (on a personal note) brought aspects of my life into question. I have found that many things I used to perceive as having the utmost importance have now been deemed trivial, as the fragility of life has been put on full display during this global pandemic. Like I have previously stated over the duration of this course, or at least since the implementation of remote learning, we must use this time for self-reflection, self-actualization, and self-love. Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* is a literary piece that resonates deeply with my life's current trajectory, leading me to believe that if I had the opportunity to spend the most time conversing with any of the authors I have read this semester, it would undoubtedly be Xingjian. Mirroring his mindset and attitude towards circumstances seems like a methodology that would certainly be beneficial.

Over the past five years, my mother has held semi-annual potluck dinners at our home in Florida. As a member of the international community, she has often prided herself on her ability to find avenues of similarities with her friends whom, likewise, are not from the United States. The potluck dinners she has hosted have been wonderful in recent years, as it allows us to take a glimpse into a multitude of different cultures underneath one roof. Gao Xingjian would be a phenomenal person to have at this dinner, as he would resonate with everyone present in a blissful manner.

Like Jay Gatsby, I would believe that Gao “was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.” His never-ending series of trials and tribulations make him very understanding of the complexities life has to offer. As a man who was already mentally preparing to die, Gao’s second lease on life makes him more inclined to want to spend the unguaranteed time we have remaining on this planet surrounding himself with things that make him happy. His insight towards what it is like to reach a state of peace would intrigue my family and friends. This is one thing I believe Xingjian would also particularly enjoy. At his feet would be a group eager to hear his words of wisdom, using their ears as a sponge soaking in every detail he uses like it’s the last drop left. His tales of triumph and perseverance would fill the room with vigor, his words dynamically transcending the room, creating an aura, or for lack of better wording, naturally easing the minds of the audience.

ALWAYS STRIVE AND PROSPER



Xingjian has experienced poverty and the severest level. He has witnessed the struggle dilapidated communities and seen the horrors of subjugation. Because of this, Gao understands the intricacies of the human psyche, and at this potluck dinner he would be able to share how one's understanding of their mind pays an integral part of their daily life. As Ta-Nehisi Coates says, "you are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable." This is an undervalued lesson that Gao would be excellent at emphasizing. He would tell the other members of the potluck dinner that we must treat our minds as our most precious gift, the crown jewel of our bodies so to speak. The crown jewel needs its protection, yet oftentimes jewelers are so concerned with what is protecting the jewel that little care is actually given to the jewel itself. Our minds are one of the few things we can control; we must spend less time conforming to others when we can make adequate decisions for ourselves.

“Thinking things over calmly – indeed, as calmly as possible – was much better than jumping to desperate decisions.” I almost wish this potluck dinner could happen in real life, solely so I could see Gao instill this sentiment into my mother. In fact, I could actually envision Gao citing Kafka’s metamorphosis to my mother, stressing how imperative it is to try to make decisions in the right mind frame rather than making emotionally charged (and usually rash) conclusions. Likewise, this sentiment would be beneficial to me, as I have a tendency to not fully think things through. While a great deal of this is due to my (diagnosed) hyperactivity, that does not mean I should be using it as a crutch. Messages like these would be one of many at our potluck dinner, and it is plausible to envision every participant at the dinner having left feeling very satisfied with the new knowledge they’d gained.



Gao Xingjian strikes me as the type of person who would be very interested in trying new foods and experiences. This too would be excellent at the potluck dinner, and I would love for him to try Jamaican jerk chicken. While I could see it being a little bit too hot for him (Jamaicans

include very hot herbs and spices in their culinary palate), I could also easily his eagerness for trying new things making the overall experience very enjoyable. He would enjoy trying the variety of different flavors available to him, adding new tastes and textures to his cooking database.

A person like Gao Xingjian has the unique ability to bring those from all walks of life together as one. In a time like this, I envision him satirically quoting Sartre, saying that “I’m sure we’ll manage to pull along together somehow ... being extremely courteous to each other”. Gao is the type of person we need in the world right now, serving as the glue in which the foundation of society is being upheld. In reality, this potluck dinner will not happen, yet the reality of the sentiments Gao Xingjian left of us with is still pertinent to modern day events. The themes and motifs of *Soul Mountain* are incredibly prevalent. Treat others the way you would like to be treated.



These past two months have brought a great deal of pain for me. Plans of meeting again in the future have been cancelled abruptly. Anticipation of the next time saying hello have instead been replaced by the dread of saying a final goodbye. Phone calls from loved ones no longer mean positive news. Texts from friends have been replaced by wake invitations from parents. I love yous have become synonymous with I need yous. Gods that were once strangers have become acquaintances I've become all too familiar with. In these difficult times I have found myself particularly mesmerized by two works of art.

“constant change figures
the time we sense
passing on its effect
surpassing things we've known before

since memory
of many things is called
experience
but what of what
we call nature's picture
surpassing things we call
since memory
we call nature's picture
surpassing things we've known before
constant change figures
experience
passing on its effect
but what of what
constant change figures
since memory
of many things is called
the time we sense
called nature's picture
but what of what
in the time we sense
surpassing things we've known before
passing on its effect
is experience”

Lyn Hejinian’s *from constant change figures* is a short poem my mother recently showed me. I had confided in her about my difficulty focusing, maintaining motivation, and general sadness following both my cousin and my friend’s untimely passings. As I have stated before, my recent experiences dipping into spirituality are the result of these events and the continuous influence my mother has had on my newfound interests. I have found myself reading this poem daily, sometimes multiple times a day.

As human beings operating in a time abundant with new technology, we have become so used to capturing the experience we are currently having rather than truly experiencing the experience for its wholesome nature that the true sentiment of the experience itself is diluted. Being more present, or as my mother loves to say “being in the now” is an underappreciated asset that our conscious allows us to implement. This time of reflection has allowed me to realize

that I have spent too much time mentally deliberating with myself over either things that have happened in the past, or things I anticipate happening in the future, rather than just mentally gathering the data of the experience and adding it to the database I call memories. In the past I can certainly say that I have let prior experiences dictate new ones, and it has come to my attention that every past experience serves as precedent towards a similar event, and every experience we have is truly unique. Change is a part of life, and I have spent so much time trying to remain homeostatic in my current form that I have not truly given myself the time needed to do some soul-searching, much less any time dedicated towards mental healing. *From constant change figures* has been serving as a biblical verse of late, an ever-present reminder that time will heal all wounds. Most importantly, we can think of life as a tree. When we are just starting out, we are deeply rooted, needing daily nurturing as we begin to grow. As we grow older, we begin to develop, with experiences branching out like leaves. Every leaf is unique, yet when all of the leaves branch out, the culmination of such growth is indicated. Likewise, this course has instilled these same values in me, as through the lenses of others' with similar experiences I have been able to truly procure thematic influences that have changed my perception of the fragility, beauty, and the essence of life itself.



Prior to COVID-19 interrupting this semester, I had not returned home to Florida in nearly two years. In the past I have taken living in Florida for granted, and in many cases I would

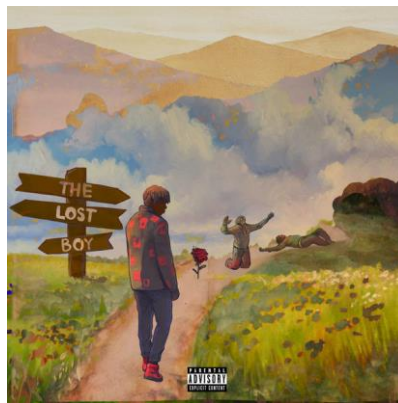
never refer to Florida as my true home due to my emotional attachment to New York from my childhood. However, since my return, I have had an entirely different outlook on the Sunshine state. My true problems never actually lied with Florida itself, and more so with the circumstances surrounding such a drastic change in location. As we have begun to approach hurricane season, the tropical climate has been particularly rainy as of late. One thing I have noticed is that following torrential downpours a plethora of lifeforms reveal themselves, most notably butterflies. I am currently undergoing a metamorphosis like that of a caterpillar to butterfly, as I am finally beginning to see my wings develop.

As unfortunate as it has been, this time has truly allowed me to delve into a new mind frame, one I firmly believe is better suited for my way of life. I recall nearly 6 years ago when my mother began diving into the world of spirituality and she had one of her healing touch instructors do a visionary reading of my energy field. The instructor told me that I was an indigo child, destined to try to create some type of global change, but still unsure about how I would do so. In an all too eerie manner, she prophetically told me that it wouldn't be until I experienced true pain in my heart that I would be ready to take on all that comes with the process of mental, emotional, and spiritual enlightenment. The loss of my cousin in particular has truly challenged my mental capacity to endure, yet for some reason I feel as if my mind has finally accepted that it is time for change, finally catching up to the plea of signals my body has been making. I have been actively taking the steps to combat my adrenal fatigue, an internal struggle that has been hindering me for quite some time. I have taken the steps to seek the appropriate mental assistance I need, and I am eager to grow into a better human being.

For this piece, I chose to incorporate a variety of album covers as my pictures that resonate with my writing. The albums I picked have been very influential to me, with many of

them consisting of songs that aided me through the darkest times of my life. In a life filled with loss, music has been one of the few things that has never left me, providing unwavering support in my greatest times of need. I find a similar solace in writing. While I had known I had always loved writing, this ability to express myself has helped me tremendously as I am undergoing my current transformation. I had very few expectations for this course (I do not mean that with disrespectful intent towards Professor Keefer or my classmates), and it exceeded all of them. This course has taught me to truly be comfortable with myself, and I have found myself mustering the courage to let a lot of things flow from the heart. My improvements as a writer have been noticed by myself, my colleagues, and my other professors, and I would like to sincerely thank everyone in this course for helping me overcome many personal obstacles. The lasting impression this course has had on me makes me feel as if I am a better person now than I was four months ago when the class had just begun. Once again, thank you Professor Keefer; you have helped me turn my pain into champagne. Little did I know I had to just keep swimming.

“I was lost like Dory, but I’m finally found” – YBN Cordae, *The Lost Boy*



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