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The Reevaluation of America

In 2018, The United States of America experienced a significantly defining moment in its history. Donald Trump was president and thrived off of dividing the people. Torn in multiple directions, the country lost the approval of the international community and was stuck at a crossroads. One side called to a return to the ways of years past, back to when life in the USA was “great.” Another side questioned if that period ever really existed; can a society that has benefitted from horrible acts of cruelty and oppression be considered great? Even further, is there a way to accept a tarnished history and work to build a future that everyone can agree is “great?” What would that even look like? Who gets to decide what that is?

In a time where reported facts and statistics are rarely bipartisan, it becomes increasingly difficult to find solid answers to problems. Perhaps the answers are not to be found in the numbers though. History is a narrative, so maybe the way to move forward can be found by those who understand how to manipulate a narrative. By looking to the storytellers, the keepers of history, problems can be identified, solutions can be proposed and the story (or what will eventually become the history) of the country can be changed.

In studying the works of the oppressed and the oppressors, by gaining an understanding of the broken foundations that the country was built upon, it becomes apparent that in order to make amends for the horrors of the past, the United States of America will have to reevaluate everything and break ties with traditions designed to keep power in the hands of a select group. The United States of America was never great (at least not to all Americans), but that is a narrative that is still being written. In terms of narrative structure, (and according to an entry on literarydevices.com) “An epiphany is a moment in which there is a sudden realization that leads to a new perspective that clarifies a problem or solution.” That new perspective will not be found in a shift back to

old ways of thinking, but rather a purging of values rooted in oppression and an influx of thought that places emphasis on inclusion and people over power.

In **Between the World and Me** by Ta-Nehisi Coates, the author writes a letter to his son that aims to serve as a primer to the harsh cruelties of what it is to be a black man in America. For the purposes of this paper, it may be helpful to imagine The United States of America as characters in these narratives. In this instance, the USA would be Coates' son. The following passage refers to Coates' peer, Prince Jones who was, by all accounts, a very productive member of society. Well-educated, charismatic and always a gentleman, Jones was gunned down by police while he was driving to see his fiancé. This excerpt comes from a meeting that Coates had with Jones' mother, Dr. Mabel Jones.

“There he was,” she said, speaking of Solomon Northup. “He had means. He had a family. He was living like a human being. And one racist act took him back. And the same is true of me. I spent years developing a career, acquiring assets, engaging responsibilities. And one racist act. It’s all it takes.” And then she talked again of all that she had, through great industry, through unceasing labor, acquired in the long journey from grinding poverty. She spoke of how her children had been raised in the lap of luxury—annual ski trips, jaunts off to Europe. She said that when her daughter was studying Shakespeare in high school, she took her to England. And when her daughter got her license at sixteen, a Mazda 626 was waiting in front. I sensed some connection to this desire to give and the raw poverty of her youth. I sensed that it was all as much for her as it was for her children. She said that Prince had never taken to material things. He loved to read. He loved to travel. But when he turned twenty-three, she bought him a jeep. She had a huge purple bow put on it. She told me that she could still see him there, looking at the jeep and simply saying, Thank you, Mom. Without interruption she added, “And that was the jeep he was killed in.”” (Coates).

This passage feels like the epitome of Coates' message to his son. The structure of it begins with a reference to "12 Years A Slave" that outlines the struggle in broad strokes; Black people can do nothing wrong, and still have it all taken away. Her children were "raised in the lap of luxury" and the way that Coates lists the characteristics of that life work to make the reader forget how he opened the paragraph. Ski trips, world travel, new cars, and more gifts from Dr. Jones to her children paint a picture in where Dr. Jones has done the work to ensure that her children are not to suffer the way that black children are destined to suffer. This imagery conveys that her children are worldly, they love to read and they have gone to the best schools, surely the rest of society can see that. Prince Jones is a shining example of how far Black people can come in America, if he can live that kind of life, and if his mother can provide that kind of life, then as a country, America must have conquered its demons from generations past. Dr. Jones has lived life the right way, and done everything the way she was supposed to, so she gets to live the kind of life where she can enjoy moments like giving her son a brand new jeep for his twenty-third birthday. "And that was the jeep he was killed in."

Coates is not writing a piece for dramatic effect, so there is no problem with giving away the ending. He is not trying to surprise his son with anything in this letter. Even then, when everything is laid out in detail it is still shocking to the reader. Coates knows this and the writer in him works with it to maximize his message. The structure itself is a metaphor for life in America for those who do not believe they are white. The system is rigged; it has clearly been rigged from day one. Despite that message, people do their best to make the most of what they can in this life. They have successes and they have failures. All of this adds up to growth and the more growth they experience, it suddenly becomes possible that they might be able to beat the odds. So they continue to grow and do good for themselves and their communities. Eventually there is a point where they can maybe even relax a bit and think that maybe, just maybe, they did change their own fate. Dr. Jones got so far as to even see her own children escape the forces that aim to see them fail. That is, at least until that force caught up and took her son. Coates uses misdirection in his writing because life in America coming from "below" is full of it.

It is plausible that one could read through **Between the World and Me** and take away that Coates has no love for America. He views his country as a place that devalues him and his people. He writes, “It is truly horrible to understand yourself as the essential below of your country. It breaks too much of what we would like to think about ourselves, our lives, the world we move through and the people who surround us” (Coates). If the working definition of “love” for a country includes flag worship, blind allegiance and celebrations of war, then Coates probably does not check those marks. Reading his words, it is clear that Coates is not one to sugarcoat or focus on the bright side. Coates definitely does not have that kind of love for America.

Yet, is that the only kind of love? There is no doubt that Coates has love for his son, especially considering that he has taken the time to write this superbly caring letter to him. However, his love for his son is also not the type of love full of rainbows and butterflies. He loves him by way of hard truth. This is also the way he shows his love for his country. Coates writes to his son, “The people who must believe they are white can never be your measuring stick. I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world” (Coates). Coates does not waste a word in this whole book, so his inclusion of the word “beautiful” is intentional. The love that Coates has for America is substantial. He acknowledges the faults and still works to improve his relationship with the country. This is not that “love-at-first-sight kind” of love, this is more like “married-for-thirty-years kind” love. The kind of love that does not only focus on what is working but understands that growth means addressing problems and doing the hard work necessary to build a stronger bond. Coates is telling America that there is a problem and that it has failed to do the hard work.

In publishing this letter to his son, Coates pays homage to one of the most prolific thought leaders in the history of America, James Baldwin. Over 50 years before **Between the World and Me** came **The Fire Next Time** by James Baldwin in 1963. The first essay in this book is a letter to Baldwin’s nephew, which inspired Coates to do the same for his son. The following passage notes why it is vital to include the perspective of the oppressed.

"This past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible—this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is certainly as good as a feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne." (Baldwin)

The imagery in this first line is vivid. The structure of it, segmented by semicolons and commas but continuing for much longer than it should is a strong statement to America's treatment of Black people. Yet, even after an impossibly long list of reasons for Black people to turn on America, there's still an ending that speaks to potential and beauty in this land. "Enough is certainly as good as a feast" is a figure of speech that takes on extra meaning. First, directly about how much black people need to suffer. Also, as a people in America, Black people have been starved, and while there is a fear of what Black people will do when allowed to flourish and "feast" on America, first there needs to be a point where Black people can at least get "enough." Having to "snatch" manhood is a condition that only applies to people whose manhood is stripped from and

kept from them. The “fire of human cruelty” is a nod to how destructive white supremacy can be. It will “rage” and it will consume everything if not extinguished, white people included. Only the people out of the fire, the oppressed, have the perspective of how clearly dangerous that fire can be.

When Baldwin writes about surviving that “fire of human cruelty” he notes that what comes of that is a self-authority that is unshakable. Only those who have lived through that fire know how to deal with it, and though they did not start the fire, they are the ones best equipped to extinguish it. The United States has acknowledged this fire in the past and has probably thought it was done at certain points in time. Baldwin knew it was still burning as does Coates. Only the oppressed can signal that the fire is gone because it is the oppressed that know how it burns.

Perhaps Coates learned about love from Baldwin. A love deeper than fairy tales and honeymoon phases is how Coates loves his son, because that is how Baldwin taught him to love being a black man. Baldwin wrote the following about love...

“Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.” (Baldwin)

Coates writes a letter to his son about life as a black man, because he learned to do so when Baldwin wrote to his nephew about the same. This is the type of love that America needs.

If America were a character reading these letters, they would undoubtedly be difficult to take. As much as the country has wanted to believe that it stands on the right (right as in correct, not political-lean) side of social issues, reading the words of Coates and Baldwin show that the country still cannot grasp how much is at stake, as well as how grave the injustices have been.

In searching for solutions, Baldwin wrote, “The boy could see that freedom depended on the possession of land.” This would be a start. By taking ownership of the

land, the oppressed would have influence in how it was run and to whose benefit it would be. Baldwin was a philosopher ahead of his time. His reach extending through many generations to come, his vision was forged in the very fires that he wrote about.

The Fire This Time by Jesmyn Ward is a collection of essays dealing with racism in the current landscape. If Coates is to be looked at as a student of Baldwin, then this collection is a whole classroom of Coates' peers. One of those students is Kiese Laymon, a black writer born and raised in Mississippi. His essay "Da Art of Storytellin' (a prequel)" is a love letter to the ability of black people to thrive in the most dire situations.

"OutKast created a different kind of stank, too: an urban Southern stank so familiar with and indebted to the gospel, blues, jazz, rock, and funk born in the rural black South. And while they were lyrically competing against each other on track after track, together Big and Dre were united, railing and wailing against New York and standing up to a post-civil-rights South chiding young Southern black boys to pull up our pants and fight white supremacy with swords of respectability and narrow conceptions of excellence. ATLiens made me love being black, Southern, celibate, sexy, awkward, free of drugs and alcohol, Grandmama's grandbaby, and cooler than a polar bear's toenails. " (Ward)

The usage of "stank" is a colloquialism that also elicits a sensory response. It would be similar to something that smells bad, or stinks, but to such a degree that a new word has to be used to capture the essence. The face that one would make when something stinks (nose and eyes crunched together) is also the face that one would make at a blues show where the guitarist hits a note that captures the deeper, raw emotion often associated with the blues. Terms like "stank" come from black culture, a culture in America that has had to make the most of the little that was available. There is an irony in aspiring to a certain level of stank. It is still frowned upon to stink, but if one can do it to a degree that it is "stank" (i.e. find a way to take ownership) then that is an accomplishment.

The second line starts a sentence with "And" which is highly frowned upon in literary circles, but so is rap and so are black people in America, so it works. This is

about re-evaluating rules that were never meant to benefit black people in the first place. This is as much about rebellion as it is self-governance. Big and Dre (the two men who comprise the group Outkast) could be pit against each other AND work as a unit. Which is much like the way that black people are often being pit against each other through myths of black-on-black crime, yet still find ways to uplift each other, even without proper media coverage.

In the line that reads “*ATLiens made me love being black, Southern, celibate, sexy, awkward, free of drugs and alcohol, Grandmama’s grandbaby, and cooler than a polar bear’s toenails.*” Laymon explains what it is to be black and responsible for self-preservation. Rap music is so often placed into a box where it is perceived to be all about gangs, drugs and violence. OutKast is a group that worked to expand the scope of the artform. They worked to introduce Southern culture into the genre, while also taking risks and exploring oddities, not being afraid to be the “weirdos” of rap. The listing of “black” and “Southern” in this line could coordinate or contrast depending on how one would view the South. Is this a reference to racism in the South or the strong Black culture in the South? That’s followed by “celibate, sexy, awkward” which is a sandwich of juxtaposition. Celibate is not supposed to be sexy, and sexy isn’t supposed to be awkward. Surely, if one is celibate and awkward, that can’t be sexy, or can it? These are the doors that OutKast opened. Rap was only supposed to be tough and hard hitting, but OutKast allowed it to be bizarre.

This passage stands out because of its tone compared to the rest of the pieces in the collection. This one feels like a celebration that was magnified because it covers OutKast who are also generally uplifting. Kiese Laymon also writes about his “Grandmama” who introduced him to “stank”. This is a story of people making something out of nothing. This short passage recreates that point. It is only three lines, but those lines are so dense and find a way to seamlessly take the reader from different musical genres in the south to awkwardness and polar bears. Grandmama’s job was to handle the least desirable parts of a chicken, and she made a beautiful life out of it. OutKast rapped about southern living but found a way to take it to another level of consciousness. Laymon took all of that and distilled it into three sentences.

In this classroom of writers responding to Baldwin, there was not one dominating message aside from an appreciation for Baldwin's contribution to the culture. This is a picture of what Baldwin has inspired, generations later, in America. Baldwin has opened the doors for black writers to speak their truths about an America that has failed black people over and over again. Sometimes those failures are funny (as covered by Kevin Young's piece "Blacker Than Thou" which covers Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who went so deep into pretending that she was black that she actually ran a chapter of the NAACP.) and sometimes the weight is unbearable (see Carol Anderson's essay "White Rage" about the ways that white people work to reverse black progress in America.).

This collection of works is extremely important. Voices of the oppressed need to be heard and they need to be shared. Without this kind of work, the harmful people in charge face no resistance. When there is someone like Donald Trump in office, declaring any oppositional media to be the enemy, there needs to be a strong pushback.

Keeping with the idea of giving voice to the oppressed, it would be a disservice to not include women in the conversation. Toni Morrison, Nobel and Pulitzer Prize recipient as well as the owner of a Presidential Medal of Freedom, is an essential piece to the narrative of the American experience for black women. Her first novel, **The Bluest Eye**, first published in 1970 captures the deep sorrow behind the lives of those who do not align with the elite of the country. Racism and sexism combine in horrific ways and find avenues to dig deep into the psyche of all affected by it. In the following passage, Morrison writes from the perspective of a black woman, Geraldine, who has internalized her hate for black people who have failed to assimilate as she has. At this moment, Geraldine has come home to see her son, Junior, who she has raised to be as "proper" as she was with girl, Pecola, who is the type of black person that Geraldine fears association with.

They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato-chip dream. In the long, hot days, they idled away, picking plaster from the walls and digging into the earth with sticks. They sat in little rows on street curbs, crowded into pews at church, taking space from the nice, neat, colored

children; they clowned on the playgrounds, broke things in dime stores, ran in front of you on the street, made ice slides on the sloped sidewalks in winter. The girls grew up knowing nothing of girdles, and the boys announced their manhood by turning the bills of their caps backward. Grass wouldn't grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down. Tin cans and tires blossomed where they lived. They lived on cold black-eyed peas and orange pop. Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled. And this one had settled in her house."(Morrison)

Morrison's mastery of her craft is on display here. Using strong sensual language to bring readers into the moment like the feeling of sleeping "six in a bed", wetting beds and digging into dirt, Morrison appeals to multiple senses to set the scene. Once in that world, showing how crowded it is, the next topic is how there is not enough space for the "nice, neat, colored children," children like her precious son, Junior. In Geraldine's mind, they quickly go from people to insects, "Like flies they hovered". There's a panic in Geraldine as she spots Pecola in her home, and she has to go through the process of dehumanizing the girl before she can act appropriately. Shortly after this is when Geraldine, a nice and proper lady, calls Pecola a "nasty little black bitch." Geraldine has internalized the racism so much that she has turned on black people and feels the need to attack them to affirm her social status. Her oppression has rooted in her and is now working through her.

In relation to the other books mentioned to this point, where they felt like they interacted and learned from each other, **The Bluest Eye** shows what happens in a world that does not interact with Baldwin, Coates or Ward (and the essayists gathered by Ward.) This book is a collection of symptoms of white supremacy on black people. The cyclical nature of how the plot moves, most notably in how Cholly, a black man and father to Pecola, passes his traumas onto his own loved ones, really speaks to how destructive America has been to its black people. This is a collection of tragedies, really. It is a heavy read, as it is heartbreak after heartbreak. Morrison turns the pain into a beautiful work of art that is both poetic and a strong narrative but just so crushing to read.

How does America make up for its treatment of black people? There is no way to undo slavery. It is a frustrating issue to deal with because there is no simple answer. It

takes work, hard work for one person to address racism within themselves, it would be exponentially more work to do that for a whole country that was raised on a history of it. It takes more than just being nice to people and refraining from saying problematic words, it is so much more than that. It's restructuring curriculum to reflect these issues and learning how to listen to the oppressed. It takes oppressors wanting to learn, and actually taking a step back to let others lead. It will have to happen community by community before it ever makes a difference nationwide. Messages and wording matter so much, these are the tools that are used to program societies. As people learn more about how to uplift each other, it is imperative to move away from harmful messages, no matter how deep they are woven into traditions.

Moving away from established traditions requires an understanding of where those traditions come from. Did the United States inherit racism? After all, people who left the British Empire founded the country. What bout sexism? Do other cultures have problems rooted in patriarchy? In placing **Things Fall Apart** and the essay “An Image of Africa” by Chinua Achebe in conversation with Joseph Conrad’s **Heart of Darkness** there is much to learn about just how far the reach of these societal ailments go.

In **Things Fall Apart**, the protagonist, Okwonko carried with him, an extremely toxic level of masculinity. Taken on by a desire to be the antithesis of his father, whom he considered lazy and therefore not a man, it drove him mad. He invested so much in his ideals, that he never allowed himself to re-evaluate the stances that he took and that ultimately led to his demise. On a larger scale, however, there’s also the narrative of how deceitful colonialism could be. In a story that humanizes Africans in a way that European history often works against, we see how colonialism (or imperialism, or capitalism) destroys communities. The Igbo, with whom Okwonko identified, were far from perfect people, and that was made clear with Okwonko, but they were their own people. They had customs and beliefs and their own systems for life. The colonizers, after the death of Dr. Brown (an evangelical, who may have been some mythical symbol for a potential understanding between the two groups), took advantage of the Igbo hospitality and broke them apart from the inside.

In contrast, **Heart of Darkness** by Joseph Conrad works to dehumanize Africans and even go as far as to attempt to humanize the racism. It feels self-congratulatory and reeks of white savior complex. Conrad writes about how “Fresleven was the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs. No doubt he was; but he had been a couple of years already out there engaged in the noble cause, you know, and he probably felt the need at last of asserting his self-respect in some way. Therefore he whacked the old nigger mercilessly...” The book takes a story based in Africa and reduces Africans to savages in the background, almost turning them into monsters while it is the colonizers who deserve to be demonized.

Speaking out against Conrad, Achebe penned the essay “An Image of Africa” in which he writes,

Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray - - a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz of Heart of Darkness should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out. (Achebe)

Achebe is a professor of literature and establishing his command on the subject. Referencing Dorian Gray from the famed British novel by Oscar Wilde, Achebe is establishing that Africa is a living reflection of the evil that lies within European history and that, in order to maintain appearances, Africa should be avoided. The educated that know literature, thus catching the reference, know that Achebe is alluding to this. Dorian Gray is cursed with a photo that reflects his soul, and Conrad has created a work that reflects his. Stay away from Africa, there is danger there. The rephrased message feels like Achebe is working to broaden the reach of the warning. Europeans, stay away from Africa, not for Africa's sake, but for the sake of the European image of superiority. Achebe is in command here. He makes his message more easily accessible for those who

may have trouble understanding his point and simultaneously making it clear that he is not the savage that Europeans think he is/used to be. Achebe shares no love for Mr. Kurtz (a character in **Heart of Darkness**, that exploited native Africans so much that it drove him mad) hinting that the title of the book should have been a reference to Kurtz and not the obvious statement on Africa. It is Kurtz whose heart is dark and had he paid attention to the warnings, he would not have been ousted and come to his demise the way he had. The final line of this passage reveals Achebe's play. Kurtz, the symbol for Europeans looking to exploit Africa, finds himself becoming the savage. Racism, while clearly damaging to those oppressed by it, also has a way of deteriorating those who use it to oppress. The real darkness is not the color of the skin of the natives in Africa, it's in the hearts of those who work to destroy it. The tone of this final line is almost smug. As if Achebe is sitting back, arms crossed and watching Kurtz ruin himself.

This passage shows a clear command of Achebe's art. Efficient with his words, Achebe masterfully pieces together his analogy and also gives the reader a glimpse into his life. He starts with an expertly crafted statement. One may wonder how Achebe, a Nigerian novelist, could gain such a command of the language and miss the message altogether. Achebe, used to the confusion, distills his message to its most urgent piece. Once more, for good measure, Achebe abandons the idea of eloquence and states his warning as simply as possible to clear any confusion.

Like a true academic, however, Achebe still needs to make his finer point. Conrad is a racist, and it shines through in his work. Even in a book that argues against the actions of a fictional Dr. Kurtz, Conrad's dehumanization is clear for any reader to see. Art is a mirror to the soul, and Conrad has been exposed by his own work of art. Achebe does not mince words and directly calls Conrad a racist. He also went on to give Conrad credit for being a skilled writer and he was also clear that being talented does not negate the spreading of hate.

This is part of the necessary reevaluation to move America forward. Just recently, Brett Kavanaugh was able to dodge accusations of sexual assault because people who worked with him could not believe that someone who has gone to Yale, risen to his level in the government and just come off as such a great guy could be capable of committing

sexual assault. Talent and/or achievements do not cancel out hate, racism or sexism. Hate, racism, and sexism, also don't cancel out technical prowess, or college degrees, though they should be used to determine how the perpetrators are remembered. It also doesn't have to be a death sentence to be caught doing something hateful. Being caught can lead to the work that it takes to be better. Unfortunately, with Kavanaugh, and with Okwonko, sometimes people would rather double down on their past and hope it gets them out of the mess that they are in instead of working to be better. Falling back on justifications that ring of "that's just how things have always been" or "boys will be boys" are at best, surefire ways to stifle meaningful progress and at worst, ways to ruin lives and even societies.

One of the higher profile allies for Kavanaugh was Susan Collins who casted a critical vote in confirming him to a lifelong appointment on the Supreme Court. Women are oppressed but it becomes complicated when their oppression leads to complicity in the oppression of others. In **The Poisonwood Bible** by Barbara Kingsolver, the book opens with a letter by Orleanna Price, a woman married to Nathan Price, a man determined to move to Africa and convert natives to his religion.

I have my own story, and increasingly in my old age it weighs on me. Now that every turn in the weather whistles an ache through my bones, I stir in bed and the memories rise out of me like a buzz of flies from a carcass. I crave to be rid of them, but find myself being careful, too, choosing which ones to let out into the light. I want you to find me innocent. As much as I've craved your lost, small body, I want you now to stop stroking my inner arms at night with your fingertips. Stop whispering. I'll live or die on the strength of your judgment, but first let me say who I am. Let me claim that Africa and I kept company for a while and then parted ways, as if we were both party to relations with a failed outcome. Or say I was afflicted with Africa like a bout of a rare disease, from which I have not managed a full recovery. Maybe I'll even confess the truth, that I rode in with the horsemen and beheld the apocalypse, but still I'll insist I was only a captive witness. What is the conqueror's wife, if not a conquest herself? (Kingsolver)

This passage in particular, is a plea to both the reader and to Ruth May (Orleanna and Nathan's daughter who died in Africa) for forgiveness and for leniency in judgment. Orleanna spent her time with Nathan blindly following him, so she does not quite know how to apologize for her part because she was just following her husband. How could she sincerely apologize for something that she did not do with sincerity? Kingsolver does a great job of laying out this conflict with this passage. It is complex and it is not so easy to simply go to either extreme, or maybe it is too easy to go to the extremes and there is a value in finding some middle ground to find clarity in the situation. Part of the problem is that Nathan only operates in extremes, so he drags his family into a situation that could have been prevented with even a tiny bit of nuance. This story is not about Nathan so much as it is about the mess that he made, and it is about how the five, very different, women that he forced into the mess had to deal with it. This passage does a great job of introducing us to that conflict.

There's an interesting theme of accountability being discussed in this. Nathan is definitely and fully responsible for bringing his family into a situation that they should not have been in. How long does that responsibility cover his family's actions though? Is there a point where it is no longer Nathan's fault, or even to his credit, when his family does something of consequence? Is it Nathan's fault that his daughter Rachel goes on to exploit Africans by opening luxury hotel? If so, does he also get credit for his other daughter, Leah fighting for African sovereignty? If there is a line to be drawn, does that line get drawn for Orleanna as well, or is that different because they are married?

Christine Blasey-Ford (the woman accusing Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault) has dealt with her assault at the hand of Kavanaugh for decades and has tried to do so quietly because of the backlash that would come. She eventually went public because the stakes were too high for her not to do so. She bucked against the little comfort that she had to stop a man from gaining immense power and all she got was death threats, ridicule from the president and he got confirmed to the Supreme Court anyhow. Susan Collins is reminiscent of Orleanna. Granted, she is older and to get to where she is in the government, it was imperative to learn how to play by the rules that the men made. It was

harder for women when she was working through the ranks, that much makes sense. Orleanna eventually decided enough was enough and left Nathan. Susan Collins has not found that moment with the “Nathans” that she works with. Orleanna was just being a wife in the same way that Collins is just being a republican. This case was a perfect moment for Susan Collins to make a statement to the effect of “women deserve better and we need to stop protecting the ‘boys will be boys’ mentality”. Instead, we got another person just doing her job.

Revisiting the idea of America as a character in a narrative, at what point does America become responsible for the traditions it was born into? Perhaps England is the Nathan Price to America’s Orleanna, oppressive and forcing complicity on the oppressed. The original colonizers were escaping persecution from the crown, so they too were victims in some sense. Orleanna was just doing what she thought she was supposed to do, just as Susan Collins was just doing her job, so in that sense, America was only doing what it was taught a country should do. This is what tradition is. At some point, however, that tradition stops passing as an excuse and the accountability falls on Orleanna/Collins/America. America can no longer blame anyone else for its failure to serve and protect its people, especially not while it still continues to fail them.

Reevaluation of long-held beliefs can be painful but it is necessary for optimal outcomes. Without reevaluation, people are held captive by decisions made at times when they were less experienced. As a country, America has seen so many advances that it is ridiculous to think that any Americans from the beginnings of the country would be able to make decisions that are to be followed by current Americans. There is access to exponentially more information and technology than there was before, so any thorough reevaluation of values would lead to something more representative of the current population. In **A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man**, author James Joyce introduces the character Stephen Dedalus. A young, Catholic Irish man, Stephen is surrounded by tradition and the forces that pull him to adhere. When those forces come into conflict with each other, he is forced to redefine his positions. After careful thought, he decides to abandon those traditions and find a life of his own making.

Stephen had his own traditions that he was born into; the church being a big one. He also found that he had a penchant for prostitutes. As a child, he expressed that he wanted to marry a girl out of his religion and was heavily shamed for it. As he grew older and acquired more knowledge, he was able to reevaluate his dedication to the religion and decided that it no longer worked for him.

In The Patience Stone by Atiq Rahimi, the unnamed protagonist is a Muslim woman who is left to care for her comatose husband in the middle of a war-torn town. As the story develops, she realizes how oppressed she has been and begins to take her life back, all while venting to her husband in his vegetative state.

"Once she has made her lunch, she comes to eat it in the room, straight out of the pan. She is soft and serene. After the first mouthful, she suddenly says, "I feel sorry for that boy! But that isn't why I let him in ... Anyway, I hurt his feelings today, and almost drove the poor thing away! I got the giggles, and he thought I was laughing at him ... which of course I was, in a way ... But it was my fiendish aunt's fault! She said something awful last night. I'd been telling her about this stammering boy, and how he comes so quickly. And..." She laughs, a very private, silent laugh. And she said I should tell him ..." The laugh, noisy this time, interrupts her again. "... Tell him to fuck with his tongue and talk with his dick!" She guffaws, wiping away tears. (Rahimi)

Starting from something as banal as eating food straight from the pan, all the way to speaking of extramarital affairs with young boys, the protagonist is exercising her freedom in a way she had never done. She seems to be enjoying life, also in a way she had never done. Her husband fell into a coma after fighting with one of the men on his side in the war. It was a pointless dispute, based on an outdated idea of honor, and because of that dispute he was stuck in a coma. His family wanted nothing to do with him, so it was up to his wife, who barely knew him, to care for him. She too was fulfilling an outdated version of her honor in doing this. With all the time to reflect, essentially alone, she eventually realized that it was pointless and took control of her own life. She no longer had to live her life in service to him. She could sleep with whom she

wanted to and even receive payment for it. When she begins to exchange sexual favors for money, she finds a sense of ownership that, in turn, offers her power over her own life. Certainly, her choices were not encouraged by anyone who subscribed to views similar to her old views. Those views and those people did not matter anymore, the only thing that mattered was the present and she made it a point to proceed in a manner that gave her the best life possible.

The USA could learn from these reevaluations. As a country, there is now access to vast amounts of knowledge of how harmful some of its practices have been. There has been work to rectify some of the damage but there is still plenty of hurt being caused in the name of tradition. Tradition itself is not a problem, but when it stands in the way of progress and upholds oppression, tradition needs not be revered.

However, the reason for the nostalgia over the past should not be ignored. There are people who have and continue to benefit from a history of oppression. In **Saturday**, by Ian McEwan, readers are introduced to Dr. Henry Perowne. In the following passage, Perowne visits a seafood market and epitomizes white male privilege.

On the tiled floor by the open doorway, piled in two wooden crates like rusting industrial rejects, are the crabs and lobsters, and in the tangle of warlike body parts there is discernible movement. On their pincers they're wearing funereal black bands. It's fortunate for the fishmonger and his customers that sea creatures are not adapted to make use of sound waves and have no voice. Otherwise there'd be howling from those crates. Even the silence among the softly stirring crowd is troubling. He turns his gaze away, towards the bloodless white flesh, and eviscerated silver forms with their unaccusing stare, and the deep-sea fish arranged in handy overlapping steaks of innocent pink, like cardboard pages of a baby's first book. Naturally, Perowne the fly-fisherman has seen the recent literature: scores of polymodal nociceptor sites just like ours in the head and neck of rainbow trout. It was once convenient to think biblically, to believe we're surrounded for our benefit by edible automata on land and sea. Now it turns out that even fish feel pain. This is the growing complication of the

modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy. Not only distant peoples are our brothers and sisters, but foxes too, and laboratory mice, and now the fish. Perowne goes on catching and eating them, and though he'd never drop a live lobster into boiling water, he's prepared to order one in a restaurant. The trick, as always, the key to human success and domination, is to be selective in your mercies. For all the discerning talk, it's the close at hand, the visible that exerts the overpowering force. And what you don't see . . . That's why in gentle Marylebone the world seems so entirely at peace. (McEwan)

In this passage, as Perowne walks through the market, the reader gets a glimpse into his mind. It must be nice for the fishmonger who does not have to deal with an audible protest of his actions on the soon-to-be seafood. Perowne himself has had to ignore protestors throughout his day, so he envies the fishmonger in that regard. He then goes into the “growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy.” In this “expanding circle” he starts with fish, and how for some reason, they no longer exist solely for human consumption, but actually have their own nerve receptors and can feel pain. His mind even wanders far enough to give a true sense of his bias when he includes “distant peoples” into this expanding circle. If it were up to him, these distant people would stay in the same category as the fish that existed only to be killed and eaten by him. At his core, he believes himself to be of a different, elevated category of species, the white man. In **Saturday**, Perowne is not blatantly made out to be a bad person. By all accounts, he is probably a really good person. So good that he saves the life of a person that broke into his house and threatened his family. Throughout the novel, which takes place all in one day, Perowne goes through multiple events that could possibly be traumatic. He witnesses a plane falling from the sky, but he turns away before it lands. There are protests all around, but he refuses to invest himself on either side of the argument, preferring to stay out of it. The man who attacked him earlier in the day shows up at his home and forces Perowne’s daughter to strip naked. The world is crumbling around Perowne, and people’s lives are either ending or being ruined. However, at the end of the day, everything seems to be fine as if it were just another Saturday. This is his privilege as a white man, no matter what happens around him, as

long as he stays detached to a certain degree, everything will end up just fine. Not only does his day end just fine; he gets to go to sleep a hero because he saved a life. In Perowne's mind, though he may have the resources and ability to improve life for everyone, "The trick, as always, the key to human success and domination, is to be selective in your mercies." In other words, it is fine to help, but foolish to help everyone.

What does it look like to be "selective in your mercies?" When a man that believes animals should only exist to be food for humans, what mercies will he show? When that same man groups foreign people with those same animals, who benefits when he is being "selective?" Perowne believes himself to be of an upper echelon of humanity, if not another species altogether. Sure, he sees other people as humans; he is a doctor and he logically knows that everyone is biologically the same. Perhaps in his subconscious he just believes that there is just something a little more special about people like him. Men like Perowne have always run America. On the surface, these men do great things. These are men of high status, often highly educated and great examples of human potential. When men like these raise their young boys, those boys are taught that they come from special bloodlines. Those young boys become men who pass on that special blood. The inference from this idea is that others who lack that special blood are not as special. These "distant peoples" are similar to men like Perowne. They walk like Perowne, they might not speak quite like Perowne, but they can speak. There was a time in America when men like Perowne attempted to quantify how much humanity was shared with the foreigners. The highly educated, great examples of human potential decided that these people shared roughly three fifths of the same humanity. They were close enough to be called humans, but not so close that they deserved to enjoy the same quality of life.

White men control the country. The systems in place cater to them in a way that sustains their power. Those same systems encourage a certain level of detachment from the struggles of others in order to continue to enjoy the privilege granted to them. How could a multi-billionaire like Jeff Bezos enjoy his fortune if he took time to pay attention to the residents of Flint, Michigan who have no access to drinkable water? He would either have to live with massive guilt or take away from his fortune in order to make amends. However, if he could detach himself from the situation and ignore the human

impulse for healing, he can go on living as if he deserves an amount of money that would be impossible to spend. The rich and the powerful have secluded themselves in ivory towers, far from the victims of their greed, removed from the consequences that come with their expansion, too far to feel the need to change anything on the ground level.

When the people, who have the power to make the necessary change, lack the motivation to do so perhaps there comes a time to force their hands. When asking for equal treatment does not work, nor does protesting or even playing by their rules, maybe it becomes time to fight. America was built on revolution, has it become time to revisit that idea? **Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights: A Novel** by Salman Rushdie can provide an idea of how that may look.

The story is centered on an argument between two old men. The world is torn apart by forces unleashed by these men and everything comes to a head during a battle for the fate of the planet and humanity itself. In the end, the world is saved, but at great cost.

There are many kinds of casualty in battle, the invisible ones, the injuries to the mind, rivaling in number the fatalities and the physical wounds. As we look back at these events we remember Teresa Saca Cuartos as one of the heroes of that war, the electricity in her fingers responsible for many successes against the jinn armies; but also as a tragic victim of the conflict, her mind broken not only by the calamity she saw around her but also by the violence with which she had been bidden by the Lightning Queen to respond to the disaster of war. In the end, rage, no matter how profoundly justified, destroys the enraged. Just as we are created anew by what we love, so we are reduced and unmade by what we hate. At the end of the climactic battle of the War of the Worlds, with Zumurrud the Great in his bottle prison, held tightly in Jimmy Kapoor's fist, and Dunia slowly emerging from unconsciousness, it was Teresa who cracked and headed for the hole in the sky. (Rushdie)

This passage serves as a warning to would-be revolutionaries. While not necessarily intended to discourage the fight, especially one that is justified, the passage is a message about what comes after the fight. “In the end, rage, no matter how profoundly

justified, destroys the enraged.” (Rushdie) Is that the cost that is necessary for true change in American society? Is there no other way?

What can be tried has not already been attempted? A violent uprising should always be the absolute last resort, so are there other avenues left to explore? In an online article published by the Guardian, Mohsin Hamid writes,

“Since well before the dawn of history, human beings have gathered together around flickering campfires to tell and listen to tales. We still do, even if the campfires are now more often glowing screens – in cinemas, on television sets, or in our hands. There are a great many reasons for this: fictional narratives offer us so many things. But in our present moment it is worth remembering one reason in particular: storytelling offers an antidote to nostalgia. By imagining, we create the potential for what might be. Religions are composed of stories precisely because of this potency. Stories have the power to liberate us from the tyranny of what was and is.” (Hamid)

Hamid suggests that imagination is what could set things right. It won’t be politicians, or economists, or even tech innovators, they created this mess and continue to dig in deeper because it only pads their bank accounts. It will be the artists, and the free thinkers who are able to imagine the way out. This is the ultimate function of the artist, to battle convention and inspire new ideas. The ability to create new worlds and envision life with a different set of rules is vital in finding creative solutions to the problems of the real world.

A master of world building, Gabriel Garcia Marquez specialized in Magic Realism, a genre based in blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. In his book **One Hundred Years of Solitude**, Marquez writes about the small town of Macondo, created by the patriarch of the Buendia family, José Arcadio Buendia. The story follows this family and this town for multiple generations, from the beginning of Macondo until the very end of it. Marquez crosses in and out of reality with this story by playing with time and death in ways that are impossible in the real world. In setting new rules and creating new possibilities, Marquez opens the door to new ways of thought.

In a book that challenges so many norms and traditions, there are so many characters that hold onto an unfortunate amount of nostalgia. The patriarch, José Arcadio Buendia drove himself mad trying to create a perpetual motion device. For the generations to follow, they all tend to branch off from the roots that he set and grow in the same direction that he did. His children took his traits and theirs took from them. It was as if everyone looked to the past for knowledge and thus sealed their fate. By the end of the story, it is discovered that the whole history of Macondo was prophesized by a man named Melquiades, who delivered the handwritten account of his prophecy to José Arcadio Buendia himself. Five generations later, the final surviving member of the Buendia family, Aureliano (II) deciphers the scripts to find that Melquiades predicted everything, including the exact moment Aureliano (II) finds the meaning of the scripts. This works in the kind of world that Marquez creates because there is an ever-present sense of magic in all things occurring in Macondo. However, what if Melquiades' prophecy was not an act of magic? If Melquiades was able to see that this family held the past so dearly, and he was there from the beginning, then all he had to do was figure out their cycles. Maybe there was no magic at all, and just a really good observation on his end. By knowing that the members Buendia family would continually repeat the mistakes of their ancestors, the ability to see the future is no different than the ability to pay attention to history.

Would Melquiades have the same success on a prophecy for America? What are the cycles? What are the cycles when it comes to oppression? Are they predictable? In looking at the treatment of black people, it starts with the Transatlantic Slave Trade. After nearly a century from the formation of the nation, the Civil War ended with the abolishment of slavery. In response to this newfound status for black people, the KKK was formed. Around the same time The Jim Crow laws were put into effect. This lasted until the Civil Rights movement, another significant milestone for equality in the country. Shortly after that, there was the war on drugs, which targeted people of color. In 2008, the first black president was elected. In 2016, a president that is praised by high-level white supremacists was elected. Black people have come far in America, but for every step forward, there is always a white backlash to follow. That is how the American cycle of oppression works.

The United States can no longer afford to be identified by ideals held by the forefathers. Those forefathers did not have access to the technology and the schools of thought that have come about since their time. The current generation better equipped to define the nation. In this redefinition of what it is to be American, it is important to take into account those voices that were not valued in the past. People of color, women, LGBTQ, and anyone else that was disenfranchised at the start of this country deserve to be part of the conversation when it comes to the future. Anything to the tune of “That’s just how we’ve always done things before” no longer applies. How things have been done is wrong, so reevaluate and learn to be better for everyone.

Maybe Melquiades does exist in this world, or at least some version of him. Coates, Ward and Baldwin have certainly identified the cycles. Morrison and Achebe have explored how deep and how far back those cycles go. Conrad, McEwan and Kingsolver have shown the faces of the perpetrators. Rahimi and Joyce have encouraged letting go of old tethers and starting anew. Rushdie provided the map for the revolution and warned of the costs. Mohsin spoke to the need of imagination and Marquez provided it. Perhaps the prophecy has been written and is only waiting to be deciphered. Maybe it is still being written. If that is the case, hopefully the writers look to their imaginations instead of the past for their answers.

This poem, “A song On the End of the World” by Czeslaw Milosz is written about the time that the Nazis were destroying Warsaw in 1944. The destruction comes about while life is going on as usual. To fight this destruction, people must step out of what comes naturally or else they surrender to the destruction.

A Song On the End of the World

Czeslaw Milosz, 1911 - 2004

On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,

A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.

On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.

Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
No other end of the world will there be,
No other end of the world will there be.

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