

## Shades of the Color Black: Perspectives of the Black Identity

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One of the most detailed essays I wrote in high school focused on the perception of African Americans in popular culture. The cultural harmony that the premiere of *Black Panther* ushered in early 2018 made me startlingly aware of the lack of diverse representation for African Americans in film and television. My research took me back 100 years, where I learned about D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*. The film, originally titled *the Clansman*, offers a skewed perspective of post-Civil War America where, instead of accurately portraying the injustices African Americans endured under the reign of Jim Crow, the Ku Klux Klan was posed as the heroes that rescued the South from free black people.

The film was highly controversial, for while there was offensive content that earned the ire and protest of African Americans, millions more people still lined up to go see the film. Not only is *Birth of a Nation* considered one of the first American blockbusters, when it premiered at the White House, President Woodrow Wilson praised it stating it was like "writing history with lightning." The fact that this narrative was so widely condoned highlights one of the main injustices of media portrayal regarding marginalized people: because they lack power in a nation wrought with racial oppression, people of color are often forced to endure whatever negative perspectives the media and popular culture enforce.

Consider the War on Drugs. Though the name suggests a legitimate effort to combat drug usage in the United States, I can't help but think the War played a major role in modern police brutality. After all, the way that War's media campaign repeatedly showed images of African Americans in handcuffs on the evening news normalizes the concept that they are criminals. Furthermore, it justifies their imprisonment while generating an image of African

Americans which has been popular since they were first enslaved and brought to America: the image of black people in chains.

Ultimately, this narrative became tiresome for me to witness. African Americans are educated on our enslavement and oppression so much that one would think that it covers the entirety of our history. Even when we are not portrayed suffering from some form of trauma, be it slavery or police brutality, how often are we allowed our time in the spotlight? I wanted to see an uplift in the tone and if I couldn't have that, I'd settle for a genuine black perspective, which served to spark the genesis of my collection.

As I grew up, I lost my taste for seeing black people reduced to criminals and secondary characters and began seeking out stories where we can take the lead. That has led me to explore a diverse range of genres including fiction, nonfiction and even a few comic books that all focus on the efforts of black characters. Ultimately, my collection is meant to destigmatize the poisonous perspectives of black people that has been popularized for so long in this country. Rather than being reduced to a one-dimensional caricature, I want to explore the range of voices that black characters offer to show that we can be heroes as well.

## Annotated Bibliography

Adjei-Brenyah, Nana Kwame. *Friday Black: Stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. Print.

I picked up this book because it was recommended for readers who enjoyed *Heads of the Colored People*. In his literary debut, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah presents a short story collection that not only examines the impact of racism on his black protagonists, but also the traumas of capitalism and gun violence. Thus, similar to Fanon, he analyzes the plight of being black as well as the violence that comes from it.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (Revised Edition)*. New York: The New Press, 2012. Print.

I read excerpts of this novel for a Race & Power class I took in high school and it not only offered me my first glimpses of the impact that the War on Drugs had on the black community, but also educated me on the latest incarnation of systematic racism. Racism that was at one point expressed through slavery and then segregation has now become embodied in the criminal justice system.

Baldwin, James. *If Beale Street Could Talk*. New York: Vintage International, 2006. Print.

One of Baldwin's most acclaimed novels, *Beale Street* stood out to me because of how it defers from the happy ending that most might've predicted. While the novel shows the preservation of love between the two main protagonists, Fonny and Tish, it also offers a realistic portrayal of the police discrimination that African Americans are still subject to through Fonny's unjust imprisonment.

Baldwin, James. *No Name in the Street*. New York: Vintage International, 2007. Print.

When someone refers you to Baldwin, chances are they'll name *The Fire Next Time* as his seminal work. While it may be his most popular, *No Name in the Street* was the first Baldwin book I was drawn to as he relays his personal experience growing up black in America, his experience being black in Paris and how it gave him a unique perspective on the black struggle in the United States and engaging with other pivotal figures of the Civil Rights Movement

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. New York: One World, 2017. Print.

I picked up this book after reading *Between the World and Me* and his run on comic book character Black Panther. Coates' third work assembles a series of essays each from a concurrent year in the Obama presidency. In doing so, Coates explores a breadth of topics some of which pertaining to the consequences and reactions of having a black

president, others focusing on social justice in relation to history and the criminal justice system.

Dennis-Benn, Nicole. *Here Comes the Sun: A Novel*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017. Print.

I received this book as part of a class called Guest Writers in high school, where my class met with authors whose material we read. Usually, when we see imagery of Jamaica, it's the gilded representation that is meant to cater to tourists. As a native Jamaican, Nicole Dennis-Benn uses her novel as a vehicle to reveal the dark side of the island, stricken with poverty and governed by colorism as her protagonist fights to earn money for her little sister to escape the cycle while dealing with a love subject to homophobia.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1995. Print.

I received this book as part of my Seminar class in my senior year in high school and breezed through it easier than most others. A fictional tale of a black young man cast out of college, Ellison's novel explores the development of the protagonist's identity through his attempts to bolster his social status by catering to white superiors. It is through these experiences that his initial psychology on how African Americans should navigate predominantly white spaces evolves as he understands the negative ways he is perceived by the people around him.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 2005. Print.

Another book I received in my Seminar class that proved to be central to my understanding of how the perception of marginalized people is manipulated to fit a negative agenda. In this book, Fanon uses a psychological approach to explore the aftermath of a colonial state and delves into how post-colonization, the colonized are traumatized by the actions of their aggressors. In doing so, he works to destigmatize casual claims that the uncolonized subject is uncivilized if just by asserting that said uncivilized condition is the outcome that could come from the anguish of colonization.

Keats, Ezra Jack. *Keats's Neighborhood: An Ezra Jack Keats Treasury*. New York: Viking Books, 2002. Print.

A collection of short stories mostly focusing on the small adventures of a black young man named Peter. This book was special to me in my childhood because it wasn't too often that I'd see an illustrated children's book with a black lead in the urban settings that Keats portrayed. I'd come to learn later in life that Keats, despite not being black, went out of his way to help push multiculturalism in literature.

Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.

I received this book as a graduation present from a few of the administration workers at my high school. As many narratives focus on the burdens of being black, this novel was

a unique read for me because it explored the life of a black woman who could pass as white. While she maintains a substantial presence in the black community, her interactions with another black woman who passes as white examines how much of our pride we're willing to sacrifice to fit in.

Lewis, John, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell. *March: Book One*. Canada: Top Shelf Productions, 2013.

Before the March on Washington, there were the Selma to Montgomery marches where nonviolent activists mobilized to protest for their right to vote. Over the course of three weeks, the Edmund Pettus Bridge became marked with both tragedy and triumph and in the first part of his graphic novel trilogy, John Lewis delivers a first-hand account of the events that transpired there.

Noah, Trevor. *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2016. Print.

There's no doubt that Trevor Noah has been able to leave his own mark both in his comedy specials and through his tenure on *the Daily Show* by relaying his experience being an African moving to America. I picked up this book because his more humorous take began to grow on me after Jon Stewart's departure from the show. In his autobiography, he focuses on his life growing up in South Africa after the abolishment of apartheid where, as a mixed-race child, he is literally born a crime and deals with trying to fit in.

Rogers, J.A. *From "Superman" to Man*. Mattituck: Amereon House, 1974. Print.

I read this book when I was younger, but it became clearer when I reread it going to college. With the tension between a small cast of characters serving to move the plot forward, the novel reads something like play. Nevertheless, Rogers uses his protagonist's dialogue with a racist white man as a way to eliminate stereotypes attributed to Africans and African Americans, thus destroying the belief that the white man is scientifically superior to the black man.

Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014. Print.

This book was required class for my class of Goucher students. If *Beale Street* offers insight to the oppressive nature of our criminal justice system, Bryan Stevenson's autobiographical account of his experience as a lawyer offers insight to its redemption. The memoir primarily details the efforts of his Equal Justice Initiative and their efforts to exonerate wrongly convicted Walter McMillian from his death row sentence while also focusing on other African Americans condemned for crimes they didn't commit.

Thomas, Angie. *The Hate U Give*. New York: Balzer + Bray, 2017. Print.

As many African Americans have been killed by police in the past few years, I've often wondered what I'm expected to do in a police encounter to survive. Angie Thomas's debut novel focuses on the life of Starr Carter and how her perception of the world and the way her blackness functions in it evolves after her friend is killed in an act of police brutality.

Thompson-Spires, Nafissa. *Heads of the Colored People: Stories*. New York: 37Ink/Atria Books, 2018. Print.

I picked this book up because I wanted to research the layout of short stories and figured that a black writer might've been more relatable. Thompson-Spires's short stories focus on the lives of African Americans living their lives while grappling with the constant judgments being made about their decisions, whether it's about a black woman not being able to be openly angry or a new mother dreading the potential racism her child is bound to face.

Wilson, August. *Fences*. New York, Plume Books, 1986. Print.

I asked my mother for this book after we saw the Oscar winning film directed by Denzel Washington. *Fences* was a difficult read for me because it was hard for me to sympathize with the story's protagonist. But with time and reflection, I feel that I came to understand his experience being shortchanged as a black man even if I didn't agree with his methods of teaching his son the lessons he had to suffer from firsthand.

X, Malcolm. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X (as told to Alex Haley)*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1973. Print.

The man who would become Malcolm X experienced a baptism through fire in order to become the revered voice of Civil Rights that current activists look up to today. Through this autobiography he recounts the journey he undertook in search of identity starting from the criminal acts he performed as an adolescent and then talking about how his imprisonment acted as the catalyst to spark his growth.

Zoboi, Ibi. *Pride*. New York: Balzer + Bray, 2018. Print.

I read the original *Pride and Prejudice* in 12<sup>th</sup> grade as part of my Seminar curriculum and while I was fond of the plot, the writing style felt outdated. In this modern retelling, Ibi Zoboi shifts the framework of Austen's narrative to a new setting focusing on a black family in Bushwick, Brooklyn. In doing so, she explores the reality of being black in Elizabeth Bennet's, rechristened Zuri Benitez, situation, dealing not only with a budding romance, but also gentrification and the looming challenge of college.

*Get Out*. Directed by Jordan Peele, performances by Daniel Kaluuya, Allison Williams, Bradley Whitford, Caleb Landry Jones, Stephen Root, Lakeith Stanfield, and Catherine Keener. Universal Pictures, 2017.

An unexpected dose of horror from acclaimed comedian Jordan Peele. The screenplay as well as the execution of the film reminds me of *Invisible Man* in the way that it visualizes an ideal that white people look for in black people as well as its tendency to show the erasure of a genuine black identity to replace it with said white ideal. The film shows the perversions of the white gaze in regard to the black body in the sense that they want our bodies, but they don't want our minds.

### **Annotated Wish List**

Acevedo, Elizabeth. *The Poet X*. Harper Collins, 2018. Print.

African Americans are consistently told by family how to live our best lives and for good reason. Family often have our best interests at heart and plenty of personal experiences to back it up. This novel focuses on such a protagonist who wants to make her voice heard but faces opposition from her family in the name of best interest.

Beatty, Paul. *The Sellout: A Novel*. Picador, 2016. Print.

I had this novel referred to me from my boss at the Brooklyn Children's Museum. The novel is a satire that focuses on a black man involved in a race trial ultimately brought to the Supreme Court. I'm interested in it because I rarely read literature grounded in satire.

Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Beacon Press, 2003. Print.

After reading some of her book synopses, I find Butler similar to Stephen King in the sense that she crafts a narrative by thrusting ordinary people into extraordinary situations. I reckon that *Kindred* is an interesting analysis on the impact of slavery due to the fact that it takes the black female protagonist Dana on an uncontrollable journey through time from a free California to the racist South prior to the Civil War.

Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Monthly Review Press, 2001. Print.

The book touches upon a similar concept as Fanon's book. Césaire focuses on the impact of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizer and considering the tendencies of colonizers to condemn the colonized subject as savages, stresses the need to "decolonize our minds, our inner life, at the same time that we decolonize society."

Greenlee, Sam. *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*. Brawtley Press, 2015. Print.

This book was referred to me by one of the mentors I had growing up. It recounts the fictional tale of the first black CIA officer and his efforts to recruit black teens into a guerilla warfare militia to overthrow the government.

Jemisin, N.K. *How Long 'til Black Future Month?: Stories*. New York: Orbit, 2018. Print.

N.K. Jemisin has been revered for her science fiction and fantasy and in this collection of short stories she focuses on our broken world from different angles, whether it be from ghosts after Hurricane Katrina or a parallel dimension using us as model to not make the same mistakes.

King Jr., Martin Luther. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Warner Books, 2001. Print.

I added this book because I'm interested in delving into the life of Dr. King as told by him. History has had a gross habit of paraphrasing and at some points omitting his words and actions failing to neglect that King was considered a terrorist during his time as an activist despite advocating for nonviolent protest and I'd love to read King's perspective on his own development into a civil rights leader.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage International, 2007. Print.

Unlike *Passing*, which focuses on an African American protagonist that can blend in with the white community and alleviate some of the racial burdens that African Americans are subject to, *The Bluest Eye* focuses on a dark-skinned African American girl to analyze young people's indoctrination to beauty standards which idolize the white body including their blue eyes.

Okorafor, Nnedi. *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*. New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2019. Print.

In recent years, Nnedi Okorafor has established a name for herself as an Afrofuturist, a genre that incorporates elements of black culture into science fiction-based literature, especially in her novel *Who Fears Death*. *Binti* is a more recently completed trilogy of stories collected into an omnibus and focuses on the journey of Binti who travels off planet to attend a prestigious university and eventually return to share the gifts she's learned with her home.

Priest, Christopher, Mark Texeira and Joe Jusko. *Black Panther: The Complete Collection vol. 1*. New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2015. Print.

Considering that Black Panther is the first black superhero to appear in comic books, it nearly feels ludicrous that it would take 30 years for him to be helmed by a black writer. Nevertheless, Priest doesn't disappoint with his 5-year tenure writing the character, making it open to new fans of the hero while establishing T'Challa as one of the biggest players in the Marvel Universe, with intellect rivaling that of Iron Man and power enough to hold off the Hulk.

