

Black Aliveness: Centering the Stories over the Teller in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

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This essay encompasses the critical component of my thesis, a series of linked short stories about Black Millennial life during the Obama era. In preparation for writing and editing these stories, I read several story collections and discussed a few of them below, couching the literary analysis within a personal history of reading and listening to stories as a child. Every writer runs into challenges, so in considering what to focus on in these collections I looked at ways these writers approach challenges that I have come across in my own efforts to tell stories. The essay mentions several authors but focuses primarily on short fiction by ZZ Packer, Danielle Evans, and Jamel Brinkley. It considers the importance of Black storytelling in a nation where the most far reaching forms of media have often allowed for very limited depictions of Black life in its multiplicity.

Years ago, when I was no longer quite a child, one of the uncles from my mother's family told me a story about a Moses from a century ago who had gone into town and offended a local white man. As the white people's anger grew the threat became clear: he needed to run off or face the lynch mob. But he didn't run off. The Moses' had invested in their corner of Southwest Mississippi, owned many dozens of acres among the Pike County pine. He didn't want to run. Instead, he rounded up his brothers and, perched on a hill with their shotguns, they fired at all the white men who approached until the mob retreated in defeat.

I'm not sure I believe the story. It seems thin and self-satisfying, a way of casting yourself as a hero during the awful old Jim Crow days. I need more information. Still, it's interesting to me how the story supports values – the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves: the Moses' are a proud family. They didn't take anything from white folks. They moved west after slavery, seeking land and independence in Mississippi, and those early generations really did seem to stick to it. They were friendly with their white neighbors but as far as I know they preferred to work their own land over working for local white families. They valued education but they never became preachers or formed businesses that profited off of Jim Crow and its captive Black markets. My great uncle became an administrator at Alcorn but my aunts and uncles were the country cousins, poor but proud. They had to work before and after school, but they never went hungry. They never took free lunch or charity or welfare, and didn't think other people should either. They saw themselves as a good family, people to be admired. When I tutor younger students, the parents sometimes tell me that boys don't like to read. I listen find it hard to relate. I don't remember a time where I wasn't awed by the power of narrative. Many stories left me spellbound as a child, and by high school I knew that I would eventually want to take some of this power for myself.

My grandfather loved to read. He died when I was two, so I don't have any memory of him, but I remember growing up seeing the many Westerns that lined his bookshelf at my grandmother's house. I remember flipping through a few once or twice, an effort to fight the boredom had set in, but I never read any of those novels. I always brought a few of my own books to Mississippi. It seemed necessary, in that time before tablets. Grandma Moses only had one TV, and you had to go outside and turn the antenna to change the channel. I tried more than once as a child, but it was always too heavy so I was stuck watching NBC soap operas. The books were a necessary reprieve. Mostly fantasy and sci-fi: *Goosebumps*, *Fear Street*, *Animorphs*. *Animorphs*, a series about a group of middle schoolers charged with saving the planet from aliens, had one Black POV character, Cassie. I liked Cassie but I identified more with Jake, the white leader, and Tobias, the poor out-of-town kid who was trapped in the form of a hawk. He sacrificed his human body for the team. Cassie was a pretty flat character, honestly, but I still looked forward to her POV. I felt so invested in her. She wasn't me, exactly, but *us*. She was Black people in this world I dreamed of falling into. The other characters could have big shortcomings, but she had to be perfect. In fact, she was as close to perfect as any character in the group. I preferred her perfection: she represented all of us, so she couldn't fail.

These were the books I brought with me to Mississippi, and reading them meant I was less bored than some of my cousins during their visits. Still, most of my cousins read as children—a few more than I did, both male and female. When parents tell me their boys won't read, I often wonder if they ever see their parents reading. I wouldn't call my little brother a great reader, yet I remember one time, when he was nine or ten, he wanted to hang out with me and, while I was reading a book in my room, he came in and read one too. He read many books as a

child. When I was that age, most of the books I read focused on white characters (the Cassie POVs in *Animorphs* only came around every five books or so). Some people find it difficult to read about characters who aren't like themselves, but I did this regularly. I read *Absolutely Normal Chaos* when I was ten or eleven and loved following Mary Lou's summer adventures in West Virginia and beyond. I read a lot of Madeline L'Engel around that time as well, having become enraptured by the world she creates in *A Wrinkle in Time*. Sometimes I would imagine myself in the main role, or think about the main character as being exactly the same, except Black, but more often than not I just went along with the story. In seventh grade I started dreaming about writing my own fantasy novel, centered on a Black boy. I read a fair amount of Michael Crichton, Steven King, and Anne Rice around that time, along with Ursula K. LeGuin and, by eighth grade, J.K. Rowling. My pre-teen self would be surprised at my stories now, which are so realistic, but I believe consensus reality began to overwhelm me in adolescence, pushing the pleasant escapism of my childhood to the periphery.

Eventually, I knew I would go to college, though I didn't know what I would study. My parents had gone, and Granddaddy Moses was supposed to go after WWII, but his father got sick and he stayed behind. He got married and had ten children, and the nine of them who lived all went to Alcorn. So I knew I would go to college, just like they had, but I had trouble seeing myself as a writer. I wanted to be a neurosurgeon at one point, though by my junior year of high school I thought I might "do something" with writing. I liked working on the school newspaper in high school so in college I decided I would become a journalist.

Zadie Smith provided early inspiration for much of my writing. I read *White Teeth* the summer after my freshman year of college and was amazed at the range of subjectivities she

explored in her fictional, though very real Willesden. I wanted to do this in my own writing—reveal something about contemporary life through stories. I felt certain that I would write a novel someday, but thought I didn't have enough experience. A more ambitious person might have sought to follow in Smith's footsteps and produce a novel right out of undergrad, but I felt like I didn't yet have the stories. I centered the stories and decided that journalism would be a great place to begin. Journalism would allow me to tell stories—other people's stories, going beyond myself and, not unlike Zadie Smith, craft stories that tell us something about the world. I don't recall knowing much about MFA programs at Wesleyan. I was of the mind that writing could not be taught. You just had to read, I thought, then write. I wrote a little fiction in college, but not much, focusing most of my energy on journalism, literary studies, and film. Senior year I started a cringy blog about my roommates. In it I joked about the tubes of toothpaste that disappeared from the bathroom and the dishes that never seemed to get washed. I complained about movies that I hated on principle, if not in fact (like *Revenge of the Nerds*). It all seemed so funny at 21, but reading the posts now, they seem more than a little twisted!

While I was in journalism school I came across ZZ Packer's work when she appeared in the *New Yorker's* 20 under 40 issue. I loved her mix of humor and poignancy immediately. Before graduation I took an English class that introduced me to Leslie Marmon Silko's stories. Her work helped me to see the Americas with renewed vision; the United States in particular is not simply a white supremacist nation state but a site of ongoing colonization. Her characters render these ideas, giving them the immediacy of a cousin in crisis. Her skill with imagery also stood out to me—especially in *Ceremony*.

As I have spent more time on my own stories, I have returned to ZZ Packer's collection *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* for inspiration and also to learn more from the craft of her stories, how she uses the elements of craft to leave you stunned at the end.

In "Brownies," ZZ Packer explores the violence of youth through a setup that might seem overwrought were it not for the race of the children. By centering Black girls in her story, Packer opens up the genre to make space for marginalized perspectives. However, outside of the most normative categories, including race, age, and gender, there's no easy way to classify this group as a whole. Though young and Black, they are not mere victims; the story's central conflict is one the girls brought upon themselves—or rather, one that the mean girls bullied everyone else to go along with.

Packer's skill handling both character and narrative is something I would like to emulate in my own writing. Narrative time occasionally slows over the course of "Brownies," but the pacing never seems to come to a stop. We learn so much about these characters over the course of the narrative: Arnetta and Olivia are the ring leaders, the biggest difference between them being Olivia's long straight hair, which makes all the other girls jealous. When Olivia speaks, everyone listens. Arnetta, on the whole, is the more active of the two. She has put the most effort into maintaining her fourth-grade social status, listening to Mrs. Margolin's religious aphorisms and making herself a favorite among the girls in her Brownies troupe.

The rich texture of "Brownies," over the course of a narrative with several surprising moments, makes it one of my favorite ZZ Packer stories to think about and discuss. Mrs. Margolin, a minor character, is described as having a duck-like body and a skill with Biblical acrostics. Silly, "country" Janice—the only character to use Black English—is convinced she will marry Michael Jackson. The protagonist's name is Laurel but everyone calls her "Snot," and

she is obsessed with the winning lines of Daphne's Langston Hughes Day poem. A lot of this information comes as an aside, slight detours from the narrative's forward progress.

Cumulatively, it gives the story richness and depth. We don't just learn about the world, we learn about the characters.

"Brownies" in particular is imbued with evocative imagery and many striking depictions. When the sun sets behind the treetops, Packer describes the lattice of tree limbs as "a canopy of black lace." As the girls wander through the night toward the bathroom, the narrator describes the stars as "fastened to the darkness, high up and holy, their places fixed and definite as we stirred beneath them." Not much happens during the walk, yet the imagery in passages such as the one above help establish the eerie mood of the scene, serving as points of connection for readers, many of whom will have their own camp memories from childhood.

Packer's wry sensibility, evident in most of her stories, is on display in "Brownies" as well. The leader of the troop of white girls has "the severe pageboy hairdo of an ancient Egyptian." "Camp Crescendo," which serves as the setting for "Brownies," was once a band and hockey camp, but following an accident that left a girl partially paralyzed, her teammates left good tidings on hockey balls that, according to the narrator, "were still stacked there, like a shrine of ostrich eggs embedded in the ground."

There no sense of an overarching Black agenda in Packer's collection. She does not shy from the silliness in her characters, finds joy in the farcical elements of human nature, and isn't afraid to take the stories to places that make many of her Black characters look bad. This is especially true in "Every Tongue Shall Confess." The story focuses on Clareese, a nurse whose adamant faith isolates her at work and fails to serve her within the patriarchal confines of the church. Evangelical Christianity makes several appearances in this book, and it is ridiculed

throughout. Still, “Every Tongue Shall Confess” finds space to empathize with Clareese. Her character is cross eyed, a characteristic some readers might find problematic given the book’s perspective on religious life. Are we complicit as readers? Has she turned these characters into creatures at the zoo, our eyes wandering the page like spectators? Not every writer would *go there*, writing a character like this, and while I cannot say that her cross eyes, as described on the page, do not contribute to the bizarre sense of the character, I don’t think she lingers on this characteristic for spectacle alone, or even primarily. Rather, the story focuses on how her condition affects her or unsettles others. As an unmarried woman that people don’t particularly like, she is unable to rise in the church’s ranks, either officially or socially, in spite of her ardent faith. Packer endears readers to this character, in the end. Clareese really does care about people. I came away from this hoping Clareese finds love, and impressed at Packer’s skill in rendering this character, who arouses frustration, condescension, and empathy over the course of one story.

Drinking Coffee Elsewhere is filled with characters who embody woefully realistic contradictions. In “Speaking in Tongues,” Dezi seems to want to really help Tia, who is just a fourteen-year-old child, after all, but he actually wants to sleep with her. Dezi’s business-minded friend, Marie, becomes Tia’s true savoir. In “Geese,” weeks of hunger drive Dina to prostitution, a prospect she wouldn’t have considered during her initial month in Japan. Spurgeon’s father, Ray, ranks among the worst father’s imaginable. A virulent narcissist, he is not redeemed. Still, many of the men from the bar are kind to Spurgeon; they wish him well despite other characters in the story characterizing these men as a bad sort. Packer’s characters may occasionally stretch credulity, but they contain multitudes. They’re complicated, like real people.

The wry humor of *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* finds some parallels in Danielle Evans’ *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*, but it is less apparent, more subtle. In its place lies a

firm commitment to character and context. Evans' collection feels less like a survey of American Blackness and more like a deep dive. Her protagonists are largely Black women of African descent, young women from the Mid-Atlantic states or the Northeast who are navigating the space between their desires and the possibilities afforded to them. The collection begins with an epigraph, "The Bridge Poem" by Donna Kate Rushin: "I'm sick of mediating with your worst self/On behalf of your better selves/I am sick/Of having to remind you/To breath/Before you suffocate/Your own fool self." Authorial intent is only one factor to consider when analyzing fiction, but I believe this notion of a multiplicity of selves is applicable to this collection. There's a consistency to the voice in many of the stories, yet their situations vary significantly. Racism—unavoidable in the United States—weaves a thread through most of the stories. In "Virgins," the main characters have very few interactions with white people, but they face structural racism and economic disadvantages every day. The characters in "Robert E. Lee Is Dead" face similar disadvantages, yet Crystal also faces discrimination from the white students in school, who resent her because she regularly outperforms them in their classes. To varying degrees, her protagonists are "young, gifted and Black," navigating school, family, and relationships. Many writers have imagined similar characters, but Evans' skill with narration makes her work stand out. At the end of "Snakes," for example, we find out that we have been misled: Allison didn't push Tara, Tara jumped. Allison, the blonde white cousin, protected Tara, who, though Black and embarrassing to her grandmother, is loved.

Evans' directs our attention, and misdirects it, through her manipulation of time. In "Snakes," the adult narrator frames a story from her childhood by the ways she has told it to different people. The story begins with the narrator reflecting on the past. Evans' begins by writing, "The summer I turned nine I went to Tallahassee to visit my grandmother for the first

and last time” (Evans 24). The words “the last time” alone are enough to indicate that the narrator is reflecting on past events, telling the story from some point in the future. The story moves forward from there, but jumps around a bit toward the end. She sets the reader up so that we expect a reveal, letting us know that she’s told this part of the story to different men, lying by telling each man he was her sole confidant. The scene that follows is packed with emotion and beautiful descriptions detailing the events that led to her blonde cousin, Allison, pushing her out of a tree and into the rocky, shallow edge of a lake. Later, Tara, the narrator, reveals that this version of the story is also a lie. Tara jumped out of the tree, and Allison told everyone she pushed her. Tara let everyone believe that Allison pushed her because that made her look innocent. They were both looking for love, but Tara had more of it, and Allison, in saying she pushed Tara, pushed everyone else away. Evans’ manipulation of time creates dramatic tension in the story, leading to a reveal that left me stunned when I first read it.

I’ve never written a story quite like this, but I am partial to unreliable narrators and manipulations in time. In “Eudaemons,” the story that begins my thesis collection, Sam is looking for the person who wrote about her hookup with her roommate’s boyfriend for a few pages, and then the story jumps ahead before jumping back to when she found the mystery web admin who made the blogpost about her tryst. I find linearity difficult, in storytelling. I tend to jump around. Jumping around can make the reading process more difficult for readers, however, and disrupt the dramatic arc of a story. In Evans’ stories, narrative time unravels in ways that heighten dramatic tension and make the reveal more satisfying.

Flashback, in particular, does not always have plot significance in *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*, but reveals character and fleshes out the world of the story. In “Wherever You Go, There You Are,” Evans uses the context of the narrator’s trip to Raleigh to describe her

first trip there. The reason behind the trip is never revealed; instead, we learn that on her way back home, Carla gets in a fight with her mother over an issue she says is stupid, but actually uncovers key truths about herself and her role in close relationships. This comes about because the narrator's mom gets upset enough to pull over on the highway and walk away into a tropical storm. Through the voice of Carla—the narrator, whose name is only mentioned once in the story—Evans' writes, "I understood that if she wasn't coming back, I wasn't going anywhere, not because I was still a few months away from my learner's permit, but because I lacked the instinct to run." She loves so deeply that she cannot move away. The mother doesn't show up in the story, outside of flashback or casual recollection. This scene, however, elucidates something about the narrator's relationship with her ex-boyfriend, Brian. She has a boyfriend, he has a fiancé, yet Brian is the one she really loves, the one who she has to have, who she will not release. If they don't get back together, they will spend years cheating on whoever they end up with, with each other. This flashback served the story in a significant way, at the level of character, if not plot.

Several of Evans' stories display exceptional skill in characterization. "Wherever You Go, There You Are" stands out as a family story, with many complex characters, and character dynamics that manifest the many threads that connect members of any large, close-knit group of people. The story begins with a lush description of a great aunt: "'I need you to take Chrissie for a bit,' Aust Edie says, because apparently I pass for a role model these days. It's Thursday night, and they're standing on the doorstep, unannounced. Aunt Edie doesn't bother coming in. She looks exhausted, her eyes puffy from crying, her usually impeccably braided white hair hanging loose and disheveled" (Evans 106). As readers, we learn so much in these lines. Physically, Aunt Edie stands at the door with the narrator's cousin, Chrissie. We receive the image of a fine white

braid of hair, and learn that Aunt Edie's hair, in the present, is disheveled. This lets us know that Aunt Edie is herself disheveled. In the next few lines, we learn that her brother is in the hospital, close to death. Chrissie's father is there with him. Carla is living in her own grandfather's house, which her dad inherited. Her own grandfather has already passed, so she's not as connected to the drama—but of course, Aunt Edie sees her as her brother's granddaughter, and someone who can help out with Chrissie. Chrissie has become a handful. We learn right away that Aunt Edie has confiscated her cellphone. All of this information is revealed to the reader within the first two pages of the story, most of it in the first two paragraphs.

Other characters also come to light in those early paragraphs, description and story action working in concert to help them pop, like true beings in an imagined parallel universe. Aunt Edie says Carla's cousin Tia is too busy with nursing school to take Chrissie, but this is a lie. Tia is a stripper, and Evans' description of Tia not only describes her physically, her aesthetic tells us something about her values and how some men value certain types of women. She writes:

Tia's job bothers Aunt Edie for reasons involving hellfire and eternal damnation. It bothers me because even though Tia's twenty-five like I am, she looks thirteen. I love her, don't get me wrong, but she's got chicken legs, and nothing in the way of hips or boobs, and a big head with wide almond eyes and a long blond weave, and while I can imagine many reasons why men might pay good money to see a real live woman, there's something unsettling about so many of them paying to see a real live Bratz doll. (Evans 106).

Again, these lines tell us so much about the characters, couched within commentary on family and gender dynamics. It's clear that Carla thinks Aunt Edie's ideas about hellfire and damnation are ridiculous. This paints her as an educated liberal type, a perception confirmed once we find

out that she is working on a dissertation about the aesthetics and activism of Gwendolyn Brooks. Some readers might also view these lines as evidence of amorality, but I think that assessment misses the mark. She is moral, but her morality comes from her own notions and ideas rather than the most standard type, handed down through the generations via family mores or religion. Still, later in the story, Carla does consider sleeping with her ex, even though he is engaged to another woman.

Through Tia's description, we learn about Carla's views on gender dynamics. Tia is the same age as Carla, but we assume that their bodies contrast: Carla's body being the more womanly, in her eyes. Tia "looks thirteen." Attraction to Tia seems pedophilic. We laugh at the line, "I love her, don't get me wrong, but she's got chicken legs." Still, Carla wonders why men love to see her, their love being of a different sort. Her body should not be erotic, according to Carla's values, yet clearly enough men find it attractive enough to want to see her dance on stage. Anyway, Tia is busy, and not a great influence for Chrissie, who has lost phone privileges because of the guy that she has been seeing. Carla really does not want to deal with this. She has her own plans to drive to Raleigh to see her ex, Brian, play his show. She can't get out of taking Chrissie, however, so Chrissie now has to tag along on the drive South. The story really gets going when the drive begins, coming to a climax in the bar after the show. Evans' descriptions and dialogue are so unique that the characters seem unique themselves, and as readers we get invested in their lives, especially within the emotionally intense moments Evans' builds for us through her expert command of craft.

Strong feelings are just as present in Jamel Brinkley's work, though the expression seems more subdued, oftentimes: barely bridled passion, misdirected anger, and quiet tragedy. Many of

his stories create a realism, a texture and depth that I've tried to approach in my own stories. The teen protagonist of "J'Ouvert 1996" begins in a fairly recognizable world of shared sibling accommodations, but the story slowly slips into the surreal. From the beginning we know that Ty is upset because he doesn't have enough money for a haircut. His little brother Omari has taken up a rubber mask that he won't take off. Throughout the story we find that he can't express his anger at any of the people who arouse it, so he lashes out, instead, at Omari.

Ty's mother is a strong woman, but a bad one. At the very least, she is a bad mother. She chastises him for not getting a job—a fair criticism, perhaps, but she dismisses Ty's desires, and doesn't seem to care what he wants to look like. Most of these perceptions come from Ty, through Brinkley's adroit use of third-person limited. The mother probably does not realize that she messed up Ty's haircut, doesn't understand or place much value on his need to seem cool, but she clearly places value on her own pleasure and romantic life—perhaps to the detriment of her children. Whether she *is* bad, is of course, a judgment each reader can make for herself, but she is clearly painted as bad. Ty and Omari have to leave the house so that she can have sex and intimacy with Mike, a man who doesn't give them more than a quarter.

"Ma" and her love life are not the only negative elements in the story; they combine to form a nexus of negative feelings and influences. Ty's father has been locked up for years and he forms a sort of nihilistic attitude about it, assuming everyone will go to jail, eventually, including himself. He is small and skinny, so he's teased. A boy he would like to be friends with steals his hat. Combined, these pressures lead to Ty's own bad decision making. We see how hurt people hurt people. Poverty turns in on itself, reproducing itself. Yet Ty's circumstances are unique. His father gave him that hat. It wasn't cool, but he wants it back.

The surreal quality develops over time, elements of consensus reality skewed by Ty's emotional state. Omari is strange. Or rather, Ty thinks he's strange, sees him as strange from the beginning of the story. He spends almost the entire story in the owl mask, which must feel hot in the middle of the summer in Brooklyn. In the first paragraph we learn about his handcrafted headlines, taped together into absurdities. Omari has an imaginary friend who he seems to grow closer to the more Ty neglects him. The J'Ouvert street party looms over the future. A midnight section of the West Indian Day parade, J'Ouvert is an ecstatic experience Ty has never witnessed or participated in, a mystery religion he longs to enter. The frenzied dancing of the parade disorients Ty, and he loses Omari, jolting him out of his self-pity. He finds him at dawn, spinning on the playground, enraptured by his imaginary friend Angela. It's not clear whether Ty has changed for the better, but the story does illuminate the influences that lead Ty to stay out all night, creating a bridge toward empathy with this character. We understand why Ty is so troubled, why Omari runs off, and why finding Omari becomes more important than any of the other troubles weighing on his mind. Although "J'Ouvert, 1996" does not come across as sociology or a call to empathy, it still humanizes a type of person who many readers would otherwise write off, shedding light on the personal problems and social problems that only create more problems in people's lives.

The implications of various class dynamics play out throughout several of Brinkley's other stories in *A Lucky Man*. "I Happy Am" follows Freddy and his class of inner-city young boys on a trip to a house pool in Westchester County. Freddy is disappointed in the visit, finding the house and the pool a little shabby, but Arlene, the woman hosting the boys, tells Freddy in so many words that the family who usually hosts the boys uses them in a way, taking pictures of each group to create an image of themselves as charitable. Freddy's situation at home is worse

than most. His mother is a single parent and his aunt passed, recently, so his mom stays home all day on the couch. “A Family” illustrates a working class dynamic between a man recently out of prison, a single mom, and her son. “Infinite Happiness” and “No More Than a Bubble” have more educated, middle class characters, and their preoccupations are very different from those of the characters with less class privilege.

Brinkley and the other authors mentioned here are doing the types of work I hope to center in my writing, bringing their incredible skill to the task of writing stories that have something to say about life in this moment and the incredible challenges facing those of us living in the United States, other settler colonies, and other locations in the Western world. We need new stories that reflect the variation in circumstances of Black people and other people of color, and how these people move throughout a world enmeshed in white supremacist power structures. No one person can understand what life is like for everyone else, yet convincing characters and compelling narration create stories with depth, stories that stick with readers and help them imagine life conditions they are never likely to otherwise encounter.

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