

It was during my sophomore year, in a contemporary literary theory course, that I first encountered Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author." This brief work thrilled me with the idea that literature is free of the constraints the notion of an author imposes. What possibilities, what vast expanses of interpretive space, I wondered, open up when we cast away our faith in a transparent authorial figure and take writing instead as "that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away"? But within a few semesters, I realized that not every "Author" is the condemnable figure that Barthes describes. In my independent project for a class called "Race, Trauma, Narrative," I tackled an important question: To what extent should we consider authorial intent in so-called literatures of trauma? The notion of interpretation that emerged from this project is one influenced by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that an ethical relation to the other requires a calling into question of the self, which exists in relation to the other and is inescapably bound to respond to his or her infinite demand. It is this notion of interpretation that guides my study of literature and drives my desire to pursue graduate study. The idea of authorship is for me a limit case through which to approach questions of agency and subjectivity, to explore the potentialities and the limitations of theory, and to integrate, perhaps discordantly, seemingly incompatible critical impulses.

As a research assistant for Dr. Zahi Zalloua, I investigated the relationship between sovereignty, ethics, and democracy in the work of Jacques Derrida, which gave me a richer understanding of the inevitable political resonances of ethical criticism. The next summer, when I assisted Dr. Nicole Simek with research on the criticism of postcolonial critique, I could see resonances of deconstructive thinking in the work of thinkers such as Edouard Glissant, but I also gained a deeper understanding of how "theory" poses problems for many postcolonial critics. Yet I could not simply dismiss theorists like Barthes and Derrida—theorists in whose philosophies I saw a potential to re-imagine human relationships by unsettling gendered, racial, and cultural boundaries. In my senior honors thesis, I continued my exploration of authorship, grappling with the historical problematics of the slave narrative in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, the spectacularization of the black writer in Percival Everett's *Erasure*, and the (im)possibility of authoring the post-racial in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*. I asked: In what ways does literature reinforce oppressive structures, and in what ways does it allow us to transcend them? What responsibilities do authors take on in penning their texts—and what do these texts demand of their readers? Unsurprisingly, I found no simple answers to these questions, but instead an array of subtle and intricate ways that each text engages—or disengages—its readers, asserting the paradoxical existence of an author who speaks only when seemingly dead.

In the graduate program at Cornell University, aided by funding from the Beinecke Scholarship that I was fortunate to receive my junior year, I would use my past projects as starting points. First, in my consideration of African American novels, I will draw on my background in gender studies to examine the roles of gender more thoroughly, engaging with writers such as Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler and Gloria Naylor. In Naylor's *Mama Day*, for example, I would like to examine how magic functions as an analogue for storytelling and interpretation, thus raising fascinating questions about the role of the female author in a society where race and space are intimately linked—and where the question of who is responsible for preserving cultural memory inevitably haunts even those resistant to tradition. I also hope to undertake a deeper investigation of readers and types of reading beginning with an exploration of the historical figuration of the reader in literary theory and moving into contemporary notions such as overreading, surface reading, and distant reading. I am fascinated by how more recent theories of interpretation interact with poststructuralist thought—how they modify, critique or

transform it, whether directly or indirectly—and by what this interaction means for authors' and readers' conceptions of race and gender. To this end, I hope to work with texts such as Percival Everett's *Glyph*, a wry and reflective tome that lampoons poststructuralist thought while brilliantly utilizing its techniques.

Cornell is the ideal place to complete my doctorate in English. One of the most appealing aspects of the PhD program is its flexible curriculum, designed with the guidance of a three member special committee rather than a single advisor; this structure would allow me to pursue interdisciplinary work and benefit from the expertise of multiple faculty members. Moreover, numerous courses the English department has offered in the past, including "Theories of Identity," "Postcolonial Poetry and the Poetics of Relation," "Haunted Subjects," "Toni Morrison's Novels," and "Derrida in/and Africa" intersect with several of my research interests simultaneously. The concentration in Minority, Indigenous, and Third World Studies would add a valuable comparative dimension to my studies.

Most importantly, Cornell is home to numerous faculty with whom I would be thrilled and honored to work. Dr. Margo Natalie Crawford's work on the relationship between skin color fetishism and phallogentrism intersects with my interest in the representation of gendered bodies in African American literature, while her article "Close Up: The Counterliteracy of Postmelancholy" informed my understanding of orality and resistance to conventional literacy, a topic I explored in my thesis chapter on Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. I also hope to work with Dr. Jeremy Braddock, whose expertise in cultural studies and 20th century African American literature would help me develop my interest in African American novels. Dr. Neil Saccamano's research on the legacy of the Enlightenment, especially in the work on Derrida, is of great interest to me, and working with him would help me deepen my understanding of faith and reason in Derrida's work. Finally, I hope to learn from Dr. Cathy Caruth, whose pioneering work in trauma studies and comparative approach to literature would enhance my studies of minority literatures.

Although I recognize the challenges that the academic job market presents, I hope to secure an academic position after attaining a PhD. I wish to teach my future students not to "understand" literature, but to play with its disparate pieces, to be themselves un-pieced, and thus to read what Barthes calls "the world as text" more attentively, critically, and empathetically. In my own engagement with texts, I do not seek comfort or comprehension; I do not believe that my questions will be answered, or that I will unravel literature's tightly woven, ambiguous webs. Rather, I want to remain unsettled, to resist totalizing discourses, and to remember always that we do not own the other—literary or otherwise—to whom we are nonetheless infinitely responsible.