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What questions/anxieties do you have about completing research for your dissertation?

--That this is too broad to complete. I realize that I must narrow the focus. The questions that I’m hoping will lead the research are a part of the statement below.

When it comes to researching your topic, is there something in particular you are wondering about?

--I’m trying to work through the various strands to decide what to give up and which to follow.

Do you have any “dream materials” you are having to find/ any resources that would be of huge value to your project?

--a list of passages, poems, fiction, movies, comedic performances, television episodes in which waste, shit, dirt, nonsense, scatting, or the scatological have a significant role.

What kinds of research have you already completed on your project, and what resources & databases have you tried?

--other than a search for specific articles on Project Muse and JStor, I’ve just begun to look at America: History and Life.

Preliminary Research Statement

Late in the Fall of 2013, I passed my Second Qualifying Examination. The research focus for the exam was place and spatial imaginaries in experimental texts and performances. The questions that drove that particular phase of research were varied. What are the imaginative and theoretical articulations of place and identity that can be tracked through close readings of African-American and African-Caribbean literature? What places are represented? How, through these representations, do writers theorize power, the public/private, relations between myriad locations, communities, and subjectivities? What role does place play in constituting normativity or the non-normative? How, over the long twentieth century, have black writers in the Americas taken to re-imagining and redefining the constitutive components of place? In this transnational moment of the multilingual and multi-sited subject, how do writers represent the multiple possibilities that a place may contain? How does transnational identity operate through these representations of place? What role does literature play in processes of articulating multiple where’s?

The three lists for the exam were:

1. Other: Place, Poetics, and New World Africans. This list is guiding my development of critical definitions for understanding space/place and a poetics of place as they are articulated through criticism, literature, and cultural texts.
2. Place in African-American and African-Caribbean Prose (1930-1997). This list is the lens through which I began to develop a taxonomy for the spatial imaginaries through which black identities are staged. During the orals process, I began to focus more specifically on the ditch, the basement, the yard, the bottoms, the kitchen, and other narrated sites where various kinds of difficulty and discomfort might be staged.
3. Transnational Blackness in 20th Century African American and African Caribbean Poetry. This list turned to poetry by poets who engage transnational black imaginaries. With this work I began to examine discursive and formal strategies for articulating black identities. What are the sounds and literacies (and forms) of blackness as imagined by national and transnational or non-national subjectivities?

For each of these lists, I am particularly interested in the work of writers who write in multiple genres, those whose work is considered experimental or avant-garde, and those whose work is transnationally situated.

My focus on the work of writers of the African-Americas and the Caribbean is fueled:

1. By an emerging sense that an interrogation of blackness, in its myriad guises and meanings, by a sense that an interrogation of some of the discursive cultural structures that legislate, regulate, narrate racial categories, and that spatialize according to those racial categories may have, to use a word that recurs throughout Henry Dumas’ poem “Mosaic Harlem,” “news” of state and individual power relations.
2. By the quest for discursive strategies in poetry and fiction that might be understood as challenges and resistance to broad social metanarratives of categorization and hierarchy?

As I prepare my prospectus, that preliminary research, which follows lines of inquiry into place, race, emplacement, and the transnational that have been established by Melvin Dixon, Paul Gilroy, Lindon Barrett, and Clyde Woods, serves as the foundation from which I begin the dissertation’s investigation of the staging grounds for an Aesthetics of Difficulty. Defined as “namely, writing or creating art that seems deliberately hard to understand or interpret,” an Aesthetics of Difficulty is often articulated as a mode expressive and indicative of the artist’s “disruptive” intentions. Descriptions of its “historical beginnings” often start with a discussion of G.W. Hegel’s opening remarks in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which warn against the reader’s use of the preface as a shortcut to bypassing the difficulty of the philosophical text, which is not meant to reconcile the reader to the “fragmented world,” but rather to articulate or suggest the contradictory nature of experience. Rather than reading through a Hegelian lens, I’m interested in Maurice Blanchot’s take on dissolution. In the final section of his 1955 book, *The Space of Literature*—“Literature and the Original Experience”—he asks:

But where has art led us? To a time *before* the world, *before* the beginning. It has cast us out of our power to begin and end; it has turned us toward the *outside* where there is no intimacy, *no place* to rest. It has led us to the infinite migration of error. For we seek art’s essence and it lies where the *nontrue* admits of nothing essential. We appeal to art’s sovereignty: it ruins the kingdom. It ruins the origin by returning to it the errant immensity of directionless eternity….At the very moment of the choice, art still holds us back in a primordial Yes and No. There, before any beginning, the somber ebb and flow of dissimulation rumbles. (244) (my italics)

Although he echoes Hegel’s contention that art is a thing of the past, Blanchot diverges from Hegel by reconfiguring that “past” as something other than the left behind, as something beyond the originary. Blanchot’s description of art is as both primordial potential and as ruinous process, as “infinite migration of error.” It’s these simultaneous yet diverging currents that seem to animate the work of writers and performers who will be the focus of my study.

The dissertation, tentatively titled *Discomforting Subjects Talking Sh\*t at the Crossroads,* will interrogate how ideas about and definitions of an “aesthetics of difficulty” might be transformed through a study of the work of African-diaspora artists and through an examination of concepts of waste (its definitions, its proximities to human bodies, its valuative, definitive, and discomforting functions) in literary and pop cultural forms as they narrate the racial. These are some of the questions that have begun to emerge: What are the kinds of difficulty that these texts (experimental and not) produce, narrate, mark, and encounter? Where and how is difficulty staged in these works? What kinds of difficulty accompany inception and reception of such texts? What do we (as readers and critics) do with difficult texts? What do we do (in terms of canon formation) with the work of black artists who are considered experimental/avant garde?

My line of interrogation into difficulty is in its early stages and may follow a line of investigation parallel to that laid out by Sianne Ngai. I’m particularly interested in her work in *Ugly Feelings.* In that work, Ngai looks at the ways that “art turns to ugly feelings as a site for interrogating its own suspended agency in the affirmative culture of a market society, where art is tolerated as essentially unthreatening.”

Particularly compelling for me is the afterword of *Ugly Feelings* which focuses on disgust, as what Ngai calls the “ugly feeling par excellence, which Kant highlights in the *Critique of Judgment* as the single exception to representational art’s otherwise unlimited power to beautify….” Ngai goes on to write about “the [European] modernist avant-garde’s critical assault on art’s identification *with* beauty…” I’m curious about the ways that the black (read: African and Western and…) artists don’t simply pick up this assault but possibly challenge the equation that positions the “turned away,” “the disappeared, “the repelled,” “the waste” as merely the negation of beauty.

My own work will track the aesthetic strategies brought to bear in contending with myriad difficulties of narrativizing transatlantic black identities (which are historically marked as always pathological and potentially criminal) and with describing the spaces and places those identities articulate and navigate. The direction of the work is toward an examination of how aesthetics and spatial imaginaries may operate as a part of racialization and as resistance to racialization.