

EXAMPLE

The focus for my African American Studies Honors Thesis comes from my interest in theorizing the interplay between understandings of the sea and alternative conceptualizations of Black worlds. More specifically, this thesis will examine the materiality of race and sexuality as social constructs guided by the literal ebbs and flows of the Black Atlantic. Moreover, this thesis questions how notions of the Atlantic Ocean enforced the colonial idea of personhood and how the enslaved were able to find their own personhood through/by other means (e.g., the mass suicide of enslaved persons at Igbo Landing and the mythical explanation of the “flying Africans”).

I would like to think more closely about the creation of Black life-worlds and death-worlds. What do Black life-worlds look like outside of Eurocentric conceptions of the life/death paradigm, and how did the everyday cultural and spiritual practices of the enslaved challenge these notions? While we understand the role of the Atlantic Ocean vis-a-vis commodification and the dehumanization of African peoples through the process of slavery, did the Atlantic Ocean also provide them with agential possibilities during and/or after the Middle Passage?

My methodological approach will be twofold: historical and literary analysis. Firstly, I will focus my hermeneutics on theories of the Atlantic as a heuristic Black geography that is essential to our understanding of Black personhood today. This will necessarily include an examination of the historical and theoretical work on the Atlantic as a possibility of Black life/personhood. In addition, the thesis will provide close readings of contemporary fiction that (re)imagines the Atlantic as a possibility of life-world-making for the enslaved and their descendants; it will theorize this life-and-death cycle beyond traditional notions of life and death

(e.g., teleological understandings of being-in-the-world). I would argue that conventional notions of life and death were experienced differently by the enslaved, whose epistemologies of relation to the ocean were shaped and informed by Africana religions and cosmologies.

Thinking about Igbo Landing or the “flying Africans” can inform new futures of life and humanity for the enslaved and their descendants. Additionally, I am interested in thinking about how this affects contemporary African diaspora studies through theoretical and fictional frameworks of oceanic possibility. In this way, the Atlantic can be understood as a vessel where Afro-diasporic life, death, and the idea of personhood were (re)defined by the enslaved.

Case Studies:

- The Igbo Landing
- Flying Africans
- Barry Jenkins’s *Moonlight*
- Ana-Maurine Lara’s *Erzulie’s Skirt*
- Aracelis Girmay’s *The Black Maria*
- Mayra Santos-Febres’s *Boat People*

Bibliography:

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- Smallwood, Stephanie E. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. 2007, pp. 273–273, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674043770>.

Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. "BLACK ATLANTIC, QUEER ATLANTIC: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ*, vol. 14, no. 2-3, 2008, pp. 191–215,

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Taylor, Paul C. "Assembly, Not Birth," *Black Is Beautiful: a Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. Wiley, 2016, pp. 1–31.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993.

Howard, Jonathan. "Swim Your Ground: Towards a Black and Blue Humanities." *Atlantic Studies (Abingdon, England)*, vol. ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print, 2022, pp. 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2021.2015944>.

Ochieng' Nyongó, Tavia Amolo. *Afro-Fabulations: the Queer Drama of Black Life*. New York University Press, 2019.

Glissant, Édouard, and Betsy Wing. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Lara, Ana-Maurine. *Erzulie's Skirt*. 1st ed., RedBone Press, 2006.

Girmay, Aracelis. *The Black Maria: Poems*. First edition., BOA Editions Ltd., 2016.

Santos-Febres, Mayra. *Boat People*. Translated by Vanessa Pérez Rosario, First edition., Cardboard House Press, 2021.

Acevedo, Elizabeth. *Clap When You Land*. HarperTeen, 2020.

Relevant Courses:

- FGSS200: Sex/Gender in Critical Perspective
- AFAM202: Introduction to African American Literature

- AFAM203: African American History, 1444-1877
- AFAM219: “The History that Hurts”: Reading Saidiya Hartman
- SPAN272: Cubanidad: Diaspora, Exiles, and Cultural Identity in Cuban Literature and Film
- SPAN292: The Abya Yala Connection: Latin American Ecological Literature and Art
- AFAM300: Black Phoenix Rising: Death and Resurrection of Black Lives
- AFAM301: Junior Colloquium: The Possibilities of Diaspora
- AFAM311: Vitalism and Black Aesthetics

Advisor:

- Professor Garry Bertholf

Readers:

- Professor Tyrone Palmer
- Professor Carolina D a

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The United States has a long history of discriminatory housing policies that too often go hand-in-hand with so-called economic development. By the mid-20th century, the racist housing practice of redlining, which was legal and active until 1968, was common. Aimed at creating more public housing in cities but born from this national context, the Housing Act of 1949 initiated the clearing of ‘slums’, paving the way for the redrawing and redevelopment of cities across the US, often displacing the cities’ poorest families. That is how the story also goes for Middletown, Connecticut.

Redevelopment projects undertaken from the 1950s through the 1980s were designed to commercialize and “revitalize” Middletown’s Main Street, and much to the vocalized frustration of Middletown’s Black residents, displaced thousands of families and businesses, breaking up communities and the businesses they had built for themselves. As previously studied by a few Wesleyan students, the racism encoded in the redevelopment plans is clear. Bradley Brian ‘19, for example, writes eloquently on how the Middletown Redevelopment Agency deliberately attacked Black housing complexes in the North End, hid behind coded rhetoric, and importantly, how various actors (including Wesleyan) had interests in attracting middle class people and businesses to Middletown, interests which drove the development project far more than the city’s interest in providing its residents with safe and affordable housing.¹ Redevelopment, of course, was advertised as an effort to eliminate “substandard, insanitary, deteriorated, deteriorating, slum or blighted areas” for the purpose of providing renovated housing and developments aimed at

¹Bradley, Brien. “The ‘Sly’ Racism of Redevelopment in Middletown, Connecticut.” Thesis, Wesleyan University , 2019

fostering economic growth.² Bradley traces the logics surrounding redevelopment of the North and South Ends of the city (including Wesleyan's ongoing role in the matter), which I hope to use as conceptual context for my research into the legacy of those projects. I plan to further his decoding of the language of economic development and fill in gaps in his research on the Metro South Urban Redevelopment Project (MSURP) specifically. In the book *Black Perspectives on Middletown* compiled by the Black Women's League, the editors trace the history of the Black population in Middletown, including their settlement along the railroad tracks and bank of the river during the '40s-70's, where the only financially accessible housing existed.³ Published in 1976, the book provides the context of Black Middletown's largely ignored political activism in the moments of the redevelopment projects. Those realities lay the groundwork for my project.

In this senior thesis project, I plan to focus first on the history of race and redevelopment in the mid-20th century, focusing first on mapping stories of MSURP and the history of the South End by exploring the physical archives across the city. Due to the smallness of the archive, I plan to interview Middletown residents and reporters on their memories of this era and their experiences with redevelopment. MSURP displaced many businesses and hundreds of families from Middletown's South End, which disrupted community life and economic survival for Middletown's growing Black community. Through my reading of scholarly work by Wesleyan students, I came to understand the activism of the South End Family Association in their opposition to the coming razing, and the pointed ignorance of its demands by the Agency.⁴ The redevelopment of the mid 20th century failed to simply "rehabilitate" poor housing complexes

²Redevelopment Powers, History, and Future § (2008).

³Black Women's League, ed. *Black Perspectives on Middletown: A Collection of Writings about the Black Experience in Middletown, Connecticut*. Middletown, CT, 1976, page 12.

⁴Winchell, Louisa. "Redevelopment Remains: Encounters with Middletown's City-As-Archive." Thesis, Wesleyan University, 2018.

and instead built more low-quality housing for the city's poorest residents which remained inaccessible for many of the displaced families. Despite these probes into various parts of redevelopment, there still lacks an investigation into the community's broader experiences of redevelopment and their material realities in the decades that followed. Building on Louisa Winchell's 2018 thesis, I hope to track the promises made to displaced residents and their outcomes –those kept and those broken.

Next, I plan on turning to the present moment to analyze the proposed Return to the Riverbend “urban renewal” project proposed for the coming decade in Middletown; I am interested in the planning and the language surrounding the proposed new riverfront attractions that will work towards the “the transformation of Middletown’s riverfront into a vibrant extension of downtown to be enjoyed by all Middletown residents.”⁵ State funding was given to cities in CT “to foster economic development in historically underserved communities”.⁶ These pushes for an extension of a downtown for the purpose of economic development in underserved communities seem to make this project an extension of the redevelopment started in the 1950’s; I see that much of the language and ideas in the new proposal mimic the redevelopment of 50 years ago. While today there is not a question of physical displacement, an exploration of the rhetoric patterns between the various projects will shed light on what lessons might be learned from Middletown’s past and how cycles of neglect and displacement have and continue to affect Black Middletown. The social and political realities in each moment necessarily inform this exploration. Through investigating the realities of housing for Black folks in Middletown today and their needs from the city, this interdisciplinary thesis will explore the legacy left by the era of

⁵Return to the Riverbend Master Plan § (n.d.).

⁶Day, Cassandra. “State Grants \$12 Million to Middletown's 10-Year Return to Riverbend Master Plan.” *CT Insider*, September 28, 2022.

redevelopment and analyze the potential implications of the forthcoming redevelopment project on the city and on Middletown's Black community as it continues to struggle for just housing.

Methods

While I will lean on secondary sources, many of them digital, this thesis will mostly draw from primary sources, including government documentation of and news articles related to the redevelopment projects of the mid 20th century. Primary sources include redevelopment plans and communications, committee meeting notes and recordings, government documents and zoning codes, and oral and written histories of Middletown community members and activists. To conduct that research, I will spend time at the Middlesex County Historical Society, The Russell Library, city hall, and other local archives. Furthermore, I will conduct interviews to collect oral histories related to housing and redevelopment.

Related Courses and Research

Professor Nasta's course **Race and Slavery in New England (AFAM278)** provided the basis for my interest in Middletown's rich local Black history. Specifically, studying the Beman Triangle inspired me; the small but bustling Black community thrived because of, in large part, the establishment of property and housing by Black people for Black ownership. Additionally, AFAM278 gave me archival skills that will support my research; in class we worked with primary sources and walked around Middletown to connect with on-site archives. The following semester I studied housing justice in the **Patricelli Center Fellowship for Social Entrepreneurship (CSPL262)**. In my semester-long research project, I investigated the players involved in combating housing inequality and for my final project proposed a new non-profit based on establishing a rent-to-own model for community living that provides low-income

people the opportunity to accrue wealth with social and economic support. My interdisciplinary studies into the intersection of Black history and housing have shown me that housing is the access point to economic stability and other qualifiers for economic mobility.