

“So What Have You Been Reading? Students and Teachers Discuss Books That Matter”

Nadia Ellis and Adriana Green *The Yellow House*

Nadia Ellis: Hello everyone. My name is Nadia Ellis. I'm an associate professor in the English Department here at UC Berkeley. I'm coming to you here as part of the Townsend Center for the Humanities' new program about books and reading and conversation that's called, "So What Have You Been Reading?" And I am happy to be here with a student of mine, Adriana Green, who in a second will introduce herself. But I wanted to let you know on behalf of the leaders of the Townsend Center for the Humanities a bit about the impetus for this program. It was conceived because the Townsend Center wanted to spotlight the kind of passion that drives the conversation, the intellectual conversation and communication at UC Berkeley, and in particular the way in which that passion is demonstrated as a relationship between a student and a teacher over a particular book.

Nadia Ellis: And so we are, Adriana and I, really, really delighted to be apparently I think the first in this series, in this new series. We are thrilled to be discussing Sarah Broom's, *The Yellow House*. Sarah Broom's *The Yellow House*, which is a national book award-winning extraordinary book that was published last summer and that I had a chance to read just as a person in the world because a friend gifted it to me last summer. And I was immediately captured with and decided to put on the syllabus of a course that I was teaching in the spring. And that's how Adriana and I had a chance to read this book together as part of a course that was co-taught between myself and my dear colleague professor Darieck Scott who is a professor in the department of African-American Studies here at UC Berkeley.

Nadia Ellis: Darieck and I taught together a course just full of extraordinary and brilliant graduate students, amongst whom was Adriana, and we had a chance together to read this book and to study it as part of a collection of books on diasporic art and literature, and it was wonderful. And so when I was asked to think about being part of this program it was the book that came to mind first. So I was thrilled that Adriana was able to join me, and now I'll turn over to her and ask her to let us know a little bit about her.

Adriana Green: Sure. Well I'm very excited to be here today. My name is Adriana Green and I am a third year in the African American and African Diaspora Studies PhD at Berkeley. Personally I'm interested in thinking through

how the U.S. has conceptualized ideas of the future and how the black community has wrestled with challenge and navigated those set ideas of a certain type of future and I think that actually relates a lot to the thoughts of time and progress, really a lot to what's happening in the book. So I'm very excited to chat about this text because it is definitely ... We read it in February and I thought of it quite frequently since then. So I appreciate the chance.

Nadia Ellis: Yeah, I'm so glad you're here. It's really never gone away ever since I picked it up. That's a big part of what I wanted to talk to you about today. And when we were first thinking about having this conversation and recording it and putting it out on the internet, you know we batted around some of the ideas and some of the things that made this book hold. I talked about the idea that this book has an architecture to it, right? That it's called *The Yellow House*. It's about literally a yellow house that Broom's family, built together and lived in, in New Orleans East. But that magically it is both extraordinarily rigorous as to its scaffolding and structure. And also it has this extraordinary numinous mood, right? It has an interiority. So, you and I had talked a little bit about this, about this idea of a book having both an exterior and an interior. And this book particularly having certain kinds of techniques and references that make it feel as if it has a spiritual quality. A singularity and interiority that can't quite be pinned down. I think that's part of why it seems to linger, right?

Adriana Green: Yes I think this is the book you walk through, similar to a house.

Nadia Ellis: It is.

Adriana Green: You move through it in a very particular way.

Nadia Ellis: Yeah. And so maybe that's where I would start. I mean I know we've both pulled some quotes we want to be able to give people who listen to this a sense of the beauty of the piece. If I were to think about the book having an interiority and balancing interiority with exteriority I would have to begin with how she thinks about, how Broom thinks about New Orleans itself, right? And about this particular place of New Orleans East, which she says at a certain point very, very early on she says, "New Orleans East is cut off, a point beyond a blank space on someone's mental map." She goes onto say a little bit later in the book and this is a little bit longer, but it feels like it really gets to the heart of what she's doing in terms of the geography of this book. She says, "The mythology of New Orleans, that it is a place, always the place for a good time. Can sometimes suffocate the people who live and suffer under the place's burden, burying them

within layers and layers of signifiers or making it impossible to truly get at what is dysfunctional about the city."

Nadia Ellis: So the first thing that I think about when I think about introducing people to this book is to point to this sort of twinned dynamic that's happening. That on the one hand she is going to uncover, Broom is going to uncover these layers and layers that make New Orleans and New Orleans East what it is. Everything from Right Canal structure, the development structure that made New Orleans East seem as if it were an appendage on New Orleans Proper. The management and misuse of the levies, right, which culminated in the disaster of Katrina. All of that is going to be rigorously studied and handled and yet, she's maintaining this idea that her particular corner, her and her family's particular corner of New Orleans East is this place outside of the mental map, right? What does it mean to try and capture a place and a feeling and an experience that is deliberately being curtailed, right? From ordinary representation. The fact that Broom does not one or the other, but both, right?

Adriana Green: Both.

Nadia Ellis: I think we both have read accounts of places that are rigorous and historical, but don't necessarily get at the soul of a particular experience. And vice versa that we get a particular individualized experience without a much larger sense of the canvas. It's a kind of magical feat that Broom is able to do both of these things. For me that idea of holding a fidelity to a very specific and singular experience of a young person coming into, as you're about to say I think, self-fashioning, right? Coming into their own sense of who they are under the arch and branches of a wide and large family tree. And holding to that perspective even as she does all of the rigorous and political work of placing the geography of New Orleans and New Orleans East sort of in context I think is pretty magical. And I continue to study this book as a model of how you can do both of those things at the same time. Is there anything that is resonant there for you in just introducing the book and its purpose?

Adriana Green: I think just you're talking about layers and how basically she's moving through the different layers that have been placed upon the city. But also in this way, towards this idea of self-fashioning, there's this quote that I didn't know if I would read, but I think I have to now because it reminds me so much of what you just said. So she's speaking about her family and her family's relationship to presentation, self-presentation. So she says, "Like her mother, my mother buried her rage in despair deep within underneath layers and layers of poise. America required these dualities

anyway and we were good at presenting our double selves. The house, unlike the clothes our mother had tailored to us, was an ungainly fit." And so there's always this ... At first I thought we were going to talk about femininity. That's what came up in our behind the scenes conversation. But as I read the text, I realized it's what we might mark as femininity as the sewing of clothes, the making of clothes, the keeping of a home, the making of a domestic space translates across the whole family.

Nadia Ellis: Yeah.

Adriana Green: So everyone is doing these things. That quote where she's talking about basically this tension between sort of how you present yourself and how the world presents itself upon you or the layers of the world that you're moving through feels like what you're saying, that what's happening on the macro level of the city she's also allowing us to see how that's happening on the micro level of a family without sacrificing either to each other.

Nadia Ellis: Yes, yes.

Adriana Green: And not overconflating the two.

Nadia Ellis: Absolutely. I mean it would be so easy to just collapse them down into each other, right? So that the family is a metaphor for the society or vice versa and you're right that there is precisely in this metaphor of self-fashioning or adornment, right? There's this idea that there is a self that one puts on and one takes off. And what's so beautiful about this book and so mysterious about it is that you're able to get to the New Orleans or the home or the Broom family that occurs when the veil is pulled back. And yet, because there's an emphasis on the notion of interiority, right? In any numbers of registers, you still have a sense that there's a way in which a certain rigorous privacy is maintained in this text. Yeah, I think about this —

Adriana Green: Where do you see that most?

Nadia Ellis: Yeah. I think about this in a couple of ways. I'm thinking for instance about the ways in which she renders on the page the distinction between Carl and her mother Ivory Mae and herself and anybody else. So she actually has a type of graphical difference, right? There's italics and actually versification that's used to render the language of Carl, her elder brother, and her much adored and respected mother Ivory Mae Broom.

There's a moment when this is a bit of a spoiler for those who haven't read the book before, but the yellow house that's at the center of the consideration does eventually fall down. And there's a moment when Sarah's told about this by Ivory Mae and she says this, "My mother Ivory Mae called *one day*. Carl said those people then came and tore our house down. That land clean as a whistle now. Looked like nothing was ever there." And that's it.

Nadia Ellis: It's almost like it's own pristine little poem. And what I find private about this is that everything that the book has been narrating thus far is about the centrality of this structure to the lives and identities of this family. It's taken away because of Katrina which is to say it's taken away because of structural neglect on the part of the city and this country. And it's a devastation. And yet, we're not given access to a certain ... to the kind of passion with which that family would have felt that devastation. At some level I think we are to understand that Broom is doing us a kindness by telling us this story in the first place and we don't get to have everything, right? So we get a formal poetic rendition of a moment in a private conversation between a mother and a daughter. In its clean lines and in its lyricism and therefore in its slight formal obstruction, I think is a kind of retention of the difference between what it is to be in that family and what it is not to be in that family, to be a reader.

Nadia Ellis: Another way that I think about that, and you and I definitely talked about this, was this really clever and fascinating way in which Broom references the fact that she speaks in tongues.

Adriana Green: Yes and that, actually I think it's in the chapter called "Interiors."

Nadia Ellis: It's in the chapter called Interiors, right? So yeah Sarah knows what she's doing, and she's very clear that there is an interior and exterior for this house, for this book and also for her, for her own subjectivity. And the sort of religious practice and experience of ecstasy of being able to speak in tongues. It's a wonderful metaphor, without hammering it home she does this, of what it's like to be vocal, to be valuable. But to not necessarily be understood at all registers, to retain a certain kind of opacity. I want to find a moment where she says this because it's so cool. Right, this is what she says, right?

Nadia Ellis: So she's thinking about she's coming of age as a teenager and this book is so good. I know you're interested in this as well. It's so good about the

coming of age of a girl who's observing and who's discovering what it's like to be herself on the page. It's really good at that. So she just again sort of casually sutures together that coming of age on the page with the sort of privacy of religious ecstasy, and she says this, "By the time I was a junior at Word of Faith, I had gained an interiority. A place without scriptures where I could live and that inside space was the room I loved best. Writing I found was interiority and so was God. I spoke in tongues as did my mother and my sister Karen. Although I have not tried, I can theoretically still speak in tongues. Tongues was interiority writ large." Right?

Nadia Ellis: I don't know how she does it because the discourse of this book, the language of this book is clarity writ large. It's so beautifully... It's so beautifully wrote, it's so precise, right, in its language. Yet, I do retain the feeling that there's a tongue being spoken here. There's a numinousness, both in what's being withheld, but also in the idea that the clarity of this language registers at multiple levels and there's a level at which it's very, very difficult to pinpoint what's happening. But it's acting on you, the same way it might be when you're in the context of someone speaking a different language. It's very cool. It's very cool.

Adriana Green: It is very cool and I think it actually relates a little bit to as a writer, I'm also very interested in how she does this, the natural mechanics of how she's drawing us in, keeping us away. How she moves us through the book in this beautiful way.

Nadia Ellis: Yeah. Yes. Yeah.

Adriana Green: I think we talked about this a little before, but this idea of she gives us enough where we feel like we are almost taking a memory from her and we're almost like remembering alongside of her.

Nadia Ellis: Yeah.

Adriana Green: So she tells us in the beginning she mentions her sister Karen's accident, but she doesn't say what it is. Almost the same way that maybe a child like herself being born last, would know that something had happened, but maybe not know the full story for years. And we, like her, we enter we get a little bit of information and it grows over time. And I think the way that she imparts these small tidbits of memory, but doesn't fully divulge, right? She's not saying, she's not giving the secret, she's not passing this information along. She's just letting some of it out and we are putting it together over time. I think there's this one moment that I had to

put the book down because I could almost ... I ended up feeling a loss rather than her sharing a loss and there's this part in the book where she's describing her mother's fear of lizards and how when a lizard would get into the house she would go over and get their neighbor, Ms. Octavia, to come and like chase it out. Just one little tiny lizard she would come and drag it out and bring it outside and her mother wouldn't be able to feel easy or calm in her home until that was out.

Adriana Green: Then Sarah's father and Ivory Mae's husband passes away. And where we start the next scene of the next movement of the book which is about grief is with a house full of lizards. And those scenes are so far apart.

Nadia Ellis: So good, yeah.

Adriana Green: But like having met Ivory Mae and seeing her relationship to her space but then the next moment we are just in a house full of lizards. It's like you could feel the change that that had to mean without her having to say anything about her mother or the space and you just move through it with her. I think that in these small ways she almost brings us, she lets us remember with her.

Nadia Ellis: It's such a beautiful way you found to put that, right? That we remember with her, right? That we become endowed with her memory. It's extraordinary. I think there's another example of that that you and I talked about that I didn't know if we would get to it, but it feels right based on what you just said. It's that moment where she withholds what happened in a particular house that had a lot of meaning for her. But it's clear that something did happen. I'm seeing if I can find it right now.

Adriana Green: And something will happen.

Nadia Ellis: And something will happen, that's what it is. So this effect that you're describing of her being able to endow her reader with the particularity of a feeling without necessarily divulging the detail that wants to remain private, right? It's a very particular structure and I think you're right that it's about a technique of interiority. The moment that you describe of having to put the book down, I had that moment with this moment when she says this. She's looking over across the street from her house and she says, "There would come a time when I would know very well the man who would stay in that house long after its charm had faded. Everything that I am writing here now leads to that." And that's all we get, right? We never ... It's almost like the lizard moment. It's not a moment that's

returned to in any specificity. But it's a moment that haunts for the rest of the story precisely because she connects whatever feeling she's having about that memory to the act of writing itself, right? It's that infusion in the language of a certain dread or disappointment that we're able to take on. It's extraordinary craft.

Nadia Ellis: What else about space is happening here for you? I know there's questions for you as a writer, as a poet, right? Around technique, around self-fashioning. I know I've been obsessed with the way in which this book is like a house and is interested in the relationship between space and place. Between physicality and the immaterial. Is there anything about self-fashioning and technique that relates to space for you when you think about this book?

Adriana Green: Well, I think the immediate thing that comes to mind is from that quote earlier where she's discussing what it means to have to, for her mother and many others, to have to navigate the dualities of being black in America. She says, "The house unlike the clothes our mother had tailored to us was an ungainly fit."

Nadia Ellis: Yeah.

Adriana Green: I think that idea "ungainly fit," that idea comes even though this book is beautifully put together, there is a self-fashioning and there's a constant tugging and a trying to work through it and trying to navigate an ungainly fit. I think that comes through maybe not necessarily in the writing itself, but in what she chooses to show about her own life.

Nadia Ellis: Yeah, yeah.

Adriana Green: I know this is important for you the type of traveling she does.

Nadia Ellis: Yes, yes.

Adriana Green: How she's kind of almost as a character and as a writer, leaving to return as if the return would be different and it will fit differently if she returns. So there's this very diasporic way of being in the world of trying to come, always to come back, never able to come back. And I think that that phrase "ungainly fit" has resonance between self-fashion.

Nadia Ellis: So good. So good. I mean, yeah it's so good. I mean we've talked about this. We talked about it both in the context of the class, which was a black diasporic class, and then you and I have talked about just as we were



thinking about doing this conversation about how this book just fully embodies the black diasporic, structurally and in terms of its writing. It is precisely about this one black family in this very specific place, New Orleans, New Orleans East specifically, and it is also at the same time about this one particular black person who is moving, right? So she's grounded and related to New Orleans but then she's going to Texas, to California, to New York.

Adriana Green: And Harlem.

Nadia Ellis: To Harlem, which has its own kind of dense representations around diaspora, to Burundi at another point. And what she's able to do so beautifully is in the tradition of black diasporic art which is to show that there is a kind of dynamic tension of belonging and affinity and insistence of multiple places, right, that act upon a particular subject position. So that many, many black people in the world do not get to choose that they have one place that they belong to, but they're constantly trying to sort through how multiple kinds of affinities make up who they are. And so I love this idea of the "ungainly fit," the idea that one nation or one story, one city despite it being yours, right?

Adriana Green: One name, right because she has many names.

Nadia Ellis: One name.

Adriana Green: In the book and in her life.

Nadia Ellis: The interior, the inside name, the outside name, right?

Adriana Green: Then also the inside the country, outside the country.

Nadia Ellis: Absolutely. I am a diaspora scholar and I've had to explain what my field is to many people a lot of times. Sometimes people seem to not understand what the word diaspora means and I think that this is such a wonderful book that one can just offer as an example of what it means to feel as if one is both from one place and also displaced from that place, right? To feel as if the place that claims you may be most closely is also the place where you can't live which I think is an extraordinary and painful and very idiosyncratic feeling to have. That's very characteristic actually of black life and black life in America. There's a moment where she's in Burundi that I really want to point to because it's such a beautiful way of thinking about the tension between the place that you're from being the place where you can't be.

Nadia Ellis: So she's working for a nonprofit at the time. She says, "My time in Burundi had helped me to place New Orleans in a more global context. As part of the often neglected global self where basic human rights of safety and security, healthcare, and decent housing go unmet. But the distance only clarified it could not induce forgetting. My traveling to Burundi was my trying the elasticity of the rubber band, pulling it all the way to the point where it should have broken, but it did not. The band snapped violently back and I found myself in the bowels of the city I left, searching for."

Nadia Ellis: At a plot level this describes her discovering that actually she's not going to stay in Burundi and that's not going to be the new place that she finds herself. And that in fact, she's going to return to New Orleans and work there for a stint. But, structurally and emotionally I think what's moving about that is that what we know is that she doesn't stay in New Orleans right? So she snaps violently back, finds work, makes more roots and then finds that she must leave again, right? And she's writing this book that is in some ways a devotional love letter as well as a critique and an exposure of this place that she's from away from that place that she'd been snapped back to. I was just so, first of all this is a very familiar procedure as someone who has belonged in multiple places, right, and has found that her excavation of the place that is maybe most responsible for her, in my case it's Kingston, Jamaica, that that investigation is happening when I'm furthest away from it, right? That that sense of longing and that sense of insistence, seems to occur precisely because I am in California where not enough Jamaicans are, where I can't get a good buddy.

Adriana Green: Might have to go dive into that.

Nadia Ellis: So yeah there is a subtlety with which she is handling some of these very classic themes, right, of diaspora. And placing New Orleans which is a Gulf coast place which is place that has a very, very rich history of black diasporic circulation. Placing it in a context of post-colonial and diasporic belonging and politics that I think more and more people are beginning to understand about more and more places in the United States. Which has often been kept separate from some of these cases. So that's part of what I think the magic of this book is, is its ability to unfold in a really delicate and subtle way some of these more traditional themes of black belonging and multiplicity right? That's what the black artists are looking at.

Adriana Green: Yes I would say that more than anything the number of quotes I pulled that fit for diaspora it's the largest category. I think there's two quotes that speak to one that speaks directly I think to what you're speaking about, about how distance is and isn't ... How you can be physically distant, but have not moved at all and vice versa. She says, "It is hard to talk about returning to a place you have not psychically left." So there's this dilation of time and space that's happening for her and that is what it is to be in a diaspora, especially the black diaspora that doesn't just move in terms of distance, but also temporally across time. One of the moments that I really had to sit and think about why what she was saying resonated with me so strongly on so many different levels was when she was talking about what it was like to be in Harlem while Katrina was happening in New Orleans and she said, "I had only watched everything that happened from a distance. What right did I have to react this strongly?"

Adriana Green: And I think that that made me think of my own experience, my father and his whole family is from New Orleans and so that brought me to the moment of being in southern Virginia, watching my father watch the TV, watching him panic and feeling this distance, not just between myself and New Orleans, but myself and my father and watching him navigate his distance. But also what it means to be in the diaspora and to encounter moments in history. There are many times where I'll read a book, a textbook and read about something that has happened years in the past and I will react to it, so strongly. You have that moment of thinking, "What right do I have to react this strongly? I am only watching this from a distance." I think that that speaks to a lot of a diasporic being when your place in the world has shifted and your family's place in the world has shifted, but maybe your identity in the world has not and you're navigating sort of all of these different times and spaces from a single point which is yourself. And that is, I mean yes that is an ungainly fit that is hard to navigate. And a lot of this book is about navigation.

Nadia Ellis: Yeah. It's so powerful what you're saying. I mean, what you're describing is the spatiality of kinship, right? This idea —

Adriana Green: And the temporality.

Nadia Ellis: And the temporality of kinship, exactly. I mean this is a book that some people call a memoir and it begins three generations before Sarah Broom was even born, right? With her describing what she calls "the world that made me." So what you're describing of watching your father, watching his city right? And your feeling this I want to call it a secondary or tertiary trauma, but it's much more direct than that, right? It's as if you're

right there with him. It has everything to do with an experience of kinship that can be really hard to describe and that's very, very potent that pertains to questions of blackness and black diaspora as you're seeing precisely because of the mobility and displacement that's occurred.

Nadia Ellis: I'm actually just thinking there's a quote where she gets at some of this. It's this relationship between the space of a city or a house that's destroyed and the space of a family and a body and a person and how those things can collapse into each other. So she says...oh goodness I've lost it. Oh, here it is yeah. She's thinking about the house again and she says, "I had no home. Mine had fallen all the way down. I understood then that the place I never wanted to claim in fact had been containing me. We own what belongs to us whether we claim it or not. When the house fell down it can be said something in me opened up. I was now the house."

Nadia Ellis: So it's this thing about... it's relating to this question of time for me that you're bringing up because it's this thing about whether or not you're at that moment inhabiting the place that is being taken away, whether or not you were there when it was built, right? Whether or not you were there when your mother was being enfolded in the embrace of this maternal line of extended kin that made her in New Orleans. Whether or not you were there, you are somehow... that feeling is transferred to you and that claim right of those women and of that house is made upon you regardless or not whether you want it or not. So that its destruction, the pain it feels, the violation it feels, becomes your pain, your violation. And part of what feels really courageous about this book is that it is possible to turn away from that claim, right? And to try and ignore that trauma and to try and ignore the accountability right? That you can have to those feelings and what's so courageous about the book is that Broom doesn't turn away, right? That she is displaced for sure. She's in a different spacial and temporal position. But she feels the claim of that home and of that family and she takes it up, right? As her responsibility to voice. It's a beautiful model of the work that art does, right? In the context of political trauma.

Adriana Green: Yes, she doesn't. The house falls all the way down, but in some way they don't allow it to fall all the way down. I mean the title of this book is *The Yellow House* and in so many ways this is what is left. And she does make it again in a way that can't be destroyed in the same fashion.

Nadia Ellis: Oh, my God, it can't be destroyed. Adriana, that's so important... I'm sorry. It can't be taken away, right? It can't be taken away, right?

Adriana Green: Yes, certainly not the same way that it was before. It's not vulnerable to the same things because I mean and that's part of the black diaspora too. The worst has happened and everything else is yes, I think Fred Moten says this, "The ships have already arrived." The SciFi disaster, the apocalypse has happened. It happened and everything after this is the living. I think there's this moment where she describes her relationship to her family and I think this is so much of what it feels like to be in this time relating to pastime. So she says, "When you are the baby in a family with 11 older points of view, all variations of the communal story developing your own becomes a matter of survival. There can be, in this scenario, no neutral ground." And I think of African-American history, African-American diasporic history as an eleventh child coming in so far after the fact we're all here in China compete with all of these other points of view and what does it mean? I think it's so important that she says "there is no neutral ground" in that and I think that you're right. Some people can think that there is a neutral ground and turn away, but she's actually saying there isn't a neutral ground and what will we do with that?

Nadia Ellis: So good. So good. What I also love about that is that she's so clear that her work is to write. Her work is to render the home in words and language. But she's also really, really clear about what Carl's work is, her older brother, and we'll remember we're given many visions of Carl sitting and watching the land after the home has been taken.

Adriana Green: As if at a wake, yes.

Nadia Ellis: As if at a wake, right. And she's able to evoke his ... The aesthetic and emotional labor that he does on the part of the home which looks different from hers, but is real. And she's able to evoke the aesthetic and emotional labor of her mother's tongue, right? She's so curious about and careful with her mother's words and is so aware that her mother too is an artist, right? Who is rendering the subjectivity and the history of this family and this life world, right? So that she sets down all of those interviews. She sets down with great transcriptive detail everything her mother says in exactly the way her mother says it because she has a sense that though she, Sarah Broom, is the writer, she is not the only artist in this family.

Adriana Green: Well it's her mother's house and I think there is this respect and this —

Nadia Ellis: Absolutely.

Adriana Green: Yes, because she does. You see her have a page of dialogue and her mother is in the room of that dialogue. But her mother's words are in italics and there's something about that similar to the epigraphs in her piece. It's almost like her mother's voice is presented as archival material, as a material object.

Nadia Ellis: Absolutely.

Adriana Green: Presented as is.

Nadia Ellis: Absolutely.

Adriana Green: And yes I think it's because her mother ... This is her mother's house and also her mother is the house that's some place for her.

Nadia Ellis: Her mother is the house and her mother's attentiveness to language and aesthetics comes from being raised in a home, a black woman who attended to the aesthetics of cooking, the aesthetics of the body, the aesthetics of the curtains, right? That there's a real care and lineage that Broom is suturing right? That is so respectful of the different ways in which history and art get made and also the multiplicity of vocality, right? I think you and I talked about this and we actually talked about this in the class as well, is a tradition Julie Dash is "Doctors of the Dust." It's a film we read alongside this book and we were really interested in that class I think to think about what the possibilities of narration are, if you displace the idea of this singular genius through whom the whole story comes. And in both of these texts in Julie Dash and Sarah Broom and many others, right, we get this idea that to tell the story of black life and black survival in diaspora is to sort of draw on resources that are multiple, that are polyvocal, that decenter any notion, that any one person can tell the story on their own.

Nadia Ellis: Again what seems to me almost quasi mystical about this book is the idea that it can have on one hand such a strong and clear aesthetic voice and on the other yield itself very undefensively, right? To the voices and to the aesthetics of other people in order to make it.

Adriana Green: I was watching a clip of her speaking and she said that she was balancing some of the tension between representing other people and being the youngest and being the one to write the story of the family. And she said that she put herself on the line, as much, if not more, than everyone else. That double play of putting oneself on the line, not just in terms of being

your vulnerability, but how often you put yourself on a page and where is that line? And I think that was a really important way that she navigated that and also this idea of time, right? In one hand most narrators they narrate in real time, in the real time of the story. But she narrates before her birth.

Nadia Ellis: That's right.

Adriana Green: And so this idea of what is real time, what is traditional time — she plays with that as a way to navigate responsibility and yeah.

Nadia Ellis: As does Dash right? So "Doctors of the Dust" is —

Adriana Green: Yes, exactly, it's the same... A young girl narrating before her birth.

Nadia Ellis: Yeah. Yes, so beautiful. The whole tradition of black feminist art. Well we are I think coming close to that moment where we start to summarize and to draw to a close. Where would you want to sort of land up? I know it's a very hard question. This is a very rich tapestry of a book. I think maybe I would end with where it starts, which is the epigraph. You drew our attention to the fact that she's such a citational writer, that she's pulling from so many writers and artists that come before her and walk alongside her. Again, as a diaspora scholar I'm just so thrilled every time I see her sight, another black diasporic writer who's wrestling with questions of place. And so, the epigraph of this book begins with a citation from a poem by Kei Miller who's book, "The Cartographer Tries to Map his Way to Zion" was a book we also studied together in this class. And so it was this wonderful sort of surprise to have these two things together. And Miller's poem has these lines that Broom quotes. She says, or he says, "Draw me a map of what you see, then I will draw you a map of what you never see and guess who's map will be bigger than who's?"

Nadia Ellis: Yeah, I'm left with this idea that somehow Broom has been able to draw a map that is both visible and invisible, right? That she is painstakingly evoked the material details of a place, of New Orleans, of New Orleans East. But she has also at the same time rendered the invisible numinous power and property of the life of a black family, right, and of a young girl coming into her aesthetic voice in a way that just balances together so beautifully. So that's probably where I would end.

Adriana Green: That's beautiful. I think my last thoughts about this book, at the moment, because I'm sure I'll have more, are about just what it's taught me, and what it has the capacity to teach others about navigating the diaspora and

this country and the many other countries like it. She says, I watched this clip of her basically talking about what it was like to live in quarantine. Sarah Broom was saying, "I've been time traveling with all my books. Time and place traveling." I think that she really does that. I mean she time travels. She goes to before she was born. She goes to different places in the world in her writing and in physically and relates that to us and I think she makes it so clear that writing is a navigational tool, it is a self-fashioning tool. It is a tool that she uses so actively and I think as a practical takeaway, no matter who we are I think if we so choose, writing can be a way for us to navigate an ungainly fit that is a country or a home or a city or whatever self has been opposed upon us on a particular day. So I appreciate her for speaking to writing as a tool so clearly throughout the text.

Nadia Ellis: So beautiful. Thank you so much Adriana.

Adriana Green: Thank you.

Nadia Ellis: This has been extraordinary. I love being in the world of this book and it's been great to share that with you one more time.

Adriana Green: Yes, even though we are socially distanced.

Nadia Ellis: I know.

Adriana Green: It's been so nice to be able to yeah, to make a way.

Nadia Ellis: Will we ever be in a room with another person again? Who knows.

Adriana Green: We don't.

Nadia Ellis: But Sarah Broom has taught us to —

Adriana Green: That's why we have books.

Nadia Ellis: ... take both worlds. Exactly, we can build a roof without needing to...

Adriana Green: Yes.

Nadia Ellis: All right well thank you again and thank you to everyone who's been able to watch this. Thank you to the Townsend Center for hosting this conversation it's been our pleasure to be a part of it. Take care everybody. Bye.



Adriana Green:      Bye.