

**WE ARE A HAUNTING**  
**TYRIEK WHITE**



**READING GROUP GUIDE**



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Colly struggles to recover from his mother's death, but not for the initial reasons given. How does Colly's grief evolve throughout the novel? How is it affected by his sense of guilt?
2. There is an element of magical realism embedded throughout the novel. How do the dead function in this book (Key, the Oyster Lady, Virgil, etc.) and how do they grant these characters a rebirth?
3. By the end of the book it is clear that Key becomes all-seeing. How is Key transformed as a seer? How do the different narrative forms and traditions in the book signal this change?
4. Family plays a central role in the novel. How does Colly's love for his older sister and father differ from his love for his mother? How does this love manifest itself amid his grief?
5. How does the primary romantic relationship—between Colly and Naima—mirror or differ from the other relationships in the novel, like Key's relationship with Dante?
6. All the personal relationships in the novel are marked by issues of identity, class, and social conditions. How is this reflected in Colly's relationship to other young people in his community, specifically his friendship with Zaire? How and when does Zaire's life pivot to a different track than Colly's? How about Raven and Tristan?
7. Tyriek White conceived of this novel in relation to Orlando Patterson's theory of social death, summarily defined as the state-sanctioned denial of citizenship for a particular group of people—particularly slavery. The novel reframes this for the modern day as those living within similar margins of society—in poverty, within the prison industrial complex, etc. Can you speak about how the material conditions of characters in the novel relate to this theory?
8. The narrative circles around themes of grief and anxiety—and yet the novel offers a place of hope. How does the intersection of history, memory, and narrative allow for a broader view beyond Colly's negative associations?

## Q&A WITH TYRIEK WHITE

**Q: Why did you decide to set your novel in East New York (Brooklyn)?**

**A:** I'm interested in how a place set on the outskirts of empire and its contemporary history of police [re: state] occupation mirrors and sometimes speaks back to the past, mainly to the legacy of slavery in America. A stretch of perhaps twenty or so blocks all the way into Jamaica Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, of marshland and landfill, informs a lot of the language and choices found in my writing.

I wanted to write a story that centered working-class, blue-collar residents who face constant discrimination in housing, education, and employment. I wanted to explore the many ways we survive (and don't survive) at the intersections of race, class, and the environment in forgotten communities.

**Q: At what point in the writing process did you understand that this novel could or should not be constructed in a linear way? What was it about this particular story that resisted linear narrative?**

**A:** People don't typically experience the world in a linear way. The experience of participating in the American project as Black people doesn't feel sensical, or linear. It is a tradition borne from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

**Q: What were your concerns as you were writing the supernatural "seeing" elements of the book? What inspired you?**

**A:** I hoped that readers could negotiate the very real lives of these characters with the supernatural nature of the story. I think ghosts, spirits, monsters are often the only ways we find to make sense of our realities, living in certain environments or living through particular histories. The way state violence manifests and plays a role in our everyday lives is often inexplicable. The works of Gabriel García Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Juan Rulfo (*Pedro Páramo*), Isabel Allende (*The House of the Spirits*), and others use elements of magical realism to tell stories of families embedded in particular social/political moments.

**Q: Two thirds of the main characters in this book are women, and you've written them with such beauty and nuance. Where did you pull your inspiration for them?**

**A:** Initially, I pulled from the women I knew. I pulled from my grandmothers, my aunts, my mother. I thought about the friendships I valued and I pulled from Barbara Christian and Fannie Lou Hamer. I pulled from books like *Sula* and *Fruit Punch*. I avoided ideas about all-knowing sages and indestructible Black women. Through a Black womanist framework, conceived and nurtured by scholars/artists such as Audre Lorde and Paule Marshall (also indirectly Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor), the body becomes a bridge between ideas and theory. I wanted the women in the book to enter the text as embodied, bringing with them the meanings and definitions ascribed to it as it moves throughout the world.

**Q: Can you speak about some of the research you did while you were writing this book? How did you navigate the academic work of research with the creative process of writing fiction?**

**A:** Listening to my elders speak about their experiences of New York City in the 1980s informed how I wrote my way into Key's life. Channeling my own upbringing—the sight of the city, the smell of the hallways and streets, the sound of the music that played—opened up the world of this story. My research also involved searching my own family archive of: obituaries, a documented family tree, and photo albums—all to reflect the idiosyncrasies of an actual family. Archival work to me can be an act of summoning, a means of access to generational/ancestral spaces.

The story benefited greatly from immersive research into the structural and environmental policies that have gripped East Brooklyn from environmentalists such as Dorceta E. Taylor. I realized there was another realm to explore, the circumstances that have led to this community in the present day. This involved old *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* articles, accounts from residents who left journals, texts on early-American/African-American lifestyles and cultures by Robert Hertz, Marcus Rediker, Frances Smith Foster, and more.

Even the spread and transformation of West African or Central African spirituality throughout the New World, due to processes of colonialism, had to be properly examined. More direct understanding of the movement of African spiritual practices involved various texts, such as a dissertation by Marcus Alan Watson from the City University of New York regarding relevant anthropological information, a closer examination of the “artifact assemblage found in 1998 under the garret room floor in the attic of the Lott Farmstead” as a clue into “an extension of Kongo-descended cultural practices” in Brooklyn during slavery.

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## FURTHER READING

Toni Morrison—*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

Imani Perry—*Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*

Saidiya Hartman—*Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*

Audre Lorde—*Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*

Barbara Christian—*Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*

Meredith M. Gadsby—*Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*

Zora Neale Hurston—*Mules and Men*

Orlando Patterson—*Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*

Jimena Canales—*The Physicist and the Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson, and the Debate That Changed Our Understanding of Time*

## ESSAYS

“An Old Burying Ground: A Relict of the Last Century in the Dutch Settlement of New Lots,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 1891, 15. <http://bklyn-genealogy-info.stevemorse.org/Cemetery/old/1891.olddutch.html>.

Johnson, Peter. “The Changing Face of the Modern Cemetery: Loudon’s Design for Life and Death,” 2012. <https://www.berfrois.com/2012/06/foucault-and-the-cemetery/>.

Schaeffer, Felicity Amaya. “Spirit Matters: Gloria Anzaldua’s Cosmic Becoming across Human/ Nonhuman Borderlands,” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, The University of Chicago (2018), vol. 43, no. 4, 1005–1029.

Watson, Marcus Alan. “Kongo to Kings County” (2016). CUNY Academic Works. [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/1288](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1288).

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**LITERATURE THAT INSPIRED THE BOOK**

Yaa Gyasi—*Homegoing*

Carmen Maria Machado—*Her Body and Other Parties*

Kiese Laymon—*Heavy*

Nafissa Thompson-Spires—*Heads of the Colored People*

Adam Johnson—*Fortune Smiles*

Garth Greenwell—*What Belongs to You*

Jesmyn Ward—*Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Juan Rulfo—*Pedro Páramo*

Virgil—*The Aeneid*

Toni Cade Bambara—*The Salt Eaters*

Toni Morrison—*Jazz*

Gloria Naylor—*Mama Day*

Zadie Smith—*NW*

James Baldwin—*Another Country*

Victor LaValle—*Big Machine*

James Baldwin—*Just above My Head*

Octavia E. Butler—*Wild Seed*

Jonathan Lethem—*The Fortress of Solitude*

Ralph Ellison—*Invisible Man*

Gabriel García Márquez—*One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Jhumpa Lahiri—*Interpreter of Maladies*

Isabel Allende—*The House of the Spirits*

## WE ARE A HAUNTING: THE PLAYLIST

“There’s a particular lineage of Black music that runs through my debut novel, *We Are a Haunting*, artifacts of migration across regions and the resiliency of ever-expanding traditions. The book is an archive, a preservation of the journey of Black music (and arts culture in general), rooted in the blues and soul, preserved through the ancestors—Martha and the Vandellas, Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, The Gap Band, Dionne Warwick. Then, there is the next generation—Shirley Murdock, Mary Jane Girls, Whitney Houston, Eric. B & Rakim, A Tribe Called Quest. Music helped me shape the material lives of the characters in this story, but also the emotional resonance of their experience. This is the playlist I used during the process of writing *We Are a Haunting*. More specifically, these songs helped me write myself into a certain scene, moment, or character.”

—Tyriek White

“Be Careful” by Snoh Aalegra

“Zion Wolf Theme (Unfinished)” by Jai Paul

“Too Fast” by Sonder

“I Hope You Know” by bLack pARty

“Nights” by Frank Ocean

“Floods” by Lucky Daye

“Sister” by Ben Howard

“Goat Head” by Brittany Howard

“Good for You” by Blood Orange, Justine Skye

“What You Wanna Do” by Faye Meana

“Make Me Cry” by Pip Millett

“Mother Maybe” by Kadhja Bonet

“Something New” (feat. Etta Bond) by SiR, Etta Bond

“Treat Me Like I’m All Yours” by Sasha Keable

“Childqueen” by Kadhja Bonet

## WE ARE A HAUNTING: THE PLAYLIST

“Spontaneous” by Flying Lotus, Little Dragon

“Dark” by Rhye

“Presence” by Brittany Howard

“Dawn Chorus” by Thom Yorke

“Joy” by Kadhja Bonet

“Due West” by Kelsey Lu

“Didn’t Know” (A-Side) (feat. Joe Armon-Jones)

by Jerome Thomas, Warren Xclnce, Joe Armon-Jones

“Tiada Akhir” by Yuna

“KINDRED II” by Kelsey Lu

“Trust” by Brent Faiyaz

“In My Dreams” by ANOHNI

“free drugs” by Ambré

“Just Bright” by Soft Glas

“Karma Plays” by McClenney, Baby Rose

“Static” by Ari Lennox

“PDLIF” by Bon Iver

“Over” by Baby Rose

“You and I” by Toro y Moi

“Lightning” by Orion Sun

## **MOVIES TO WATCH AFTER READING WE ARE A HAUNTING**

*Daughters of the Dust* (1991)

*Paid in Full* (2002)

*Pariah* (2011)

*Belly* (1998)

*Eve's Bayou* (1997)

## **STEP INTO THE ART OF TYRIEK WHITE'S WE ARE A HAUNTING**

*Book of the Dead of the Goldworker of Amun, Sobekmose*, ca. 1500–1480 B.C.E.

Jan Martense Schenck House, 1676

*American Gothic*, Gordon Parks, 1942

*Blue Landscape*, Hale Woodruff, 1968

*Black Girl's Window*, Betye Saar, 1969

*Frontal Passage*, James Turrell, 1994

*How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You?*, Yinka Shonibare, 1995

*Presentation*, Dana Schutz, 2005

*Ain't I a Woman*, Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter, 2018/23

*School Children*, from the series *An Ode to (You)'all*, Akea Brionne, 2022

*A House Called Florida*, Allison Janae Hamilton, 2022

*Way Over There Inside Me*, Torkwase Dyson, 2022



AUTHOR PHOTOGRAPH BY ZORAYA LUA

**TYRIEK WHITE** is a writer, musician, and educator from Brooklyn, New York. He is the author of the novel *We Are a Haunting* which won the Center for Fiction 2023 First Novel Prize and was long-listed for the Brooklyn Public Library Book Prize. He has received fellowships from Creative Callaloo, New York State Writers Institute, and Key West Literary Seminar, among other honors. He is currently the media director of Lampblack Literary Foundation, which seeks to provide mutual aid and various resources to Black writers across the diaspora. He holds a degree in Creative Writing and Africana Studies from Pitzer College and most recently earned an MFA from the University of Mississippi.



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