

Pivotal Books on Injustice and Inequality A Washtenaw County NOW project, 2017

John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (1961)

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)

“Knocked my socks off...a gift from a Franciscan Priest to 5 MSU students doing Action Poverty Summer mission work...it solidified my Feminism.”

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929) “I wept.”

Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (1992)

Roxanne Gay, *Bad Feminist* (2014)

“This was a time when I was beginning to understand the politics of gender inequality. I had just turned 30 and was realizing that my class privilege had blinded me to a lot of everyday discrimination that women in lower classes experienced. I also realized that as a person of color who had just moved to the U.S., I was treated a lot differently and often spoken to condescendingly even by 'well - meaning' people only because I looked a certain way. Adjusting to a new country while being brown meant giving concessions to others (often) ignorant perceptions of what I must be like. It was at this time when I was trying to reconcile my privilege in certain aspects with my oppression in other aspects, that I read Roxane Gay. The humor which she brought to different aspects of being feminist was the best aspect of this book - because it made feminism accessible to an explorer like me. She also used pop culture examples which made it so relatable. most importantly she allowed for flawed feminism - which we as activists often don't allow ourself. She made it seem ok to have ambivalent views on certain things and reminded me that it's alright to slip from the impossibly high standards we hold for ourselves, at times.”

Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991)

“Clearly represented organized systemic injustice in education related to race and class.”

Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (1995)

“I grew up the daughter of a redneck, racist bar owner in Boise, Idaho. His world-view and the world-views of those around our family/community was very white -- not always overtly racist, but just as a fact that blacks and latinos did not cross the boundary in to the world I inhabited very often. The one black family that lived in the neighborhood was a preachers family down the way. They had nine children, and I was friends with the youngest, Anthony, who was in my grade at school. I remember my father seeing a grade school picture of me and Anthony together on a rollerskating field trip and for the first time I heard in words what I had been learning in deeds throughout my lifetime, "girl, I better not see you out and about with this nigger." Anthony and I remained friends, but I never wove him in to my life after that in the same way I did my white friends -- both for fear for his well being and my own. When I was 18 I moved to NYC and for the first time had to on a daily basis confront my own un-examined opinions about difference as I trotted them out one after another to inevitable derision, disappointment, and outright shock from those unlucky enough to be in the way of them (luckily, I feel shame but don't often get stopped by it -- I try to get curious). In the 80s and 90s my Manhattan Valley neighborhood was a liminal space on the Upper West Side near Columbia University. Not quite the tip towards minority majority of Harlem, not quite the

white majority of mid-town or the east side. Remember that movie quote from *Brother from Another Planet*? "Card Trickster: I have another magic trick for you. Wanna see me make all the white people disappear? Subway Public Address Announcer: Fifty-Ninth Street, Columbus Circle; 125th Street next. This an Uptown A Express going to 207. Change for the AA local across the platform, the D, or the upper level, change for the number 1 Broadway trains. Card Trickster (as all the white people exit the train): See, what'd I tell ya?" -- That was my neighborhood. Anyway, all this is to say I was naive, uninformed, unused to having to navigate difference and my place in it. Reading Kozol's *Amazing Grace* was that first tentative step to understanding why in my mind "black people don't just get over it and move forward" -- it was the first book to explain to me that often there is a subsystem that the dominant group creates that makes it nearly impossible for the marginalized group to thrive and essentially compete for social and economic space. It taught me to stop accepting things as is and start asking "why" and struggling with my place in the answers. I started looking at architecture and infrastructure of the city and identifying where difference gets played out. I began teaching reading to adults at the Harlem public library and got schooled on the uniformed categories I was ascribing to blacks. One of my lessons that I was all excited about was teaching a unit on Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement (look at how forward thinking I am!). Two of my class members were black and born in the U.S. -- they felt deeply connected and enjoyed the lesson. The remaining eight members of my class were recent immigrants from places like Kenya, Eritrea and Nigeria. They had zero fucks to give about this unit and expressed to me that they were not to be lumped in with U.S. blacks (who they felt by the continued processing of the slavery dynamic and evolution of civil rights had made it harder for black emigrants to assimilate). I've moved on to different voices and teachers, but Kozol's scientific analysis of why oppressed groups had difficulty moving out of their secondary status punched a much needed hole in my naive belief in personal agency as a means of getting ahead."

Margo Jefferson, *Negroland* (2015)

"When I can't get into a book and keep setting it aside, I sometimes open it in the middle and read from there for a while. SO GLAD I did that with *Negroland*. It was an exceptionally deep and agonizingly painful read, but so full of insight that, once I went back to the beginning, I couldn't put it down.

Many reviewers found this memoir difficult because of the at-once distant and searingly interior stop-and-start style of the prose. Since Jefferson teaches creative writing, guess I shouldn't be surprised that her writing is ...creative. I didn't love it right off the bat, but when I finally caught on to her rhythm, it was worth persevering.

I've rarely read such a painful description of living within the cage of a racist society. The aphorism "money can't buy happiness" applies here. The systematic bigotry, slights, insults, misunderstandings, excruciating expectations, and downright malice of racist white Chicago in the 50s thru 70s were insightfully described. (I have no expectation that it's any different today.)

I wanted to weep for Jefferson's confusion and longings as a child, right up through her depression, suicidality and rage in her college years. But it's not told in a torrent. Somehow it slowly seeps out in short vignettes and paragraphs, journal entries, and through the quoted words of others in what feels like serving after serving of unthawed TV dinners. Or delectable bowls of ice cream with a large tablespoon of shit on top. A long anticipated trip to the beach in Atlantic City is cut short by the defilement of a racist treatment by the hotel staff. The obsessive grading and evaluation of hair and nose and skin tone. The lifelong struggle to find a way out of the cage only to finally realize that our society IS THE CAGE."

Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother* (2012)

“As in *Fun Home*, the structure of this graphic novel, the details hidden in the wonderful illustrations, and the nakedness of the memoir are absolutely extraordinary. It continues to amaze me how deeply graphic novels can address serious and complex subjects. This one moved me so deeply that I had to pause several times for months just to get a little breathing room. As a woman & a lesbian, I could identify with the powerful dynamics Bechdel addresses that we experience with our mothers, especially when we depart from the norm and love women. It was so affecting, that at a certain point (half-way thru the book) I paused to make a list of about 25 similarities between Bechdel's life and my own. It felt like almost a film, and almost about me. The list of striking and bizarre similarities included our mothers' attitudes & withdrawal, our own retreat into intellectualism & therapy, the names of our teddy bears, an episode of epic violence in each of our lives at age 18, having closeted gays in our immediate family, and much more both in our identification with our mothers, their responses to events in their lives, and our reactions in our own lives. Bechdel's comic strip series DTWOF (Dykes to Watch Out For) has held a special place in our lesbian family down thru the years. It was almost the ONLY outside depiction of life as we lived it in our college town: communal lesbian houses, the GAYby boom, the women's music festivals, the lesbian bookstore, the pink collar jobs, the struggle to come to terms with our bi & trans community members, etc. *Are You My Mother* is ultimately mostly about Bechdel's inner world and psyche vs *Fun Home* which concerns her outer world and events. Thus it's the deeper and harder read. Well worth it, though!”

Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (2015)

“An audacious novel set in the eerie days of civilization's collapse, *Station Eleven* is a post-apocalyptic tale where tangential links to a dying actor are the center around which a number of lives are strung. The protagonists travel along the west coast of Michigan, performing in a Shakespearean troupe. I like stories where people of diversity appear because they are interesting characters -- and (GASP-uh) the fact of their differentness is not the subject of the narrative. Thus I was happy to realize that survivors of the Georgian Flu in this book are pleasantly diverse and interesting, not all white folks, as so often is the case in many post-apocalyptic novels. Sometimes, you can surmise from their names, like Sayid or Jeevan. Sometimes, you hear from a third party that someone is Asian or Black. Midway through the book it becomes clear that Clark is gay. Hurrah! While we may have some different desires and histories, our spirits and needs as humans are pretty clearly the same.

I like books which help open my eyes to the beauty of the world. This book certainly did that. Mandel doesn't stint on allowing her characters to feel devastating loss after the plague (and rightly, most of that longing is for lost loved ones, not comforts or things), but she also doesn't stint in allowing them to appreciate the beauty of the world with fewer human beings. There is terrible pain, but also deeply felt connection and joy.

I like visions where art and music are an important part of what is needed for survival--not just food, water, sleep, safety. Although the quote that is revered by the Traveling Symphony is "Survival is Insufficient," it's clear that art and music ARE PART of survival and rebuilding.

Overall, a dark but deeply true and resonant vision of a not-that-unlikely future.”

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (1974)

“Science fiction is a great vehicle for allegory; to explore ideas, posit hypotheses, construct stories around a what-if or play with science and technology in ways we can't yet in reality. Some philosophy can only be examined in metaphor and parable. The book certainly made me think about the aspects of our culture that I accepted as necessary truths, that on further evaluations prove to be a product of our own

brainwashing. Too many of the governing parts of our lives that we accept as necessary truths have never really been questioned and weighed in our own minds.

Le Guin's book is not a call to arms to discard our corrupt capitalist patriarchal system and form anarchist or socialist communities with *The Dispossessed* as our Little Red Book. It depicts a plausible anarchistic society, one with problems of its own instead of a perfect utopia. Instead, she wants us to examine our own lives and political structures and think about what ideals really should drive society, and then what aspects of our political and social systems should or can be improved upon, since we can all agree they are far from perfect.

The Dispossessed is what a book should strive to be: more than just words on a page, but the encapsulation of ideas sublimely expressed."

Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (1978)

"Allowed me to see the world, particularly the religious and spiritual world, from a whole new view. Open up a doorway to understanding the many aspects of the feminine divine, the vastness of spirituality and that it isn't limited to a monotheistic male centered God/deity...blew me away and changed my world, my life and the path that I walk on."

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)

"It helped me understand that the injustices that I have experienced both first- and second-hand cross all barriers, including race and gender and socio-economic status. It helped me understand how we can own our own power and live beyond the things that are taken from us. It helped me understand that the pain, the joy, all the wonderful and terrible aspects of humanity are common to all of us regardless of race, gender and social or economic status. It helped me understand that our hearts (and not our skin color, our education, our gender, our economic or social class) define us. Our hearts alone define us. It made me FEEL as if I have many, many sisters, whether we recognize each other or not."

Carol Stack, *All Our Kin* (1975)

"I read this book as a freshman in college and it challenged me to look beyond the stereotypes of the welfare queen running rampant in Reagan's America in the 1980s. Stack's book illuminates the highly adaptive, creative, and caring ways that members of a poor African American community in the midwest survived despite the violence and exploitation they faced in a deindustrializing economy and under a hostile state welfare system. Stack did this research while a young, single, white, mother and the book is also a model of self-reflective practices as she critically examines her own journey in learning about the meaning of race, in particular, but also gender and class."

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

"I had never read anything like it. And felt I was traveling along with him, through different eras, geographies, political affiliations. And through all of the journeys and encounters, devastating and absurd as they often are, remained naively hopeful that something would work out, or that there would be some resolution to bring him peace. It was eye-opening and distressing to read as a high-school student. I think it was one of the earliest and strongest introductions to racial inequity as a teenager."

Kevin Boyle, *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* (2004)

"This is the true story of a black physician in Detroit 90 years ago who bought a home in an all white

neighborhood, was besieged by mobs two nights in a row, and wound up on trial for murder along with 10 friends and family members. He was defended by Clarence Darrow. The issues then were all the same issues underlying the Detroit riots that occurred in 1967, which I remember, and the issues that still resonate throughout our country TODAY.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015)

“This is a long letter from the author to his 15 year old son, describing his life, dreams, challenges and learned truths about the world in ways he hopes will help his son better address his own future, stay safe and find joy. Since reading it, I have found myself wondering how some of my black male friends who are also physically imposing have managed to stay alive in this toxic environment.”

Michael Dyson, *Tears we Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (2017)