

mary wants to be a superwoman

study guide

--erica lewis

themes to watch out for

black history

native american history

ancestral family

chosen family

american history

childhood

adulthood

race

culture

pop music

memory

oral tradition

social injustice

listen to this

At the Close of the Century by Stevie Wonder

Lemonade by Beyoncé

Big Mama Thornton with the Muddy Waters Blues Band -1966, Big Mama Thornton

Amazing Grace by Aretha Franklin

The Essential Mahalia Jackson by Mahalia Jackson

Are You Experienced by The Jimi Hendrix Experience

Are You Hep to the Jive by Cab Calloway

“Miss You,” The Rolling Stones

exercises

Make a list of your ten favorite pop songs. Write down how each one has played a role in making the soundtrack your life.

Speak to a relative from a previous generation. Record your conversations. Choose songs that you think tell their story.

Write a poem to the ancestors

questions to think about

What are you listening to right now?

How has the past influenced your present? Your future?

How does music inform memory?

Are there specific songs that trigger specific memories?

Here are some of my influences/favorite poets:

1. Leroi Jones – Before there was Amiri Baraka there was Leroi Jones, who embraced all of the scenes 50s and 60s lower east side new york. Heavily influenced by jazz, he had yet to become the leader of the black arts movement but was grappling, nonetheless, with the realities of race and artistic integrity. You can feel all of this in my favorite poem, “in memory of radio,” a bop prosody elegy to childhood and love.
2. Eric Baus – there is a quietness about his work, but also an intensity that draws you into the strange little worlds he creates full of bugs and birds and dirt and wind. So much is held within a pause, a blank space, and no sound at all.
3. Sampson Starkweather – this guy is so in love with poetry it’s palpable. And contagious. His poetry has swag. He takes the everydayness of life and flips it and finds joy and pain and love in everything simultaneously. Mad love for him.
4. Etheridge Knight – *Poems from Prison*, Knight’s debut book of poetry, is reminiscent of Langston Hughes, or what Hughes would have said in 1968 when the book was first published. His work was hailed as “an example of the powerful truth of blackness in art,” and was written for the people in a way that the people could relate.
5. Mathias Svalina – talk about wearing your whole heart on your sleeve. You’ve never had a real feeling until you’ve read one of his dreams.
6. Jill Magi –the first poet I read that wove the textual with the textural. She wrote maps for words and I understood that a book of poems needn’t be one-offs stitched together, that each poem could/should stand on its own yet feed into the next. This was storytelling.
7. Kristin Prevallet/Maggie Nelson – *i: afterlife* and *bluets* blew my mind. Their use of memory and detail and emotion and color took confessionalism to such a different place. It wasn’t woe is me women’s writing; it was about getting your roar back.
8. Susan Howe – always haunting, Howe’s work is an amalgamation of well-researched ghosts and time standing still in ethereal matter-of-factness. Otherworldly. *The Midnight* left me breathless.
9. Tongo Eisen-Martin – Eisen-Martin’s debut, *someone’s already dead*, is stunning. Unapologetic and unrelenting, he confronts the ugliness of injustice, politics, power structures, and survival with fierceness and love. An old soul willing to re-ignite the revolution, Tongo’s storytelling will leave you speechless and set you on fire.
10. Leslie Scalapino – Scalapino used language as a literal tool. For sound. For color. Her work gave me permission to be experimental, to play with words and sounds, and the courage to couple those words and sounds with the visual, to see and use the page and the margin to create conversations. She changed the way I saw and experience confessionalism.