



DREAM COUNTRY DISCUSSION GUIDE

Ruptures

“For me, the rupture was the story.”

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

“Then he came back out on the porch and sat there for hours, watching the sun rise. Wondering if his own history was just a dream-loop folding back on itself over and over again, in endless variation and repetition, always in search of a place to rest.”

—Dream Country (page 321)

***Dream Country* weaves together several stories and repeatedly confronts the trauma of enslavement, colonialism, and war on two continents. The resulting narrative tapestry is not linear and is frequently and violently ruptured. In many ways, the author refuses to allow the story “a place to rest,” perhaps due in part to how these difficult historical traumas lay right beneath the surface for Kollie and Ujay, Fanewu and Angel, Eddie and Clark.**

1. In what ways does the author “rupture” the story and attempt to recover histories in this book?
2. From the beginning of the book, we see various examples of a hostility living right beneath the surface of almost every interaction between African

Americans and Liberians. Discuss what reasons you see for this.

3. Education comes up often in this novel, both as a primary instrument for carving the way “out” of global second-class citizenship and also as a site of violence. How is education experienced by Angel? Kollie? Clark?
4. There is a very difficult scene in the book’s beginning where Kollie witnesses the school security guard, Eddie, assault Clark. In that moment, Kollie feels stuck and unable to interrupt the violence. After Eddie leaves Clark, Kollie attempts to comfort him but fails, and Clark, in a fragile state, threatens Kollie, demanding that he never say anything about the incident. Discuss what connections these kinds of violent experiences have to silence. Why do you think, in this moment, Kollie and Clark were unable to find a way to be tender with and comfort each other? Do you see parallel moments elsewhere in the book in other places and times?
5. Throughout *Dream Country*, Ujay is hardened to Fanewu, Angel, and Kollie. Why do you think this family was so distant from one another?
6. Part III tells the story of Yasmine Wright and her family, beginning on an early nineteenth-century plantation in Virginia. Yasmine, like many enslaved,

formerly enslaved, and other “free” black people in North America, looks for a better life for herself and her children, one where they will not always have to go through the back door. Describe the role that the American Colonization Society (ACS) played in many African Americans departure to “settle” Liberia. How did this create a rupture between African Americans and indigenous Liberians and reproduce the master-and-en-slaved that the Wrights fled in Virginia?

7. Yasmine begins Part III as an unambiguously black woman, but by the end of her story, Lani, Yasmine’s youngest child, is described by an indigenous Liberian as “unabashedly sweet white woman.” Discuss how the book presents “whiteness” and “blackness.” What causes a person to be perceived as “white” or “black” in each of the sections?
8. Discuss the American Colonization Society’s interpretation and practice of Christianity. Did this interpretation view the indigenous people of what would be Liberia as fully human? Did Yasmine adopt the same view of Liberians? How does Yasmine’s character develop in her view of the indigenous people of Liberia in practice over time?

Dreams

“We are the ones on the plantation speaking and singing to each other in code, to let others know our intent—such art and artfulness precede what sets us free, and more often than not, are the code by which that freedom is achieved. If we cannot first imagine freedom, we cannot achieve it. Freedom, like fiction and all art, is a process in which the dream of freedom is only the first part.”

—Kevin Young, *The Grey Album:
On The Blackness of Blackness*

“...I have imagined in some shadowy part of my mind and heart that my father lost someone close to him, someone he loved deeply, and in doing so, lost his own dream too. Which is why he is so intent on the rest of us letting go of ours before they really start. At least now I know that he believes these losses are a kindness.”

—Dream Country (333–335)

This novel is aptly titled *Dream Country*, as it is a mosaic of stories highlighting self-recreation and intense longing for elsewhere. This elsewhere is an imagined territory—a dream—that is sometimes spoken of, other times kept hidden away, safe from war or the auction block. Wherever the dream lives, the fact remains: “if we cannot first imagine freedom, we cannot achieve it.”

1. Take a moment to think about the various hope and dreams parents in this novel have for their children. Discuss the ways these worked out or didn't and why.
2. *Dream Country* moves backward and forward again and again. Why do you think the author chose to structure the novel in this way?
3. In Part II of the book, Togar remembers in a dream his young wife explaining why she left the home she loved to live with him in his village: "*Because it is not the only beautiful thing in the world, my husband.*" This line is implicitly echoed again by Felicia, Angel's fiancée, when she answers Angel's question about why she left Chicago. Discuss the ways that dreams of love help characters throughout the book overcome, if only momentarily, the ruptures in their lives.
4. At the end of the book, Angel writes about her father, saying that she believed "he lost someone close to him, someone he loved deeply, and in doing so lost his own dream too. Which is why he is so intent on the rest of us letting go of ours before they really start." Discuss how the dashed dreams of parents can become unfair expectations or imposed life-paths for their children.
5. The book's title is *Dream Country*, and the characters in the novel cling to imagined or dreamlike territories in their minds: Yasmine of an Africa free of the ghosts of slavery, Ujay of a liberated Liberia and then later

of any place free of all the terrors of the Liberian civil war, Kollie of his club in the suburbs. In what ways do these imagined territories weave together? In what ways do they collide?

6. Angel at the end of the novel, seems to be the fulfillment of many of the various dreams. In the closing paragraphs she speaks of how, “Our bodies enclose the twisted threads of history—passed flesh to flesh, from parent to child, conqueror to conquered, love to beloved.” Discuss the twisted threads in this book’s five generations. How do they come to culminate in Angel?