

## Discussion Questions for *White Space: Essays on Culture, Race, & Writing* by Jennifer De Leon

- “White Space” can mean different things in the context of Jenn’s collection of essays. What are some of them? (Remember to pay attention to the subtitle of this book!)
- *White Space* is divided into three sections: “Before,” “Guatemala,” and “After.” Why do you think Jenn divided the book that way? Is there a “Before,” “[fill in the blank],” “After” in your own life?
- In the first essay, “Mapping Yolanda,” Jenn describes her observations of her family: “I always knew that Yolanda, my parents, and other relatives hadn’t moved from Guatemala to the United States for wanderlust, but it wasn’t until I had moved away from Boston that I saw their stories in a different light. The flashbulbs of economics and politics had revealed realities, surely, but it was the stories of others—my students’ families in particular—that began to unveil my own past, even my present.” Discuss how learning others’ stories — deeper than headlines or stereotypes — can in turn help us learn about ourselves.
- Jenn treats each “character” in her book with nuance — even the ones she might not understand or relate to. Did you see any aspect of your own life reflected in anyone in *White Space*? What did you think?
- Similarly, Jenn’s writing is extremely descriptive and detail-rich. For instance, in Guatemala she observes “The chubby little boys, brothers in matching tan tracksuits, munching on Tortrix chips. The women balancing the country on their heads—red buckets, baskets, pineapples, tortillas, blankets, plastic combs, bananas.” And when she housesits for the “famous author,” she notices his house: “Oil paintings. Pear-shaped candles in trios. Metallic reading lamps that camouflaged in the natural environment of the living room with the stone walls and massive fireplace. Ceiling-high bookshelves. Oh, the books. Barefoot Contessa cookbooks, hardcovers of *’Tis* and *The Poisonwood Bible*. Copies of *Tender Is the Night* and *1,911 Best Things Anybody Ever Said*...An entire row, bottom shelf, was devoted to the world in the form of atlases.” What are some quick and easily recognizable details about your own world? Do you think they “mean” anything?
- The author’s journey to becoming a writer is also a journey toward understanding her parents, particularly her father. In what ways do these things intertwine?

- Jenn writes that “College was like another country.” Have you had “another country” experience in your own life? (This can be literally another country, or like Jenn, a place or culture with which you aren’t familiar.)
- Jenn, on describing her mom attending a community college class: “Even though I understood the divide between us, I didn’t like it. I didn’t want it to be there. A part of me wanted her to be like my friends’ parents, the ones who emailed them feedback on paper drafts, the ones who forwarded them internship opportunities on Capitol hill, ones who had car phones and used words like *indeed*.” What kind of internal struggles does Jenn face when her parents ask her to help with tasks, such as her mom’s college paper or her dad’s resume?
- We sometimes hear the phrase “representation matters,” meaning: It is edifying for someone of a particular group to see someone like them in media, positions of power, or simply doing something they want to do. Who were some role models for Jenn? How did Jenn herself get to embody “representation matters” for someone?

***Some noteworthy quotes to discuss:***

“Fluency in a second language, however, is about more than the ability to translate one word to another. It is an invisible, yet potent, comfort in the culture of that language.” (37)

“My parents agreed that education was important. It was the reason they had left their homeland of Guatemala and, later, Boston. They believed the suburbs meant security—good schools, organized sports, a library down the street. My mother pushed the idea of college on us before we could write in cursive. We took elective classes in French and read chapter books for fun. Many of my cousins, on the other hand, lived in Section 8 housing and changed schools often. But when we were all together, in the pocket of Friday night, we were the same.” (4)

“We have no control over the circumstances into which we are born. The ropes we reach for in trying to soar somewhere new, somewhere better, often carry us to unpredictable places.” (15)

“My needs in Guatemala were already so much more basic: food, shelter, clean drinking water, bath. Perhaps it was like this in Boston too, but I had skewed vision.” (52)

