Title: 2009 Seattle Reads 'My Jim': Contemporary African-American Writing

Speaker 1:

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Chris Higash:

I'm Chris Higashi, Program Manager of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. Want to thank you all for joining us for this evening with Ta-Nehisi Coates and Attica Locke. Tonight's program is part of Seattle Reads, My Jim by Seattle author, Nancy Rawles. So, this is the 11th year of the library's internationally renowned community reading series, and it's really been a pleasure to feature our first local author.

We're very grateful to the Wallace Foundation for generous support for Seattle Reads since its inception. We also have support this year from KUOW Public Radio and Three Reverse Press. So, we also thank our independent bookstore partners, Elliott Bay Book Company. And please do visit the Elliott Bay table. Karen has Nancy Rawles novel and other works from our recommended reading list.

And finally, the special thank you to the Seattle Public Library Foundation whose support makes possible so many of our free library programs. So, we've been spending the last few months doing a whole series of programs leading up to Nancy Rawles's visit. These have been panel discussions and films and other authors. Nancy will be with us next week, Wednesday through Saturday, making seven public appearances to talk with readers about her book. On Friday night here in the auditorium, she's going to give a talk titled Living with Passion. That's the main event of this year's series.

So, tonight is part one of a two-part program on contemporary African-American writing and publishing, focusing on the younger generation of writers. So, tonight we have readings by Ta-Nehisi Coates from the Beautiful Struggle and Attica Locke from Blackwater Rising. Tomorrow at 2:00, we'll be at the Northwest African American Museum with a panel discussion with the two writers, their two editors whom you'll meet in just a moment, and two independent booksellers.

So, I'm going to turn things over shortly to Chris Jackson, who was Nancy Rawls editor at Crown for My Jim. He's now with Spiegel & Grau, and Chris is going to introduce his author, Ta-Nehisi Coates. Then

after that, Ta-Nehisi will read and speak. Then I'm going to turn things over to Dawn Davis who is the editorial director of Amistad HarperCollins, and Dawn is going to introduce her author, Attica Locke. So, each of the authors will read and speak, and then they'll answer some questions and then sign books at the front table. Okay. Chris Jackson. Thanks.

Chris Jackson:

Hi there. I first met Ta-Nehisi Coates probably four or five years ago. At the time, Ta-Nehisi was a writer, a staff writer for The Village Voice who was known for writing this bomb throwing, provocative, contrarian articles on all sorts of subjects. And what fascinated me about Ta-Nehisi before I met him, just through his writing, and it's interesting that he's here as a representative of the new generation of Black writers was his almost unidentifiable sources of his opinions. There was a strain of vestigial Black nationalism in his writing. There was a strain of hip-hop influence.

And then there was something that was just purely uniquely Ta-Nehisi. And in that respect, I think he does represent a new voice in a new moment, I think, in African American writing. Ta-Nehisi went on from the Village Voice to write for ... He hates for me to go through this, but I'm going to do it anyway, Time magazine. He currently writes for The Atlantic, as well as occasionally for The New Yorker. And he has a blog on the Atlantic.com's website, which is an incredibly lively, interesting place to go to read about politics and hip-hop and occasionally Worlds of Warcraft.

And Beautiful Struggle is his first book. It's a memoir about him and his father, and he'll obviously be able to tell you much more about it than I will hear. But I will say things that he can't say such as it has been stupendously reviewed everywhere. He's been called the James Joyce of the hip-hop generation by Walter Mosley. And he, I think, really is an extraordinary writer with a long career ahead of him. And as I like to say, he's a name you'll be hearing a lot from, although mostly mispronounced. So, Ta-Nehisi.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Can't read with stuff in your mouth, so unprofessional. I told Chris, Chris wanted to have one of those little sheets with your bio on it where they just read. That's what he wanted to do. I told him I wanted something special. He's my editor. I told him he knew me better than to read off of some sheet. So, he got close. That was all right. That was an all right introduction. He did okay.

I do want to say, well, first of all, this is my book. This is the Beautiful Struggle. It's a memoir. It's my memoir of growing up in west Baltimore in the 1980s and in the early '90s, period of crack, teen pregnancy, HIV and hip-hop and a lot of cool cartoons. So, that's in there also. I do want to say that it's such an honor to have Chris here. I've done quite a bit of readings. I got to make sure my phone's off. Wouldn't want that to happen. I've done quite a few readings since the book came out a year ago, and it's mostly just been me, but Chris was so integral to this book. And I think this just doesn't get said enough. You think about author. That's not my phone. Mine's off. You think about author and writer pairings, and Chris was so perfect for this.

As you can imagine, there are not too many, although we're blessed with two African American editors here tonight. If I can just speak colloquially, there just aren't too many of us in the field. And Chris was not just an African American, but an African American hood came up at a particular point in time with a

particular sensibility that he brought to bear to this book. And it just made it so much better than I think it would have been. It certainly made it better than the proposal that I sent off to him.

So, I wanted to say that because it really is an honor to have him here. I'm going to read from my book and it really is the story I think of ... in a small sense, it's the story of young Black men or young Black boys at a particular time trying to become men. In a bigger sense, it's about the struggles that I think boys of all races face in this society as we make this transition and there's always thinking of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a boy subsequently.

And it's about having a dad to guide you through that period during a time in which so few boys actually have dads and are left groping, trying to figure out what manhood is. I don't know that we arrived at any firm answers. It's so interesting whenever I'm out reading from the book, people always ask, they say, "All right, so at what point did you get it?" Because throughout this book, I'm screwing up in various ways. "What point did you get, at what point were you no longer scrubbing?" I always look at it. I say, "I don't know if I'm there yet."

So, this is from the first chapter of the Beautiful Struggle. And I think what you'll get here is just some sense of myself, my older brother and my father. We lived in a row house in the slope of Tioga Parkway in West Baltimore. There was a small kitchen, three bedrooms and three bathrooms, but only one that anybody ever wanted to use. All of us slept upstairs, my folks and a modest master, my two sisters, Chrissy and Kelly, went back from Howard University in an area where dad also stored his books.

There was a terrace outback with a riding wooden balcony. I almost died out there one day leaning against the crumbling wood. I tumbled headlong, but caught myself on the backdoor roof and came down lucky feet first to the ground. My room was the smallest and always checkered with the scattered volumes of World Book, Childcraft, Dragonlance, and Narnia.

I slept on bunk beds made from thick pine, shared the bottom with my baby brother, Menelik. Big Bill, "As in all things was up top." By mere months, he was my father's first son, but he turned this minor advantage into heraldry. He began sentences with, "As the oldest son." And sought to turn all his younger siblings into warriors. Big Bill was never scared.

He had a bop that moved the crowd and pre-empted beef. When bored, he'd entertain himself cracking on your busted fade, your acne, or your off-brand kicks. Bill, "Ta-Nehisi, get the out of here with those weak-ass NBAs. Know what that shit stands for? Next time by Adidas." And Gary, "I don't know what you laughing at over there in those four striped cougars. Know what that means, can you get Adidas?"

In those days, Crazy Chucky threatened our neighborhood. When we lined up for five on five, he took every tackle personally. Every block was an invite to scrap. Once he pulled a metal stake from the ground, swung it at fat Wayne until he retreated all the way into our living room. And that was when my father came out and revealed the face of, "This is not a game."

Chucky cursed and waved the stake, then he stalked off. That night, I lay on the bottom bunk for playing it all for Bill. Me, "Man, that nigga Chucky is crazy." Bill, "Fuck Chucky. If he ever stepped in me, I'll fuck him up." That fall, Chucky killed his father, got gaffled by the Jakes and disappeared into the nether world of Boys Village or Hickey Juvenile.

Private School Stevie lived two doors down. I would sit outside playing with his G.I. Joes until I realized that this made me a target. Across the street was Mondawmin Mall, the fashion seat of west Baltimore, the pit of sex, beat downs and cool. Every window glittered with leather, fur, sterling, and stickers with large red numbers and slash marks. But the price tags and fat ass honeys made boys turn killer. One misstep onto some kids suede Pumas and the G-hard begins.

In those days, cocaine was the air. And though I never saw the thing fire up, the smoke darkened everything. Turned our homey town into a bizarre of cheap ornaments bought expensively, a Gamora on the inner harbor. A young man's worth was the width of his blonde cable link chain. The space between two, three, then four finger rings marked footman from Calvary. Calvary from Great Gentry of this darker age. In all our dreams, we cruised the avenue in black Cherokee Jeeps and parked at the corner of Hot and Live, our systems flogging eardrums, pumping LaToya and Sucker M.C.'s. Even I shared those dreams and I was only 10.

While I was hobbled by preteen status and basic nature, Big Bill was enthralled by all the lights. This was the summer of 1986. KRS-One laid siege to Queensbridge. I would stand in my bedroom mirror, throwing up my hands, reciting the words of Todd Smith, walking down the street to the hardcore beat while my JVC vibrates the concrete.

Bill and my other brother, John, spent all summer busing tables. Bill schemed on a fat rope, one that would dangle from his neck like a sin. Still his money was young and he couldn't stomach the months of layaway. So, he returned from the mall with too many Ziploc bags, each the size of a woman's fist, each glimmering like him in the light. They held massive rings, one a dawn with a golden kite, another spanning two fingers molded into a dollar sign. He flashed them before me.

And I was caught by how the glowing metal made him swell inside his own skin. He was profiling, lost in all his glory when my father stepped up to him. Dad, "Son, they're fake. Son, you've been had." Bill, "You're bugging. This is 14 carat. I paid cash money." Dad, "Son, son, let's have him smelt it down and test it. If it's even 10 carats or more, I'll pay you for the rings with interest."

Man, Bill's head went reeling. The dream was finally within reach. He saw a gold herringbone spread across his black BVD t-shirt and when he bopped through Mondawmin all the Jennies would jump on his jock and soldiers would collapse or salute. In the order of Slick Rick, Bill would wear the scarlet robe, so he agreed to my father's proposition, convinced that he was on the better end. We were so young, drunk on ourselves and could not know that all the alleys we took as original, my dad had stepped through before. He found a place to smelt the gold and do the math and I don't know what was worse, the negative results or my father's ruthful chuckle and sermon.

Afterward, dad went over to Mondawmin and had Bill point out the merchants. Then he walked to the glass counter, brandished the results and spoke magic words. The magic words were fraud, Black community, and state's attorney. Bill never felt the same about gold again.

So, that's from the first chapter, and I think it just lays out the essential challenge of the book, which is my parents were really trying to balance two things, and that is a strong belief that you cannot be scared of your community, and yet at the same time, trying to make you aware of things that are beyond some of the negative values that may be present in your community. And so, on the one hand,

there was my brother who was more of it, and then there was me who was of somewhere completely different. And so, we had to, I think, both find our way through that.

This is from another portion later in the book. And I think if there's one thing about the Beautiful Struggle that really bugs me is that it really is a man's book. And so, I think part of the problem is my mother, who was such an influence on my life, doesn't come through as effectively as I really, really would like her to. It's focused on boys. Hopefully I'll get to that in the next book. I did dedicate the book to her though, hopefully to make up for that.

But this is about a particular point in my life, somewhat later on in my childhood, in which she actually did have quite an impact. And I think other boys would probably say the same thing, but this is just about a point where she had an impact on how I approached young girls, and particularly how I approached young Black girls.

I guess I should also tell you that this is at a point when I've been kicked out of high school for the second time, and my parents have just completely fed up with me, and so I'm left to make my own way through. This is from Chapter 7, bamboo earrings, at least two pair. You may note that all my references to girls have been briefed and mostly touched by failure. My catalog was comic.

Page one. I sat on the fence in early June 1985, my last years of boyhood, drawing the dark. I was waiting on Brenda Neal, who I knew had to walk this way to make it home. Soon as she'd be off to fall staff or one of those boarding schools way out with the horses and fencing teams. Of course, she was brown and lovely. Her eyes were great planets, but what I remember most was how the world would pause and come to her, how she spoke and walked easily like fifth grade with all its giant uncertainties was just her personal ballet.

When she laughed, her voice lightly cracked and with it, something inside me too took days to set right. She would tap her number two pencil against a desk and look up in a way for an answer and even that dumb look thrilled me. Then I knew how the damn dinosaurs had died, that even here in Ms. Boone's ordinary classroom, cataclysm awaits.

I was on the fence at Cold Spring and Callaway, a block away from the 7-Eleven where I saw my first gap across the street from where the highway men of Wabash snatched my black skully, sat there nursing my final chance. I don't remember what I said, but in response, she walked past and would have smiled and said something nice because she was not the type to get loud on you and for now had rejected the seductive venom and back talk that is the birthright of all Black girls. What I know is that I did not say what was needed, what ached beneath every rib that I watched her walk away with at best a goodbye and a good luck.

Man, I was born under a lame sign. Big Bill could make them yell, "Go William and do the whop." Dad had his flock and thus direct evidence that in these matters, his was the arm of Thor, but I had taken the wrong exit, picked up a manual written in French because in truth, my greatest disaster was that I just did not understand. Jennifer would clip me in the hallway, pull my shirt, punch me in the shoulder, grab it my chair while I reared back on two legs, smash an index finger in my face, and then an hour later smile and ask what I was reading, but it never got through.

Page seven. There I am at my seventh-grade locker, halfway through the year of all hell. Tianda whispers in my ear, "Ta-Nehisi, I have a crush on you." I turn and she's running off only to turn back for

a second, unsmiling through her glasses and say, "It's true." I am overcome, but still I demand parted clouds and a booming voice. A glad to see you grin would have helped and furthermore. I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to do next. I could walk her home, but Tianda lives down near Longwood where legionnaires carry warhammers and long daggers in their dip.

I am my own quagmire. And so, at the end of the week, Tianda extends her right hand to mush my face and sucks her teeth. "Ta-Nehisi, I don't have a crush on you." I should have known. All of us were damn as goods, and if I missed something, it was this. My greatest peril was sudden and defied, a Timberland boot to the dome, the talking end of a 380, a cop looking to make his night. But on the other side, the pitfalls were bottomless. This was the era of high schools fitted with nurseries. HIV was the air. Nigga that year at Woodlawn, I had a mother or an expecting in every class and still fools had the nerve to yell, "You got a fat ass from the passenger seat. Always from the passenger seat of a speeding car to saddle up and ask why you never smile."

Who knew what this dude was holding behind those cold hazel eyes? Girls and knowledge was shooting down without so much as eye contact because they knew every smile, every infatuated act compromised security and handed us a weapon that we would only deploy for selfish use. So, they made themselves into fortresses and demanded you drop your arms before they even thought about draw a bridge. They had so much more to lose.

Page 12. It is 1992 and I am doing what I have mastered at Woodlawn Senior High School, sleeping through health class. My head is resting on folded arms. My folded arms are resting on my desk next to one of my father's latest reprints, which needless to say is not the text of this class. Ebony Kelly walks past with a stack of papers and taps my desk until I come out of the haze.

I was in exile then from Baltimore Polytechnic High School, banished from the crystal city and denied even the rep of west Baltimore's public schools. What karmic poetry? I had spent all those years wrestling with the knowledge only to become a county boy. I had disgraced my parents and exhausted by the riggers of it all. They simply threw up their hands and backed off. "You do what you want, boy." My father told me one day in the back of the car. "But at the end of this school year, you will leave my house. You can go into the army. I don't care, but you ain't going to be here next year."

Dad and my mother believed 17 was an internship to manhood, that at that point the child would be what he was. This was my senior year, the first time no one checked my homework, asked if I had studied or requested progress reports from school. I came to Woodlawn with a 1.8 GPA. College would require a series of awesome labors. I would have to start with the invention of time travel. Still, I was blessed with some understanding of some standardized tests and thus SAT scores that at least here in Baltimore stood out.

And my advanced classes at Poly had softened my landing here in my senior year at Woodlawn. I had three classes after lunch, health, Spanish 1, Applied Math. I remember that. Those were the days. I showed my respect by sleeping as much as I could and pulling bees on pop quizzes. The classrooms were crowded and tight. The last thing a teacher wanted was to make me an issue. They left me to my afternoon nap. I left them to their restless kids.

Ebony had not been informed of this arrangement. She sat at the front of the class, knew all the answers and was the first pick for class errands. She tapped on the desk until I looked up, handed me

some [inaudible 00:24:12] ditto, then picked up the thin book that was lying next to my arm. "What are you reading? "She said. "David Walker's Appeal. It was written by a Black guy from the slavery days. He predicted a lot of the stuff they said back in the '60s. They killed him, of course."

She stood there for a moment asking more about the book than gave her impression of Malcolm's memoirs and carelessly smiled. That was when I noticed her. I came to Woodland not sure of what was next. Half of me saw myself fulfilling the destiny of my mother ... I'm sorry. Half of me saw me fulfilling the destiny of those my mother had called out as if I had to had my gun niggas. They stood on their corners, their brains otherwise correct, spewing tales of life altering moments, conflicts in which it all hinged on. But they came out losers and the frame was always the same.

If I had had my gun, that nigga wouldn't have said shit. Or if I had have had my gun, that bitch would have let me see my kids. It was a taxing on me for losers, brothers who wasted their minds. That possibility, membership and a garbage cheap of lost men hung over me, clowning even my most primal instincts. But she was Black and beautiful like her name. And wrong as it was, this made her prominent to me.

Years ago, I had embarrassed my mother. We were sitting in with one of her girlfriends in the living room and now came that predictable moment that I hated. Why do women care so much about the buddy romances of young boys? Girlfriend, "Ta-Nehisi, what sort of girls do you like?" Ta-Nehisi, "I like light-skinned girls." There must have been a gasp, but I was young and would have completely missed it, because the next image is post-conversation sitting in the car with my mother staring at me. The car unstarted. Her eyes were power drills.

And though she herself was a shade from yellow, she was a patriot. "Little boy, don't you ever say anything like that again? You can have your little eyes on whoever you want for whatever you want. But you remember that these little Black girls are somebody's daughter, somebody's sister, and someday somebody's mother." I didn't get it right away. I was even angry at first, but then days piled onto weeks and then onto months until a shame came over me and I understood. So, by now, I knew that to say to Ebony, "Well, you're pretty for a dark-skinned girl." Was a hate crime.

We talked reading and politics until the teacher sat her down and throughout it all, she smiled and giggled. And for the first time since elementary school, I was down with someone who was both knowledge and free. I watched her in the halls over the following days. I wasn't down with anybody here. I talked little and this was county school. I didn't even fuck with [inaudible 00:27:10] like that.

I fed myself on my own myth. They were snapped to my chill Rob G. I was the west Baltimore original while they just played the part. But goddamn their girls with their rap skirts, sundresses and wide leg jeans were exotica. She was a duchess among them. She stood out amid the dime pack, the ones who got their hair done monthly and touch ups on the midweek. She wore it rap to pull back into a French roll with blue glitter or curly bangs hanging down the front. They dressed like it was all a fashion show. They dispensed smiles and laughter as if from a box of exquisite chocolate with none despair. All of them except Ebony. She was always laughing. Thank you.

Dawn Davis:

Hi. So, I've been working in editorial for several, several years. And throughout that time, people have come to me from time to time and said, "You know, you should really find the next Walter Mosley. We haven't seen your generation's Walter Mosley." And I think, "Yeah, right. I got that. It would be great if I had a manuscript that came across my desk that even had character development like Walter Moseley or the tension building of Walter Mosley." I would love that. It's occurred to me, but year after year, indeed, I never saw anything close to it.

And then one day, lo and behold, last spring, I got a manuscript and I found myself reading it way into the hours of the night and into the morning. And I thought that I had found someone who could write a noir, a thriller with big characters and big themes, and I was absolutely exhilarated. Her name is Attica Locke and she's with us today. George Pelecanos has praised her as Blackwater Rising as a stylish involving literary thriller with a strong emphasis on human politics and character.

And even James Ellroy has called Blackwater Rising the baddest, best bad town novel in some time. But she's more than that. I'm so impressed because she's a mother of a two-year-old who somehow managed to write. I can barely do anything. I can barely get to the subway without getting lost with two children. She is a woman who writes a male character that is so incredibly believable and round.

She is also a debut novelist and so many debut novelists choose to write about themselves. They are so often autobiographical, and yet she's chosen to write a novel that grapples with some big ideas. And she will tell you more about it or you'll hear about it when she reads, but she wanted to know what happens when someone who was raging against the machine as a youth, who was a radical, who was an idealist, becomes part of the institution. What happens to those emotions? What happens to that anger? She explores that in a murder, mystery, noir, thriller, and it's something that you really have to experience on your own. And without further ado, Attica Locke.

Attica Locke:

Thanks, Dawn. Let me just take a moment and express my gratitude for being here. I am a debut novelist, and it was years ago that I sat across the dinner table from my husband and said, "I'm going to write a book." And he thankfully went along with that plan. It took a year off. And I'm very happy to be here. And I'm specifically happy to be here as a part of the Seattle Reads program, but even particularly this program and listening to Ta-Nehisi, I think it's no accident that the two of us are here and that we're roughly of the same generation. And some of our themes I think overlap.

And I think the reason is that it is the post-civil rights, post new integration generation that's finally coming of an age where we can put two thoughts together about our experience. Because I'm fascinated with transitions and I think probably in American history for the psychology of Black America, there are probably three big ... I'm not a historian, but the way I look at it, big events. And one would be the transition out of slavery during reconstruction. One would be integration and this sudden shift. And I think the third one is the man who's in the White House now. And time will tell what that means for my daughter's life.

And my book was looking at what the civil rights movement meant to my generation. And it is a murder mystery. It takes place in Texas in the '80s. And the main character is a small-time criminal defense attorney who is trying to shift from his days as a radical and trying to psychologically shift into the Reagan '80s. So, Blackwater Rising, I'm going to read from the first chapter, which sets up the story.

So, again, Texas, 1981. The boat is smaller than he imagined and dingier. Even at night, Jay can tell it needs a paint job. This is not at all what they discussed. The guy on the phone said moonlight cruise, city lights and all that. Jay had pictured something quaint, something with a little romance, like the river boats on the poncho train in New Orleans, only smaller. But this thing looks like a doctored-up fishing boat at best. It is flat and wide and ugly, a barge, badly overdressed, like a big girl invited to her first and probably last school dance.

There are Christmas lights draped over every corner of the thing and strung in a line framing the cabin door. They're blinking erratically, somewhat desperately winking at Jay, promising a good time, wanting him to come on in. Jay stays right where he is staring at the boat's cabin, four leaning walls covered with a cheap carport material.

The whole thing looks like it was slapped together as an afterthought, a sloppy attempt at decorum like a hat resting precariously on a drunk's head. Jay turns and looks at his wife who hasn't exactly gotten out of the car yet. The door is open and her feet are on the ground, but Bernie is still sitting in the passenger seat, peeking at her husband through the crack between the door and the Skylark's rusting frame. She peers at her shoes, a pair of navy-blue Dr. Scholl's. A small luxury she allowed herself somewhere near the end of her sixth month.

She looks up from her sandals to the boat teeter-tottering on the water. She is making quick assessments, he knows, weighing her physical condition against the boats. She glances at her husband again, waiting for an explanation. Jay looks out across the bayou before him. It is little more than a narrow, muddy strip of water flowing some 30 feet below street level. It snakes through the underbelly of the city, starting to the west and going through downtown, all the way out to the ship channel in the port of Houston, where it eventually spills out into the Gulf of Mexico.

The view here from Allen's Landing is grim. There are thick unkempt weeds choked up on the banks of the water, crawling up the cement pilings that hold main street overhead and save for a dim yellow bulb at the foot of a small wooden pier. Allen's Landing is complete blackness.

Jay stands beneath his city, staring at the raggedy boat, feeling a knot tighten in his throat. A familiar sense at the neck, a feeling of always coming up short where his wife is concerned. He feels a sharp stab of anger. The guy on the phone lied to him. The guy on the phone is a liar. It feels good to outsource it, to put it on somebody else. When the truth is there are 35 open case files on his desk, at least 10 or 12 with court time pending. There wasn't time to plan anything for Bernie's birthday. And more important, there hasn't been any money, not for months. He's waiting on a couple of slip and falls to pay big, but until then there's nothing coming in.

When one of his clients, a guy who owes him money for some small-time probate work said he had a brother or uncle or cousin or somebody who runs boat tours up and down the bayou, Jay jumped at the chance. He got the whole thing comped. Just like the dinette set he and Bernie eat off of every night, just like his wife's car that's been on cement blocks in Petey's garage since April. Jay shakes his head and disgust. Here he is, a working man with a degree, two in fact, and still he's taking handouts, living secondhand. He feels the anger again and beneath it's ugly cousin, Shane. He tucks the feelings away. Anger he knows is a young man's game. Something he long ago outgrew.

There's a man standing on the boat near the head. He's thin and nearing 70 and wearing an ill-fitting pair of wranglers. There are tight gray curls poking out of his nylon baseball cap. The words Brotherhood of Longshoreman Local 116 smudged with dirt and grease. He's sucking on the end of a brown cigarette. The old man nods in Jay's direction, tipping the bill of his cap. Jay reaches for his wife's hand. "I'm not getting on that thing."

She tries to fold her arms across her chest to make the point, but her growing belly is not where it used to be or even where it was last week. Her arms barely reach across the front of her body. "Come on." He says, "You got the man waiting now.". "I ain't thinking about that man." Jay tugs on her hand, feels her give just the tiniest bit. "Come on." Bernie makes a whistling sound through her teeth, barely audible, which Jay hears and recognizes at once. It's meant to signal her thinning patience.

Jay takes her arm, leading her to the edge of the small pier. It sags and creeks beneath their weight. The old man in the baseball cap puts one cowboy boot on a rotted plank of wood that bridges the barge to the pier and flicks his cigarette over the side of the boat. Jay watches it fall into the water, which is black like oil. It's impossible to tell how deep the bayou is, how far to the bottom.

Jay squeezes his wife's hand, reluctant to turn her over to the old man who is reaching a hand over the side of the boat, waiting for Bernie to take her first step. "You Jimmy? "Jay asks him. "Nah, Jimmy ain't coming.". "Who are you?". "Jimmy's cousin." Jay nods as if he were expecting this all along as if being Jimmy's cousin is an acceptable credential for a boat's captain. All the identification a person would ever need. He doesn't want Bernie to see his concern. He doesn't want her to march back to the car.

The old man takes Bernie's hand and gently guides her onto the boat's deck, leading her and Jay to the cabin door. He keeps close by Bernie's side, making sure she doesn't trip or miss a step and Jay feels a sudden unexpected softness for Jimmy's cousin. He nods at the old man's cat making small talk. "You Union?" He asks him. The old man shoots a quick glance in Jay's direction, taking in his clean shave, the pressed clothes and dress shoes and the smooth hands narrow a scratch on them. "What you know about it?" There's a lot Jay knows more than his clothes explained, but the question here and now is not worth his time.

He concentrates on the floor in front of him sidestepping a dirty puddle of water, pooling under an old AC unit stuck in the cabin's window, thinking how easy it would be for someone to slip and fall. He follows a step or two behind his wife watching as she pauses at the entrance to the cabin. It's black on the other side and she waits for Jay to go in first. He takes the lead, stepping over the threshold. He can smell Evelyn's perfume, still lingering in the room. A smoky woodsy scent like sandalwood, like the soap Bernie used to bathe with before she got pregnant and grew intolerant of it and a host of other smells like gasoline and scrambled eggs.

The scent lets him know that Evelyn was here, that she followed his careful instructions. He feels a warm rush of relief and reaches for his wife's hand, pulling Bernie along. She doesn't like the dark. He knows she doesn't like not being in on something. "What is this?" She whispers. Jay takes another step feeling along the wall for the switch. When the light finally comes, Bernie lets out a gasp, clutching her chest.

Inside the cabin, there are balloons instead of flowers, hot links and brisket instead of filet, and a cooler of beer and grape Shasta instead of wine. It's not much, Jay knows, nothing fancy, but still it has a certain charm. He feels a wave of gratitude for his wife for this night out, even for his sister-in-law.

In the center of the room is a table set for two, a chocolate cake on top with white and yellow roses, just like Evelyn promised. Bernie stares at the cake, the balloons, all of it, a slow smile spreading across her face. She turns to her husband, reaching on her tiptoes for Jay's neck, pressing her cheek to his. She bites his ear a small, sweet reprimand, a reminder she doesn't like secrets.

The boat's engine starts up and Jay feels the pull of it in his knees. They start a slow coast to the east and out of downtown. Beads of water rocking and rolling across the top of the air conditioning unit. The moist weak stream of air it offers isn't enough to cool an outhouse. The room is only a few degrees below miserably hot. Jay is already sweating through his dress shirt. Still, he smiles to himself thinking he's got everything he needs right here. His family, Bernie and the baby, all he has.

There's a sister somewhere, a mother he isn't talking to. Old friends he's been avoiding for more than 10 years. He hasn't spoken to his buddies, his comrades, cats from way, way back since his trial. The one that nearly killed him, the one that drove him to law school in the first place. He started missing meetings after that, skipping funerals, ignoring phone calls until eventually his friends just stopped calling until they got the hint

He counts himself lucky really. A lot of his old friends are dead or locked up or in hiding out of the country somewhere. They are men who cannot come home. But Jay's life was spared by an inch, a single juror, a woman, and the only Black on the panel. He remembers how she smiled his way every morning of the trial. Always with a small nod. "It's okay." The smile said, "I got you, son. I'm not going to let you fall."

After the trial, after he checked himself in and out of St. Joseph's Hospital, he learned the juror, his angel was a widow who stayed out on Noble Street down from Bernie's church. The same church where her father, Reverend Boykins, had loaded a bus full with half of his congregation every morning of Jay's trial. They were women mostly dressed in their best stockings and felt hats and cat eye glasses with white rhinestones. They rode to the courthouse every day for two weeks simply because they'd heard a young man was in trouble.

No questions asked. They claimed him as one of their own. They sat through days of FBI testimony, including a secret government tape that was played in the hushed courtroom. A tape of a hasty phone call Jay had made in the spring of 1970. The prosecutors had him on a charge of inciting a riot and conspiracy to commit murder of an agent of the federal government, a kid like him and a paid informant. They had Jay on tape talking to Stokely, a phone call that ran less than three and a half minutes and sealed his fate.

Jay, 19 at the time, sat at the defense table in a borrowed suit, scared out of his mind. His lawyer, appointed by the judge, was a white kid, not that much older than Jay. He wouldn't listen and he rarely looked at Jay. Instead, he slid a yellow legal pad and a number two pencil across the table. Anything Jay had to say, he should write it down. Jay remembers staring at the pencil thinking of his exams of all things. He was a senior in college then and failing Spanish.

He sat at the defense table and wondered how old he would be when he got out if they gave him two years or 20. He tried to imagine the whole of his life every Christmas, every kiss, every breath spent in prison. He tried to do the math, dividing his life in half, then fourths, then split again over and over until it was something small enough to fit inside a six by eight cell at the walls in Huntsville. Any way he looked at it, a conviction was a death sentence.

He remembers looking around the courtroom every morning and not recognizing a soul. His friends all stayed away treating his arrest and pending incarceration as something contagious. He was humbled, almost sickened with shame to see the women from the church. Women he did not even know show up every day, taking up the first two and three rows in the gallery, never speaking or making a scene just there every time he turned around. "We got you, son. We're not going to let you fall."

His own mother hadn't come to the courthouse once, hadn't even come to see him and lock up. He didn't know Bernie then or her father didn't know the church or god. He was a young man full of ideas that were simple, black and white. He liked to talk big about the coming revolution, about the church negro who was all show and no action who was doing nothing for the cause. A word spoken one too many times, worked into one too many speeches until it had lost all meaning for Jay, until it was just a word, a shortcut, a litmus test for picking sides.

Well, he's not on anyone's side anymore except his own. There are other American dreams, he reasons. One is money, of course, a different kind of freedom and seemingly within his reach. If he works hard, where's the suit placed by the new rules? His dreams are simple now. Home, his wife, his baby. He watches Bernadine moving to the music on the boombox, wiping sweat from her brow, pasting stray black hairs against her bronze skin.

Jay stands perfectly still lost in the way of his wife's hips. He smiles and leans over the cooler for a second beer, feeling the boat moving beneath his feet. An hour or so later, the cake cut and food nearly gone. Jay and Bernie are alone on the deck. Bernie leans her forearms against the hand railing, sticking her face into the moist night air. Jay pops the top of his Coors, his fourth or maybe his fifth. He lost count somewhere near turning basin. The only spot between downtown and the Port of Houston where a boat can turn around on the narrow bayou.

They are heading back to Allen's Landing now, but still a few miles from downtown. From the rear of the boat, Jay can see the lights of the high-rise buildings up ahead. The headquarters of coal oil industry standing tall above the rest. To the rear of the boat is a view of the port and the ship channel lined with oil refineries on either side. From here, the refineries are mere clusters of blinking lights and puffs of smoke, white against the swollen charcoal sky, rising on the dewy horizon like cities on a distant planet. Between the refineries in downtown Houston, there's not much to look at, but water and trees as the boat floats through a stretch of nearly pitch-black darkness.

Jay stands next to his wife on the deck following shadows with his eyes, tracing the silhouette of moss hanging from the aged water oaks that line the banks of the water. He finishes his beer dropping the can on the deck. They are about to head back inside when they hear the first scream. What sounds at first like a cat's cry, shrill and desperate. It's coming from the north side of the bayou, high above them from somewhere in the thick of trees and weeds lining the bank.

At first, Jay thinks it's an animal caught in the brush, but then he hears it again. He looks at his wife. She too is staring through the trees. The old man in the baseball cap suddenly emerges from the captain's cabin. "What the hell was that?" He asks. Jay shakes his head even though he already knows. Somewhere deep down, he knows. It wasn't an animal, he heard it was a woman.

The old man ducks into the main cabin. A few seconds later, Jay hears the music stop, then silence. Nothing except the soft whisper of water lapping against the sides of the boat as they creep slowly along the surface of the bayou. The old man emerges from the main cabin. "Y'all heard something?". "Over there." Bernie says, pointing to the brush along the embankment.

Jay strains to make out any buildings behind the trees trying to place where they are. He makes quick calculations judging their distance from downtown with his eyes, trying to gauge how long they've been drifting westward. But in the darkness and with his drunken sense of time, he can only guess. There's somewhere near Lockwood Drive near Fifth Ward that much he can tell.

He can see part of the Freedman's National Bank clock from here rising high behind the trees. It's late, he realizes, just shy of midnight. He's had a couple of cases come out of Fifth Ward, property disputes and petty theft, but also fist fights and hold-ups and one kid who knifed another one just for playing his music too loud. Jay knows they are floating through the backside of one of the roughest neighborhoods in the city.

Bernie turns to her husband, "Something's wrong out there, Jay." Behind them, there's another scream, a howl, really, a plea. A woman's voice shaped into two very distinct words. "Help me." Jay feels a slight flutter across his chest, a tiny hiccup of dread. Bernie's voice drops to a whisper, "What in the devil is going on out there?" The old man disappears into the captain's cabin. A few seconds later, he emerges carrying a flashlight. He shines the weak light into the brush on the north side of the bayou, calling out into the darkness to a face none of them can see. "You okay out there? Hey, you okay out there?" A gunshot cracks through the air.

Jay's heart stops. Everything going still. He has a fleeting panicked thought. This is it. He actually looks down to see if he's been hit. An old habit set off by firecrackers and bad mufflers, a holdover from his other life. There's a second shot then. It echoes and rolls across the air like thunder. The old man lets out a low raspy moan, "God in heaven." Jay grabs for his wife's hand, pulling her toward the door to the main cabin away from the open deck. Bernie yanks her hand free of his. The movement's strong and decisive. She turns to face the old man in the baseball cap. "Sir, I think you'd better turn this thing around.". "I can't." He says to her and Jay. "The bayou's too narrow. Besides the basin, there's no place to turn her around till we get back to Allen's Landing.". "Then stop the boat." Bernie says.

The old man shoots a quick glance in Jay's direction, making it clear he intends to take no instruction from the pregnant woman, not without her husband's say so, which only infuriates Bernie, "Stop this boat." In the end, the old man relents, starting on his own for the captain's cabin. Jay grabs his arm, "Don't.". "Somebody's in trouble out there, Jay.". "There are two people out there, B." He says. "The girl and who or whatever it is she's running from." He's picturing a street fight or a knockdown drag out between lovers or something worse, much, much worse.

"Leave it alone." He hears himself say. Bernie stares at Jay, her voice hushed, "What is the matter with you?" Her disappointment in him, no matter how it cuts is not the point. "Somebody shooting out there,

B." He says. "You got me on this boat and pointing to the only other able body on board, a man almost 70 and my wife. I, for one, am not willing to put you or myself at risk to step into some trouble. We don't know the first thing about. We don't know that girl. Don't know what kind of trouble she brings."

He hears the cynicism in his voice, hates it, but feels pressed to speak it anyway. The oldest con in the book he thinks to himself is the damsel in distress. The girl by the side of the road with a flat tire, the one with a boyfriend waiting in the weeds to jump you as soon as you stop to help. "Just leave it alone." He says. Bernie stares at him for a long, painful moment, squinting around the edges of her eyes as if she's trying to place him, someone she used to know. "Oh, Jay.". "We'll call the police." He says. "It's a good plan. Clean, simple, logical."

The old man is sheepish, slow to move. "We ain't got a city license to run this thing after hours.". "Oh, god." Bernie mumbles. "Call the policeman." Jay says. The old man size and walks to a dirty white phone that's smudged with oil and grime and resting outside the door to the captain's cabin. He lifts the phone what looks more like a walkie-talkie or a CB receiver. Jay and Bernie watch as the old man punches the buttons on the phone a few times. Hearing nothing, he finally slams the receiver in its cradle. The phone apparently is not working, "Fucking Jimmy." The old man says.

There's another scream closer this time. Bernie grabs the flashlight from the old man's hand, swinging the cloudy white light toward the embankment just in time to see a body drop, rolling zigzag down the steep bank, bumping up against weeds and uneven soil. It rolls all the way down the embankment and then it disappears. Jay hears a quiet splash, a sucking sound, the bayou swallowing something whole.

Bernie looks at Jay. He can hear his own heartbeat low in his throat. A moment later, a ripple breaks the still water, its waves spread like arms offering an embrace. "Somebody's moving out there." The captain mumbles. There's a burp and gurgle of air. Something surfaces on the water. Jay hears splashing and then a cry, hoarse and starved for air. Bernie waits for no one's permission. She marches into the captain's cabin. She has to reach past her belly to touch the key sticking out of the control board, turning it to the left. The engine sputters, then falls quiet. No one on the deck moves. No one says a word. Bernie and the old man are both looking at Jay.

He moves quickly without a word being said, removing his watch, but not his wedding band, thinking to himself that this is one of those times when being a man or rather trying to play the part to any convincing degree trumps his better judgment. He's not exactly a big guy to begin with and the years have softened his once wirey frame. He kicks off his shoes, then lifts his shirt from his pants past the slight punch around his middle. He starts to take it off, but changes his mind. He makes an awkward climb onto the decks railing, then takes a deep breath, holding it tight and precious in his chest and jumps.

The water is warm and bitter. It comes in everywhere in his mouth and throat through his clothes. Beneath the surface, the bayou is alive, pulling at him, tugging at his arms and legs. He has some vague sense of the light from the boat, but his eyes are burning. It's impossible to see clearly. He moves blindly through the darkness, reeled in by the sound of her voice.

This next passage is when they're on the boat. Jay is bent over, his hands on his knees trying to line up one breath after another, trying not to pass out. Out of the corner of his eye, he gets the first good look at the woman he carried across the bayou. The life he's just saved. She's white and filthy. There's black

dirt coating her skin, dead leaves clinging to her arms. She's terrified, shaking, staring at a room full of black faces, each of whom is staring back at her. The boat's cabin is still and quiet.

"He follow you?" It's his first question before her name, before he asks if she's okay. She can't or won't speak. She sits on the edge of one of the folding chairs at the table, her teeth chattering, blue and yellow balloons swaying incongruously over her head. Bernie and the other seat reaches across the table for a stack of wrinkled paper napkins. She offers them to the stranger who is soaking wet, but the woman won't let go of her purse long enough to take one. "Are you okay?" Bernie asks gently.

Jay's eyes skim the woman's body. She's not been shot. He sees right away. The skin beneath her neck is red and swollen, but Jay can't be sure if that was his doing when he grabbed her in the water or someone else's. Other than that, there isn't a scratch on her. She looks up aware that Jay is watching her and tightens the grip on her purse as if she half expects him to make a clean snatch and run away with it.

He senses this white woman is afraid of him. "Where is he?" He asks. "I don't know." She says. Her voice sweet but raw, like a rusty church bell swinging on its hinge. "I ran. I just ran." Jay is still thinking there's a gun somewhere close by, turns to the old man in the baseball cap. "Start the boat now." The old man slips to the cabin door and a few minutes later, Jay hears the engine start. He turns back to the woman. "What happened to you?" She lowers her eyes, her face taking on a hot crimson color. She is too shamed, it seems to look him in the eye. "He attack you?". "Jay." Bernie says softly, shaking her head. A silent suggestion that whatever went on behind those trees, maybe this woman terrified and shaking is not ready to say it out loud in mixed company no less.

Jay nods backing off, but doesn't take his eyes off the stranger. She lost her shoes somewhere in the water, but Jay can tell by the cut and fabric of her dress that it isn't cheap. She's also missing an earring. Its twin is round and gold with a diamond in the center. There's a diamond on her ring finger too, right hand, not left, a rock three times bigger than the one Bernie is wearing. Eyeing the clothes and the rock, Jay asks, "Where were you?". "Excuse me?" The woman says. "Where were you coming from?"

She stares at him blankly as if she doesn't understand the question, but Jay catches an unmistakable flash of recognition in her copper colored eyes. He thinks she knows exactly what he's asking. "What was a woman like you doing in a neighborhood like this roundabout midnight alone?" She cuts her eyes away from Jay turning to Bernie instead. "Is there a washroom I can use?" Bernie points to a swinging door across the room. It stops just short of the floor offering little privacy.

Bernie offers the paper napkins again. The woman is slow to move. Her body's stiff like a broken doll as if held together at this late hour by sheer will as if she's afraid that any tiny motion might break her on two and she won't let go of her purse. Bernie reaches for the handbag as if to set it on the table for the woman, but the move startles her. She lets out a small cry and protest. Her eyes are light with a kind of panic.

Bernie lets go of the purse instantly and the bag tumbles from both their hands. They all watch as it falls onto the floor, landing with surprising softness. Its mouth open to the room. The purse Jay sees is empty. It contains nothing, not a lipstick case or a book of matches, not even housekeys or a few coins. Like her missing shoes and earring, it seems the contents of the woman's purse were lost somewhere

in the bayou. Lost or dumped, he thinks. The word occurring to him unexpectedly, lodging itself stubbornly in the back of his mind like a sharp pebble in his shoe. Bernie and the woman reach for the purse at the same time. "Don't touch it." Jay says, "Don't touch a thing. Just leave it alone." He thinks.

And this last passage is once they're in the car and they are driving this woman to the police station. Jay watches her in the rear-view mirror. She's in the back seat, eyes closed, turning her diamond ring over and over, fingering the icy stone as if it were a talisman or a rosary, something to bring luck or a promise of redemption. They're only a few blocks from the central station. They ride in silence, the stranger in the back and Bernie in the front passenger seat.

Jay keeps the Buick Skylark at an even 35 miles an hour, careful not to draw any undue attention. He's keenly aware of the irony, his fear of being stopped by cops on his way to a police station, but driving a strange white woman whose name he never got at this time of night in this city makes him edgy, cautious. There's no one in front of the police station when he pulls to the curb. Jay parks the car, but leaves the engine running.

Downtown Central Police Station is an older building, a rarity in a city that has a curious habit of raising its own history. The station was built in early mid-century before the city was a boom town. Before the post-war explosion of American highways made gas the most coveted commodity in the country, before 1973 in the embargo, before the crisis, before oil made Houston. "Should we go in?" Bernie asks. The woman in the backseat opens her eyes. They meet Jay's in the rear-view mirror. "I'm fine from here." Her voice is mannered. Calm. "Thank you."

She steps out of the car and walks up the first steps to the police station then stops. She's gathering her strength maybe, or Jay thinks she's stalling. "You think she's okay?" Bernie asks. Jay puts the car in drive, fresh sweat breaking across his brow. Just the idea of being anywhere near a police station at this time of night, looking like a ragged dog tangled up in some white woman's mess makes him more than a little dizzy. He knows firsthand the long creative arm of southern law enforcement knows when he ought to keep his mouth shut. He locks the doors and pulls away from the curb, stealing a final glance in his rear-view mirror. He watches the woman standing alone in front of the police station and wonders if she's going inside. Thank you.

Speaker 1:

I'd like to open it up to questions. Yes.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I wanted to ask, and I'll give my answer in a second, but I just wanted you to elaborate a little more. So, in terms of your schooling situation, was it majority white or what was...

Attica Locke:

Yeah. I grew up in Houston, Texas, and it was one of the last cities in the country to fully integrate. So, I was bused to school. So, I was literally bused to someplace all the way across the city. And I had a very uncomfortable dual existence that they were the people in my neighborhood, which was a Black ghetto, but like a Black ghetto in 1978, which meant single families and homes they owned. So, I don't

know how ghetto that is, but I had this one life here and then I had this other life at the white school and the two never met up. And it was very fractured and really emotionally uncomfortable. So, it was like all white. And because then they put you in those gifted classes, then I was really by myself in the whole scene.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I was asking because it's interesting. That's a very common is, not the word I'm looking for. It's almost an archetype of our generation actually. I mean, my spouse's situation was very much the same way. And I always find it interesting. Whenever I meet people like that, I pepper them with questions because I had the complete opposite. I mean, you know they think you're stupid, you know they think you steal. And that's why we don't live around them. That's why you're not at their school.

So, I'm always fascinated by people who had the same thing, and not to say there was anything wrong with it, and yet we'll send you to school over there. I think they're very obvious reasons because those are the better schools. I mean, so it's not that I think that that's insane or anything. It's weird because my dad was in the Panther Party, and so he went from this guy from north Philly with no particular political identity, going into the army, thinking it was going to be like John Wayne flex, getting radicalized in the army as so many people, Black, white, whatever, often are. Coming out, joining the Panther Party, talking about socialism, communism, whatever.

And really, this is going to sound weird, but very much from a Black perspective, shifting rightward and becoming a kind of quasi-nationalist almost and very much buying into capitalism and a weird version of America. America, through a lens darkly as we could think about it. My dad loved Booker T. Washington and that was like his ideal. It was like, Booker T. Washington, do for self. Don't ask anybody for anything. They hate you anyway. I mean, he never said it like that, but I mean, I think that sense is what exists in the community. Those people over there do not like you.

And so, I think my parents' response to that was ... I mean, when you think about it was a basic fear. It's like, I don't know what's over there and I don't know what they're going to do to you and I can't protect you. There may be problems here in this neighborhood, but they're the problems I've grown up with. They're the problems that I know. I know about negroes. I know what negroes do. I know negroes are crazy. I know negro's craziness. I don't know white folks crazy and I'm scared about that. So, it was very much like that sort of thing. That was like my parents' response. That's a very long winding answer to the question.

Attica Locke:

You know what? I actually would, and I can only speak for me. And again, I tend to be really interested in psychology. And for me, I started having nerves and panic during the election about him getting elected because it would ask of me, forget what even to ask of everybody else. It would ask me to lay down some of my stuff. And I'm not saying that all of a sudden Obama's elected and everything's coming up roses, but it cannot be ignored. I will not downplay it and it is a big deal because he's not even just Black, but it's like the African.

I mean, it is such a shift in American culture that I started feeling panicky that I would have to let go of some stories that I grew up with or that I've been holding onto about what it means to be Black in

America to make space for it. There's something else it means too. So, I do think it is a huge psychological shift and I think that my daughter's experience in this country is, I think, going to be very different. Even if she still bumps up against a lot of racism, there will still be this humongous counterbalance to that that can't be ignored.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Yeah. Just to add on to that, and just to piggyback on what I was saying before, the big complication is ... So, I was just saying about how from my parents' generation, they hate you, they think you still da, da, da. It's very hard to maintain. And I understand that some people think George Bush was the worst president ever and that he ruined the country. So, I know that there's a whole way of thinking and say, "Yeah, it took that to elect a Black guy."

Having said that, it's very hard to maintain that old line of thinking after you watch a Black guy go to North Carolina, go to Virginia, go to Colorado, go to Indiana and compete and win. And large swaths of white people say, "Yeah, he's great." So, it definitely complicates that they hate you narrative. I like that they hate you narrative. Everything was simple.

Attica Locke:

It's very similar to what you were saying about what your parents said, that those are the problems that they know. And that's what I was trying to express. I was feeling an anxiety that I have to let go of a story because as bad as it was to say, this is America up until this point, that's the America that we all knew and had come from. And I really think January 20th, you step into a different country. And I am grateful to him and his wife for taking that journey. I mean, taking one for the team, for the rest of us, so that we have to look at our own stuff. However uncomfortable race and stuff that came up between him and Hillary and everything during the campaign, that's great. It's great.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I think for people who came up with parents like ours, I do think that there is an impulse that downplay it and I think that's very dangerous. I think that's as dangerous as overplaying.

Attica Locke:

That's where we're right. I think it would be blowing his mind somewhere that Barack is in office. That is a generational shift that's Jesse Jackson on TV, talking about he wants to cut off his nuts. I mean, that is a generational thing that I would think it would be scary for a Reverend Wright to let go of his stories. I don't know, that's tough.

Speaker 1:

It talked about the book, but there were other parts of the review that talked about we're in this post-Black moment. And I wanted to ask the two of you, I haven't read either of your books, but one thing that you both have in common is the reflective aspect of looking back and reflecting on that moment, the '60s and the after effects of that. Do you agree with this idea that we're in a post-Black moment or do you feel that this is a useful paradigm to be talking about Black books?

Attica Locke:

Only if you put Black in quotes post-Black and then you just decide whatever you think that is because I don't want to be a post-racial society. I want to be a wide-open racial society. I don't believe in all this colorblind stuff. I don't believe in any of that. I don't know why we have to be post that, but I do think there's something to post-Black if you put that in quotes and then you have some narrow idea of what that is and we're past that. Well, okay. But I don't know really what that means. I don't know. I mean, I wouldn't want to feel like I couldn't write from a Black worldview. I mean, I don't know that that goes anywhere any more than somebody writing about Native American culture in Alaska. I mean, I'm still Black. I mean, I'm still Black.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Yeah. I [inaudible 01:09:00] my own now. I'm suspicious anytime anyone says anything like that. And what is Thoreau in the book, Walden, first page, he's got this great line where he says, and I'm going to mangle this quote, but it's a great quote. He says, "Whenever I'm talking to somebody, the first thing I ask of them is some statement on where they're from and who they are and what countries they've been to, because if they're truly honest, certainly it is a different country to me."

And the idea is that there's great beauty in people being who they are and of themselves. I want to know what it's like to be a Jewish kid on the Upper East Side. I'm very interested in that. I don't want you to be post Jewish Upper East Side. Attica's from Houston. I wouldn't want her to be post-Houston. She's from Houston. She got to write about Houston. That's who she is. Writers here in Seattle, I mean, you have to write about Seattle. I'm from Baltimore. That's my experience. No one asks Irish American writers to be post-Irish. They write about their experience. Their ethnicity is very important to them.

I'm deeply suspicious of the urge to ask African Americans to abandon or to be posted their ethnicity. Who would ask that of any artists? What art would we have in the world if ethnicity was completely left at the door? I mean, I would hate for that, for any literature, of any color, of any group of people. I don't know what I would write about. You know what I mean? I mean, being Black is as important to me as being a man, as being a father. I mean, you wouldn't ask me to be post-father. You wouldn't ask me to be post-son. I'm deeply suspicious of that, if you can't tell. I'll tell you how I really feel.

Attica Locke:

Well, they were saying that about his book because it doesn't, in any overt way, deal with Black as a political construct.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Just Black them.

Attica Locke:

I don't know. I don't know. But I think that's what they mean by the term is that his family went ... But that's not even true anyway, because you can't even take that out of the story because part of it is

about a respite from the city and this and that. But I think what they mean by it is you're not talking about Black stuff.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

And I read the excerpt and I haven't read the book, but in the excerpt from the book of the New Yorker, he does talk about being Black. I think the point was I'm not Black from the ghetto, and so therefore I'm not...

Attica Locke:

So, I'm post-Black, right?

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

... what the hell is that? I mean, come on. I mean, I'm sorry.

Speaker 1:

Did you all hear what book they were talking about was Colson Whitehead's Sag Harbor, his brand-new novel?

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

He didn't say that. Colson Whitehead didn't say the book was posted.

Speaker 1:

The question is about blogging.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I think not so much blogging, but for me, the blogging is me thinking out loud. Having people comment and people who are reasonably intelligent, actually quite intelligent, comment on that publicly. You have no idea how hard you have to...

Speaker 7:

[inaudible 01:12:31].

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Yeah. Exactly. You have no idea how hard you have to think before you write. I mean, it's been a great mental exercise in sharpening, not just your debate skills, but how you think about the world, because people will call you on it. Writers are constantly complaining about the internet and what the internet's doing to writing, but writers for too long, as far as I'm concerned, at least essay writers, people who have been in the world of argument have been unaccountable and have been only accountable to this select group of people who had access to the select group of journals.

I don't want to live in that world as a writer or as a reader. People should be called to task. They should be able to defend what they write, and they shouldn't shy away from it. And if you have any interest in becoming a better writer, you won't shy away from it. It can be extremely frustrating. There's nothing worse than taking an hour to write a post and then someone saying it's there, T-H-E-R-E.

But they're right, but they're right. You understand what I'm saying? No, they're right, they're right. And you want to be the king, so heavy's the crown. I mean, you're the writer. It's your privilege to be a writer. You have to carry that. I don't always carry it so well, but I do my best to carry it. Writers should be accountable and the potential of blogging and just the internet in general, in terms of its interactivity, is it makes writers who are in the world of argument accountable for the stupid stuff that we're bound to say. Now, there's certain things you have to do to make sure that works well, that you actually are having people come who are going to do that for you. But I think when done well, it's a great tool. It'll make you a better writer as far as I'm concerned.

Speaker 1:

Thank you all for coming. This program was presented by the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. Thank you for listening to this library podcast.