



Library podcast

Seattle Reads: Meet Angela Flournoy at Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute

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[00:00:36] Good evening. Thank you. Thank you so very much for coming tonight.

[00:00:43] We are just very very happy that you took the time out of your schedules and shared this special event with us. And I want to make sure I get everybody who's sponsoring let you know. I'm George McDaid and I'm a member of the African-American writers alliance and you have you know me and. We read every second set at Columbia City fair where Miss for new I was. Monday night. But also Langston where you are it's a sponsor of the Northwest African American museum the Black Heritage Society of

[00:01:19] Washington and of course the Seattle Public Library. I have one regret. And that one regret is that everybody here has not heard this wonderful offer

[00:01:32] On each occasion the library has worked really hard. I know Mondays she's found three places. I know this is not the first time tonight. There are all kinds of fabulous things you may read about her on the cover of the book online or whatever. But the best something to do is to see her as one of eight children neither the youngest nor the oldest. But you know stuck in there in the middle. I love the book. I loved the book. And so I just want you to sit back and relax enjoy everything she has to say

[00:02:07] For now.

[00:02:15] Hi everybody I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager at The Seattle Public Library. And before we get to tonight's program I just have a couple quick announcements. I wanted to mention that it is the 19th year of the Seattle Public Library Seattle Reads series and I'm not sure haven't. Many of you participated before. Maybe we can. Yeah. Clap if we have. That's great. Thank you for that. And yeah I'm really excited that the 19th year is here and

hundreds of one book community reading programs have taken place all over the country and internationally. And I'm really proud to say that the project originated in Seattle back in 1998.

[00:02:56] So we've we've been showing the rest of the world how it's done.

[00:03:01] I wanted to take a minute to thank our Seattle Reed sponsors. We're grateful to the Wallace Foundation The Seattle Times and KUOW for their generous promotional support. We're particularly grateful as as Dr. McDade mentioned we're particularly grateful to this year's Community Partners Northwest African-American museum the Black Heritage Society of Washington the African-American writers alliance Elliott Bay Book Company and Langston for hosting us here tonight. And finally I wanted to say a special thanks to the Seattle Public Library Foundation and the thousands of people in our community who make gifts to benefit the library. This private support makes Seattle reads possible in addition to hundreds of other free library programs and services. So if any of your library foundation donors here tonight. Thank you so much for your support. Tonight we're going to enjoy a conversation with Angela Flournoy and enable Koma moderated by Vivian Phillips.

[00:03:53] Hi. How's everybody doing.

[00:03:58] I don't know if I got the right Mike and I might have to switch it up.

[00:04:02] My name is Vivian Phillips and I have been so pleased I've been invited to come and have this conversation with our two guests this evening everything about India we're coma and also Angela Flournoy is in the program. But there are a couple of things I just want to highlight before I invite them out. I do you all know that Angela's book was named Best Book of the year by O Magazine NPR essence. You have to give me some time to get this together and also the Detroit Free Press in 2015 named her book The must read novel of 2015. So we're just so incredibly pleased and excited to have her here with us this evening. Before I have her come out I want to say a little something extra about enabled Cuomo everybody in here know in yay what coma.

[00:05:04] We'll show him some love. That

[00:05:09] We are in the central central area which is in his home his exhibit an elegant utility is on view at the Northwest African-American museum now through May 28. And just he is one of our most important keepers of the culture in this central area as a photographer as a writer as a filmmaker as a thinker.

[00:05:33] The stranger said about his exhibit that he is an artist as ethno ethnography fur gracefully re contextualizing his personal and family history into the larger context of structural racism redlining. And the story of African-Americans in Seattle. So because these two individuals have really expressed their thoughts about black life black life specifically in the central area as has India done. I would like to ask you to please help me welcome enable coma. And our special guests Angela Flournoy has

[00:06:36] Everyone in the audience read the Turner house applause and what did you all think about that Turner House.

[00:06:50] For those of you who have not read the Turner house you are planning to read the Turner house right.

[00:07:00] I start because we have this conversation a couple of months a few months ago actually when Angela was here and the NEA was also doing some work. I should say around the Angeles visit about the confluence essentially of these two Fords. This sort of structural racism the gentrification of this central area and the changing landscape. And then Angela in your book you write about a family whose beginnings I think mirror the beginnings of both NEA and my family coming from the south to the north the Great Migration and then settling in Detroit and having this piece of property that is essentially the American dream but it turns out that that's not exactly what it is. It's something that's I want to say it's a nightmare because it's not a nightmare but will you start by talking a little bit about how and why you decided to write this particular piece of literature.

[00:08:14] Sure thing. Thank you for being here and I wanted to thank the Northwest tap connection for the beautiful performance.

[00:08:22] Express how happy I am to be here with all of you if you haven't read the book. OK.

[00:08:26] No judgment. I'm such. No. Well no judgment from me. But I'm so really when I started to think about

[00:08:39] Writing about a house in Detroit it was really very just sort of selfish and personal. The house my father grew up in. No one was living in it. It was in a part of the city where there was sort of more abandoned lots than there were occupied homes. But that house was beautiful and it had been maintained for like 60 years but. So I was just bothered by that. And so really in the beginning I thought I would tell him a sort of simple story all in one time period. I decided in 2010 to start writing the book and so I thought it would be a story set in 2008 and it would just be about sort of one like spring in the life of this family trying to figure out what to do with this house. But when I really started to research the history of black homeownership in Detroit I realize you can't really tell a story about that neighborhood and sort of how it got to be where it was without going all the way back to the beginning of sort of like mass migration of African-Americans from the south to Detroit. And in that story is one that is related to the story of housing segregation and redlining. And so it ended up being a story with a lot more sort of capital eye issues than I ever thought it would be. But it was sort of necessary

[00:09:55] In yay. Where did your investigation of your family and their history in the central area their migration from the south really start. I would say that. It's always been a part. Of our

[00:10:11] Family identity our conversation so I can't pinpoint a specific time when I was there. I began to look into it.

[00:10:23] Our connections to Arkansas have been an active connection. You know my entire life and so and our ancestors my great grandmother and great grandfather family portraits of them with my grandparents generations. There are two of them that were taken some time in the 20s judging by the age of the children in the photo have been ever present and have been used on numerous occasions over multiple years on family reunion T-shirts and programs. And so it's always been something that we've actively kept alive as a way of solidifying our family identity. So when I started this project all of that background was already alive and active. So what are the things that both of you found in your investigations and in writing this story and telling the story that surprised you

[00:11:24] About who you are and who you were as a part of your family lineage.

[00:11:33] I think one of the things that probably surprised me the most was and not particularly just for my family but for families like them in cities like Detroit and other northern cities including this one was just how sort of determined and really kind of doggedly they pursued the American dream even when all of these obstacles were put in front of them.

[00:11:59] They just kept trying and they agreed to loans that they knew it's not like they were stupid. They knew that they were predatory but they knew that these were the only loans that were going to get and they made those notes even though if they were a day late you know they wouldn't own anything. They would just be all taken from them and really the kind of like the ingenuity and the sort of relentlessness to keep trying to figure out a way to make it work was something that I had kind of taken for granted before I really sort of delved into that history.

[00:12:31] What about you.

[00:12:33] The same I think if I can just reference your story. I think that in our so there were eight siblings and my grandparents generation five of whom settled permanently in Seattle.

[00:12:53] Seven of the eight came through Seattle and two ultimately settled in Los Angeles. But of the five that that establish their families and stayed here there was just a lot of in in quantum terms collective work and responsibility cooperative economics which principles which principles. Oh

[00:13:19] So we're talking about a jima. Yeah. We talked about Egypt and Egypt. So. So you know we're we're you know it really was about and you know and even though I referenced Kwanzaa as a way of sort of encapsulating those ideas. This was just a way of being.

[00:13:37] It was just a way of being that they brought with them from Arkansas. And so I think it to your question you know I think what surprised me was the depth to which those values really informed how they thought about money and land ownership and wealth and how they set priorities around those things. In our last public conversation I sort of shared some sort of a long version of how my grandparents over a period of 70 years literally gave a home away in two stages with very specific intent.

[00:14:23] Ok each time knowing exactly what they were doing and why they were doing it a home that today I own that is probably worth at least one point two million dollars OK.

[00:14:36] But you know just the thinking around why they would do that really helped to help me to understand things like Angela said that I just took for granted things because living in a big family were just ways that we did.

[00:14:49] Liza we existed together then I didn't have to think about that I have to think about now that I'm managing a lot on my own and I have to use my own value system to figure out how do I make choices.

[00:15:02] I think it's really interesting that in both your story and knowing you know a little bit more via the exhibit and also through the book The Turner House there is this story of resilience that tends to continue to bubble up even when there are challenges and siblings who are not agreeing on what to do with the family treasure so to speak. There's still this resilience. Was that at all something that you experienced from a gut place and knew that it would be a part of this story or was it something that developed as you were going along with your research.

[00:15:47] For me I thought it was very important to have a book that was about African-Americans who were not rich not the Cosbys which is a fraught reference these days but like they were they were well off but they weren't unhappy right.

[00:16:06] They weren't tragic and I. That was really important to me. I think a lot of times people use poverty as a shorthand for an emotional state when it is not necessarily an emotional state.

[00:16:19] And that was not the experience of any of my sort of my families. I mean I come from several big families even though my father's is only one from Detroit. Several big sort of great migration families. And so it was important to me to have. To have

[00:16:39] Something that was not sort of up for grabs as far as one of the things that might happen was complete disillusionment of the family to everyone sort of just gives up on each other and goes away because that's just never really been my experience even in my father's family is a fifth of their routine.

[00:16:55] Sometimes I wonder why all of them are so interested in each other and some of them are 20 years apart in age and some of them you know live on other opposite coasts but they're very interested in each other and they're very interested in making sure that their children know sort of about one another and about all of their cousins etc. and that is something that is separate sort of the kind of pride that they have in the family unit is sort of separate from any sort of monetary accomplishments or anything like that. And

[00:17:29] I come from a pretty like working class family it's not that we necessarily have a lot of property or money but that was important to me to to really create a family that was like rich in their own sort of sense of self and history despite weather like the outside world viewed them as having anything to kind of be proud of.

[00:17:51] Yeah I think again I'm going to kind of come back to that theme of things that I took for granted because you know the idea of resilience. So my grandfather my great uncle. Worked a lot together closely and both of them had middle school level educations but both were were self-employed by the time I came around they were largely self-employed. And own property and they did all of that between the two of them with the sweat of their brow you know in partnership of course with their family their wives but in my experience of what that meant on a daily basis was the commitment to getting up every day and doing something.

[00:18:52] And it was that work ethic that was not puritanical. But it was definitely a thing that was like breathing. And you know I never.

[00:19:05] There are people in my family that are very political and have very astute political sensibilities and talk a lot about it and make it like the forefront of how they interact in the world. My grandparents were not that

[00:19:19] Ok but the way that they the way that they engaged in family building and and work as a way of you know of providing a space for family in the context of America was a very revolutionary and a very political act.

[00:19:40] Ok. When we think about the politics of Marcus Garvey and nation building right. Or even we think about the politics. If we think about you know sort of a point counterpoint the politics of wd be the boy's we had one political philosopher who was talking about you know really you know building infrastructure building things that people could sustain themselves off of. And one that was really talking about really building the intellectual you know in the philosophical and the academic capacity of the race in the parlance of the age is still more possible in the north.

[00:20:21] I think it's really possible in Seattle. And I think that my family really took advantage of the possibilities here to really push that as far as they could.

[00:20:34] And so as far as resilience is concerned I think that again is really something that was really like breathing.

[00:20:41] And I think what I learned from that was to be very aware of the nature of what it means to be black in America from one generation like my mother's generation. And then what it meant to not let that sort of richer humanity from my grandparents generation. And so I'm really I'm really would like to cosign that that idea that there is something tragic fundamentally tragic about our experience. It's not.

[00:21:16] So you both have had an opportunity to experience one another's work. ANGELA You got to visit the exhibit on Monday and you've read the book.

[00:21:26] I'd love to know what you all your response to one another's work.

[00:21:33] I say put me on the spot. OK. Well luckily I just finished the book I was fresh.

[00:21:39] So I was trying to think about so first of all I'm just gonna say there's a there's a passage at the beginning of a chapter on page 312. So. So if you might have have an opportunity to reference that but I think it really encapsulates a lot of themes that are really important. And I don't know if you remember sermons more houses and ghosts do it. He was haunted houses more than ghost do. But it's really about the importance of place. It's about the importance of place and all of the forces that challenge what you know how we frame that important.

[00:22:18] So we've frame that importance in terms of our familial connections in terms of our lineage in terms of our origin stories and in those places. In your words become mascots they become a symbol you know almost a sigil. Right. And I think that if we're really thinking about the importance of land in family identity since we're an American we're going to sort of think contextually about how we've been acculturated going back even to toward you know feudal Europe you know the importance of land and families sigils word like those two things were tied hand in hand.

[00:22:54] And so I think it's not a mistake that in this country as black folks are really thinking and working on rebuilding our humanity independent of you know the holocaust of slavery that so much of our collective identity is really rooted in you know a sense of place and a sense of not being displaced.

[00:23:21] And so even though nobody was living in the home. Right. And the only people living in the home the only people who literally the only people that went into their home in the whole book in the family were at their points of greatest desperation and they were seeking some sort of relief or refuge or restitution OK. In the case of Troy in in that space and I think that that was really you know important for me towards the end of the book a pivotal understanding about why the Euro house was so important.

[00:23:56] Wow what a great observation. And also I think bringing that back to a lot of the work that you've been doing and others have been doing around just trying to hold on to that sense of place as it relates to this geographic area that we were redlined in to and now being gentrified out of service. It's a great observation. So now it's your turn.

[00:24:22] I regret making you go for it. Thank you so much.

[00:24:26] So an elegant utility if you all have not seen it at the Northwest African-American museum you should go. I had the privilege of going on Monday. It's not open on Monday but I was able to go on Monday. And. Well I think that first off one of the things that really struck me were just the the

portraits including those two that you mentioned of your your great grandparents and also of like children. And the thing that I think. People who are sort of drawn to storytelling as like you and I are one of those things that because it's funny it's like my family have sort of similar portraits. And then there's there's like the ones like the elders and then the ones of like my father and his children and I think there's maybe only like seven kids in this picture. But the thing that I immediately thought about was how there's clearly so much pride and this is clearly like an occasion. And it's it's communicated through the photos and there's also in the exhibit there's this ledger of payments. This is your grandmother great grandmother my grandfather Grandfather made to the person whose house he was purchasing correct. And the payments are so sort of meticulously kept track of and logged. And it's something that I think. A lot of people. Perhaps might take for granted. But again if you're if you're really trying to figure out a way to get a toehold on this sort of like self-reliance and creating this new kind of like family coat of arms or says Sigal it's something that is really kind of integral and to have those artifacts is really exciting to see. And there's also in the video exhibit there's just these really beautiful portraits of people and especially the ones of the younger people and that kind of both pride and sort of a little bit of vulnerability and coin is that kind of communicated there like moving portrait. So there they're like videos of people and the adults are able to sit and look at the camera longer but the tilt then start to squirm.

[00:26:45] And it's really just like lovely.

[00:26:47] And it's something that I think especially in African-American people and especially with the young men I couldn't help but think how often when people are interacting with those same young men in other spaces they don't see that vulnerability. I mean I often do because they are I'm like I guess I'm an old lady now.

[00:27:03] So they see me at the grocery store in their life. But in so many cases they don't see that. And so it's really one of the things that it highlighted for me is like when I go to family reunions and I have like young relatives or what I was myself or younger relative and they're

[00:27:23] Inside the home is really the only place where people do not like expect something of you. Other than just for you to like relax and be yourself. And that is something that really is communicated in those portraits is like the side of them not necessarily even your friends you find yourself sort of posturing but that is something that is really precious and delicate about like home life. I thought it was captured really really well.

[00:27:51] I just say you know I'm glad you brought that up. And I think that one of the things there's a lot in the exhibit that is embedded in it that's not overtly stated. And I think when I was thinking about putting it together I was really thinking about

[00:28:11] What those things would be. And whether or not it was important to include to make the effort to include them. So if I think about the exhibit as an active piece a piece that one is there and people can take it on whatever level you know that that they that they can respond to it.

[00:28:36] But also it's something that I can look at and I can respond to. You see it I'm saying.

[00:28:41] So so I wanted one I wanted it to be a piece that for me would be alive in that way. And that's another part of

[00:28:53] That space making that place making sense of space.

[00:28:57] And so that idea of going into a space and just being who you are you know and if I feel my you know the more conversations I continual conversations I have about my family the more people comment that you know our family is probably not as dysfunctional as other large families.

[00:29:19] No it doesn't feel that way.

[00:29:20] Doesn't feel that way you know because in time you know how I felt at the end of the Turner house it was a day where I'll go get. You know. And so.

[00:29:30] But I think that when you have large numbers of people you're going to have all kinds of folks that just don't mix.

[00:29:39] And it would not mix them in any other context but they really gel in that family space and it allows you to just be one of the things that occurs to me about both your works is that what's really at the center even though it's about family that the family is really the nucleus for a broader community. And that really bubbles up. I want to delve into that a little bit.

[00:30:04] I actually really want to know how you all create community since it's so much at the center of the work that you do. How does that translate into your personal environment.

[00:30:19] Well I mean I sort of create multiple communities I suppose. I I really do believe in the power of community as far as being a black woman writer a black writer being a writer of color and all of the ways that I can be sort of colitis scoped out. But until I really do try to foster that whether that is mentoring young black writers whether that is teaching in spaces that are for black fiction writers is a program called Ken below. That. Sponsors a weeklong retreat in Taos New Mexico every summer and I'm teaching there this July will be my second time. And that is also sort of try to signal boost the work of other black writers. I really do believe in that. There are some writers who are suspicious of community.

[00:31:12] I think that is going to somehow I don't know like impede on their own sort of brain space but I do think that's one not necessarily a luxury that like bike riders can afford and also to I think that nothing can impede on your brain space and except for usually yourself. Mike it's my experience and. Outside of that I try to. There's so many different communities that I try to be a part of I try to be a part of the community of my neighborhood and bedside which is a neighborhood that is rapidly gentrifying but that does have institutions like weeks built heritage center and that does have still a large and vibrant sort of black home owner community and my landlords I live in a brownstone and my

landlords own the Browns stored stone and they're Jamaican and I try to foster community there. Yeah so it's sort of at all levels the weeks hmm.

[00:32:12] Community.

[00:32:13] Is that not a preserved community that was owned by African free African-Americans early on in the eighteen hundreds. Yes it is one of the. It is not the oldest in the New York area because the oldest I believe is sandy brown in Staten Island. But it is one of two of the oldest sort of like free black communities in New York.

[00:32:36] And it's fully preserved and gated and has a little museum. Yeah yeah it's awesome. How do you create community besides the fact that we create community for you right.

[00:32:48] So you know I feel like you know I walk in to community. You know I mean it's all when

[00:32:57] There's so much I feel like I don't really create it as much as you know I try to figure out how to be the healthiest part of it and how to make the best contribution to it. As an artist you know I made a very conscious choice very early on not to be an artist for art's sake.

[00:33:19] And so you know my art has always been very much informed by the politics of black people you know going back to. So my father's Nigeria and he was politicized by my mother. And for him avant garde jazz is a very political expression of being black in the Western Hemisphere. And so for him talking about the political philosophy of black liberation often is not indistinguishable from talking about black music and the music that he reveres.

[00:34:02] And so you know that kind of you know sort of you know really holistic way of embracing you know the creative process and the sort of being in community the the the being a part of process is just sort of informs how I do things and so yeah I mean you are on the board of Langston you know that's what I meant by yes we create community for yes we throw Enya into leadership positions whether he wants or not.

[00:34:35] You know I guess you know that was something that you know obviously you know I've joined to support a transition process and as you know yeah I just you know just observing how your art has grown or changed it's shifted over the years. I think you've become quite a commentator on

[00:35:00] Siri would you want to become a commentator on The Times through your art as opposed to being an artist for art's sake. Yeah I get that. OK. So we're going to throw it directly to the audience so that you all can ask your questions and maybe what will be best is if we have people just maybe come to we've got a cordless da it's a done deal questions I left it wide open for you all. So I see one all the way in the back too. We'll start with you Mr. Brown.

[00:35:35] Thank you so much. Well first of all I want to say really enjoyed your book. Thank you. As well as the exhibit as well. And that. Just hearing you talk both of you talk as well just brings another

level richness to it I think. Well I want to make more common than I have two separate questions and one is I think both the book and going to see the exhibit brought out a lot of emotional responses in me in relation to my family and that whole legacy in terms of my grandparents coming up from Texas and what have you. And actually it's kind of inform me possibly going down for a family reunion in Texas in Houston this summer. But I would say I feel like a fish out of water because. You know when my family UW they kind of didn't look back and so and I would be the only one going down and basically representing my grandparents who have passed away. And so you know whatever that means or doesn't mean I don't know. But this is informing a little bit of that but my questions one is for you Angela. What if anything about Detroit. Because I think you've given us another understanding of what Detroit is you know we have in our minds of what that is. But you know for those of us who live in the Pacific Northwest what else were you trying to convey about that city maybe and then for India. I notice that your exhibit. What struck me oh and in both cases I think a ledger as I mentioned in your book other people a right to write and say if that good.

[00:37:22] Sorry. And then NEA. In your exhibit you have the family not tree but Constellation. And I wonder if you could talk about. Beautiful. Thank you tyro what specifically about Detroit.

[00:37:35] So I guess sort of for me in some ways even though before my family was in Detroit my family was in Arkansas that side of my family. It's a person who lives in Los Angeles.

[00:37:49] The book is a little bit of like a like an imagined origin story for me as far as how my family got to Detroit and it is a place that I feel like that's going back home even though that's just sort of like the most recent stop for us. I don't have necessarily that much not many roots still or like no people still from my Arkansas family. But as far as what I think you all here in sunny Seattle and in the Pacific Northwest

[00:38:19] It's been sunny since I've been here. So. She'll be moving back to Seattle.

[00:38:26] But what I think that one thing is not to be so doom and gloom about it but one thing I think that is important. That again is something I didn't realize the book would be about was about sort of. The ramifications of exclusion really like

[00:38:48] When a city decides that there are undesirables that they just don't really care whether or not they figure out a way to like you know make it in the city.

[00:38:57] There will be a day that everyone will suffer for that for that.

[00:39:02] As far as like you just you can't have a city where where there is only sort of like the richest can live in it like you have to have a city that has a diverse economy with different levels of income as well as a diverse sort of identity. And so if anything applies here and not just particularly here but so many cities seem to be grappling with this as so many were like as a result of the great migration really a city. All these cities had these you know in the north had all of these really like sort of liberal identities but these were the same cities who really aggressively went after redlining and really

aggressively had housing covenants right. And and when it came to sort of putting their money where their mouth was as far as are we really progressive are we really inclusive. A lot of cities 67 years ago really showed that they weren't. And I feel like we're at another moment of reckoning not just here but in a lot of places. And so I'm hoping that we can learn from the past if not it will just be sort of a cyclical thing that keeps on happening where we keep on having these areas where people are sort of displaced and then those areas become desirable then the people are displaced again.

[00:40:21] And that's just really not sort of tenable forever.

[00:40:26] I think it's really interesting that most people in Seattle don't really recognize that the housing covenants in this city were not lifted until 1968 within our lifetime.

[00:40:40] So you were asking about the family constellation. So was there something specific that you like. I guess just to

[00:40:52] Oh. So why why that formation. I think in circles.

[00:40:57] I think I know literally you know I think I think I don't really think in linear you know I think about how things are related how they interact with one another.

[00:41:10] When I think about my family that's how I think about it and I think the so just for context so for anyone who hasn't seen it there. There are on that entire constellation. There's only one branch of that constellation that represents families that are not based in Seattle.

[00:41:34] Okay in those families that are in Ohio. And so with all those other folks that are sort of spread out in that galaxy formation we have. We all we have relationships that are based on

[00:41:53] Who we are to one another.

[00:41:54] So short of saying OK well you're so and so's and so and so and so and so is not necessarily the way that it works.

[00:42:02] Ok. My cousin Clifford is my cousin Clifford right. And I'll be honest with you. My cousin Clifford. I didn't actually know that Mary was his mom until now.

[00:42:16] I mean you know so my cousin Clifford Mary was his mom and my cousin Mary who was my mom Bertie's daughter and my mom Bertie live next door.

[00:42:28] And so all of her children were all around all her grandchildren I was all around him and everything. And and then my uncle both children and grandchildren were always all around in my choice.

[00:42:40] And so those relationships at a certain point become independent of the lineage lineage of the lineage.

[00:42:46] And so you know you know I didn't think intentionally about the formation except how did it feel intuitively to express you know what the family looks and feels like to me. I think the thing that I was most intentional about were the positioning of my great grandparents in the center and then their eight children around them. And that really represents you know in sort of a graphical form there may maybe references to the the structure of the atomic structure sort of an origin story.

[00:43:27] Yeah. Because it is not just circles. It really is.

[00:43:30] It is a different way of looking at the branches read as a constellation as a constellation. In fact what we know you came from a big family that was in your cousin who was playing guitar.

[00:43:42] Yes. What was going to be here. An extension of that.

[00:43:47] Yeah. Are we all the way at the top all the way at the top. A slightly different point of view. I I'm just thrilled with the connections between NEA show and Angeles book. It is really exciting for all of us in Seattle to have that special relationship that nobody in the other city has. But what I wanted to ask about is the role of objects because in both the exhibition that NEA has and in the book you have these really physical objects like the. Was it a sword that Troy got that he stole and the flute and in India show these stupendous tools. And I wondered if you could talk a little about those objects are they characters in the book. Are they holding the spirit of the people I'd like to hear a little more about them and maybe some other objects.

[00:44:37] Wow.

[00:44:39] And so in some ways the objects are cheating. They're kind of like plot like they think they're sort of easy kind of like things to make like a through line in between characters or in a in a plot sense which is not maybe I shouldn't say that's not very romantic for me to say but in another way particularly for Layla a person who has

[00:45:11] Had to leave in a hurry from an apartment more than once every time she does this her sort of inventory of belongings becomes smaller and smaller.

[00:45:20] Right. Until this last time she decides she's only going to take what people take in a fire. Right. So she already has some crap in her car but she used the city bailiffs are here and so she decides she's going to take her social security card all her papers but then just some photos of her kid and her father's obituary and that's it. And so for her in particular like the objects do mean a lot. And especially because she her and also for Brienne. Because her brand has also had a semi sort of transient life due to Layla's gambling gambling those objects like there's like a pink dresser that Rio Grande tried to like drag to all the places until Layla lost track of it are important because they have had like a lack of stability. And so it is really also Carter was able to represent like sort of these last

lines that she knew she shouldn't cross and she decided she would if only temporarily. But she still couldn't. Like she couldn't find her father's pipe because she just couldn't. And so. In some ways that the challenge with Layla without sort of getting to nuts and bolts about it is that she is a character who's not very interested in talking to other people. And so the objects are one way for us to sort of learn things about her without her being sort of drawn into conversations that she's anxious about because she has all of these secrets that she's trying to keep up.

[00:46:49] I think we have time for just a couple more questions.

[00:47:00] First I just want to thank you Angela. I'm very familiar with Detroit. I was born in Flint in nineteen forty eight. And so this was very much my story. And I want to thank you especially for the big room because I remember when my cousin shakes moved into the big room in our house. So anyway thank you. My question is about what kind of since you don't live in Detroit and you have lived away from that area for a long time. What kind of research did you do to provide us with this really real portrait of the city that I'm very familiar with.

[00:47:50] Oh thank you. The ultimate compliment.

[00:47:53] I did a lot of boring like reading books. Library research I would say at the time I was at I was a grad student at the University of Iowa and the good thing about being affiliated with the university is you can really get like any book even if sometimes you have books that you can't necessarily leave the library with. You can get access to it and you just have to go kind of like have a date with it in the library. And so I just read a lot of books about the history of Detroit the history of sort of the auto industry of Detroit and really started like broad history of like French sort of settling of Detroit and then got realized like I didn't have to do all of that novel and then got a lot more specific which probably with the most useful thing being when I actually just started reading like oral histories of African-Americans who lived in Detroit between 1916 and 1967 and that was sort of like perfect because those were the things that I having started going to Detroit for the first time I went to Victoria I was less than a year old to start and going like in the eighties and going like every year of my life I felt like I could remember at least how it felt from the 80s on but not. Like obviously before I was born. And so and because it's not a city that there's a lot of landmarks like that remain besides sort of like the really big kind of municipal ones. I was able to through these elderly people's sort of memories of their own childhood really recreate like a landscape and get so many interesting bits of texture like there was a man who was a bouncer who in his oral history it was really all about all the clubs he had.

[00:49:37] He had been a bouncer at in Paradise Valley. And so one by one because he was a bouncer at one club that was called Club six six six not because of anything demonic but because it was like six six six Hastings Street and because of that he literally was able to say like by number like 6 6 7 6 6 8 all of these other clubs and I didn't put them all in the books but it was really useful to just know what's what the atmosphere was like. But also just walking around on street view on Google Maps and like YouTube being all so interesting there's a really interesting. Kind of creepy on YouTube you can find it. The I think its army corps of engineers. They went in during the 67 uprising flash riots whatever you want to call it. They went in with helicopters and just videotaped like block by

block like what was happening. And but not actually just the action just stuff. It's really weird to see. But one thing that's really striking is how crowded it was. And that is something that I've never seen in my own lifetime because by the time I was born Detroit was already a city that was a really depopulated. But it was just like people were popping out like from driveways and alleys people lived everywhere. And that's not like how the city is now. And so there's just a wealth of it's not like it's you can have a straight line when you're researching for a book because you don't really know what you're looking for. You just have to kind of sit around.

[00:51:10] I felt the same way. I haven't spent a lot of time in Detroit but enough to know there was like Oh my God she must be from there.

[00:51:18] It's great. One last question. You all with the mike make the choice.

[00:51:25] Well Angela I'm curious about how come that family had to have 13 kids. That's really a big family and they must have been kind of hard to manage as a writer.

[00:51:36] It's not that big for some of us. I mean not immediately but some of our families who migrated from the north to this out came from big families themselves.

[00:51:46] Oh yeah yeah. So for me personally it didn't feel hard to manage because. I come from a big family. So there are so similarly.

[00:51:57] I wish I had thought about making a constellation. I I really didn't want a family tree in my book at all.

[00:52:03] So I had very little to do with the design of it because I was like trying to pretend it didn't exist because I really wanted people to have to suffer through the disorienting feeling of sort of entering a room with all of these connections that pre-date you as you might if you're like you know a significant other it comes over for Christmas or something and have to sort of figure it out.

[00:52:23] But my editor convinced me that perhaps most readers aren't going to do that but some of you might have I don't know people who read it on Kindle.

[00:52:34] You had to because I don't think the Kindle had family tree on it but so I really one thing that I think I learned very early in life was how to quickly sort of prioritize like adults like walking into a room and knowing like OK well there's like 13 adults in here.

[00:52:53] Well this person I have to speak to right now or they're going to have an attitude this person doesn't care if I ever say hello to them. You know this person is a person who you have to ask them if they want more water. And that was something that I learned at a very young age.

[00:53:06] And I think the way that I think about characters is like a big Web. I don't think about like one person. And so it didn't seem unusual to me if I was have made to limit sort of a story to just one person. I don't think I would be able to do it because I immediately start thinking about like

[00:53:23] Who are they're connected to and how weird is their life and their identity like shaped by all these other people well this has been really rich and I think I feel potential collaboration at some point between the two of you.

[00:53:39] I'm just feeling a little something at least you can draw and families surprise.

[00:53:45] This is how it happened. So we're going to have one more performance from Northwest tab and then you are all invited to join us downstairs after that for book signing.

[00:53:59] Anybody here need to pick up the book one person one person needs to pick up the book. Everybody else is by their own book with them.

[00:54:09] Well that's awesome. We'll have a good time downstairs anyway. I personally want to thank everyone at Seattle Public Library for this is my thank you if you don't mind this.

[00:54:21] I want to thank everybody in Seattle Public Library for actually hosting this wonderful event with these two individuals and inviting my interaction.

[00:54:32] I really appreciate it. Thank you so much. Angela it's been a joy. Thank you.

[00:54:37] Nea thank you.

[00:54:45] Northwest have connections. Give them a big round of applause.

[00:54:49] Everything that they performed tonight was inspired by chapters of Angela's book so that's amazing that they were able to put together those works and perform them for you guys tonight. And I want to thank you guys again for coming. My name is Jasmine Scott I'm the program manager for link stem. If you don't know about Langston I'm alleges it sounds like you guys are anxious to go but please come find me and I want to tell you more about Langston which is the new nonprofit organization which is housed here at Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute. So thank you guys again for coming and we'll see you guys downstairs.

[00:55:27] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.