APRIL 12, 2019

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS is the author of Losing My Cool*, a memoir chronicling his experiences growing up in New Jersey as the son of a black father and a white mother and constructing an identity in the space between his love for hip-hop and for literature. His new book,* Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*, forthcoming from Norton in October, explores a further complication in the author's already fraught self-conception, and the often-contradictory ways in which society views and reifies racial categorization.*

The author spoke to me by Skype from his home in Paris, France, where he lives with his wife and two children.

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OTIS HOUSTON: You've been critical of the ways in which writers conceptualize their identity on the page, and about different ways of thinking about identity in relation to society. I thought we could start by talking about some of these themes in your upcoming book, *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*, which questions some of the metrics by which we understand race in the 21st century.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: The book started for me in 2013 when my daughter, Marlow, was born. Prior to that, in 2012, I had written an op-ed in *The New York Times*kind of glibly and really confidently making the case that my kids would be black no matter what they looked like because it's a kind of political stance more than a genetic identity.

My wife is French and she's white, and it occurred to me that perhaps our kids would be kind of white-looking. But the reality of our daughter's birth really struck me, and I realized that I couldn't just send her out into the world with this antiquated logic of hypo-descent, which is really the slave master's logic and reinforces some really bad stuff if you think about it for a minute, even though it has allowed the black community to have a lot of solidarity when they needed it.

We had this very Scandinavian-looking child, and for the first time in my life what I now call the fiction of race was thrust into my consciousness. It's an experience that most people, black or white, don't have to have

because most people don't live on the racial margins and don't see how ridiculous it is to say something like, "My father is black, and my daughter is white, but they have the same smile." And my daughter is blond-haired and has blue eyes and white skin, but she's of 20 percent West African descent. Most people don't actually have these kinds of contradictions. So, her birth really set me down this path. I wrote an essay about it for the *Virginia Quarterly Review* called "Black and Blue and Blond" about questioning and reassessing things I'd taken for granted, and Jonathan Franzen was kind enough to include it in the *Best American Essays*, which he edited in 2016.

I realized that I wanted to work through the issues in a longer treatment, and I began working on a book proposal in 2015, sold it in 2016 to Norton, and then it took me until January to finish that book. It was a pretty slim volume, but it really wasn't about getting words on the page. It was difficult because I had to do some personal growing and some living with my family and some living with these issues to complete the book. I also wrote a piece that really helped me, a profile of an artist and philosopher named Adrian Piper, who lives in Berlin. She's from New York, and she's in her 70s, and she's a really brilliant woman. She's a black woman and, though both of her parents are black, she could pass for many things, including white, if she wanted to. People often don't recognize her as black, and she's done a lot of artwork to play with this, and written some brilliant essays on it. I profiled her for *The New York Times Magazine* on the occasion of her career retrospective at MOMA, and we talked about these issues. She's famously "retired from race" — she's retired from being black — and I came out of the encounter believing that that's a really compelling position, and almost irrefutably the correct position.

So, my book started with this questioning essay about what it means to have a white child — what kind of black person am I if I can have a child like this? What type of white-looking child is she if she can be significantly genetically West African? It ended as an argument against race, just all the way, saying that we're not going to transcend racism so long as we believe that you are a different race than I am, which necessarily imposes and implies hierarchies. So, I don't think you can transcend racism without transcending racial categorization, and the book became a kind of memoir making an argument.

In that *Virginia Quarterly Review* essay, you wrote that you don't want your daughter to reject blackness, only to embrace a white identity in its place. What does a non-racialized identity look like to you? And in attempting to transcend racial categorization, how can you be sure you aren't reproducing some kind of racialized identity by another name, that in abandoning blackness, you aren't just adopting a white cultural stance?

The thing is, white people need to retire from whiteness, too, for this to work. It's not just brown people. White people, I think, have to become more acquainted with racial thinking — though not in the way of Richard Spencer — and realize that they're not the neutral standard from which everything else is a deviation. They need to realize that they have a constructed identity like everybody else, and then to reject that, to reject the ways that whiteness is made. We really need white people to get onboard with that.

First of all, I think that there are more or less critical ways to engage with the identity that others kind of foist on you. I think that it's a lot easier for an ambiguous-looking person, or a person who can pass as someone of a different racial group. It's a lot easier for them to take the stance that I'm advocating, but I don't think it's an impossible stance for somebody who's not ambiguous looking to take. So, I think my daughter would have an easier time of it. She's five now, and people are pretty happy to just assume she's white. But transcending race, for me, would mean for her to vigilantly complicate people's understanding of her, and not to just comply with the way people talk. So, not only would my daughter not identify herself as white, but she would also, I hope, bring a kind of consciousness that's not white to the way she makes her own life.

Identity is always a negotiation between the way that you see yourself and the way society and institutions see you. I can't just walk out of the house and say I'm Japanese. But I can push back against the fact, for example, that in France where I live society projects on me an Arab identity. It makes no more sense for me to accept the Arab identity that strangers assume for me, than I think it would for my daughter to accept the white identity that strangers assume for her. She can push back against that projection.

I'm inspired by a guy named Kmele Foster who hosts a podcast called *The Fifth Column*. He's a very dark-skinned, unambiguous-looking man with a brown wife and brown children, and he does not allow himself to be identified as black. He's explained that this is partially because he has a variety of genetic ancestries, regardless of skin color. Like most blacks, and a lot of whites, he has both European and African DNA. But he also rejects it out of principle. He says that, if race doesn't exist, then he can't go around reifying it. I think that's a very difficult thing to do in reality, but it's really impressive when you see somebody putting it into practice in their own life and insisting on defining themselves instead of being defined. I think that you can't do it alone, but the more people begin to question their received identity, the more norms actually can change. Room by room, conversation by conversation, a society can actually change. Norms can change. It won't change everywhere evenly at the same time, but I believe it can change. As an example of shifting paradigms, I think the way we now talk about same-sex marriage or gender spectrums shows how rapidly a society can reconceive its categorical thinking.

On the subject of categories and paradigms, I'm thinking that, as a culture, we often don't do a very good job of defining the terms we use to describe difference. When we say the word "race," for instance, it can potentially mean any number of things, whether it's a biologically grounded distinction, or whether it's a socially imposed category.

Most people, you say, reject the notion of race as a biological reality. But, while current antiracist thought generally categorizes race as a social construction, you suggest it ultimately ends up resembling a kind of racial essentialism.

You're absolutely right. We don't all use the term the same way, and a lot of the power and stubbornness of the term comes in its ability to slide between the two definitions. But, in point of fact, we still use it as though there is some type of biological aspect to it. Most of us don't actually behave as though it's a complete social construction. I make my living as a writer, and identify as a writer. That's a social construction — it's not inherent in me. But most of us don't think of race the way we think of occupation, or something like that.

Walter Benn Michaels makes a point that I find very compelling, which is that saying that race is socially constructed is like saying that we know it was a mistake to say it was biologically constructed, and then doubling down on that mistake — just finding another means of doing the same exact thing.

What happened in France recently, is that the term race is not officially used anymore. That's not to say that France doesn't have a racist society, but I think that is actually the kind of move we have to take seriously and think about. If the term is not descriptive, and if most of us have a difficult time pinpointing exactly how race is constructed — some people believe they're white, some people believe they're black, and it's inescapable — then I think the term has to be banished and we have to find better ways of talking about what we're talking about.

I find oftentimes with race, especially when it's blackness, what we're really talking about are social conditions like class, and cultural conditions that are also related to class. Oftentimes, it can be a lot more productive to separate out enormous abstractions, like color, from the thing we're actually trying to talk about. When you're talking about affirmative action, when you're talking about problems in the inner city, when you're talking about stop-and-frisk, you're not actually talking about something so broad as a color category, and especially not a color category that can stretch all the way from someone lighter than my complexion to someone darker than Kmele Foster.

Also, white people don't fit in one color category. It can be very confusing to try to get a grip on what it means to be white when talking about such a huge number of people and lumping them in one abstract color category.

You've often quoted the Roman playwright Terence, "I am human; nothing human is alien to me." That seems to suggest a universal humanist stance, which rejects the divisions of identity as arbitrary. But I also think that to say that publicly in the United States right now would prompt many writers on race to argue that it is a naïve aspiration, and that we can't currently transcend the divisions of race because society doesn't allow it. Is it naïve to invoke a universal conception of identity?

I think people *would* say it's naïve. In my book, I have an interaction with a student at Bard, an undergrad, dark-skinned son of Jamaican immigrants in Queens. He took issue with me, saying that I was naïve because at Bard he's black, period, because that's the way the white people in Tivoli treat him. The way he saw it, to try and transcend race would be disloyal to the working-class Queens neighborhood he came from. I understand exactly where he's coming from. But, in going to college, he's already making a class transcendence from the background he described. And, oftentimes, switching classes or getting outside of your class condition can feel like a racial betrayal. And, for the reasons we were talking about before, allowing your self-definition to be dictated by other people is not necessarily the most fulfilling move.

So, I said to him in response that I think he's right that it sounds a bit naïve, but a certain type of naïveté is actually necessary to break through some of the gridlock we've had on this issue for a very long time. I think that we've already gone to the limits of what a sophisticated relationship to race thinking can do for us.

I think that you need to have this kind of childlike way of looking at things, as the writer Albert Murray described, and which you see with children before they've been conditioned into race-thinking, which is that the color of your skin is not white. The color of my skin isn't black. Those colors don't even manifest on human flesh. We don't even describe ourselves in words that are actually accurate to flesh tones. Any fool can see that white people are not actually white and black people are not black. This spectrum of pigmentation, we all have the same capacity for it. It's activated in certain populations and not in others. And there will always be visual differences between people. What can change, and what we're in control of, is the kind of meaning that we derive from these physical differences.

There's no more significance in the color of skin than there is in the color of eyes, and yet we don't think that eyes make nearly as much difference as skin does. Can we possibly imagine a future society in which eye color, hair color, and skin color were interchangeably insignificant? It's hard to conceive of that now, but I really think

that to get there, it will require some naïveté. It will require getting rid of some cynicism. It will require extending the benefit of the doubt in interactions. These are difficult things to imagine, especially at this moment. But yeah, I think that it is naïve to invoke Terence. It's as naïve as pointing out that the sun doesn't actually rise and set. People look at you like you're stupid if you actually insist on such accuracy of speech! But I think that, actually, accuracy of speech would help us a lot in a racial matters.

Earlier this year on the *Two for Tea Podcast*, you suggested that the American conception of blackness is fundamentally an identity of suffering, in contrast to the position of privilege associated with whiteness. You said, "The idea that white people are the only people who have led satisfactory lives is what I object to."

Elsewhere, in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed titled "My Black Privilege," you contrast the experiences of your maternal grandfather, who was white and openly racist, and your father, who was born black in segregated Texas. You write, "[W]hen I compare these two men, I do not recognize my father as the victim." What leads you to reject the label of "victim" for your father? And how does this inform your own self-conception?

I think about this a lot. My father has suffered from racism in society. But racism also harmed my grandfather severely. His racism, and his inability to overcome his aversion to the fact that his daughter married a black man, ruined his relationship with his child, to whom he had been extremely close. On his deathbed, he told my brother that he deeply regretted it, and he apologized. But he didn't have the ability during his lifetime to apologize sufficiently to salvage the relationship, and he lost something very special with his daughter. I now understand, as a father, the enormity of the price he paid for his racism. That's just one small example, but I think it's not insignificant, actually. White people can cut themselves off from a lot of the world. And not just white people — avoiding a type of group because you believe they're inherently inferior impoverishes and diminishes the world and your own life.

My father grew up in a racist society, and 30 years or more of his life were spent before civil rights. And yet actually, he can't be considered a victim. Everything in life is not about your race. Maybe the internet discourse makes it hard for us to see, but not every moment of my dad's life, even in the segregated South, was about being a furious black man. My father has really wonderful memories of his segregated part of Galveston, Texas, where he lived, and in the segregated side of town, there were interactions with Jews, there were some white neighbors, and things were never as black and white as we tend to imagine.

That's not to say that there wasn't extreme racism. I just mean to say that life is always more complex than a neat victim role would suggest. My grandfather was white and enjoyed white privilege, but he didn't have a great education. He didn't make enormous amounts of money. When he was very young, he got in a car accident that ruined his back. And you know, he just was a kind of provincial guy. My father, by contrast, needed to learn about the world and needed to get out, and he felt that his life depended on getting an education. He wasn't complacent, and he got an education that allowed the world to become accessible to him in a way that it is not accessible to many of my white family members.

I don't dismiss the fact that there's real material inequality, and a lot of it overlaps with race. But I also think that I can't allow my life to come down to that. My mother inherited some sliver of a house that she split with her siblings, and my dad didn't. But to reduce life to a share of a three-bedroom bungalow in San Diego, or something like that, seems to me to miss a lot of the meaning of life.

In other words, you feel that to define your father as simply a marginalized person would be to obscure more salient features of his experience?

Yeah. And he couldn't bear it. That's not how he wants to think of himself. He doesn't want to pretend that everything has been hunky-dory, but he wants to think of himself as someone who met challenges. That's how I want to think of myself. I'm 37, and at this point, I'm aware that life is not equal. But the question to me is, what are you able to do from where you start, and what are you able to make of your own life? And I find it really difficult to not feel in control of making my own meaning, of making my own values.

I feel that human beings are very resilient, but sometimes, in the conversation, black people are thought of or constructed as particularly non-resilient in ways that other groups aren't. That really bothers me. It feels patronizing, even when it's coming from people who are otherwise well meaning. The notion that a black boy who pulls a gun on Ta-Nehisi Coates, or who pulled a gun in the playground where I was playing when I was a teenager — the notion that that person cannot be morally responsible for his actions because he's only reacting to things that happened to his grandfather and great-grandfather in the Deep South — I find that that's hard to tolerate. It's hard to tolerate such an infantilizing view of yourself in the 21st century. So, I really pushed back against that.

There's a kind of black culture in the South that my father is very much a part of, as were Murray and Ralph Ellison, which sees being black not just as a racial condition but as a form of discipline, and as a kind of gift, even, in an almost Hegelian sense in which you're closer to the stuff of life. There's a kind of stoic knowledge

that can come out of it. That's why I don't see my father as a victim. I think he got closer to the meaning of life than my grandfather, who stayed much more on the surface.

So much of our popular art springs from traditions in black American culture, whether you're talking about the blues, or hip-hop, or literature. You might argue that the experiences from which these art forms sprang can't be simply defined by suffering. But were they shaped by it?

Yeah, that's absolutely right. Murray calls the blues "equipment for living," and I think that's really what it is. It's not a musical genre, although it is also that. It's an approach to life. It's stoicism. It's a way of making more from your conditions than what is given to you. This is the blackness that I was raised around, so I just never thought of black people as being afraid, as being weak, as needing help in perpetuity.

I don't have a definite position on affirmative action other than to say that I think it was necessary. It may still be necessary. But, you can't say something like that has to be permanently necessary unless you're willing to say that my people can never be equal or are singularly unequal. It's really a troubling concept to entertain.

In New York City, we're having this conversation right now about getting rid of standardized tests because blacks, and also Latinos, are unable to succeed on the test in numbers that correspond to their population. We have a kind of white/black binary, the way that we talk about race in the United States — white people have everything; black people have nothing. This is untenable and unjust and is morally wrong.

We have no way of talking about the reality in which 75 percent of these students in Stuyvesant High School are Asian, 65 percent of whom are eligible for free lunch because they're impoverished, and many are first-generation immigrants who learned English as a second language. You can say all types of things about how the tests don't measure everything. But there is a problem, I think, when black people are deemed, even by those who want to help, permanently incapable of competing on equal terms. This is a way of constructing blackness that I reject. We live in an enormous country where there's such diversity in black experience that a term like black doesn't really describe a lot of my experience of being black. It doesn't fit a lot of people's experiences. I can't see how the way we are talking about race in New York for the test fits with my black life. So, my project comes out of a frustration that there's a lot of diversity and a lot of individuality precluded. It's a way of understanding our really dynamic and mixed-up polity.

I think the way that we can't talk about Asians with anything like accuracy, and we don't really have the ability to incorporate them into dynamics in a way that makes sense — that speaks to the way that race doesn't really

get at a lot of what's going on in these issues and these inequalities anymore.

On the *Two for Tea Podcast*, you and the host, Iona Italia, discussed the emergence of certain trends among writers on the subject of racial trauma. You said "to just reproduce the wound as though the wound can never heal seems to me to be very much where we are now in the culture; we kind of fetishize the wound and worship the wound and don't want to heal."

What do you mean by "woundedness" here? And how does it connect with racial identity?

This is something that Leon Wieseltier pointed out about antisemitism. I think that it can be easier to believe the world doesn't change than to believe that the world changes slowly or erratically. We can backslide into the Trump era, but that doesn't mean that, ultimately, we're not getting where we're trying to go, or that we can never get there.

I think there's almost a kind of relief in saying, "Look, who are we to be fooled? Of course, this racist country elected Donald Trump. It was all bullshit. The society is white supremacist from beginning to end." That's comforting!

John McWhorter of *The Atlantic* has pointed this out. It's not just specific to black people, but there's a kind of black person that will say, "We're a damaged people, and I think we will always be a damaged people." If you think about it, there's a kind of pride that comes from that. There's a kind of pride in believing that the black condition is so difficult that nothing more than getting through your day has to be required of you, because you've already survived so much. And the way we use the term "survivor" today, beyond racial identity, has become a kind of badge. There's a pride in that.

And likewise, I think that many white people kind of search for a way to survive something or to have gone through some type of trauma, because this seems to instill some type of meaning on a life that's otherwise too comfortable. I think there's a kind of perverse pride, and it's psychologically very difficult to give up. Even in my own life, back in high school, a lot of us felt very good at the segregated black table, and we kind of felt that we were defying all the odds and it was us against the white world that didn't want to see us do well. Just being part of that was exhilarating. You were in opposition; your identity felt opposed to the world around you. And we derive self-confidence from that. I think that has to be given up. In the new book, I wrote about how white people have to give up whiteness. But in some ways, it's very difficult to convince — not all, certainly, but many — members of oppressed groups to give up their hard-won identity. They're not going to want to do it because

when you do, you have to be responsible for creating yourself anew. You have to be responsible for finding new ways of belonging to each other, new values, new ways of construction. In reality, that's terrifying.

You say that people sometimes see their marginalized statuses as a distinction of honor. Much has also been said about Donald Trump advancing his own kind of white identity politics, and that a large percentage of white Americans feel that they are discriminated against when they have been polled on the topic. Why do you think white Americans are also finding a mentality of victimhood so appealing right now?

What people call, for want of a better term, oppression Olympics has crossed over into mainstream white consciousness as well. Donald Trump ran an identity politics campaign of victimization. My extended family members who voted for Trump very much believe that they are victimized in society and that there's a whole lot of elites — it has nothing to do with skin color — who have gotten it over on them; that they're hardworking, play-by-the-rules-types, and that they are increasingly strangers in their own land. There are many ways to confer an underdog status on yourself, and that is very seductive.

In Europe, there's an obsession with "reverse colonization" that has really infected the mainstream discourse — the idea that there's a "white replacement" going on. Many, many people are, to varying degrees, sympathetic to this view that they're endangered.

I think that you see something similar in the case of Jussie Smollett. I'm not certain, but it seems to me that a lot of this gets exasperated by the social media and Twitter atmosphere where everybody dramatizes their life story. And you have it end with a guy like Smollett realizing that it's not enough to be a pretty successful actor, but he would have even greater status if he were a guy to whom a hate crime was done. It's very much at odds with the kind of notions of honor, and of stoicism, and silent engagement with the world that my father's generation comes from. And that kind of black identity is a very different way of engaging the world. I think it's generational as much as it's racial.

This sounds like an ironic reversal of values, but is it still getting at the same thing? For instance, whereas your father's generation might have prized stoicism and resiliency, perhaps our generation sees victimhood, or an oppressed social position as being a pathway to an honorable sense of self.

The idea of honor is different now than it was. That's certainly the case. But also it confers real power. I think you can never lose sight of the fact that the whites rallying behind Trump are using that sense of oppression as a

means of maintaining or growing their power; that on college campuses, the people who can assume an oppressed identity have real power. They have the ear of the administrators; they actually effect change; they get speakers banned. They exercise power in real ways.

Some journalists and writers who make a career out of denying that they have power are some of the most influential voices of our era. But the whole thing would fall apart if they were to recognize their own power. I think it's somewhat disingenuous. I think a lot of people engage with a victim identity out of a sense of empowerment, and not just out of a kind of shift in values.

Look at Sarah Jeong and Twitter, for example.

You mean the controversy over her years-old Tweets, in which she said denigrating things about whites?

Yes. She's able to do something that, were she not to cleave to the victim identity, she could never do. She gets to have it both ways. I think that we're increasingly seeing this on the right, as well. Trump is absolutely not a victim, but he can always kind of adopt that pose. That posture comes with real benefits. I think we're still figuring out what this is doing to our society — the continual outflanking for a more and more marginalized stance. And this is going to be an increasing problem in a country that will become a majority minority population. The sense of victimization among whites is only going to grow as they inevitably will see the numbers. So, I think it's one of the pressing issues of our time, actually.

Ta-Nehisi Coates was just interviewed in *New York Magazine*discussing the recent renewal in the conversation around reparations. The writer Coleman Hughes responded in an op-ed arguing that the central thesis of much of Coates's work is upended by his own critical and commercial success as an author writing about race in the United States. Do you think Coates's success has any bearing on his arguments about race in America, especially given that much of his more recent work has been based on his personal experiences as a black man living in a racist society?

He's never been able to account for his own personal and professional success. He has no way of accounting for the millions of whites who have earnestly bought his book in an attempt to hear what he's trying to tell them. I think that's an enormous flaw. And Coleman made a very good point, which has just arisen, which is that Coates's central thesis cannot account for mainstream politicians, including white politicians like Nancy Pelosi, now championing reparations.

It seems to undermine everything he's based his past four or five years of work on — the idea that white supremacy is implacable, and that blacks will never be given the reparations that other groups have been given, such as the Japanese after internment. The fact that some candidates, as Coleman pointed out, now have to campaign on saying that they want to do this, I think speaks to the extent to which Coates has underestimated the complexity of American society and the possibility for good faith renewal.

I could tell that Coates was saying that he thinks he may have been too pessimistic in the past, so he has the chance to revise his positions. Anybody does. But certainly, the way he presented the world in "The Case for Reparations," which I thought was a very fine piece of writing nonetheless, and the way that he presented American reality in *Between the World and Me*, doesn't seem to leave much possibility for the enormous impact his own ideas have already had on the conversation.

I think Coates's most abiding argument is probably most clearly evident in his essay "The First White President," which appeared both in the October 2017 issue of *The Atlantic*, and in his essay collection *We Were Eight Years in Power*, published the same month. In *The American Scholar*, you wrote that, "Coates is nothing if not engaging and thought-provoking," but that reading the essay left you feeling "almost sickened."

He makes white supremacy almost magical, you know? It gets supernatural, almost, the way he's talking about the "bloody heirloom" — this "amulet."

… that Trump cracked open to release its "eldritch energies" …

Eldritch energies!

It really does start to mirror the way that Julius Evola and some of these real white supremacists write about the inherent, almost supernatural specialness of whiteness, as well. I don't think that he intended that at all. But when you start thinking of whiteness as something that powerful, that persistent, that adaptable; when you get to the point where you are saying that someone like George Packer is essentially a white supremacist too, which he did in the essay — these are the things that started to add up to the sickening feeling that there's a kind of gleeful, antiracist essentializing that doesn't actually want to get to that place where, for a little bit of the first Obama term, I think a lot of us thought we might get to. It seems now that the antiracist left doesn't even want to go there, even if we could. That's what was such a bummer about that essay. It almost seemed like he was relieved, glad, and vindicated that Trump was elected. He needed the United States to put Donald Trump in

office, and he needed white people to be implicated, even though lots and lots of whites did not vote for Donald Trump.

Do you really think Coates would have been disappointed had Donald Trump lost the election?

I mean, where would that leave his argument? It seems like his argument got an enormous bump from Trump being elected. But "The First White President" was, I think, a turning point. Prior to that, I feel like the type of argument I was trying to have, even about my daughter, was met with extraordinary resistance. Sometime after the publication of "The First White President," people were suddenly much more receptive to this idea that identities are complicated things, and that we all need to take a step back from essentialism, whether it comes from racists on the right or whether it comes from antiracists. And I hope that essay represented a peak in the conversation. I think it had left an enormous amount of readers dissatisfied, even as his other work continues to be very successful.

Wesley Morris touched on these themes in a 2018 *New York Times* column titled "The Morality Wars," which I thought was a really deep engagement with the ways in which social justice concerns have become almost ubiquitous in the discussion of art and literature.

I've been thinking about the movie *Black Panther* in this instance. I felt that most of its insights about race came more from the conversation around it than from the film itself. But it was perhaps unique as a movie with a majority black cast that garnered so much commercial success, both in the United States and abroad. Does the value of representation sometimes outstrip the artistic values in a work?

The casting was absolutely important. That's great, as was the fact that a black director proved the lie that you can't sell movies with black leads overseas. It was great to see that set to rest. But there was the idea that, as a black person, my self-esteem was supposed to be tied in with this project, and that we can't talk about it honestly as a work of art or as a work of commercial entertainment — that it has to have this kind of sacred luster to it.

White people aren't expected to derive a sense of their self from these types of products. It's infantilizing, the idea that black people need an imaginary Wakanda, and it really got to the point of excess in the popular discourse. Those types of things do make me think it's going to be harder to transcend some of these abstract categorizations than it ought to be. And I understand a lot of it comes from a pent-up sense of popular disrespect. I understand all of that. But the need for Wakanda to *mean* something, for *Black Panther* to *mean*something — to be honest, I found it embarrassing.

I'm afraid to say, but the idea that representation alone is what matters most? Black artists of previous eras dedicated their careers to fighting this kind of reductive notion. Ralph Ellison's entire life was dedicated to arguing against that. He wrote *Invisible Man* from exactly the opposite perspective. In some ways, I do think that we've made negative progress even as we've made representational gains.

I think about the conversation around *Girls*, for example, which is a very white show, and Lena Dunham was essentially forced to have, like, a bit of Donald Glover in it. I found that so strange. You know, the show was good or bad — it succeeded or failed based on the standards it set for itself. But it felt very contrived and just weird when she forced a black character in. And I didn't need that for myself, and I didn't understand who these viewers were who felt they did. If *Girls* is too white, you don't watch the show. There are other shows. But the idea that every show must include a certain amount of each identity group to be palatable? That's not the way I engage with art, and that's not the way I want to engage with art. It seemed to me, again, to be an infantilization of audiences and of what we can be expected to be capable of appreciating. And I think it's a loss. I really think that those episodes of *Girls* were some of the more unsuccessful ones, because it didn't inherently make sense in the logic of the artwork itself.

There has also been a lot of discussion about diversity in the Academy Awards.

The Oscars probably has been too white. And it's wonderful, when a film like *Moonlight* gets made and recognized. But what does it mean to just have *Green Book*? I don't know. And what does it mean to be arguing with so much emotional investment over how a handful of Hollywood elites get treated or not treated? That's the other thing that I think is really missing the boat when we talk about racial equality or oppression, and we're talking about a couple dozen Hollywood actors being included or not. I mean, how does that help or not help the poor kid in any number of cities? The kid in Chicago? I don't know. I'm not a complete philistine — I believe in the power of symbols. To have a black family in the White House, I think, had a real symbolic value. And, while I believe that stories like *Moonlight* are important, I think we invested far too much energy in things like #OscarsSoWhite.

You agree that it's important for people to see a black family in the White House, if only to demonstrate that it's possible. Is it also important for black children to be able to see people who look like them on television, or in movies, or even in television commercials? Is there an importance in people, whatever their background, seeing folks who superficially resemble them included in mainstream media?

Yeah, there probably is. I'm sure that there is. But one thing that often gets lost in a lot of these debates is that black people have only ever been around 12 percent of the population. So it doesn't really bother me or my sense of myself if I don't always see myself. Also — getting back to my own obtuseness or naïveté — I saw myself in *Crime and Punishment* in a way that I did with very few novels in which the protagonist resembled me and my American contemporary social identity. I saw myself in *The Brothers Karamazov*. I saw myself in the novels of Roberto Bolaño, and in Borges's *Ficciones* set in Buenos Aires. The self is really something that I don't think can be boiled down to physical appearance, necessarily, or to gender, to epoch, to time or era, to language. The notion that to see myself is to see a mixed race, heterosexual, endomorphic contemporary, I think really reduces what the self is.

I never saw myself more clearly than in the novels of Dostoyevsky when I was in college. No one has ever spoken more to my sense of myself. And I can see myself in Batman. I relate to Bruce Wayne more than I do to the Black Panther, if we have to go into comic books. I don't want to be glib about it — I understand why a young boy or young girl needing some self-esteem, a young girl seeing *Wonder Woman*… I get it. But I think we really should not go too far with it, or we risk restricting the self too severely. The self is a multitudinous thing, right?

In your first book, *Losing My Cool*, you described feeling, as a young man, a sense of kinship with, and even a cultural ownership over, philosophers and writers and artists who are associated with the classical Western canon. What does it mean to take ownership over a canon that has not traditionally been racially inclusive?

For instance, many college-age students are feeling that black, Asian, and Latino students should be able to see thinkers from nonwhite backgrounds represented in the curriculum. And I think there is certainly value in that. But should a black student or a black writer feel more connected to an African writer than they might to a European Enlightenment-age thinker?

I think there's value in having representation, for sure. But you're going to miss out on a lot if you want to cancel all of the people who held certain abhorrent views on certain issues, or if you want to cancel all the people who enjoyed and exercised white male cis hetero privilege. You're just going to reduce the world. There's going to be a lot of great stuff that you'll still get. I'm glad that we have syllabi now that include Junot Díaz or Chinua Achebe. That's great. That just makes the world richer. But to get rid of all of those objectionable people that dominated the syllabi for so long, all those canonical voices, would be to really diminish the world.

To be black in America, to be Latina, Muslim, or whatever you are in America in the 21st century is still to come from a tradition, and it's a tradition that's been informed by voices, whether you like it or not. The country we live in has been shaped by certain ideas, and so, to think that you don't need to encounter those ideas anymore because you're retroactively judging identities based on contemporary norms, seems to me a really short-sighted way of engaging with intellectual growth. It seems to me antithetical to the idea of understanding the society you live in. Furthermore, you're just going to miss out on so many enjoyable things.

Dostoyevsky was a terrible antisemite, to use him as an example again, and I believe he said some terrible things about Africans. I can hold that in my mind, and at the same time I can say that he achieved something that transcended his own bigotry and limitations in *The Brothers Karamazov*. He was a proselytizing, narrow-minded, born-again Christian. But he achieved in his art voices and characters that were far grander and more supple and able to contradict his own dogmas. It seems to me that you can acknowledge his shortcomings as a person and really benefit from encountering the ideas on the page. And it's really something that this is more and more a kind of controversial perspective.

I guess I'm dating myself. I just squeaked through college before the window really shut. Maybe I went to a slightly more conservative campus; I went to Georgetown. We didn't really have canon war conversations in the years '99 to 2003, when I was there, so I could study Hegel and that really wasn't considered crazy, you know? And I'm thankful for that. I'm thankful for growing up in an era of payphones, still mostly pre-internet. The whole game didn't go berserk until I was already out.

You mentioned Junot Díaz. I was just rereading his 2014 essay in *The New Yorker* titled "MFA vs. POC" in which he argues that fine arts programs were, and perhaps still are, oppressively white. By way of example, Díaz says of his workshop experiences in an MFA writing program,

> **From what I saw the plurality of students and faculty had been educated exclusively in the tradition of writers like William Gaddis, Francine Prose or Alice Munro, and not at all in the traditions of Toni Morrison, Cherrie Moraga, Maxine Hong Kingston, Arundhati Roy, Edwidge Danticat, Alice Walker, or Jamaica Kincaid.**

First of all, perhaps he has a point in that I immediately recognize all the names in the first list, and only three in the second. But it's not at all clear to me that Toni Morrison is speaking a different language from Alice Munro, or that these very different writers represent completely different worldviews.

Toni Morrison has said how indebted she is to Faulkner.

Or James Baldwin, for instance, who seems very much to be writing in the tradition of Enlightenment thinking.

And of Henry James! Baldwin was very upfront about his debt to the King James Bible and to Henry James's novels. I mean, there are no boundaries. I just think you're richer by reading some Jamaica Kincaid and some Junot Díaz and some Teju Cole on your syllabi. You're richer for having more voices. But the idea that those voices aren't also in a conversation with the voices that have already been there, and the idea that identity is a zero-sum game, is something that racists believe. But it's also something that antiracists seem to believe; that someone has to be pushed out in order for Toni Morrison to come in. I don't buy that.

I was at the American Academy in Berlin in 2017. I'm not white. (It's almost impossible to actually have a conversation where you stop using the term "black." So I hope, you know, when I say black and white, I'm not implying that I believe those terms are true. I'm just using it because that's the way we speak about people.) I'm a black guy at the American Academy. There's another black woman; there's an Indian woman; there's a Turkish woman. So, out of 12 fellows, I've already gotten to four who are not white. But the staff is pretty white — it's Germany. On the first day, one of these American academics who was a fellow walks in and says, "God, it's so white in here. Like, they can't have any people of color?" I didn't know her. I didn't really say anything, but in my head, I was thinking, what do you expect? It can't be that white people can or must or ought to just disappear from some of these places like MFA programs.

It's great that a guy like Junot Díaz had his talent found and fully cultivated. I believe he was at Cornell. That's fantastic. But, for better or worse, most of the highly educated black friends I had in school were not interested in going to MFA programs for a variety of reasons. For me, that doesn't seem scandalous. There may be all types of concrete steps we should take to try to make those spaces more inclusive. I'm down for that. But the sense of scandal and the sense of injury is where I've got to get off the bus.

Often, proponents of diversity in literature and publishing will use the add-on phrase "of color" to describe writers who are not white, or their work. Díaz, for instance, uses the term "writers of color" in his essay, and others have broadened the term to "voices of color." The implication seems to be that the mainstream is defined by a kind of rhetoric and discourse and way of speaking that is inherently shaped and defined by whiteness, that nonwhite writers and readers identify with a different form of communication, and that these two ways of speaking are fundamentally incompatible.

Is there such a thing as different "voices" that correspond to a writer's experience of race? And if so, are these different voices incomprehensible to one another?

It doesn't make sense if you think about it for a minute. Junot Díaz's own work disproves it, because he's proven that all types of non-Spanish speakers can jump right into his heavily Spanish-inflected worlds, and he can make Santo Domingo the world as well as Joyce could make Dublin the world. His own work proves that there's just a voice, and there are good voices and bad voices. There are seductive voices and less seductive voices.

As you point out, it's clear to me that Junot Díaz is able to conjure the world through his particular perspective in a way that is as urgent and universally appealing as Joyce's rendering of Dublin. This brings us back again, I think, to the humanist angle we discussed before. That is, the idea that we have a shared human experience, and surface characteristics, and the categorization they bring, don't make our voices incomprehensible to people from differing backgrounds.

I think that's really the beauty and the singular power of writing. It's the closest thing we have so far to getting inside another person's mind, of seeing another person's thoughts. You're seeing them in their best form because they've revised and edited them, but it brings you into another person's consciousness. Ta-Nehisi Coates's book brings millions of readers, who have never experienced his social reality, into it. And it proves the existence and the need and the willingness and the desire for empathy between people from different backgrounds. It proves the bridge-ability of experience.

I was riveted and blown away by *Drown* when I first encountered that as a young person who thought he might want to figure out how to write. Junot Díaz's voice was a revelation. I grew up in New Jersey, not far from him, and I had never thought about Dominican social reality before. In a way, it's kind of optimistic, maybe, that while these talented writers may be coming from different angles, their own work, as with Dostoyevsky, gives us a lot more hope than some of their more limiting arguments.

And I think ultimately that's something to be hopeful about.

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Otis Houston is a graduate of Pacific University's MFA creative writing program and lives with his wife in Portland, Oregon. His work has appeared in Kitchen Work *and* Defenestration.