Secret Colors Revisited: A Dialogue on Race and the Arts

David Mura Interviews Alexs Pate at The Loft Literary Center on July 10, 2015

Part 1: Losing Absalom

Alexs Pate: I have no idea how I'm supposed to— jeez. Thank you.

David Mura: Yup.

Alexs Pate: I will name those organizations.

David Mura: You want to name those organizations?

Alexs Pate: No, no. That's OK.

David Mura: I'm perfectly fine to go with you on that. So I want to start with *Losing Absalom.* And that's Alexs's first novel.

In *Losing Absalom* because his father is dying, Absalom was dying, Sonny Goodman leaves his middle-class life in the Twin Cities to return to the Philadelphia neighborhood he grew up in, a neighborhood he feels in some ways he's escaped, in others, feels guilty about escaping. It's a black neighborhood that like in many cities during the 1980's is feeling the effects of the drug trade, the shift in its economic makeup, and traditional black working-class stability.

Near the end of the novel, Sonny has a confrontation with his sister's boyfriend, Dancer, who has subscribed in this way. To Dancer, there were only two types of black people, those who had hope and those who didn't. Anybody who had was a punk. That's how he imagined Sonny.

So can you speak a bit about *Losing Absalom*? I'm highlighting here a few things from the book. First, there's Sonny's ambiguous feelings about having moved from North Philly to the Twin Cities, the deep sense of guilt he carries about his middle-class success, which, in part, depended upon, or in his mind, depended upon his leaving Philly and his family.

Second, there's the way the neighborhood that he grew up in is changing. And third, there's Dancer's division of black people who have hope and black people who don't.

Alexs Pate: First of all, let me say, again, thank you for inviting me to be here. It wasn't coerced. There was no quid pro quo. And for that introduction, which almost robbed me of my voice, in a way.

I also want to say that about a week or so ago, John A. Williams passed away. He wrote, *The Man Who Cried I Am.* I was lucky enough to write the introduction to that book when it was republished.

I remember sitting in a classroom at Temple University reading *The Man Who Cried I Am* for the first time and saying, "I want to be a novelist." And saying to the instructor Cyprian Lamar Rowe at the time at Temple, "I want to write. I want to be a novelist."

And him saying, "You already are. You just have to keep going. You just have to do it." "And I want to be as good as John A. Williams." And he was like, "You already are. You just have to show it."

And then 20, or I don't know how many years later, when I get a chance to write the introduction to that book, I call John and I'm like, "I just want you to know how much your life and your career meant to me." Before I talked to him, I talked to his wife. And she said, "John really respects you and respects the work that you're doing."

It was just like, wow. For a writer, for me as a writer, this is all you want is for somebody to say back to you, "we appreciate—" or, "you're attempt to connect the dots between me and the next person, the next story, the next writer is an important thing."

So *Losing Absalom* comes out of, in some ways, that drive to capture the life and the world of the family that I grew up in, and the community I grew up in, and the struggle that I faced. I always say that I probably would've written that book differently had it happened after the Million Man March that Farrakhan organized.

And actually, it hasn't materialized. The benefit to that I don't think ever materialized. But before that, all I felt was desolation and despair.

I grew up in inner city Philadelphia, North Philly. And the neighborhood that I grew up in was crumbling. Crack had taken over. It didn't really matter where all of that was coming from, whether it was the CIA, or whatever people thought about that. Crack had worked its way into my neighborhood and was killing everything. And you could just see it falling apart.

So when I would go back home, I didn't feel like it was home anymore. The neighborhood was in despair. So I wrote *Losing Absalom* about that attempt to reclaim, or that desire to reclaim and build.

Because there's a part in *Losing Absalom* where I say— my dad told me, "Your job is to get your education and get out of here." That was always the push. "Get your education and get out of this neighborhood. Because nothing good is going to happen to you here."

Well, they were right. But what happens when everybody leaves? What happens when you go to college and you get your stuff and you go out? Well, it just leaves people who are struggling under pressure. Those are the people who have to figure out how to make it work. And it's hard.

So move from that moment to me in Minnesota. I remember my first trip here; I'm riding down 494. I'm going to Wayzata and I'm like, "whoa!"

[LAUGHTER]

What the hell is going on here? There are no buildings. You can see— I wrote an essay called, "The Unobstructed Eye" because it was like there was this moment, I look straight out, and I could just keep looking.

And I came here to work for a Fortune 500 company. I was in a corporate mode at that time. I hadn't really found my writing voice. I came into Minnesota culture and it— those of you who have come from somewhere else for some period of time, you can't— it's just like, "What is going on?"

I don't want to be insulting at all because I am now a Minnesotan. I probably do the same things. I thought people were weird, but I'm weird now.

It makes me think about being in the Navy when I got on my first ship. I came on this ship in the middle of the night in the Naples harbor, Naples, Italy. And I'm just fresh out of North Philly.

We get off a boat. We climb up a Jacob's ladder, climb onto the ship. They direct us to the mess deck where the movie is playing. And all the sailors had been out to sea for two weeks. They had beards; they were throwing spitballs at each other.

They were crazy because that's what two weeks out to sea will do to you when you're with 350 other guys. And then two weeks later, I had a big beard and we were throwing spitballs.

There's a certain way about coming to Minnesota from North Philly where you're talking fast, and everything is sort of calm. But really, if you're not paying attention, you will get got here just the same way.

People are not weak. It's different pace, it's different energy. And it's indirect. A lot of communication is indirect.

David Mura: Really? Really?

Alexs Pate: So when I thought back to my life in Philadelphia, and I also think about Henry Louis Gates in *Figures in Black* saying that, "the farther you are from home, the clearer you see it." And I started to see my home for what it was, the struggle that my family was under, my sister, my mom, my dad, my friends, people being killed, the drug thing happening, the economic poverty, all that stuff was happening.

And I realized I was incapable of having an impact on that. I could go back. But in some way, I had already lost my relevance. And I wanted to capture that in *Losing Absalom.* So his absorption into the corporate culture— and then his dad gets sick, just like my dad got sick. And you go home, and you're forced to be there for a period of time. And it just ate at me.

And one of the things I felt my dad gave me was the ability to tell that story. In *Losing Absalom,* the first part was— well, I sort of answered that. What was the second part of that question?

David Mura: Just the way the neighborhood was changing and then this division between hope and not hope, and not having hope.

Alexs Pate: It's really hard to have hope in certain environments. You can't accuse people of being hopeless in a hopeless environment. And I would make the case that hope is the most valuable asset that each of us has.

I want hope more than anything. I want to go to bed hoping that tomorrow will come and that it will be better. And so Sonny's sense that hope was possible in the face of all that I thought was worth documenting.

Of course there was a way in which his hope was cut short. But I don't want to— you're not all going to run out and buy the book, so there's no spoiler here. Just at the moment when Sonny is about to make some resolution, he ends up in a situation he doesn't need to be in, and he's killed. Sorry, that was a true spoiler.

But there is no other answer. That whole thing you can't go home again, you can go home again, but you may not leave. And he had to go back. His dad was dying.

And he ends up in a room where there's a gun. He picks up the gun. And the person, who didn't want to see somebody else with a gun, pulled the trigger on him.

And while the bullet is coming at him, he turns to his dad who is in a coma, but who is next to him in that room. And he says, "I thought you told me this wasn't going to be like this." And his dad says, "We did the best we could. This is the way it is."

David Mura: So what did you learn by writing that ending?

Alexs Pate: I didn't learn anything. I learned that I don't need to be going home that much.

[LAUGHTER]

Our culture is really messed up. If we talk too long, you know I'm going to be going off on how we try to make things look pretty, and sound pretty, and talk pretty. But there's a part of us that knows that things are bad. Things were bad then anyway. And hope, again, is the only balance to that.

David Mura: So how do you hope in a situation like that?

Alexs Pate: You change your life. You take care of yourself. You try to grow. And then you give you can give, in that respect. For some people, I realize, everybody wouldn't agree with this. But for me, this is about liberating each individual person separately and with a focused effort to liberate yourself from cultural expectation so that your individuality can serve to save you so you are free to save someone else.

It's very difficult to get 10 people to order even the same pizza. And it's like I came up in the Black Power movement, been a cultural nationalist. I spent time on all areas of black political empowerment.

And I see a lot of burnt out people. I see a lot of struggle. I see a lot of frustration and bitterness. And I think bitterness is the absolute opposite of hope. And it has no place in a vibrant life.

We should live vibrant lives, every single one of us all the time. It shouldn't be this heaviness that we can't breathe. That's what my work now it about. It's about freeing as many of our children as I can, or we can, to have lives that are hopeful.

Part 2: The Outlaw Comes to Know Himself

David Mura: I want to talk to you then about a couple moments in your career as a writer where I see you begin to mount that assault upon pessimism and the lack of hope. So as I said, more than 20 years ago, there was that video of the Rodney King beating. And the police who did that were tried and found innocent.

L.A. erupted in violence. As part of that violence, there were conflicts between Korean storeowners and the African-American community. And Alexs and I had been talking about doing a show together and doing some sort of collaboration.

And when that happened, we just decided we have to do a show together. And if we just stand on stage and go, "I'm Asian-American, he's African-American, we're friends," we would just move the dialogue one step forward.

[LAUGHTER]

And I'm going to ask Alexs some more questions about that in relationship to today and this past year. Because obviously, in 1992— or I can't remember what exact date— when the Rodney King video came out, people didn't have a lot of cameras. It was just by chance that some white guy— it was a white guy— peered over his fence and saw this thing and got it on videotape.

Obviously during this past year, the whole culture, in certain ways, the dialogue has been shifted. Because everything that African-Americans and people of color have been saying about the police for years, suddenly it's like white people suddenly realize, oh yeah, this has been happening. We have to stop not seeing this.

So as part of the piece, and a portion of it is in this book *Afro Asia*, which has a picture of Du Bois and Mao Zedong on the cover. I really wish it was somebody other than Mao that we had to put up against Du Bois. But anyway, I wanted to ask Alexs to read a piece from that.

Alexs Pate: This is a poem of sorts called, "The Outlaw Comes to Know Himself."

have you ever
in an instant
been jolted by an intense fear?
have you been somewhere
maybe in your car
on the freeway
i94 maybe and been electrified
by an instant trembling of dread?
i have
and it has brought me here
actually i was on 94
mindless, speeding through
traffic eyes focused on the road just
ahead disappearing
under the hood of my car
and suddenly i was full of terror
sweating, shaking
suddenly i realized that i was not going
anywhere
i was fleeing
i was a fugitive
i was running from you

i understand you've been looking for me
and that haunted me
at first i didn't know why
and that haunted me too
but it finally came to me
on that day
in the car
i killed someone
murdered someone
in this life or the last
a conscious crime
or dream
but i did it

and now i understand why
i always freeze when
the doorbell rings
why i stare police in the eye
(a practiced deception)
why i reveal as little as possible
why i can't watch richard kimble
search for the one armed man
anymore

why
it just makes me mad
that he won't simply turn around
and tell those motherfuckas
"i did not kill my wife"
is there no justice?
but kimble knew there was no justice
and i think he was afraid he'd
confess
just like me

i could confess to you right now
the bombing at the world trade center
all the slain police
all the robberies
all the abductions
all the rapes
all the murders

i did it.

i mean i'm a black man

i am an outlaw
by law
i could have done it

when that policeman died
was shot
like a paper target
pinned on a bale of hay
my life became tenuous
less solid
more abstract
my picture rode in squad cars
and was distributed
from memory
everywhere
i was everywhere
and the police wanted
me for questioning
or because i knew someone
or because my jacket's blue
or because my brake lights
weren't working
or something

but they were looking for me

and you know i couldn't wait
until they found me
i knew they would
i would have gladly surrendered
just to relieve the pressure
i'm here now aren't i?
but i waited, often in darkness

at night
as the mississippi mud
falls from my face
i have to still my shudders
remind myself that no one is
after
me no one wants me
and in the moon's black
i cower
try to remember what i've done
who i've hurt
to make them pursue me so
relentlessly
i am the murderer
i am the rapist
i must be
why else would i feel their sour
breath on my neck

but i am growing tired of the run
i want my picture instead to be enshrined
celebrated
known for its brilliance and strength
so you might know the lines given to me by my mother
as they differ from those given to me by my father
but we are so far from that
i am the outlaw always
even to myself
i frighten myself
because i will let you
demonize me
like marion barry
or iron mike tyson
or michael jackson
or clarence thomas
i will take that toke

i will touch you
torture you
i will
because it doesn't matter
what i do
i'm not like luke perry
on the cover of Vanity Fair
with a gun in his sexy hand
posing
i am not the Duke teaching
boys the details of cowboy styling
the subtle relationship between
being white and being right

even if you are jesse james
people will march down
small town streets
high school band horns blowing a
canapy
over a celebration of murder and
robbery: jesse was the ultimate
outlaw and they celebrate him

but me, i can't breathe wrong or
poof, i'm the demon
i'm just an extension of my lineage
nat turner, jack johnson, richard pryor
or just that brother sitting over there:
outlaws
but not the celebrating kind
nosirree, the hanging kind

oh yes, oh yes
i had to learn the distinctions
between outlaws
turner to be hung
bush to be president
tyson to be prisoner
stalone to be star
i had to learn to feel like an
outlaw
which is not done over night

[APPLAUSE]

David Mura: So can you speak a little bit on the circumstances of how you came to write that and then what happened then after you wrote this in terms of your understanding of guilt and the part it played in your life as an African-American man?

Alexs Pate: Yeah. Well, I'm pretty paranoid. There's just a lot of things I wouldn't do, couldn't do. I do not want to get too far outside of the city. When I was doing Writers in the Schools, I had to pack up my car and go to Bemidji or somewhere, and you're terrified. I'm terrified. The further I get away from the city, it terrifies me.

And I truly was on I-94 coming from Saint Paul going to Minneapolis and I had to pull my car over. I was having a panic attack. And I realized at that moment that all the accumulated images of black men being pursued, being beat down, had reached its saturation point in my consciousness. And I could not survive it any longer if I didn't come up with a way of responding to that.

So I devised a way to respond to that. I began to meditate on what had been taken from me as a child. But first you have to outline what it is where you are. And that's what that was, a sort of itemization of the way in which my life had been affected by stuff that I had nothing to do with, how I did not have a chance to be free.

People tell you all your life, "Oh, you can be anything you want to be. You haven't done— you've got a great mind. You're smart. You can do anything you want to do." Well, it's not true. It's not true.

You have to come to grips. You have to overcome this for that to be possible. But nobody tells you that. Nobody tells you how much weight you're going to be dragging around by the time you're 14, how much weight you'll have to drag around by the time you're 35.

We all, every person of color in here—and it's not just black folks— every person of color in here has learned how to manage the weight they're dragging around. If you don't identify as a straight, white person in this country, if you're queer in any way, you're dragging around weight. And you have to figure out how to do that.

And when you do that, you give up stuff. Freedom is a concept. So I just made a— and partly, like I told you, this was your fault.

[LAUGHTER]

And I'm used to interviewing other people, but David's work, although in a different trajectory, demonstrates courage. I was kind of a punk. In the sense of facing what was in front of me as a human being to grow, I don't think I would have had the courage to face it if it hadn't been for you. So I just want to say that too.

Part 3: Finding Makeba

David Mura: Well, in terms of this idea of facing it, I think it is appropriate now to talk about *Finding Makeba.* And this is Alexs's second novel. And it deals with a struggling African-American artist Ben Crestfield and his marriage to Helen, an African-American woman, and their daughter, Makeba.

Under complex circumstances, Ben leaves his marriage. And when Helen disappears with Makeba, he loses contact with his daughter and never again contacts her until one day, when at a book signing, Makeba shows up bearing a journal which she gives to Ben.

Years ago, Alexs did a performance piece for children called, "For Children with Missing Fathers." And *Finding Makeba* confronts this painful rupture of the parent/child bond.

In the opening chapter, Makeba also hands Ben a letter, part of which read, "My life has brought me to this moment where I need to talk to you. I need to hear your voice. No matter how hard I've tried to completely push you out of my mind, I have to admit that I still have a hole in me. Maybe I did need to know why it all happened. Maybe I needed to tell you that no matter how you tell me the story, it could never adequately explain away the most important fact, you left me."

This letter hits the reader hard right in the chest. And as I was reading this novel this week, I was so taken aback by the way the writing confronts the pain and heartbreak of Makeba, as well as Ben and Helen.

In my intro, I talked about the false guilts and stereotypes that are placed upon African-Americans and other people of color in a society infected by racism. And how in your art, you examine the burdens and psychic weight of those psychic guilts.

But *Finding Makeba* doesn't shy away also from Ben's very true and real guilt. He did not seek out to find Makeba. She sought him. I know the opening in Makeba's journals came after the portions of the book that explore Ben's relationship with Helen.

It strikes me that you needed to confront these issues within this book if you are to grow as an artist. And what's more, in a way, this book cleared the way for all the work that came after this, including the Innocent Classroom. So can you talk a bit about the difficulties of writing this novel and confronting the issues it brings up?

Alexs Pate: This is the problem with having a friend do this.

David Mura: Sorry.

Alexs Pate: That book was very difficult for me to write. But again, I think I took my mark from you and the courage that you always used to address sexuality in the Asian-American male identity.

But I think it could be summarized this way: I did write that book and it was, at first, a long plaint, like a meditation on my loss and my guilt. And I think in order to pursue innocence, which I didn't know that's what I was doing, but I think you have to itemize, you have to inventory all the things that you've done as a way of clearing out all the crap that people are putting on you that you did not do.

You have to face what you are culpable for and make amends. That's one of the things about the Million Man March I thought was valid. You have to accept where you've been weak and then you have to recover from that. But it should bolster you against all the stereotypes and negative things that are being placed on you by the culture.

I wrote that book. And I remember being at the Walker Art Center at a point where I was almost done. And this couple walked up to me the brother, who I don't remember, said, "This is the guy who's writing a book about reuniting with his daughter." And I looked at him, and he said," Tell her. Tell her the story."

[LAUGHTER]

"I'm writing a book about a guy who's reuniting with his daughter." He says, "No, no, no. You have to tell her the whole story." So I didn't know her or him at that point. So I start talking. And almost 30 seconds into my explanation, she starts crying.

And she says, "My dad doesn't care about me." And I'm like, "No, I think part of the book is about how men are prevented from expressing their loss about the children they're separated from." Because the loss of a child is the loss of a child.

Male, female, it doesn't really matter. If you are not with your child, you may be partying, having a good, ol' time. But you are not disconnected from that knowledge. That knowledge can never be completely erased.

And so I said, "No, I'm really trying to give full voice to that. But I guarantee you, your dad may not know how, he may never say, he may never express it, but he has never forgotten you." I'm looking at the guy, and he's gone. He's getting drinks. And I'm like, “Come back and get your—"

But I got home that night, and I decided the book could not go the way it was. Her voice had to be there. It couldn't just be a father's voice. It could be, but it wasn't right. And so I alternated.

So it became a book inside of a book inside of a book in which for every chapter, Makeba at that point when she meets Ben, she says, "Yes, I'm your daughter. I've read your book. Here's my book that responds to your book." And both of those pieces are in that book.

And normally when I'm teaching writers, I'm like, stay away from writing outside your gender. So you'll have to be the judge of that yourself, if you read it.

David Mura: And when the book came out, what was the reaction to it from African-American men and African-American women?

Alexs Pate: Has anybody heard of this book before I just started talking about it?

[LAUGHTER]

Do you really need to ask that question? *Essence Magazine* said this is a book every African-American woman should have on her bookshelf. It got good reviews. But why am I not who you said you thought I should be?

[LAUGHTER]

Because the media, because the publishers, because the critics, because the Academy, because of all of that don't really give a crap about what a black man is talking about if he's not talking about killing somebody.

David Mura: But I know there are black men who came up to you and said, "That book was important."

Alexs Pate: Thank you. See, I didn't know where you were going.

[LAUGHTER]

When I was on a book tour, I'd be in situations in a bookstore where I'm reading. And I'd see these brothers starting to line up in the back, a lot of them homeless brothers. And they would come up after. They would say, "I know. I understand what you're saying. You got me right there."

And I came away from that book tour realizing there are so many black men in this country who felt like their separation from their families was a noble gesture. They knew they couldn't do what they needed to do to be successful and responsible. And they bailed.

And whether that's good or bad, right or wrong, that was how they felt. And so a lot of these guys were truly homeless guys. And that's why they were homeless. They had left the whole expectation thing behind because they couldn't— they were on drugs.

Most of it, I think, is probably drugs or PTSD, or all kinds of things that would keep them from being fathers, and they ran. That's what I learned. That was real. And that was a very sad— the book is kind of sad, although there is this reunion and a reunification of father and daughter.

And also, as you know, halfway through writing this book, my daughter who I was separated from, found me in a bookstore. This is after I wrote the story. She walked in the bookstore with her boyfriend and saw my book *Losing Absalom* on the bookshelf and he said, "Is that your dad?"

And that began a brand-new relationship with my daughter, with my family actually. So from a writing standpoint, writing heals. Writing makes connections I think you can't will things into being.

Part 4: Amistad and Afro-Pessimism

David Mura: OK, we're not going to get through all his books.

Alexs Pate: No.

David Mura: But I do—

[LAUGHTER]

David Mura: Because we— Years ago, Greg Tate and—

Alexs Pate: Arthur Jafa.

David Mura: —Arthur Jafa, they did this performance for Intermedia Arts where they just talked. And they agreed they were going to talk until everybody left.

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: I was the curator.

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: I'm sitting with this brother, sitting right here. And I'm like, "How long is this going to go on?"

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: We had a party scheduled for post show. People went out, went to bars, came back for the after-party. And these brothers were still up there talking. It was hilarious.

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: We can't do that.

David Mura: Yeah.

Alexs Pate: Now we'll kill you.

David Mura: I promise you, we're not going to do this tonight.

[LAUGHTER]

David Mura: But I do want to ask you about the Innocent Classroom. Yeah, we'll go about ten more minutes. And then we'll open it up for questions from the audience.

So I want to talk about *Amistad*. How many of you have seen the movie? Yeah, most of you have seen the movie. So you know the movie.

If you know the movie, the movie opens with the slaves revolting on the ship and attacking the Spanish sailors on the ship. You don't understand what they're saying. There are no subtitles. So it opens with an act of violence of blacks upon whites. And you don't understand what they're saying.

The film is framed through the eyes of Roger Baldwin, who's a young white lawyer, played by Mathew McConaughey. So Alexs took this script of this film and really made an African-American novel, a black novel. And if you had made a movie of his novel, it would have been a black film. So I want to talk to you about just the aesthetic choices that you made, how you started.

[PHONE RINGS]

[LAUGHTER]

David Mura: I'm sorry. This is my wife.

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: She's a doctor though. Come on now.

[LAUGHTER]

David Mura: So can you just talk about the way that you opened, why you opened the way you did, how you present the novel? And also, the other thing that strikes me is that Cinqué is your first character who's really free from guilt.

Alexs Pate: Right, right.

David Mura: He's innocent.

Alexs Pate: Right.

David Mura: He sees himself as innocent, but he's on trial. He's still on trial.

Alexs Pate: That's true. I never really thought about that. Well, when they asked me to do the book, I did a little research, and then I wrote the book. I didn't read the script until— I sent them

a manuscript of *Amistad* based on my story that I wanted to tell. And they sent it back to me and said, "Great job. But it needs to look a little bit like the film itself."

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: So I—

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: I mean, it's really important, I think, for writers— so first, I want to do this quickly. So first, writing *Amistad* was one of the most amazing experiences I had. It changed my life. It changed my career trajectory. It paid off for me. It did a lot of good things. But it wasn't my ideas. Therefore, I didn't get rich doing it. And that's the only negative side of it.

The other part of that is that I learned that I was truly a writer, because I could be given a story and I could— the way I talk about it is like they gave me the plans, but I picked the molding. I picked the floor. I picked the walls. I wrote this story. But the premise, the early part of the book, is the only thing that remains from the original draft that I wrote.

I took this on as a project of sort of imbedding in this work a narrative and a theme that they couldn't see. And I really never thought about Cinqué's innocence. I was really thinking about home, and about how most African-Americans don't really know what home is, that it's a quandary, that home is a vexed place, and it's a place where police can come in, and things can change, and our world is really kind of complicated.

And I was just exploring this whole idea, because I was dealing with African Africans and African-Americans. And for me, it was the first time I had to come up against that dichotomy. It's like, what does it mean to not have any guilt within you?

But I was also dealing with the moment where guilt is created. When you think about Adam Smith, Adam Smith said the true power of our existence in this culture is property, from an economic capitalist standpoint. And the only real property is your body. So when you give up your body, you in fact already are walking into an environment to be a slave.

So it lead me back to the Middle Passage and all the Africans who jumped off ship to keep from being enslaved, and how we celebrate our strength and persistence and survival on Sundays in black American churches. We survived. We survived. And it's a really powerful narrative. I get that. But what about the people who chose not to even go through that?

Toni Morrison tackles this in "Beloved," and she does in others. That's a really important question. How do you restore your sense of power and dignity and strength when you've given up your body?

So I was wrestling with all of those issues. And to me, in some fundamental way, if there isn’t any sense of guilt that African-Americans carry, if that's true— and I'm not sure it is— it starts at

that. It starts in that moment, when we really consider the fact that we've had to climb completely out of slavery.

I think where we are right now, where you have an African-American man who is President of the United States, there is a certain way— I was just listening to Nas. And there is a way in which— he has a lyric where he talks about "I didn't change change. Who would have ever expected that change? The change that there would a black man in the presidency makes me look at the flag. I look at the flag in a different way now than I looked at it before."

And I think we are in a progression. I don't know what it means. I don't know where we are. But that depth of not being the owner of your own destiny, it's a long journey to the place where you are the maker of your own destiny. And all the writers that stand between that reality and this reality have been pushing us forward, trying to help us recover dignity and strength and power, and the capacity to make decisions for ourselves that is untainted by the toxicity of slavery.

David Mura: We have a friend, Frank Wilderson, who's a memoirist and an academic. And he writes out of this school of thought called Afro-Pessimism. And in Afro-Pessimism, what they argue is that the ontology of slavery continues to exist in the present.

And so this ontology views whiteness as human, and therefore, as citizen. It views blackness as non-human, and therefore, incapable of being a citizen. As a non-citizen and non-human, blackness is something which can be owned and sold, which can be fungible—is the word the use— which is property. And violence can be wreaked upon the black body—

Alexs Pate: Without consequence.

David Mura: —without justification or consequence. So there's doesn't need to be a reason to wreak violence upon the black body. There doesn't have to be legal justification. You don't have to declare war.

Alexs Pate: Much more importantly—

David Mura: Yeah?

Alexs Pate: —you don't have much recourse.

David Mura: Yeah, you don't have recourse. And I remember when I first read Frank's book. And I thought it was very insightful and useful. It's called *"Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Racial Antagonisms*.

But I thought, is this really the case? But as time has gone on, I've more and more just said yeah. If you read the *The New Jim Crow*, if you look at the last year, if you look at the arguments that we're having about the damn Confederate flag, it's like the past is still living in the present.

Alexs Pate: Hm.

David Mura: You know, you and I sort of argue sometimes about optimism and pessimism. For instance, he thought Obama was not going to be elected.

Alexs Pate: And maybe he shouldn't have been.

David Mura: But I think on the other hand that his argument that the country was not ready for a black president in many ways has been proven true. So I want to ask you, where do you think we are today, given this year of Walter Scott, of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and thankfully, Black Lives Matter?

Alexs Pate: What's wonderful about where we are is there is still hope. It's like a molting that is taking place in this culture. It's like we're scraping our backs up against wood, trying to scrape off the crap that has accumulated there so that people can step forward.

I'm not ready to throw in the towel on that. And I think that we just haven't come up with the proper technique of throwing history off. But this is where we come in. People need to move. We need to move.

So yes, there needs to be street action. There needs to be all of that. But there also needs to be people thinking about this in a brand new way. It's like we need to move. We can't go back to the '60s for our tactics for struggle, in my opinion. There has to be some innovation here. It's time.

So I try to keep my focus very limited. Because I think if you take a big picture look at this, it will lead to a kind of ennui, a kind of emptiness. It's like we're just going around in circles.

There is certain kind of circular familiarity with what is happening. And for those of us who are over 35, 40 years old, we've seen these moves where people are in the streets, there's this response, everything goes quiet. Then something happens. Then there's people in the streets. And we go through. And I'm tired of that. I'm personally tired of that.

So I am not an Afro-Pessimist. But the novel I'm writing, *The Slide*, is based on Frank's theory, that you can't win. That's his— I would summarize it as saying you can't win in a society that doesn't acknowledge your ontological reality, that doesn't accept you as a human being, and that you have to fight for that recognition before you can get anything else.

That's hard. But I think that's the journey we're on. And I said hope, but I think in my novel, the only way to respond to that— in my novel, my main character opens the book in a coma, paralyzed. He's already been beaten. And so the struggle then is, how do you pull it all back together to breathe life, and hope, and then love?

Love is the— and this BS cliché. I think when you're a person like me, some part of that is you just have to live with the BS cliché part of me that believes that hope and love has value. I'm not buying into the despair of Afro-Pessimism.

David Mura: Good.

Part 5: Innocence and The Innocent Classroom

David Mura: And so where does the Innocent Classroom fit in with this?

Alexs Pate: It is an intervention in that circular, consistent— there's a problem. I'm going to scream really loud. I'm going to be the squeaky wheel. You're going to pour some oil on it. And then it's going to keep running until it gets dry again. And then it's going to blow up. And then there's going to be a squeaky wheel. The Innocent Classroom attempts to intervene in the lives of kids.

Just like that drive where I went into a panic attack, it's an attempt to circumvent the panic. It's an attempt to begin working with children of color now, to begin to exorcise, disconnect, and free them from the negative stereotypes that cover and impact their lives on a day-to-day level.

So one of the things that I do, as you know— and you've done it too— is I would ask you, what does American culture tell you about the kids? If you were teachers, what does American culture tell you about the kids that you are going to be teaching?

And I could go to that board, and you would give me a list. And that list would not be a pretty list. They are thugs and gangsters. They're promiscuous and single parents and angry and lazy and loud. I mean, I've done this hundreds of times now.

And I say to them— because I'm not saying this is how you think. I'm saying this is what the culture tells you about them. And then I say, "If you know it, they know it." They know. And they actually know that you know it. They actually are anticipating your knowledge.

They know. If you think about this from an epistemological— that is, how people think about what they think about— kids are thinking ahead of you all the time. She's in her purse.

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: So my whole thing is the only way to intervene is to be honest. Let's be real. Our kids know what we know. They know that even though we're fighting it— I don't see color. I'm trying not to— they look at you like, "yeah, sure." Because they know that's what's happening.

So what we've done with Innocent Classroom is developed a process by which those things can be disconnected. So we help— we're using the phrase now— "free children to achieve." It's like, free that child.

And if you've read any of Claude Steele's work in stereotype threat and stereotype consciousness, while I was developing this idea, I ran headlong into that theory about stereotype threat and stereotype consciousness, stereotype consciousness being the thing that we all know stereotypes exist, and we all know they exist about us. Stereotype threat is when you actually take an action, where you are aware that that stereotype exists about you, and you try to act differently, or you

surrender to the stereotype. And our kids are presented with that challenge every single day, every time, every minute of the day, on busses, walking in, we are all presented with that conflict every day.

When I walk into a restaurant, if they put you at a bad table, am I going to go off on you? Because I feel like this is what you do to all the black people who walk into your restaurant, who you didn't anticipate. I'm going to get a bad table. Or am I going to sit there and take it, even though I don't feel comfortable with it? Or am I going to look around and say, "Well, this is the only table. This is natural, normal."

But we've got to go through this process all the time. This is a weight. This is weight. This is a barrier. And our children have to go through this all the time. And nobody has acknowledged that they have to go through this. And nobody's there to help them. So what we're doing is trying to prepare teachers to help our students, help them operate outside of that paradigm.

Because there is another way. If you don't validate the stereotypes, or if you accept and acknowledge the stereotypes and blow them away, and then focus on individual progression, and the relationship between— somebody who cares about you, and who you acknowledge cares about you, has to be the one to help you move past that. And one of the least ways in which our teachers are trained is to develop authentic relationships with their children, with their students. And so Innocent Classroom is about helping teachers build authentic relationships with the express purpose of leveraging those relationships in an effort to help our children not respond to stereotype threat.

David Mura: So what are the barriers that the teachers face to doing that?

Alexs Pate: The same barriers we've been talking about this entire session. It's difficult. It's very difficult to go through the process of thinking a kid with his pants around his butt who is talking out of turn, who's disruptive, who's angry, who's cursing at you, has something really good, is good, has something really powerful that you can get in touch with, and you can leverage that to change his life.

You have to get past that. And that doesn't mean accepting bad behavior. I mean, I'm talking about an authentic relationship. In an authentic relationship, there is accountability. And so it's about getting to the place where you can claim an authentic relationship with a child, and then asking them to be accountable to that. Now it's time for you to do your homework.

So it was theory. It was theory four years ago. We have documented proof. We have evaluators who have looked at it. We're seeing changes in test scores, changes in suspensions and referrals, changes in school culture. It's just amazing. And teachers— it puts teachers right back in the place where they should be, which is to be engaged in a child's life in such a way that you can actually teach them.

David Mura: OK, so I have one more question, and then we'll open it up for questions. So in certain ways, the progress of your work has been towards a reclamation or reconnection with your own sense of innocence. And in certain ways, the work has been a laboratory for you to

develop this program, and a meditation on the themes of guilt and innocence and the ways it has affected the psyche of African-Americans and people of color. And I know that you have gone through your own journey on that.

Alexs Pate: Yep.

David Mura: Can you speak a little bit about that, and where you are now?

Alexs Pate: Well, from that moment, that panic, I began to do the inventory, and began to think about how many ways, why I would never go camping, why—

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: There are lots of things that are on that list.

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: And why I shut myself off from the outside world as a way to protect what little bit of innocence I've had. I don't expose myself a lot to the outside world because I can't control crazy people or racists. A lot of people are used to dealing with all that stuff. I didn't expose myself to that a lot while I was going through this process.

I was writing an essay called "Revolutionary Innocence." I've been it for fifteen years. It led to the development of the Innocent Classroom. It is a bringing together of all these ideas. But I think being aware of these issues as a black person, as a person of color, and charting, I have a list of things.

I took Sxela to the Children's— we go to the Children's Theater at least once a year for a party or something. Not Children's Theater, the Children's Museum in Saint Paul. And if you're a black man, and you're with a child, people look at you like you just robbed a bank. What's going on? Why are you here? Are you OK? Is she OK?

You might not believe this. But I've talked to a lot of men. And when you're traveling just with a child, people look at you like, "wow, I've never seen that before. That's really interesting. Is she OK?I mean, this is maybe not what they're thinking. But this is what I think they're thinking. And it makes me really uncomfortable.

And Bao, I saw you there that day, right? He was there with Sông. And I was there with Sxela. And I got home. I got all the way home. And I looked up. And I thought, "I didn't have that feeling that day." And I checked it off of my list.

I was at a party for a colleague when I was at the University, that dark place called the University of Minnesota.

[LAUGHTER]

David Mura: So we named one of the institutions.

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: Yeah. If we keep going, I'm going to start naming people.

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: I was at a party for our department and I had a drink or two. And I had to drive home. And it was way out somewhere, and I got lost. And I saw a cop car parked in front of an apartment building, lights flashing.

I drive towards the car, make a U turn, pull up alongside it. I rolled my window down and said, "I'm lost. I'm trying to reach 94. Can you tell me how to get there?" And he says, "Excuse me?" I said, "I'm lost. I'm trying to get to 94."

He gets out of his car, walks around to my side of the window. He says, "Well, you want to go up there two blocks, make a right turn, and you'll run right into it."

I drive off. And once again, I have a panic attack. I pull over halfway between there and Minneapolis and I catch myself. I was like, I did that. Protect and serve. He was there to help me.

Because normally, you go the other way. I was like, "What am I doing?" I'm in a suburb. There's a cop car waiting for me. This is my destiny. When you lecture in front of African-American men, that's like destiny right there. I didn't know what it was going to be, but now I know. He's waiting for me.

And when I tell that story to other brothers, they're like, "Man, you could have been killed that night. That was so dangerous." But I'm like, "This is the test. This is the test of innocence."

Audience: Yeah.

Alexs Pate: You have to constantly press, constantly. That's scary. It's scary. But if you talk about it and think about it enough, you start doing things you didn't know you were going to do. And then you do them. And then it's done.

It's like if you've ever been in a car with people of color, and you pull up to a corner, and there's a cop at the other side of that street, everybody goes, "Hey, there's a cop!"

[LAUGHTER]

Alexs Pate: Because you know. And if he comes up behind you, destiny has arrived.

Audience: Yeah.

Alexs Pate: Brake light? That's why, in "The Outlaw"— And I just think when you don't go through that check list, when you're not thinking that way, and then you get past that point, and you realize, oh, that happened, and it didn't faze me, check it off your list. I'm reaching a degree of innocence that my dad did not have, my brother, that nobody in my family had.

I mean, it's just hard to live. I just couldn't keep living that way. And somebody has to blaze this trail for us. And I think there are a lot people out there doing this, don't get me wrong. But I think we have to do this.

I think Trayvon Martin is the hero, the martyr. Because he turned to face that guy. He had done nothing wrong. There's no reason to be running. You didn't do anything wrong. The guy was not a police officer. There was nothing. And he turned to face him.

That's the tragedy of innovation and progression and heroism. That's how it happens. You're just being stupid and dumb, maybe, being out that time of night, smoking dope, or whatever he was doing. I don't really care. But the fact is, he did nothing to warrant the punishment, the consequence that he engaged in.

But I see him differently from some of those other experiences. Because he turned. I'm going to turn and face you, because I'm not thinking there's anything bad going to happen. Because why should there be something bad about to happen?

I'm done with that. It's hard to live like that. We shouldn't have to live like that. My daughter is not going to live like that. We're not going to live like that. It's time to change.

[APPLAUSE]

Part 6: Q&A