

John McWhorter on 2017-01-25 at 13.03

LOURY: John McWhorter, how are you doing?

MCWHORTER: Hey, Glenn. How are you?

LOURY: Getting by over here in Providence, Rhode Island, at Brown University, where I am a professor of economics, and I'm also the host of *The Glenn Show* at Bloggingheads.tv. And I am introducing my friend and conversation partner, John McWhorter of Columbia University, where he teaches linguistics and humanities and all manner of things, and the longstanding contributor to the Bloggingheads enterprise. So welcome, John. Welcome here. It's week one of the Trump Administration. An inauguration has taken place. A cabinet has been appointed and is in the process of being confirmed. Policies are being rolled out. And statements are being made. And it's up to us to parse it. You have to --

MCWHORTER: You notice, Glenn, that -- it's interesting. Whenever Trump talks about how bad the inner cities are, there's people who suddenly talk about how the inner cities are actually not nearly as bad as he says, and the -- you know, we hear about all of the coherency in the community, etc. But then, if it isn't him saying it, then what we hear is that the black community is, in many ways, worse

off than it's ever been. And, you know, you hear all this apocalyptic rhetoric. And it seems that, now, the new variation of it is that he says in his inaugural that there's carnage. And what that means is, for example, black teenagers shooting each other over sneakers and whatnot in the cities. And he wants to do something about it. And we're supposed to cluck our tongues and say that he's exaggerating what the problem is, or that him focusing on this carnage is pathologizing black people and is, therefore, racist. When, in fact, you might say -- and this gets back to an earlier conversation of ours -- that this quote, unquote, carnage is really much more of a problem for most people in inner city communities than the occasional rogue, white cop. And yet we're supposed to look upon his saying he wants to help the inner city as just a variation on Richard Nixon talking about law and order. And really, it's just a veiled way of him saying that black people are no good. I'm not sure I quite understand that at this point. What about you?

LOURY: Well, I think I do understand it, although I don't necessarily endorse it or agree with it. In fact, as a matter of fact, I don't endorse it or agree with it. Certainly your description of many people's reactions is accurate. I think that is when Trump says things are bad

in inner cities, they say he's slandering black people; he paints with too broad a brush; black America is complicated; it's not just a bunch of ghettos with, you know, failing schools and gunfire going off. And that's certainly correct. That's not black America. On the other hand, I don't recall Trump ever having said, you know, "All blacks are like this." What I recall him having said is, "We got a serious problem here in America, affecting our African Americans, and I'm going to fix it. I'm going to fix it." Now the reason I think that people are re-- that many people react in the way that you described is that they don't want to give credit to the idea or the possibility that he might be right on some of the substantive policy questions that are at stake here. So, for example, he touts the high murder rate, the carnage, quote, unquote, in Chicago, President Obama's hometown. He can be heard to recite how many have been killed, how many have been caught, since the President was elevated -- Obama to the Office of the President in 2009. And he's going to fix it. He's actually now announcing -- so I heard in my newspaper this morning -- that the Feds are going to go into Chicago and try to fix that problem if the local authorities can't do it. Consider the contrast. Consider the contrast. President Obama, a native of Chicago -- I

mean, you know, it's his adopted hometown. He gets elevated to the highest office in the land. Carnage flows over onto the streets of the South Side and the West Side of the city. And he does nothing much about it. Perhaps quite unfair. It is a local problem. What can the President do? You can ask these questions. Well, he can mobilize the Justice Department to go in and investigate the Chicago Police Department for its malfeasance and its racism and its misdeeds. I'm for that, by the way. I'm for calling out the police department for its misdeeds and having a federal oversight of local police authority when they step wrong. That's OK with me. That's something that he can do. But he can't, really, can he, given the atmosphere that's been created in this era of Black Lives Matter, say, "We have a first order emergency on the streets of our cities that has to do with black people killing black people." He doesn't have to say it that way, but that would be the bottom line. "I'm going to take action because I care about those lives. Those lives matter to me. And here's what I'm going to do." And then he has the following extraordinary action. First of all, he embarrasses his compatriot, Rahm Emmanuel, former Chief of Staff at the White House of Obama, and Mayor of the City, who should already have been doing whatever it is

that needs to be done. And secondly, he gives ammunition to the anti-black lives matter types who are saying, "You framed the problem wrongly." This is something you just said a moment ago. You just said, "It's a bigger problem than what the police are doing." And the President, that is Obama, couldn't have said that without stepping on the political program of some of his allies. So that's what I think is going on. And, I mean, we're going to see. Trump is going to federalize something in Chicago. He's going to send in the National Guard. I don't know if this is what he's going to do. He's going to have the US district attorneys start prosecuting local criminal cases whenever the federal government has jurisdiction there, in order to get a tougher kind of law enforcement visit. [He's?] going to support the police union in Chicago, which is in constant battle with the civic authorities there with the community. He's going to take a side in that. I mean, it's going to be interesting.

MCWHORTER: And, I mean, obviously, the man has no idea. I mean, he has never had occasion to delve into these matters. And I, you know, go into my anti-Trump route. He's not a curious man. He doesn't know. I have said in the media over the past week that he has to be read as somebody who thinks a lot like an adolescent. And that may

be a slam. It may sound like a slam. I mean it as an empirical statement, just as that amoeba reproduce by splitting in half. He has a childlike mentality. But the point is he wants to do something about that situation. And he doesn't want to do it because he's worried about these guys bothering white women as they go by with their purses. I don't think any of us would say that what's worrying him is what that does to the white community. It's a black-on-black -- sorry -- issue. And he has all these plans for what he wants to do for the country. And of all things, he considers that -- despite how easy it is to call him a racist -- he considers that part of what he wants to do. Just like he wants to put up these walls, and he wants to cut off the old trade deals, he wants to stop black people from killing each other in the inner cities. And, you know, if he has anything going that would be different from what's going on so far, I would have to welcome it. And yet I'm quite prepared to say something like that in print and be roasted by a certain contingent for a week because I dare to support Trump, and it wouldn't be expected from McWhorter and blah, blah, blah. I'm not sure that this is the way to do it. I'm very disappointed in this presidency. I mean, this week has been bizarre. It's like something out of a movie. But if he says that he

wants to do something about the carnage in the inner city -
- and carnage is what it is -- I'd like to take a look.
You know, a stopped clock is right twice a day. And so I
really wish that people would give him a bit more of a
break on this.

LOURY: OK. So you're joining me in the give-Trump-a-chance
position, at least on this.

MCWHORTER: Yeah. On that.

LOURY: So I'll accept that. (laughs) That's not as far as
I'd like to see you go. But, I mean, one step at a time.
You make two different kinds of points. One of them is
about the maneuver that Trump is making vis-à-vis, quote,
the carnage. And then the other is about the general
quality of him as a human being and of the team that he's
assembling. I'd like for us, in due course, to address
both of them. But let's talk just for a moment a little
bit more about the first. If he's able to make any headway
on this, if he's able, in a year, having done something --
whatever it is -- task force, at the Justice Department --

MCWHORTER: Give it two years. Yeah.

LOURY: Give it two years -- OK, midterm elections, 2018 -- to
see a significant impact, that he could, you know, maybe
lie and say, "It's caused by what I did," because he
wouldn't know whether it was really caused by what he did

or not. But it's going to be hard for people to argue with -- you know, nothing succeeds like success. It's going to completely flip the script about these problems. OK, so the issue of the Republicans being racist and not caring anything about black people -- OK, so a president engages in extraordinary action, which his African American predecessor elected not to pursue, on behalf of the objective of making life better for black people, OK? Not in some theoretical sense, you know, enterprise zones, and capital is going to flow into the city, and everybody's going to be rich, but in a basic, you know, sort of gut-level, hardheaded sense of, the streets were unsafe; there were too many guns on the streets; there were too many people getting killed. Repeat offenders are being let out of prison too early. Gangs were roaming (overlapping dialogue; inaudible), --

MCWHORTER: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). Yeah.

LOURY: -- etc. If he's able to actually do something about that, it'll just take -- it'll make the discourse completely different about these matters. As it is now, the names Richard Nixon and his southern strategy, Ronald Reagan and his War on Drugs, and Donald Trump and the presumed indifference that he has to black people, and how hell is going to descend upon persons of color because this

guy doesn't care, that's the narrative. And that narrative won't be sustainable if he's able to make some headway. So this is smart. Whatever might be his deeper values, it strikes me that this is very smart politics on his part. And if I may say so -- and I have to say this, John, and forgive me for going on so long -- I predicted this, I don't know, 18 months ago.

MCWHORTER: Oh, you mean the deal that he would offer to black --?

LOURY: No, I meant the idea that he should make a major component of his domestic policy platform dealing with the problems of the inner cities: bringing jobs, fixing schools, and addressing the question of safety and violence in the cities, that that should be a major thing that he would do. I -- before he had done it, I said that that would be a -- now he's doing it and, you know, I have to say that I'm kind of happy about having been right about the President's behavior. I just hope it pays off for the benefit of our people. (laughs)

MCWHORTER: Well, I'm not happy that I think I may be right in that after you said that, what I said was, yeah, and if he did it, or if he doesn't -- kind of left it in the subjective, then the usual suspects would just dismiss him as a racist who couldn't possibly mean it. And from, you

know, the news, roughly over the past 48 hours, it looks like that might be true. And I think that that's really a shame. I think that your prediction, more locally, is interesting. I mean, let's say that if, in two years, it's painfully clear that Chicago has really turned the corner, then the impulse of the people we're talking about will be to seek to deny the connection. That will be considered the right thing to do, not to just open up their eyes and say, "Wow, something is actually working, and an awful lot of people are happier." Instead, the first strategy will certainly be to try to make an argument -- although it's going to be a fragile one -- was that there was already a decline before anything Trump did started to take effect. So let's say that, for some reason, there's some kind of decline from exactly tomorrow until about May. That will be seen as indicating that it wasn't Trump who created it. Or the idea will be, yes, crime is down, but employment opportunities are lower, and so these people have been, you know, turned loose in a world that has no place for them, or something like that. It'll certainly be that. No way will you see something like Slate admitting that something good has happened. Although, Glenn, there's another issue: [Carson?], and his idea that people need to get off welfare, and that's what Trump implied in his speech. And

let's concede that there was probably a racialized meaning to the welfare. I certainly heard it that way. I'm going to agree with you again in that there is a crushing amount of evidence, of which I'm sure you're aware -- and this is something that a lot of people left of center have a very hard time facing. Some of them don't know it. Some of them know it, but it just doesn't fit with the thought pattern -- which is that there are an awful lot of young and young-ish men -- and now this is race-neutral -- who could work, but don't. The evidence from all corners is crushing that that is on the rise over the past 50 years. And I don't think their lazy. I think that you speak the language that you grow up in. If you grow up in a setting where a man who doesn't work 40 hours a week is not celebrated, but it's just -- it's normal. Not all men you know work 40 hours a week, and yet the ones who don't are part of the community, and nobody really calls them on it, and that's just the way it is. All you have to do is grow up in a community like that. And even if the community became that way because of a true lack of job opportunity decades ago, even if that's how it started, if the cultural trait just continues if the sense of norms have changed, then even when the economy changes, you may have a different sense of what it is to be a contributing human

being to a community. That has happened to a lot of guys and there are a lot of studies. William Julius Wilson shows that in his own work, and work disappears in a lot of the interviews he does with inner city black men, way back in the '80s. There's a lot of that.

LOURY: Well, let me ask you --

MCWHORTER: And s-- welfare -- very quickly, very quickly.

Welfare is kind of a shorthand, but there does need to be a movement to get able-bodied people, certain able-bodied people back into steady work. And if Carson is all about that, that's another stopped clock that might be right twice a day. Go ahead.

LOURY: Well, no. What I wanted to interject was -- critical is whether one understands the low level of work as a supply-side or a demand-side problem. Whether you understand it as reflecting the in-- the lack of interest in working on behalf of the unemployed men, or whether you understand it as a result of the fact that aren't decent jobs available, I think Bill Wilson, whom you cited, would acknowledge that the absence of work is important when work disappears, but would say that it has mainly to do with the structure of the provision of jobs, not with the values or interests in working of the people in the community. I think that there are others who, on the right, would take a

different view. I think -- I'm thinking now [on?] the work of the columnist Robert Cherry, who's at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. I mean, he's not, anyway, comparable to Bill Wilson, in terms of his distinction as a social scientist, but he has paid a lot of attention to the data with respect to employment, and has been trying to explore this question of whether many of the maladies that we see in these communities, including, you know, violence, and drug trafficking, and gang activity, and so forth, is somehow connected with low attachment to the workforce amongst the men in these cities. Looking across American cities at the extent of non-employment amongst young men, white and black, and correlating that with other social maladies. And he provides evidence of the sort that you are talking about to support this.

Though I think he's probably more -- that is, Robert Cherry -- friendly to the notion that the values and the kind of behavioral habits that have taken root in some of our least advantaged communities are a deep part of the problem. Oh, and by the way, JD Vance of *Hillbilly Elegy* fame, who writes about poor, white people, says the same thing. That is, says that this mentality of non-work and of being carried by the system is part of the problem and people are -- you know, sort of learned helplessness and things like

that. So anyway, that's what I wanted to interject. I took too long to say it.

MCWHORTER: Yeah. I think -- yeah. I think that if Carson is aware of that, and acts on it, then there's something where I could certainly get behind it. It would be good to see more of those guys working. JD -- the Vance book, which I've now read and reviewed, is a perfect example. And it's interesting that the punditocracy kind of likes that book. You know, the idea is that he's considered insightful in showing that cultural attitudes can persist beyond the conditions that set them going, which is something that a lot (inaudible) have a really hard time with. And everybody thinks it's OK when it's about these Appalachian whites, but I think a lot of reviewers have missed, if you understand where Vance is coming from, with his quote, unquote hillbilly self, then why is it different when you're talking about black people? And for a lot of people, the answer is racism. Racism draws a bright line. If you're laboring under that kind of bigotry, then it's different. But I don't think anybody truly believes that bigotry, either overt or covert, is the difference between a black, poor guy not working and a white, poor guy not working. It doesn't make things easier for the black guy, but it doesn't keep him unemployed. Time has passed. And

yet that conversation doesn't seem to be being had. And it worries me. *Hillbilly Elegy* could really be called, basically, *Poor, American, Young-ish Man Elegy*. But people don't want to upend it that far.

LOURY: I got to say a couple things here. One's about jobs and one's about the culture of poverty. Concerning jobs -- I'm not going to make this a prediction because I think it's quite unlikely to happen -- but I will -- I want to pronounce -- and this is entirely in keeping with what we've just been saying now about the importance of work. If the Trump Administration is serious about throwing down a marker and fixing the inner cities, they ought to declare something like, we have projects that need doing. Anybody who wants to work has got a job here. We're going to pay you -- I'll make up a number -- \$15 an hour, OK? You have to show up at 7:00 in the morning, we're going to give you an hour's lunch break, and you go home at 4:00, OK? We're going to pay you for a day's work. Anybody, OK? If you're not an axe murderer, if you haven't been convicted on embezzling on the scale of, you know, one of these embezzlers, or something like that -- I don't care if you were hustling a little drugs here and there. I don't care if, you know, you got caught. Whatever. We got a job for you. All comers. Anybody come. We are going to pay you.

Employer of last resort. Nobody should be without a job, OK? If they say that, I don't know how anybody -- except the unions, OK, who will object to all these people taking away work from their members -- I don't see how anybody could object to that. That's one thing that I wanted to say. On the culture of poverty, the reason that the reaction to Vance is much more accepting of him giving a graphic depiction of culture of poverty-like impediments within the white community that he grew up in, much more accepting of that than they would be if somebody giving a s-- Ben Carson or somebody giving a similar characterization of black communities, I think, has a lot to do with the history of race, and racial rhetoric, and racial stereotyping, and racial scapegoating. People remember from 40 years ago, from 75 years ago, maybe even from 20 years ago, during the welfare reform debate, they remember how race was trotted out in a thinly-veiled way of saying that these people are unfit, that if only they were like us, they wouldn't be poor, and so forth, and so on. And they don't want to encourage -- black and white commentators don't want to encourage that kind of narrative about black people: The reason they're poor and that they're lagging is because they're lazy, because their families are broken up, because they're dependent on

welfare, because they don't have our values. They're not hardworking people. They're not real Americans. That's the subtext of that kind of talk. And people are afraid of that talk. And you have to acknowledge, I think, that they have warrant, historically speaking, to be afraid of that kind of talk. But we needed a pivot, I think. I mean, and I'll stop. We're in the 21st century now, well into the 21st century, man. I mean, it is not any longer 1960, or 1940, or even 1980. And the reticence that people might have for taking seriously a cultural component to the much broader problem should, I think, be abandoned, or should be diminished because I'm convinced, having observed these matters for quite a while, that it's definitely -- that is, the cultural issues are definitely a part of the problem. People say that culture is a consequence of structure; it's a result of opportunities. I will say, to a certain degree, that's true, but not completely so. You can't tell me that people don't have free will, communities don't have control over the values they teach to their children, blah, blah, blah, blah. I don't say culture determines everything. I say it's a part of the story. A lot of people disagree with even raising that in a racial context, but I think that disagreement is really an anachronism that we're going to have to abandon.

MCWHORTER: You know, I worry sometimes about this issue of memory, though. I completely get your point. But sometimes black America is discussed as if it's this one organism, in a way that I don't see a lot of other groups being discussed. And so, for example, there is certainly a way of talking about black people and work, particularly in the 1970s, the 1980s, and maybe into the '90s. But it's gotten to the point where for you to have been a mature person, and heard about that way of speaking, and been really imprinted by it, at this point, your hair is graying. I mean, I think, you know, at 51, I remember that conversation when I was a teenager. And you could've been a teenager and not been paying attention. Frankly, I apparently was. What worries me is that there are people now who are 26 and 27, who are laboring under the same memory you're talking about, where when somebody says something about culture, we're supposed to think, well, their memory includes watching things that Ronald Reagan said on the news and reading about it being discussed in *Time Magazine* at the time. They don't remember that. I think that it gets to the point where there's a culture of a different kind, which is just to resist all criticism of black people at all costs because part of black identity, subconsciously, is feeling beleaguered, and feeling like a

hero because you're living through all of this racist abuse. But your proposal would be a glorious thing because -- let's say that all of that work was offered. All of a sudden, it's 1933. I'll bet there are now bureaucratic obstacles to this, such that it could never happen. I've read a little bit about it. But let's say that you could actually do that and say, "OK, inner city people, you have a job, unless you killed somebody," or something like that. The restrictions would have to be pretty lax, because if they weren't, it would be, well, no, this is no good because so many of these people, because of racism, have criminal records. So you have to really think -- pretty much everybody. If you did, and it was that stark, then -- two things, (inaudible): One, it could be that, you know, 95 out of 100 of these men would go to work, and inner city communities, whatever color they were, would turn upside-down. Two, and I think more likely, is that an awful lot of people would go to work, but an awful lot of people, rather mysteriously, would show up for a while, but then it kind of wouldn't work out, and it wouldn't always be because they were too addled by this or that to do it. Some people just wouldn't be up for it, I think just because of a lifetime's condition. And a lot of them would be very good people. This would show it. This would

indicate that we're not only dealing with structure. We're also dealing with what structure can leave in its dirty wake. And then people could understand culture matters, too, and not just as something to discuss parenthetically over the coffee break. So either way, it would work, but wouldn't be nice if something like that happened, and basically, everybody just went to work. It would just silence an entire conversation.

LOURY: Can I say --

MCWHORTER: Trump would be real (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

LOURY: I'm sorry to interrupt. OK.

MCWHORTER: -- to try it.

LOURY: I got to say a couple of things. One is, I know you mean this, but it should be said, women are welcome, as well. We just mean men, OK?

MCWHORTER: Yeah. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: We don't just mean jobs for men. We're not saying that only men should be getting work, or whatever. We do think male unemployment is an issue, but --

MCWHORTER: Very important.

LOURY: -- this would be open to everybody, and the idea is, you know, I mean, whatever. So I think that needs to be said. The other thing that I wanted to raise here, though,

is it has to do with -- and I wonder what you think about this, John. We constantly have this kind of trope or meme -- that is, you and I, Glenn and John, the black guys at Bloggingheads.tv -- in which we say, "Here's what we think." And then we say, "But, you know, there are a bunch of usual suspects out there who would never agree with us." Now you surely have noticed in the comments section that some people have said, "Oh, guys, get over yourselves." I mean, they've said a number of things. They've said, "Have some of those people on." And we say, "We've tried and they won't come," and so on. And then they say, "Oh, guys, get over yourselves. You know, talk about the issues, and not just talk constantly about whether the people arguing are not doing." We're -- not to mention certain names here, like Charles Blow, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West -- we must not speak of those people, because then it would appear that we're obsessed with them and that we're only being driven by reacting to them, and we want to be them, and all this kind of crazy stuff. And I'm simply flagging the issue for our own sake, and that of the audience, and inviting you to make any comment that you might want to make about that. Because that's not what we're about in my mind, although it may come across that way sometimes.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, that's an interesting point. You -- I don't mean this as any kind of slam, but you read the comments section more than I do, partly because, frankly, it's usually mostly about you. But the --

LOURY: That's a damn good reason, John. (laughter)

MCWHORTER: The point about us mentioning those sorts of people all the time, I frankly think some of the audience miss the point on this. And that is that -- it certainly isn't that we want to be them. The reason that it rankles us so much that those people say what they say is because they are there powerful shapers of opinion. And frankly, the way I feel is that if person X, if we're not supposed to say their names, writes something that makes black people seem like children, humanity's first eternal children who have no control over their own face, then I don't like it that I'm looked at, by extension, that way, by especially, yes, white readers. There is a kind of black thinker -- I got mauled by one in the *New York Times* book review last weekend. I wrote a nice, little book, as a matter of fact. I'm going to --

LOURY: You just happen to have a copy at hand, eh? All right. John's book.

MCWHORTER: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: Everybody, John's book.

MCWHORTER: *Talking Back, Talking Black.*

LOURY: *Talking Back, Talking Black.*

MCWHORTER: And the nice (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

LOURY: Can I say, "talkin'"? Do I have to say, "talking"?

Can I say "talkin'"?

MCWHORTER: You should say that. Yes.

LOURY: OK. (laughs)

MCWHORTER: And I wrote this. And they assigned it to somebody. I don't know who this person is. But they don't like the book because they think that I'm talking mostly to white people, which I'm not, but let's say that I was. Let's say I was writing it about black English and trying to make white people understand. The bad thing this reviewer says is that it's academic. Folks, I did not write this book for academics. It's written for everybody. Anyway, suppose I was writing it for white people. He has -- this reviewer has an idea that I shouldn't be concerned what white people think, and that, really, it must be that you and I wish to curry their favor. We wish them to know that we know Greek, and that we have cotillions, and that we're above the common mass (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: The politics of respectability is what we're guilty of.

MCWHORTER: It's like in '05. No, that's not what it is.

It's that smart people who have a lot of power listen to, if I'm going to say a name, Charles Blow. And so you wind up having a conversation with somebody who clearly has read Charles Blow that morning and is waiting for you to agree with an ideology that, frankly, is dehumanizing. That's why those people come up. It's not that either of us wants to be Charles Blow. It's that we don't like what is shaped as the mainstream opinion about what black is -- very quickly at this point, you know, it's --

LOURY: No, explain why it's dehumanizing. I want the listeners to hear you. I think I know what you will say, but explain why it's dehumanizing.

MCWHORTER: It makes it seem like you are psychically weak, that tiny slights ruin your day in a way that it wouldn't for other people. It makes it seem like the people who you consider yourself to belong to have no agency, have no control, and require not only an open door -- and I get the open door; that's called 1964 -- but then, also, that the playing field be completely level. Now everybody knows -- and yes, especially if you're in New York City in educated circles, where every second person you meet is Jewish -- everybody knows that under conditions like that, a people can thrive, and the fact that Jews were white is not all of

the story. A people can thrive. It's a certain kind of ideology that, in about 1966, when our people started coming to the forefront through the open door, it really makes me tired. And so I told you, very briefly, a story of how I have -- one, Jewish is not the point -- an educated upper-middle class white friend, and a little older than me, who sincerely believes that I must be bypassed by cabs all the time in New York City. I'm not. I've lived here for 15 years. I've been waiting and waiting for it to happen. I am a night owl. I've been in many kinds of neighborhoods. I've been taking cabs in all sorts of directions. They don't. That was a problem 20 years ago. I know it was. It's changed. This friend can't believe that this doesn't happen to me all the time. And it's because of reading things like the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times*. She thinks that I'm just not noticing it. And in general, she thinks that I walk around not noticing all the racism that's perpetrated against me, which makes me a little bit angry. She thinks I'm a child in that way. The reason she thinks it is not because she's a racist white person. She doesn't have a racist bone in her body. It's because she reads Ta-Nehisi Coates and Charles Blow. That's why those people get on my nerves, because they make black people look weak, of course, by

extension, me. But in general, I think they're telling a story that's an insult to their own people. Does that make sense?

LOURY: It does make sense. But it makes me want to ask you, why would those people who are being insulted by this story, nevertheless flock in droves to support and consume the intellectual production of these commentators? It's not just white people.

MCWHORTER: Well -- Glen, your sound dropped out.

LOURY: Can you hear me now?

MCWHORTER: Yeah.

LOURY: I said, it's not only white people who are influenced by, or devotees of, the Charles Blows and Ta-Nehisi Coateses of the world. It's many black people. So if black people are being insulted, as you and I maintain -- and I agree with what -- every word that you just got through saying about this agency problem. And this was the point of the brilliant review of *Between the World and Me* that --

MCWHORTER: Will --

LOURY: What's his name again? Williams.

MCWHORTER: Thomas Chatterton Williams.

LOURY: Yeah, Thomas Chatterton Williams published in the *London Review of Books*, you know, wait a minute, don't we

get to decide how we live? Notwithstanding the vicissitudes and slings and arrows of the outrageous history, don't we make our own lives? Aren't we responsible for what our children do in our own communities? Really? We're just puppets at the end of the string, being jerked this way and that by white supremacy? We don't have anything to say about it? You invoked the Jews, and of course, by extension, there would be many other ethnic groups who have faced discrimination in American History and who have, nevertheless, prospered. Why can't we prosper? No, slavery was unique. I grant you that point. But slavery was also 150-plus years ago. So you mean to tell me --

MCWHORTER: And (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

LOURY: -- that black people uniquely -- black African American people, uniquely amongst the ethnic stew of American society, are incapacitated by the slings and arrows of an outrageous historical fortune, such that they are merely supine objects of the historical flux, and not subjects who make their own lives and make their own history? I mean, I'm sorry, I elaborate on what you say. But I agree with it 100%. But why don't black people agree with us about this, John?

MCWHORTER: Noble victim. It feels good to be the victim when your conditions actually are relatively comfortable. Many people have documented this on both sides of the ocean that we're both closest to. It gives one a sense of purpose. It gives one a sense of legitimacy. I mean, everybody is subject to an extent, when they're a kid, to the tattle tale complex. We all have it. We all, to an extent, have the martyr complex. It's just an outgrowth of that. I'm sure psychologists would have a field day analyzing it. But yeah, it can be very attractive. And, you know, I think it -- one thing -- talk about the comments section. We should say, it's not just slavery. Many people would say, "Yes, but Jim Crowe only ended 50 years ago." And you realize that the real significance, I've come to realize, of Coates's *Atlantic* article that really put him in a new place -- the real significance is to extend it even further, the idea being that, then once Jim Crowe was over, there was redlining, which kept black people in their own neighborhoods and kept them from pursuing opportunities outside of them. Because the redlining argument, rather conveniently, extends it from 1964 until roughly about 1976, because redlining, the practice, didn't end as soon as the Fair Housing Act of 1968 came along. So the idea is that we're still rubbing

our eyes from something we just got over around when Jimmy Carter became president. And I still don't get it. No. No. I don't think that redlining explains what's going on in Chicago right now. I don't think so. And the idea that people connected to me would be looked at that way feels like an insult. I think it's empirically wrong. It's empirically wrong in such a clear way that I think that everybody that pretends to espouse it knows deep down that it's empirically wrong. And yet here we are. But yet people must understand, whatever our flaws, we are not sitting here in our offices, angry that we don't get to write something for the *New York Times* every three days. You could not pay me to do that. That would be an insupportable job. It's that those people shape opinion about what it is to black in ways that you and I disagree with. I think that's a legitimate reason to call people out. I assume that you feel the same way.

LOURY: All right, John. Yeah. I'm going to close that subject off, but -- I do, but I want to talk to you about something else: Donald J. Trump. So he gives an inauguration address that many observers said was dark, and belligerent, and didn't reach out to his fellows. And a key part of that inaugural address -- and I really want to know what you think about this -- was America first. We're

going to deal with America first. Now here's my question, since we're the black guys at Bloggingheads.tv: How do you think that we African Americans ought to position ourselves vis-à-vis what is a global upsurge in nationalism. I mean, you're seeing it everywhere, from Brexit, to Hungary, to France, to Germany, to India. I mean, you know, we could go on. And articles are being written about this. But we're seeing it here in the United States. We're going to build a pipeline and we're going to use American steel to make the pipes, OK? We're going to -- it's our people. Whatever the international issues, America first. Now here's my question I'm trying to get to: What should we African Americans, who are thoughtful and reflective, say in response to that? On the one hand, we are on the ship, OK, America, and he's saying, "America first." So if the ship prospers, we prosper, OK? If jobs come back, those are jobs, in part, for African American people. If the borders are secured, one of the consequences of that will be less competition for the labor services of African Americans, especially lower-skilled African Americans in the cities. I'm not advocating anything. I'm just making an observation. The inward orientation -- we're not going to spend trillions of dollars fighting wars in far-off lands; we're going to rebuild our country -- can't be --

can it? -- bad for the people who are the least well off within the country that's getting ready to be rebuilt? Can it be? On the other hand, ideologically, morally, I think of the ministry of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example. There's something in the experience of African Americans that looks beyond the nationalistic interest of the state, the United States of America, towards some transcendent moral ideals. So when King, in 1967, at the Riverside Church, comes out against the Vietnam War, he says things like, I'm a Christian Minister on behalf of mankind. I'm not quoting him, but this is the gist of it. I'm not interested in fighting somebody because they're a communist. I'm interested in thinking about global humanity and what's right for the world, and what's right for -- and he would say, in God's sight, and -- you know, and keeping with my religious convictions. But American nationalism, has it got to be -- because we would associate it, maybe, with right wing, with fascism, with militarism, and so forth -- has it got to be the enemy of the interests of black people? Or put differently, do African American freedom fighters have to be opposed to American nationalism? Or is Donald Trump, in introducing this idea of [American first?], creating a very serious dilemma for African American political activists and

intellectuals? Are we now going to have to choose between a kind of internationalism, a kind of cosmopolitan, transnational sensibility, on the one hand, and getting on a train that's leaving the station to rebuild their country where so many of our people are lacking in opportunity and in resources? So I just want to put that question to you.

MCWHORTER: That's a good think tank paper that I seriously hope you are writing. And my answer, off the cuff, is -- is expression 'on the cuff'? -- no, on the fly -- is that (laughter) I think --

LOURY: You're the linguist.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, and I'm really drawing a blank on that expression. I think that in this moment -- that's something Stanley Crouch used to say -- in this moment, I think that black intellectuals have made it quite clear how good they -- and I don't say 'we' because it isn't my particular beef -- but they can be at being moral beacons. I think that it's been shown. I think that our whole in-house race debate is predicated partly on a sense that black thought has a particular moral perspective to lend to the nation. And all of that, in itself, is quite valid. But I would say that in this moment, it would really behoove the same people to put their efforts into making life better for poor, black people right here, with the

idea being, if America's going to be first, please let us be part of that America. Clean up -- help clean up our inner cities in a way that it hasn't been done before. If there are to be fewer immigrants -- and we can talk about what the morality of that was going to be -- help us -- help channel us into the jobs that will now open up, that if America is going to be first, we'd like to be part of the America, and not to mean it as in, if America's going to be first, then we want to be part of the America, and therefore, we must try to keep teaching all white people not to be racist at the depths of their beings. Not that. But just, let's jump on board. And I think that would be a nice way to spend the next four to eight years, rather than trying to be junior Kings and saying, no, America must not turn inward, and we, as black people who have been through so much are in a position to understand the dangers of xenophobia and veiled bigotry, and we must maintain our connection with our African brethren and sistren, etc. No. I think there's been enough of that. I would have to try to be more pragmatic, myself. What do you think?

LOURY: Yeah. I mean, I asked the question, in part, because I'm inclined towards that pragmatic position. I'm inclined toward the idea that if there's going to be a resurgence of inward focus, nationalistic kind of America-first thinking,

then please, let's let African American communities benefit from that and African Americans being part of that. We are, after all, Americans. And, you know, the communities need help. People need jobs, they need hope, and so on. So that I would want to hold the Trump Administration to a high standard in this regard. You said, "America first." OK, well, we're part of America. You said, "For everybody." OK. Show me. I mean, I want to see it. I don't just want to see corporate profits going up. I don't just want to see factories being built. I want to see results, OK, results for the least of these, you know, within the American (inaudible). I'm inclined to say that. I think we're going to know something when we see some primary challenges within the Democratic party to some sitting African American members of Congress who've been representing districts in America's big cities for decades, I mean, some of them for nearly a half century, people who are elected from majority-minority districts that were created in order to produce an electorate that was demographically friendly to them sitting in Congress, and who are members of the Congressional Black Caucus. When we see some people challenging the Maxine Waters, and John Conyers, and so forth, of the world, on the -- black people, on the argument that all y'all got is a

oppositional power, all you're interested in is thumbing your nose at the president. Well, I tell you what, the year is 2017 and I'm not interested in fighting your old battles anymore. I'm interested in getting something for my people. And I tell you what. I'm prepared to do business with Democrats, Republicans, or anybody else, including Donald J. Trump -- excuse me -- including Donald J. Trump, on behalf of our people. No, I'm not a lackey. No, I'm not an Uncle Tom. You called me an Uncle Tom? Let's have an argument. We're going to get outside -- go outside and we're going to fight about that, metaphorically speaking -- and attracting black votes. They don't even have to win. All they got to do is get 40, 45%. When you start seeing the analog of the Tea Party unseating or trying to unseat some longtime negro incumbents, on the argument that we've been following you people for a half century and we've got nothing to show for it, it's time for new -- you're against charter schools? You're against charter schools? Well, I tell you what. Me and my fellow African American parents who are trying to get an education for our kids are for charter schools. You know what? We're for charter schools, etc. You're against the police? We're trying to get from home to the grocery store and back without getting our heads blown off. You're against the

cops? Well, I tell you what. Me and my fellow, you know, renegade people here are for the cops, including black cops. We want there to be some black cops, but we're for the cops. When you start seeing that -- and I'm not predicting it, but I don't rule it out. I think it's something that really could happen. It would be a harbinger of a real change. I'm hoping for it, frankly.

MCWHORTER: I'm with you, Glenn. I'm with you. These are strange times.

LOURY: Are they, now?

MCWHORTER: I've got to go teach music.

LOURY: All right.

MCWHORTER: And so --

LOURY: We got 45 minutes in.

MCWHORTER: Let's continue --

LOURY: That's enough for a session. We'll talk again in a few weeks. Thanks for giving me your time, John.

MCWHORTER: You're welcome.

LOURY: Teaching music. Teaching what? What are you -- is it Mozart? Is it Beethoven?

MCWHORTER: Today is just --

LOURY: Is it something that I could understand? (laughter)

MCWHORTER: I'm doing a little harmony, major, minor, and a little instruments of the orchestra. And that's -- because

this is one of the first classes, so I'm teaching them the very -- salt and pepper. And then we start with Gregorian chants next week. So we'll see.

LOURY: Ah, that's lovely, John. That's what the core curriculum at Columbia University will do for a human being.

MCWHORTER: That's what this is. Yeah.

LOURY: You know, I'm a self-taught jazz pianist over here, John. You got to come and play my piano one of these days.

MCWHORTER: You told me that once. You said that you can play.

LOURY: Come up to Providence. Give a lecture. I promise that you won't be stoned. And come and have dinner at my house and play my piano. That's -- we got to make that happen.

MCWHORTER: I want that to really happen. I always like it when I'm up there, and it's been a long time, so, yeah. Definitely.

LOURY: All right, my friend. Take care of yourself.

MCWHORTER: All right. I'll talk to you very soon.

LOURY: Bye.

END OF AUDIO FILE