

John McWhorter on 2016-09-12 at 13.15

MCWHORTER: Yes.

LOURY: Hey, John McWhorter, you got the first word in there for a change. This is Glenn Loury at *The Glenn Show* with my partner of conversation, and my friend and colleague, John McWhorter. I'm at Brown University; he's at Columbia University. You guys know us. We're the black guys at the bloggingheads.tv site. And we are here to talk about race in the presidential campaign year 2016. John, thanks for being on the show.

MCWHORTER: My pleasure, Glenn. It's been too long. Good to see you.

LOURY: I took the month of August off -- I'm not going to lie -- from Blogging Heads and, therefore, fell a little bit behind on all of this stuff that's been happening that you and I want to talk about. To wit, Donald J Trump, The Donald, has now come out with a full-throated appeal for his African Americans to vote for him. What do we have to -- "What the hell do we have to lose?" he pronounces. After all, there are no jobs, our communities are unsafe, the -- you know, bodies laying left and right, we're in despair, it's hopeless, nothing has changed, the Democrats have led us down the Primrose Path and haven't delivered.

What do we have to lose? And that has occasioned no small degree of commentary over the last few weeks. Just want to say one thing before I turn it over to you, John, which is, I'm beating my chest now, because I predicted months ago that this was a move that Donald Trump should, could make. I didn't know that he would make it, didn't know he was smart enough to make it. But as a matter of fact, they're doing now, the Trump campaign, exactly what I envisioned might be done by them, which is to say, go to places like Philadelphia and Detroit, walk up and down the streets, decry the lack of jobs, the trash piled up in the corner, the despair, the violence, and so forth, and so on, and say, "Whatever you think about me, I'm a builder, I'm a guy that gets things done, and I'm here to fix this problem. Believe me, this problem is important to me. It's at the top of my list. I'm going to fix it." That's what I thought he should do, and that's what he's doing. And I -- you know, I'm beating my chest, I'll pat myself on the back, and I'll be done.

MCWHORTER: Well, so, what you said -- what we said is he would do it, and that the general line would be to say, no, you can't listen to him. He's a racist. And I'm going to take a line that you've taken, although I think you overdo it, but this has to be said. I think I said, at the time -

- Charles Blow, you can imagine what column he would write. And he must've written, like, three columns, basically, (laughs) in the wake of all that. And to the point that, you know, we don't even need to outline them. And, yeah, I mean --

LOURY: Anybody can go and -- excuse me for interrupting.

Just go and look up these columns, which we're not going to link at the site, but they will be very easy to find at the *New York Times*, and you'll see what John is talking about.

MCWHORTER: Yeah. And so -- yeah. The idea is, you can't listen to him because he is a racist, and this being said in the same vein as somebody 60 years ago would have sussed out, or thought they had sussed out that somebody was a communist. Now, frankly, the word 'racism' and 'racist' have become so -- not just loaded, but they've drifted so much from what they were originally supposed to mean, that -- the whole question of 'Is Donald Trump a racist?' is rich enough to furnish a discussion in itself. I mean, in terms of what we all think we mean, yeah, I don't think that his feelings about racism are exactly pure. But the point was supposed to be, with his offer to the black community, would he help us or not, not what are the feelings in his heart about whether or not he'd want one of his daughters to marry a black person, or whether he thinks

we're smart enough. And I think that that just got completely lost. And, yeah, it was quite predictable. What did you think?

LOURY: Well, I think the distinction that you're drawing right now is important. That is, between, one the one hand, if you will, the characterological reaction to Trump: What kind of human being is he? He's despicable; he's a racist. And on the other hand, again, if you will -- hold on my Mac is telling me, "Not running fast enough to record the video from this call. The recording frame will be lowered to compensate. To prevent this warning," -- OK, we're going to carry on. (laughter) Characterological response: On the one hand, who is this guy? He's a bad guy. You know, he is, 'I'm racist,' as you might say, on the one hand. And somehow -- I don't know what programmatic or political response, which is to say, OK, he raises a question. Well, what do we have to say about the question. And the case at hand, he raises a question about, our African Americans (laughs) in the inner cities, and whether or not they've been well-served by a certain political program, which you can trace back to the 1960s, and you identify the Democratic Party, and the extent to which deviating from their conventional voting habits -- might be 20% of them, 30% deviate. And they don't all have

to deviate. Just enough that they actually matter for an electoral outcome -- might be to their advantage. Now that's a question that nobody kind of wants to engage with, because they're so outraged, or maybe they're afraid. I don't know. Maybe they're outraged that a man like Trump, of his character, would raise it, or maybe they're simply afraid that if you go down that road, you're going to get answers that you're not really looking for. But what do you think? Do you think it's worth discussing the characterological question, is Trump a racist? Or do you think that that kind of talk is -- you mentioned it -- not dissimilar, in some ways, from the talk about, is so-and-so a communist. Somebody who wants to debate in 1948 policy toward China, or in 1952, the nature of the New Deal. And you're on the right, and you see them wanting to raise these questions about, you know, America's role in the world, or about the structure of our internal social relations, and you dismiss them by imputing a motive to them, a dark motive, OK, unspeakable motive, OK, unpatriotic communist, a traitor. This is unspeakable. Racism is functioning a little bit like that in our political climate today. Unspeakable motives. You're all-right, you -- whatever. I mean, in one of Charles Blow's columns, which we're not going to dwell on, but the one

that ran this morning or yesterday, he says Hillary Clinton was right to characterize 50% of Donald Trump's supporters

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MCWHORTER: As deplorables. Right.

LOURY: -- as a basket of deplorables because they were homophobic. Whatever. And he has statistics saying what Trump's supporters believe. And among them are, 62% think that blacks are more criminal than whites, OK? Now --
(laughs)

MCWHORTER: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: But there is more crime per capita committed by black people than white people, OK? That's just literally true. Does that mean that there's something darkly criminal about the negro soul? Well, no. And I expect many of the people who responded affirmatively to that question don't think so, either. Some of them probably do. But really? You're going to banish a discussion of racial differences and criminality by waving the racist, bloody shirt in somebody's face and daring them to say it? What a foolish strategy, because they don't forget the facts. You just push the facts underground when you do that.

MCWHORTER: And see, the problem is, there are two interpretations of that kind of behavior. One is, frankly, that somebody like blow isn't bright to see these

differences. And that's not true. It's clear that it's not a matter of him not having the mental fire power to understand that you can't assume that somebody who says that black people are more criminal thinks that black people are gorillas. It's just so facile. It doesn't follow from A to B, because society is complicated. So it means that he's under the grip of an ideology. And I'm not going to say religion again. But it's that there's a certain pattern of thought that you're expected to exhibit, regardless of the facts. And, of course, that type of person thinks that you and I have the ideology, but really, there are blinders. And here's an example of how bad this has gotten. We're talking about Trump being a racist. Remember 15 minutes ago it was Hillary who -- and I'm now getting comfortable with calling her by her first name, which I used to really not like, but we have to, to distinguish her from her husband. So that's why I'm beginning to stop saying, "Is Clinton..." Hillary we were calling a racist because of the super-predator comment and these policies that she supported 25 years ago. And we had a whole lusty conversation from all the usual suspects about how she shouldn't get the black vote, as if she wasn't going to, because she, too, is, 'I'm racist,' in a way that you have to sniff out from the language she used,

and what happened to black communities in the wake of these policies, which people like -- and I'm not calling her out as some sort of fraud or something -- but people like Michelle Alexander, talking about the damage to black communities, all with an implication that this is the portrait of Black America that, yes, there are some Glenn Lourys and Michelle Alexanders and me. But, really, the meat of it is this ghetto-scape. And this is what people like the Clintons supported and left behind. But then, when Donald Trump says, "Well, what have you got to lose, given that you're living in exactly the ghetto-scape that the various people talk about all the time?" then, all of a sudden, it's time to talk about the plurality of black experiences, and to kind of shove the underclass under the rug, and to talk about how, now, it's a race-neutral concept. None of this -- I don't to say makes sense, because that's too loaded. None of this follows logically anymore. The idea is simply that your job is to cry racism, regardless of where the facts are taking you. This is a sickness. Glenn, here's a genuine question, because I've been reading a lot of James Baldwin lately, because I enjoy him, and I realized about two months ago, I haven't nearly as much of him as I often let on. So I'm actually reading a whole Library of America volume.

LOURY: That's great, John. I'm happy to hear that.

MCWHORTER: And I can't believe how many of the things we talk about now were already being talked about, not in 1980, but in 1950. The whole business about poor, black people actually want more policing in their communities. Conservatives were saying that in 1960. Is it worse now, the way we're talking about racism, than it was in 1960 or '70.

LOURY: Yes. It's obviously worse in my mind, because the objective circumstances today are much less severe an impediment to African American life aspiration than was the case in 1950. And yet the failures in social development in some quarters of black society had the festering problems that exist, for example, the violence in the streets of cities like Chicago, but also, you know, low school achievement outcomes, and so on, are stark. And so, I mean, I think part of what's going on -- and I take no pleasure in saying this -- is that there's a kind -- that accounts for the confusion, the flip-flopping that you just described, which is vivid. You're quite right. On the one hand, African Americans are catching hell, so much so that professional football players can't salute the flag because the country is so bereft of justice for black Americans. And this is reflected in every statistic. The school-to-

prison pipeline, that whole narrative is built upon the fact that African American kids are vastly overrepresented among kids who are disciplined within school buildings, presumably for the behaviors that they exhibit. The affirmative action debate -- this is at the high end of higher education at elite, selective higher education. But all of this stuff about diversity, and inclusion, and the exclusion of the African American students is built on basic, factual circumstances of the relatively low rate of penetration of conventionally-defined barriers of achievement into these elite institutions. It's strange credulity to think of them as, if you will, actively, racistly excluding African Americans. The -- Michelle Alexander's great celebrity and cultural influence is driven, in large part, by people's revulsion at, shame in the face of, despair over the overrepresentation of African Americans in the criminal justice system, and so forth, and so on. And we're in the year 2016. And, you know, the world is moving on. The country is very multicultural. The Hispanics are a bigger and more politically influential minority. The Asian American population grows rapidly and is impressively dominant in various exclusive venues of performance, and so forth. And African American circumstances are lagging. And I think, you know, there's,

like, two crudely distinct, distinguished accounts one can give. It's their fault, African Americans, or it's our fault, American society, OK? The stake that people have in the latter being the narrative embraced by respectable -- and not the former -- is huge, OK? So any hint that one wants to talk about the former, it's their fault, that it's African Americans, about the structure of our families, about the values communicated to our children, about the extent to which we work hard and pursue the same path of achievement as other nonwhite immigrant groups are pursuing in this country, about our criminality, about the violence that besets our communities, any inkling of crediting that it could be their fault -- I speak now of African Americans; I speak of ourselves -- that it could be our fault, and not the society's fault, not the failure of American capitalism, the failure of American democracy, the failure of American politics, the racism of the Republicans, the latent racism, the structural racism -- I mean, all of this language, all this theology-slash-ideology that you are given to pointing out, it seems to me, rests upon the knee to ward off, at all costs, the imputation of responsibility to African Americans for the persisting subordinate position that we, taken as a whole, occupy in the society. That's what's at stake. Donald

Trump has to be a racist. And not only Donald Trump, Glenn Loury and John McWhorter will, at the end of the day, have to be racists, too, or deluded, self-hating, contemptible, Uncle-Tom-ish, you know, carrying favor with the white man, practitioners of respectability politics. There's no alternative but that the world has to be seen in that way. Otherwise, the desperate straits into which a third, 40% of our people still have fallen, in still language, will be vivid, and the responsibility for it will be spread around, not just to whites, or to racism, or to the structures of American society, but to African American culture, to the structure of our family, to the values that are embraced and that we teach to our children, to the extent to which we seize the opportunities that are available. I mean, the stakes are humend-- tremendous here, so I think. That's my view.

MCWHORTER: You know, Glenn, there's a -- we're making a request, though, that I'm not sure of the reasonability of. And this is what I mean. A lot of what you said, especially if the discussion was the way it was 20 or 30 years ago, would've been a frustration at black intellectuals. But more and more, you and I are frustrated with the way white people are looking at these things. And it brings me to mind of, you know, Ta-Nehisi Coates's

piece, two or three months ago, where he said that your thirst for fame was Saharan? And what did he -- he knocked me. And what he didn't like about me is that I didn't like what the white response to his book was, and that I was more interested in the white response than in the black man who wrote the book, as he put it. And that's an interesting way of looking at it because, yeah, what makes me sick about *Between the World and Me* has nothing to do with Ta-Nehisi Coates's personal experiences. It's that the white response to it is that that book fuels the narrative that black people have no real responsibility for their actions. And the problem with this, Glenn, is this, that I see that more and more in educated white people today. I have some good -- you know, very Upper West Side, white, Jewish, of a certain age, New York friends -- except they don't have to live on the Upper West Side -- who swear that, when I say that over the 15 years I've lived in New York, I've never been bypassed by a cab under any conditions. I know that happened before, but by the time I got here in 2002, it must've been over, because it's never happened to me, and I'm always waiting. They swear that I must've missed it. They think that I'm in some kind of denial. They kind of pat me on the head. And, of course,

they love Ta-Nehisi Coates's work. They're fueled in it.

I went -- I'm not going to go on too long. I went to a --

LOURY: Yeah. Go ahead.

MCWHORTER: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) gathering the other night, in that kind of crowd, where the idea was for people who don't know each other to chat, get to know one another. I swear, at the end of this thing, there was actually almost -- it was like a ceremony, where the person convening it brought up the whole Black Lives Matter issue. This person is white, talking about how that bothers -- what happens to black people with the police bothers them more than anybody. And as we went around the table, it became clear that what everybody was supposed to do was say a certain kind of thing about black pain and the police, regardless of what they did in this life. Some of them were kind of baffled, but everybody got into line, including me. You had to do it. Now this is my question, Glenn. These white people have learned their lesson. You know, 40 years ago is gone. They know that to be black is to be this victim of racism. Whenever we walk outside, it's all about racism. Responsibility and self-help are taboo. They've learned it. Then somebody like you or me comes along and says, "You know what? You're treating us like children. This is a kind of racism in itself." You

know what, Glenn? If I were one of these educated whites, listening to somebody like me saying that, I don't know what I would say or do. My impl-- my general feeling would be that that person needed to be dismissed as somehow not representative because it's hard enough to me to wrap my head around this idea of these people as beleaguered in the way they say, anyway. And now that I've mastered this [epipoise?], I'm not going to listen to this contrarian who says that this thing that I've learned about white privilege isn't true. I get why they don't listen to you and me. It's too much. It was hard enough for them to accept the gospel that they had to take in after 1966. I'm not sure we can expect them to change. Are we telling them to start telling people like Ta-Nehisi Coates to give it up? (inaudible) --

LOURY: All right. I think --

MCWHORTER: What can they do?

LOURY: I think what we're telling them is to take black people seriously, and then we're trying to offer a vision of what we think that means. I think we're telling them that Ta-Nehisi Coates and his ilk, to the extent that they are able, lyrically, eloquently, powerfully, with pathos, and passion, and fury, and, you know, economy of phrase, and memorable expression, to give voice to, you know, what

American racism has wrought, that that's not an -- I think what we're telling them is that that's not enough. I mean, admiration of, appreciation of the fact that racism has wrought what it has wrought is not enough. And we want to be taken seriously. It's the soft bigotry of low expectations. George W Bush's phrase, but it's apt. It's apt, OK?

MCWHORTER: It's a good phrase.

LOURY: OK. Now, I mean, if you've got people mowing down innocent bystanders with automatic weapons, behaving like barbarians, behaving so cruelly and viciously, evidencing such a contempt for the value of life -- and that has become an epidemic problem in certain areas -- if you've got that, the argument that, "Oh, well, what could you expect, after all? We built the ghettos and we locked people in; what would you expect?" is a failure to take people seriously. And I think what -- the message that we're trying to get across to people -- you say it's futile -- I'm not sure. I'm not willing to give up, although I see the difficulty. The message that we're trying to get across to them has something to do with what real equality between black and white in this country would consist in. And it would not be clientage. It would not be a clientele-type relationship of a patronization, in which

enlightened whites bestowed a certain get-out-of-jail-free card, a certain pass from otherwise what would be the judgments that would be rendered, while looking the other way. And that's not equality. That's not -- that's a corruption of the soul of the black man, I would say. That's what I would say from my identity perspective. But it's also a foolish notion for the powers that be of what would actually constitute social justice or equality in the country. So I think this is something at stake here that's worth fighting over, is what I'm saying, though I grant you that the psychological barriers to people being willing to open up to such a thing are serious. But the fact can be just overpowering. So right now, on the ground, in Chicago, certain Democratic politicians like Rahm Emmanuel are taking note of the fact that repeat offenders who have done violent things in the past, and have weapons charges, and who have gotten slapped on the wrist by judges, are getting out and killing people, like the two brothers who are alleged to have shot Dwyane Wade's cousin, while she was strolling her baby on the avenue. They had a beef with somebody, and they fired weapons, and now this young woman is dead, OK? They were, these particular two brothers, recently released on charges that they might've been kept in custody for. And Emmanuel is complaining that the

judges were too lenient. Now we know what Michelle Alexander's going to say about that. She's going to say, "I knew Rahm Emmanuel was a racist all along. He was a part of the Democratic Party cabal that helped the Clintons bring along mass incarceration in the first place. We can't be surprised." But I really don't think that answer is sufficient. This is not about Rahm Emmanuel's soul. This is about how do you respond to carnage and people bleeding out on the streets of a city. And if your only answer is to wave the racism bloody shirt, you have no answer at all to that. So, you know, I think it's a fight worth fighting. I'm not going to give up on fighting the fight. Take us seriously. Ta-Nehisi Coates is the High Priest -- do you know that *Meet the Press* -- Chuck Todd yesterday had a tweet of Ta-Nehisi Coates is featured in his summary report on Hillary Clinton's basket of deplorables? Apparently Ta-Nehisi Coates tweeted, "Hillary Clinton was right," or four words to that effect. That was reported on NBC national network television yesterday, as if it were relevant to anything. So think about the authority that's been imputed to this individual -- I talk now about Mr. Coates -- to be a guide, a monitor, a dispenser of wisdom about social ethics, in the face of these horrific things that we're talking about. I'm not --

I'm talking about violence in Chicago, but I'm also talking about how do you react to Hillary Clinton's politics, and so forth, and so on.

MCWHORTER: He's a priest. That's a perfect example. It's as if he's, you know, somebody who can say four, five oracular words, and they're written on a tablet. It's not an analogy. It's actually what happened. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: And my response is that, that's also, take black people seriously. That's my response.

MCWHORTER: We need -- it's almost as if we need an ad agency to come up with a way of saying that, that would get through to people, because, yeah. It's at the point -- I mean, at my experience that I've mentioned on Blogging Heads many times, of not being able to get into any mainstream org at a very simple, temperate piece saying that Black Lives Matter might also address black-on-black crime. And I've written a piece saying that black-on-black crime is not a bad thing to say. If anybody wants to know what I mean, I wrote it for *Heatstreet*. So I am going to use the term. And I think black-on-black crime is a problem, and yet no one wants to talk about it, including some of my most easygoing, you know, editors. You just cannot have it done. And I think that the anti-empiricism

is striking, to read about how high black-on-black homicide is in Chicago, in particular, this summer, to read about the sorts of things that happen between, one black people and other, nationwide, and to even imagine that the logical response to that could be, well, there's racism in this country; what do you expect? Or, there's segregation. There weren't enough white people around. Or, they're doing this because there aren't enough middle-class black people around to serve as role models, these models we don't use for any other human beings at any other stage in the evolution of this species. Or while we're on Coates -- what the hell -- that passage in his book about how black teens are doing this sort of things because, on some abstract level, they remember the lynching of their ancestors. This is voodoo talk. And yet it's accepted because of this obsession with sussing out racism, which I'm afraid is really just an expression of what people used to vent by being class snobs, or by being people who chased down heretics. It seems to be human impulse, and so something as vital as addressing the heritage of black people and how they're treated has been hijacked by this impulse that I think is really just about feeling good. And that is something that I feel about the white people in question and the black people in question, where our whole

identity is founded on nurturing this vision of ourselves as victims of racism. We need words that can cut through it.

LOURY: OK. I got to do this, because you and I agree. So I have to step out of, you know, my comfortable, you know, posture with which I'm, you know, very familiar, and try to be an adversary here of what it is that you've just been saying. And what comes to mind that I imagine people might say is, well, what about the alt right, OK? What about the real racists? What about the white nationalists? What about the resurgence of white nationalism? What about the implacable opposition to Obama and the Obamas in the White House because they're black? What about the Republican Party's consistent effort to try to change voting rules to make it harder for black people to cast their ballots? What about the racial bias, animus, and hatred that are given voice to, if not always by Trump himself, then by the people who are supporting him? Have you been to one of his rallies? Have you listened to what those people say? What about the fact that a big swath of these rep-- people who support him -- this is from Charles Blow again this morning, or yesterday: "I think the Confedera-- we wish that the Confederacy had won the Civil War." What about that? You know, what about the Georgetown University's

legacy of transacting and slaves? What about the present-day reminders that any African American thoughtful person has to confront on a daily basis, and all of the symbolism, and memorabilia, and ceremony, and so forth, of American political culture, of the subordinate status of African Americans? What about that?

MCWHORTER: Yeah. (inaudible) -- I mean, it's pretty easy. I'm not sure where it was ever said that racists went away. I think we've always assumed that they would always be there. If you put the right words to it, you can get a room clapping by saying that racism is forever. So they're still there. Now, of course, these organizations increase in membership. Does that mean that racism is on the rise, or is what's on the rise that people sign up for an organization? Yes, there are going to be, quote, un-quote, deplorables out there. And I presume that we can survive. We've survived so very much else, and the Georgetown story is not what happened 200 years ago. It's what the university is trying to do to address it. And I think it's very interesting that you read in the response of many people, to what Georgetown's trying to do to address it, a certain unmistakable implication that there's nothing they could do that some people would consider enough. The idea is to assail the past and to assail the fact that this

university is up and running in the present. The idea that they could do something where we would finally say, OK, yes, it was awful. You have redressed it. We can move on. That seems to somehow be against the program. There will always be racists. The issue is how much power they have. And as far as they have less and less power -- and know what Dylan Roof did does not cancel out the whole discussion. He's one person. As far as less and less power, then I consider that progress. To run around looking for bigots -- well, you're always going to find them. You're always going to find these organizations. Does anybody notice that it's easier to sign up for an organization these days because of something called the internet? That doesn't mean that things are worse than they were in 1960, or does it mean that they were the same. So those people's responses, frankly, don't interest me because they're not giving me real evidence of anything getting worse. Who ever said racism was going to be gone? The issue is whether it hurts people, and how much. But we're not supposed to talk about that, are we?

LOURY: No. I mean, I'm listening to you, and I can't say that I disagree. A couple of things come to mind, and now I'm arguing with myself, because just a moment ago, I was trying to take the other side of the argument. One thing

that comes to mind is, how can you live by the identity politics sword and not expect that it's going to have two edges to it? In other words, how can you constantly live in a world in which race is everything, blackness is everything? The first thing we want to know about somebody, if they are assaulted by a police officer, is the race of the officer and the race of the person assaulted. And if that combination comes in white-black, then we've got a real federal offense and we're off to the races. We're concerned about the racial identity of the students who study in our elite universities, and we got to get it right, and the faculties of these universities, and we got to get it right. The overrepresentation of African Americans amongst those being punished for lawbreaking is a matter of grave concern. We indoctrinate our students when they come into the university -- indoctrinate them or, you know, induct them, you know, transition them into our communities in ways that overly, in my view, attend to their racial and gender and sexual orientation identities. That's who they are for us as they come in. So we live by the identity politics sword. Well, then, what happens when white people discover that they have an identity, or white southerners from the hill country of eastern Kentucky and southwestern Ohio, or whites who grew up good ol' boys,

where the Confederate flag was a symbol of regional pride, or whatnot, and who are willing to tell someone asking them on a questionnaire that they wish that the Confederacy had won? Are they racist? Are they any more racist than the Black Panther Party celebrants who constantly are talking to me about a Republic of New Africa kind of vision of -- Michael Eric Dyson started off that infamous piece of his, that Open Letter to White America in the *Washington Post* -- or was it the *New York Times*? It was the *New York Times* -- a couple months ago with, "Black Americans are a nation of 40 million within a nation of 320." Really? Black Americans are a nation? Racial skin pigmentation defines a kind of political, civic identity? And then I'm going to be surprised if certain white people begin to also elaborate those identities? No, no, no. I'm not saying Jim Crowe racism was a reaction against African American pride and self-love. No, I'm not saying that. But I'm saying the politics of 2016 is dripping with racial identity politics claims. We view the electorate almost entirely in those terms. How many liberal pieces have we read where people are crowing about the fact that whites are going to become a minority, that they'll soon be a minority, that it's going to be a majority? So if you live by that sword, and then you discover that there are some

white people who say, "Ah, we're becoming a minority," there are some white people who say, "Ah, we're going to have pride in whiteness," there are some white people who say, "My kid didn't get into the university because he's white," and now they're racist, and you think that you can simply wave that bloody shirt and make it all go away? OK, you cannot. And the threat that Donald Trump could actually win this election, heaven forbid, for the sake of the country -- but I don't think anybody here in mid-September with less than two months to go till election day can declare with certainty that he will not -- rests in my view substantially upon the smug, morally high-handed, supercilious arrogance of people who think that they can simply pull that card out, and play it, and make every other argument go away, and everybody else is supposed to run to their corner and shut up. They ain't running and they ain't shutting up.

MCWHORTER: You know, it's interesting that -- of course, many people's responses to you would be that these, you know, white people from Arkansas, etc. have to understand that black people are the victims and that whites have been the oppressors, and so they're not allowed to have a sentence of, you know, ethnic pride or anything because, of course, their entire sense of group-hood is founded on the

existence of the subordinates. And it actually -- it's funny; we don't normally talk about this kind of thing. It brings me back to a Baldwin point. Baldwin was huge on the idea that Black America would o-- that America, in general, white Americans remained broken and incomplete until they acknowledged their role in black despair and black oppression, that white people didn't want to see it. And when I read him saying that -- and he said it on and on, way past the late '60s. That was a big point of his. And I think to myself, this is a man writing with a cigarette in his hand, having been told in New York City that he could not eat at a diner -- and this is -- he's in the other time. And this is where white people, even then, are saying, "What are you so upset about it? You can do whatever you want." That's what he meant. Now today, his heirs are making the same point. And it's often considered profound. And whoever's up there, forgive me one more time. Coates does this. And so in his reparations piece, he has one line where he says, "America needs to face itself squarely." That's Baldwin. So chalk one up for Toni Morrison's estimation. America has to face itself squarely. So white Americans need to look in the mirror and see their role. I see that point as obsolete now. I'm just -- to take some random human being. I don't see why

Hillary Clinton needs to look in the mirror, and face herself squarely, and think about her role in black oppression. Or, if she's a politician, then take a Hillary Clinton who isn't famous. I don't get it. The woman at the supermarket? Does she need to face her role? I think that the nature of the oppression today has gotten so abstract that the point is lost. But it's interesting. I think that Baldwin was part of seeding this idea, but people didn't allow for times to change, that whites aren't allowed to have an identity because a crucial part of especially poor whites' identity is being not as down on the bottom as those black people. And many people who would listen to you now would say that you're ignorant or unfeeling not to understand that the good ol' boys' identity is black oppression. As Coates would say, it's heritage. And so what would you say in response to that?

LOURY: No. I get this completely. I can hear my colleague, Professor Tricia Rose admonishing me. Right now, right now, at this very moment, I can hear her voice --

MCWHORTER: That's what she would say.

LOURY: -- because what we're doing here, I think she might say -- or I would bet money that she would say -- is we're kind of indulging a post-racial sentiment, you know, a kind of colorblind post-racialism, in which we want to rush past

the meanings and the deeply-entrenched mechanisms and processes of social reproduction that create, and reproduce, and legitimate African American social disadvantage. We want to remove the race element from the discussion. And it's clear that white people have an interest in doing that because then they're relieved of the responsibility of responding to the thing, but black people ought not. We ought to -- it's been transformed into a different kind of oppression. You no longer are giving the direct -- you know, no blacks need apply, you can't get the loan, we don't hire black people here, you know, restrictive covenant on the housing transactions exclusion. But you're getting -- and, you know, I'm not -- this is not my argument, so I may not be giving it the full force that it's due. You're getting, you know, more subtle, like the system of mass incarceration, which is ostensibly race-neutral. We have laws. If people break them, they're punished, but -- which is really dripping with race, both because of history -- the particular laws we have, have evolved -- also because the settings in which black and white people find themselves are so very different, constrained by such very different forces, such that the same laws will bite differently to the black people. And since we're not talking about those -- that history, and

we're not talking about those racially different conditions -- we're talking about the law being racially neutral -- we're missing something important. Likewise, I think, a person in this spirit might argue underperformance in the academic realm, you know, teacher expectations, biases of one kind or another, the absence of role models, all the kind of stuff that, you know, you would not be much persuaded by, but that's what people are going to argue, I think.

MCWHORTER: Yeah. One of the hardest ones is the idea that, on the one hand, you'll have an article explaining why poverty makes black boys less able to keep still and more likely to lash out in school. But then you have a whole literature, growing in bookshelves of literature about how black boys are overly punished in school just because of the way they talk. There's actually a study showing that the way you walk affects how much you're punished. And is this crisis -- and it's hard to hold both of those same things in your head. It's just that they seem to --

LOURY: Oh, and by the way, if I may, there will be no discussion about how many of those boys have fathers at home who were disciplining them on a basis, and providing a role model, a male role model, of how it is that you're

supposed to conduct yourself as a responsible adult. Too few of them do.

MCWHORTER: Or if there is, still, the judgment has to be that they're being over-punished. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

LOURY: Let me say, I'm thinking about my course I'm teaching on race and inequality to my Brown undergraduates this semester. And a book -- I don't know if you've seen it -- that I'm likely to assign is a memoir by a white guy called JD Vance --

MCWHORTER: This book that's running around. Yeah, I've read it.

LOURY: Yeah everybody's reading this book.

MCWHORTER: I've read it. Read it. Yeah.

LOURY: Ah. I've read it. I actually read it. I was over in Southeast Asia. I had some time on my hand on a long airplane flight. I read the book, cover to cover.

MCWHORTER: It's actually pretty good.

LOURY: I was moved by it, man. This is a hillbilly.

Hillbilly Elegy is the book. Everybody should've heard about it by now because it's at the top of the Bestseller List. JD Vance, he grew up -- born in Kentucky, grew up in southwest Ohio -- you know, hill country Kentucky, coal miners and stuff like that. They're hillbillies, OK?

They're hillbillies. They got all the cultural traits that hillbillies got and he describes them in some detail.

They're violent, they're drunken, they're drug-addicted, they're pathological in their family life. He had, you know, men coming in and out of his mother's life all the time. No guy ever lasted --

MCWHORTER: Lackadaisical attitude towards steady work.

LOURY: Yeah. Lackadaisical attitude, heavy welfare dependency, got an excuse for why they're not doing anything. You know, everybody's got an excuse. They have no -- the world hates them, prejudice against them, blah, blah, blah, blah. And he -- somehow he gets to the Marines after high school, he gets to Ohio State University after the Marines, and he ends up at Yale Law School, which is the best law school on the planet. It's the hardest law school to get in on the planet. He gets to law school. He doesn't know what fork to use when he goes to the dinner. He's wearing tennis shoes to his job interviews. You know, think -- I mean, he just doesn't know what to do. And he's a hillbilly, OK? I mean, he's just hill-- now here's my point. My point is, when I read that book, it reminded me a lot about the South Side of the Chicago (inaudible) that I'm familiar with from my own growing up, OK? There's a lot that these people have in common, these people who are

hillbillies on the one hand, and residents of inner-city ghettos across the land on the other. It seems to me --

MCWHORTER: Like Tom Sowell's book.

LOURY: There's a lot --

MCWHORTER: It actually talks about redneck culture and black culture.

LOURY: I see --

MCWHORTER: Remember that one he wrote? Go ahead.

LOURY: No, I don't remember that. But I'm not surprised. It sounds very much like Sowell. No, I can conclude. I'm just trying to say, identity is a multidimensional vector, we would say, in economic analy-- multidimensional array of different kinds of traits. One of them is race, or the color of your skin, the texture of your hair, the shape of the bones in your face. There are many other elements to that array that define identity. One of the most important moral choices we make in life is which elements of our own specific array of multidimensional qualities do we tend to settle upon as the central ones for defining who we are, who we are as political beings and as social and moral beings. And race is only one of those dimensions. And the mono-cultural identity dynamic, in which people wanted to (inaudible) themselves primarily in those terms, is, I think, a mistake, politically, because your alliances would

be more capacious, more robust, more extensive, if you were to admit that you had -- and this goes both ways, of course; it goes on both sides -- a lot in common with the white people who were poor and the black people who were poor. But it's also morally problematic that you reduce the full range of your humanity. You know, look at the empathy that's lost. I should be able to look at a good ol' boy, waving one of those Confederate flags, who came out of some hollow somewhere, where there was no money, nobody had any jobs, everybody was coughing up emphysema, and they were beating their children and, you know, whatever, whatever, and see something that I can identify with, rather than simply putting a racist basket-of-deplorable label on that person and turning my nose up in contempt. I should be able to see something in the fact that we've discussed here at Blogging Heads that when the police run around, and they've got too much power, and too much firepower, and they're shooting civilians down, twice as often, the people who are shot down are white people, as are black people. Now I'm not trying to erase anything in saying that. I'm saying, empathy. I'm saying, a moral presentation of self, which is complicated, and nuanced, and which admits of seeing commonality across the racial

lines. Black is not the whole thing. It's not the main thing.

MCWHORTER: You know, it's funny; you're talking about that book, and the reviews of that book are as interesting as the book, in a way, because really, *Hillbilly Elegy* is a sort of white version of Shelby Steele's first book. And I daresay, I read it, and I thought, this is my book like that. It's called *Losing the Race*. And I thought, this is a *Losing the Race* that had a better editor, and so it isn't too long. This is one of those my-people-my-people books, except his people are white. And it's interesting because you can see in a lot of the reviews that white reviewers read *Hillbilly Elegy* and they're inclined to agree, to some considerable extent, with Vance's analysis that to probably more than 50% of an extent, it's the people's fault. There's a cultural problem. And they feel OK in thinking that about those people because they're white. But then I think everybody sees a certain inconsistency, because they know that if they were reading about brown people then they would assume that it was the system. And so I forget who did the *Times's* review, but the end it by saying that Vance is talking about people who are in despair, and so the idea is that these are people -- basically, it's the system. This person -- I don't know whether it was the reviewer or

an editor that felt that it had to end that way, because you can't condemn them, because there's a short step from that to saying that, really, we have to apply the same analysis to people in Chicago, because I think everybody knows skin color alone cannot be the only -- the differential that many people would say --

LOURY: (to outside person) Hey, give just a minute, OK?

MCWHORTER: -- that it is. It's a very interesting book because I think you can't -- you cannot read *Hillbilly Elegy* and not realize that circumstances can create cultural patterns that take on a life of their own, such that it's no longer the circumstances anymore. We're not supposed to say that about black people, but it's so clear that that's what's going on with the *Hillbilly Elegy*. And there's nobody to condemn, but wish that people would look at that book and think, here's now, maybe, I need to think about South Side Chicago; here's now I need to think about black people, as well, to treat them as adults, because I think it would be a healthy thing for our discourse. I don't know if that's going to happen, but it's a very interesting book in that way.

LOURY: You're right. You're spot on, as far as I'm concerned, John. I couldn't have said it better myself. Absolutely, absolutely right. That's the first thing that

I thought when I read Vance. I thought -- (laughs) Tanehisi Coates is at the top of the Bestseller List with the book that he writes about black people. JD Vance is at the top of the Bestseller List with this book that he's writing about those white people. And that's not an accident. In other words, what becomes an acceptable piece of cultural production, which is really pointing to culture -- this is Vance -- when it's got a white face on it, it's fine. It -- you know, it's fine. But if it has a black face on it, that kind of posture, that would be too much like Thomas Sowell, too much like -- well, too much like John McWhorter.

MCWHORTER: To get to the top of the list as a black writer, you'd have to fail the system. Right.

LOURY: So this is all very interesting. We should probably come back to it. But I'm going to have to cut this short now because I have someone else waiting to talk to me, John.

MCWHORTER: So do I. This was good, Glenn.

LOURY: Yeah, I think so, too. Thanks very much.

MCWHORTER: To be continued.

LOURY: Indeed. Take care of yourself, my friend.

MCWHORTER: You, too.

END OF AUDIO FILE