

bhtv-2017-12-20-loury-mcwhorter audio

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LOURY: So, let's get started. This is the *Glenn Show* at [Bloggingheads.tv](https://www.bloggingheads.tv). This is the *Glenn Show*, this is Glenn

Loury, with John McWhorter, my frequent conversation partner John McWhorter of Columbia University, a linguist and professor there. Me, an economist at Brown University. We are the black guys at Bloggingheads.tv. [Self-styled?]. And we have business as black intellectuals, talking about politics in America, because the Twitter wires are afire with controversy. [Ta-Nehisi Coates?], Cornel West, a conflagration. John, since your heart is so much in this conversation about these guys, why don't you take over and set the stage for us to talk about it?

MCWHORTER: Well I guess what's been interesting is that first, Cornel West, who is not usually known for writing, you know, as much as we think of him as an academic/intellectual, he openly prefers talking to, you know, writing. You don't know West all that well as you might think from say, op-eds. That's just not his thing. But he actually took the occasion to write a piece in *The Guardian*, for some reason, I mean it's a reputable place, but he could have gotten it in many places, but he --

LOURY: [Any?] newspaper, OK, I mean go ahead.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, anyway. So in *The Guardian*, he wrote a piece where he assails Ta-Nehisi Coates for being a neoliberal, and that's using neoliberal in the modern sense of basically a conservative in liberal clothing who is an

apologist for an oppressive status quo. Which is an unusual label to apply.

LOURY: [If I may interject?] accuses him of fetishizing white supremacy.

MCWHORTER: Yeah. Kind of a forced argument, if you ask me. Because yes, Coates believes that white supremacy is a supreme evil, and he argues against it, and West's idea seems to be, and of course there's a logic in this, I suppose, that in arguing that white supremacy is such an implacable force, and that it's the only thing worth talking about as the cause for black problems, Coates is giving it too much power, and not talking enough about what we should think of as the real problems. And for West, this is a kind of cross-racial approach that he's espousing, where we're supposed to be talking about Wall Street. We're supposed to be talking about general oppressive powers that move people at Haymarket, etc., and that therefore Coates, of all people, is a bad guy in not fighting that broader fight, and in fetishizing --

LOURY: Let me get this straight, John. You're defending Ta-Nehisi Coates? I just want to make sure I'm hearing you.

MCWHORTER: From that charge, yes. I mean he's making it sound like Ta-Nehisi Coates is basically in cahoots with the cigar chomping white plutocrats, which is of course, a

rather odd analysis given that Ta-Nehisi Coates has his fist stuck up against what he sees as black people's main problems, and frankly, seems to despise the country that he lives in. So it's just a bizarre, a bizarre accusation from West, and it almost makes me wonder whether there's some other source.

LOURY: Don't go there, don't go there. (laughter)

MCWHORTER: Well, I don't know if I'm going where, you know -  
-

LOURY: [Sorry?]. (laughter) You wouldn't like it if somebody did that to you.

MCWHORTER: Well let me say quickly that the scuttlebutt is that West is just jealous of Coates, because Coates become, you know, I genuinely don't know if that's what it is. I don't know.

LOURY: Not talking that way. (laughter)

MCWHORTER: Yeah. What do you think?

LOURY: Well first of all, I think West's motives are unknowable, and I think it's a fundamental violation of civil conversation to speculate invidiously about the motives of a person with that kind of -- it would make argument impossible. I mean Ta-Nehisi Coates has been successful, therefore any criticism of him can be dismissed, any, as motivated by a jealousy, especially if

it came from a black person. Think how kind of damaging that is, it poisons the well in a certain way. No, I want to give West the benefit of the doubt, I don't know what his motives are. Why should I impugn, you know, I shouldn't do that, I shouldn't do that. I should meet his arguments. Now my response to West is not dissimilar to yours. I'm not going to defend Ta-Nehisi Coates, but I will say that yeah, I think West is [off?] -- first of all, there's nothing wrong with being a neoliberal! There's nothing wrong with neoliberalism as I understand it, which would mean something like a laissez-faire, low regulation, believing in markets, thinking capitalism was a good thing, kind of view. Thinking corporations actually were legal fictions through which shareholders, workers, and customers entered into contracts that produced value, and that value is distributed through the corporation. Not that corporations were the incarnations of some kind of evil. Thinking that the United States had enormous responsibilities on the global stage that needed to be exercised in some way. If Barack Obama was going to be president of the United States, obviously he had to conduct the American military. A trillion-dollar enterprise with far flung assets all over the globe, and interests that go back 100 years. How is Barack Obama going to be president

and play footsie with Cornel West and that, you know,  
coffeehouse left-wing romantic bullshit? OK, so --

MCWHORTER: (laughter).

LOURY: (inaudible) West on that. I'm not, I'm not.

MCWHORTER: You make it sound like he knows it's bullshit.

But OK. (laughter) And I didn't say it was, exactly.

LOURY: [I think?] there are criticisms of Cornel West, I mean  
of Ta-Nehisi Coates, in virtue of his use of the Barack  
Obama presidency. We were eight years in power? Come on,  
that deserves the contemptuous response of any thoughtful  
person. We? Who the fuck are we? We were eight years in  
power? And who appointed him to speak for we? So, the  
racism, I mean come on, it's time to be serious people, an  
adult people. The (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)  
implicit in a public advocacy of African Americans that  
takes it in some essential way as politically meaningful  
the color of people's skin, contrary to the very  
fundamental moral principle that got us the revolution out  
of Jim Crow in the first place, is a mistake. OK? There's  
a particular Ta-Nehisi Coates, and you don't have to go to  
whether or not he thinks that Obama should have arrested  
the Goldman Sachs executives. You know, so that's my  
response.

MCWHORTER: Yeah. Well you know, what I find interesting is that West is accusing Coates of having been some kind of apologist for, or bootlicker, for Obama, when you know, last time I checked, Ta-Nehisi Coates was being accused by some people, much more quietly than he would be now, but some people were daring to say that he was too critical of Obama. And there's a whole story of Ta-Nehisi Coates going, you know, to that White House event with various journalists that were invited to -- black journalists were invited to speak with Obama, you know, being late, and more to the point, being critical of the president. Because I thought, and maybe I missed something, but I thought that Coates was among the people like, for example, Tavis Smiley, who thought that Barack Obama had not been a black enough president. And his views changed somewhat over the years, and I think he sees Obama as a hero in many ways. But West's critique, it's the funniest thing about West. And again, I'm not going to go here just to do this sort of Twitter mudslinging, I find this genuinely curious, given that I've met West a couple of times, and you know, when you actually meet these people, you realize that the mudslinging is just cartoon. We've talked about that. How you learn to stop doing it yourself when you realize that you're talking about real people. I wish some others would

understand that. But, it's interesting. West seems, and I hate to say this, but I get the feeling he really was deeply insulted that Obama didn't treat him more specially at the inauguration, because West's fury at Obama for not doing what you said. You know, as if Obama's really supposed to walk in, and be this black Marxist, Amiri Baraka president. Who really expected that? And yet, West seems to have really developed a kind of animus against Obama, which suggests some sort of external explanation. And if that's what it is, it's a shame that then, he brings that into making an equally semi-coherent charge against, you know, this young writer. And that's another thing, you know, West is older than me, Ta-Nehisi Coates is younger than me, and he's just kind of spitting on this person who's been, you know, brought into fame, you know, when he didn't even expect it. I don't get it.

LOURY: He's spitting up at Ta-Nehisi Coates. I mean, the difference in cultural impact is enormous. Do you remember *Race Matters*, when that book came out in 1992, or whatever?

MCWHORTER: Yeah, I do.

LOURY: Successful book on many levels for Cornel West, but Ta-Nehisi Coates is like an order of magnitude or two more culturally impactful. No, no, no, no. I do want to talk about -- I don't want to talk about Cornel West much. I

mean I should say something on behalf of Cornel West, actually. Because I respect the man that I knew, OK, so I first met Cornel West at a seminar at the Yale University Law School that Owen Fitz had invited me to give a talk. And he and Adolf Reed were both in the audience, and this would have been about 1985, 1986. And I had interactions with him since on one level or another. I've said it here before John, but I think it needs to be said again. I remember a lecture I heard Cornel West give in McCosh 50, which is this big lecture hall in Princeton. I happened to sneak into the back row, because I was in town for something else, and I wanted to hear him lecture on the Enlightenment, on Western civilization, on Locke, and Kant, and Rousseau, and Hume. I mean, it was amazingly impressive, John. I mean I agree with, you know, because Cornel West has become this iconic thing, you know? And he has this shtick, you know, and he personifies something that I'm not exactly all that excited about, if we wanted to talk about African American excellence and whatnot, I don't think Cornel West, all things said, and it pains me to say it at a certain level, deserves to be on the Mount Rushmore of African American intellectuals of the 20th and 21st century, and so forth, and so on. Coates and Obama. So yeah, Coates was modulating, he was managing an asset,

OK? Access to the president, you leverage that into something, OK? You become the narrator of the time, OK? Of the African American president. I, when my president was black, my black president, our black president. The blackness, the idea of blackness in power, this is -- it's very powerful. So, Coates' relationship with Obama is that -- but he has to maintain his credibility, OK? He can't seem to be too sycophantic. So there has to be some kind of distancing that's going on at the same time. But, there's no politics in Coates, and that's one of West's objections. And I think West is right about that.

Although there's no politics in West, either. (laughter)

MCWHORTER: Yeah, you know, it's --

LOURY: Have an analysis. No, I mean no, I think this is a fair point to say. So, West is a left-wing ideologue. I mean West has a system in his head, he thinks he understands what (inaudible) American, colonial, whatever, he has a narrative, he has a certain view. Coates does not. You know, as I've said here before and, you know, people get mad at you for saying it, it's really pissing me off that people get mad at you for saying the obvious thing, brother it's not that deep, there's not really a depth or analysis of the political, historical economic

social dynamic that's ongoing. Come on, it's, you know, anyway, anyway, anyway. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

MCWHORTER: Well I think that there's a way of approaching it constructively, which is that no, Coates doesn't have what we would call politics, because his message is that white supremacy is such a decisive force that nothing can change unless, in some way, we change the way white people think and we change the way society is arranged on an absolutely fundamental level. And then, Coates will often say that he's not even sure that would work. Let's say that that's what he believes, that to him is what the political argument is, and it's a very pessimistic one, but you can't say that the pessimism makes him wrong. And so, West's idea is that Coates' politics, let's say that it's not very constructive. My personal feeling about it is that Coates' work is art. It's, if you're going to be very generous about it, it's a kind of art. But if West is frustrated that Coates has become so popular, then I think we can give West one in that what he means is that, and I think you and I would also agree with this, if you decide that Coates' views on race are the proper ones, that they're the most interesting ones that anybody has in the 2000 teens, I don't think most of his fans, black or white, are thinking about the fact that if you embrace that, you're embracing

fatalism. What you're basically saying, you may think that what you're saying is well, what we're going to do is somehow constructively change the way all white people think, and we're going to get rid of all major inequality in society. But then if you think again, you realize how would any of that ever happen? And so, all the people who think that Coates is such a prophet aren't thinking about the fact that what he's telling them is that they are evil, and that nothing's ever going to change. West is not crazy to have a problem with that form of politics, because as you and I know, whether or not it ever happens, West thinks of himself as being political in getting arrested, in being on the barricades, in helping with the symbolism of Al Sharpton running for president. Yeah, that's not what Coates does. So West thinks I'm out on the street, and Coates is basically telling people standing in the line at Zabar's that nothing is ever going to happen, because white people are too racist. I can see how that would upset West. You know what I mean? You know, it's not the kind of politics he would want, because it's too static. Right? You know, I don't think it makes Ta-Nehisi Coates a "neoliberal." (laughter) It does mean that West thinks that he's on the barricades while Ta-Nehisi Coates is just

writing things that make people feel good about how evil they are. He isn't crazy in that, is he?

LOURY: No, I don't have any issue to take with you John. Maybe I want to make a different, a slightly different point. I have racial essentialism written down here on my pad. I think, you gave a description of what you take to be Coates' argument about white supremacy, and white privilege, and so on. And West objecting to that, saying it fetishizes, and I can imagine what he means by that. But I want to talk about how it racially essentializes. And I want to say how deeply mistaken that framing of the issue is. And I can say it across everything from how do you fix schools, to what should be the protocol governing police conduct in dangerous situations, to the tax bill, to immigration policy. I mean, there's serious issues, OK? That I mean, there are fundamental issues, and we've got, you know, the African American population, the marginal population, the impoverished population, the incarcerated population, the underclass population, the ghettoized population, man, the world is moving so fast, the markets are changing, everything is going upside down. And people are being left behind, and they're being ghettoized in some really deep and profound way. OK? So now, what are the intellectual effusions coming out of these various sources,

whether it be the offices of *The Atlantic*, where, who's the editor there, Jeffrey Goldberg?

MCWHORTER: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) right yeah.

LOURY: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) at Brown giving a talk. I went out of my way to go to the talk, because I wanted to hear what he was going to say about Ta-Nehisi Coates. And he talked about he was his friend, and he glowed with a certain kind of, you know, wonder and joy in the moment of, you know, I'm not kidding, I'm not kidding!

MCWHORTER: Oh, I know you're not.

LOURY: So, that is the tail wagging the dog. OK? To the extent that whatever titillation Jeffrey Goldberg, with due respect, with due respect to him, OK? I don't mean this personally. Whatever titillates someone who sits in that position, and others, to, you know, enshrine Ta-Nehisi Coates in the way that they have done, that's the tail wagging the dog if it becomes the center of the discourse about these issues that I'm talking about. A fast moving, profoundly dynamic world, a marginalized people who have been historically oppressed. And an intellectual framework adequate to analyzing the moment and being a foundation for action. OK? So now, Ta-Nehisi Coates is -- you know, it's a phenomenon, you know, I was talking about a bubble, I don't know how long bubbles last, I don't know, but I know

there's no foundation there. OK? So, and Cornel West, like I said, he has a shtick. Cornel West is not even any longer Cornel West. He's the act. You know?

MCWHORTER: Glenn, let me ask you something.

LOURY: No, no, let me just say one thing. Just excuse me, OK?

MCWHORTER: OK.

LOURY: I just gave a lecture at Columbia University two weeks ago.

MCWHORTER: Which I'm sorry I had to miss.

LOURY: The Kenneth Arrow lecture, the 10th annual Kenneth Arrow lecture, and I provided an analysis. Now I, you know, if y'all are going to get mad at me for a self-reference here, audience, go ahead and get mad at me. I provided an analysis, OK? You can go to [glennloury.com](http://glennloury.com) and link, you can get the video, you can get the text. I provided an analysis, now it might be right, or it might be wrong. But it's a structured, disciplined, foundational vision about what the nature of these issues are. I happen to be an economist, and I am not apologizing for being a neoliberal, to the extent that I think capitalism is a system that is basically liberating billions of poor people on this planet, and creating completely new technological universes which we are inhabiting, and making us rich.

Richer than our grandparents could ever have imagined. I actually believe that. OK? But I have an analysis of the racial situation. It may be right, or it may be wrong, but it's an attempt to provide a disciplined, intellectual foundation for doing something here. That's what --

MCWHORTER: What --

LOURY: -- I'm interested in, not in the effusions of Cornel West and Ta-Nehisi Coates arguing about each other on Twitter. And do you know that he cancelled his Twitter account? I know you know that, and you should talk about that.

MCWHORTER: Well first, first Glenn, actually you know in the grand scheme of things, Ta-Nehisi Coates getting rid of his Twitter account, we live in a time when that made the front page of the *New York Times*. (laughter) That's less important, what is your prescription? I want to know. Ta-Nehisi Coates not being on Twitter is not as interesting to me as that. What was your prescription?

LOURY: OK.

MCWHORTER: Can you put it in so many words?

LOURY: Yeah, I think I can put it in so many words. OK. So, what I'm saying is that there are two narratives about black disadvantage. A bias narrative, and a development narrative. OK. And I'm saying, I'm saying that the issue

is development. OK? So, bias is what it is. And we know about racism, we know about white supremacy. Nobody is discounting that. We know about discrimination, we know about exclusion. We know about underrepresentation. Bias, antidiscrimination, the idea of equal rights, civil rights, OK? Nothing wrong with that. That's a great thing. All right? The issue today is development. The jails are full of people, you've got two narratives. The system, Michelle Alexander, or, or, families and communities failing to nurture and develop their young people so that they're able to, socialized, and fit to occupy civil society. And they're incarcerated. That's another narrative, OK? If we don't address the developmental disparities, look at the African American family, OK? Not -- you see people, they're going to go off on some kind of wild tangent, I'm talking about 65 or 70% of kids born to unmarried women. You can't tell me that that doesn't matter. It matters. There can be many explanations for it. Don't try to ignore that fact. Development. The test scores? This whole edifice that we built of diversity and inclusion is founded on a lie, John. Because the issue is performance, and the Asians have demonstrated that. The facts are so palpable that it amazes me that people can't look at them. The Asians have demonstrated, these are people who are second-

generation descendants from people who were born 10,000 miles from here. It's an open society. African American underrepresentation is a reflection of African American underdevelopment. Now, we can go into the historical reasons for that. If the issue is who is to blame, there'll be plenty enough blame to go around. But the fundamental imperative is to enhance development, and that won't happen unless you acknowledge the absence of it. The test scores reflect an inadequate acquisition of functional and cognitive capacities essential to functioning in the modern world. And the gaps are enormous. Etc., etc. So, I'm saying development versus bias, development versus bias, OK? I also have to have an intellectual thing to my economists. I mean, that's the other thing that I will say here. I'm rooted in a discipline! I'm talking about hundreds of departments around the world, and tens of thousands of scholars. OK? There's a literature. You refer to the work that has gone before. You operate within a framework in which there has been elaborated, carefully, a set of insights, assumptions, presumptions, techniques, and methods, concepts, that have been tested on a global basis for centuries. (inaudible). Kenneth Arrow was a genius, the honor of being able to give that lecture before these [simple?] multitudes, they had a symposium at the

university, a day long symposium with a half dozen or more panels of people presenting short talks based on ideas that had been inspired by Kenneth Arrow. He has, six or eight of his students are Nobel laureates. That's the real deal. It's the actual university. It is the elite venue where the front tiers are being advanced, OK? How many students of Cornel West are functioning at that level? How many students of Henry Lewis Gates, Jr., are functioning at that level? I'm not even talking about Ta-Nehisi Coates. The Afro Studies hustle, the avoidance of the necessity of failure against standards in order for the standards to be meaningful, and for the kind of disciplines and capacities that constitute excellence to be honed and developed, it's a shell game. It's a lie! OK? That's what I'm saying. To say that the jails are full of black people means that the criminal justice system is racist and to leave it at that? When the bodies pile up in Chicago and elsewhere? To talk about diversity, inclusion as the way of legitimating and institutionalizing a deferential and racist withholding of judgment from African American people to perform at the level of excellence that a place like MIT, or Cal Tech, or Brown, or Columbia, or Yale, requires. I mean I'm really, really angry about this, because people

are being dishonest about this. In the interest of a coon show, John. A coon show.

MCWHORTER: Well go ahead --

LOURY: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). That's what we're talking about.

MCWHORTER: I know you're -- I understand how angry you are, and I am too, I just don't particularly like to show it, because I am deeply unattractive when I'm angry, and I've learned that since I was young. You do it better than I do. But I think this is the problem. In a way, I asked you that question because let's pull the camera back now, and let's look at the black punditocracy, most of it. And most of blackademia, and I'm being sincere when I say that I'm not into the ad hominem attacks on motives, etc. And for anybody who says that what's gotten around about me talking to you about Ta-Nehisi Coates, that is not ad hominem. That clip that got around, I explicitly said, and I, when I said it I had no idea anybody was ever going to clip it and send it around, it isn't about him. My problem with Ta-Nehisi Coates is 99% the way that he's been received and packaged, and what it symbolizes. So I'm not dissing all these people, but frankly, the times have detached that whole crowd from the sorts of things you're talking about. From what black people, and especially poor

and struggling black people, really need. And I mean, if you think about it, all of it is so juicy up close while it's happening. And so, for example, you know, a few days ago, Ta-Nehisi Coates leaves Twitter. And there's all sorts of things you could say about that. But, you know, 10 minutes ago, it was that Michael Eric Dyson wrote a 10,000-word piece where he made clear that he hates Cornel West. Now apparently, Cornel West hates Ta-Nehisi Coates. Ta-Nehisi Coates, you know, is no fan of either one of us. And there are all sorts of people with roughly the politics of Ta-Nehisi Coates who, you know, don't like you and me, and I imagine that, you know, I don't know what's going to happen, but you kind of can imagine that Michael Eric Dyson and Coates might have some sort of feud at some point. And all of that, frankly --

LOURY: (inaudible) we should mention some women, too.

(laughter)

MCWHORTER: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) it's funny, somebody sent me something yesterday, a Twitter discussion, and no I was not following it myself, but a discussion of Ta-Nehisi Coates leaving Twitter, apparently Jelani Cobb has a savory name for me. And he works, he works like, yards from the office that I'm sitting in right now. And so that's just --

LOURY: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) is the name?

MCWHORTER: You know what Glenn? Because now we work at the same school, I'm not going to stir it up, but he has had things like that to say about me for a very long time, and I've just, you know, I let it roll off of me, and I've never said a single word about him. But the point being that all of that has become this different planet, as you're saying, from actually helping people who are in jail, helping people who are not equipped to do well in school, helping people who are not equipped (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: -- understanding, you know --

MCWHORTER: Glenn, quickly. Quickly. This is what I think. I don't think that the next administration is going to be a Trump one. I think that there's a good chance that things are going to switch to something more reasonable in three years. And I wonder if there isn't room for people, you've been through this before. But I wonder if there isn't room for people like you and me to try to make a brief to the next people who are in power for some sort of new black --

LOURY: The next who are in power. Come on, I mean that's (inaudible).

MCWHORTER: New black politics. You know, from people, you know, we're not --

LOURY: Politics if Democrats are in power? We have to wait for a Democratic administration to have politics?

MCWHORTER: I think these days, it would be easier. And you know, you and I are not Republicans, we are not conservatives. We are just different from the crowd that we're talking about. And if they are doing something which it looks like to me has more to do with them, they're not self-centered. What they're doing has become a little bit inwardly focused. All movements do. But maybe if you and I and some other people can help formulate some ideas, (inaudible) we need to write a book. I think we need to write a book explaining, because otherwise, yeah, what you get is people who have been misled into thinking that certain postures, not that they're not sincere, but certain postures, implying that we need a new revolution, are the politics. I think it's clear that those politics don't change anything. But it's our responsibility not to just yell and scream, but to try to do something actually constructive. Do you know what I mean?

LOURY: Yeah, I know what you mean John. I have a number of responses, I mean I've been accumulating -- three things written on my pad here, Peter Principle, Tom Wolfe, and Trump. Peter --

MCWHORTER: Tom Wolfe?

LOURY: Tom Wolfe the novelist.

MCWHORTER: Yeah.

LOURY: *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Peter Principle, so that's my take these days on Ta-Nehisi cancelling his Twitter account, (inaudible) and so on. That he's risen to the level of his incompetency, quote unquote, that's a very unkind thing to say. But, you know, you get swept up by events and whatnot, and you get thrown into a vortex, and you have the foundation that you have. And you know, he says I'm out, I didn't get in it for this. You know, so that's the Peter Principle, I think that's at play. Tom Wolfe, I'm saying all of this, all these personalities that you talk about, all these personalities that you're talking about, all these feuds, are fodder for some satirical novelist to enter into this world, and to the sole -- I mean I want to go to the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

MCWHORTER: I'm surprised it hasn't happened yet.

LOURY: You know what I'm saying? I mean I want to --

MCWHORTER: Yeah.

LOURY: -- because it's a shtick. I'm talking about Cornel West in particular, but I'm also talking about the performative art of being this kind of figure, disconnected, and this is a legitimate critique, and Adolph Reed should be mentioned in this context as someone who has

made this critique, disconnected from the structures that are actually determining the historical and sociopolitical, economic nexuses that are actually determining the circumstances of the people. And the idea that this feeds on a certain sensibility in the white audience, a lot of this. Should, and again, Reed deserves credit for being aware of this, should be deeply troubling. The functioning of a black intellectual, a self-styled and a typed black intellectual, you're an intellectual, you're black, you write books with titles like *White People, Let Me Tell You About My Pain*. This is a Michael Eric Dyson. That's not the literal title, I can't remember the title, but.

MCWHORTER: It has -- the, no, don't have any tears  
(overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: To what racism was doing to us. You write books like that. So, this performance, this public act, the publications, the lectures that are given, the television appearances, the pronouncements, attitudes, the postures, the slogans that are touted, and all of it, all of it, OK, needs to be understood as the function that it's playing within the culture. OK? And therefore, therefore the audience. But, it strikes me as really very interesting, a very interesting question about what is the audience, what are the needs of the audience? What is being rewarded by

the audience? What are the structures and rewards that are coming to people that determine how these things flow? And you know, the, anyway, anyway, I'm a little bit rambling. Tom Wolfe should write a novel about these characters, OK? The pomposity! OK? The vacuous pomposity, the strutting arrogant, know nothingness, OK? The slogan spouting of them. OK?

MCWHORTER: Nobody would dare.

LOURY: Yeah, OK. I guess we can leave it there. I'm sorry John, I'm sorry, OK.

MCWHORTER: No, I know what (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: And Trump, I mean --

MCWHORTER: There is a Wolfeian aspect to it all. I know what you mean it all feeling like the *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Yeah, you're right. It's just, I'd be interested to see somebody dare try it. You know Glenn, it's interesting.

LOURY: Well that's exactly a problem with our, with the political correctness and the kind of Onanistic kind of, you know, closed in, blinkered, blind, racist presuppositions of this intellectual culture around these issues. Of course, somebody black should do a *Saturday*

*Night Live* kind of sendup of the pomposity, the hot air balloon vacuousness.

MCWHORTER: Yeah.

LOURY: But the fact that it's not happening show the impoverishment of our intellectual culture. And kind of, you know, groupthink.

MCWHORTER: You know though, there are cracks in the plaster, you know, and I found it stimulating lately, and so for example, it is, you know, it's now considered OK to address Coates as a person instead of as a god. It's really changed over the past six months, for example. And I think that that is one indication that there is from, you know, we're not talking about any move to the right, but just a sense that the public intellectual culture can be about something other than white people feeling good about themselves. Because that's an awful lot, as Adolph Reed pointed out in that piece, that's an awful lot of what gets you out there, and especially has been the case since about five years ago. But I think that there are an equal number of people out there who can see through a lot of that, but just learn that if you say anything about it, you get roasted by the kinds of people who apparently now, you know, turn their guns on Ta-Nehisi Coates to an extent. I'm not sure exactly what the reasons were that he left

Twitter. But, I think that they're actually, if the message were put in a way that was effective, and you know something Glenn? I haven't said this outside of my house until now. But remember how about a year ago, I was saying that I was going to just basically stop writing, and you kind of were helping pull me back from the brink, but I was thinking that the nature of the culture is such that I'm going to just drop out for five years? I haven't done it, and I haven't made any formal announcements, but over about the past four months, I've written less than I have in 15 years. And I've just turned stuff down, I have held off my desire to write about things as they happen, and I haven't made any dramatic pronouncements or decisions, but there really has been a part of me that has thought the culture as it is, is such that it isn't worth trying to say anything other than that message that, you know, certain organs find so pleasing. And I've just really concentrated more on being happy language guy, because you know, life is short. But I think that to the extent that the sun comes through the clouds, there is something to be said for a statement about the things that we're talking about that somebody can hold between their hands, as opposed to -- and I'm not saying this simply to say, "Gosh Glenn, you and me need to write a book." I think that it shouldn't be just

you and me. Or if it is, it ought to be a book that's very carefully written. But I think there's room, there is room for this message. It would just have to be put in such a way that it was clear that our concern was not in just yelling and screaming at the people with three names, but in a real concern for people who need help. Do you think that it's impossible? Do you think that's not worth thinking about? How do we work around it?

LOURY: It's worth thinking about it. Let me first say oh, how flattering that you would propose even that we think about writing a book together. I rather like the idea of thinking about that. I think we have a lot of fodder in these conversations that we've accumulated over the years, if there was some way to make use of that. But on the issue of quitting, and what difference does it make and whatnot, I mean I certainly thought about quitting a long time ago, when I went through this personal crisis, you know, I left Harvard and moved to Boston University and I, you know, became a Christian, and was kind of reconstructing my life and whatnot. And I mean, I published three papers in the *American Economic Review* in one year, John, 1993. Three papers in one year in the *American Economic Review*, come on now, that's -- come on that's like hitting four home runs in a World Series.

MCWHORTER: That's huge. Yeah.

LOURY: Yeah. I mean that's like, (inaudible). Because I say I'm going back to science, I'm going back to science. Man by 1995, '96, I was raising money for the Institute on Race and Social Division at Boston University. I was back in the race business, and I've been kind of in the race business ever since. You know, so I don't know, I can't quit somehow. Although I tire of a certain kind of back and forth, you know, I got invited, for example, to write something on identity politics at one of these web zines that wants to have a forum on identity politics, and I'm thinking, you know, and I'm supposed to be like the sensible, non-conservative, OK? The person who is not, you know, like a Trump or a Breitbart, or a Bannon kind of, you know, alt-rightist, or some kind of, you know, white -- not recognizing that white identity politics is the godfather of all identity politics. Although I don't think that's true. (laughter) But not that person. But also, not somebody who was just going to spout, you know, this kind of, this line, you know? So, and I'm sorry, I don't want to go on too long, I just don't know if I want to do it. You know, and engage in a debate, and I don't think anybody's listening, I -- to be honest with you, I think I know the answers.

MCWHORTER: Mm-hmm. (laughter)

LOURY: I do, I think transracial humanism has got to be the foundation of any ultimately successful and worthy of being successful progressive movement. Transracial humanism. I think we have to get out of the idea of essentializing these subjective things. OK? I think it's profoundly corrupted. Profoundly, seductively corrupted. And testimony, I felt this, I felt this. You're flirting with identity epistemology. You're creating these academic disciplines where I'm sorry, you know, I can't go on. I mean it's ridiculous. It's ridiculous that we can't discuss this. But --

MCWHORTER: Yeah, I think that we owe something to a generation of people who are growing up with information going around on the internet, and information on their phones, in a way you can reach people, in a way that you couldn't before. And I think that the time is right for a dialogue about race where we make it clear that we've drifted into this era where we think that talking about race means talking about white absolutism, and it's the job of black people to hope that the United States becomes a different planet. And that's happened very slowly, I always fetishize the year 1966, although I know that that's arbitrary, but ever since then the conversation has moved,

such that, for example, you know the idea 15 years ago, I think for about the past seven or eight years, almost nobody thinks this who's checked up on me. But 15 years ago, the idea was that I was a conservative, and I knew a great many white people who naturally thought that I shared all the views that Republicans typically did at the time. And the reason was because, if you said certain things that were out of step with what had become the racial orthodoxy of say, *The New York Times* op-ed page, then it was assumed that you were a Republican. It took me years to completely figure out that if I said affirmative action should be based on class rather than color, that an awful lot of intelligent people thought that also meant that I was against a woman's right to have an abortion, and was a big booster of lowering taxes on small businesses. That's what people actually thought. And the reason for that was not that I was a conservative, or you, it's that the center, in terms of what the typical *New Yorker* reader thinks of as the center, on race, had moved way, way, way to the left. And this didn't happen as the result of any one thing, but in between 1960 and 1970, something seismic happened in that way. And now we've got two generations who never knew any other reality. And so that it means that on race, nobody knows it, but you're a split person. And I don't

mean in the Du Bois sense. It means that on race, you think that the truth is some sort of Amiri Baraka, Cornel West, hard left. Whereas on everything else, you're probably somewhere in the middle, or maybe even to the right. That needs to be brought out more, because I think that most people, when presented with the problems with that, understand it. So on the one hand, you're supposed to say that America is this police state where the main problem is whites who hate black people, and our black bodies, and the cops are always standing there with their guns ready to shoot somebody down. All you have to say in many quarters is really, picture yourself being one of the black people in question. Think about what the real problems in their lives are. Do you really think that it's the white cop? Even though white cops can do really terrible things? Don't you think that there's a misfocus, in terms of helping black America, if the main thing is going to be, being angry at the Michael Slagers and you know, the Darren Wilsons? Most people get that. It just isn't put in so many words, as often as it should be.

LOURY: I hear you, and you stimulate me, and it makes me want to say something, which is related, if only tangentially, to what you were saying. Which is what I have written on my pad here again, "black nationalism." So I want to talk

about American empire, OK? So I want to talk about this critique, Obama had too many drone strikes, he was -- I want to talk about this anti-Americanism that creeps in, this kind of genuflection at, you know, the altar of all of these -- we know the nation was founded on, you know, the stealing of the land and the eradication of the native population, and the enslavement, the plundering, the rapacious, the Mexicans, we stole their land, OK? This kind of thing. OK? Versus America, the engine of global prosperity and freedom for the better part of a century. America, you know, and I could go on, OK? You didn't build this. Oh yes I did, a certain kind of American, someone who might have even voted for Donald Trump, might say. I'm not apologizing for the history of the country, and so forth and so on. This kind of idea that would be a counterpoint to this reflexive, the image that I have is the American flag with missiles pointing out of it, OK?

MCWHORTER: (laughter) Yeah.

LOURY: And you know, and this kind of, you know, eagle claws, eagle claws, you know? This global raping of the planet, the corporations, I can see Oliver Stone's set already, I can see exactly how the shadows are falling over the faces of people as they make their deals, and their machinations of the extraction, and whatever. That's a complete

fallacy, in my opinion, OK? I think the fact that so many people from every corner of the planet want to come to the United States of America and make their lives is a testimony to the greatness of what is happening here, without trying to disallow that there are flaws, OK? Not saying that. OK? There's nothing but opportunity here. It's an open, dynamic society. It's a great and rich society. Flawed, yes. Flawed, yes. Flawed. Now what should be -- I say black nationalism, what should be the position of African Americans vis-à-vis their Americanness? OK? The -- you can't ignore the fact that somebody saying, "America First" got elected president of this country. Now, I'm tired of all of this childish bickering about Trump, Trump, Trump, Trump, Trump. We live in the year 2017, in the United States of America, there's a global dynamic of political transformation ongoing. America is a part of this flux, and this -- and African Americans are situated within it in a certain way. OK? A guy who said, "America First" won the election, that's the country we live in. What should be the positions of African Americans vis-à-vis their Americanness, OK? And this reflexive kind of snide, kind of -- and we all know, we all know smugly, I mean we all know that America's -- it's just not an adult conversation, John. It's not -- it indulges, and it

doesn't provide a foundation for action. So, I'm not prepared to bet that Trump's not going to be -- this is getting to my bottom line. I'm not prepared to bet that he won't be reelected. He may, or he may not. Perhaps you're right. OK? Perhaps you're right, but he may. OK? The country that we live in, are we going to join the barricades around San Francisco, New York, the northwest Pacific coast, the Acela corridor, against the country? Are you going to take African Americans lock, stock, and barrel, because you political spokespersons, intellectual newspaper op-ed writers, have in your hands the future of your people? Are you going to take them lock, stock, and barrel, off into the resistance? No, no, that's not serious politics. OK? We need, this is what we need. We need \$10 billion of federal money devoted to 100 \$100 million experiments in middle and large-sized cities around this country, to bring tutors to charter schools, to create midnight basketball or recreation parks, or whatever, to get nurses going home with newborn and the mother, to get early childhood education, to get manhood training, if that's what's necessary to keep these kids from popping bullets in each other's heads. OK? We need a serious program. Trump is the president of the United States. He's the one who's going to get behind the \$10 billion in

the 100 cities or not, or not. The idea that we don't have a politics until he's not president, we joined this manic, moral panicking, oh God the sky is falling, charade, instead of having a serious politics focus on the development of our people? The sky's not falling. The tectonic plates are shifting. The global and national tectonic plates are shifting. A serious black politics would not use the history of suffering of our people as a prop in a losing left-wing cause. There. I said it. It would speak for itself. It would have a historical analysis that was independent of feminism, for example. I mean, just to give one of many, many examples. It would not be reflexively anti-American.

MCWHORTER: I think --

LOURY: Not make a fetish out of taking a knee when the national anthem is played. People are going to get mad at me, I don't care! This is too important, and it's too serious. We are sons of the soil in the United States of America. We African Americans are as American as any people have ever been, or will ever be. OK? When somebody says, "America First," we should have something to say about that. Speaking for ourselves. Thank you for indulging me.

MCWHORTER: All right, here, so here's something constructive that cuts into a lot of that. One of those self-conscious impulses that today, one is pardoned to suppose, is the essence of being an informed black person, is the idea that for us, and for us alone, the past is always the present. And so, it makes sense to a great many people now to say, for example, "There was not only Jim Crow, but there was redlining that penned most black people into substandard neighborhoods until 1970, and in some places even beyond." And that therefore, because of these things that happened to our grandparents, everything that happens to us today has to be understood with a different moral and intellectual lens than it would be for anybody else, including poor whites. Nowadays, that's considered to be a higher wisdom, when people talk about "woke," part of what they mean tacitly is that idea that with black people, it has to be understood that not just slavery, but what was going on two or three generations ago, has immediate, present day effects that must profoundly color our judgments, and our strategies, and our decisions. Now what's interesting is if you go back to what black leaders of any political stripe thought in say, 1905, one of the weirdest things that you notice about their literature, academic, political, and everything in between, is a

constant idea that slavery was like this, and look at what we've done since then, despite Reconstruction, despite *Plessy v. Ferguson*, here are all the advances that we have made in the face of all of this. That's what Du Bois, for example, started out being about. Not just Booker T. Washington, anybody did that. And then after a certain point, that is absolutely unthinkable, and that point happens in the 1960s. And so, for example, you know, the *Amos and Andy* TV show was decried by the NAACP for not showing enough successful black people. Late '60s, the sitcom *Julia*, with Diane Carol, about a middle-class nurse, is criticized by basically the children of the same people for showing her as too successful and not dealing with enough racism. There was a sea change then. If we could teach people now that we need to go back to, or that there's an intellectual case to be made, not to mention a moral one, for going back to the idea that yes, the past sucked, yes the past was not all that long ago, but our only job as self-directed human beings, and the only world we're only going to live in, and the only nation we're ever going to live in, is to make the best of what we've got, most people would get that and here's how we know. Remember when Trump was up there as a candidate saying, "Well what have you got to lose, black people? You live in

these neighborhoods where you get shot, etc." All of the sudden, all the people who today despise Trump, and I frankly am among those who despise Trump, but all the people who despised Trump were getting up to say, "I grew up in the ghetto, and it wasn't like that. I grew up in a depressed neighborhood, and we could walk back from school, we had community," etc., etc. The impulse is in them. But those very same people would also be very happy to read you know who, or anybody else, talking about, you know, redlining and about how today's ghetto conditions are the direct result of that. We can get through to them. It's just a matter of showing people what the difference between then and now really was, ideologically. And you know, there are going to be some people who are going to stick in the grooves that you're talking about. People don't change, we don't. You know? When are we going to change? I'm not changing, you know, it would take incredible amounts of counterevidence for me to suddenly become the kind of person we're talking about. I have an ideology, openly admitted. So do they, they're not going to change. But there are people out there who are less rigid than we are. And I just wonder if maybe we could get, we could get to them. Because this stuff doesn't need to be that hard. It really doesn't.

LOURY: OK John, that's hopeful. That's very positive.

MCWHORTER: Glenn, we're going to have to stop now, because I have to run home. But yeah.

LOURY: Yeah, all right John. That's another conversation in the can, thanks for coming on the *Glenn Show*.

MCWHORTER: Of course. Let's keep thinking.

LOURY: I hear you. It's an open-ended invitation to conversation, and we will continue to talk about it in this venue and elsewhere, I hope.

MCWHORTER: We shall.

LOURY: Yeah. Take care.

MCWHORTER: Have a good --

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