

Frank X. Walker Poetry Reading

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>> KIKI: Good evening, everyone.

I'm Professor Kiki Petrosino, the director of the creative writing program here at U of L. I teach creative writing and literature here. First of all, I want to tell you a little bit about the Anne and William Axton Reading Series. This reading series was established in 1999 through the generosity of the late William Axton, former University of Louisville professor of English and his wife, the late Anne Axton. The series brings emerging and distinguished writers from across the country to the University of Louisville for two-day visits to read from their work and to share their knowledge and expertise with the University and the community. Writers give a public reading and a Q and A on the first day, and on the following

morning, they're invited to conduct a master class where select student work is critiqued. All of these events are free and open to the public.

Okay?

So tonight, we are honored to have Frank X. Walker in our midst, and I'd like to note that this is a makeup reading from last spring when the snow kept us all apart. So as part of this Axton visit, Professor Walker already gave his master class review on March 27th, so tonight we will just be here enjoying his poetry, listening to it here in this public setting.

I also wanted to let you know that captioning services are available for tonight's reading. If you feel more comfortable actually looking at a transcript of what is being said aloud, you can come here to Jana and pick up a hand-held device, which will transcribe everything that is being said for you tonight, okay?

We also have books for sale, which Professor Walker's provided here up in the front, we have additional books for sale through the University of Louisville bookstore in the back.

Multidisciplinary artist and recent

Kentucky Poet Laureate, Frank X. Walker is a Full Professor in the Department of English and African - American Africana studies at the University of Kentucky and founding editor of Pluck!, the Journal of Affrilachian Arts & Culture. A Cave Canem Fellow and co-founder of the Affrilachian Poets, he is the author of - - is it six? I think it's many more - - eight now, yes, eight collections of poetry including, Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers, winner of the 2014 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Poetry; and Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York, winner of the Lillian Smith Book Award. Voted one of the most creative professors in the south, he is the originator of the word, Affrilachia, and is dedicated to deconstructing and forcing a new definition of what it means to be Appalachian.

The Lannan Poetry Fellowship Award recipient has degrees from the University of Kentucky and Spalding University as well as two honorary doctorates from the University of Kentucky and Transylvania University.

Professor Walker's poems have been praised for their, quote, deep links to African

- American poetic tradition of social commentary and historical excavation and for the way they, quote, summon ghosts of the southern past to probe the daily horror of dehumanization under the reign of Jim Crow and the terrifying psychological roots of white supremacy of the past and present. Those quotes come from Minrose Gwin's review of Turn Me Loose, The Unghosting of Medgar Evers.

Other reviewers have remarked that Professor Walker's projects are ardently imagined, full of profound insight and that their use of sound and the vernacular in his poems harkens to the Blues riffs and slang of Langston Hughes, but with a decidedly more contemporary cadence. That's what all the critics say.

In reading Professor Walker's work, I'm struck by the way that the poet's intense connection to history and landscape and place also coexist with disconnection, disembodiment, and without not outright questioning, then questing for something just out of reach, yes, the historical past is part of the quest, but this poet is always aware too of how public and private histories coexist, not always comfortably in the

same moment. In the poem *Buring Albatross*, For example, the poem's speaker assists his father in tying a necktie, but the gesture quickly deepens into something that Shakespeare would call rich constraint, quote: I execute the maneuvers with fluid precision and imagine I am creasing and folding a Japanese paper swan. He stares at my knuckles, smiling, perhaps seeing his own hands stuccoing a high ceiling or replacing a worn-out alternator. Standing close enough to kiss, we almost touch and pretend to bury other heavy things, sewn together like the opposite ends of the fabric in my hands.

Last March, I had the pleasure of observing Professor Walker's master class in which he reviewed the poetry of a handful of U of L creative writing students. He dedicated the 2 hours, which actually stretched into more like 3, helping students realize in their own poems moments like the one that I quoted above, which is to say that his exercises and discussions turned students attention again and again to that point in the poem where the lyric energy of the language allows the poem to begin speaking in its own strange tongue.

And once you become aware of that breakthrough of innovative language in your poem, which of course proceeds differently for every piece that you write, it becomes easier to see the places where you need to edit or where you need to write more. I was impressed by the way that he treated each student's poem as an existing work in progress, as a thing in the world and valued it as something in the process of becoming.

Please welcome Frank X. Walker!

[Applause]

>> FRANK X. WALKER: How are you guys doing?

>> AUDIENCE: Good.

>> FRANK X. WALKER: All right.

This is more like a classroom than a reading space. Not quite a cafe, not quite an auditorium. I'm going to wander around because it just feels strange being behind here. I'm not going to sit. But what I'm going to do is I'm going to read poems from at least three different places that I hope will connect for you. I'm always struck by trying to share something that's useful that is connected to now, even when it starts someplace historical.

I'm going to jump forward in history to the civil rights era. And the motivation for this particular book, I was teaching a class at U.K. with 300 students and I polled them one day and asked them to name the significant assassinations from the Civil Rights era, and immediately they said MLK, Malcolm X, JFK, and then nothing. They were stumped. Somebody said, you know, the president's cousin, brother, relative, and then they filled in a blank and they got Bobby. They did not even come close to remembering or mentioning Medgar, and that - - it didn't just shock me, it hurt. Because I tried to figure out why these 18- year- olds had never heard of Medgar Evers, and I know part of it had to do with, you know, everyday history gets longer, but the history books still stay the same. So somebody's doing some editing, and if you pay attention to what's happening nationally, you know that a lot of editing is happening in Texas, where they make most of our textbooks for public schools.

You know, there's a story recently about a textbook that describes enslaved individuals as workers, not slaves, which is more

than tragic. You know, but imagine that they had never heard of Medgar Evers, and that was the first in this whole line of political assassinations. So I wanted to tell that story and I wrote a few poems that ended up becoming what is now a book, but I wanted to do it in a different way, so that if you had the book, you could pay attention to the architecture in the book. And this book is built along the spine of two songs, Dixie and Strange Fruit.

In my opinion, if you want to talk north and south, union and confederate, you can throw Dixie and Strange Fruit in there in the same way. That set up the conversation to have this back and forth all the way through the book. And in this book, Medgar is the only person who does not speak, he only lends his final words to the title, you know, and when Medgar was taken to the hospital and died, before he died, he sat up on the bed and said "turn me loose," and then left this plane, and that's why it's called *Turn Me Loose*, but the speakers are primarily Byron De La Beckwith, the assassin, his two wives, first and second wife, Willie and Thelma, Myrlie Evers, the

widow, and Medgar's brother, Charles. And then there's another voice that acts like a Greek chorus and fills in some of the historical information that if you had a public school education that didn't include Medgar Evers, this might fill in some blanks. So those are the voices you will hear. I'm going to give you a sampling of some of these, and then move on and save some time for your questions and concerns or comments.

One of the things that - - I don't want to have to say too much, I'm just going to assume that you guys know the story, but there were three trials, and he wasn't proven guilty until after the third one, and an undercover FBI agent who had gone under cover as a clansman testified that De La Beckwith bragged about killing Medgar Evers, at Klan levels, he was a highly sought-after speaker around the country, and for years, and he was 80 years old when he finally went - - 80 plus when he went to prison. But one of the things he would say regularly is that killing Medgar was no more difficult than the discomfort women experience when they give birth to children. So he was equating taking a life with bringing a life

into the world, which to me, as a parent, is offensive.

So here's a poem in De La Beckwith's voice that's called "After Birth," and it tries to pull in that strange comparison he made.

"After Birth" by De La Beckwith.

Like them, a man can conceive an idea, an event, a moment so clearly he can name it even before it breathes. We both can carry things around inside for only so long and no matter how small it starts out, it can swell and get so heavy our backs hurt. We can't find comfort enough to sleep at night. All we can think about is the relief that waits at the end. And when it was finally time, it was painless. It was the most natural thing I've ever done. I just closed my eyes and squeezed. Then opened them and there he was, just laying there still covered with blood but already trying to crawl.

I must admit like any proud parent, I was afraid at first. Afraid he'd live, afraid he'd die too soon. Funny how life and death is a whole lot of pushing and pulling, holding and seeking breath, the whole world turned upside down

until somebody screams.

So hopefully that makes you a little uncomfortable in that space. And the thing about this book is it starts in a very dark space. These are not happy poems. These are poems about something that's very real and dark, and it's also hopefully possibly a mirror for what happened in South Africa with reconciliation issues. But it starts in this very dark place and eventually rises to a point, where like what happened to Myrlie Evers at the very end was able to forgive the killing, for taking her husband from this world, but before you even get to that point, I want to make sure the reader experiences this discomfort that comes with that great loss.

I want to flashback - - forward to the conversation I referenced in the beginning. All the way through this book, the women talk back to back, this idea of north and south, up and down, good and bad keeps being repeated sometimes on the page in the individual poems. There's a poem in the very beginning called "Ambiguity Over the Confederate Flag," and it's in two columns. And when you look at it, it looks like there might be

two poems on one page, but it's actually three poems. And they're not just two poems that disagree with each other, as to this modern form, but when you read them together, you know, you get what my mother called the whole story, two sides to every story and then there's the truth, and the truth is the sum of everybody's point of view, right? Which we rarely get. And quite often, what's served to us as truth we accept because somebody called it history, and that history is often just one person's point of view that hasn't been challenged, though once it's classified as history, the assumption is it must be true. But here is - - I'm going to read the two voices, and you'll hear the disagreement in the way I read it, and then I'll read what it sounds like when I read the whole story together.

"Ambiguity Over the Confederate Flag."

In the old south, we would sit on the veranda, look out over the horizon at the young who happily played behind, while their mothers sang rapturous spirituals. Those were the good- old days, not having them use the whip was more

civilized than slavery.

In the old south, life was full of work, from sunup 'til sundown, nothing but fields of cotton. Children tried to pick their own weight by age 13 and filled 500- pound sacks and lived the blues. For plantation owners, sharecropping and extending debt was almost more profitable than slavery.

And here it is together.

In the old south, life was full of work, we would sit on the veranda from sunup 'til sundown, look at over the horizon at nothing but fields of cotton. The young children who happily played behind tried to pick their own weight, while their mothers by age 13 filled 500- pound sacks, sang rapturous spirituals and lived the blues. Those were the good- old days where plantation owners, not having to use the whip, sharecropping and extending debt was more civilized, was almost more profitable than slavery.

So you hear how that works? That's one of probably 5 different modern forms that are in this collection, partly from all my friends who are poets like Makalani Bandeli over there.

Because this is motivated by trying to reach young people, one of the things I struggle with is this whole conversation around the use of the "N" word, so there are two poems, the first one is by De La Beckwith speaking and then the response poem in this dialogue is Charles Evers, and this is the best defense I have for why not to use the "N" word.

By De La Beckwith: "Humor Me." I was raised with the word nigger in my mouth. In this part of the south, it was considered our silver spoon. It practically lived in every good joke I heard growing up in Mississippi. The only other good ones were about sex. But I've seen bad jokes about niggers and sex, kick all the power of whiskey right off the front porch, turn it into something so mean somebody would have to get smacked around to stir that power back up again. Sometimes it was a dog too friendly for drunks, sometimes it was a girlfriend or a wife who wandered grinning into our man talk and snickered at all the wrong parts. If there weren't no women or dogs around, us men would pile into a truck and ride off towards the coon side of town looking for something funny.

Charles Evers, The "N" Word.

Hearing that word launched in the back of any throat brings back the smell of german shepherd breath, of fresh gasoline and the sulphur air, a fear both ours and theirs. I hear nine brave children walking the gauntlet of hate in Little Rock and four innocent little girls lifted up to heaven too soon. Instead of a rebel yell, I hear a rifle bark. Instead of a whiskey- soaked yeehaw, I hear a window break and children sobbing for a father face down in a pool of blood. I hear all my faith collapse on the wings of a woman's scream. I can't hear anything less and absolutely nothing funny.

Y'all all right?

This whole idea of trying to use music is repeated in a lot of different ways. I'm going to read two poems, one - - and these are the wives of these two men in this drama. The wife of De La Beckwith and then the widow, Myrlie Evers, back- to- back, and each poem references some music and dancing. I imagine these two women as two loyal women who loved their husbands, two very different men. I'm not sure if I could say they were different kinds of love, but listen for the -

- for what connects them. Both of these poems are kind of set in the bedroom.

This first one is called "Fireproof" in the voice of Willie De La Beckwith. He would come home from evening rallies and secret meetings so in love with me. I could never see nothing wrong with what he did with his hands. I just pretended I didn't know what gunpowder smelled like or why he kept his rifle so clean. If he walked through that door and said Willie, burn these clothes, I'd pile them on the coals and stare at the fire, I'd listen to the music twix the crackle and calm as we danced. And while the ashes gathered 'round they owned kind in the bottom of the grate, I'd watch the embers glow like our bedroom did. Now, I ain't saying he was right or wrong, he often confused hatred with desire, but if you ain't never set a man on fire, feel him explode inside you then die in your arms, honey, you've got no idea what I'm talking about. That was Willie De La Beckwith.

And this next one I actually call "Listening to Music." And one of the things that I came across in Myrlie Evers' autobiography when

I was doing the research is that she talked about some days Medgar would come home from his work in the field, and that fieldwork included discovering the details and then making them known to the world everything about Emmett Till, and what happened to Emmett Till. And he would come home sometimes and he couldn't speak, he couldn't even form a word, and she described a situation where they would just turn on the radio and put the kids to bed and they would just lay in the dark and hold each other.

So I did some research and found the radio station and then found the playlist and then download the same songs they listened to and then I listened to them in the dark for a couple days. And I was only a little surprised that most of that music were love songs, were ballads. So this is called "Listening to Music." Myrlie Evers is speaking.

The right song slow dancing through the air at the end of a long day full of kids and no husband cannot only set the tone but put the sound of yesterday back in the air. Smokey Robinson and the Miracles croon all the sweet words that his eyes whispered across the doorframe when he finally came

home. But more often than not, it was Sam Cooke and Ray Charles or Bobby Blue Band taking turns in my ears reminding me how much I loved that man. No matter how mad or lonely I might have felt, the right song was like a Kodak Brownie of us cuddling, or an atlas mapping out all of our rough spots and the ways around them. After sweet talking him out of his suit and tie, after he unloaded the day's burdens, we melted together in the dark, beneath the covers and the crackle of the radio. The sound of my guys singing backup and Medgar's jackhammer heart finally slowing to match our leaky faucet, as he fell asleep in my arms, completing the soundtrack for a perfect night.

So you can hear the things that those two poems have in common. Now, I wouldn't go so far as to say that one woman loved their husband more than the other, or that they were different kinds of love.

One of the things that I also want to do is to try to touch on other things that are a big deal in the south. Since I work there, I have to bring up another university in this state, but only because they are part of a conference that is the

SEC and the biggest deal in the SEC is football. So I'm going to read a poem that tries to imagine or recapture something you're very familiar with. You all went to a high school that had a homecoming, I'm assuming, and you played a team during homecoming that was usually the cross-town rival. In my high school, it was the Bullitt County Rebels, and we would raise money, hundreds of dollars, by getting an old car from the junkyard, painting it black and gold and putting rebels and Bullitt County and all their logos on the car and then charging people 50 cents to take a sledgehammer and hit the car. And we would raise almost \$1,000 in a couple of days because we could transfer all that anger against the other team and their colors.

And then there were these things called pep rallies, you know, where people get - - surround a big bonfire and get excited as a crowd or a mob. Well, imagine that whole thing, that whole experience before any such thing as football, the whole event is still happening, but in the center of all of that is a lynching. This is called "Southern Sports," Byron De La Beckwith.

Sometimes it starts with a bonfire or

begins with taunting and spitting, quickly graduated to cursing and punching and kicking some body as hard as you can for the sheer joy of causing them pain, an entertainment for the crowd now celebrating the crack or pop of broken bodies. Showering outstanding individual violence with applause and cheers. All you need is some body wearing a color you've been taught to hate. Some body threatening to take what's rightfully yours, and a little girl with her thighs exposed held high in the air and screaming.

So hopefully, you can see how that crosses over. For me, you know, I always wonder about, you know, that sport thing and the cheerleaders. It's hard for me to enjoy much of anything, because I see other stuff when I'm looking at it, that's what happens. A few books can ruin you!

One of the things I try to imagine is what an exchange between Myrlie Evers and De La Beckwith's wife would have been like, so this next poem, I'm trying to imagine Myrlie Evers addressing the wives in general. It's called "Sorority Meeting."

Myrlie Evers speaks to Willie and Thelma

De La Beckwith.

My faith urges me to love you. My stomach begs me to not. All I know is that day made us sisters somehow. After longer nervous nights and trials on end, we are bound together in this unholy sorority of misery. I think about you every time I run my hands across the echos and the hollows of my sheets. They seem loudest just before I wake. I open my eyes every morning half expecting Medgar to be there, then I think about you and your eyes always snatch me back, your eyes won't let me forget. We are sorority sisters now with a gut - wrenching country ballad for a sweetheart song, tired funeral and courtroom clothes with colors and secrets we will take to our graves. I was forced to sleep night after night after night with a ghost, you chose to sleep with a killer. We all pledged our love, crossed our hearts and swallowed oaths before being initiated with a bullet.

And the poem that follows that is a poem that's in the imagined voice of the bullet. The details are taken straight from the court transcripts.

Medgar was in his driveway, he had just

unloaded an armload of T- shirts from a rally, but De La Beckwith was across the street hiding in the honeysuckle bushes, had a rifle with a scope, they pulled his fingerprints off the scope for the first trial, but he still went home. The bullet went through his back, into a window, through a wall into the kitchen and landed on the kitchen counter. The title comes from how much the bullet fragment weighed when they found it. It's called one- third of 180 grams of lead.

Both of them were history, even before one pulled the trigger, before I rocketed through the smoke and barrel hidden in the honeysuckle. Before I tore through a man's back, shattered his family, a window and tore through an inner wall, before I bounced off a refrigerator and a coffeepot, before I landed at my destined point in history, next to a watermelon, what was cruel was the irony, not the melon, not the man falling in slow motion, but the man squinting through the crosshairs reducing the justice system to a small circle praying that he not miss, then sending me to deliver a message as if the woman screaming in the dark or the children crying at her feet could

ever believe a bullet was small enough to hate.

All right. I'm going to read some happier poems now. There are two poems in here that reflect I guess my dark humor. I'll read one of those. One of the things that - - I'm going to explain it to you in advance. Nobody ever gets it. You have to be as dark as I am, I think. I was trying to think of something that could possibly be funny in this whole story, so I imagined that De La Beckwith on his deathbed became a believer, gave his life over to God, was saved, and went to heaven. But then when he got to heaven, he looked up and God was a black woman and he gets mad because he thinks it's been a mistake, he got sent to hell instead. See, nobody's laughing. I thought that was funny, right?

So this is called "Last Meal Haiku," and all the stanzas of it are separate haikus. Myrlie Evers is the speaker.

Imagine Byron sitting down to eat, using his cotton shirt sleeves as substitutes for napkins, clutching a steak knife, no unleavened bread, enjoying blood that drips from every single bite of his final meal. Imagine before he lays

down to sleep ready to meet his maker he gets on his knees and confesses all his sins in time to be saved, but when he looks up at God's burnt brash face, he thinks he has gone to hell. See, nobody laughed.

One of the things - - you will respond to this based on your age. This next poem is called 1 Mississippi, 2 Mississippi. People my age and older know that that was the way to count when we were little. The rest of you, that's okay. This poem is really about that conversation on the page, two different voices, but I want you to listen and see if you can tell the difference between which of these things sound like - - they're really about classism versus racism, okay? It's called "1 Mississippi, 2 Mississippiis."

You've got old plantation, we've got shotgun houses. You've got sprawling verandas, we've got a piece of front porch. You've got beautiful gardens, we've got cotton fields. You've got Ole Miss law school, we've got parch in prison. You've got Gulf Shore beaches, we've got riverbanks. You've got debutant balls, we've got juke joints. You've got bridge parties, we've got

dominoes and spades. You've got mint juleps, we've got homemade hooch. You've got your grandmother's china, we've got paper plates. You see a proud history, we see a racist past. You don't remember lynchings, we can't forget. You've got blacks, we've got blues.

And I'll read one more - - two more from this series and release you from this hostage situation.

One of the things that was interesting in this whole story is that for the third trial they exhumed Medgar's body, and his son, who was just a baby when Medgar was killed, was present when they pried the lid off the casket. And it just so happened that at that moment, at that almost exact time of day, the son was the exact same age that his father was when he was killed, and the body was so well preserved that when he looked at his father's face, it looked like he was looking in the mirror. And you can find this picture online, it's like he's looking like somebody took the head, copied it, photo-shopped it and turned it around backwards and put it in the casket, they're almost identical. So I tried to remember growing up in

my house, my parents were divorced when I was 4, and my mother for years used to look at me and say stop doing that! And I didn't know what she was talking about. And when I was 13, I got to spend time with my father, and I saw that thing, right? I looked in the mirror and it was like the same thing we do with our mouth that one of my cousins does and one of my other brothers does and one of my uncles does, it's something that's in the DNA. So imagine what it felt like for Myrlie to lose a husband and then to have this son grow up to look just like his father. In some of those cases, he might even laugh like his father or walk like his father or even eat his food. My sister always says that before I take a bite, I shake whatever's on the fork, I want to make sure it's dead. But those little kind of quirks and things we pass on to each other. This is a poem called, "Gift of Time," at the very end, when she's in that forgiving mood.

When I was able to see beauty in a world littered with scars, when I discovered stores of memories that a bullet couldn't quit, when I watched a son grow into his father's face, his laugh, his walk, I saw how faith could be restored

and was finally able to imagine that before he fell in love with guns, before he lost his mother and his childhood, before he needed a reason to hate, to feel threatened to push back against imaginary walls collapsing in on him like August heat and no fan, I imagine before all that, little Byron was good. He was clean, he was innocent, and I finally understood that trouble don't last always.

I guess that's as close to happy as you get in this book. And I'll close with this poem called "Heavy Waits," and that's W- A- I- T, in this series, and "Heavy Wait."

In Mississippi is the love for elephant self, choose a memory as sharp as her ivory tusk with as many wrinkles as her thick, thick past, if she forgets, she need only to reach back, caress her keloid skin and run her fingers across the braille history raised on her spine or the bruised couplets around her supple neck. For Mississippi to love her elephant self, she need only to open her blue gray eyes and move, move as if she carries the entire weight of history and southern guilt on her massive head. Move in any direction as long as it is forward. For Mississippi to love her

elephant self, she must ask for, extend and receive forgiveness but she must never, ever, ever forget.

So that's turn loose.

[Applause]

>> FRANK X. WALKER: All right. I'm going to read three poems from - - that are so fresh, this is what they look like on the page. All right? But these are - - this is what's happening now. This is what I'm consumed with. "Spell to End Police Violence."

Pass a new ordinance, make it illegal to not be white. Upgrade tasers, tear gas canisters, smoke grenades and rubber bullets with a semiautomatic effect that recreates the pain and anguish black mothers feel when they lose and bury their sons. Give all policeman bigger dicks instead of guns. Let them shoot each other.

"Baltimore 101," also from the news.

Fear is a magnetizer. It changes the polarity of black bodies, makes them highly attractive to bullets, police batons, tasers, white rage, white guilt and white lies. Fear is a steroid. It turns small children into large men, men and women into monsters and noncompliant teens

into dangerous gangs and threatening mobs. Fear is a revisionist history class. It turns people of color into the enslavers, flag-waiving confederate soldiers, lynch mobs, clansmen, night riders and terrorists. Fear is a magician, it turns hip-hop into gangster rap, plastic toys into guns, cigarillos, cell phones, wallets, frowns and extended index fingers into high-caliber weapons. Fear is a sniper, it takes dead aim, aims to kill, kills for sport and pleasure. It's pleased to take souvenirs and stuffs and mounts as trophies. Now which of us should really be afraid?

And the last one in this series is called "Straight From the Playbook."

Call the play. Decide who will take the shot. Pull the trigger until nothing is moving and all testicles are empty. Cuff the body, call for backup, confiscate the cameras, plant the evidence. Say the suspect was resisting arrest. Say his eyes reached for the officer's gun. Say the officer feared for his life. Leak the victim's old mugshots to the press or manipulate school photos until 12-year-old child looks 30. Highlight the victim's dark past. Announce

suspicious tox screen. Show images of prostrate bodies in the street. Say his father was absent, cut to a shot of his grieving mother. Call press conference. Recast officer as victim. Praise the officer's military background and sterling record. Suspend him with a paid vacation. Cut to closeup of officer surrounded by other officers and loving family. Demand an apology for the defamation of his character. Raise money for his defense. Produce an anonymous witness. Claim the video was faked. Say the media sensationalized the story. Show black community rioting. Cut to joyous footage of young black boys holding up trophies, show white students burning couches, torching cars, swimming in alcohol, blowing off a little steam. Call another play. Declare the shooting justified. Cock the trigger. Take another shot!

And this last one from this series do you guys know who Cornell West is? If you do, then this will make sense to you. If you don't, don't worry about it. I wrote this in the spring. It's called "Dandelion."

Your seed head and its height

radiates like a Cornell West afro. You keep on coming and coming as long as your roots are intact. You are considered a nuisance, most unwelcome on suburban front lawns. Where you are - - where you, too, are likely to be grabbed by the neck, thrown to the ground or just blown away.

All right. Because I can feel the tension in the room, I'm going to give you a gift of a love poem. This particular poem is part of a project, this poem has been translated into now 12 languages and each phrase in the poem has been coupled with a tattoo. And there are now 1,400 people around the world who have parts of this poem on their body's somewhere, including my son, and myself. Part of the graphic image and part of the lines you will hear, it's called "Love Letter to the World." And I'm just reading it because you guys feel so heavy right now. But as you listen, imagine a part of this on your body somewhere.

I love you, world. Love your seven different faces, love your healing waters wide and deep, love the thing you have with the sun and the moon and what it teaches us about companionship, about change, about revolution. Love the mirror

at your navel, how it shows off your hemispheres, illustrating important lessons about balance, about reflection, about centering ourselves. Love how much like little worlds we are, how are earth quakes, how our earthquake is your shiver, your sneeze a tsunami, an avalanche. When you have hot flashes, we call it a draught. You once covered your whole body with ice to cool a fever. When you weep daily over our continued ignorance, our epic failures and petty squabbles, our every transgression, your waters break and we are born again. Love your outreach, our mutual attraction, your gravitational pull. For every treasure we steal from your womb, you send us hail and thunderstorms. When we invent poisons and no antidotes and build monuments to ourselves, you send tornadoes and hurricanes to remind us of how small we truly are. And yet every day, you continue to humble, inspire and move us to tears with your natural beauty. Our own effort to mimic your vistas are what we dare call art and dance, music and poetry, architecture and language, and love. It is the only thing we have ever gotten right. We can't pass the course on humanity if we

keep failing the lessons on harmony and until we unlearn fear and hate. Thank you, world, for this open book exam before us for still believing we are worthy of your love, we who love you black already know that everything we do to you we also do to ourselves.

Thank you!

[Applause]

>> FRANK X. WALKER: How are we on time?

>> KIKI: You could take a question or two if you would like.

>> FRANK X. WALKER: Sure, we'll take a comment or question or express your outrage or discomfort. Just stunned? Just wiped out, huh?

>> AUDIENCE: I like your commentary on the female experience, I like the voice, you know writing the female voice. I just wonder if you are going to continue to do that when you write about Ferguson, more contemporary things, and why you might think that's important.

>> FRANK X. WALKER: I don't know that I think it's important, I think it's just

natural to me, just a reflection of - - like I'm one of 11 kids, I have 7 sisters and only one is older than me. And so I really feel like I was raised by women, and my mother was the most impressionable force in the universe, as far as was concerned. Everything I am is not an accident, this is what she was trying to build. But, you know, I think that the advantage I have is that if I ever get it wrong, my sisters will tell me, and they will enjoy telling me, too. But so far, they keep checking it off and saying you know, this passes. You know, but I feel it is important, and I think that one of the biggest compliments I've ever gotten was being called a feminist. But yeah, I think it's important. Thank you for your comment. Thanks for hearing that. Other questions, comments? Concerns? Yes?

>> AUDIENCE: Thinker, philosopher, poet Fred Moten speaks about African-Americans having refuse subjectivity or black people in general having something called refuse subjectivity, basically that we are - - our existence is reduced to nothing within - - in this world, in the world of white supremacy. I find it

quite interesting that in almost all of your books, especially - - well, in your books of poetry that deal with persona poems, you always have - - almost always have this collage of voices, of multiple races, and of course genders as well. You always almost, almost in most of your persona poems have women speaking as well, the York poems have women speaking in them. But my question is - - so I find that by doing that, you almost - - and you as a speaker reading these poems, you - - it's an equality, not only on the page but when we hear you speaking in all these different people's voice, it almost, you know, there's an equality or there is a bringing up of African-Americans and equalizing them to the other voices. So and my question is, is that something that you were - - that you consciously do? What is your - - what is your motivation or what is your thinking behind bringing this - - all these voices together and putting them side by side and making them almost seem equal or making them equal, I would say?

>> FRANK X. WALKER: You know, I don't know that I think about that, you know, that equality part of it, but I do think about them all

being present. I think if you counted the voices, you know, you could probably even, just by how much they all speak, you might be able to say well, this one seemed more important than the other. And then how do you explain the absence of Medgar in that particular collection. So I think - - I think what I'm shooting for is authenticity, right? And I'm also trying to document a period of history that, in my opinion, has either been misrepresented, under- told, muted, told incorrectly. You know, the thing about - - I have two books of fortune about the Lewis and Clark expedition, but I think of them as Lewis and Clark and York, because when I grew up and what I learned in school was is that it was just Lewis and Clark, you know, two white male superheros. There wasn't a dog until later, there wasn't Sacajawea, Sah cah - gar- we- ah, a Native American 15- year- old woman with a 3- month- old baby, and there wasn't York, an African- American who lived right here in Louisville, Kentucky, bronze version is on Belvedere, 6th and Main, and there wasn't 42 people, it was just Lewis and Clark. I was embarrassed that that was the truth, and I didn't

want to continue that. I wanted to have all those voices, you know, not revised, you know, or reversed history, but correct it. You know, so I think of - - to think of the those particular books as trying fix something, you know, I guess at the core, you know, I'm my dad under a 1975 raggedy car trying to make it go again, you know. I don't know how much that will fix it, it will get us somewhere, once it rolls and starts, you have to cut it off. But yeah, I think I'm just reaching for something authentic. But I'm always surprised at how many - - you know, it's a book the poetry, you know, I don't even pretend to say this is a book that belongs in the history section, it's still poetry. But so many history classes you know, use it as a supplemental text, but it's used across the curriculum in a lot of different places. And, you know, I think right now this particular book has helped a lot of cities and colleges and community college systems have the difficult conversation about race. It's still the most difficult conversation in America. I'm sure when you leave here, you'll be able to count how many times you were uncomfortable tonight. When I first read

from this book, before it was a book it was in West Virginia in a room with all librarians. Think about what librarians look like. These were all white and female, middle-aged, and I didn't have an order, I just opened a stack of poems and started reading for about 20 minutes, and I didn't even look up because I didn't have the - - I didn't know the poems yet. So at 20 minutes, I look up, and the entire room was in tears, I mean, just sopping wet. And it kind of freaked me out a little bit, I thought, you know, was that too much? What happened? Then we had a hour-long conversation about why the room was crying. And it - - you know, I thought - - I had to change the order of the book because I want people to be able to finish the book, but I also want to have them express why that was too much. And it was a really useful conversation that helped, you know, kind of round out some of the poems in the collection. You know, I think it was very useful. But I always wonder about how much people can take, you know, so but at the same time, there's no way I could tell the story and even reach for any real humor, you know. I mean, I've been accused of not writing love poems,

but I disagree, you know, I think that I love that story very much, you know, I love history, I love helping people know what the truth is. And it's not always flowers and trees and sunshine. I don't write those poems. Somebody else can do that. But I think this is necessary stuff. And if people can get through it, it can open a door for a bigger conversation.

And in places like this, you know, a lot of people are afraid to bridge the conversation. You know, you can't fire me, I don't work here, you know. But, you know, this is a - - sometimes I wish the room was bigger and there were - - because a lot of people who need to hear and have this conversation are not here, so how do you, you know - - that's the good thing about books is that the poems still live. And these are being recorded and available on some kind of cloud thing U of L has. So you will be able to access this and make somebody watch it and suffer through it, too. But thank you for that question.

>> KIKI: Thank you! Let's give a hand and...

[Applause]

>> KIKI: And speaking of books,
please buy some and take them to those people that
need to hear them. Take some bookmarks also that
tell you what else is going on in the Axton Series
this semester. Thanks.