

Reading After Trump: Conversations in Literature and Politics

Stanford University

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Guest: Professor Michael Benveniste

Text: *The Underground Railroad* (2016), by Colson Whitehead

Alex Woloch: Hi, I'm Alex Woloch.

Kenny Ligda: I'm Kenny Ligda.

Alex Woloch: This is *Reading After Trump*. Our aim in this podcast is to initiate conversations with literary scholars, critics, and historians about what literature can tell us about this political moment. The views expressed here are our own, and don't necessarily reflect the view, policy, or positions of Stanford University.

Kenny Ligda: All right. We're very fortunate to be joined today by Professor Michael Benveniste, who Alex and I both knew through the graduate program here at Stanford and is now teaching at the University of Puget Sound. Welcome, Mike.

Michael Benveniste: Thank you very much.

Alex Woloch: Welcome back.

Michael Benveniste: Thank you. It's nice to be in the sun for a little while.

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Michael Benveniste: In the sort of grim Northwest that Kenny is all too familiar with.

Kenny Ligda: I'm from Seattle and I think it's wonderful up there. So your field of research is?

Michael Benveniste: I primarily look at post-World War II American multi-ethnic fiction up to the contemporary, and I originally started looking at ethnic literary production in the context of Cold War studies. Lately, my interest has shifted a little bit towards post-65 novels, and most of my teaching takes place in multi-ethnic lit, but broadly in the 20th century to the present. So one of the things I'm very interested in is the ways in which novels speculatively engage with ideas like equality, justice, or theorizing freedom more broadly—sort of ethical issues: after the civil rights era and the instantiation of formal equality legally, how does the discourse of ethnicity change as a result?

Kenny Ligda: So the past two years or so of American politics have been germane to your research?

Michael Benveniste: Yes. They've been very startling and eye-opening, and they've caused me to question a lot of things that I thought I knew.

Alex Woloch: And—let's see, you graduated from Stanford in?

Michael Benveniste: I want to say 2012.

Alex Woloch: 2012.

Michael Benveniste: Might have been 13.

Alex Woloch: I mean, obviously, your research then and since then has been very much about literature and politics. I think, I mean, one hallmark of, that I think about your work is just the voracious reading of novels, of narratives in this period. You're very interested in how history is encoded and the different ways that novels at different points turn to history. There seems to be this desire to write historically at certain moments, so we could historicize that itself. I just, I imagine you're still kind of that voracious reader but it was almost like I felt like when you were working on your PhD, you had this, it was like an intellectual, maybe even an ethical sense that you had to really keep reading enough so that you could get a sense of the full field and also the patterns. Like the patterns of how fiction is working. You're interested in individual texts but also the whole conditions of possibility of what fiction can be at a certain moment.

Michael Benveniste: Yeah. I mean, I can say pretty authoritatively that the same voracity of reading no longer obtains in part because I'm teaching now, not gloriously enjoying just being a graduate student. But I still try to read really widely, and that's one of the things that's been fascinating over the past few years in looking at the evolution of writers like Whitehead as he's turned away from some of the traits early in his work I liked, is to think about the ways in which some of the trends that I was really interested in and identified in writers up through like Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. There seemed to be some new permutations within the field of multi-ethnic writing that I'm trying to keep my eye on. But, it's difficult because I tend to focus primarily on African-American and Asian-American, but I also try to read slightly more broadly if I can.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, and of course, one of the dangers or privileges of working in the contemporary period is that the writers that one's really studying, they write more stuff. So then you do feel compelled to rush out and read the newest thing. You have a view about a writer, and then they go and write something else.

Kenny Ligda: Every now and then, a manuscript comes out of an attic, but generally, it's kind of like, Keats and Austen are kind of closed books in a way—whereas the novelist we're going to talk about today, Colson Whitehead, is doing ongoing and different work.

Michael Benveniste: Yeah, and he's actually one of the writers who did absolutely surprise me in that early on I'd been focused on his first few works. In particular, *The Intuitionist*, I think is really interesting and dovetails a lot with some of the writing of history and historical fantasy that I was looking at, well I'm still working on it, because I'm still working on that book. But, when he published *Zone One*, his dystopian post-apocalyptic zombie novel, in which the representation of race was strategically deployed in a very minimal sense, it dramatically, well, it violated my expectations of what Whitehead was going to be producing. I had an imagined

trajectory for him as a writer and that shook it up. And this novel also I find a little bit uncanny in that sense. It's not a break with his other work but it's also not something that would have necessarily predicted. I was drawn to him early on in like *John Henry Days*, *The Intuitionist*, and *Apex Hides the Hurt* because he was doing a really interesting thing where he was writing these novels about black, American, white-collar professionals, insofar as *John Henry Days* revolves around a journalist as well, and I'm fascinated by the intersection of professional class politics and racial politics in his work and the way that intersected with a particular version of revising history and then, obviously *Zone One* moves sort of outside of history into this strange dystopian zombie land although it's still interested in finance since it takes place in Manhattan.

Kenny Ligda: The book that we have today, *The Underground Railroad*, I'm looking at the paperback cover and there's so much acclimation on this cover that it's—

Alex Woloch: Yeah, that's true.

Kenny Ligda: It's not *difficult* to find the title, but there is, there are other things. “Terrific”—Barack Obama. “Winner of the Pulitzer Prize.” “An American masterpiece,” says NPR. “#1 *New York Times* Bestseller.” “A triumph,” *The Washington Post*. “Winner of the National Book Award.” It's also an Oprah book, and if we ever have occasion to do *Reading After Oprah*, we can reuse this episode. But—

Michael Benveniste: I think it was an Oprah book selection upon its publication. It wasn't something that was added retrospectively, and I believe that also the plan for this novel was that it was not going to come out originally in August. Then some of the pre-reviews were so strong that the publisher decided to distribute copies to select bookstores. So there's like a run of 200,000 books that went out August 2nd.

Alex Woloch: So let me go off script a little bit, just with the question, because I am really interested in you as a reader. When did you first read this? Did you read this right after it came out or?

Michael Benveniste: Yeah, I read it as soon as I could get it from Amazon and I wanted to make sure I read it without any editorial apparatus or reviews. I just wanted to dive in because I knew the central conceit of the novel from the pre-publicity.

Alex Woloch: Would be of interest.

Michael Benveniste: Yeah. So I thought, well, I'm very interested how Colson Whitehead is going to tackle historical fiction and particularly, how he's going to engage with the genre of the neo-slave novel. So, yeah, I picked it up, I read it and I will say my initial response was disappointment and ambivalence and hopefully we'll talk about that. Some of it has to do with the central conceit of the railroad itself and its function in the text, because I think that there's a lot of ballyhoo about it and there's the question of its meaning I think, is open. It's sometimes referred to as a metaphor, but it's, doesn't strike me that it is. It seems like a literalization of what was a historical metaphor and so I'm curious about that.

Alex Woloch: So, maybe we can just dive into that. I think we were thinking we could talk a little bit about Mike's reading of this in relation to your research projects and your scholarly interests, and then your experience of it in a different context, in the context of teaching it, and that was like teaching after the election, right?

Michael Benveniste: Yeah. So I taught this class-

Alex Woloch: Presumably I don't actually- when it was this published? Was this-

Michael Benveniste: August 2016.

Alex Woloch: Okay. So, you if you read it immediately, you would have read it before the- while we were in that heat of the election.

Kenny Ligda: Right after the conventions, right?

Alex Woloch: Yes. Why don't you walk us through a little bit your sense of ambivalence. I will say, knowing Mike's work a little bit more broadly, if we think about novels in the last 30 years and the question of history, the interest in history, obsession with history, and then at the same time, the question of magic, the role of magic, the interest in magic, and the weird ways that there's so many plots that sort of rely on magical devices or objects or turns, and strangely these things are often happening together, right?

Mike Benveniste: Yeah. I'm somewhat of a crank because in particular what I'm interested in historical novels is the models of causality they articulate through their narrative apparatus. So, for me sometimes the invocation of magic or metaphysics can be something that can be obfuscating in terms of thinking about historical and social causality. So, that was actually part of my initial response to the novel was that I enjoyed the writing, and I love Whitehead as a writer. It's sort of a tonally fascinating novel and that it starts out of what we might call a sort of hyper-realist mode when it's detailing life on the plantation. One of the things I noticed very early on was a tendency to catalogue atrocity. There's a lot of this in the novel, and in fact, the idea of cataloguing comes up thematically later in the novel. So, this was like a blunt force attack that I wasn't expecting from Whitehead given his previous work, and the way he had written about race, it was very jarring, very intense. Then you get to the conceit of the Underground Railroad. I guess most of my dissatisfaction started once I hit the underground railroad, and as I was thinking structurally about the novel and the role it performed because I ended up not thinking it was terribly important overall. I have a slight different perspective now, but.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. I mean Ken, do you want to talk a little about just the central conceit, or?

Kenny Ligda: Yes. Just for background case if you haven't read the novel, so it's about a slave, Cora, who is born on a Georgia plantation, escapes and then takes the underground railroad which is an actual underground railroad. There's sort of an episodic structure where she in company with other people on and off goes to South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee.

Mike Benveniste: Tennessee is a really strange chapter.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. Tennessee, Indiana, and eventually I think ends up going west to California where there's kind of a hopeful ending. In the context of sort of magical realist tradition, there is an unreal element of this book. I think there's one very prominent one, which is that the underground railroad is an underground railroad. Should we just read this passage?

Mike Benveniste: Sure.

Kenny Ligda: The first time it's introduced?

Mike Benveniste: That sounds great.

Kenny Ligda: By "we" I mean you.

Mike Benveniste: Oh, okay. All right. Is it okay if I just read the whole thing or?

Kenny Ligda: How about the parts in bold.

Mike Benveniste: This is a passage that's sort of narrating Cora's response to the railroad when she's first led to it. She's going to be encountering the operator Lumbly here, who she'll be dialoguing with, and she's being accompanied by Caesar, who is the fellow slave on the plantation, who's actually entreated Cora to escape. So, they're getting ready to flee through the underground railroad:

"The sheer industry that had made such a project possible. Cora and Caesar noticed the rails. Two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel, pinned into the dirt by wooden crossties. The steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some unconceivable source and shooting toward a miraculous terminus. Someone had been thoughtful enough to arrange a small bench on the platform. Cora felt dizzy and sat down." Then we have a little ellipsis here where Cora is going to inquire about where the train actually goes, "'To where?' Cora asked. 'Away from here, that's all I can tell you....The problem is that one destination may be more to your liking than another. Stations are discovered, lines discontinued, you won't know what waits above you until you pull in.'" We have another brief ellipsis here. "The tunnel pulled at her. How many hands had it required to make this place? And the tunnels beyond, wherever and how far they led? She thought of the picking, how it raced down the furrows at harvest, the African bodies working as one, as fast as their strength permitted. The vast fields burst with hundred of thousands of white bolls, strung like stars in the sky on the clearest of clear nights." Another ellipses. "'Every state is different,' Lumbly was saying. 'Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country before you reach your final stop.'" Then they board the train and they travel to South Carolina. The final image of this section/chapter is "When they next stepped into the sunlight, they were in South Carolina. She looked up at the skyscraper and reeled, wondering how far she had traveled."

Kenny Ligda: How do you feel reading it?

Mike Benveniste: Well, I don't like reading out loud in generally.

Kenny Ligda: But when you first read it?

Mike Benveniste: When I first read it, so I was waiting to get to this point of the novel since the foregrounded element of the novel was the fantastic conceit that is theoretically galvanizing the narrative. So, one of the things that impressed me when I read it is how nonmarvelous the train is diegetically. Cora is not amazed by the train. In fact, in this passage, one of the things she immediately turns to are the practical questions of how this seeming impossibility was materially constructed. So, there is a real attempt to embed it realistically in the moment. I think that Cora's apprehension of it as something fundamentally non-magical is interesting given some of the things that happened later in the novel. Like given the things that the novel does think of as being magical or impossible later when we hopefully talk about delusions and things. Then, the other thing that struck me was the way in which it introduces this almost fairy-tale logic of locomotion, like the idea that the destinations are unknown. You just sort of have to engage the conceit and allow it to take you where it will, which reminded me to some degree of Alice in Wonderland. This idea of you just sort of have to accept the unknown rules on their own unknown terms, and then reality will confront you as it will when you resurface.

Kenny Ligda: But what is it that you don't like about the book?

Mike Benveniste: The railroad? What's wrong with...

Alex Woloch: Maybe another way of phrasing questions like, what are the different ways that we can take this kind of central move? What you're sort of saying is actually less central than you would expect to be in terms of the logic of the novel as a whole, if I'm following you.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: But still there's this glaring from the title on, there is glaring like absolute unreality of a real literal railroad that didn't exist and were confronted with that. So, do you think there's a variety of ways that we can take that? Like what Whitehead is up to? In fact, this move is not so unusual. This kind of imposition of a starkly, unreal dimension to real history.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah. I mean this introduction, especially within the world of neo-slave narratives is, I wouldn't say typical because I think Whitehead is doing something a little bit different, but Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, there are airplanes and televisions that interrupt the taxi, and Raven Quickskill gets away by riding an airplane. In *Middle Passage* by Charles Johnson, there's the massive metaphysical conceit at the end where you find out that effectively what's in the hold of the slave ship is an African god. *Beloved* obviously, has a ghost which is very important. There are sundry examples of these. So, part of my response was conditioned by my own understanding of this narrative form as a trope itself for the narration of a particular history. I wanted to see the text deliver more on the invocation of a trope because on my initial reading, I thought what this signaled is a sort of genre alliance. Part of the reason this sounds very severe and so I should talk about this is my past tense opinion of the novel, but part of the reason I felt this way and I'd be curious to hear what you guys think as you go through, is that it seemed to be that most of the novel was primarily a picaresque which was emphasizing the

different destination that you get to. So, the functional role of the railroad is actually relatively minimal in the text and there's not a ton of space dedicated to its description and most of the action of the text doesn't revolve around the railroad, although near the end there's the threat that the slave catcher Ridgeway will expose the railroad. So, I was sort of wondering why such a deliberately fantastic and ostentatious conceit, because they're also not traveling so far or so fast that the action is predicated on this conceit. So, like in *Kindred* for example, the plot of that novel can't happen without time travel and in *Beloved* the plot can't happen without a ghost. This is maybe overly severe, but when I first read this I thought, well, this plot could happen. I haven't completely resolved for myself why I think it literalizes the metaphor. I think it has to do actually with my understanding after teaching with my class—this is my original reading—some of this bit at the end where we start talking about states, which I think is one way into thinking about why the literal realization of the metaphor.

Alex Woloch: Well that seemed like such a stark pun like every state is different.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: I mean that really took me aback...each one of state of possibilities. What do you make of that, Mike?

Mike Benveniste: The obvious thing is there's going to be a picaresque and the novel itself is organized formally into alternating sections, some that are character vignettes and then the others are defined by their location by states, South Carolina, North Carolina Tennessee, Indiana, and then we get the North as the final one which I think it's important that it's indeterminate. So, yeah the obvious literal way is every state in the union is different but of course, it's using this sense of state more grandiosely, and so, there's one way in which, I mean, it's a state of possibility here and I think one of the things that the novel is teasing you with right off the bat is that this picturesque is going to take you through multiple different sort of conceptual or logical states like different states meaning different logics of organizing reality and the state itself. So, I think though that that pun on the state as a sort of legislative infrastructural reality and state as also a seemingly metaphysical or more amorphous subjective state is deliberate and I think that gets to maybe what the novel is working at in this relationship between the literal and the figural. Does that make sense?

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: So what it's it like when you taught it? O, maybe back up and say when you taught it.

Mike Benveniste: Okay. I taught this last semester and to contextualize my experience teaching it, I was teaching it in a course called Logics of History, multi-ethnic historical fiction since 1945.

Alex Woloch: This would have been Autumn of 2017?

Mike Benveniste: Yeah. I taught this actually quite as a senior seminar, very good students, very engaged, and involved a lot of theoretical reading where we started out with Linda Hutcheon, Amy Elias, really heavy theoretical stuff on postmodern and post structural critiques of history, historical fiction, historical fiction of the late 20th century, and then we read some narrative theory. So I staged the reading of this novel I thought very strategically to produce one sort of conversation about it. Immediately before we read this novel, we had read Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. Then, we read Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* which I'll say one brief thing about, and then for theory, we had read some Adolph Reed and Kenneth Warren's *What Was African-American Literature?* I wanted them to think about the different ways and strategies through which history is invoked in the present to articulate identitarian positions and to grapple with if we agreed with some of those tactics, if we saw them as still politically germane. I was really hoping this would cause the students to push back a little against the text. I didn't want them to dislike it or read it cynically. I wanted to sort of read and say what does it do. But let's also appraise that.

Alex Woloch: Just to restate that a little, knowing Mike's work. Part of it is that rather than just seeing the novel as sort of valuable because it's telling us about history, you also want your students to be skeptical about just that very move toward history. History doesn't always teach us more. Like if we imagine the present is too much like the past, that can also be a kind of mistake and there's various reasons we might make that error.

Mike Benveniste: That's exactly right and that's why we read this theory because of course, Warren in *What Was African-American Literature?* We're talking about how this formation of literary production is tied to a specific historical circumstance, Jim Crow, and when that disappears, so does that organizing logic—and my students weren't that excited about it. Adolph Reed has a similar argument that he presents in that the sort of anachronistic rearticulation of the present in terms of the historical past, causes us to fail and more nuanced analyses of the way power asymmetries operate in the present. Yeah, so that's part of it.

Alex Woloch: So, you were kind of setting that up as the context for your students?

Mike Benveniste: I thought that pedagogically that's what I was establishing. We had read *A Mercy* right before this which was fascinating, because that came out right after Obama was elected effectively, and most of the writing and discussion of that including interviews with Morrison talk about it as a pre-racial novel for the post racial era. Morrison is pretty explicit in interviews in saying that she wanted to go back to the colonial period to a pre racial moment where there was slavery, but not slavery predicated on necessarily strict racial hierarchies or at least not racial binary. So, just like let's think about this, now let's look at this novel, because this novel clearly does something different. So, when I got into it with my students, they loved it. I mean they really like the novel. They thought that the underground railroad was a fabulous conceit, and what I realized in teaching and what made me think about it for this podcast for the period of Trump, I realized in the classroom about 15 minutes in that they had a ready-made vocabulary for this text and that it was so apprehensible to them that it required very little teaching. That made me think about the context I was teaching it in.

Alex Woloch: So, what was the ready-made?

Mike Benveniste: So, one of the terms that came up right off the bat and this to be fair has a lot to do with the fact that this text is also written I think probably its more important context that is then inflected by Trump is the Black Lives Matter movement. Hopefully, we can talk about where I see that coming up figuratively in the text or maybe literally actually to be quite honest. But one of the things that my students were hunting through the text and they were like locating all of these moments of structural white supremacy, or racism without racists, or talking about Ridgeway as the sort of pre-police force slave catcher whose job is to uphold the economic structure of the South and reinforce racial divisions that he has no investment in. I was like, “Wow, wait a minute. All right.” Like “run with it,” and so, part of what was interesting to me about it in that moment was the ready at handness with my students of white supremacy as a critical analytic term.

Alex Woloch: Was that not the case with other novels that you read in the course? I mean, did that not only really emerge with this-

Mike Benveniste: It really came up with this novel. The students didn't volunteer that term, when we discussed Ishmael Reed nor Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, and it didn't come up when doing some of the Asian-American texts—we had been reading some Karen Tei Yamashita et cetera. So it got me thinking about the way in which this text is so inflammatory in its moment. It's obviously, the phrase white supremacy in critical discourse has a history, right? And if you're a theorist of white supremacy, obviously texts like *Beloved* are literally about white supremacy. But if you look at the critical discussion of *Beloved*, the word, the phrase white supremacy springs up in discussions of it. Later in the 2000s, it's really in the mid, like between 2007 and 10, I started seeing it in critical literature and then more in terms of popular discourse. The frequency with which I see the phrase in articles and editorials in popular media that seemed to me something that really was catalyzed by Black Lives Matter. Again, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, like Charles Mills talked about this in the very beginning of the 2000s, late 90s so it's there, but it's the prevalence and the the immediate applicability of it. So, I thought, oh it's fascinating that this is- it clearly galvanized them at an affective level in engaging with the novel as well in a way that other novels didn't, if that makes sense. I think part of it had to do with the, I think this novel has a very strong almost moral clarity to it that some other novels don't.

Alex Woloch: If you can take us through a little bit more what it would mean to see this as a Black Lives Matter text. Do you view that as deliberate on Whitehead's part? Then how does that relate back to this literal figurative central conceit?

Mike Benveniste: Yeah, all right. Can I say something stage-

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Mike Benveniste: -how hopefully we can put these together. Because the other big thing is the element of the novel that I find the most interesting in the discussion with the students, I found the most compelling formally is the way it manages time, and the way it deliberately deploys anachronism and I think the grafting of times is connected to the idea of metaphor versus literalism in this novel and thinking about whether there's a difference, a strict difference

between those two and thinking about whether or not there's a strict difference between historical moments as well. I think to talk about that it does help to think about what elements of the novel, where these anachronistic elements, for example. So, one would be the section in North Carolina. This is after South Carolina which hopefully will also get a chance to talk about. But where Cora is again fleeing north through the underground railroad, she comes up and she's shown this thing that they've called the Freedom Trail, which is this absolutely horrific and very vividly imagined length as far as the eye can see, of like lynched black bodies leading into the town in North Carolina she's going to. Then, when she gets of the town, she has to be stowed in an attic. And she spends the majority of that chapter stowed in an attic. While she's in the attic, she gets to witness various atrocities in the town because it turns out that the solution in North Carolina to the abolition of slavery, it was to abolish the presence of black individuals. And so it is illegal in North Carolina to simply be black. And Cora ultimately ends up witnessing the lynching of a young girl. This is also one of the literary allusions as she describes the children running around and the foot of the girl gleefully is sort of an allusion to Claude McKay's "The Lynching" which ends with the children like little demons running around the body. So, all right. So we have that, and Whitehead has in interview said that he was inspired by the *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and she spent seven years in an attic, so that's clearly there. He also mentioned in an interview that he meant somewhat anachronistically to think about a white supremacist state explicitly in North Carolina. There, he mentioned in an NPR interview, he was meaning to echo the Holocaust. There's also a resonances of Anne Frank here. But when I read it with my class, the allusion that was the top of the mind for my students was Trayvon Martin and they were like, oh, all white spaces in which the black body is immediately policed and then the social order is predicated on the hyper graphic display of murdered black bodies and they were saying this sounds to us like the thing that helped to inspire the Black Lives Matter movement in terms of the use of digital and personal media devices to reveal/expose these things as the logic of the state, right? So, that was one of the moments that I thought was very powerful when my students rearticulated it to me that way. I believe other reviewers have mentioned this or made this connection I think Whitehead himself has made it. But another clear allusion in that section is blackness itself becomes the grounds for someone to be stopped and detained. So, there seems to be a reference to stop and frisk policies and profiling more broadly. Does that make sense? So, that was where that episode then became more vivid. The way my students were responding, it was clearly inflected by the historical moment in which they reading it, right? That's not- I mean obviously the novel was written in that historical moment too, so the counterfactual experiment where I say, "What would that passage have meant to someone who read it in 1982?"

Alex Woloch: Doesn't work.

Mike Benveniste: It doesn't work.

Alex Woloch: Right.

Mike Benveniste: But it seemed to me both the logic of that episode itself and my students response to it was driven by the sociohistorical context and in part Black Lives Matter. But I also think for my students in the fall, part of the strength that their response to it and why they found the novel so politically and emotionally compelling is because they had just watched a campaign unfold that embraced the support of overt white supremacist, ethno-nationalists and they had a

president who was reluctant to disavow the support of Nazis effectively. And I don't think everyone was confident at that point that Steve Bannon's comment that the racists would all eventually burn off, quote unquote. Their support was just important for getting into the White House and then they disappear. I don't think anyone was confident that was going to happen. So, I think that a lot of the power of the novel for my students especially and for me after thinking about this really derived from that particular debate, which was really acute.

Kenny Ligda: Earlier we were talking about an important function in a lot of historical fiction is to say the past was not like the present, but you can't overgeneralize. But seems like a really important part of Whitehead's project is probably to say the present is a lot more like the past than you might want to think.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah, I think there's a strong impulse in this novel too. Again, it's, in *Flight to Canada* by Ishmael Reed does something similar, but I don't think it's the same. But to superimpose the past and present. But there's actually multiple temporal moments. Do you mind if I mention a few of them? We can talk about it more broadly.

Kenny Ligda: Definitely.

Mike Benveniste: Before Cora has fled to North Carolina, she and Caesar have escaped to South Carolina where there is now a large free black population, in which the state has effectively bought all of the slaves and created a large free black community. This black community is reliant on the patronage of white benefactors in the area, and the focus is, I'm trying to remember them now. I think they're referred to as colored uplift. It's about upward mobility in a free black area. This particular section of the novel conflates multiple moments in the Jim Crow era, and telegraphs ahead. So, one of the things Cora finds out there is a very distressing plot through which black women are being sterilized without their knowledge or participation. Evidently, this refers to some medical experiments that were done in the late 20th century in the United States, 1940s to 1970s where black women were being sterilized without their knowledge/volunteering at US hospitals in the South. The other more specific historical reference is they mentioned that there's an experiment going on that the black population are unwittingly participating in, which is effectively in exchange for their free healthcare, which is an experiment on the effects of syphilis. And that is a reference to the Tuskegee syphilis experiments that happened from the 1930s to 1970s. They were very clear allusion. We have like the eugenics moment, we have the Tuskegee experiments, and then we also have the sort of Jim Crow era idea of separate but equal uplift. I just wanted to highlight this because you can sort of see where these like temporal moments are getting mashed together in the novel. And to some degree, they're all present in the novel, but they also on these little islands that you travel to on the railroad.

Kenny Ligda: I basically, enjoy is the wrong word for this novel because it's a pretty brutal read, but I'd like to love reading it and one thing I sort of live texted, Mike, as I was going through the novel. One thing I liked is that, I had the sense of, this is kind of bringing the past to life for me, I can imagine this stuff much better than I could by looking at the black and white pictures, or reading Frederick Douglass, or whatever. But it sounds like what you're telling me is that, a lot of the stuff in the novel is not the way it was.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: In 1820.

Mike Benveniste: No. Well, one of the other questions I think was fascinating is when is this novel?

Kenny Ligda: Right.

Mike Benveniste: Some reviewers have suggested it takes place really in a sort of alternate historical timeline, much like *The Intuitionist* that people think of as taking place in a historically displaced shadow reality that vaguely corresponds to Jim Crow America, but can't be targeted exactly. The only really historical referent we get is references to the Fugitive Slave Act which I think is passed in 1851.

Kenny Ligda: Right.

Mike Benveniste: But it seems as though the civil war hasn't happened, but we also have the Carolinas where in one slavery has been abolished because the state has purchased the contracts of all the slaves and the other slavery has been abolished because it's been outlawed to be black in a state.

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Mike Benveniste: Evidently, that also has a sort of historical reference of Whitehead's, and that I believe in 1826, North Carolina made it illegal for any free black to enter the state. It was illegal to be a free black person in North Carolina.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, I'm just seeing at the opening like there's a deliberate non-dating. Is that right? I mean...

Mike Benveniste: It's what sort of fascinating as you can, I mean, through these allusions, right? There's an incredible density of historical research. There's allusions to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Mike Benveniste: Peppered throughout the novel, the not knowing the birth date thing is an allusion to a famous part of his first version of the-

Alex Woloch: Right.

Mike Benveniste: -*Autobiography*. There's this insane density of historical knowledge, but it's-

Alex Woloch: But it confuses the chronology, right?

Mike Benveniste: It confuses the chronology and so it's not deployed with the interest of establishing a historical chronology. So I guess part of this would be that it's clearly not interested in teaching you the real story in a factual referential sense of the antebellum period.

Alex Woloch: But wouldn't that be the case for like the neo-slave novel in general? I mean or do you think this is that can vary a lot—?

Mike Benveniste: I think it varies. I think that there's this thinking about the relationship between past and present in a way that many of the neo-slave narratives explicitly do. But I think it's doing so in a way that's fundamentally different than say *Beloved*, something I know much better in which *Beloved* is using this metaphysical conceit of the ghost which is multiple perspectives to really think about literally how the past moves or migrates into the present, but we have a present that's sort of established as the reconstruction of postwar present there that it's haunting. And here we're actually almost seeing the future be sucked back into the past.

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Mike Benveniste: The narrative of the novel which it is very interesting.

Alex Woloch: So in like *Beloved* we wouldn't find those shades of Tuskegee or of Jim Crow or this sort of palimpsest of a number of different temporally separated historical moments.

Mike Benveniste: No, I mean, *Beloved*, I think in my reading of it is pretty deliberate about keeping antebellum and postbellum separate in terms of actual interaction or like the time-space of the novel itself. Then the ghost is what brings those things from before into the after. I mean it's a little more nuanced, but I don't think there's the same collapsing you get here.

Alex Woloch: So, where did your students go with that? Was that like a starting point for other engagement with the novel or is that the end point?

Mike Benveniste: It wasn't the end point, but I had to then drive a more formal analytical approach, say like, okay, let's look at how this is manifest, and what the novel is saying about politics, historical experience et cetera. But what it led to was a lot of discussions about how the novel in strange ways through this almost anarchic anachronism reflected some of their own feelings about contemporary politics. So, this led them to reflect on the ways in which historical reality could be experienced differently depending on the social context and your subject position. For example, a couple of the students said, oh, this idea of being dislocated or the present suddenly being crammed back into the past, they were like this is basically what's happening here. Like we have a fascist government now. I can see that. But it was fascinating because it was a way that framed for them, their experience of the campaign, and then the election. So, seeing white nationalists demonstrate in public squares.

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Mike Benveniste: Right? For my students, it was like the past had come into the present or we had collapsed back into the past and I mean that was something that was prevalent even in the

run up to the election, in the way that a lot of left liberal media and commentary thought about it, right? In terms of the language of multiculturalism, and the present day multicultural reality that we thought we were in and the DNC certainly thought it was the future inevitably, the future of America it says. In some ways, there was this implicit logic idea that the Trump campaign *was* an anachronism, right? The idea of ethno-nationalism, right? The idea of predicating national identity on whiteness, and some fantasy of white work class identity was the past.

Alex Woloch: The phrase that came to my mind when you were talking was that you have Trump as the first white president, right? That's like the Ta-Nehisi Coates line which is exactly about like it's a white supremacy being visible in a way that it wasn't before, because it's a more contested position. And so it's an anachronism, but the anachronism actually becomes completely something new, and different and specific, I guess.

Mike Benveniste: No, I mean this is where I don't know how successful we were, but I tried to push my students this way because it's particularly once they started latching onto the notion of white supremacy, I wanted to push for the analytic, and say like, okay, how does it work in this novel? Does it come from somewhere? Is it the causal anterior factor that leads to everything else? And I made them read a little bit of the debate between Ta-Nehisi Coates and Cornel West. The Twitter feud.

Alex Woloch: Right.

Mike Benveniste: Which was fascinating in the context of this novel because I thought the novel was also in thinking about the relationship between white supremacy, slavery, but also the afterlives of the institution of slavery in this anachronistic way—was really begging these questions, forcing my students to think about these questions in a very productive way.

Alex Woloch: Did they come up with answers? Or are there ways you think there's that analytical attraction on these questions? Do we actually learn something about white supremacy like in this novel?

Mike Benveniste: I mean, I don't know that we learn more about it than we would learn if we went and read Charles Mills for example, in an analytic sense, but I do think that he's trying to give an affective map, and think about how this displaces itself into experience and action at both macro and microscopic levels, which is valuable. I mean I think it's a thing literature can do that's good. One of the other things is, it helped my students to think about how multifaceted this could be, and not think of white supremacy as just dudes with white hoods on their heads.

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Mike Benveniste: And there's also an allusion to the KKK in this novel, which is another anachronism since the KKK is a postbellum formation. But it's again, it's important. I think that's deliberate. The novel wants to hit you with that. I guess one of the questions or things that brought us to it in class was coming back to this every state is different, and thinking about the difference between the places we are in the novel and then asking, are they actually different?

Kenny Ligda: Right. Because in Indiana, they're in a sort of utopian agrarian black community.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: But the point is, it doesn't survive, right? It's destroyed and it is no different, right? Indiana seems to be in a way North Carolina.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah. In fact, it is destroyed in what you could call a mass lynching scene by the surrounding white community whose resentment at the flourishing black agrarian community leads to this massive siege and massacre. In the same way that there are different permutations, right? But South Carolina, we find out that it's actually about creating a controlled society in which there are all these internalized forms of control that still articulate versions of infrastructural white supremacy.

Alex Woloch: Right.

Mike Benveniste: In which we have the doctors performing sub rosa medical research as part of the black uplift project. So, the thing that seems to differ between them is the particular mode of that structure, but in the class, we came back to this like, "So, do we think every state is different?" And that's what we discussed. We discussed what are the specific differences and then is there some underlying similarity? I think there was a quote I can't remember where it's- it's when Cora is in North Carolina, when she's looking out the window, and she sees the girl that's being lynched because she's effectively been caught being black in North Carolina and it's staged as this dramatic performance that the town is watching. The--the man who's in charge of it says, he says effectively she thought she could escape the logic of our system. But that was a key line for my students, this idea of the logic of the system, and this is something I wanted them to think about through the Coates-West debate, and through the novel itself, which is the relationship between the logic of the system, and the system itself. This is why I taught it with Morrison's *A Mercy* because I think my students' automatic reflex is to think that the logic of the system pre-exist the system. So, you have strong forms of racialization, and then this leads to a racially stratified system whereas Morrison's novel sort of goes the other way and looks at how various types of power inequality and difference and there's clear policing of difference then is transformed into something, it's like the prehistory of strict racialization. One of the questions I had for them, and I would ask you guys what your thoughts are from the novel is, what this relationship is in the novel between the idea and the thing. That's where it comes back to me that like the railroad, and that sort of-

Kenny Ligda: That's a super hard question.

Mike Benveniste: Yes.

Kenny Ligda: I can't believe you're pushing that...

Mike Benveniste: This is what I asked of my undergraduates. I was like you guys should be able to answer this for me because I can't.

Kenny Ligda: Something you mentioned earlier, Mike, was the moral clarity, that it seemed like your students picked up in the novel. For a long time, moral clarity has not been a good thing.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: For literary scholars to have in a novel, not have it over at the front. But maybe there is a time for moral clarity and maybe this is it.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah, and I don't mean by that I'm expecting a novel about antebellum slavery to be ambiguous on the status of the institution. I guess one of the ways I would—just to nuance what I'm saying slightly—but to point it out is, that of course in her escape Cora ends up somewhat accidentally killing a 12-year-old, right, who's attempting to catch her along with another group they're out hunting for wild boar together but then they happened upon the slaves and they attack them. She hits him with a rock and when she finds out that he's died, she's very blunt about, like: I don't care. He shouldn't have tried to catch me and I think that many of the readers of this book likewise don't see that as a moral complication, whereas *Beloved* is also equally unambiguous about the institution of slavery obviously. But of course it does want to introduce the way in which that institution itself produces fundamental ethical ambiguities that make it difficult to moralize, right. It makes it hard to moralize about infanticide. Part of the strength for that novel has to do with the complexity of that question, that it introduces in that context. This novel, I don't know that there's a moment where we're like “How do I judge Cora's action here? Do I agree with this?” Because I think for the most part everyone reads this novel and we wanted to do what she does.

Alex Woloch: Then it's like it's not seven types of ambiguity but like seven types of clarity or something. I guess the idea would be that clarity itself can be because there's gradations of it in different forms of it, and it's like linked to imagination and it's not just sort of a very simple thing, that is not simple to have clarity.

Mike Benveniste: This is one of the things that discussing with my students, helped me actually appreciate about it because I'm not the sort of scholar of literature who always appreciates ambiguity. Sometimes I want my works to be politically forthright and I think it's important to stake out positions and persuade people of them. That was one of the things I also got from my classes. This was a very effectively persuasive text for my students.

Alex Woloch: It's good that you can practice a little bit of what you preach to and actually be persuaded a little bit by your students.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: That's always a very exciting thing.

Mike Benveniste: It's a very nice experience.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. It's like the Tom Sawyer, like they're doing the teaching and you convince them to do it. That's a sign that you've been doing something right. Let's go back to literal

metaphor so the crucial—again thinking about the crucial crux from the title on, the underground railroad is a real thing and it's actually metaphorical in its reality, ironically.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: It's a real metaphor.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: Then if it becomes real, it's no longer a metaphor, it's just a railroad, and it's underground. Neither of the terms are longer metaphor but Mike you were kind of connecting that to, as I follow your rather complicated argument it's that the mixing of literal and figurative is part of that mixing of times.

Mike Benveniste: I think the-

Alex Woloch: Allowing us to see the way that the future gets set back.

Mike Benveniste: I think the novel is really formally interested in a conceptually import way with these contact zones, and in the same way it's thinking about the way the future gets subsumed back into the past. It's also I think interested in this contact point between the literal and the metaphorical, which the railroad really epitomizes and we could sort of think about like what gives the railroad its reality, right, outside of the text. This wasn't on our list, I hope it's okay, it's just a passage that I was thinking of today when I was thinking about this. This is earlier in the book it's in the Ridgeway chapter and it's where he's sort of thinking about the pursuit of slaves et cetera, et cetera but it has this really interesting moment I thought and thinking about the role of magic in the text, the role the fantastic. But so just this moment: "Abolitionist lawyers erected barricades of paperwork every week in a stratagem. New York was a free state, they argued, and any colored person became magically free once they stepped over the border. They exploited understandable discrepancies between the bulletins and the individual in the courtroom." So I thought this was an interesting moment to sort of reframe this and that the operation of jurisprudence and law is rearticulated as a kind of magic. But of course it is a kind of magic by which a thing becomes a person or a person becomes a thing based on a line, and based on statute. This was one of the things in the novel that caused me to sort of *re-re-reflect* that on the way the novel is thinking about the discourse of magic and fantasy, and thinking about it is something maybe historically real, and that this magic is clearly embedded here. One of the things that really reminded me of this, sorry to sort of off topic, but we also, in the course we've done *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy, which uses an insane amount of figural language as I like these epic similes all over it. But there's this really, I think, important moment in that novel where the Glenn gang has just massacred a bunch of Native Americans and they're doing so for pay. What they need to do is they scalp their victims. They bring the scalps back and trade it for money. But Glanton in talking to one of his men says "Get that receipt for us." But receipt is there obviously referring to the scalp, and this is a metaphor, in a sense, but it's a metaphor that exposes the violence of state, right. In other words, the metaphor itself is real or is literally true because of a material power of state behind it, right. That enforces and allows this sort of atrocity. So part of me was wondering if in thinking about the railroad, and thinking about

how in some way the structure of white supremacy made it literal. This is something that the novel is contemplating. Does that make sense, or thinking about this contact zone between...

Alex Woloch: Yeah, no, it totally makes sense and I have a really odd question. It would be in particularly odd if I traced my association which was thinking about teaching Robinson Crusoe this week and for the first time I had this weird thought that being of a desert island in a series of ways, including the disorientation he experiences and the sort of having to start over is actually sort of reflective of the experience of migration and immigration, and I had never had that thought. Question to you Mike is, and if it doesn't work out, I mean just the wall, like if we have a border, and Trump is absolutely fixated on making it literal like this bizarre literalization of something that's really figurative, just seems weirdly parallel to this title.

Mike Benveniste: No, it- I think in some ways it's complementary. I mean part of what the discussion is what the class brought me to think about my own work is this question of the literal and the figural and starting to rethink the figural or fantastic language, it's mobilized in a lot of late 20th century contemporary fiction which I've in my own work been somewhat critical of. To some degree I think about perhaps because what I'd always thought is that what this articulates is a sort of version of cultural politics in which representation, act of representation automatically and gender material lacks of praxis, right. It's not that I don't think politics of cultural representation can never amount to practice. But I don't know that it always does. One of the things this is sort of kind of rethink is the causal relationship between those two and thinking about perhaps there's a degree to which material power, structural infrastructural power, is one of the things that legitimates and gives one the power to impose, right. That's like the a priori condition for literalizing metaphor, for turning a scalp into a receipt, right.

Alex Woloch: Or a border into a wall.

Mike Benveniste: Yeah. Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: Well, does it go in the book?

Mike Benveniste: No, this is- I'm, I'm looking at something different with much more contemporary writers. So I've actually been starting to think about this Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Chang-Rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel*, and I'm starting to think about a different way these novels are approaching, the category of character and the relationship between character and race. This sort of- we're not going to have time for it today but this is part of why I was interested in the museum scene there where Cora is forced to occupy type, and I think that one of the things this novel is very invested in is making an implicit argument that ethnic fiction isn't representing subjective typicality. I mean Cora herself is by definition in this novel atypical in that she survives. But I think that there's another interesting dynamic in the novel revolving around it's sort of rejection of typicality or typicalness.

Alex Woloch: Kenny, I don't know if you had this association backs like to the conversation with Morgan and like the Nathaniel West novel but at a certain points I was thinking about that

in relation to this, and of course then we've had this *Gulliver's Travels* theme because we talked about *Gulliver's Travels* and then the hero of this Nathaniel West novel which is called a-

Kenny Ligda: *A Cool Million*.

Alex Woloch: *A Cool Million* is Lemuel Pitkin and now *Gulliver's Travels*, so.

Michael Benveniste: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: Themes emerge and I think a particular power of the piqueresque is that it captures a feeling of being completely at the mercy of history, which is both kind of an escape from the reality of one's own responsibility but is also sometimes how reality is experienced. I think in this particular moment the sense of just one damn thing after another, and wherever you go there's more problems. I think that recurs in a lot of the works that continue to come to mind. That's my theory on why it might be coming back.

Alex Woloch: Cool. Well listen great thanks to Mike for joining us today. And stay tuned. We are hoping to do some more conversations before too long.

Kenny Ligda: Absolutely.

Mike Benveniste: Thank you guys for having me. I appreciate it.

Alex Woloch: Thanks Mike.

Kenny Ligda: You've been listening to *Reading After Trump* conversations in literature and politics. This is a production of the Stanford English Department in collaboration with the Office of Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning. *Reading After Trump* is created and hosted by Alex Woloch and Kenny Lidga. Music is by Brett Yarnton.