

## What If Our Textbooks Were Black? – episode 2 (FINAL)

R4 ANNOUNCER:

**Now on BBC Radio 4: artists, cultural figures, educators and students challenge us to reconsider our established models of learning. The Chicago-based curator Naomi Beckwith raises questions about education, history and race, in: ‘What If Our Textbooks Were Black?’**

### 0’00” NAOMI OPENING STATEMENT

NAOMI: When I decided to be a curator, I just knew... two things. One, that culture mattered, that culture was just as important as politics, and as business, in terms of the way we organise ourselves as human beings. And two – I knew that there was no way I could not think about Black history writ large, in the way that I present that.

*MUSIC: Art Ensemble of Chicago – Thème de Yoyo*

### 0’30” MONTAGE

IMANI: In my art class all we talk about are white artists. In my music class, all we talk about are white artists. Like, that’s ridiculous.

PRINCESS: Let’s just reach back to the motherland, and let’s see if we can retain and reignite and reinvigorate the authenticity from whence we were taken away from.

THOMAS: It’s history! It is history! Our history has just been omitted from their textbooks.

NAOMI: When you’ve been told you’re right, for a long long time, it’s hard to let go of your assumptions.

*MUSIC: Art Ensemble of Chicago – Thème de Yoyo*

### 1’15” NAOMI ON A CHICAGO STREET

**I’m Naomi Beckwith. I’m an art curator here in Chicago, and a life-long student.**

**I decided to call this series “What if our Textbooks were Black” because I believe we need to rebalance the story of art and culture – not just in exhibitions, but in education. We all know our European history, but what**

about our Black history? Where are the inspirational artists, musicians, writers and thinkers that are being overlooked?

*MUSIC: Mike Reed – Watching The Boats (from Flesh and Bone LP)*

#### NAOMI IN STUDIO

We're imagining a whole new textbook.

Already within its pages, from our first episode, we have the vernacular poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, and the dance forms innovated by Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus.

This time: we'll turn our attention to music – and first, visual art.

#### NAOMI IN GALLERY (ECHOEY SPACE) – quiet, low voice (suitable for gallery!)

The first time I saw a painting by Kerry James Marshall, I thought: “if I were an artist, I would paint a scene precisely like that!”

Kerry mostly creates scenes with black figures, and I mean literally black: ebony, charcoal, obsidian-coloured people.

We see them situated in places that you can actually locate in Black neighborhoods across the US.

And yet, Kerry's paintings feel relevant to the broadest international audience.

#### 2'45" KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

KERRY: I remember starting in kindergarten, my kindergarten teacher kept a scrapbook of pictures and postcards and greeting cards, and all kinds of things that she clipped from magazines and stuff, and that scrapbook, she let the kids who are best behaved look at that scrapbook while everybody was taking a nap after recess. That was the book that changed my life!

NAOMI: What did it do?

KERRY: It made me know that I wanted to make pictures like the pictures I was looking at in that scrapbook. I wanted to make pictures that made other people feel the way those pictures in that book were making me feel. So that's – literally, that's the beginning of my interest – I didn't know there was such a thing as an artist, you don't know it's called that, but you can look at a lot of those pictures and you can see the difference between a drawing and a photograph, and you can tell that a drawing was something somebody made. And so it set up, for me, this sort of quest, to try to figure out what it was they knew that allowed them to do the kinds of things they did.

**MUSIC: Archie Shepp – Blues for Brother George Jackson (from Attica Blues LP)**

NAOMI: So, you discover what an artist is, and what an artist can do... What, in your art education, began to frame this idea – or what helped you, I should say, start to create a work that spoke to a public?

KERRY: Well that's something that didn't happen until much later. I came across a book when I was in 5th grade, called 'Great Negroes Past and Present'. And it's an odd book! Because it didn't have photographs of any of the people in, it didn't have any examples of their work. Instead it had illustrations that some artists had drawn of them. (laughs) But it's the first place where I saw the name Charles White. And... his name stuck with me. Ebony magazine, later on, did a great profile on Charles White. 1961 or something like that. And that was the first time I really saw examples of his work. I had never really seen pictures drawn of Black people that looked as powerful as those.

NAOMI: Absolutely. Did you study under Charles White?

KERRY: I did. That's why I went to Otis Art Institute, because he was there. I found out he taught on Tuesdays and Thursday evenings – I just went in there. I went in there with a sketchbook, where I had no business being! I went into that class, and I situated myself in a corner in the back. But when the class took a break, he saw me over in that corner, he came over and talked to me. And what he said was: "you can't see nothing from back here, pull that stool up on the front line, where you can see, and do some drawing". And then after that, he said: "You know what, if you want to come by anytime, you want to come by, just come on."

NAOMI: Wow.

**ARCHIVE OF CHARLES WHITE <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWpV6JCqVzI>**

*CHARLES WHITE ARCHIVE: "I use – assemble – those images of Black people that symbolically represent the masses of Black people in this country. I use this image to talk about the condition of man, the injustices of society..."*

**5'45"**

KERRY: When you look at Charles White's work, it's powerfully rendered, perfectly made, technically virtuosic paintings. And there are images of Black people doing ordinary things, but being extraordinary looking while they are doing it.

NAOMI: And how would you describe those images, those people?

KERRY: They seemed... uncomplicatedly self-confident. I mean, they had a presence that seemed extraordinary. I mean, drawing could not, technically, certainly could not be done better than that. That's as good as it can be done.

*MUSIC: Mr Fingers – What About This Love (dub version)*

**And yet, Charles White is only recently enjoying major museum recognition.**

**For Kerry James Marshall, this was a riddle to solve.**

KERRY: I didn't see Charles White's work in there. Not – certainly not consistently. Now, one of the excuses for not including a lot of Black people in things was always this notion that it's not good enough... but I think Charles White's work answers that question of whether you were able to do good enough, by doing it magnificently. It compared favorably with the works of Leonardo da Vinci, with Michelangelo, with Rafael. I mean, it looked as good as any of those drawings did. Which is why somebody like me, who was interested in this discrepancy between the things that I saw Charles White do, in the presence that he had, or the lack of presence that he had in the historical narrative, why I had to find out what was really going on there. But as I started reading more theory of art, and looking at art history and criticism, you understand that excellence is not the measure of historical significance. Which meant that I had to figure out why he's not there, given what I thought was the magnificence of the work he had done.

NAOMI: And what do you think those reasons were?

KERRY: Because, simply making pictures is not what defines the value of a thing that's called an artwork, but asking the question of what kind of things can and can't be artwork seem to be the thing that matters the most.

NAOMI: Mmmm.

KERRY: But what it is, is that every aspect of the object has to be considered as well as the image that's in the object. And I think what I do with my painting is, I consider all those things. So, I'm always making an object. I'm taking Charles White's first advice: that when you're making work, you make the best drawings you can – the ideas will take care of themselves.

8'30"

IN GALLERY

KERRY: My goal as an artist was to be able to make work that could hang in museums alongside everything that was already there. That was my goal...

NAOMI: You wanted a painting next to Veronese...

KERRY: I did! And I also wanted to ultimately end up being one of those artists in Chapter 25 of the standard art historical narratives that outlined how people did amazing things with their craft and knowledge. That's what I wanted. That's what I wanted.

## IN STUDIO

NAOMI: Which brings me to that question: what if our textbooks were Black?

KERRY: Mm-hmm?

NAOMI: What would the study of other Black figures – even including yourself – do for future generations?

KERRY: Right – what kind of question is that?!

NAOMI: That's big! (laughter) What are we missing? What are we missing, by not looking at what is a really capacious field, the field of Black art and artists? And what could we gain, by paying some attention to it?

KERRY: Well, I mean... this is a complicated question. Because, when I came up, I didn't experience – my encounter with art was not framed by an experience of “lack”. But it was clear to me from the outset, that I always had choices. That I was choosing things. But the thing is, what you find out is that those demands for more Black history classes and stuff were not universally desired! (laughs) So it's like, everybody didn't want to take a class in negro history! It's like, yeah, there were protests, and things like that, going up. But those protests were often led by people who were outside. They were mostly college students from UCLA and from Berkeley and places like that, coming down to South Central, leading these sort of rallies and protests and stuff like that. But for the kids who were in school, it's not like every Black student who is in school wants to take classes in Black history and Black Studies, it's just not like that. A lot of the interest that you have has to be self-driven.

## 10'40" NAOMI LINK – FROM KERRY JAMES MARSHALL TO MIKE REED

*MUSIC: Mike Reed – Watching The Boats (from Flesh and Bone LP)*

**We're here imagining a new textbook, celebrating those Black role models – artists, writers, dancers, musicians – whose contributions to history are so often overlooked.**

**But for this project to be truly meaningful, it can't just be academic, only sited within the walls of the classroom, within the pages of a book.**

**Kerry James Marshall told us why meeting his idol was so important, and what he gained from that direct personal and social connection.**

**The musician Mike Reed feels the same way...**

**11'20" MIKE REED**

MIKE: The classroom experience was information. But what I was really looking for was connections to people, just be able to say, I have a question – what is, how do you do this? After a while I figured I didn't need to be in the classroom to find those answers – there could just be this person or that person that I could just go to directly, and mostly find them, from a club at a jam session.

*MUSIC: Mike Reed – Call Off Tomorrow (from Flesh and Bone LP)*

**I'm sitting with Mike Reed in his club The Hungry Brain, on the North West side of Chicago.**

**Mike's a composer, and a performer. He's also involved in running a couple of festivals.**

**And, he's an active member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, a 50-year-old union of musicians and educators whose wide experiments with improvised performances expanded the boundaries of music as we know it.**

**To people starting out in his profession, Mike has this advice:**

MIKE: If you want to get the most out of taking lessons with someone, find somebody who is part of a jam session that you like, and take lessons from them. Picking up information just from the community, and from peers... of course, just being in the room.

NAOMI: Mmmm. This is an intentionally naïve question, but – is that typical?

MIKE: It should be typical... it's how, at this point, whatever we call jazz music, it's folk music, passed on from person to person. It's becoming LESS typical, or maybe the more typical thing is finding things out on YouTube... I think, still, the musicians that operate well

within different contexts, they get asked to do things more – they do have that skill set of assessing and finding out information from a social interaction.

13'20"

*MUSIC: Rahsaan Roland Kirk – If I Loved You (live, with Robert Shy on drums)*

MIKE: There is oral traditions, not only of how to play – that's hugely important – but then the stories. So, when you sit there and you let a great drummer like Robert Shy tell you stories about playing with Rahsaan Roland Kirk, you sit there and listen till 4 in the morning. And this is where we really are passing – these are kind of archival stories. And then every so often somebody puts it down somewhere, whether it's by usually making a record.

### **Mike Reed connected deeply with music, from an early age.**

MIKE: By the time I was 10, and had my allowance, I'd go to the record store and just blow all my money. I was really into the blues. And usually, the blues and jazz sections were next to each other, and I wandered over too far one day, saw this record, two guys with saxophones on the cover, blues for so-and-so... and so I bought it.

*MUSIC: Coleman Hawkins / Ben Webster – Don't Get Around Much Anymore*

<https://www.discogs.com/Coleman-Hawkins-Ben-Webster-Coleman-Hawkins-Ben-Webster/release/3572177>

<https://music.apple.com/gb/album/dont-get-around-much-anymore/530640348?i=530640673>

MIKE And I hated it! ... except for one track on it: "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" – Duke Ellington composition. And it was a Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster record, very legendary session. But it slowly shifted my ability to hear things. And so, when I was then really getting into wanting to play music, I also had this idea – well if I could play jazz, I betcha I'd get really smart, get smarter in life! So there's things like this, I was like, I wanna play drums, and the people that were most proficient at it were these jazz musicians.

15'00"

NAOMI: So let's talk about your first encounter with AACM?

MIKE: So, the AACM – or, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians – you know, originally forming in '65, they wanted to essentially control the type of music that they wanted to make, the environments it was going to be put in, and hopefully some bit of what the financial existence was. That's to put it very, very simply. So, in a time period where, normally you were caught at the behest of club owners, that you're there for entertainment, and also to be dictated what those terms of that entertainment are gonna be. So, these rules are hugely changing, but also the artistic rise of the musicians' community starts to really come to the forefront. We see it in the music of people like John

Coltrane, and even Miles Davis, where the artistic ideas are starting to really move, for its own benefit, not for the benefit of popular appeal, and popular audience, and/or to sell records.

*MUSIC: John Coltrane – Cousin Mary (from Giant Steps LP)*

16'00"

MIKE: The people that I really loved – Coltrane, or Monk, or whoever – they were making their own music, for the most part, and they would play some standards, but what we really know them for is their own music. So, if I wanted to be like that, it's like, well then, I have to make my own music.

NAOMI: Historically there's been a little bit of rift between composition and improvisation. And my understanding, or at least what I've gleaned from the AACM, is that improvisation itself is a form of composition. And I'm wondering if you can kind of explain, what that means for the practice of the AACM?

MIKE: Y'know, improvisation isn't strictly a jazz thing – it's a technique. American music in general, and folk music, has improvisation in it. You know, it's interesting that a lot of jazz improvisers that really get into composition, like an Anthony Braxton... they definitely go at the notion of composition as a very important part of who they wanna present to be. It's huge. It's a huge thing. And you know, if you look back, actually, also, when we talk about Mingus, Charles Mingus, and we talk about Ellington, it's very huge to be considered as legitimate composers.

NAOMI: Why? (OFF MIC)

MIKE: Well, I think it's because that difference between straight contemporary music, or even historical music, they wanna be considered as great as Gershwin! They want their music to be up there with the most “acceptable” types of institutional spaces. And it should be! And it's interesting, as that whole progression has moved and, you know now – the idea of jazz being America's classical music that's really evolved itself, and you have a lot of these artists really being accepted on the highest level.

18'00" NAOMI ON STREET

**Jazz is America's music. And this beautiful tradition wouldn't exist if it weren't for the epic, often painful history of black people in America. Thanks to social rights and cultural pride movements, we can all celebrate both the history and the incredible American art it produced.**

*MUSIC: Mike Reed – Watching The Boats (from Flesh and Bone LP)*



## NAOMI IN STUDIO

**All the artists we've met for this series are aware both of their craft, and of the Black history that informs their amazing art.**

**Mike Reed and Kerry James Marshall value the importance of informal social interactions as teachable moments.**

**Princess Mhoon and Dr Haki Madhubuti – who we met in the first episode – they also create their own institutions to continue those legacies.**

**They know their history as much as their art.**

**They are the authors and the subjects of our textbook.**

## 19'00" KERRY, HAKI & PRINCESS

KERRY: I had a certain belief from something that Charles White said, that if you're making work as an artist, you should make work, it should always be ABOUT something. And it should always be about something that mattered. And if history matters, then that means I got to know a little bit more about history than average, if I'm going to make work that seems to want to address it.

PRINCESS: It's kind of for us, by us, and we continue to encourage each other, part of the work that I do is to continue to glorify this history, as we constantly look at ourselves through a different lens, through this social media fallacy of what it means to be a Black dancing body. How can we continue the conversation, and make sure that it's told?

HAKI: We are the only people, we're one of the few people who are actually confused about who we are. When we talk about Black people, we're never talking about just colour – but we're also talking about culture. Now, your culture gives you a sense of identity, purpose and direction, OK? Now, from the culture, you get consciousness. So we talking about Black, we're talking about colour, culture and consciousness. So the negro is a filthy invention, created in some plantation in Mississippi. And so that's not our identity – that's somebody else's definition of us. So, once we began to redefine ourselves, that's what essentially our great thinkers were doing – that we decide who we are.

## 20'40" YOUNG PEOPLE on HISTORY EDUCATION

**We may decide who we are... but, who decides what we're taught?**

**Imani, Angelina and Isaiah are all Black high school students here in Chicago. I'm curious to know what they've been learning in history classes – and what they want to learn.**

IMANI: Most of the classes I take are, like, history and social sciences, because that's what I enjoy the most. I find it really fascinating, like, what has gone on, and how that relates to what I'm doing right now.

ANGELINA: I haven't taken as many history courses as Imani has, because I'm just generally not that interested in history. Like, I feel bad that I'm not, but, I was struggling to pay attention, because it was like – I know that these are white stories. I've heard about George Washington, all the people that were the founding fathers, but I always have the question – where were the Black people?

ISAIAH: I'd definitely like to see an African American studies course, as not just – oh, it's something extra you do if you have time for it. At my school we have African American culture club – and that's good, that's an amazing opportunity – but not everyone can stay after school. School is there for you to learn. If I wanna learn about my history, it shouldn't be something that I have to do extra!

IMANI: I really have to look hard, and fight for things that should be easy for me to find, especially in a majority Black school. And I think it's hard because a lot of kids end up compromising.

ANGELINA: I completely agree. I didn't have the time to take African-American studies class, because I'm striving to get into these advanced placement courses, so I can get into the college I wanna get into. So, it's like, putting my cultural studies on the downside so I can go to a college that's prestigious.

NAOMI: So, what would you like to see on these curricula? For instance, if there was an Afro American Literature class, who would you wanna see?

IMANI: I think the first thought is, who I'm tired of seeing! I'm tired during Black History Month of only learning about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, and then, the teacher being "are you more of a Malcolm X, or a Martin Luther King?! Are you passive resistance or do you try and fight the man?" Like, I'm tired of just learning about the same two people every Black History Month!

ISAIAH: Yeah. And it would be great to go into depth of Black history, further than not only activism and fighting for our rights – that's amazing, and I understand that that's the core of it – but when we learn white history, we learn about artists, poets, musicians, Beethoven, Michelangelo, all of these great people that were so relevant to their history, but, what about the Harlem Renaissance, learning about all of these different people? And how jazz created a movement that sparked the nation? And white people stole it from Black culture and they become more popular for it?

ANGELINA: Yeah. There are so many stories that I do not know, and those are the stories that I wanna know.

### **23'30" THOMAS GREEN**

**My own education began at Beasley Academic Center, on Chicago's south side, where – unusually – Black history was a regular part of the curriculum. I didn't have to choose!**

**When I was at Beasley, Thomas Green was the guidance counselor.**

NAOMI: Mr Green... tell me, what does it mean to educate a Black child?

THOMAS: A Black student? Oh my gosh, if you're Black also, it means the world! You want to impart some knowledge to them. You want them to be better than you. I think you take a special pride in working with your own people. You can look in their eyes and you almost see your own reflection, and you want them to be successful. You want them to be successful. And if they happen to be your kin, or your relative, for real, you really want them to be successful, you want them to do better than you – succeed, become a doctor, be a lawyer..... you can do anything!

### **24'30" NAOMI ON CHICAGO STREET**

**I've spoken to my friends, my colleagues, mentors, even idols for this project. And I've tried to construct a black history, thru arts and culture. I can imagine a moment when someone could set these stories in a book, or they could be a part of a school curriculum.**

**But as I've listened and reflected more, I've realised something I need to keep in mind: that the simple act of learning was once one of the most fraught activities for Black people in America.**

### **NAOMI IN STUDIO**

Enslaved people could be maimed or killed for reading... then, almost a century after the end of slavery, people had to argue to the highest court in the land that black children were at least worthy of the most basic amenities, like books in their classrooms.

*MUSIC: Lift Ev'ry Voice And Sing – Joey DeFrancesco / Dan Wilson / Jason Brown / Troy Roberts (from Project Freedom LP)*

The arts—music, dance, poetry, making things, connecting with people—have been a primary means of passing on knowledge, when you couldn't do it in a classroom. In a condition where formal education may not be possible, self-education is one of the most radical acts to undergo.

To imagine a black textbook, is not just to add stories to a broad history. It is to counteract centuries of hate and segregation. And it is to tell a broader world, that it's a better place thanks to the love and beauty black people have poured into it – despite efforts to prevent us from doing so.

#### 26'15" CLOSING BIT

THOMAS: We should be proud of our achievements, and we should continue to lift our voices and sing our own praises, and recognize our forefathers and our ancestors who lifted us up and brought us this far. And it's up to us to lift the next generation up and move them forward also.

#### MUSIC UP

NAOMI: And what would you do if you had to write that Black textbook?

PRINCESS: If I had to write this Black textbook, we would start with each of our cultures in their respective homes. We would all individually walk our journeys. We would describe how we cross paths, how we cross pollinated, how we made beautiful new dances, beautiful new songs. And they would all be like veins running through a body, and they would travel back to their homes when they wanted to come together and convene when they wanted to. But, understanding that, we're each beautiful in our own right. It could be an Encyclopedia Britannica with this culminating story of "this is America".

**27'30" ENDS**

R4 ANNOUNCER:

**"What If Our Textbooks Were Black?" was presented by Naomi Beckwith. The series was produced by Natalie Moore and Steve Urquhart. It's a Reduced Listening production for BBC Radio 4.**