

## What If Our Textbooks Were Black? – episode 1 (FINAL)

R4 ANNOUNCER:

**Which chapters from history are taught in schools – and what’s being left out? Over the next two weeks, here on BBC Radio 4, the Chicago-based curator Naomi Beckwith asks artists some frank questions about education, history and race, in: ‘What If Our Textbooks Were Black?’**

### 0’00” OPENING MONTAGE

NAOMI: Are you not getting any stories about Black people and African Americans in school now? ANGELINA: Unfortunately, no.

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

KERRY: What you see in books is always supposed to represent the best that human beings are able to do. Why else would it be in a book?

ISAIAH: An actual course that’s focused around my history and my culture... would be great.

NAOMI: 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?

MIKE: It has a lot to do with having an ongoing, current conversation with the past.

ANGELINA: There are so many stories I do not know. And those are the stories I wanna know.

NAOMI: I think people are hungry for these kinds of stories.

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

### 1’00” NAOMI SELF-INTRO & SETS OUT THE PROJECT

NAOMI: My name is Naomi Beckwith, I’m a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

**Really, I’m a storyteller – trying to make sure those stories that don’t often get told are getting told. That’s what museums do, right?**

**But of course, not everyone goes to museums. We can change our exhibitions, and keep on changing them, and keep on telling different**

stories... but if we don't also change our textbooks, then nothing changes at all.

So, I'm going to be speculating about this. And I'd like you to speculate with me.

NAOMI: The speculation is: what if our textbooks were black? What if our books and our education focused as much on a global Black history as it does on a European history? The reality of it is that there have been significant players, contributors, actors in the cultural history of the world, who don't originate from Europe, who originate from the African continent and its descendants. So, I'd like to maybe fill in some of those gaps in histories, and see if we can find some compelling stories around ways in which we can expand our history of the world.

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

**Here's the plan: We're going to imagine a new textbook.**

**Inside, we'll encounter master storytellers: artists, musicians, writers, thinkers... some incredible yet *not well-known-enough* people, without whom history and culture is almost unimaginable.**

**And, in turn, they'll speak about artists and teachers who inspired them.**

**We'll learn about these key cultural figures together.**

NAOMI: For me, the lesson isn't to walk away with this trivia knowledge, where you can quote it up already – all these cool figures in history – but to walk away with thinking about maybe absences in our own educational system, absences in our own self education, and that this becomes a tool by which we can all be more expansive about our interest, where we focus... I want to spark people's curiosity to learn more. More so than saying, oh I've got a good primer on Black history right now. That's a great place to start, but not the place to end up.

**3'25" SCHOOL ATMOS**

NAOMI: I had an interesting education that I didn't realise was singular until many years later. I was born and raised on the south side of Chicago, went to an incredible public school – a school called Beasley Academic Center – and it was a bit of an experimental school with the greatest athletic facilities, that had an incredibly high teacher and staff to student ratio, it had a language arts center, so I was learning French at the very beginning ... all this was happening in a school that was really quite posh, relatively speaking. But, also at that time,

in the early 80s in Chicago, everyone – no matter how posh or bourgeois you may have been – would have been affected by the Black Power Movement. So, not only was the school set up for all this infrastructural excellence, it was set up to teach these students – about 98% of them were African American – it was set up to teach us Black history, along with the standard curriculum. I was taught to know all of Western history, and all of American history, but always know and value Black history as well.

**4'50" THOMAS GREEN**

**It's been decades since I left Beasley... and I'm about to be reunited with Thomas Green – he was a guidance counsellor when I was there, eventually becoming assistant principle.**

NAOMI: Mr Green!

THOMAS: Yes, hi! How are you?

NAOMI: I'm very good! And I've only known you as Mr Green my entire life...! Last time you saw me I was knee high to a grasshopper! (laughs) Wait, I'm gonna ask an incredibly conceited question: do you remember me from Beasley?

THOMAS: I remember the smile. I remember the effervescence. I remember the energy. That's the part you would never forget for a student. The energy and the look.

NAOMI: Why thank you! Can you tell us a little bit about Beasley?

THOMAS: Oh jeez. Now you're gonna have me boasting and bragging and crying at the same time! I think from the years 1978 to 1998, that twenty year span, Beasley was the best school in the country. Even President Clinton came by the school when he was running for office – he was Governor Clinton of Arkansas at the time – and he proclaimed Beasley one of the best schools in the country. One of the best elementary schools.

**6'00"**

**ARCHIVE CLIP: Governor Bill Clinton visiting Beasley in 1992**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGL7JquMIAs> – at around 33'30": "this school is a model for what we wish all schools could be..."**

**<https://mediaburn.org/video/the-90s-election-specials-raw-bill-clinton-at-beasley-school-2/>**

*BILL CLINTON: This school is a model for what we wish all schools would be. Your school is always in the top of all competitions in this area, you students always do very well. If I become president, it's my job to try to help make education better...*

NAOMI: You know the best thing for me is I had no idea it was the top school in the country.

THOMAS: Oh yeah! No, I don't think the kids did. They didn't know we were a good school. We were having a good time...

NAOMI: So, it wasn't so much about status. It was just about feeling fulfilled in the building itself.

**ARCHIVE CLIP: Governor Bill Clinton visiting Beasley in 1992 (fades)**

*BILL CLINTON: Tomorrow people will read about this school, all over America! (cheers, applause)*

NAOMI: Amazing! I remember that we started every day going into class, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States of America, which was a common activity across schools in America! But whereas most schools would probably sing 'America the Beautiful', or 'God Bless America' – at Beasley we would finish the Pledge of Allegiance and then sing... the Black national anthem! The 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing'. Can you explain 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing'?

**AUDIO: Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing**

THOMAS: It's a form of inspiration, pride, sound of success, sound of accomplishment. To give you encouragement to continue the fight, to continue to be successful. Cos we're a successful people. Black people are successful. I don't know what other people think about Black people, but we – we built this country on our backs. Free labor for 300 years? Come on! Y'know? We're hard workers. We're hard workers. We worked for free but we work hard, and we've done a phenomenal job.

NAOMI: Mmm. It also was something that I didn't realize the significance of until later. Mostly because then I realized that not everyone started the day singing the Black national anthem! But, I get the sense that many generations before mine had a hard time understanding the legacy of enslavement, and the legacy of what it meant to strive through that. I think so many people tend to think that Black History starts with the civil rights movement.

THOMAS: Oh! (laughs)

NAOMI: And this is why we're posing the question, what if my textbooks were Black? And the question I'm asking everyone starts with the preface really. And that is, there is a presumption that Black history is primarily for Black people.

THOMAS: Oh no – it's history! It is history! Our history has just been omitted from their textbooks. They don't want to know history. They don't want to know prior to the trans-Atlantic voyage over here. There were Black people, and Black civilizations, doing extremely well in Africa. If they just look at, just, global history, and the influence of the African trades in Asia Minor, and some of those other areas over there, even before coming to this country as slaves. But, it's history. And it's a tremendous part of global history, it's not restricted to

Black people. It's a global, pan-American kind of history. Pan-African-ism kind of history. (giggles)

9'30"

**It's touching to see Mr Green again. I think, as a child, I took for granted the benign discipline directed at me and my peers from adults in my life. But I came to realize how motivated and energized he was, by simply instilling a sense of self worth into young people. His service to the world was to educate young African Americans. Like me, Thomas Green was born and raised in Chicago, and he was taught by some equally energetic and passionate teachers...**

THOMAS: I was looking for something to show you... my eighth grade teacher, one of the teachers was Madeline Stratton. She brought the Black history curriculum to the Chicago Public Schools in 1941. I didn't have her in 1941, I wasn't even born! But this was near the end of her life. She was my history teacher, and she always incorporated Black history. She was phenomenal.

*MUSIC: Miles Davis – Pinocchio (from Nefertiti)*

**You know, Mr Green mentions it almost in passing, but that was a really crucial moment – his teacher was responsible for getting Black history taught in Chicago's classrooms. And that was before the height of the Civil Rights movement.**

**When I was at Beasley, learning all this amazing Black history, I had no idea that as soon as I was going to leave that school, Black history would no longer be part of my formal education, anywhere else. Black history lessons were unusual. They still are.**

THOMAS: It's not taught in other states. It's not taught in – they've eliminated the civil war in some of these other states. They don't even talk about it in these other states.

*MUSIC: Miles Davis – Pinocchio (from Nefertiti)*

NAOMI: Why were the arts important to integrate into the curriculum at Beasley?

THOMAS: Wow – I think that makes you... a better person. I think it broadens your horizon and it gives you some divergent thinking and creativity, you need that creativity. And the spontaneity and expression. You have to have arts. You have to have the music, the visual arts, the performing arts, um, the plays, the programs, the dance programs. We just had – it's in us to create things. It's a spirit, it's something that, that can't always be found in books.

**11'45" NAOMI LINK FROM THOMAS GREEN TO PRINCESS MHOON**

**Ah yes... making art is an education that can't only happen through textbooks! If Mr Green was giving me Black history in grade school, by high school I was also dancing....**

*AUDIO: ALYO dance class / drum beat*

**Dance: A way to move the body and to celebrate cultural heritage, especially if sometimes you don't feel embraced by other cultures. Here's someone I danced with when I was younger, and who's still dancing...**

**13'30" PRINCESS MHOON**

PRINCESS: My name is Princess Mhoon –

**Princess Mhoon. And that's her true birth name!**

PRINCESS: – I am a dancer, choreographer, director, educator, entrepreneur, scholar.

NAOMI: So Princess, you and I met dancing! Um... you went on and became a professional dancer. Tell me a little bit about your dance education?

PRINCESS: Uh... I wanted to do ballet so bad. I had no concept of where dance could take me. I only loved movement.

*MUSIC FADES IN – Swan Lake (Tchaikovsky): "Black Swan Entry (Pas de Deux)"*

The preparation to go into a ballet class prepares you for your dreams of being a princess. The tights, the shoes, the hair neatly combed. We know black girls we love our edges down!

(laughs) It was all of that, the pink. So, you're preparing and setting the stage for this high level of self-esteem that precedes entering the dance studio.

### **MUSIC UP**

I remember my teacher, she was Emily...

### **MUSIC UP**

...I loved Emily. She was encouraging. She smiled. There was positive reinforcement. There wasn't – I didn't feel the oppression of what ballet can be to some folks.

### **MUSIC UP**

PRINCESS: I had never seen a Black ballerina. I may not even have been to a ballet. I only saw colouring books. They never look like me. But you have this fantasy that you are special. Deep down inside, even though the world is not telling you you're special. Now, we can debate whether or not it's for the Black body. We could talk politics on the history of ballet. We can do all of that.

### **MUSIC ENDS**

But, it's like little breaks to your self-esteem, as a young girl.

14'20"

**Princess's parents instilled in her a love for black culture. So, just as she realised that ballet wasn't working with her body—or that ballet didn't want her type of body—she turned to black choreographers who gave her other forms to work with.**

**Two of her biggest influences are Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus.**

**AUDIO: Katherine Dunham archive footage**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcN0G7xltwo>

PRINCESS: We have to acknowledge Katherine Dunham as kind of the matriarch, she's been called, of Black modern dance. Pearl Primus did very similar work, anthropological work. Dunham was, she was doing work in the Caribbean. And her final stop was Haiti. So, a lot of her influences are there.

*ARCHIVE: "Haiti – 1936. For Katherine Dunham, the American dancer and anthropologist, Haiti is the last leg of a year-long study of Caribbean dance..."*

NAOMI: How does she get to the Caribbean? Why was she there?

PRINCESS: She attended the University of Chicago, Anthropological Studies, and part of her work was looking at dance as a part of culture. And she decided to focus on the Caribbean. Now, she had been dancing and studying in ballet. So, this work took her there. And then, what she did was, she brought those dances back and codified her own technique, to give voice to a movement, and bring it some... the word I'm looking for, dignity. To dignify the black aesthetic and bring it over here.

NAOMI: And how was it undignified before?

PRINCESS: Because we, you know, we were jigaboos, and we were monkeys, and we were gorillas, and everything that we did, there was no understanding or meaning behind it. Katherine Dunham, she did her anthropological work in the Caribbean. Pearl Primus did her anthropological work in Africa. Right? And both of these women... they dignified it, to put it to a concert stage, but then also were social and political activists.

**AUDIO: Katherine Dunham archive footage [Pathé News clip]**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSTuO5E9\\_1q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSTuO5E9_1q)

ARCHIVE: *"The rhythm of West Indies creole music is heard in England for the first time since 1948, as the Katherine Dunham company of dancers stages a negro ballet..."*

16'35"

PRINCESS: Katherine Dunham performed all over, she went to Hollywood, Broadway... and there was one all white audience that were just, they were just screaming "encore encore". And she came back out, and she said "we will not perform anymore until people that look like me can sit in those seats with you all."

**AUDIO: clip of Katherine Dunham saying this, [taken from BBC WS 2004 documentary]**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p03cqd94> at around 20'00"

KATHERINE: *"...well now, most of the people in the audience didn't have no idea, they just didn't think about it! And I think this is true – these things have to be exposed for us to get good thinking people into action. So that's an example of something I would do automatically. It just seemed wrong, and something had to be said."*

**MUSIC: Erroll Garner – Stormy Weather**

**That's the voice of Katherine Dunham herself, speaking on the BBC in 2004 – a couple of years before she passed away. She and Pearl Primus are in our textbook, without question.**

NAOMI: The title of this series is "What if my Textbooks were Black". And if we can imagine a curriculum, or a pedagogy that includes the Katherine Dunhams of this world..... what would be different about our educations?

PRINCESS: There would be a mutual respect, and a humanity that lived in those pages, where each culture understood how we were interconnected. That one is not better than the other. That we're all on this human journey, that we all have different cultures, but that none of us can be pushed out. We're all a part of this story.

*MUSIC: Nicole Mitchell – Center of the Earth*

NAOMI: And you are writing a book! What's in it?

PRINCESS: I am writing a book about the Black Arts Movement. Um – it was a period in Chicago and across America, during the 1960s and the 70s, when Black citizens who were also artists came together to kind of... maybe unconsciously form, reform and reshape their identity. So, there was a combination of not only dancers, but musicians, visual artists, writers, to poets, to novelists, political activists. They all came together with this bold, audacious voice about what it meant to be Black, and it really spoke throughout their work.

*MUSIC: Nicole Mitchell – Center of the Earth*

19'15" NAOMI LINK FROM PRINCESS MHOON TO HAKI MADHUBUTI

**One of the key figures of the Black Arts Movement is Professor Haki Madhubuti – who's a poet, publisher, and educator.**

**Dr Madhubuti started the Chicago landmark Third World Press over 50 years ago, publishing some of THE most celebrated black poets and thinkers.**

**And he's an autodidact, who believes education goes hand in hand with liberation. You can't be free until you can think for yourself.**

*AUDIO OF HAKI SHOWING NAOMI AROUND THE BUILDING...*

**We're meeting in his office at Third World Press, in Grand Crossing area of Chicago's South Side.**

22'00" HAKI MADHUBUTI

HAKI: I'm 77 years old, knocking the hell out of 78...!

**Surrounded by thousands of books by distinguished Black writers, this office is a far cry from where he was 60 years ago – he was then called Don Lee – serving in the US military.**

HAKI: My first day of going to basic training, I was reading Paul Robeson's "Here I Stand". So the first day of basic training, there are three Blacks in the group I'm in, the rest are white Southerners. And I had this book in my hand with Paul Robeson's big Black magnificent face on the cover! And the drill sergeant saw the book, he snatched the book out of my hand, and commits to tear the pages out of the book, and gave a page to each of the recruits and told them to use it as toilet paper. Now, that was a wake up call, 1960, just turned 18 years old... and I said, what am I doing here? I'm there because I'm Black, poor, no family, no options, and I'm halfway intelligent... I decided that morning, I'm a Black man, a man of African ancestry, and I will never apologise for that.

*MUSIC: Mos Def – Umi Says*

**Dr Madhubuti soon took a reading course, and developed his writing skills.**

**Within a few years, he'd left the military and started his own publishing company.**

**He became a pillar of the Black Arts Movement, equally inspired by his favourite writers, and by the liberation politics of Malcolm X.**

HAKI: For my generation, he pretty much gave us a voice. He was the clarion call for action, for us, for young Black men and I would think women too... and so, he became my first mentor, even though I never met him. So when he was assassinated, it stopped everything. We ceased being negroes, we became Black people. OK? We ceased taking everything the whites, power structure, said about us as gospel. And we became a lot more sceptical. Malcolm brought it home.

22'00"

**Among Dr Madhubuti's other mentors, was the poet Gwendolyn Brooks.**

HAKI: I met Gwendolyn Brooks at a southside church, along with two or three other poets, we walked in one Saturday morning in the workshop she was teaching. She was basically teaching poetry writing to a community, community organisation, of young people, basically growing up in America without the kind of support and attention that young people need. So she put her resources into that, and her time into teaching them how to write poetry. So we, we walked over and introduced ourselves. And I was the only one that had published a book at that time – 'Think Black', it had the continent of Africa on it, with 'Think Black'. I

gave her a copy, and she did something I'd never seen before. She looked at it for maybe five, ten seconds, very intensely, and then, she just held it to her heart, and smiled and said "thank, you, young man". That kind of touched me, a bit. And, so that started our relationship.

*MUSIC: Willie Dixon – The Same Thing*

**Gwendolyn Brooks was Chicago's brilliant poet laureate—a woman who found inspiration in the everyday life and language, the sounds, rhythm, and words of Chicago's south side community.**

*AUDIO CLIP OF GWENDOLYN BROOKS READING HER POETRY...*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3RqadW5azY>

*GWENDOLYN: "Queen of the Blues. Mame was singing at the midnight club, and the place was red with Blues..."*

**Despite her national fame – and being the first African American ever to win a Pulitzer Prize – she was committed to teaching poetry to anyone and everyone, listening and learning from them too. If I could, I'd nominate her for sainthood.**

HAKI: Gwendolyn Brooks was the example of where I needed to be, and where I wanted to go. And we became very very close. I became probably the closest person to her, on one level because, she saw in me my intensity and in my deep commitment to Black people – I mean, my question always was, and continues to this day, "who loves Black people, unconditionally?" – I'm talking about these young brothers out here, killing each other, I'm talking about these preachers lying to Black people every Sunday... but the key point we have to remember is, we only do what we were taught to do. So, the question goes, how do we move and develop a pedagogy, and develop a way of teaching and receiving life-giving and life-saving information? And you can only do that at two levels – (1) with parents and families, but our families are being torn astrunder, so you don't have these two-parent families in the hardcore Black community... and (2) schools.

*TRAFFIC FX*

HAKI: When I met my wife, she was volunteering on an after-school program, and she was doing a masters degree on the Black Arts Movement. So we started dating, and walking, and I said what do we need? And she said, we need schools, Black schools. So I said, let's start one. We already started Third World Press. And, what happened, we started our first school, Saturday school, right over there on the corner of 78<sup>th</sup> and Ellis. The structure we now own, this half a block. So that's part of how we do this stuff – it gets back, "who loves Black people?"

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

**People might think of those involved with the Black Arts Movement as separatists and political firebrands.**

**But Haki Madhubuti reminds me that, really, they are motivated – more than anything – by love.**

**He and his wife, Dr Carol Lee, started the now-thriving ‘Betty Shabazz International Charter School’, because they wanted young black people to find love in themselves.**

**And once we believed that we possessed something beautiful inside, we could place more even beauty in the world.**

**Even Malcolm X said that the salvation of the people would be in poetry.**

NAOMI: Why were arts in particular, and literature, so important?

HAKI: Well, arts make people human. The only way you can really get to the human heart, and the brain, is basically through the arts. And, artists seek out other artists. Actually, the most advanced artists among us during that period – and probably even today – the musicians. They read a different kind of literature, which is music. And so, it took the poets and the visual artists to bring a different sensibility. Because we’re dealing with language, and therefore the translation of what we’re trying to say is more clearly understood, other than these very advanced musicians.

**27’00” CLOSING BIT**

**Next time:**

**We’ll talk to one of those “advanced musicians”, the composer and drummer Mike Reed.**

**And we’ll meet the celebrated artist Kerry James Marshall – who’ll challenge everything we’ve just heard...**

KERRY: Those demands for more Black history classes and stuff were not universally desired! The fact that there are Black Studies departments and things like that, 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.

**27'30" ENDS**

R4 ANNOUNCER:

**And Naomi Beckwith returns at the same time next Monday, 4 o'clock. "What If Our Textbooks Were Black?" is produced by Natalie Moore and Steve Urquhart. It's a Reduced Listening production for BBC Radio 4.**