Literary Conversations: Intersections

February 9, 2021

The PEN/Faulkner Foundation celebrates literature and fosters connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire both individuals and communities.

If you're able to, please consider donating to PEN/Faulkner.

You can also purchase Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*, Tope Folarin's *A Particular Kind of Black Man*, and Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* from Politics & Prose.

Shahenda Helmy: Hello, everyone. Welcome to the first Literary Conversation of 2021, Intersections. My name is Shahenda Helmy and I am the Programs Director at PEN/Faulkner. It is my absolute honor to welcome you all here tonight. For those of you joining us for the first time, the PEN/Faulkner Foundation is a literary nonprofit based in Washington, DC. Our mission is to celebrate literature and foster connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire both individuals and communities.

We fulfill our mission by administering two annual literary awards – the PEN/Malamud Award Award for Excellence in the Short Story and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction – as well as through our many education programs, which bring free books and author visits into DC public and public charter schools. We are very proud to be able to continue our work virtually during this pandemic and have been committed to increasing accessibility to our events by adopting a Pay-What-You-Will model for our Literary Conversations.

If you are able and haven't already, please consider making a donation to PEN/Faulkner through the link that we'll put up in the chat shortly.

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Any amount that you give will help us to continue to provide high-quality programming throughout this pandemic and beyond. Thank you in advance for your donations.

I'd also like to take a quick moment and thank the National Museum of Women in the Arts for partnering with us on tonight's event. NMWA is the only major museum in the world that is solely dedicated to championing women through the arts. The museum itself is here in Washington, DC, and is an absolutely fascinating place to visit. Make sure you check out their online programming in the meantime and give them a visit when it is safe to do so.

Before I get started to introduce tonight's panelists, I want to just go over a couple of housekeeping notes about the event. There will be a short Q&A session at the end of the program. Please submit your questions using the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen. You can also upvote and comment on your favorite questions and we'll do our best to get to as many as we can in the time that we have.

Without further ado, I'm very excited to introduce tonight's fantastic panelists. We are joined by Tope Folarin, a Nigerian-American writer based in Washington, DC, and the author of *A Particular Kind of Black Man*. Tope has won the Caine Prize for African Writing, was named a writer to watch by the *New York Times*, and among the most promising African writers under 40 by the Hay's Festival Africa39 initiative.

Also on the panel tonight is Min Jin Lee, national bestselling author of *Pachinko* and *Free Food for Millionaires*. *Pachinko*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award, has been translated into 30 languages and has been ordered to series [as] a television adaptation by Apple, which is very exciting. Min also serves as a trustee of PEN America, a director of the Authors Guild, and is on the National Advisory Board of [the] Immigration Initiative at Harvard.

We are also honored to have Scottish-American writer, Douglas Stuart, author of *Shuggie Bain*, which won the Booker Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Award, the Kirkus Prize, and many other awards and accolades. He wrote *Shuggie Bain* over a 10 year period and is currently working on his second novel, *Loch Awe*.

Finally, leading tonight's discussion is the amazing Bethanne Patrick, author and book critic, not to mention PEN/Faulkner Vice President and Programs Committee chair. Bethanne's work frequently appears in *The Washington Post*, the *LA Times*, NPR Books, and LitHub.

That's it for me. Thank you all again so much for joining us tonight and I hope you enjoy the program. Bethanne and everyone else, please take it away.

Bethanne Patrick: Thank you, Shahenda ,so much and thank you all for being here with us this evening. So excited as the lights go up and our authors join me on screen. This is just a wonderful event. I also want to thank the National Museum of Women in the Arts so much for working on this particular panel with us because intersections and intersectionality have so much to do with the lives of women and femmes in the world today.

Intersectionality, I just want to say a word or two about it before I begin our conversation. It's a theory of multi-dimensional oppression and empowerment because social identities that intersect and overlap can be both. I think the best way to introduce it is with some words from the woman who coined the term, Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who in 1989, defined intersectionality as a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it locks and intersects. It is the acknowledgment that everyone has their own unique experience of discrimination and privilege.

I think this is something that the books our authors here have written really resonates with those. I want to ask each of you to talk a little bit about where you see intersectionality occurring in your lives, how you became aware of the idea, even if you didn't know the term intersectionality, but you saw that there was a little place where things were pushing together and making something different for you. It might have been positive, it might've been negative. Often, intersectionality is a difficult thing. Douglas, would you start, please?

Douglas Stuart: That's a brilliant question. I think I've always felt fairly liminal, which is quite a strange thing, I think, for a white Scottish man to say. Growing up poor in Glasgow and queer in a city that was very run by the patriarchy, it's a very hard-drinking, hard-working, hard-loving city, there was really no place for me as a young man. As that grew in my life and actually through my literary career when I wanted to go on and study English as a young man, I never was encouraged towards that because I came from the wrong social class.

Actually, writing *Shuggie* was about reclaiming all those bits of myself that were never quite enough. Even my regional accent as a young man was never seen as something that would cut across things or be acceptable in certain circles. I was forever code-switching or shifting myself depending on the audience it was. I guess intersectionality, for me, comes at the struggle of

trying to accept myself and trying to pull all these little bits of myself that [are] never enough and pulling them into a complete human being.

Bethanne: Thank you. That is such an interesting juxtaposition of lots of different things. One of those threads that I want to pull and connect, Tope, with you is the idea of needing to speak a certain way because, in *A Particular Kind of Black Man*, this is something that comes up frequently for your protagonist. His father wants his sons to be able to at least sound like the ruling class. Is that a fair assessment? How does that work with your experience of pushing up against intersections?

Tope Folarin: It's a great question and I actually agree with a lot of what Douglas said. The protagonist of my novel is in a position in which he's trying to simultaneously reckon with who he is, to become a full human being, which is the task that all of us, I think, in our own ways, are engaged in. It's a task that's made much more difficult for him because he's a person of color in a place that's predominantly white. You have the clash of the external expectation of the person he's supposed to be, and then have something that's blossoming within him that in many ways contradicts that.

The question that my protagonist has to grapple with, that I've grappled with throughout the course of my life is, how do you meld these two things? Is it possible to do so? One potential path if you attempt to integrate these things that can't be integrated is something close to insanity. That's why a number of people, people that I've loved dearly, have succumbed to something like that because they've determined that it's impossible to reconcile who they are with who society wishes them to be. That resonates too with me as an artist. I think that my charge as an artist is to be as radical and honest as I can be.

In attempting to do that, I'm also reckoning with a literary culture that perhaps doesn't want that or desire that or doesn't even understand that. I think that many artists of color recognize that in order for their work to be acceptable to people, it has to be accessible because if it isn't accessible, then nobody will read it. By nobody, I mean the gatekeepers, the folks who are in charge of publishing the work.

The question becomes, as an artist who's deeply interested in innovation and being radical is, to what extent can I be fooling myself on the page and still have a pathway into publishing and have a pathway into literary success? In many ways, that struggle echoes and rhymes with the journey that my protagonist goes on in terms of searching for his identity.

Bethanne: I'm smiling and nodding wildly because, Tope, you're bringing up things I want to talk about and questions that I have. Not that we can't talk about them now, it's just so great because we really are involved in a conversation here. Min, I want to have you answer the question that Douglas and Tope have just talked about, about where you've experienced intersectionality and how you see it in terms of both discrimination and privilege, because particularly in *Free Food for Millionaires*, I saw some instances where characters really did use intersections in their lives to gain privilege for sure.

It's so often that we talk about intersections as being about oppression. It's not that the good things necessarily aren't about oppression either, but I will stop talking and let you speak.

Min Jin Lee: Actually, I love what you just said. I'm 52 years old so I feel really privileged to say intersectionality is something that I grew up with. In 1989 when it came out with Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw, who I really want to honor especially during Black History Month. Hello.

[chuckling]

Min: I also got to study with bell hooks. In my experience of studying with bell hooks for two years, and studying and learning about Dr. Crenshaw as the idea was blooming, for me, it was really a form of empowerment. Politicization is often very linked with oppression, and I think recognizing oppression is incredibly important. Yet, I also think that being politicized made me realize how fun and cool and privileged I am because I have this power to resist.

If someone doesn't tell you that you have the power to resist, you think that, "Oh, I just have to suck it up and take it." I'm well aware that suffering is important, but I'm also really aware of, like, "How do I get what I want?" I think that learning how to be ambitious, that was something that I didn't get as a child. As a child, it wasn't like somebody was telling me, "Oh, when you grow up, go get what you want."

[laughter]

Min: Nobody said, "Oh, go and learn how to talk or to assert what you want or to disagree." All those things I wasn't taught. In a way, being politicized, even knowing that there was a structural problem, was actually a form of opening doors and windows and roofs. I think it's amazing. As a matter of fact, I talk to my students all the time about intersectionality, of how it can be a way to claim power by recognizing there's something wrong, rather than thinking there's something wrong with you.

Bethanne: That's exactly it. It can be an empowering thing. Tope, what you just said, I would love to hear Min and Douglas respond to that, the idea of just being an artist, just being someone who's trying to create, is a difficult intersection for almost all of us. It doesn't matter how you've grown up, there are very few parents or a few Bohemian families who say, "Go for it, honey. You'll be able to live on some Top Ramen."

I had an old music teacher who would make ketchup soup out of packets and hot water and season it with salt and pepper. We all know that if we're willing to endure extreme poverty, we can go for just anything, but many of your characters, and many of us who are living as artists, want to also live. Maybe we don't care about being terribly rich, maybe we don't care about luxuries, maybe we do. The fact is, choosing art makes it more difficult.

Tope: I will just jump in very briefly here and say that's definitely the case. I'm looking for the right word here. It's probably even worse for writers of color because it's difficult for any artist to make it. We've all seen the movies and read the plays and read the stories about the artists who are struggling to make it. Think about being a writer of color or a visual artist of color, and recognizing that the pathway is incredibly difficult.

At the same time, you're trying to introduce something that may be new to folks who haven't interacted with someone like you before. Not only are you thinking about poverty, you're thinking about an even longer stretch of being isolated or being ignored or whatever the case may be. That's the risk you take on when you're trying to create, and you're not operating from the center of the literal universe in a certain way. That's something that I think we need to scrapple with as well.

Bethanne: We definitely need to scrapple with that. Min, how about your idea of being an artist and what Tope just said about the stories not always being familiar? I think all three of your books, or four of them complete right now, do have some of this in some way.

Min: Oh my goodness. It's funny because if I had to list all of my weird identities, it's really long. I have a lot of surprises. People are like, "What? You're a Presbyterian? You grew up working class, and you're a feminist and you're progressive, and you're a Presbyterian. That's weird." I think, "I know."

[laughter]

Min: At the same time, I think it's like a different window. I think that's the reason why I write community novels. I'll always write community novels, I'll always write a mission because I think every corner is really interesting to me. I feel like I can see myself deeply in that person. As for being an artist, it's always been really, really hard. I think that if you are working class, if you are immigrants, if you are female, if you are Presbyterian, whatever, [laughs] it's a very, very strange thing. I don't know what you guys think.

I used to think, "Oh, if I meet the right Korean people, I'm going to find my people." I used to think, "Oh, if I meet the right feminists, I'm going to find my people. If I meet the right people from Queens, from Elmhurst, I'm going to meet my people." Then I kept on having a series of heartbreaks, and I realized, "No, I just belong with people who are artists who are misfits like me, and then we're going to get along." Then I realized like, "Oh," then my world just got bigger. It didn't get smaller. It actually just got much bigger, and then I felt better. Again, intersectionality, you can actually have it in a group.

Bethanne: Intersectionality. Douglas, I want to hear from you but I just want to make sure that I say this, I had the same feelings. For me, it was Episcopalians. If I find the right Episcopalians, if I find the right people at college or in grad school, if I find the right medievalist, because I was a medievalist.

[laughter]

Min: Everyone is, yes.

Bethanne: Everyone is. No, I didn't find the right anything until I went to my first Associated Writing Programs or AWP conference, and realized, as you did Min, that my people are writers and artists, and creatives. I do think that is something many of us have in common. As you said, it makes the world larger. Did you find that, Douglas, that your world expanded when you decided, "That's it. I'm giving myself over to this enormous task of writing this big fat book?"

Douglas: I loved what Min said there, but actually think I sat down to write the book in order to make sense of the different parts of myself. I think, in a lot of ways, I couldn't find the right language to explain myself and I was shifting. The prism of me was turning so frequently to whoever that I was facing. Actually, I found literature a great way to pull together all the complex parts of my life and what I felt and all the different people I felt was inside myself.

Even thinking about the boy who grew up in poverty in Glasgow, that's a queer kid that was pushed to the side by the men in my world. Then a guy who ended up in New York working for these huge fashion brands, who had transcended many social classes and was really at the height of his creative career, these two things didn't sit together. Really writing *Shuggie* for me was about pulling all those parts of myself together and putting it into this document in many ways.

Actually, even the intersection of my creative life – because I had spent many years trying to come around, and then find a place for myself in writing because it was something I had to come to in my adult life. As soon as I did that, and as soon as I started to sit at the page and write, I actually pulled all of my other creative skills with me. My ability with textiles, with fashion, and my visual arts, were actually when I realized that was where my seat of strength lay, that was an intersection in my life that I wanted to bring to my writing and amplify.

Bethanne: Actually, I was going to have Tope read first but now, because of that answer, Douglas, would you please read to us from *Shuggie Bain*? This is early in the book. I'll let you set it up. I'm so glad you chose this particular scene.

Douglas: Sorry, Tope.

[laughter]

Douglas: Yes, this is actually a scene from the beginning of the book when we just meet our calamitous heroine, Agnes, who is the proud, defiant mother of the Bain family. She is a wonderful woman. She is a working-class woman. She's incredibly glamorous, incredibly proud, very inventive, but she is chafing at the smallness of her life. She has married the wrong man, and all of her very humble, realistic dreams are not going to be met. The world often sees her as being too much, and in fact, it's the world around her that's not enough. She is at a card party in one of the, what Americans would call, housing projects in the scheme.

Douglas reading from *Shuggie Bain*: The women cackled without breaking their concentration on the cards. It was sweaty and close in the front room. Agnes watched her mammy, little Lizzie, carefully studying her hand, flanked by the bulk of Nan Flannigan on one side and Reeny Sweeny on the other. The women sat thigh to thigh and tore at the last scraps of a fish supper. They were moving coins and folding cards with greasy fingers. Ann Marie Easton, the youngest amongst them, was concentrating on rolling mean-looking cigarettes of loose tobacco on her skirt. The women spilt their housekeeping money on the low tea table and were pushing five- and ten-pence bets back and forward.

It bored Agnes. There was a time before baggy cardigans and skinny husbands that she had led them all up to the dancing. As girls, they had clung to one another like a string of pearls and sang at the top of their voices all the way down Sauchiehall Street. They had been underage, but Agnes, sure of herself even at fifteen, knew she would get them in. The doormen always saw her gleaming at the back of the line and beckoned her forward, and she pulled the other girls behind her like a chain gang. They held on to the belt of her coat and muttered protest, but Agnes just smiled her best smile for the doormen, the smile she kept for men, the same one she hid from her mother. She had loved to show off her smile back then. She got her teeth from her daddy's side and the Campbell teeth had always been weak, they were a reason for humility in an otherwise handsome face. Her own adult teeth had come in small and crooked, and even when they were new they had never been white because of the smoking and her mammy's strong tea. At fifteen she had begged Lizzie to let her have them all taken out. The discomfort of the false teeth was nothing when compared to the movie star smile she thought they must give her. Each [new] tooth was broad and even and as straight as Elizabeth Taylor's.

Agnes sucked at her porcelain. Now here they were, every Friday night, these same women playing cards in her mammy's front room. There was not a single drop of make-up between them. Nobody had much of a heart to sing any more.

Douglas: Thank you.

Bethanne: Thank you so much. You feel that you're in the front room, and one thing I want everyone to know is that there is this wonderful action that comes, I believe, just after where the women have ordered all kinds of different brassieres from [the] catalog, and they try them on over their clothes, and then keep them on while they're playing cards. Of course, Agnes is just appalled by her mother doing something like this.

I think so many of us who have lives that are different from our parents know what it's like to just be absolutely appalled by that parental, not just the difference, but especially if they're enjoying the difference. [laughs] If Lizzie is just having a grand time, that is just awful. I think that intersectionality, one of the things that really fascinates me about it is it does raise possibilities where we can figure out where we don't have a good understanding of others, where we don't have the resources, or the information, or the compassion to help people.

I know that there are people who also argue, and I don't want to get into politics too much, but I know some people say, "Oh, intersectionality shows special treatment for certain groups." I'm just saying that to give a nod to the fact that there's another side. I'm much more interested in how your characters in your stories point up those places where someone can learn something about someone else, where someone can help someone else. Anything that brings up for any of you about your books.

Tope: Go ahead.

Douglas: No, you please. I've spoken.

Tope: I was going to say very quickly that I think in many ways, my art is obsessed with that question because I'm convinced as a human being that we can't ever really fully know others if we don't fully know ourselves. It's taking that journey and being unafraid of doing that that I'm concerned with. I guess it sounds simple, but it's maybe one of the hardest things you can do, is to really reckon with yourself. One way of thinking about it is just standing naked in the mirror and saying, "This is who I am. Let me reckon with this fully." We're encouraged to not do that. It's [to] obscure the various parts of ourselves that for whatever reason we don't like, or we don't want to reckon with.

I am convinced that one has to undertake that journey because what you'll discover if you really begin to reckon with yourself and reconcile yourself to the parts of yourself that you might not like is that you might recognize those parts of yourself in other people. You might say, "Okay, I can fully engage with this person as a fellow human being because I see parts of them in myself and vice versa. Let's begin this hard journey of attempting to create community even in a space and environment where that seems to be incredibly difficult."

Bethanne: Thank you so much for that, Tope. Min, I don't want to keep ignoring *Pachinko*, so bring *Pachinko* into this. It's just that I read *Free Food* more recently.

Min: No. Actually, I like. Go ahead. I'm sorry.

Bethanne: Oh, good. You don't mind talking about it.

Min: I'm actually writing a script right now on *Free Food*. It's very top of mind even though it's an old book of mine. Actually, I wanted to talk about Douglas's reading if that's okay.

Bethanne: Oh, yes, go ahead.

Min: Why not? Because I'm also a critic.

[laughter]

Min: In a good way.

Bethanne: Don't flex tonight.

Tope: Instant criticism –

[crosstalk]

Min: This is literary criticism because I think one of the things that's really powerful about intersectionality is that when you have writers who really embrace their background, and also the intimacy of that background. One of the things that's happening in Douglas Stuart's work – I just started to type.

Bethanne: Oh, it's not Scottish. [laughs]

Min: Douglas Stuart's work is that, in all the descriptions, what you see is the beauty and poverty, the appreciation of beauty and poverty. It's not just poverty. It's not just the difficulty and the embarrassment and the awkwardness of what's going on, but what you have is design. You also have beauty. You have the pearls. You have the thigh to thigh. In that description, you have the recognition that the narrator has great sympathy for people. Just because they don't have money, it doesn't mean that they don't have style, or a sense of beauty, or aesthetics, or an appreciation for that which is rich and glorious. That's not the exclusive province of the rich.

Bethanne: Or affection.

Min: Or affection, of course, and intimacy. I think, for me, that is incredibly empowering about the idea of intersectionality because it gives you the ability to say, "The way we've been presented is so wrong," because actually, all of us – no matter what our class station or race or gender or sexual identity or ability – we have actually all these expansive, glorious parts of ourselves that you're not allowing us to express. That's the reason why I think it's so important to have access to publication, access to sharing and disseminating our ideas, because we have been shut out for a very, very long time.

Bethanne: That is something that I think is really important. I have another quote to read, if you all will put up with me. It's from Audre Lorde, the great poet and activist. She says, "From my membership in all of these groups, Black, lesbian, feminist, socialists, poet, mother, I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sexes, and colors and sexualities, and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression. I have learned that sexism and heterosexism both arise from the same source as racism." That's from *There Is No Hierarchy of Oppression*.

I found that incredibly powerful. With what you were just saying about Douglas's work, Min, if you can show compassion for a group that comes from the same source also. Racism and sexism come from this source of hatred and compassion and recognition of difference come

from this source of love. I just want to get into the literary culture and publishing. With that, Tope, I'm going to have you give your reading.

Tope: Sure. I'm just going to say something very quickly in response to that quote.

Bethanne: Of course.

Tope: I think it's really powerful. I think also what it signals is that in so many ways we're moving towards a literature of disparate parts. Away from literature that emphasizes this notion that you can be – what I'll call a white male literature. The literature that I grew up reading in school, which posits that you can be this fully fleshed human being who traipses around and conquers the world or whatever that narrative may be.

Now, as we proceed in the 21st century, it seems like a literature of parts becomes more appropriate because it's about recognizing all of those parts that we're made up of and not de-emphasizing one at the expense of another, whatever. I'm just saying that this is fully who I am. I think you see that all in all kinds of ways in the literature that we're seeing as published, people emphasizing those parts and shoving it into the work, even if it's messy, even if it doesn't make complete sense. Insisting on its presence there, I think, is deeply important. I'm not sure if that's a prelude to my reading, but I wanted to say that.

Bethanne: Let's let it be. I love that.

Tope: I'll just read from the first couple pages of my novel.

Bethanne: Thank you.

Tope reading from *A Particular Kind of Black Man*: She told me I could serve her in heaven. She accompanied me to school each day. School was about a mile away and a few 100 feet into my truck. Just as my family's apartment building drifted out of view behind me, she would appear at my side. I don't remember how she looked. Memory often summons a generic figure in her place, an elderly White woman with physical gray hair, slightly bent over, a smile featuring an assortment of gaps and silver linings. I do remember her touch, however. It felt cool and papery, disarmingly comfortable on the hottest days of fall.

She would often pat my head as we walked together, and a penetrating silence would counsel the morning sounds around us. I felt comfortable, protected somehow in her presence. She never walked all the way to school with me, but her parting words were always the same. "Remember, if you are a good boy here on Earth, you can serve me in heaven." I was five years old. Her words sounded magical to me, vast and alluring. I didn't know her. I barely knew her name, but the offer she held out to me each morning seemed far too generous to dismiss slightly.

In class, I would think about what servitude in heaven would be like. I imagined myself carrying buckets of water for her on streets of gold, rubbing her feet as angels sang praises in the background. I imagined that I'd have my own heavenly shack. I'd have time to do my own personal heavenly things as well. How else would I get to heaven? One day I told my father about her offer. We were talking about heaven, a favorite subject of his and I mentioned that I already had a place there. "I've already found someone to serve," I said. "What do you mean?"

Dad smiled warmly at me. I felt his love. I repeated myself, "Daddy, I'm going to heaven." "And how are you going to get there?" He said. I told him about the old lady, my heavenly shack, the streets of gold. My father stared at me a moment, grief and sadness surging briefly to the surface of his face, and then anger. He leaned forward, stared into my eyes, "Listen to me now. The only person you will serve in heaven is God. You will serve no one else."

Tope: Thanks.

Bethanne: Thank you, Tope. I think it's important for everyone to know about that powerful passage is that, of course, young Tunde has just met his first Mormon. I'm not going to pretend to know a lot about Mormon theology or dogma, but at the time, many people who were Mormons believed that a person of color could not go to heaven except as a servant of a White person.

Tope: Yes, you couldn't ascend to the highest level of heaven without accompanying some White, I guess we'll call them heavenly sponsor or something. [chuckles]

Bethanne: This old woman with papery hands, [chuckles] a heavenly sponsor. What was going through her head? That's the thing that comes back to me in having read that scene and then hearing you speak it. I think this is something – many of us who have seen someone be racist is, what was going through her head? Really, she thought that people who had a different skin color were meant to be her servant? I don't know.

Tope: From her perspective, it's a gift. That's the thing, it's a gift she's offering this young boy, she's like, "I want to help you out. The biggest, most impactful, glorious thing I can give you is this opportunity to serve me for eternity." It's an insidious way that racism sometimes works. If it's embedded in the psyche of somebody, that can be a legitimate way of expressing love in a way.

Bethanne: People believe it's a gift. Yes, exactly. In the novels that all three of you have written, there are hierarchies of oppression being addressed. The literary world, and this is something Tope has touched on already, and the literary world includes writing but also publishing and bookselling, has supported many of these hierarchies for a long time. Let's really get into it. Let's just dish. [laughs] Do you individually, together, believe change is happening? Is it change that seeps into our culture at large? Is that too big a question? Do I need to draw it back?

Tope: I'm now going to step into the breach.

Bethanne: Please, go.

[chuckling]

Tope: Potentially say something that'll get me in trouble, but it is what it is. I think that things are changing. I'm sure a lot of people have the chance to read the *Vulture* piece about *American Dirt* that was published, I think about a month ago. They spilled the beans on what happened around the publication of that book. Over the course of the past year, we've seen a number of people of color ascend to really high positions in publishing. I think that's a really wonderful, positive development, but we still inhabit this space where the most popular Netflix film after George Floyd was murdered, it was *The Help*.

I think one reason that's the case is because it provides this entry point for people who aren't necessarily accustomed to thinking about the lives of other people. It provides this entry point to say, "Here's what they may be experiencing." The only caveat that I think needs to be attached to this wonderful development that all these people of color are sending to these wonderful heights, is that they're still operating within a framework in which the *American Dirt* thing can still happen.

I have to say, personally, that when my book was out, I can't be too specific here, but there were a couple Black editors who saw the work and they both had a similar comment. They didn't think it would work in the marketplace. I wonder the extent to which Black editors are still operating with that logic because they still have this mandate to make money for their publishing house–

Bethanne: Exactly.

Tope: –and their publishing houses are operating under this belief that only a certain kind of book can do well on the market, which means they're not going to give the marketing support to other books. One really needs to break this system in a certain way before we begin to see the radical works of art that I think will have a profound impact on our country, in our society, in the world at large. I'm hoping that that happens in the very near future.

Bethanne: Amen to that. Comments on what Tope just said, Douglas or Min, from you, or I can start twisting words to my evil purposes.

[chuckling]

Bethanne: Not yours, not your word.

Douglas: I have been writing for much less time than Min and Tope, and so I can only speak from a very personal point of view. I was struck when *Shuggie* was sent out for publication at the rejections I received, not by the rejections, that's part of a writer's life, but how the publishing houses didn't know how to market it to people. They didn't know what shelf to put it on, where it fit in, who would want to hear about the Scottish family. Even with a book that is 500 pages, and I think covers quite a lot of humanity, they were trying to reduce it to what it was really truly about. That is almost the opposite of what we're talking about today. That's reductive.

The thing that I think has been surprising about *Shuggie* and has taken a lot of people in the publishing industry by surprise, is how much people can relate to the book, how much humanity crosses all of us. Even though this is a family all the way over there in Scotland, we can understand the love, and the hope, and the desperation, and the wants, and how women might feel, and how young queer boys might feel. That's in the universal part of it, or the intersectionality of it, I guess, at least to everybody. The publishing industry didn't see that in the book. They only saw which shelf it would go on and what book it was like that had come before.

Bethanne: Min, how about you? Sorry, Tope, I did not pull it up.

Tope: There it is.

Bethanne: There it is. *A Particular Kind of Black Man*, there we go. Clearly, your books have been very, very successful, and people are relating to them. Did you feel that it was difficult to get the publishing world to understand what you were trying to do?

Min: It's very funny because it took me 11 years to publish my first book, and because I had nothing but rejections. Then I had a terrible experience with publishing my first book because my editor actually quit before the paperback and then I had to move to Japan. [laughs] The publication cycle really hurt. I think that for me, that experience of having incredible reviews, and then all of a sudden losing the house support because I lost my editor. That actually happened to me with *Pachinko* as well.

Bethanne: Oh my goodness.

Min: I think what ended up happening was, I've always written about people who don't get help. I was born thinking, "I'm on my own, I'm going to have to figure this out." [laughs] My parents aren't going to help me – [crosstalk]

Bethanne: Carry on or not.

Min: Right. I'm just going to have to figure this out, it's me and God.

[laughter]

Min: I think what ended up happening is I just did not – I think I went to every single book club that asked on my own steam. Also, I started to understand that everybody in publishing is perfectly well-minded. Everybody's well-intentioned. It's really a nice little world. I've been into other worlds, I've studied Wall Street, I've studied investment banking, I've studied law, I've studied Hollywood, it's not nice out there. Publishing people are actually pretty nice people.

[chuckling]

Min: Then, I started to understand, "Oh, a publicist at an in-house publisher has to be responsible for 20 books. How in the world can they possibly do this?" Then they might only have three chips. For example, for *Pachinko* I was reviewed, and nobody understands it, but if you look it up, you'll realize that's historically inaccurate. It was reviewed by the *New York Times*, and it was reviewed by [the] *San Francisco Chronicle*. If you look at *The Washington Post*, for example, the audiobook was reviewed and it has one paragraph. That's it.

No *Wall Street Journal*, nothing else. *USA Today* came through. I had the *New York Times*, which is grand, but it wasn't first page or anything. The reason I'm sharing all this with you is because people always feel like, "Oh my gosh, you had this great publishing success." It came out in February 2007. I had exactly those two reviews and the *San Francisco Chronicle* came in later. I didn't get anything else. In the UK, they did some good reviews, and that carried over to the US.

Bethanne: Wow. Interesting. This goes into one of the things I wanted to ask is that in our culture, there are a lot of people I know who will read stories, take novels, about things that they don't believe in, will not accept, can't understand. This goes to what you all have said. I think fiction has a particularly important role in disseminating ideas about intersectionality, opening up discussions about intersectionality. It's very interesting to me that someone will pick up *Shuggie Bain*, and they probably in their daytime life don't talk about alcoholism or poverty–

Min: Or Scotland.

Bethanne: –or Scotland, yes, or anything.

Min: [laughs]

Bethanne: They read this book, [it] may be in their book club or whatever, but they will take it in. I know so many people who seem very rigid and very stuck in their particular intersection who will read fiction that goes way, way beyond their own experience. Go ahead, Min.

Min: I want to interrupt you here because my little tiny point is, even though initially I didn't have this critical support in the US, what I did decide to do because my husband lost his job right on the day of my publication of *Pachinko*. I went to Barnes and Noble to do the kickoff event.

[laughter]

Min: My husband met me in the afternoon right before I walked into the green room for Barnes, he was like, "I lost my job today." I was like, "Fuck, and I had already lost my editor." Then I thought, "Oh my gosh, I got to sell this book, what am I going to do because if I don't sell this book, and those numbers are shitty, I'm in trouble?" I just started to accept every single offer to meet anywhere. I would have read in a street corner. [laughs]

I'm really, really shy because we have no health insurance, our son was in college, it was terrifying. The thing that I want to say is if it wasn't for readers who said, "I read this book, I liked it," and they gave it to somebody else, I would have been totally fucked. Pardon my French, but it was really readers. If readers read your book and they like it, they will get excited, and they will tell other people. Readers saved my bacon.

Bethanne: Readers connecting with these stories, I hope, makes a difference in how they look at people, how they treat people. I think it does, it's hard to say. Is it fair to say evanescent thing? It's hard to hold on to. Seeing someone read the story about Tunde who has so much to overcome. One of the things, Tope, that you talk about, we're talking about different kinds of intersectionality is seeing a family where mental illness –

Not that there isn't a mental illness in the other books, but in *A Particular Kind of Black Man*, we have this mother who just sinks into herself and she's never well again. That is not a spoiler, that is just an important part of life. I'm wondering about how the literary world allows not just stories of difference, but stories of really hard things, things are different. Some difference you can see, other difference is more difficult to write about and to explain. Does that make sense?

Tope: Yes. Look, when I was writing, I started writing this book in 2010, I think. It was published in 2019. If we share anything, it's this long gestation period for our books. My parents are from Nigeria so much of the book is in its own way autobiographical. Whenever I was thinking about what had happened to me and how to transpose that, or translate that into fiction, I was thinking about how honest I want it to be about certain painful things and also the way those painful things were perceived.

In this context, for example, by this context, I mean the United States of America, the West, whatever you want to call it, we think about mental illness in a very particular way. It's this condition that you might have, if you're fortunate enough to have medical insurance, you can go to a doctor or you can go to some professional and get some help for it. In the context that my parents emerged from, it's a sign of some spiritual demise, or something is happening and you need a spiritual intervention.

I grew up with those two traditions firmly ensconced in my head. I didn't want to do the thing that I've been encouraged to do in some quarters, which is to say, "Okay, the West African tradition needs to be jettisoned in favor of this other tradition." I thought, "How interesting would it be to insist saying that this reality that people in West Africa have is a legitimate way of thinking about the world? The thing that I try to do in my book is to insist on putting it in the book in the way that my parents, my extended family members thought about it. That's one reason why– Sorry.

Bethanne: Not diminishing that.

Tope: At all, no. To not diminish that. To say that, for example, this idea of multiple realities, again, here, it's a sci-fi fantasy notion. In other parts of the world, there is a belief that there are other realities. I wanted to just put that into the book, not apologize for it, not explain it away, not medicate in its own way, but say this is the way that certain people experienced the world and just put it out there. I was reading a lot of Frantz Fanon and Du Bois when I wrote my book and I think in their own ways, they're also talking about these conditions and ideas. I felt empowered when I was writing, when I was being shy on the page to say, to say, "You know what, let me just go for it and see what happens."

Bethanne: Thank you. I want to have you read, Min. Just before you read, and I don't want to forget, Douglas, to ask this of you in a minute, it seems to me that what Tope is talking about with the West African spiritual tradition is something that comes into your books with the Christian church and its influence on Koreans and Korean-Americans. In *Free Food* certainly, there is such an important emphasis on the church.

Again, as Tope was saying, you don't diminish it or make fun of it. There are some individual characters who might say, "Oh, why is she at church all the time? Or, what have you, but the omniscient perspective allows you to show how important it is to Leah, for example. Would you comment on that for just a moment before you read, please?

Min: Sure. One of the things that I really want to talk about, and I think this is where literary novelists are failing, we're getting an F on this, is that very often we have such disdain and contempt for religion. Actually, most people in the world have religion. For example, I think most Western writers fail Islam. We just fail it. We get a big old F. I think, how could you forget that most people in the world believe in something? Just because most of us don't doesn't necessarily mean that they don't believe in it. Also, they find most of their identity in that community. Most people will say I'm a Catholic more than I'm Irish or Italian.

I want to respect that. I really want to understand why they feel this way because it's such an important part of their intersectional identity. Also, I'm going to say something really, and I'm going to get in trouble for saying this, but if you're writing about Koreans and you don't write about the church, you don’t know Korean people. It's like you missed the point because, even if you hate Christianity, it's part of their lives. We build churches like 7-Eleven, that's what we do.

[laughter]

Min: In the same way, I have to write about suicide because Koreans are constantly thinking or talking about suicide. It's one of the most prevalent extreme ends of mental illness that happens in the Korean community around the world so I have to write about it.

Bethanne: That is really, really telling – if you're not reading about church, you just don't know Koreans.

Min: I know. I'm going to get in trouble for saying that. Maybe we have to erase that part. [laughs]

Bethanne: You have to say, and if you don't write about alcohol, you don't know Glaswegians.

[laughter]

Bethanne: With that, Min, would you read from–

Min: Sure.

Bethanne: *Pachinko,* please?

Min: Yes. I'm going to read a really, really tiny section. It's very early in the book. It's March 1933. We're in the Busan ferry terminal. The mom is saying goodbye to her daughter and the daughter's pregnant. It's Yangjin and it's Sunja.

Min reading from *Pachinko*: "I saw the gold watch [in your things]," Yangjin said.

"Was it from that man?"

"Yes."

"What kind of man can afford something like that?"

Sunja didn't reply.

"Where is the man who gave you [that] watch?"

"He lives in Osaka."

"But that's where you're going. Are you planning to see him?"

"No."

"You cannot see this man, Sunja. He abandoned you. He's not good."

And Yangjin took her daughter's hand.

"You cannot see him. That man, that man"—Yangjin pointed at Isak, who was still talking to the immigration officers—"that man saved your life. He saved your child. You're a member of his family now. I have no right to see you again. Do you know what that's like for a mother? Soon, you'll be a mother. And I hope that you'll have a son who won't have to leave you when he gets married."

Sunja nodded.

"The watch. What will you do with it?"

"I'll sell it when I get to Osaka."

Yangjin was satisfied with that answer.

“Save it for an emergency. If your husband asks where you got it, tell him that I gave it to you.”

Yangjin fumbled with the purse tucked beneath her blouse.

“This belonged to your father’s mother.” Yangjin gave her the two gold rings her mother-in-law had given to her before she died.

“Try not to sell these unless you have to. You should have something in case you need money. You’re a thrifty girl, but raising a child requires money. There will be things that you can’t expect, like doctor’s visits. And if it’s a boy, you’ll need fees for school. And if your husband doesn’t give you money for your household, earn something and put aside savings for emergencies. Spend what you need but just throw even a few coins into a tin and forget that you have it. A woman should always have something set by. Take good care of your husband. Otherwise, another woman will. Treat your husband’s family with reverence. Obey them. If you make mistakes, they’ll curse our family. Think of your kind father, who always did his best for us.” Yangjin tried to think of anything else she was supposed to tell her. But it was so hard to focus.

Sunja slipped the rings into the fabric bag beneath her blouse where she kept her watch and money.

“Omoni, I’m sorry.”

“I know, I know.” Yangjin closed her mouth and she stroked Sunja’s hair. “You’re all I have. And now, I have nothing.”

Min: Thank you.

Bethanne: Thank you so much. Oh, man. [chuckles] I'm not supposed to cry while I'm moderating.

Min: I always cry at this because it was really hard for me to write that. It was really, really hard for me to write that.

Bethanne: Really, really difficult scene. Talk about your intersectionality – if it's a boy, you'll need school fees.

Min: Right. Actually, that's really normal. I believe that what's interesting about sexism, very often it's imparted by women.

Bethanne: Yes.

Min: [chuckles] I want to be honest about that. It's not always this man who's like this enemy. It's not always so simple.

Bethanne: No, it isn't. It's internalized. Tope, you touched on that earlier. It's also something, Douglas, you touched on when you were talking about a boy not being accepted by the men in his society, but the men are also taught by the women how to be. This is exactly [the] part of intersectionality that's difficult, is – it's not as if we can go to the intersection and unknot it and there we are, we're free. There are a lot of pain points, of trigger points, if you will. I know that we have questions lining up in the queue. There's one more thing I want to talk about now. We

can take some questions, and then if we go through them all, probably won't happen, then I'll have a few other questions.

I do want to talk about how intersectionality affects the prose itself and forms. Tope, I'm thinking of the Nelly pages in *A Particular Kind of Black Man*. I'm thinking of craft books like *Meander*, *Spiral*, *Explode* by Jane Alison, and Matthew Salesses' *Craft in the Real World* which just came out. I'm loving that he is blowing up the idea of workshopping the way it's always been done. It's not that that is all bad. It's that it needs to be questioned.

We know that a linear narrative isn't the only way. That intersectionality means we can do things differently. I'm not just talking about chronologically linear as in, time's arrow flying. I'm talking about just deciding to, for instance, Douglas, tell a story that is really hard, and unrelenting, and not saying, "Okay. We're going to put a happily ever after in here." I know in writing, you all took time in writing these novels. Is that something that you specifically thought about in terms of the actual craft of *Shuggie Bain*?

Douglas: Absolutely. I thought often who was I in service to when I was writing the book. I was always in service to the characters and the life that they were living. I never thought about the reader. I had no notion of the reader even through the editing process. When it came to it, I felt that I had to tell it from their truth. There [are] sometimes voices within me that wanted to turn the narrative a little bit, to give some more hope or to make it not turn out as it wouldn't necessarily be in real life. That felt like I was letting somebody down.

Even when I was writing the book, and I was thinking about the voice, and the language, and how the characters talked, and how they spoke to each other, I felt that I had to hold on to that quite firmly because I felt if I had taken their sense of themselves or their sense of belonging and I corrupted it in some way in order to make them more palatable for other people, then I had let them down.

Bethanne: Thank you. Excellent. Tope, you have definitely got some more experimental elements in, especially the second half of the book. You have some chapters that are just a line or two. You had, as I said, the Nelly pages where Tunde is saying a name again and again, and again. Those are all really important to the narrative. It's not just something whimsical. It's something you had to think about deeply. Can you comment on that? On bringing in those elements in a book as you've said that you already knew was going to have its hurdles.

Tope: I'm obsessed with craft and structure. I wanted to tell a story structurally the same time I was telling the story with the pros. One of the things that came to me was that I wanted to start the book in a "conventional way" and to provide an access point to a reader who doesn't know a great deal about the character I'm writing about. Then, as the character begins to reckon with himself, the book does as well. The book decides, "I can't be a conventional linear narrative because that's not the life I'm depicting," and so the book begins to break apart at a certain point.

There was something I went back and forth with my publisher about, which was at the middle part of the book, I wanted to have a middle passage, to reverse the middle passage, we think about a lot. My way of doing that on the page was to strip away – Typically, books have the name of the book and the author on the top of the page, and I said, "Let's strip all of that away. Let's just have this dialogue-based back and forth with the protagonist and his love interest because he's discovering as he falls in love that he's discovering more about himself. He's

getting stripped away, everything, all the defenses that he's constructed over the course of his life aren't really effective in this phase of falling in love."

It's also a middle passage back to his true self if you will. That was really important for me to figure out how to do that structurally. Then, at the end of my book, and I'm not giving anything away when I say this, the last chapter is composed of earlier parts of the book. Basically, it's collaged. I copied earlier chapters, earlier descriptions, and I put them all. The structural point at the end is that he is made of these great parts. He's discovered a way to become whole by integrating every other part out there that didn't make sense to him, but then it makes sense to a lot of people who met him.

The last word of my book is home. He's discovered a way to make a home by fully embracing all of these weird, out there parts of himself. That was really important. I'm obsessed with visual art, I have to say, especially the art of the 1920s, and surrealism, and dadaism. Spent a lot of time thinking about the development of cubism and what that represented. It sort of fractured the history of visual art.

I spent a lot of time looking at paintings and thinking about how, as artists like Braque and Picasso begin to develop cubism, what they are doing is they're dealing with the entire history of Western art. They're also breaking it up and saying, "As we enter this 20th century, we have to create something new, that it counts where we are in life right now." I have to admit that my ambition was to try to do something in my own way similar in my book.

Bethanne: Tope, who won on those middle pages?

Tope: Oh, I did.

[laughter]

Tope: Look, I had two requests. First of all, I'm not going to italicize any non-English word. To their credit, they were down with that. We went back and forth with this because it was an unconventional request. I actually wanted to go more radical. I wanted to strip away page numbers. I said, "Page numbers are a way of seeding to this idea that time works in a linear way." They're like, "No, Tope. Page numbers."

[laughter]

Tope: I said okay.

Bethanne: You had to compromise.

Tope: They're like, "You're losing the play." [laughs]

Bethanne: Anyone who is writing a novel is grappling with intersectionality because it comes from a cishet white male tradition in so many ways. Not that that is necessarily the complete genesis of fiction. We don't need to go into a history of literature right now, we don't have the time. With at least the 21st century, we're still working within parameters that, as all of you have acknowledged, were put together by white men in New York, London. Let's face it. New York, London, Paris, Munich.

Everybody's talking about pop music. I'm aging myself right now. Min, how about that idea for you? The idea of not adhering to the given form because you write big, wonderful? *Free Food for Millionaires* is like the *Middlemarch* I've been waiting for my whole life. It's just a *Middlemarch* being a big touchstone for me.

Min: It's my favorite book.

Bethanne: There we go.

Min: There we go. [chuckles] That Dorothea is such a dope. [laughs]

Bethanne: It is. We can talk about Casey's reading of *Middlemarch* for such a long time and we would probably have the best evening. Since you are nodding at least to that tradition of the Victorian novel which was enlarged, enhanced, changed, and Douglas, you are too, but you're using it to your own purposes. Min, I was wondering if you could comment on that as well, on breaking down narrative convention, in your case, mostly by content and character.

Min: Yes, and message. I thought I would figure out how to write the 19th-century realist novel. I was like, "You know what, George Eliot, bullseye. Just let me try."

[laughter]

Bethanne: Whatever.

Min: Publishing said, "No." [laughs] I was like, "I'm just going to keep trying." [laughs] Then finally, I just, "You know what, fuck it. I'm just going to do it anyway." I just kept on going but then I feel so in command of that form. I can say that now. I'm 52. I just don't care. I've written those two books. You can give a test on it. It's actually taught as a way to do that form.

That makes me feel enormous pride because I wasn't even born in America. [laughs] English is my second language, but then I feel like that was my way of creating the Trojan horse to create the most radical message – that in the 19th-century novel, the heroine does not have to die. My female character does not die. She makes lots of mistakes and she's just not killed off. [laughs]

Bethanne: Right. Exactly.

Min: Lily dies. Right?

Bethanne: Right.

Min: Lily Bart dies. Anna Karenina dies. Balzac dies. I'm sorry. Madame Bovary dies. Everybody dies. My girl's going to live. [laughs]

Bethanne: [unintelligible] winds up with a blind widow. [chuckles]

Min: Right. Also, in my experience, I've been into so many rooms where people are literally still asking me, I'm 52, "How did you get here?" [laughs] "What are you doing here. How do you say your name again?" They still ask me things like, "Oh, is your book written in translation?" I get this all the time. “Is your book written in translation,” still all the time. They ask me still at 52 where I went to college. I wasn't thinking. I think it's amazing that Tope – Tope is significantly younger than I am. I think it's amazing that you can say, "You know what, I'm just going to play

with the form and that'll be my joy." You should have joy. I think that James Joyce had joy in breaking form.

I love *Ulysses*. I'm probably one of the few people actually. I actually liked it. In the same time, you can also do other things besides *Ulysses*. I really wanted to try to use it for my own ends to say something really radical. My messages are really radical. *Pachinko* is a really radical, progressive book and so is *Free Food for Millionaires*. It's really fun for me.

I just recently wrote the introduction for *The Great Gatsby* for the Penguin Classics reissue. Go figure. It was really fun to just, for 6,000 words, nerd out and talk about the queer reading of Nick Carraway because I said, "If you want me to do this for almost no money, I'm just going to go for it."

[laughter]

Min: I'm going to write about the bromance. I'm going to write about the fact that he really messed up white women. It was such a joyful thing for me because I love being a scholar and I also love criticism and I also really, really love research. I also love trying to figure out how to do something really hard. My principal goal is the fact that I'm allowed to be me, that's a radical gesture.

Bethanne: I'm going to turn to the questions now and wind up on that because all three of you have managed to be you in your books and that is a radical gesture. That is why we are here tonight talking about intersectionality. Min, that is a really fantastic segue. I will, after we talk through some questions, come back and wrap things up but this is really exciting.

There are so many questions here. From Rebecca Cha, “how do you manage the intersection between your own liminal experience of living in between cultures and expectations and writing characters whose lived experience is drastically different from your own? Does it feel appropriative? What do you do when it does?” I'll let whichever one of you wants to take that first. I don't know if any of the three of you is writing a character whose lived experience is drastically different in all ways, but I'll let you answer.

Tope: I think even if you're not, if you're writing a book, that you have to write characters who aren't you and who have different experiences. I think my approach to it is just, I take in everything, I mentioned before that I love visual art and my love too of writers and thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Soyinka and those folks that I grew up with that my parents were talking about. But I also desperately love *Real Housewives* and I'll watch every episode. I think that, for me, it's important to take in as much of the world – because what is actually happening to them –

One thing that I liked to do before the world shut down was, I live in DC, I'd go to Dupont Circle, which is this wonderful, biggest park in the middle of DC. I'd sit and I'd listen to conversations. Part of the act of being an artist is trying to understand humanity. There's something that you said, I certainly do this in my book for talking about, or trying to depict yourself or some version of yourself on the page. I think another important part of it too is learning other human beings and getting a sense of how they are in the world. That's something that I do appreciate and something that I really try to do in my work as well.

Bethanne: Anything Douglas or Min from you, or shall I move on? Thank you, Tope, very much.

Douglas: The only thing maybe I could add to that is because I write about poverty and I write about the limits of poverty, how it keeps my characters on the streets, they know, and they don't get to necessarily see as much of the world as they wanted to. I had to have some restraint with myself as a writer because obviously, my understanding of the world is bigger than Shuggie would ever have seen. I found that I knew very quickly when I was writing my prose or when I was explaining the world, if I was standing at the character's shoulder or if I was standing and watching them.

Anytime I felt like I was looking back at them on the page and inviting the reader to look at them, then I was doing the wrong thing. I can't really say what it made me do. Sometimes it was, I had to consider the references they would understand, or perhaps I would have to simplify my prose or take out her arrogance. Often, if I had written a very arrogant sentence that I loved and I thought it was the most beautiful sentence I'd ever written. I had to remember that when I was writing about characters that didn't necessarily see themselves in literature or turn to literature, I didn't want to deny them the access of my book.

Bethanne: Thank you. Let's see. For Min Jin Lee from Melissa Stephan, “I gather that you do in-depth research into the historical time and place of your story and interview people who experience the things that happened to your characters. Are there things in *Pachinko* that might surprise readers to know truly happened?”

Min: Almost everything in that book truly happened to multiple people. Gosh, that book took me almost 30 years to write because I was working on it off and on. I wrote it before I wrote *Free Food for Millionaires*, actually. Then I had to throw that away and start again. I could probably draw a footnote to every sentence, but I won't.

[laughter]

Min: For example, almost every one of those things actually happened to multiple people and I have to figure out how to make it into a composite. The book is taught in a lot of history and political science classes, undergraduate and graduate-level because scholars have said it actually does cohere. The hardest thing for me was to try to figure out the sense of responsibility. I guess I can tie up both questions, this one as well as the last one, is that I think that you're allowed to show up if you could bring something to the table. If you can't, you should go home. Don't waste anybody's time.

I don't really need to hear the sound of my voice. It's fine. I'm really happy to stay home and read my amazing books [laughs], the books I didn't write. In the same way, if I bring you a book and I ask you to give me your time, because it's not the 12.99 or whatever, because I make $1 if I sell a copy of *Pachinko*. I was recently asked to do an event and they were going, "I'm going to sell 50 copies." I'm like, "It's going to make $50 for me, pal." [laughs] That's not working. Do I really believe in the purpose of something?

Bethanne: Doug would love to have those $50 million, Min.

[laughter]

Min: I'm only bringing this up because what I'm just trying to say is, I think sometimes what I hear in the question, especially the first person who asked, Rebecca, the question I'm hearing is the anxiety, is, do I have the right to do something? I'm saying you do if you actually do the

work. You do. I don't know what it is you wanted to do, but you have the right to be there if you do the work. I was really nervous about writing about certain authors I really admire.

I've written about bell hooks in *The New York Times*, I've written about F Scott Fitzgerald now for Penguin Classics. I was nervous, but I did the work and I'm going, "I did a really good job." [laughs] I'm being a little cheeky right now, but I'm doing that on purpose for my young people because I want them to take a little space because they don't see people like me ever taking space. I think, "By the way, I'm in therapy, I'm really nervous. I'm scared of shit." However, sometimes if I do the work, I feel it's okay to show up.

Bethanne: If you're bringing something to the table, I think that is such an important thing for all of your readers to hear. That's what we want as readers, we don't want to read a book about someone talking to themselves. *My Dinner with Andre* has been done.

[laughter]

Tope: I love that movie by the way. It's fine.

Bethanne: I love that movie, it is, in a way – the movie lets you know that it's people talking about themselves to themselves. Laura Strachan, hello, Laura, says, "How do we get past the mindset of, we don't know how to market this, to get to the readers who are going to champion great fiction?"

Tope: I think you have to be willing to take risks. Every year, a publishing house decides that certain books will – It's a vicious cycle. This book did well in the past or this book. You begin to see the marketing copy, this book is like this and that. Douglas said something that I thought was really interesting, which is about categorizing his book. The same thing happened to me. All of a sudden I was being asked to talk about my novel like an immigration novel. I was like, "What?" The books that I read most often when I was writing my book were probably *Counterlife* by Roth. I read Kafka. I read *Boneheads*.

Those are the people I kept on going back to because I was interested in trying to do something. Then they're like, "Okay, write about immigration and how this is an immigration novel." Part of it, Douglas said it perfectly, is they're reducing incomprehensible people to something that's more comprehensible. I think the important thing is to step out of that to say, "Okay, I'm dealing with a full living human being who probably is inspired by all kinds of things and that interacts with all kinds of art." Ask the writer, this might sound revolutionary, but what are your interests, what's going on, and then perhaps try to build around that.

There's this externally imposed classification system that's happening right now that I think is really problematic and taking a risk. Part of it does involve taking a risk. I know that's hard to do in a profit-driven world, but I think that if you're willing to do that, that you'll be surprised by what people – Like voting. One of the things we heard, and I know you said you weren't going to be political here but allow me to just – [crosstalk]

Bethanne: Oh, no, please.

Tope: [chuckles]

Bethanne: You could be political.

Tope: The triumphs that happened in Georgia, a triumph if you're a Democrat, happened because there were a number of people who had never voted before who came out to vote because somebody was specifically talking to them. I think the same thing can happen in publishing there, a bunch of people who aren't reading right now because you're like, "This isn't for me, I don't want to read that." If you make an attempt to say like, "This is a book that might connect to you in some way. I know we typically don't market towards you but check this out," that you'd be surprised by the people who would all of a sudden start taking up books and engaging with books in a way they haven't before.

Bethanne: I'm going to interrupt it before anyone else answers because Anna Takahashi says, "Thank you for addressing the publishing piece. In addition to actively seeking out writers with different backgrounds, what else can readers do?" I think that is a great follow on to what you just said, Tope.

Tope: Yes, absolutely. I say readers do have a responsibility as well to read outside what they generally read. Blame is a harsh word here but I don't place the blame on readers. I do think that publishing houses have to be willing to take risks, have to be willing to pull a Stacey Abrams, reach beyond the expected readership, and reach out to people. Even take a look at something like Netflix, which I think has done an interesting job.

I have my critiques of Netflix, but I think they've done a really interesting job of soliciting work from all kinds of different places and putting it on this platform. Some of that work doesn't get marketed the way it should, absolutely, but I think they've done an interesting job of saying, "If you're not typically a person who sits down to watch television, here's a show that might appeal to you." I think that publishing maybe needs to think about writing and books in a similar way.

Bethanne: Douglas, I'm wondering what you think about what readers can do, especially because although you live in the United States, and you are a Scottish-American, you are familiar with the British or the UK publishing scene in a way the rest of us might not be. Is there anything, for example, that you know of besides our beloved Big Scottish Book Club with Damian Barr–?

[chuckling]

Bethanne: Is there anything there [that] helps readers along the lines of this Netflix model that Tope has brought up?

Douglas: That's a good question. I won't say – *Shuggie* was also seen as the outside of the British publishing industry as well because it deals with working-class families. This wasn't a thing about an immigrant voice in America. This was about who wants to read about people having a tough time and you can watch, how does that go on. I think Tope is totally right. I think the only insight I could probably give is, as a man who has spent 25 years running huge fashion brands, I'm very aware of trends and how marketing works, and how people sell things on to other people. What Tope says about the courage and the bravery of doing what you want, there's a disruption to that as well.

I think if people can categorize your work and place it in the family tree of other bits of work, that's great. Also, there is plenty of space for people who are doing the first thing of something or hope of doing the thing that is really outside of the trend. Any writer today should feel encouraged actually if their work can't be placed so neatly on the shelf with its predecessors. I would take courage in that because, *Shuggie*, anecdotally, when they were sending around the

manuscript, they were like, "What is this like?" They were going back to the 1980s to find James Coleman books and Irvine Welsh books in the '90s. That was the comp for it. That was the already sobering moment for me, but then look at *Shuggie* go.

[chuckling]

Bethanne: Jennifer Cheng says, "I was really struck by Min Jin Lee's early comment about always writing community novels, always writing from an omniscient perspective. Audre Lorde was quoted earlier and she, of course, believes strongly in the idea of a community of women. What do communities mean to you? What does solidarity mean and look like, especially in today's political climate? What, in your opinion, is the role of art in imagining a better future?" I think that's great, Douglas. That builds off of what you've just said. Take courage, be different, and imagine a better future. Jennifer, thank you for that question. Anyone, the role of art in imagining a better future?

Min: I really see no purpose to art except for that. I don't. I would never be a writer unless I believe that I had a message and something to say that matters. That may seem insanely grandiose, but I really don't care. I really don't care. I say that intentionally because I think people in my community, especially my racial, ethnic, gender, blah, blah, blah, all of it, usually aren't walking around saying things like, "Oh, I have a message and you should listen to me." I've actually had to do a lot of overcoming to say, "You know what, actually, I do believe some things."

If you actually connect with that, thank you. If you don't, that's okay. I fight really hard for Pan-America because I believe that we have the right to disagree and to have different messages. Two things. This goes back to marketing, just because I have all of two books [laughs] and it took me 20 years to publish two books. One is, I think you really have to manage your expectations of who your audience is. There is absolutely a marketplace for every writer in America. Every writer in America. If your expectation, let's say your Substack newsletter, if 50 people is good, that's fine.

If your Patreon followers can give you 100 people, you can actually probably have pin money. You can have enough money to buy coffee every month. If you want it to be a best-seller, that's another tack. If you want to be a prize winner, that's another tact. I know because I judge. I'm a critic, I'm a judge, I publish, I teach. All those different worlds I realize like, "Oh, no, you can't manage expectations." That's one. Two is, I do not believe anyone's going to do it for you. I don't.

We live in a neoliberal economy. It is winner take all. It's gotten so cruel, actually, and as a matter of fact, for anybody who came out with a book in 2020, in 2019, and 2021, oh, goodness. That is such a difficult time. One of the things that I think writers can do is lift each other's books up and go, like, "Hey, I liked it." Whenever I'm asked, I try to go like, "I like this." I try to bring a new person and an old person, especially when I like it. There you go.

[laughter]

Min: We have to do this for each other in terms of solidarity. You guys, we're family. We're here for each other, and I think that that does make a difference. I will either not write a review, but I will never write a bad review as a writer. As a fiction writer, I can't do it. I just can't because I know what it's like, and I'm going, "Oh, I understand why they did that." I'm glad because I probably don't want to read that book, but I know it's really tricky. When I get excited about a

book, I can't be a better megaphone, because I think I want to sell books. I do because I want us to survive.

Bethanne: And imagine a better future.

Min: Absolutely.

Bethanne: There's so many more questions, and we're not going to be able to get to all of them. I have one last question. We have one minute left. Lisa Page, hello, Lisa. "I love what Min Jin Lee said about intersectionality, opening up her life and opening up opportunity. How do all three of you feel about this idea about intersectionality, opening things up for you?" I am so sorry to all the people that we haven't been able to get to questions for. We'll figure it out. How do all three of you feel about Lisa's question and about this idea?

Tope: It's a really important question, I have to say that the first time that I fully felt myself and fully recognized myself is when I sat down and committed to writing about an experience that in so many ways echoed my own. I hadn't encountered in literature the tale of somebody who emerges from poverty and has severe identity issues and doesn't necessarily see the world the way everyone else does. More than that, is deeply impacted by these dual belief systems. One that is based on logic and adherence to solving things in a very sequential way and another that has this spiritual basis and that spirituality suffuses everything.

The first place where I could bring all these things together was in the pages of a book. For me, that's why books are so desperately important because they are one of the few places. I think too, as we talk about the future, that we have an obligation as artists. One, to work on craft so that you do a good job of getting your ideas out there, but two, insisting on the importance of your presence in this space. There will be some headwinds, there will be some difficulty, but the thing is that I don't think you want to write towards the center of this moment.

I think you always have to be looking towards the future. In the future, they'll look back towards those folks who were reaching out a hand to them. That's what I try to do in my writing, I try to reach out a hand to the future to say, "I'm somebody from the past, and I'm trying to figure out how we get there, and this is my message to you." That, I think is dangerous and maybe not the best, most lucrative plan in the short term, but I think in the long-term it makes a great deal of sense and it helps humanity move forward. That's my two and a half cents.

Bethanne: Thank you. Min, Douglas, any words to add about reaching a hand out to the future?

Min: I teach at a college and I love my students and my next book is about generation Z. These are really young, bright, talented, incredible, also very open-hearted people. I think whatever we can do to try to not be discouraging – I'm so sick and tired of all this dystopia and apocalypse. I'm tired of it. I think that in a way I want very much to encourage this next generation to believe in good things and that our decisions matter even though we do live in a neoliberal economy. That requires the elders to behave better, to be more decent, to have better messages, and also give advice. If someone asks me things, I try to tell them if I know something.

Bethanne: Douglas?

Douglas: I think part of reaching out to the future is first correcting our past and making sure that we set that down in truth. I feel like as a writer, I'm so keen to bring people to the page that have been left off historically. That's just where I'm at right now with my writing journey. I think

that is a forward-thinking thing because you can't just keep erasing people as we go through the world and not hearing the urgency of their lives and then keep pitching forward because they really, truly get left behind then. Right now, I'm in a bit of a period of excavation in the hopes that if I can do that, then the future will be more truthful. I don't know.

Bethanne: I think that is what intersectionality brings, is a commitment to the truth. All three of you are doing that. Thank you so much, Tope Folarin, Min Jin Lee, Douglas Stuart for being here with me this evening and talking about the idea of intersections. Thanks to the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Thank you all who've been here. For those of you whose questions did not get answered, you never know, stay tuned. I might be able to do something to help out with those. Right now, I need to turn our attention to our Executive Director at the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, Gwydion Suilebhan, and I'm going to say goodbye to everyone else. If we could just mute ourselves and stop the video.

Gwydion Suilebhan: Hello everyone. I am Gwydion Suilebhan, PEN/Faulkner's Executive Director. Let me start by offering tremendous thanks to all of our incredible guests and to PEN/Faulkner's own, Bethanne Patrick, for moderating tonight brilliantly. Also to all of you for making this another incredible Literary Conversation. We really could not do anything we do without your participation. I wanted to close tonight by dropping our donation link back into the chat window.

[Donate to PEN/Faulkner using this link! bit.ly/penfaulkner]

PEN/Faulkner has continued to stay strong and stay hopeful throughout this whole pandemic. Part of what's given us that hope has been the support that you have given us.

Books have the ability to help us all bear up under difficult circumstances and keep our lives rich and full to make sure that we all feel seen in the ways that we are as the people we are. That's why we work really hard to put intersectional books into the hands of DC students who don't always have enough access to stories even in good times and for whom recent events have been even more difficult on that front.

Even $15 from you can totally transform one young person's reading life. If you can do $15 a month, if you can manage that, it helps us do the same thing over and over again throughout the year and have a really big lasting effect. Thank you so much for anything you can do in support of PEN/Faulkner and thank you for joining us tonight. We wish you the very best and we hope you have a really good night.