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Dr. Rafael Walker, *Arizona Quarterly*

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Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the Hopkins Press Journals Division. Last month, the United States Post Office announced its 2023 slate of stamp designs, which includes tributes to writers Toni Morrison and Ernest Gaines, both of whom died in 2019. Our guest today, Dr. Rafael Walker, recently published a paper in the journal *Arizona Quarterly* that examines how Gaines' last book, *The Tragedy of Brady Sims*, draws parallels to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Dr. Walker is an assistant professor of English at Baruch College, City University of New York.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Walker. I'm so excited to talk to you about your paper.

Rafael Walker

It's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The first question we'd like to ask all our guests is, can you tell us your academic origin story? What led you to your specific area of research and academic focus?

Rafael Walker

Sure. You're taking me back now, but I didn't start off as a lover of books, which is something you won't hear from a whole lot of people who are professors of English. But I got into it with American literature and remembered, I won't—I will spare you the sappiness of my high school, sort of, crush on *The Awakening*.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, but now you're talking my language though because I love that book so much. (laughter) I'm swooning, I'm swooning. If you say *The Awakening*, I'm in, I'm in.

Rafael Walker

(laughter) Such a feel good story, right?

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right? Oh, yeah. It's a gem. It's a real pick-me-up.

Rafael Walker

But that—it was that novel that got me both into reading and into American literature, which I continued when I went to college and then went to graduate school and kept doing American literature. And as I was graduating, there was, let us say, a bit of a racial reckoning going on. And by that, I mean

Black Lives Matter was really beginning when I was finishing up graduate studies. And before I hadn't worked a whole lot with African American literature, but just the discussion surrounding race in the country sort of showed me that it was an all-hands-on-deck situation. So, I felt sort of drawn to, kind of contribute what I could as an English professor and started moving my research more in the direction of African American literature to help the culture make sense of a lot of these issues as best I could. So, I work in American literature broadly, but I'm someone who sees all American literature, be it by Black people or Hispanic people or whomever, as part of American literature. So, I don't see them as separate at all.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Interesting. Thank you so much. Your paper in *Arizona Quarterly* is a detailed look at Ernest Gaines' *The Tragedy of Brady Sims* and some of the parallels between that book and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, what led you to draw the comparison of those two books? How did you bring them together?

Rafael Walker

So, I read *The Tragedy of Brady Sims* pretty much as soon as it came out. I've long been an admirer of Ernest Gaines. And when you see something as dramatic as a plot device where a parent kills his own child, that's big, right? And instantly my mind went to *Beloved* and I thought to myself, okay, well, obviously this is some kind of engagement with Morrison's work. That fact alone. So, when one sort of megastar contemporary engages with another, that's a literary event in itself.

And I thought, okay, there's something to be said about that. And then it was also just the moment in which he had chosen to have make that literary illusion or that intertextual link. You know, much of the—so with Black Lives Matter and the attention then and now being paid to the kind of suffering and oppression of Black people, you know, that movement focused mainly on Black men at first, and many have argued that it came at the expense of Black women. That's true, but it also—that line of inquiry or those questions, they also had the effect of kind of splitting or creating this division between Black men, Black women—Black men and Black feminism. And of course, this was all abetted by the intersection of these movements with the Me Too movement.

And it was sometimes—not so much in scholarship though, sometimes there, but certainly in the mainstream—a lot of the differences between Black men and Black women were being emphasized or overstated, exaggerated really is the better way to put it, that made it seem that Black men were somehow on the same level or capable of the same level of discrimination that White men were. And that just wasn't true, because as we know, it is often the case that unlike with White men, for Black men, it's their very masculinity that actually is a liability some of the time. And that's not true for White men. So, Gaines reaching to his sort of most preeminent contemporary in Black feminism seemed to me this move to try to heal that breach that was being widened by the way that we were separating Black people and talking about them differently based on gender. And so that I thought, I thought a book speaking to that as well was super, super timely and something we needed to be paying attention to.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Agreed, agreed. So, you note in his work that Gaines, I'm going to quote you, “conspicuously abstains from entering into the psyches of its victims, the community's young Black men, trying to avoid the kind of psychologizing in Morrison's *Beloved*, and that this strategy compels readers to locate the illness, not

in them, but in their circumstances". Do you also think that sort of distancing that he does, do you think from the minds and the point of view of the victim and victims in the book, do you think it makes that very painful and violent story easier to read and less painful on the reader when there's a little bit of a wall there?

Rafael Walker

It's a good question. It could in less capable hands.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Good answer, good answer.

Rafael Walker

I think that, for good reasons, scholarship about Black people and really about oppressed minorities or groups in general—including sexual minorities, women, and so forth—for good reason they've wanted to find moments in literature that show these groups showing agency. They're not completely disempowered. They are kind of within their disempowerment, finding ways to self-realize or to kind of move forward through their own communities. I think that's a very good thing.

But in emphasizing agency, as I think Gaines was well aware, we can sometimes really forget or miss pointing the finger where the blame lies and showing that these are just people trying to live their lives. There's nothing wrong with them. It's actually all of these external forces, be they sociological, legal, whatever. It's these forces that are affecting their lives or making it so hard for them to live. It actually seems in certain ways even more tragic. Their victimhood seems even more emphasized than it might seem if you highlight their agency too much. Of course, nobody wants to be a victim, but sometimes people are. Especially in the, gosh, graphic parade of Black men and women who were the victims of police crime, the people who are supposed to protect you are actually the ones killing you.

I mean, I think in a case like that, emphasizing agency is really not the way to go because of course this is what so many of the police officers who have inflicted violence on Black people said, "Oh, they resisted or they did X." And in moving out of the psychology or moving away from focusing on the agency of these characters and the Black people that they represent in society, that comes through I think a bit more clearly. And the tragedy—you have to remember that's the name of Gaines' novella, *The Tragedy of Brady Sims*—that tragedy, I think, becomes even more acute and more visible. So, I mean, for me as a reader, no, it's actually not easier to read, it becomes even sadder.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right. No, I think that's a really great point. And I agree with you. I agree with you. And I also kind of agree it can be both, but I guess I love the way you explained it because it takes all the negotiables out, and it just gets you down to the humanity. Like, this person should, this should not have happened to this person. Even if they were a terrible person, this should not have happened to this person. No, I really, that's a really good point. I'm going to reread, I think with that in mind.

Rafael Walker

If I can just add also—

Mary Alice Yeskey

Please.

Rafael Walker

—one of the things they talk about in the essay is that one of the risks that you run in focusing on kind of the psychic costs of racism, you know—in Morrison's case, it was racism plus slavery and all these other things—you can risk pathologizing the characters. That's not what Morrison does. She shows that everything that is, kind of wrong, with him, all their duress is the product of the world that they live in. But I think what Gaines wanted to show is that these people are perfectly normal. There's nothing wrong with them. You know, even in terrible circumstances, such as those that his characters and Morrison's are living in, it's almost sort of miraculous that people can end up being okay and well-adjusted.

And so, you know, just as I said before, that focusing on agency can sometimes occlude some of the problems that are going on. It's also true that showing that your characters can remain sane in the face of so many of these terrible problems highlights resilience. And of course, these people shouldn't have to be that resilient, and it's amazing that they are.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right. That's extraordinary in and of itself. Yeah, absolutely. No, that's a really good point as well. Thank you for that. To your knowledge, did Gaines and Morrison ever meet or exchange communication? Did he ever sort of publicly acknowledge her work or vice versa?

Rafael Walker

To my knowledge, they didn't. I know they were not close acquaintances at all. Whether they met or not, I can't really verify. Of course, in researching for an article of this kind, that was a question I was very interested in. But I do know this. I do know that he admired her work. So, in an interview that he did, I think in 1999, he was asked about the heroes of his day. And I think he interpreted that question largely to mean, OK, what writers do I like now? And he mentions only two by name: one, his friend, Alice Walker. They were very good friends. She promoted his work; was probably the reason why his novel from 1971, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, got turned into a film because she wrote so highly of it in the *Times*. But Alice Walker and Morrison are the two that he mentions specifically as, quote, very good writers, very good African American writers.

So, he was an admirer, but I think there is probably largely a writerly decorum that writers follow where you don't really talk too much about your peers when someone is doing an interview of you. The interviewer probably would want to respect that writer, not make the writer about—or not make the interview about other writers.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right. Yeah, I hear you. Yeah.

Rafael Walker

This is your spotlight. And also, you know, you might not have all perfectly positive things to say about your contemporaries' work. And so, you know, you wouldn't want to be put on the spot.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right.

Rafael Walker

Because, I mean, these are very, very good writers. And though they might admire the other work, they're going to find something wrong with it.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right. Yeah. That's true.

Rafael Walker

And, you know, writers are sort of famously sensitive. So, one wouldn't want to get that misunderstood.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Understood. And not only that, but I mean, you can say that, you know, both of those women were phenomenal writers. I loved this book by her. I did not care for that book. Both of those things can be true, but you don't want to go down that like rabbit hole.

Rafael Walker

Exactly. Exactly.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Understood. One thing that Morrison and Gaines do have in common is that they both had their books banned both by school systems and prisons. Morrison addressed book banning directly in *Burn This Book: Notes on Literature and Engagement*. Did Gaines ever comment, that you know of, about his work being banned in those institutions?

Rafael Walker

You know, I couldn't find anything on the question of, you know, Gaines' response to his books being banned in schools. I can't really find him commenting much on that. But it is true that Morrison, you know, when she heard about *Paradise* being banned in Texas—when she got the letter from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, saying that *Paradise* was basically causing riots—it really excited her. She thought how wonderful—

Mary Alice Yeskey

—that she succeeded.

Rafael Walker

(laughter) The book is so dangerous that it's, you know, exciting riots in this terrible place that actually needs to be overhauled and rioted anyway. Gaines was very, very deeply invested in the penitentiary

system, specifically Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana, which was infamous for its treatment of its prisoners and its death penalties and all of that. He corresponded with a number of inmates who had been on death row, largely in preparation for his novel that was largely about the penitentiary, which was *A Lesson Before Dying*. Which as it happens, has been banned in schools, and was also the novel that kind of—I mean, he had been launched, but he had never been kind of a household name in the way that Morrison had been, and she's still, you know, more famous to be sure—but this really put him on the map. So much so that Oprah caught wind of it, and it became one of Oprah's picks for Oprah's Book Club. And it's sort of interesting to me that—it's his novel on prison that's getting banned that is the one that Oprah chooses and the one that kind of anoints him. And Morrison, of course, *Beloved*, which is also a hyper-banned book that Oprah had chosen.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I think Oprah knows what we know: that if it's banned, then it's probably saying something real important.

Rafael Walker

(laughter) That's right. That's right. I would imagine that he was probably very grateful.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah. I mean, yeah, there's something to be said. I'm reminded—this is a strange segue, but bear with me because it will make sense in a second. But I read several papers, and I listened to a podcast about the parental advisory label that they stuck on CDs and that started in the eighties for, you know, that was for violent and explicit language. And that—

Rafael Walker

Right, Tipper Gore.

Mary Alice Yeskey

(laughter) Thank you, Tipper Gore. But that, you know, with artists like, you know, with NWA, they just realized if you just—they used to have it at the bottom of the CD, and then if they put it on the top of the CD, you could see it when it was on display in the record store. I'm dating myself—and that they sold more. And so, then that just became a thing, like, make it bigger, make it the whole album cover, like embrace it. And so, it's kind of like this, like banning that you're doing—it's like the Streisand effect—all you're doing is making more people want it. So, congratulations on not succeeding.

Rafael Walker

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. You know, and of course, I mean, I don't at all celebrate the bands that are happening now.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right.

Rafael Walker

So, whatever. It is true that, you know, if you really want to get a rebellious teenager interested in reading books, tell them you can't.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yep. That's very true. I mean, it's, it's basic, basic psychology. Excellent. Well, thank you so much.

What is, what's next for you research-wise? Are there any papers or books that you're working on that you'd like to share with our listeners?

Rafael Walker

Sure. Well, um, most immediately I'm finishing an edition for Broadview Press of Nella Larson's *Passing*. So that is coming soon. And I am also finishing my first monograph which is tentatively titled *Realism After Individualism: Women Desire, and the Modern American Novel*, which is about the American realist novel from roughly 1890 to 1920, focusing on a lot of writers who have just completely fallen off the radar for reasons they talk about in the book, but that I think we all should be still reading and would think sort of better flesh out our understanding of American literary history. So those are the two big things on my plate.

So, the second book that I'm working on, uh, is on biraciality in American literature. So these are books that, you know, many have been on our radars for a long time, but scholarship hasn't really paid attention to the fact that the characters are biracial and haven't really thought about the difference that that makes when often it's, you know, if they were—if they had two Black parents and weren't biracial, the very plots that happened wouldn't have happened. The problems that they faced wouldn't have happened. So that book is trying to understand biracial literature as this distinct subset within African American literature and with its own sort of set of conventions and its own tradition. So, that's that second project.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That sounds so interesting. I'm so—I'm intrigued to read that as well.

Thank you so much. This has been such a wonderful conversation. I'm excited to reread *Tragedy of Brady Sims* after your paper and I wish you all the best of luck with your books and your research.

Rafael Walker

Thank you very much, Mary. It's a pleasure to be here.

Mary Alice Yeskey

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