

# Koritha Mitchell on Coming to Terms with “Know-Your-Place” Aggression

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## Rahne Alexander

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. My name is Rahne Alexander and I am the Senior Publicist for the Journals Division of Hopkins Press. Today on the podcast we welcome Koritha Mitchell.

Now, she wears many hats. She is a public intellectual, a professor of English, a literary historian, an award-winning author and cultural critic, and as of last year, she is also a member of the Hopkins Press advisory board. Her work has already had quite an impact both within the academy as well as in the larger public sphere. Over the years, Mitchell has written for many of the journals published by Hopkins Press, including one piece that has garnered a great deal of attention in recent months.

Her article, “Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression: A Form of Self-Care”, was first published in the Winter 2018 Issue of *African American Review*. And it's her concept of “know-your-place aggression” that has delivered a steady readership over since. The article was one of our most read articles last year and continues to capture attention. Just as we began this interview, the concept was cited in the mainstream press in a piece about football player Shedeur Sanders that appeared in *Esquire Magazine*.

Join us as we talk with Koritha Mitchell about the Impact of coining such an evocative term, how it evolved, her long relationship with Hopkins Press, and what she has in store for us next.

Thank you for your time, Koritha. I'm really honored to get to talk with you on the Hopkins Press Podcast.

## Koritha Mitchell

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

## Rahne Alexander

I first became of your work sometime last year when in the course of doing my social media work for the journals, the magazine *Public Books* published an interview with you. And that opens with a discussion about the concept, which we'll talk about in a little bit. The term you coined, which is “know-your-place aggression.” That's such a beautifully concise term, one that I feel like delivered me like this “a-ha” moment, even for those of us that have been working in like intersectional politics and other liberation projects. It was like, yes, of course, of course. How was it to come up with that, that idea?

## Koritha Mitchell

Yeah. [Laughter]

**Rahne Alexander**

Did it just come down on a pillow from the heavens?

**Koritha Mitchell**

It's so, I so appreciate an opportunity to talk about this because it has been quite the journey. I first used it as a term that I put in the public in 2012 and in writing my First book *Living with Lynching*. I had, in the lead up to it being published in 2011, I had started this blog and so it was in 2012 that I posted, "know-your-place aggression" as a term. And I used it to talk about what was happening at my university at the time, Ohio State University. And basically, there were students who were using something that they were calling OSU haters as a way to anonymously talk about the racist things that happened to students of color on campus. And they were anonymous so that you couldn't make the issue, *them*. You had to deal with, "Wow, look at how hostile this environment is for Buckeyes of color." Basically. And so when I saw what they were doing, I was impressed by it. And I saw that it was a way of showing that your success at feeling comfortable as a student at Ohio State, feeling like you are a Buckeye like anybody else, your success and feeling that comfort is what is being countered here. How do I put you back in your proper place where you recognize that as a student of color, we all assume you're here just because you got an unfair handout. Right?

**Rahne Alexander**

Yeah.

**Koritha Mitchell**

And that was first time I used the term and started just feeling like, you don't understand violence, whether it is discursive violence or physical violence, you don't actually understand it unless you understand that it is a reaction to the success of people who are not supposed to be successful. So, I did that in 2012. But like I said, a lot of this is related to my first book, *Living with Lynching*, right? Which came out in 2011.

Well, at a discussion about my book, as soon as it came out, a person I didn't know who I came to know is a gay Black man named Kevin Tyler. After I gave my presentation about *Living with Lynching*. He said, "You know, this was all very powerful, but do you not realize that what you're talking about is happening today, right now?" And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "The torture and mutilation that you're talking about happened to Lynch victims is happening to gay people right now." And I said, "I didn't know that, but I'm willing to learn from you about that."

**Rahne Alexander**

Mm-hmm. [Agrees]

**Koritha Mitchell**

And so after that book talk, he sends me newspaper article after newspaper article of people who were mutilated before being killed or mutilate. He just sends me all of this information. So, long story short, I basically get on a mission to decide if I agree with him that lynching and anti-LGBT violence are similar.

**Rahne Alexander**

Mm-hmm. [Agrees]

**Koritha Mitchell**

And as I do the research, I come to believe that he's exactly right. So, what that led to was a 2013 article that I published in *Callaloo* about the similarities between lynching and anti-LGBT violence. And one of the main similarities, is that it is the success of the marginalized group that inspires the violence. So, Black people were targets of the mob because they were successful in some way and needed to be put back in their proper place. And Gay people who were not staying in the closet, Trans people who were not staying in the closet were successful in living their truth and that needed to be countered. And that combination realizing that it is, the victory that is being, you know, rejected. That was an important thing for me to recognize. And that's what I talked about in 2013 in that piece. So, I won't give all of the different iterations, but there's another article in 2015 where I do that. But then the 2018 piece is the piece that is most important that I felt convicted to publish it because I knew that know-your-place aggression was going to be the theoretical framework for my book, *From Slave Cabins To The White House*, but know-your-place aggression in that book is all about toward African-Americans specifically.

**Rahne Alexander**

Mm-hmm. [Agrees]

**Koritha Mitchell**

And what I had come to recognize is that it needs to be thought of in terms of Ableism. It needs to be thought of in terms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, trans-antagonism, Islamophobia. Like it was important to me that I make it clear that know-your-place aggression is against any marginalized group. It's not just African-Americans. So I wanted that to be in the world *before From Slave Cabinets To The White House* was in the world. And so that is what I was able to do with publishing that piece in 2018 in *African-American Review* with the amazing, Johns Hopkins University Press.

**Rahne Alexander**

[Laughter]

**Koritha Mitchell**

So yeah, so that is how that essay came about. Many, many years of thinking through it and refining it.

But part of what made me feel confident enough to publish the 2018 version in *African American Review* is that I had given a talk based on it, in 2016 for the Ford Foundation Fellows Conference. And I will admit to you that being a Ford Foundation Fellow is a big part of how I came to develop this idea as well.

**Rahne Alexander**

Mm-hmm. [Agrees]

**Koritha Mitchell**

Because being in community with scholars of color in every discipline throughout the United States made it clear to me that it was their success that made them targets of all kinds of foul things. That were like, it was so common to hear stories from my colleagues around the country, to hear stories that would be a reason to leave academia altogether. And these were cutting edge scholars in whatever field they were. And every one of them had a story that should have made them leave academia.

**Rahne Alexander**

Right, right.

**Koritha Mitchell**

And so understanding again, that it was our victories that made us targets for abuse was really just crucial. And I couldn't keep that to myself. I needed it to be in print and I needed it to be in print in a way that called other scholars to be in conversation. Right? So scholars who are focused on ableism, scholars who are focused on Islamophobia and, and so on. Right? Like to really make it clear that this isn't just about my experience as a Black woman.

**Rahne Alexander**

Yeah. And I think that it's so amazing that it continues to get so much attention. We put it out on social media and we unlocked it. You know, so that it was beyond the paywall. And of course, every time I do that, people are like, look at this article, look at this article. And we just in the last couple of days, we saw it get quoted in *Esquire*.

**Koritha Mitchell**

Yeah. [Laughter]

**Rahne Alexander**

Which I mean, but it's resonating on that popular level in talking about the NFL and I'm hoping I get his name right. Shedeur Sanders, I think is the name of the player.

**Koritha Mitchell**

Yeah.

**Rahne Alexander**

And yeah, so they're quoting you in *Esquire*.

**Koritha Mitchell**

Yeah, yeah, it's really, I mean. You know, over the years, it has been remarkable to, it's been remarkably gratifying more than anything. Right? Because I feel like understanding know-your-place aggression was literally sanity-saving for me. And because it saved my sanity, I wanted it to be circulating, so that other people would know not to internalize the BS. Because that's really what all of this is designed to do. It's designed to have me think that the only way that I experienced this aggression is if I'm doing something wrong. And my whole thing is "No, no, no. You're not doing anything wrong. You're doing everything right." And that's why somebody wants to put you back in your proper place because actually having to compete with you is *never* on the agenda. [Laughter]

And so I would say that, you know, having the piece in *African-American Review*, having so many moments where Johns Hopkins University Press, elevates it in everything has led to me hearing from people in every sector. Like I've had heartfelt letters from people who are bankers, who have said, you know, "I kept switching departments thinking that I could do something different and it would be different, and you released me from thinking that I was doing something wrong." So it has been remarkable to feel like whether people are in academia or not, it has been sanity-saving for me. And so that for them, and that has been really gratifying for me. Yeah, so *Esquire* did it in relationship to the NFL.

A couple of weeks before that, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* gestured toward the concept in order to talk about the removal of Junot Diaz from *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. And yeah, over the years, there have been different ways that people have either done a kind of public recognition of the concept or honestly, lots of private recognition of the concept that has really been gratifying for me. So yeah, it's been kind of remarkable to see the different ways it has traveled. But for me, more than anything, it's like knowing that this means that people are internalizing less of the hostility is such a gift.

**Rahne Alexander**

One of my goals in doing this podcast and publicizing the journals is that I want to make these ideas accessible to people outside of the Academy too.

**Koritha Mitchell**

Yeah.

**Rahne Alexander**

So it's nice to see that happening and that it can resonate in that really visceral level. And you know, so that a reader doesn't have to think like, "I've got to get a, you know, PhD to understand what's going on in this article." They can feel it.

**Koritha Mitchell**

Yeah.

**Rahne Alexander**

You know, they can feel it. I love that this has kind of evolved through the Hopkins Press Journals Program too, as you're telling the story of the concept. And it's one of the reasons I want to have you on the podcast because over the years you've written for so many of our journals, of course, *African American Review*, *American Quarterly*, *J19*, *Theatre Journal*, and of course, *Callaloo*. We'll talk more about *Callaloo*, in a minute.

**Koritha Mitchell**

[Laughter]

**Rahne Alexander**

But I just think it's something like not only that we can have this wide-ranging scholarship for people working in humanities and social sciences, you can find a home in all these different Journals. But clearly you're able to cultivate an idea over time.

**Koritha Mitchell**

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Agrees] Yeah, it's been really remarkable. I think for me, you know, as a scholar, you have goal outlets, you know, and it just so happens. I guess, that Johns Hopkins University Press has a lot of goal outlets.

**Rahne Alexander**

[Laughter]

**Koritha Mitchell**

[Laughter] And I know we'll talk about *Callaloo* more later, but I have to begin with *Callaloo* partly because I had my first job out of the PhD at Ohio State University. And so I started there in 2005. And one of the things that I came to appreciate is that Ohio State had a cohort of Black students in the 70s who got their PhDs and went on to do amazing things. And one of those people in that cohort was Charles H. Rowell, the founder of *Callaloo*. And so being at Ohio State, I think, me even more attentive to the importance of *Callaloo* as an outlet.

And so it was immediately a goal kind of space for me. So I'll say that as one of the ways that, you know, this has been important. Rowell started to have conferences and it was at one of his conferences that I was asked to chair a panel on "queer love." And because I chaired that panel, it became kind of the way that I brought my grappling with Kevin Tyler's question about how I should think about the similarities between lynching and anti-LGBT violence, it was that queer love panel that kind of gave me the license to kind of move forward with making the argument that I was making there. So, I would say that that is why I begin with *Callaloo* as a goal publication.

There's also no question that *American Quarterly*, was a goal publication of mine. And I saw *American Quarterly* as a goal publication because with *Living with Lynching* being my first book, part of what I did is I was trained in an English department, 100% literary critic training. But because I was looking at plays about lynching written before 1930 in *Living with Lynching*, as I was, you know, revising my dissertation to become that first book, I kind of gave myself an education in theater history and performance studies by going to conferences that I wouldn't have gone to if I were just doing a literary angle. And so because of that interdisciplinary exposure I was giving myself, *American Quarterly* became a goal because I saw it as a premier interdisciplinary kind of space. So that became a goal for me and I'm so proud of the piece that I placed there. I remember that review process as incredibly grueling. I won't go through all of that, but it was an opportunity to talk about James Baldwin as a performance theorist. And I remained really, really, really, really proud of that piece.

*Theatre Journal* ends up being really important for me, partly because again, it's a premier outlet. But also they have performance review space, and so that is the place that I wanted to try my hand at performance reviews, and I believe that's where I placed something. It's been more than a decade ago now, because I found out about original lynching plays that were put on in New York City. And when this author let me know about it, I traveled to New York City, so that I could see it and pitch this performance review.

So, I think I say all of this to say that it's absolutely the case that for me, having the journal in mind is part of what becomes the creative process for what I'm doing. And then I'll mention *J19* too, just because I think *J19* is an example of a relatively new journal, but that from the very start, it's associated with C19, which is the Society of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Americanists. And from the moment that that organization came into being, they might've been new kids on the block, *honey*, but they carried weight from jump. Okay?

**Rahne Alexander**

Yeah.

**Koritha Mitchell**

And so it was just always an important intellectual space for me to keep alive my training in 19<sup>th</sup> century African-American literature. Because when I first got to Ohio State, a lot of my teaching was 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

And I will admit to you, I was a little bit worried about not continuing to feel versed in 19<sup>th</sup> century, and so *J19* immediately became a kind of important intellectual home for me. And their journal from the beginning, again, commanded respect. So, my experience with that journal more has been since I've been more of a senior scholar. So more often than not, I've been invited to do things in relationship to that journal. But in all instances, I admit that yes. It is the imprimatur, it is the reputation, it is the level of credential that I feel is associated with the journal that I definitely do not ignore.

**Rahne Alexander**

[Laughter] That's really, that's really great to hear. And yeah, I feel like as a, especially if you're coming up as a scholar, it's got to be a little bit fraught. "Like how do I even approach a journal? Do I have an idea that's good enough for this journal? Or like, I have an idea, but where, where do I even place it?"

**Koritha Mitchell**

Mm-hmm. [Agrees]

**Rahne Alexander**

That whole process. I get questions like that all the time when I go to conferences. Right?

**Koritha Mitchell**

Yeah. I'm just a fan of "have your goal and go after it." Have your goal and work on the work until it meets the goal that you wanted. And to me, that's about a goal for yourself. It's not about proving something to somebody else so much as it can be a goal for yourself. And that's how I approached it. But yeah, definitely was grueling. I'm not gonna lie.

**Rahne Alexander**

[Laughter]

**Koritha Mitchell**

There's plenty of grueling stories I can tell. [Laughter]

**Rahne Alexander**

Indeed, indeed. And you recently joined the board at Hopkins Press. Am I, am I right about that?

**Koritha Mitchell**

Yes, that's I was recommended as a candidate for the advisory board by someone who has served on it before, Carolyn Deaver, who just won a Guggenheim by the way.

And then once I got the invitation and I was considering it, I saw that Martha S. Jones is on this Advisory Board. And because I've talked to Martha, many more times over the years than I had to Carolyn, I reached out to her and said, you know, what do you think about this? What's your experience been, blah, blah, blah? And she was just like, this is the best board I'm on hands down. And I was like, say no more. [Laughter]

**Rahne Alexander** [Laughter] That's cool. That's cool.

**Koritha Mitchell**

Yeah. Oh, and Martha S. Jones just became a Guggenheim Fellow too.

**Rahne Alexander**

You're all, you're in great company. [Laughter]

**Koritha Mitchell**

Right?

**Rahne Alexander**

So, let's talk about *Callaloo* a little bit. You've talked a little bit about your history and you've written so many pieces for them over the years. And, you know, of course, they've got a brand new editor that I got to talk with on this podcast a couple of months ago, Kyla Kupferstein-Torres. She's amazing. I love her energy. I'm really excited for the new development in *Callaloo*. How has your relationship been with it over the years?

**Koritha Mitchell**

Again, I would say I always had Charles H. Rowell and just the amazing contribution that *Callaloo*, is on my radar and just was always floored by how dynamic the journal itself is. Right? That it was always diasporic in its orientation, was bringing in visual culture, performance culture. I mean, just the dynamism and truly covering the diaspora.

**Rahne Alexander**

Mm-hmm. [Agrees]

**Koritha Mitchell**

And so just always saw it as a kind of guiding light as a result. So, when he launched those in-person conferences, I was just floored and honored to be invited. I don't remember when they first started. I do think the first one was at Johns Hopkins University, actually, and I wasn't invited to that one. But I was invited to them after



that and went every single time. And so I would say that part of my relationship with *Callaloo* has to do with being able to be in community, both on the page and off the page. And just how much of a gift that was to, you know, I think that honestly, it informs, it, it informs who I am to this day. So I guess what I'll say is like, I am definitely more involved with other Journals now, but there's no question in my mind how much *Callaloo* formed who I am.

**Rahne Alexander**

Mm-hmm. [Agrees]

**Koritha Mitchell**

So, one way that I can make that concrete is to say that that kind of on the page and off the page experience, I think has been part of why I care so much about embodiment and thinking about embodiment in relationship to our intellectual work. And so much of my work has been about that. Right? Even recently in, publishing a Broadview Edition of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, I actually went to Edenton, North Carolina, where Harriet Jacobs had been hiding for 6 years, 11 months in her grandmother's attic space and walked the streets of Edenton and just had a powerful experience that I ended up publishing about in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. And I bring that up to say that it is all about embodiment and how embodiment is related to my intellectual work.

And that piece is an example of what I mean about the imprint of my experiences with *Callaloo* and the dynamism that Charles H. Rowell built into that amazing contribution that he gave us over all those, like just his way of doing that work *definitely* formed who I am. So, I'm excited to see that, you know, this transition has happened, that there's, you know, all of this new energy and it's just, I'm just so glad to know that people understood the importance of not letting this fall away.

**Rahne Alexander**

Yeah, absolutely! Well, you've always got so much exciting stuff going on. It's definitely worth that people follow your Blog, your social media.

**Koritha Mitchell**

[Laughter]

**Rahne Alexander**

Do you want to talk a little bit about what you're working on now?

**Koritha Mitchell**

Wow. So, the book that I am just beginning to write, it's been on my head and heart for years. I just made the transition of moving from Ohio to Massachusetts less than two years ago. So what I have to admit is that that transition was very humbling. And so there was a kind of disruption in my writing as a result of moving after 18 Years in one place to a new place. But I am newly working on the book that's been on my head and heart, and it's basically a memoir about being deliberately, blissfully child-free.

**Rahne Alexander**

[Laughter]

**Koritha Mitchell**

[Laughter]

**Rahne Alexander**

Yay! Okay.

**Koritha Mitchell**

Yeah. And it's one of those things where, you know, I've been with my partner for 26 years and I think that what it has done is it has made me so clear about what people will say to women that they never say to men. And so throughout those 26 years, I have encountered strangers and acquaintances alike who say things to me about being child-free, well, they call it "childless" — that are just absolutely offensive. And especially now that Roe v. Wade has been reversed, I feel even more agency around it. So, I guess the only thing I'll say is that the whole point of the book for me is that I believe that human beings create joy by making deliberate decisions and I'm just going to use this deliberate decision as the way that I explain how we all need to be making deliberate decisions to create joy. Because society is set up to make sure that we don't make those decisions deliberately. There are all kinds of things happening to make sure that we're just lulled into following a script. And I think that we take our joy back by making decisions on purpose and I want to share that story as the way that I've done it.

**Rahne Alexander**

Wow. I'm looking forward to that. Those are, are words I'm going to be thinking about for a long time. [Laughter]

**Koritha Mitchell**

Thank you. Thank you.

**Rahne Alexander**

Thank you so much for your time today.

**Koritha Mitchell**

I appreciate it. It's such a pleasure and honor to get to think back on this amazing journey that I've taken. Like was an opportunity to really think back, like yeah, there's been so many Johns Hopkins University Press outlets that have made a difference in who I am as a scholar. So, thank you for the chance to think on that.

**Rahne Alexander**

Yeah, yeah. Of course, of course.

Thank you for joining us on the Hopkins Press Podcast. For further reading, please visit the Show Notes on the Hopkins Press Multimedia Podcast Page, where we will have links to all the Koritha Mitchell articles, we discuss and we'll make them freely available to all listeners for a limited time.

The theme music is by Jean Toba, which you can find on the Free Music Archive, also linked to the Podcast Information Page. Thank you so much for listening and we hope you'll join us next time.

