Sarah McConnell: This is A.D. Carson's song, Sticks and Stones. It's all about the power of language.

A.D. Carson: Now that we see the broken bodies and bones, the bruises of the battered, not from sticks and stones but from the results of what we've long been taught could never hurt us. I wonder if we can stand by our assertion that words don't matter as much as they've always told us.

Sarah McConnell: A.D. Carson is a professor at the University of Virginia and a hip-hop artist. He uses his lyrical gifts to tell hard stories, stories that some people might not want to hear. For example, he went to graduate school at Clemson University, home of the Tigers. There, he used the poetic metaphor of a tiger's stripes to draw attention to Clemson's own history.

A.D. Carson: We are the Tigers, built on a legacy of slavery, sharecropping, and convict labor, by slave owners, supremacists, and segregationists, but come to the campus of Clemson University, and you'd hardly be able to tell it from looking around. It's a shame. We'd be a beautiful tiger, if only we could see our stripes.

Sarah McConnell: From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. On today's show, we're looking at how creative writing, poetry, and the arts can help us tackle stories of racial injustice, violence, and discrimination. We'll return to A.D. Carson's hip-hop poetics later in the show, but first, we first started thinking about this topic when we heard Lulu Miller's poignant farewell letter to the state of Virginia. Lulu is our friend and one of the founders of the NPR show Invisibilia. She's thought a lot about how to convey difficult topics in accessible ways.

Sarah McConnell: Lulu, you were recently a fellow here at Virginia Humanities, working on a book project that explores a really awful period where certain women who were deemed unfit were forced to be sterilized and not have kids.

Lulu Miller: Yeah, and, to just add to the awfulness, it wasn't just women. It was men, too. It was people of all ages, of all races. Officially the target of the campaign, it was a eugenicist campaign. There's a whole eugenics chapter of American history that I personally didn't grow up learning anything about, but a lot of it, a lot of it, happened in Virginia.

Lulu Miller: People were sterilized for it could have been anything. It could be that you were "promiscuous" or "feeble minded," there was a woman sterilized for telling coarse stories, for having wanderlust. The reasons were as varied and vague as you could imagine. It was just anything that people in power didn't like.

Sarah McConnell: This was a chapter in a forthcoming book of yours called Why Fish Don't Exist.

Lulu Miller: Yes.

Sarah McConnell: The book is about the dangers of miscategorizing people and things.

Lulu Miller: Exactly, yes. Well put. I'm still working on how to describe it, but yes, exactly. Truly, I crashed into this history in my research, not knowing I was heading that way. I'm looking into the life story of this one scientist and American biologist named David Starr Jordan. He became a very early and loud proponent of the eugenics movement.

Lulu Miller: The way that he got there was through a very innocent desire to categorize creatures on earth. His specialty originally was fish. He was looking for the shape of the great tree of life, that blueprint that is said to reveal who we're all connected and from whence we really come. In that quest for order and properly arranging things, he started to have all these misbeliefs that you could actually categorize humans into kinds of fitness and that there were certain types who were higher, more naturally fit than others. He wanted to save the race by getting rid of certain kinds of people.

Sarah McConnell: So you're about to leave Virginia, and you've been here about nine years, right?

Lulu Miller: Yeah.

Sarah McConnell: Came from Massachusetts?

Lulu Miller: Yep.

Sarah McConnell: Hard to leave Virginia now?

Lulu Miller: It is really hard. It is. I've loved living here. I've found it to be an incredibly gentle and welcoming place, but I think that's also in part because of who I am, as a white woman. So it's been an interesting time to be here. I'm sort of charmed by certain aspects of it and am also seeing it undergoing a really hard time. I'm sort of having my own personal awakening here, too.

Lulu Miller: But yes, I am really sad. I'm sad to leave the people. I'm sad to leave the landscape. I'm sad to leave my big front porch. When am I going to get that again?

Sarah McConnell: And balmy weather.

Lulu Miller: And balmy weather and flower trees, yeah.

Sarah McConnell: Not so long ago, you were in Lynchburg, Virginia with a group called Create Virginia. You read a letter, a sort of goodbye letter, a farewell letter to Virginia, that I'd love for you to explain and read to me now.

Lulu Miller: Okay, sure. Yeah, so this was a conference for art-makers all over Virginia to get together and think about art-making. Also, crazy enough, business, how to make a little money off the endeavor. So I was asked to come and talk about creating art in Virginia. I had just found out I had to leave, that I'd be moving to Chicago really soon. So the thing that came out was this honestly a love letter. If you want, I could just ... Should I just read it?

Sarah McConnell: I'd love it.

Lulu Miller: Okay.

Lulu Miller: Dear Virginia, oh how I'm going to miss you. I'm going to miss the view of the Blue Ridge Mountains beckoning above your highways. I'm going to miss your pickup trucks, your albino deer, your kaleidoscopic moss. I'm going to miss your gas station fried chicken. I'm going to miss your gentlest hint of a drawl. I'm going to miss your red earth and your chocolate milk rivers. I'm going to miss your slogan, Virginia is for lovers, your belief that lovin' and cuddlin' by a fire is a thing on which to stake your official state identity.

Lulu Miller: I'm going to miss how quickly you call a snow day. I'm going to miss your weeping willows and your fireflies, the fact that your trees in the spring look like they have been colored in by a 5-year-old girl with access to the crayon box, pinks and purples. I'm going to miss the twang in your banjo, the bears in your trees. I will even miss your gar, that prehistoric trash fish who thumps against my canoe with its terrifying snake body and alligator fangs. I'm going to miss your February crocuses, your coconut cream pies, your nearly lickable stars.

Lulu Miller: But the thing I will miss the most is your newfound outrage. It has taken too long for so many of us to see the ugliness that is lurking under all this physical beauty. It has been so easy to be distracted by the serpentine walls and the apple orchards and not consider on what blood, what pain they have been built and maintained. It is shameful that it took such glaring hints as Nazis, as white leaders wearing blackface, as our neighbors donning torches and white hoods, to make us see just how bad the problem really is.

Lulu Miller: Just the other week, our schools were shut down because of a threat to nonwhite students. These events are by no means isolated to Virginia. They are symptomatic of a sickness that afflicts our entire country. But because this human ugliness has gotten so vivid here, it as though some force has chosen us to respond, repent, repair, take action. Off all the mediums available in your soil, Virginia, the pigments and metal ores and clays, it is your outrage that I am most excited to see how you will use. What will you do with this outrage? How will you bend it and twist it and twirl it into sculptures and words and patterns to make new art? How will it fire you up, make your skin crawl, make your hand dance in strange new ways across canvases or notebooks or clay?

Lulu Miller: As Virginians, we have a choice right now. We can look back to those flowering trees and far away blue ridges and let ourselves be lulled by them. We can let the fireflies and the scent of magnolia lull us back into a trance, a dream state that everything here is beautiful, that everything here is fine. Or, we can look straight at the human ugliness that also grows from our soil and venture into it, get ourselves wet with fear and sadness and discomfort and shame, and use our art to reckon with it, to call attention to it.

Lulu Miller: After the bloody Amritsar massacre in India, that massacre in 1919 where British troops marched on a crowd of unarmed civilians gathered for a spring harvest festival and opened fire, killing hundreds, including children and babies, 70 years later, Gandhi's great grandson, Tushar Gandhi, looked back on the ugliness of that day and saw a strange gift. "The beauty of it," he said, "was that Gandhi didn't have to be a spin doctor to make people understand that British rule was unjust, it was so transparently malicious."

Lulu Miller: After the attack, everything changed. Such naked injustice spurred the beginning of a nation rising up to remake their country anew. Perhaps we are faced now with a similar kind of strange gift. Injustice and hate has been made so vivid on our streets that we can't ignore it anymore. How will you respond, Virginia? What art will you make? This is a moment that I think needs art more than any other.

Lulu Miller: I was talking to A.D. Carson, a professor at UVA, who says that over the years he's noticed that people respond with more openness to metaphor. He says it seems like it's easier for people to cry at the plight of Simba, a cartoon lion cub who lost his dad, than say, a fallen black body in their own home town. He does not fault humanity so much for this wiring, but instead, he uses it to try to make people feel. He recently made a spoken word piece about the loss of black lives, as told through fruit.

Lulu Miller: Oddly enough, just days after he mentioned this to me, I came across a scientific study that found evidence for this strange effect of metaphor. The study looked at how our brains respond to fiction versus nonfiction and found that our touch areas light up with much more intensity to fiction. For some reason it seems our brains are more able to let themselves feel, literally feel when they encounter fiction, when they encounter art. Perhaps this was even something the ancient Greeks knew long ago. The metaphor is Greek for "carry over." The art, the metaphor, the story, the best vessel for carrying emotions across that great divide that exists between two people.

Lulu Miller: Could it be that when something is art, we feel less responsible than when it is reality, less defensive? Our hackles come down and we're more willing to let the ideas, the emotions, the stories penetrate? I don't know. Whatever the reason, Virginia, I charge you to use this fact, this sneaky technique of metaphor, of art, to inspire the kind of empathy our country so desperately needs right now.

Lulu Miller: We've already seen the gurgling fits and starts of it here, the poster art, the symposiums organized to have scholars explore how we got here and how we might change, the plays and poems written by high schoolers in response to the events of August 11th and 12th. The galleries whose curators have decided to give over whole months to display this kind of work.

Lulu Miller: When I leave this summer, I'm going to miss being up close to seeing art like this, but Virginia, I will be watching you from afar. I hope whatever you make, it is beautiful, and I hope that it is ugly. I hope that it disturbs and burns and enrages. I hope that it splits the ears and prickles the skin and tugs at the heart. I hope that you use the fruits of this gentle velvety landscape not to lull you to complacency, but to replenish you after a hard day's work. I hope you venture out into the human world. I hope you have the hard conversations and encounter the hard news that might continue to outrage you, to move you, to inspire you. When you are exhausted from it all, I hope you lay down in the grass, take a huge huff of magnolia, and let that sweet Virginia sun recharge you with the strength to keep going.

Lulu Miller: From my freezing cold apartment in Chicago, I will be missing you, Virginia, and watching with hunger and hope, to see what you make. With Love, Lulu.

Sarah McConnell: Lulu, what a great parting gift from you.

Lulu Miller: Thank you. Thanks. Thanks for letting me read it.

Sarah McConnell: Lulu Miller is a former fellow at Virginia Humanities who got her MFA at the University of Virginia. She's co-founder of the National Public Radio show Invisibilia. Lulu mentioned a conversation she had with UVA professor A.D. Carson that made her think differently about metaphor and its role in telling difficult stories.

Sarah McConnell: So we brought Professor Carson into the studio to discuss his work about the role of rap and poetry in this political moment. A.D., Lulu Miller of Invisibilia loved your piece Maybe Metaphors Are Easier, where you say metaphors allow us to talk around the thing we really want to talk about but don't. Why are metaphors easier? Isn't it easier to name the thing?

A.D. Carson: Yeah, I believe that it is easier to name the thing that we want to talk about, but when we do that, then we automatically receive pushback from the people with whom we're talking.

Sarah McConnell: Give me an example.

A.D. Carson: I mean, the easiest example is if I go into work and then someone says something that is definitely racist, and I say, "What you said is racist," then rather than having a conversation about what was said, what ends up happening is a conversation about why that person is not racist, how they could not possibly be racist. Then all of these alibis that really provide evidence that the person could not be what I actually said they were, even if the particular act definitely, literally is racist.

Sarah McConnell: So much of your thinking and writing and rapping has been around this idea of the power of language and the power of naming. It creates violence.

A.D. Carson: Yeah, I mean, if we think about George Zimmerman on a phone call, he's describing someone as a criminal, or he's describing someone as a thug, or he's describing these guys who always get away with it. The violence occurs in that instance when he makes those descriptions. Then that violence is fulfilled whenever he kills Trayvon Martin. Very often, when we use those kinds of descriptors, criminal, thug, these guys who get away with it, even in some instances when we use the descriptor like rapper, what we're doing is we're relegating people to a place in language.

A.D. Carson: So if we think, for instance, about there was a man who was killed by police in California. His name is Willie McCoy. My interaction with Willie McCoy's story began with me reading a headline that says "rapper killed by California police." I wondered what that headline was really trying to convey to me. If that headline read "poet killed by California police," would I have a different response to it?

A.D. Carson: The answer to that is probably yes, in the same way that if I, as a rapper who's a professor, am murdered and someone chose to write "professor killed by Virginia police" as opposed to "rapper killed by Virginia police," responses to my death, or the description of my death, would be much different. So why was the choice made? What does the word rapper do to describe the person who was killed by the police?

Sarah McConnell: When you were getting your PHD in Clemson, South Carolina, you wrote a letter to your mother in case you were killed. Why?

A.D. Carson: Well, because I started at Clemson in July of 2013. That Friday, Fruitvale Station was released, and that was the movie about the story about the killing of Oscar Grant. Oscar Grant was killed at the BART station in Oakland on I think it was a New Year's celebration that he'd gone to. He was approached by some officers, one of whom ultimately killed him. That Saturday, George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing Trayvon Martin.

A.D. Carson: That summer marked the beginning of what we now know as the Black Lives Matter movement. It seemed that almost every week people were being killed, and there was this very public awareness of who they were being killed by and how they seemed to not matter to the world.

Sarah McConnell: This letter you wrote to your mother wasn't just a poem for artistic purposes. You actually were afraid to drive around Clemson.

A.D. Carson: Well, yeah. I made sure that I was going to take as much care into my interaction with South Carolina as I possibly could. There's all of this stuff that's happening. You have the shooting of a passenger who is pulled over, who is asked by a South Carolina officer to get his ID. Then when he goes to get his ID, that officer shoots him. You have Alton Sterling. You have Walter Scott. You have the shooting in Charleston. You have all of these things that are happening all around you, and you're living on a campus in a community where there are lots of people who every time you say that these things matter and you're distressed by them going on, there's another community around you that's saying these things are okay, or, why did he run, or what did he do in order for the officer to ... You know, all of those things are happening.

A.D. Carson: So when I wrote that piece called To My Mother Just in Case, I was thinking of the reality of my being who I am in South Carolina. If I were pulled over and detained and then word got out that I had taken my own life, I want my mom to investigate that. I want my family to ask questions because I needed to articulate, I needed to make sure that there was a document that said I don't feel like being detained would be the kind of thing that would make me take me away from her. I wouldn't do that. So if that happened, please find out what really happened.

Sarah McConnell: Were you afraid? I mean, literally did you think it kind of scares me to be vulnerable to police around here at night?

A.D. Carson: I don't know if fear was the thing that was motivating me, so much more than the power and the weight of certain kinds of narratives and the story that my mom would have to live with if she was told that I had taken my own life and she'd recently talked to me and she couldn't tell it and she didn't know that I felt that way. Then she would have to live with the reality that there was something that she could have done, and she didn't do it. That's something about my relationship with her and her relationship with the reality that I might not be there anymore.

A.D. Carson: So I think that that was the thing that was really motivating me. I've been thinking about this recently. The world might ask more questions if something happened to me in Virginia than the world would have ever cared about, whenever I was a doctoral student in South Carolina. So earning that degree, in a certain way, changed the way that the world will choose to see me. It changes the way that the person, whomever those people might be who write headlines, might choose to describe me to the world. That fundamentally changes the way that people respond emotionally to something happening to me, which is strange because of course I feel like I'm the same person.

Sarah McConnell: I don't mean to pick on Clemson, because colleges throughout the south and throughout the country are reckoning with the idea that they were, many of them, built on former plantations, or built by enslaved labor, or built by people who were not acknowledged in their current stories.

Sarah McConnell: But while you were at Clemson getting your PhD, you did spend a lot of time thinking about how language related to the naming of buildings there and the notion that a mostly African American football team that has won the national championship plays on a football field that used to be a plantation, or adjacent to one.

A.D. Carson: Yeah, I agree that Clemson is not alone in this, but I do believe that universities are ... Part of what universities are selling to us, as a public, is their ability to turn us into different kinds of people. For them to make us into the kinds of people who are worthy of let's say respect. This respectability that they give us then is supposed to somehow be a thing that we are really thankful for, and we should maybe never even question that process.

A.D. Carson: But yes, Clemson, as I'm there trying to earn this degree and trying to do this study that I've committed to doing, I realize that the university is doing a certain kind of work in language and that work that they're doing in language is really avoiding telling a story about itself that would kind of accurately portray what was going on there. Then that makes it really difficult for us to see what is currently going on there.

Sarah McConnell: It's so amazing that no sooner did you get your PhD from Clemson than you were hired at the University of Virginia, but you came on board at the University of Virginia right before the alt right marched into town, or marched on town, with torches armed and hateful slogans. How did you process that?

A.D. Carson: One of the things that I said down in Clemson, and I still believe it to this day, because people would ask all the time why are you in Clemson.

Sarah McConnell: You mean why would you be in a southern university?

A.D. Carson: Yeah, why would you be there? If these things are happening, then why don't you go somewhere else? That's a common question. That's a question that I still get. I say, well, so if we imagine the United States as a crime scene, and I think that there are some pretty strong arguments that it is, and evidence of that crime is all over this country, when certain evidence that's been buried or been ignored is discovered and then everyone is talking about it, that doesn't make the rest of the place not a crime scene. That just means that we're now focusing on this specific evidence for this specific moment.

A.D. Carson: So the alt right here in Charlottesville is one example, or the so called blackface controversy is another example. Because all of this evidence of these crimes has been so successfully buried, and I say successfully, not like cleverly but has been successfully buried or let's say deliberately and successfully ignored for such a long time, we're going to continue to uncover evidence of these crimes. If we were to move every time we found evidence of the crime that became America, then we would find no place. We would find welcome in no place.

A.D. Carson: The thing that I was saying about Clemson, not using accurate language to describe what had been there and what is currently there-

Sarah McConnell: Plantations.

A.D. Carson: Yes. The same can be said about Charlottesville. The alt right left, so to speak, but what brought them there is still here. I think that we have to reckon with that.

Sarah McConnell: A.D. Carson, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

A.D. Carson: Thanks so much for having me. I appreciate it.

A.D. Carson: Perhaps we stop asking politely for people to stop picking and plucking and pillaging and plundering and killing and wondering why people are pissed off. Maybe metaphors are no easier because some fruit grows where it's less likely to fall like this.

Sarah McConnell: A.D. Carson is a professor of hip-hop and the global self at the University of Virginia. You can find a link to his mix tapes and to his hip-hop album dissertation at WithGoodReasonRadio.org. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

A.D. Carson: Maybe that it takes us talking about fruit to even begin talking about us.

Sarah McConnell: Welcome back to With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Earlier this year, Virginia governor Ralph Northam made national news after he was alleged to have appeared in blackface in a yearbook photo.

Speaker 4: A scandal erupting over the Democratic governor of Virginia. Virginia's Republican party says he should resign if he's one of the people shown in a page from his 1984 medical school yearbook. The picture shows two people, you can see it right there, one in blackface and another in a Ku Klux Klan robe and hood.

Sarah McConnell: Blackface is a source of real pain for many African Americans, but now one theater professor is interrogating that hurtful history by flipping the script. Professor Tawnya Pettiford-Wates is an accomplished actor and director, who has appeared on programs like Twin Peaks and Fugitive. Doctor T., as her students call her, now teaches theater at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Sarah McConnell: Doctor T., tell me the story of the Conciliation Project, how it first started for you.

Tawnya P.W.: I was at Seattle Central Community College, and we did a project based on Uncle Tom's Cabin. One of the students raises his hand and he says, "Doctor T., how are we going to do Uncle Tom when there are no black people in this class?" So I looked around the class, and I realized there were all kinds of people of color in the class, but there were no African Americans, or there were no Africans, there were no black people in the class, period.

Tawnya P.W.: So I said we're going to do a minstrel show, but with blackface and whiteface. We're going to caricature whiteness in the same way blackness is caricatured.

Sarah McConnell: Help me understand why the audience was so shocked when people took off their blackface or their whiteface.

Tawnya P.W.: Because there were no black people that were actors in the show. All of the people who were playing black characters were either white or of another race, but not black. Consequently, the audience bought in to the stereotype, the way that these minstrels presented blackness. That's why they were shocked. They really did believe in the stereotype. The believed that's how black people act, that's how black people sing, that's how black people dance, et cetera, et cetera. Consequently, when they couldn't see any black people anywhere on the stage, they were like, "What?"

Sarah McConnell: Remind us of why Uncle Tom still matters. What were you trying to show?

Tawnya P.W.: Uncle Tom is an iconic character. I think everyone knows that it can also be a slur, an intracultural slur, when one black person calls another black person Uncle Tom, like an Oreo, like black on the outside, white on the inside. Angela Davis sat on my doctoral committee, and she said, "You realize that Uncle Tom is the construction of a white woman's fantasy." I was like, "What?" In my mind. She's like, "Yeah, he's not real." I mean, that is so true. Uncle Tom is not real, and yet decades and hundreds of years we've been using it against one another as a weapon. Even though the author of the book Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, was an abolitionist and abhorred slavery, she actually set up this false binary that allowed Uncle Tom to live in infamy that there's such a thing as a good slave and a bad slave, and there's such a thing as a good master and a bad master.

Sarah McConnell: How did realizing a young white actor was actually playing the black person challenge their stereotypes and their racism?

Tawnya P.W.: I mean, those characters were created to denigrate black people. I mean, that's what the minstrel show was about. They called them negro impersonators, and they were always white people that smeared this cork makeup all over their face, blackened their face, and enlarged their lips and then proceeded to do buffoonery on the stage as if these were the actions and words of actual black people. Sometimes they even called themselves authentic Negroes or authentic impersonators.

Tawnya P.W.: So think that modern audiences recognizes that that style has really never gone anywhere, that it still exists, and that we still have a predisposition to believe in those stereotypes.

Sarah McConnell: When you said it was the first time you ever really saw it dawn on a white person what it was really like to be black, can you think back to the individual you saw that in, in that first play?

Tawnya P.W.: Yes. I mean, people were weeping. We had to pass out tissues, which became a part of our process. Now when we do our plays, we always pass out tissues. We have everyone in the audience wipe off their proverbial or symbolic mask, because we all wear them, and we all recognize that we all wear them.

Tawnya P.W.: This woman was weeping, and she singled out the actor that played Uncle Tom, who was a white man. She asked him that question. She said, "How did it feel to step into the skin of a black person and become that?" When she said those words, the thing that dawned on me was that she recognized there was a difference between being black and being white. Let me just say that a lot of people want to deny that there is a different experience for being black in America and being white.

Sarah McConnell: Didn't you worry that someone would misinterpret what you were doing by using blackface, this very thing that we are now in the midst of condemning?

Tawnya P.W.: Absolutely. Are you kidding? That's why all the students were very freaked out by it, too. Some people even said, "You know that's illegal. You can't do that." That's why I decided that we needed to also use white face and that we needed to satirize white people with the same zealous attack that black people are satirized in that medium.

Tawnya P.W.: This was the first time that I had witnessed, myself, actual authentic conversation about race that was not people trying to deny that it existed in the first place. It was profound. The word started to spread about this performance, and we had packed audiences and lines around the theater. The community sort of said you can't stop doing this, and that's how the Conciliation Project was born.

Sarah McConnell: For starters, why the conciliation and not the reconciliation project?

Tawnya P.W.: Reconciliation implies that you are redoing something that you have done before. We recognize that in America we have never conciled around these issues of race, that African people were brought here against our will. We did not come here as immigrants. It started in violence and enslavement. It started in forced labor without pay. That has to first be conciled. Conciliation means winning over from a state of hostility, so first we have to recognize that we are not friends, that our history has dictated that we are not friends, and that we need to concile our histories. Once we do that, then if we have a schism, then if we have a break, we can talk about reconciling something.

Sarah McConnell: When you have Conciliation plays, are they all Uncle Tom, or there's a whole realm of different subjects?

Tawnya P.W.: Oh, yeah. After we did that one, we decided that we needed to do the entire color wheel. So the next play that we worked on was called Genocide Trail: A Holocaust Unspoken, where we unpacked the Native genocide that happened in this country, the land that was taken, the displacement and uprooting of Native peoples. We used minstrelsy in that, too, like in how cars are named after Native tribes, sports teams, we've also minstrelized Native people and Native culture.

Tawnya P.W.: Then we moved on to brown people, in play called Stolen Land: Border Crossings. That play talks about we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us, basically, and everything that the Latin diaspora brings to America, and how our colonialism and systems have taken what was not ours to take.

Tawnya P.W.: Then we moved on to Yellow Fever, The Internment, which is where we are right now, as we're dealing with children in cages on the southern border and immigrants packed like sardines in spaces that are meant to be prisons. We're dealing with the same thing again, the othering of a culture that then dehumanizes them.

Sarah McConnell: Can you walk me through some of the dialogue you have at the end of a Conciliation Project play? Maybe examples of questions you ask and what the audience asks.

Tawnya P.W.: For example, at the end of Uncle Tom Deconstructed, we use ... I don't know if you've ever heard of a social scientist by the name of Peggy McIntosh, but she wrote a piece called Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack of White Privilege. The cast members who are white speak the lines like they're written. For example, "I never have to worry about going into a store and being followed simply because I'm black. I never have to worry about preparing my children for the inevitable police stop that they're going to experience."

Tawnya P.W.: It causes white people in the audience to relate to the white person on stage who is saying those things. Sometimes it causes people to say something like, "Well, I grew up poor. I don't feel like I'm privileged. I had to struggle. My parents had to struggle." So forth and so on. Then that starts a conversation about, yes, it's not that other people don't struggle. You don't have to struggle because you're white. You're struggling because you're poor. Poverty is something that at least you have an opportunity to change. The color of your skin, you don't have that opportunity. Things like that. I mean, conversations.

Tawnya P.W.: Sometimes we have conversations about history. When we did Genocide Trail, someone said, "You didn't speak enough about what the Quakers did helping these Native children." Then we have to talk about that the Native children were taken away from their families in order to be educated in a Eurocentric way, and their own customs and ways of being and knowledge and ways of knowing were denigrated as savage and unacceptable. Religious missionaries often had good intentions, just like Harriet Beecher Stowe had good intentions, but good intentions are not enough.

Sarah McConnell: Do you think theater in this way can actually heal injustice?

Tawnya P.W.: I do. That's why I do it. Theater is a very powerful tool of enlightening, of experiencing, of educating, of teaching, of inspiring, and igniting people's passions. We've gone all around the country. We've actually gone around the world with that particular play.

Sarah McConnell: You now live and teach in Richmond, Virginia. What might you give us from the debacle that Virginians experienced-

Tawnya P.W.: Oh my god, yes.

Sarah McConnell: -when top officials were discovered to have, in younger days, dressed in blackface?

Tawnya P.W.: Well, you know, that's still a thing that happens. Every Halloween, we put out a post that says do not do this, because people still do. It is a part of our history, and it shouldn't surprise anyone that there are pictures and relics and opinions and feelings and beliefs around these issues. Elected officials need to listen. I think that the stories of people of color need to be heard, and they need to be heard from us. White people have been the historians. They have been the mouthpiece. They've been telling the story, and now they have to listen. The story is perhaps not one that they want to hear, but it's one that needs to be heard.

Sarah McConnell: Doctor Tawnya Pettiford-Wates is a professor of theater at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her work Uncle Tom Deconstructed was nominated for a social justice award by Amnesty International.

Sarah McConnell: Coming up next, how a grieving orca inspired a writer to put her toughest truths on stage. Artisia Green heard about a grieving orca whale who swam along with the body of her stillborn calf for 17 days and 1,000 miles. She realized the story of the mourning orca could help her tell her own story.

Sarah McConnell: Artisia Green is a professor at William & Mary, who specializes in African American dramaturgy. She's also a scholar, performer, and director whose published work on the playwright August Wilson and staged a performance of Lillian Hellman's classic play The Children's Hour.

Sarah McConnell: Professor Green, you have said there's an actual aesthetic to African American theater that is quite distinct from mainstream, traditional theater. What do you mean? Help us understand that.

Artisia Green: I want us to begin thinking about African American theater, or black theater, as something that is beyond colorism and responses, only responses, to a question. The tradition was certainly born out of a need to create space to tell stories of a particular community, when other avenues were denied to them; however, it is a commonplace tendency to assume that the presence of black people on stage means that this work is black theater.

Artisia Green: When we talk about having a particular aesthetic, we mean that there are certain ways of telling a story that demonstrate our culture: the ways in which we talk, the ways in which we walk, the ways in which we praise spirit, the ways in which the work itself conjures forces that demonstrate the relationship between the material world and the spiritual world. From an African perspective, you can't have one without the other. So it's a holistic approach the work.

Sarah McConnell: You're working on a show about your own journey healing from trauma, using the extended metaphor of an orca mother whale in mourning. The mother orca was mourning her dead baby, and for people who did not hear about that story, would you please share it?

Artisia Green: In the Pacific Northwest late last summer, for 17 days there was a mother orca whose name is Tahlequah, who had given birth to a baby calf. Shortly after giving birth, the baby died. For the next 17 days, she carried her dead baby on her crown, pushing it through the Pacific Northwest, accompanied by other members of her pod. They helped her take her tour of grief until the 17th day, when she released her baby back to the ocean.

Artisia Green: I became aware of this story about halfway through her journey and felt it was an invitation to examine all of the trauma that I had buried within my body and to be more vulnerable to actually do the work of examining it and bringing it to the surface and letting those things go.

Artisia Green: I was socialized in a particular kind of way, as I think many black women are. Things happen, we register that it has happened, and then we tuck it away. Then we go on about our lives, taking care of our children, attending to our work, attending to ourselves, our partners, until those things begin to take up residence in our body, becoming fibroids, turning into cancer, and other ailments and diseases.

Artisia Green: I actually was going through those things. I had a number of fibroids that were causing a number of other health issues. So the past maybe year and a half was pretty rough, but it was my body's way of telling me, "You need to attend to these things that you have buried within you."

Sarah McConnell: How did it dawn on you that there was a lot that that orca mother was going through that you related to in your own life?

Artisia Green: The fact that her journey went on so long.

Sarah McConnell: Yeah.

Artisia Green: And the world was watching, saying, "Oh, but she's not eating. We're concerned about her health. If she's not eating, she's not gaining weight. She's carrying a baby on her head that is decomposing. So now we're wondering about what kind of health risks she's exposing herself to, while we have this decomposing baby that she's holding." But I didn't see any of those things. I wasn't preoccupied with any of the things that were happening externally.

Artisia Green: I was preoccupied with the fact that she was being transparent, and she was being vulnerable, and she was saying that I was going to take as much time as I needed to process this very traumatic thing that has happened to me. Black mothers raise their daughters to be super heroes. I mean, I saw my mother go through some very traumatic things, but in front of us, she was a super hero. But I think we gotta put those capes down at some point. Our trauma, if we don't deal with it, our grief, if we don't deal with it, it causes more harm than good.

Artisia Green: So what ends up happening in this play is that it takes the form of a scream, a very primal, guttural scream. It feels violent, but oh it's so cathartic when it happens. The title, the central character who I named Tahlequah in honor of this mother orca, she comes to the beach, as I often do. She runs into some supernatural forces who go on this heroine's journey with her, that aid her in getting to the point where she can scream.

Artisia Green: It takes the form of a scream because one day something had happened, and I began to cry. I said, "I don't have time for this. I have to go to work." I wiped my tears, I packed my bags, and I went to work. And so it's not a cry, it's a scream because there have been many instances where I have said out loud or not, "I don't have time to cry. I don't have time to think about this because the children need me, my husband needs me, my mother needs me, my students need me. I'm trying to advance in my career." So this play becomes about me making space to scream, to release years of opportunities where I did not take them, to cry.

Sarah McConnell: Professor A.D. Carson at the University of Virginia spoke earlier in the show about loving the power of metaphor and how metaphor helps us tell difficult stories. Why metaphor, as in your Dance of the Orcas? Why not a more literal form of storytelling?

Artisia Green: Oh yeah. It's about the aesthetic. When you want to tell a story, especially about something like this, you want to open it up in such a way that invites others to see themselves in the work as well, so that we all walk away from the experience having gained something. I think the metaphor opens it up in such a way that it invites others to step in.

Sarah McConnell: When will you stage The Dance of the Orcas?

Artisia Green: November 7th. The works is a part of The Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora Conference, which will be held at William & Mary November 5th through the 11th.

Sarah McConnell: Professor Artisia Green teaches theater and Africana studies at William & Mary. Her new piece is The Dance of the Orcas.

Sarah McConnell: Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the law firm of McGuire Woods and by the University of Virginia Health System, connecting doctors and patients through telemedicine to deliver high quality care throughout Virginia, the US, and the world. UVAHealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Alison Quantz, Elliot Majerczyk and Cass Adair. Jeanie Palin handles listener services.

Sarah McConnell: Special thanks this week to Steve Clark of WCVE and Deb Farmer of WHRV. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.