

# REIMAGINING AMERICAN IDENTITY

Greg Thomas  
Amiel Handelsman  
Jewel Kinch-Thomas



# **REIMAGINING AMERICAN IDENTITY**

by

**Greg Thomas,**

**Amiel Handelsman**

**and Jewel Kinch-Thomas**



# Table of Contents

---

Introduction . . . . .	v
Part I: The Omni-American Vision . . . . .	1
Part II: Answering the Call With Murray in Mind . . . . .	43
Part III: The Omni-American Heroine's Journey . . . . .	63
Join Us for the Stepping Up Journey . . . . .	71



# Introduction

---

We wrote this booklet for anyone who, like us:

- Has been inspired to answer the call of our racial reckoning
- Feels an urgency to act and appreciates the complexity
- Prefers nuance over certainty and gratitude over grievance
- Seeks not a final state of wokeness but instead a journey of awakening

The booklet is structured as a series of conversations among the three of us. It centers on a particular American writer, Albert Murray, and his unique Omni-American vision. If you haven't heard of Murray or this vision, you're in the right place. *Reimagining American Identity* offers an introduction to both.

If you are wondering how this relates to George Floyd, antiracism, and the current state of our democracy, read along as we wrestle together with these questions.

In Part One you'll learn by watching someone learn in front of you. It's an extended interview that took place when one of us, Amiel, was brand new to Murray's work while the other, Greg, had spent decades studying, writing, and teaching about the Omni-American vision.

Part Two turns the tables. Greg asks Amiel to share his perspectives on Murray and his relevance to the world we now inhabit three years after the original interview.

In Part Three, Jewel takes the floor and expands the conversation to include the heroine's journey, "ensemble mindset," and a future that integrates masculine and feminine energies within each of us.





## Part One

# The Omni-American Vision<sup>1</sup>

---

### Amiel Handelsman

Hello, everyone. We are here on the second to last day of Black History Month and continuing in this series on the American experience of race. Actually, we should rename that the American experience of culture and identity. That distinction will become clear as we get into today's conversation.

I welcome back Greg Thomas, former jazz columnist for *The New York Daily News* and CEO of the Jazz Leadership Project. He was our guide through the True but Partial Challenge on race and, more recently, was joined by his partner in life and business for The Jazz Leadership Project with Jewel Kinch-Thomas. I'm happy that he's joining me again to steer us through this week's journey.

In this episode, we hone our lens on to one of the best writers on American culture and identity I have come across, a man named Albert Murray. Now you may not have heard of him, but the more I read about him, the more influential I see he has been over the last half century.

Toni Morrison, a novelist whose name many of you recognize, said that "Murray's perceptions are firmly based in the blues idiom. And it is

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on an interview recorded in February 2018

black music, no less than literary criticism and historical analysis that gives his work its authenticity, its emotional vigor, and its tenacious hold on the intellect.” That was Toni Morrison.

Now I’ve got a quote from Henry Louis Gates, who is the chair of Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard and one of our leading public intellectuals. Here is what Professor Gates said about Murray’s first book, *The Omni Americans*. Gates: “This book was so pissed off, jaw jutting and unapologetic, that it demanded to be taken seriously.” That’s Henry Louis Gates on Albert Murray’s *The Omni Americans*.

So, in this conversation, we talk about what it means to be an American and how the culture of Black Americans is not only not separate from but central to American culture. We talk about Murray’s views of the folklore of white supremacy and the fakelore of black pathology, and why he offers what I would consider a brutal critique of the studies of social scientists in the 50s, 60s and 70s, of the so-called ghetto—he calls them ghettoologists. And we talk about the blues idiom, what it means to have a frame of acceptance, and what it means to be brer rabbit in the briarpatch. So, this is not only a story of America, but also a story of all of us, as we find our way through the hero’s journey. And that’s why I think you’ll find that in my interview with Greg, we discover some important lessons on how to go from a state of being where we’re kind of down, where we’re just getting in touch with the hard facts of life into a place where we are resilient and even joyful.

So, Greg, last time, we walked through some prominent intellectuals speaking about the American experience of race, and today we’re going to bring it together with Albert Murray, who is not a well-known name in American pop culture, yet very influential, and I wondered if you could introduce Albert Murray, who he is, where his influence has been felt and how you personally knew him.

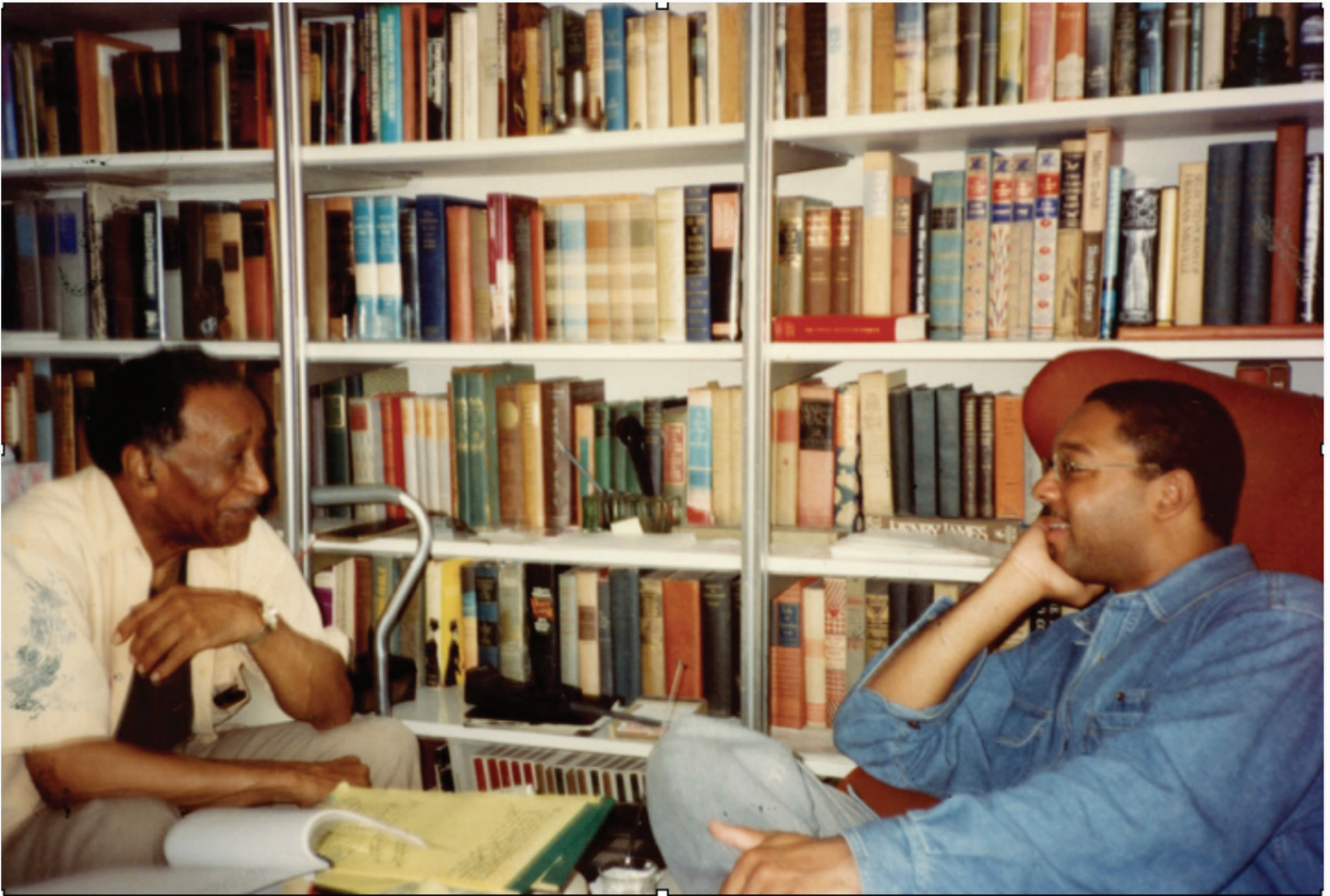
## Greg Thomas

I'll be glad to. Albert Murray would have been 100 in 2016. He passed away in 2013. He was one of the great American writers and thinkers on American identity and American culture of the 20th century. He's the author of over 10 books. Four books of fiction, a tetralogy which he calls a Scooter cycle. Scooter, the main character of his novel, was a representation of his consciousness. A book of poetry, as well as numerous nonfiction books, including *The Omni-Americans*, which came out in 1970, *South to a Very Old Place*, 1971. *The Hero and the Blues*, *Stomping the Blues*, *The Autobiography of Count Basie as told to Albert Murray*, *The Blue Devils of Nada*. And there's a few more.

These works deal with race, particularly in *The Omni-Americans*, but he was more interested in what can we, as human beings, do to create form in order to confront the impending entropy of the universe.

That may sound kind of grandiose, but I want to put that out here first and foremost, because that was the level of his thought. And that was the direction of his thought. Now we can get granular with certain things and will, but I wanted to state that. For him, art, story, were ways that human beings put feeling into form—he liked to riff on the American philosopher Susanne Langer, who wrote *Feeling and Form* and other works dealing with that concept—in order to put into motion human culture, again, to create form, to create structure in the midst of all of this chaos that we're undergoing in our lives, but also in the universe itself.

So, the blues is an example of that, which we can talk about some more. He's very influential among thinkers and writers who focus on American culture, particularly through blues and jazz. Stanley Crouch was profoundly influenced by Albert Murray. Wynton Marsalis, who is one of our most celebrated American artists, considers Murray as like an intellectual grandfather. He was called the Dean of Afro-American letters back in the 70s.



Albert Murray (left) and Wynton Marsalis (right)

So, he's not well known, as you mentioned, in American pop culture, because his writing is on a level of fine art. And that's something that takes a cultivated taste as well as a lot of education. Because as Henry Louis Gates Jr. said, Albert Murray was a polymath. Now as far as my own relationship with him—I consider him a mentor. Back in the early to mid-90s, I reached out to him. I had a book idea in mind.

I'll tell that story very quickly: I had in mind a book that would take a look at his view on American culture and identity through the lens of blues and jazz. The other two writers included in my proposed book were John Henrik Clark, who one might say was black nationalist historian, and Lerone Bennett, best known as a long-time editor of

*Ebony Magazine*. He was also a historian. When I reached out to Murray, I told him what the project was. Actually, first, I wrote him a letter. Then I gave him a call. He said, "Hey, man, why are you putting me with those guys?"



Albert Murray (front with cane) and Greg Thomas (back center)

## Amiel

[Laughs]

## Greg

[Laughs] So for me, I was trying to come to terms with these, what I call *streams* of black American thought, these different ideological traditions. I was really trying to come to terms with all of that after having done a lot of reading and study. And that was one of my ways of dealing with it. So, in any event, I would visit him. And I would get

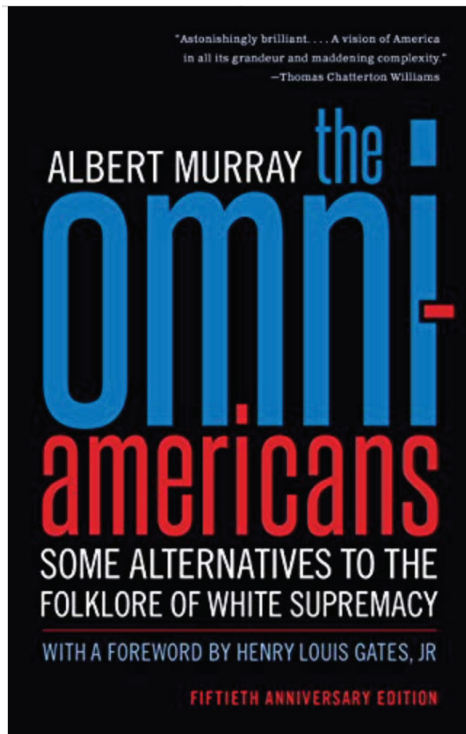
a grandmaster class in erudition each and every time but not from the place you might think of: someone who is very smart, being like a professor. Mind you, he was a professor. He taught in many institutions: Colgate, Emory, and others. But he was so down home and down to earth at the same time.

He had an earthy sense of humor, a really earthy laugh. He could riff on the great writers and thinkers of the American and Western literary tradition, philosophical tradition, and all of that. But he could get bawdy at the same time. He was very influential on me and, as I mentioned, several others. And another time we can talk about why he's not better known. But the bottom line is that I thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk about him and his ideas. Because in this series on race, his perspective can provide a lot of light and a lot of insight as to ways that we can look at race and transcend the limitations and decoy of race, because it's really an illusion that we get tripped up in so much.

## Amiel

Well, I credit you for introducing me to his work. And just since we've been in contact the last several weeks, I think I've read two or three of his books and the language just pops off the page. And it is a very distinctive, punchy, funny, serious, very highbrow intellectual style. And it's just like, whoa, what universe is this guy from? He's been around the Milky Way and back and explaining it to us.

Let's get into this book, *The Omni-Americans*, his first book, which came out in 1970. And it's a great title, kind of an unusual title, especially for a book about race. And Henry Louis Gates of Harvard, who you mentioned earlier, said the book was, quote, so pissed off jaw jutting and unapologetic, that it demanded to be taken seriously. So let's get into this. What did Murray mean by Omni-Americans?



Greg

[Laughs] I'll be glad to answer that question. But I did want to say that *The Omni-Americans* is less about race than what the subtitle says. *The Omni-Americans: **Black Experience and American Culture***. That I think is more accurate than saying it's about race. But *The Omni-Americans* deals with just that. Omni-Americans has to do with American identity and culture as coming through a synthesis. Frederick Douglass called it a "composite." The identity of America is not one avenue or channel or tributary. American identity, American culture is a combination and synthesis of certain fundamental roots, obviously, in terms of the intellectual tradition, the Enlightenment, coming from the Western Enlightenment tradition when you're talking about the founders of the country. But from a cultural perspective, that lower left quadrant cultural dimension<sup>2</sup> that we talked about in our first conversation, it

<sup>2</sup> The lower-left quadrant of Ken Wilber's AQAL (all quadrants, all levels) Integral model, which displays the individual and collective dimensions of inner and external reality. Culture via intersubjective shared agreements on meaning, values, and traditions is represented by the lower-left quadrant. The upper left is individual subjectivity, the upper right the individual's body and behavior. The lower right is the institutional and structural quadrant where so much of today's "culture wars" are fought.

concerns what Constance Rourke in *American Humor* talked about as three primary figures or types.

You have the American Indian or what we now call the Native American, a backwoodsman. You also have the Yankee. That's a primary figure in American culture. But you also have the Negro. These are fundamental archetypes in American history and American literature that are riffed on. Now, of course, we are talking about America. All of the world has come to America. But I'm focusing here on the foundational root aspects of American identity.

So, you have a composite of those types. You find that, say, in jazz. You find that in Black American culture. Black American culture is not just African. Yes, you have African roots. But there's also European roots. In jazz, you've got African roots, European roots, Afro-Cuban roots. But it still maintains its identity as its own actual thing. So, it's a holon, to use an Integral term.

## **Amiel**

A whole and a part.

## **Greg**

Right. It's a whole, but it's got these different parts to it. So, Omni Americans are about the whole aspect of American identity and culture, with different parts being part and parcel of it. So, whenever you hear someone saying that this is American, let's make America great again, they're usually talking about some past in which white folks were dominant socially, politically, economically. They are not talking about American culture as it exists, in actuality.



## Amiel

He might say, MAMA, Make America Mulatto Again, which is a term he used.

## Greg

Ah ha, yes. There you go. That word mulatto, which is kind of out of favor these days. But yeah, it's a mixture, man. One of the things that President Obama said early on, he said Americans are mutts, you know, this mixture. I thought that was inelegant, and I wish he had been familiar with *The Omni-Americans*, because he could have said "we're Omni-Americans," and it would have done wonders to make Omni-Americanism more familiar to the populace. Yeah. If we look at our individual, whole selves, we have all of the different parts of ourselves, biologically and otherwise, but we are an organic whole. So, the Omni-Americans are the organic whole of American culture and identity.

## Amiel

Nice. So this relates to something I'm curious about, which is, there is a notion that so-called Black Americans are outside of, quote, unquote, mainstream American culture. And you actually hear this from all sorts of different folks of different skin colors, right. I hear it every week. And Murray said, number one, that's wrong. And number two, black culture is actually central to American culture. So what did he see that other people have not?



Albert Murray (left) and Ralph Ellison (right)

## Greg

Well, again, he's focusing on culture, not race and racial exclusion. One of the things that his dear friend and intellectual partner, Ralph Ellison, said, in one of his many famous essays was that though it is true that Negro Americans did not have social, political, and economic freedom, it was in the cultural sphere where we grew and developed and evolved. Where we created a world and worldview that was extremely powerful, which is obvious when you look at the impact of Black American culture around the world, especially through music, through style, through dance, through food, and other aspects. So the idea that we're not part of the mainstream is bunk, and it has been bunk for quite a long time, because even when we had social, economic, and political exclusion, our influence on the culture was powerful and remains so.

## Amiel

So let's talk about his view of black nationalism and Afrocentrism. And while we're on this topic of culture, in his book *The Omni-Americans*, he uses the term "safari technicians," which is a term I don't think you'll see anywhere else.

## Greg

[Laughs.] I don't think you'll find that elsewhere either.

## Amiel

What did he mean by that? And what was that group of people doing that he found objectionable?

## Greg

That term, "safari technicians," is in an essay, "The Elusive Black Middle Class." And in that same essay, a little further long, he talks about ghettoologists. Yeah, so the safari technicians and ghettoologists are social scientists, pseudo-scientists, according to Murray. And to Ellison too. Those people pursued a social science agenda with *so-called* objectivity, and *so-called* lack of bias. But the bottom line was them showing that black Americans were pathological, were outside of 'middle-class norms.' And those social science perspectives really became, whether they intended it or not, a justification for segregation, for, actually, white supremacy.

Murray talks about the folklore of white supremacy and the fakelore of black pathology. So those ghetto-ologists, or social science survey technicians, are part of the mix in *The Omni-Americans* that he puts his keen eye on. But regarding safari technicians and black nationalists: look, Murray in *The Omni-Americans*, as my dear late friend, Michael James, would say, "Murray kicked everybody's ass in *The Omni-Americans*."

[Laughs] Michael James was Duke Ellington's nephew, and was one of Murray's best friends and proteges.

## Amiel

[Laughs]

## Greg

He kicked everyone's butt. So, it's not a surprise that black nationalism . . . Afrocentrism or Afrocentricity was not in existence. In 1970, black nationalism was. Afrocentricity is an extension of black nationalism that came online in the 80s, and 90s. In terms of black nationalism, Murray thought of black nationalism as an ideology that accepts the premise of racial separation. Black nationalism, he thought, focuses more on race and oppression, and the history of such, than the true integrated cultural dynamics of the country.<sup>3</sup> He believed in self-determination, as do black nationalists, but he didn't need that ideology to be self-determining.

The thing about Ellison and Murray that's so key to understand is that culture wasn't just an expression of the arts. It is that, but it's not *just* that. Culture was a tool of response to the situations we found ourselves in. Culture was a tool of finding meaning in the midst of absurdity and meaninglessness. Culture was a way that we were able to define and express who we were in our highest values.

So when you have someone like Maulana Karenga, who posited what he called cultural nationalism, saying that black folks, that we need to just get rid of the blues, that the blues that was old-timey, that shows a *profound lack* of understanding of the true essence of what the blues and the blues idiom was and is about. So black nationalists focus more on politics. And for Murray, yes, politics are important. But for him politics was not the be all and end all of life. So black nationalism—and this

---

<sup>3</sup> Of course, this is true today of anti-racist woke ideology and Critical Race Theory.

is something I learned from Anthony Appiah—Afrocentricity or Afrocentrism, and black nationalism, are like the mirror image of Eurocentricity and Eurocentrism; it's a reaction to that. You can end up getting caught in a binary kind of thing when you accept those types of limited, politically-based views of reality.

Murray was a man of the humanities, Murray was a literary man, which means that he looked at more of a holistic view of the human condition through literature and through the humanities. He never allowed himself to be limited by particular ideologies, whether it was black nationalism, or Marxism or Freudianism. Any of those isms. He didn't fall for that.

## Amiel

Right. Let's go back to the social scientists, the ghetto-ologists, and his critique. Now, this is a group that many of them considered themselves what in that day was a very positive term—'liberal,' right, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan and many others who wrote about the black community and its culture. So: what were these social scientists saying about the ghetto?

## Greg

Well, first of all, Murray challenged the term "the ghetto." That was a term that originally was applied to Jewish slums, because they were segregated. Black folks are not segregated in that way. They're a part of the economies and a part of the urban landscape. And they're not on reservations, quote, unquote. That is the actual definition of ghetto. He dismissed that because it was just definitionally wrong. But again, on a higher level, it was a way to show how black folks were not compliant with the so-called norms, white middle-class norms. I'm going to turn to *The Omni-Americans* for one of the most devastating things that he said. When you're talking about devastating critiques, let me give you a quick paragraph from *The Omni-Americans* early on.



He says:

“Such is the procedure that enables the folklore technician to provide statistical evidence as proof to show that Negroes are not like other Americans. But why is it that no widely publicized social science surveys ever measure conformity and deviation in terms of norms of citizenship, which are based on the national ideals as established by the Declaration of Independence in the Constitution. The Constitution not only expresses principles of conduct that are valid for mankind as a whole, it is also the ultimate official source for definitions of desirable and undesirable American behavior. The major emphasis in large surveys is never placed on the failure of white Americans to measure up to the standards of the Constitution. The primary attention repeatedly is focused on Negroes as victims. Again and again, the assumptions of the surveys is that slavery and oppression have made Negroes inferior to other Americans, and hence less American. This is true even of such relatively fair-minded study as ‘An American Dilemma.’” That was by Gunnar Myrdal’s study.

So, you see what I'm saying? He flips the script on the kind of analyses that ghettoize, that segregate black America and Black Americans from the mainstream of American life. And he says, hey, let's take a look at it from this angle. He does that over and over again in *The Omni-Americans*, and while some of it, because of its time, is dated, most of it is still accurate today and still unmatched in terms of its polemical might and deep intelligence.

## Amiel

Yeah, just a little more on this, because his critique is still so valid. And the views he critiques are still prevalent today. Let me just mention a few of the things that he talks about in the book that he says are the problems. You know, the wretched life, the matriarchal family. Black men are emasculated. There's cultural deprivation and despair, lack of self-respect. These are things that the famous Moynihan report and other social scientists were saying, so talk a little bit more about those stereotypes and a little more about what's off about them.

## Greg

Right. You know, I think, oftentimes, that it's best to just take the direct words of Murray. Because the time we have is short and we have a lot to discuss, I'll only read a portion. But I want to share a bit again from *The Omni-Americans*.

"The widely publicized document that became known as the Moynihan Report: the Negro Family, a Case for National Action, is a notorious example of the use of social science survey as a propaganda vehicle to promote a negative image of Negro life in the United States. It has all the superficial trappings of an objective monograph of scientific research, and has been readily accepted by far too many editors and teachers across the nation, as if it were the final word on U.S. Negro behavior. Many white journalists and newspaper readers now presume to explain the conduct of

Negroes in the United States, in terms of the structure of Negro family life as described by Moynihan. And yet Moynihan did not initiate his research project as a comprehensive study of family life at all. He set out to compile such data as would advertise Negro family life in the worst possible light in order to make, as he insists, even in his title, a case for national action. Moynihan insists that his intentions were the best, and perhaps they were, but the fact remains that at a time when Negroes were not only demanding freedom now, as never before, but were beginning to get it, Moynihan issued a quasi-scientific pamphlet that declares on the flimsiest evidence that they are not ready for freedom. At a time when Negroes are demanding freedom as a constitutional right, the Moynihan report is saying, in effect, that those who have been exploiting Negroes for years should now, upon being shown his statistics, become benevolent enough to set up a nationwide welfare program for them. Not once does he cite any Negro assets that white people might find more attractive than black subservience. Good intentions notwithstanding, Moynihan's arbitrary interpretations make a far stronger case for the Negro equivalent of Indian reservations than for desegregation now."

And this goes on for page after page after page where he totally deconstructs and blows away Moynihan's analysis. Now, it's not to say that out-of-wedlock-births were not prevalent. But if you look at the entirety of the country and the statistics from then and subsequently, you see that that was and is an issue across most groups in America, period. But if you just focus on black out-of-wedlock births, then what are you doing? You're segregating your analysis once again.

## Amiel

In other words, the norms that you're supposedly comparing blacks to are not norms. All these things are present there. Now, let me ask, because I know you want to move along a little deeper into his



worldview. So, let's say you peel away the social science views. You set aside black nationalism. And you get this deeper and more complex understanding. Let's get into that. What is this broader, more nuanced worldview that he brings?

## Greg

Okay. I'm going to quote again, but this time from a 1996 interview with a writer named Tony Scherman, and it relates directly to the social sciences.

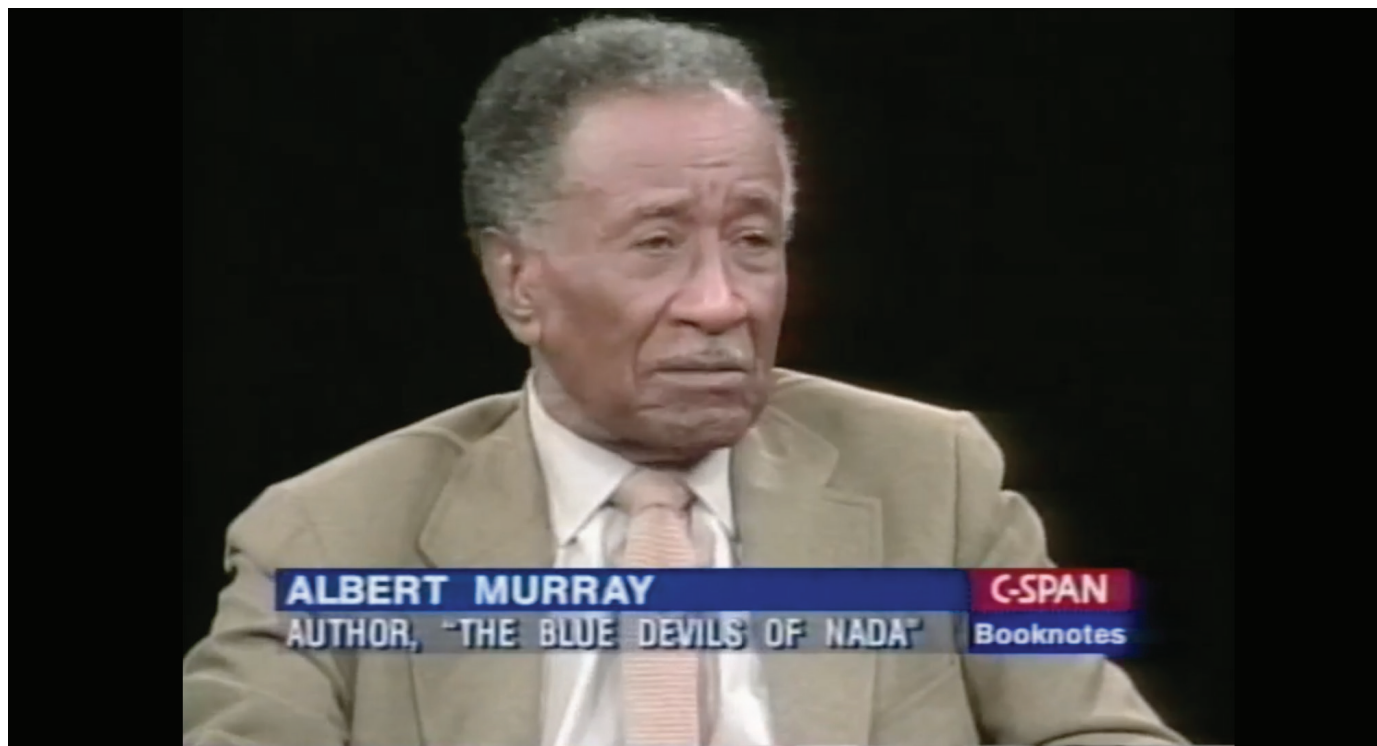
Tony Scherman asked him, "What is your quarrel with the social sciences as the basis for education?"

Murray: "Oversimplification of motives, questionable underlying assumptions. The social function of literature, of all art, is to help the individual to come to terms with himself upon the earth. To help him confront the deepest, most complex questions of life, you see. The human proposition. If you deal with sociological concepts, you never deal with the basic complexity of life."

And then you step back and say, in Integral terms, you're dealing with the lower right quadrant primarily.

"You reduce everything to social and political problems, stuff like whether or not the red ants like the brown ants. The storyteller is not someone who tries to solve a voting problem, or some type of social problem. The guy wasn't trying to solve some political problem when in Elizabethan England, he [Shakespeare] was writing *Hamlet*. You get what I'm saying? When you look at the deeper and much more complicated personal problems, you'll find that the oldest answers are still the answers. There's nothing outdated about fairy tales, about legends, about the religious holy books, and so forth. When you know how to decode them and apply them to your life, well, you approach wisdom."

So that's what we're talking about when we get to Murray and Ellison. There's a level of wisdom that comes from all of their deep study and living and their way of framing life and art and culture that is so insightful for everyone.



One of the things that Murray said in 1996, in that interview with Brian Lamb on CSPAN's *Booknotes* that I asked you to check out, was that when he writes, he's not just writing for a Black American audience. He's writing for all Americans. And he believes that as Americans, we are heir to the best of all knowledge and all cultures across time. So, he's trying to write for the ages. And that's the level of ambition that he had.

That is probably, frankly, one of the reasons why he's not that easy to deal with. The level of knowledge and erudition and sophistication is such that most people can't deal with it, especially because our educational system in higher ed is so focused on particular disciplines. The higher up you go, Masters, PhD, the more narrowly you're going

to be focused on a particular discipline. It is not really multi- or interdisciplinary, though they have those aspects in some fields.

So, it's difficult to deal with someone like a Murray or an Ellison, whose range of knowledge was so deep and broad. It's like, whoa, you've gotta do so much study just to be able to hang. But, hey, it matters what your aspirations are. For me, I've delved deeply into both of their work, and it has given me a perspective that allows me to be able to look at, as we did in the last show, at both the truth of certain thinkers that you mentioned, but also where they're partial. I've done that through my own study of various fields and such, not just Ellison and Murray. But they're fundamental and foundational for me.

## **Amiel**

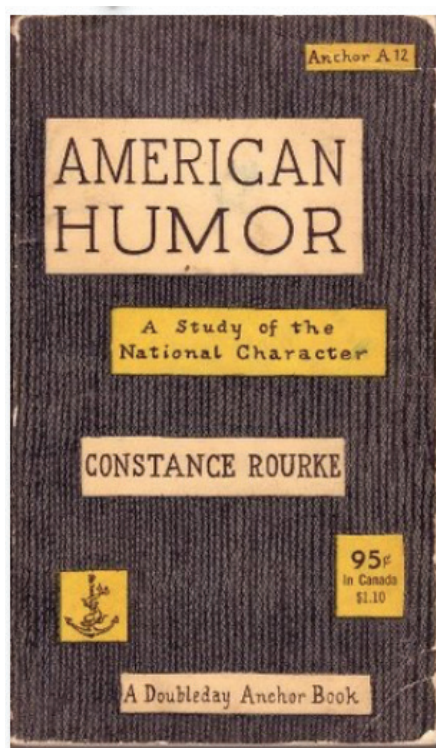
Well, I will admit that while reading his stuff, and as I said, I've gotten tremendous value from it. There are references there like to T.S. Eliot. I say to myself, "You know, I don't understand that. But I'm going to keep going." There's a lot of those. Now, let's go into some of the metaphors and worldviews that just pop up again and again. I'll mention a few. We've got the blues idiom. We've got the briar patch. We've got the story of the hero. And, of course, they overlap. Pick where you want to start and tell us about it.

## **Greg**

Sure. The blues idiom was Murray's philosophical and aesthetic compass.

The blues idiom was his description of a style of life that derived from the Black American experience but wasn't limited to it. It also applies to the American experience overall. So, he quotes, again, cultural historian Constance Rourke, who has a great statement that he loved when he read her back in the 30s. She wrote about those three figures I mentioned earlier. So, one of the things she said about these primary archetypes, American archetypes, and, in particular, the Negro, was

that “they provide emblems for pioneer people who require resilience as a prime trait.”



That’s a beautiful statement, and that’s how Murray looked at the blues idiom. He looked at the blues idiom as a way of interacting in the world where you look at it like the blues does. If you look at the first eight bars of the blues, that’s like objective reality: stated for four bars, then repeated for four bars. That’s the objective reality.

But the last four bars of the blues are usually some kind of response to the objective reality, a statement of acceptance, a statement of hope and optimism, a statement sometimes things are just the way they are. So that orientation to life through the blues idiom and through the blues is fundamental from a philosophical and psychological perspective for Murray.

He said that the “blues as such,” and you find this in his book *Stomping the Blues*, is about depression, being melancholy, being sad. That’s the blues as such. But blues music is a response to the blues as such.

So, you might find a blues song being played, and the lyrics are a tale of woe. But the trombones are responding in a way that kind of sounds a little bawdy. The trumpets are making fun of it in a humorous way. The saxophones are being sensual. It's as if they say, we're going to deal with this *sensually*. You know, we're not just going to accept this. Hey, there's all kinds of ways to respond to life. So, for Murray, blues music, and blues idiom music, jazz primarily, was a heroic response to the exigencies of life that surrounded it. The blues idiom is a way to put form on the chaos and entropy of our lives. And a way to tap into what Joseph Campbell called the hero's journey. Actually, Murray was friends with Joseph Campbell.



Harriet Tubman (left) and Frederick Douglass (right)

So for Murray, there's a heroic dimension of the blues idiom and Black American history. In the *Omni-Americans*, he talks about Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. He talks about key figures who represent a way of responding to American life that's the opposite of being a victim. It's like the brer rabbit tales. He called it Jack Rabbit. That was the Alabama

version of brer rabbit, Jack Rabbit. If you look at that archetype or that figure from the folk dimension of Black American history and culture, that Jack Rabbit, which became, by the way, Bugs Bunny, it's a way of dealing with life as if you're living in the midst of a briar patch.

Now, for any folks from the South, or, probably, the Midwest, a briar patch is thorny. You know, it's like, you've got a rose, but you've got those thorns leading up to that rose, where you got a whole patch of that that the Jack Rabbit *lived in*.

So from the very start, you know that a briar patch life is a lowdown dirty shame. But as Murray said in that same interview from 1996 on CSPAN, you usually have two choices. You could ask the question as Camus did: to be or not to be? Should I even continue living? Murray said, I think most Americans, and most Black Americans, particularly of his generation, would say, rather, You know, something—I'm going to get clean tonight, I'm going to, you know, take out my fancy suit, put on my Sunday best, but it will be for my Saturday night function, will be for my going out to have a good time and stomp the blues.

I'm going to do my best to affirm life itself, as opposed to being down-trodden and acting and being like a victim. So, there's a very heroic orientation to Murray's modeling and his metaphors. And he thought that stories and metaphors and art were what he called equipment for living. He got that from Kenneth Burke.

## **Amiel**

Love that. And he's saying that this is not just his recommendation for how Americans should live. He's saying that this describes the creative response to challenge and ordeal.

## **Greg**

Exactly. There it is. If you're in a briar patch, you got to maneuver very carefully. But the thing is, the images of actually being in the

briar patch and getting your skill level to such a place, to getting your chops together, as we say in music and in jazz, to where you can swing with resilience, to where we, no matter what the changes of life, or the chord changes that come up in the song, you're able to handle it and deal with it and move and maneuver. And you do that through skill, through practice. And by engaging with others who are also striving for levels of excellence and eloquence, that no matter *what* comes up, you're able to deal with it. I think that's more of a model to abide by and strive for than some of the models and thinkers that we've been talking about in the last episode, and that are just so current out here.

It's true that a lot of the people, well, I'll put it like this—it's fair to say that in terms of Black American writers and thinkers, that the way that Richard Wright, who wrote *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, and even James Baldwin, were oriented, and even Amiri Baraka. I'm giving you three people who I think are very influential on TaNehisi Coates. Their way of viewing things is way more prominent than an Ellison/Murray perspective, which definitely was heroic, was about trying to become champions, not champions *over someone*, but champions *with others who are striving for something better, for greatness*. To overcome challenges.

So, you could just tell that this is a model that's not only important for people of color. This is important, period, particularly when you look at the level of volatility and uncertainty based on what's going on in technology and the Internet and robotics, and this and that. What kind of orientation towards life do we need to have in order to deal with these changes that are coming and that are underfoot? If you look at yourself as a victim, do you have a shot? Do you have any chance at all, if you consider yourself a victim?

What would you say?

## Amiel

You better have a lot of luck.

## Greg

Yeah. But it seems to me that you'll have a lot more luck if you have an outlook towards life that is hopeful, that is optimistic. I don't mean optimistic in some pollyannish way. No, the blues deals with the reality, the toughness, the tragic side of life, but the blues also has the comic dimension. It is more of a whole perspective where, yes, we don't deny. And this is another concept that I'll bring in that's key for Murray: frame of acceptance, and frame of rejection. These are terms that come from the great—here is another polymath, Kenneth Burke. He's usually confined to communications and rhetoric. He has a model called dramatism.

But in any event, when you have narrative forms, when you have stories, Burke basically said that you usually have a "frame of acceptance" and a "frame of rejection." The frame of rejection is basically a way of looking at life with satire. You're complaining. Things shouldn't be this way. And we see a lot of evidence of that type of writing and that type of speech out here.

But the frame of acceptance, for example, is not about accepting injustice. The frame of acceptance says, Look, this is the reality of life. That briar patch is very real. But what is it gonna take? It is going to take me being the best prepared I can, and is going to take me engaging in a journey that one could say is heroic, that is akin to the epic stories of great literature. And you know there's a lot of challenges and there's a lot of stuff in those kinds of stories, but you are the author of your own story, so why not be the hero of your own story? This may remind some of your listeners of Robert Kegan's "self-authoring" stage.

You affirm and accept the reality of life. But you say, hey, I'm going to do the best I can with the tools I have. And I'm gonna prepare myself,



coach myself, and also have mentors. I mean, the hero isn't just doing this by himself. He's got guides and mentors along the way. He's got people he's doing it with. So, it's not *just* a solo journey. But that's an orientation to life itself.

So, a lot of the people we were talking about in the previous episode, I'd say they're coming from a frame of rejection. Coates is a well-written and narrated, fatalistic frame of rejection. That's okay. In literature, there are classics with a frame of rejection framework. It's not that it's invalid. But to me, a frame of acceptance, which is more difficult, is one that is wider and deeper, and gives more avenues for people to be able to find their way through the mess.

## **Amiel**

I love it. It's like there are thorns in the Briar Patch and we do have the blues per se, but there's also the ingenuity of the Jack Rabbit. And there is the blues music that lifts us up. So, you're partial if you focus only on the first part. But if you include both, you have an accurate representation. I just want to say one other thing I heard you mentioned is that this blues idiom and the metaphor of the hero's journey, these both come from many different cultures and are applicable universally. As you said, this is not just for dark-skinned people. This is for everybody.

## **Greg**

There you go. That's it. That's the thing about literature. If the writer is able to achieve a level of eloquence where he or she takes the particular aspects of the characters' lives and paints a picture that is truly all four quadrants. Let's use that reference. Then you're able to go from the particular to the universal, because there are certain universals that we share as human beings. And you realize and achieve that transition from a particular through the universal in the process of reading the work, as you relate to it.

You could be in your room. And, because of your economic station, not able to travel the world. But you can read books that will take you around the world and take you to the universe and back, right in your own room. You see what I mean? So, this orientation and these perspectives are so key, and like you say, are far beyond being just for people with dark complexions.

Now, I just want to read this right quick, because Murray has a way of being very concise, and I can be a bit long-winded, so I'll read a definition of blues idiom. Tony Scherman, in that same interview from 1996, asked him, "What is the blues idiom?"

Murray: "It is an attitude of affirmation in the face of difficulty, of improvisation in the face of challenge. It means that you acknowledge that life is a low-down dirty shame yet confront that fact with perseverance, with humor, and above all, with elegance."

And when he says elegance, he's not just talking about refinement. I once asked him about elegance. And I told him that one of the critiques that I had heard of his concept of elegance was that it's too effete, that it is too much about refinement. He said, "Man, these people need to get an education!"

## **Amiel**

[Laughs] What did he mean by that?

## **Greg**

[Laugh] He said, "Man, when I say elegance, I'm talking about like a mathematical elegance. I'm talking about to have a solution to a problem that is so elegant, that it could have been a problem that had been around for hundreds of years. And you're able to give a response that is so precise, so concise, so on the mark and not necessarily complicated—that it is an elegant solution to a problem."

So, I'll give you an example of that in reference to race. When you talk about geniuses, you plumb their work, and you see these gems that they don't even develop in full themselves. They just leave it out there for folks to develop. It's there. It just takes you to do the digging.

On just a few occasions that I'm aware of, he talked about, in that same Brian Lamb interview, that usually when you're talking about difference, based on race, gender, ethnicity, culture, whatever. Difference. He said, usually there's two responses to difference. You could be fearful of difference. Like xenophobia. Or you can be attracted to the difference. Mmmm, that's interesting. Exotica.

He asked: What do you do? First, you accept the fact that these are natural human responses. You don't have to be judgmental or feel guilty. That's just humanity. That's human beings, the human condition. But second, what you do is accept it. You integrate it into yourself. You synthesize it. Frame of acceptance, again.

**Amiel**

Ooooh.

**Greg**

And by so doing, you make it your own and universal at the same time. That's the kind of genius I'm talking about. Who says that kind of stuff out here these days?

**Amiel**

All of us who read Albert Murray.

**Greg**

[Laughs] As folks can tell, I'm very passionate about my mentor. Albert Murray. I could talk about him for a long time. But I'm gonna stop talking and let you get some more questions out, man.

## Amiel

Yeah, sure. I want to acknowledge a few things here, just to repeat, because I think it's so important for listeners to notice how different you feel, hearing Greg talk about the blues idiom and about this sense of elegance and improvisation in the midst of challenge, compared to how you feel when we talk about the social scientists so-called description of so-called black culture. Whether you are the one being described, or describing it, or listening to it, it's a very different feeling. And so I just want to reference an earlier interview I did on the podcast, and I'll provide a link, on mood. And moods I refer to as predispositions for action. They are to emotions as the climate is to the weather. And so a lot of us think of emotions as just a result of what happened. But moods evoke. They create a predisposition for action. And so I want to break it down.

## Greg

Break it down, Amiel.

## Amiel

Briefly, because I promised you I wasn't gonna take all the airway.

## Greg

Man, I love it: riff.

## Amiel

When I lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan for a bunch of years as an adult. And I used to drive down the road to Ypsilanti, which is like the midpoint between Ann Arbor and Detroit, for the blues bars. I didn't realize this until later. I did that because I was feeling down. And the music and I have to say the dance, which we haven't really talked about much, lifted me up. And it *predisposed me to more excellence in academics, dating, athletics, just by participating.*

And so I want to acknowledge, to connect it to this concept of mood that a lot of my listeners are familiar with and that my clients hear me talk about. But here we have a practice coming from a particular culture that is actually an amalgam of many cultures that is perfect for this. And I think it's probably why you have a business around this as well. Am I right?

## Greg

Yes, absolutely. It's called the Jazz Leadership Project. It's where we use the principles and practices of jazz music as a model and metaphor for leadership and team development, and as well as diversity and inclusion, all those different elements. So, we talk about improvisation. We talk about swing as resilience, improvisation as a way to deal with challenges. You talk about syncopation being those elements where things are offbeat, but you're able to still deal with it. You look at the blues, as we've talked about it.



## **SHARED LEADERSHIP**

These are ways of confronting situations in the workplace and in your life. But in the workplace and as far as leadership, when we talk about jazz, jazz is about shared leadership. It's really not a hierarchical conception. It is more horizontal and is shared in this sense: you have a

band playing, and you have many times a band leader on the marquee, in the actual performance of jazz the leadership gets passed around. So that a person, they play a melody together as a group. Rhythm section plays certain aspects. The drums and the bass—that’s where the swing is. The drums and the bass. The bass *walking*, the drums *riding* the cymbal. The piano player is comping, which means to accompany and to compliment. And you have the front line like the sax or trumpet, they’re playing a melody, right? Then there’s a round of solos, which are each person’s interpretation of that melody, the harmony, the rhythm, the mood, as you mentioned.

But then it’s not just that one person who solos. It gets passed around. So, the piano gets a little, or the drummer gets a little. The base. And in that moment, where they’re making their aesthetic statement, they are the leader, and everyone else is supporting, and listening. Support and challenge at the same time, actually. And that’s life. I mean, it’s not just about, “Oh, we’re supporting you.” Yeah, but we are also challenging you. We are holding your behind accountable. You got to come up and play. Because people who spent their hard-earned money to come out here and try to have you stomp the blues. Because when you stompin’ the blues, you’re lifting people’s moods. You’re lifting their spirits. See, that’s Murray also.



## **ENSEMBLE MINDSET**

So, these aspects, and of course, the team itself, or the ensemble. We call it the Ensemble Mindset. That's about high-performance groups, high performance teams. So, all of these things, and the diversity and inclusion is right there. If I talk about the origins of the music itself, as I did earlier, it's all there. So, we do these workshops, where we use live musicians, or webinars where we use multimedia technology. And we present these models with examples. And we have the people engage in exercises to really embody what we're saying, and then they can apply it to their lives and at the workplace.

## Amiel

[Laughs] Wow. I want to ask about the dancing and how that fits in here. Because, as I said, that was a big part of my personal experience. And the one critique I've read of Murray and his preference for musicians is he really preferred musicians where people danced. Someone wrote that he didn't like any jazz person after born after—I don't know what year it was, 1945 or something like that. So talk about the dance. You know, you've got the team. You've got the music. So, who's dancing? Is that the customer? Is that the Board of Directors?

## Greg

Oh, okay. Yeah. Oooh, that's good. That's good. Well, you know, that's very interesting because for Murray dance was the preeminent expression of affirmation of life. Dancing with your whole body and being expressing itself. One of the things that he says in a book that I wrote the afterword for, *Murray Talks Music: Albert Murray on Jazz and Blues*. There's a conversation between him and Dizzy Gillespie. Dizzy is the founder of a style called bebop with Charlie Parker and others. Dizzy made a statement. He says, "You know something? Dancing don't make you cry." So, when you're dancing, you're literally affirming life itself.



Lindy Hop dancing

He has a statement somewhere where he places dancing—as a matter of fact, he says, in *The Hero and The Blues*, that dancing was the very first art. If you look anthropologically, that was the first art. And it's about movement, right? I mean, if you talk about life itself, one aspect of life is movement. So, if you put the dancing together with music, then you're talking about ritual. And for Murray, art is a way that you take your everyday experiences and your feelings and you *process it*. You *stylize it* into what he called aesthetic statement. When you do that, the aesthetic statement becomes emblematic of those moods, those feelings. And it's a way that you create that form, which again, for him, you create form to make sense out of life, to make meaning and to counter chaos and entropy.

So that feeling that you felt, man, that's what you were supposed to be feeling because you went there to *stomp the blues*. And you did. And



that's what it's supposed to be. Now it gets a little funny because he says there's two levels.

There's the Saturday night function. So that's the secular side. Then there's the Sunday morning church service, right? So that's obviously dealing with the sacred and the religious.

The secular aspect of the ritual is the Saturday night function, which first serves to banish the evil spirits in the world and your life condition. So, Murray gets down to a fundamental anthropological ritual level, but he applies it to our modern lives. So, first thing you do is you banish the spirits, the bad spirits, the evil spirits, you know. The blues, the blue devils, they don't like that. They want you to feel down. They want you to be depressed. But then after a while, when you get that groove going, that rhythm going, that flow going, then that banishing ritual becomes a fertility ritual, baby. It becomes a fertility ritual. And that's how you continue life itself. [Laughs] So you got to have some feel good. You got to have some good feeling in there just to continue and enjoy your life. And of course, in actuality, to physically engage in a fertility ritual to continue the species.

## **Amiel**

Exactly. So, you have the Saturday night, let's just call it, *conception*. Then what happens on Sunday morning?

## **Greg**

On Sunday morning, you get up and you give honor to the Lord. You go there to acknowledge your sins and to deal with forgiveness. But then, to relate this to the music, when you get to the music, the music actually is not as separated as that. What do they say? You sing a joyful noise unto the Lord.

## Amiel

Yeah.

## Greg

So, if you're talkin' about the Black American church, one of the things they say about the Saturday night function is if you can get it rocking and rolling as good as it does during a revival service, you get to something. The Spirit is there. So, in musical terms, there's not as much of a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, as we call it. And in fact, gospel music is grounded in the blues. Thomas Dorsey, the father of gospel music, was a blues pianist and writer. Yes he was, before he started writing gospel music.



Thomas Dorsey

**Amiel**

A lot of intermingling. A lot of intermingling.

**Greg**

That's how culture works, man. That's how culture works.

**Amiel**

A couple more. A couple more questions. One is a comment, actually. I'm going to make a comment and see what you think about it. So, somebody, you said, said the dancing, when you dance, you don't cry? Who was that? Dizzy Gillespie?

**Greg**

Yes. Dizzy Gillespie.

**Amiel**

So, I want to add the Amiel Amendment to that.

Based on my own experiences, learning some forms of dance, when you're not good at it, can bring tears.

**Greg**

[Laughs]

**Amiel**

And I'm thinking about partner dancing, particularly where you just don't know you're supposed to be leading and you don't know what you're doing.

**Greg**

[Laughs]

## Amiel

So maybe this will be my last question. So, you're helping people of all sorts, all backgrounds and professions, learn how to play the music and dance. I wonder what, what you notice about the challenge of being a beginner at that and how you work with that.

## Greg

Oh, that's good. That's really important. You've got to have that beginner's mind. You gotta be *open to learning*. You got to go through those steps and stages: beginner, intermediate, advanced. Apprentice to journeymen to craftsman and master craftsman. So, it's a process. It's like learning anything. So, yeah, if you're an early musician or early dancer, hey, it's gon' be tough. But you got to have persistence, perseverance, dedication to getting your chops together, so that it can become second nature. See, once it becomes second nature, that's when you can get into that flow.

## Amiel

Yes, that's when there's no crying.

## Greg

That's when it's fun. That's right. [Laughs]

## Amiel

I'm there with some forms of dance, not there with others. Can you go through that list again? Because, see, in organizations we have pay scales and we have titles. We don't talk about the levels of learning very much. So, again, as we close, mention what those are again.

## Greg

Well, fundamentally, and this comes from medieval times, when you talk about the apprentice. There's a system, a craftsman system where

to do jewelry or to learn an art you apprentice to a master. So, you learn the basics. Or even in popular culture. What was Mr. Miyagi with—

**Amiel**

*The Karate Kid.*

**Greg**

With Ralph--

**Amiel**

Wax on, wax off. Apprentice.



Scene from *The Karate Kid*: "Wax on, wax off."

**Greg**

Exactly. Yeah, that's the apprentice level. You learn and you don't necessarily see how it fits together. But you follow instructions.

You're open to coaching. You're open to learning. So, you get your fundamentals down. You get your basics down. Then you get facility with those basics, and that's the intermediate level, that journeyman level, where you have more facility and understanding and, oh, you're getting good at this.

But then, when you actually go to a place where it goes from the conscious to the unconscious part of your mind and it is second nature, when you can have that flow, and you don't have to think about it, and you're just responding and moving in the moment, that's when you're talking about mastery. And that's another thing that I think is very important for us to deal with: the concept of mastery.

By the way, I found that quote on dance.

## Amiel

Oooh. Let's hear it.

## Greg

Yeah, I found it, man.

This is from my *New Republic* review of the Library of America edition of Murray's nonfiction. He said,

"A definitive characteristic of the descendants of American slaves is an orientation to elegance."

This is from his book, *From the Briar Patch File: On Context, Procedure, and American Identity*.

"The disposition in the face of all misery and uncertainty in the universe, to refine all human action in the direction of a dance-beat elegance, I submit that there is nothing that anybody in the world has ever done that is more civilized or sophisticated than to dance

elegantly, which is to state with your total physical being an affirmative attitude toward the sheer fact of existence.”

That’s Albert Murray, talking about dance.

## **Amiel**

Wow, love it.

## **Greg**

That’s how important dance is. That’s why for him and Ellison, when the dance tradition and the music got separated, where it just became more of a concert form, it was very hurtful to them. Not because they were old fogeys or conservatives, but because they looked at it from a perspective of a cultural whole, how it played into the culture of the originators of the music and the country as a whole. So, they thought it was a profound loss when the dance dimension went away.

## **Amiel**

I’m gonna ask you to give me a couple of musical recommendations, so those who are fired up and ready to go will have a place to start. I just got a Duke Ellington album. And I want to also emphasize, for those who don’t do a lot of dancing, that we may be underestimating the value of the blues idiom for all of us and overestimating how hard it is to learn to embody it.

## **Greg**

There you go.

## **Amiel**

So, we can work our way through.

## Greg

I'll be glad to give you some recommendations. Speaking of Duke, he's the greatest American composer of the 20th century. There are so many examples, but I would say there's a special one that is a little more obscure to many folks. It's called *The Queen's Suite*. He actually wrote that for the Queen of England. It's beautiful and powerful. There's a beautiful ballad, "A Single Petal of a Rose" on that. Oh my God, check that out.



There's of course the classic Miles Davis *Kind of Blue*. I would say Cannonball Adderley's *Somethin' Else*; that's also with Miles Davis. I would also say *Louis Armstrong Meets Oscar Peterson*. Check that out. That is vintage Pops, but in the '50s. Early Pops in the 1920s is Armstrong as a revolutionary and firebrand. Most people know him as a great entertainer. But Louis Armstrong was a *revolutionary artist* that profoundly influenced the course of American music. And, therefore, world culture. So, he was the Promethean figure of jazz, Louis Armstrong. I would also recommend you check out Count Basie's *April in Paris* recording.



## Amiel

Right. I have that one. That has some bounce.

## Greg

Oh, good. There are so many others. John Coltrane's *Blue Train*. I love that. Yeah. There's so many.

## Amiel

Now we're delving into your original area of expertise. We'll need a few more hours! One thing that popped out for me about Murray is you'll notice he often embodies the trumpet function of making fun, and when he's making fun of all these different casts of characters. It is really enjoyable to read, because he has a lightness to him, but he is stomping. Not just stomping out the blues but stomping *on* those who will keep us *in* the blues. And it's a delight. *The Omni-Americans* will take you there. So, let me say once again, Greg Thomas. Thank you.

## Greg

Thank you. I so appreciate you giving me a chance to come on your show to share. And I hope this enriches your series on race, or rather, on American experience and culture.



## Part Two:

# Answering the Call With Murray in Mind

---

### Greg

Since we spoke in 2018, you've taken a deep dive into Murray's work. What are your key takeaways?

### Amiel

To prepare for that interview, I read some of his work, but mostly I was learning about Murray through you. In the past three years, it's been great to go more deeply into the source material like his essays and book reviews plus his correspondence with Ralph Ellison—and reading Ellison himself, which is in many ways a side window into Murray, isn't it? This reading, which I credit you for inspiring, has not only expanded my appreciation for Murray but also helped me see how you've both embraced his ideas and extended them. Because even though you call yourself a Murray and Ellison man, you're also an Integral man, right? That means including the insights of postmodernism, what Steve McIntosh calls the "communitarian ethos of sensitivity." As well as the Integral insights that adults can grow through stages of development; that art, culture and morality are separate spheres that too often we mush together; and that, as Jewel points out, the hero's journey is only half of the story. The

other half being the heroine's journey, which incorporates the qualities of connection, compassion, and being part of a larger whole that we often associate with the feminine in each of us.

## Greg

Yes, through my study of Integral theory and even Metamodernism, I've been able to expand upon the foundation of Murray and Ellison's work. And thanks for mentioning Jewel's work on the heroine's journey, which has rounded the circle of my understanding even further. Please continue.

## Amiel

I'm realizing that what I've just said is more about how you've extended Murray's work than the work itself. So let's get into that second point: what diving into Murray's work has taught me about his vision. There's a lot to say, but let me emphasize three points.

First, I'm amazed by how refreshingly original Murray's vision was. Here he was writing at a time when black nationalism was on the rise, when social scientists were talking about the "culture of poverty" and the supposed problems with the black family structure, and he steps into the arena and calls bullshit(!) on both of those narratives. What an audacious act! It's why, apparently, people who read his work either loved it or despised it. He took original stands that cut against the grain. As Skip Gates said, *The Omni-Americans* was "pissed off, jaw-jutting, and unapologetic." I've now read the book three times, and it feels exactly like that every time. And he wrote it over fifty years ago!

Second, I've had this sense of, "Where have you been all my life?" Or "Where have you been all our lives?" It's a feeling of loss, of something missing, and it brings up a question: what would life be like in the United States today if as a country we had taken his ideas seriously? Could we have avoided a generation of misguided public policies

like the three-strikes-and-you're-out crime bill or the incredibly slow process of expanding health care access? Could we have avoided or at least minimized the culture wars that were escalating just at the time Murray was starting to publish? And, if we had done those things, might we have built up a wider and deeper voting constituency for tackling wealth inequality, climate change, and so on? It's all speculative and counterfactual, of course, but these questions feel important to raise when you take his vision seriously and contrast it with the relatively narrow and uninformed debates we've largely been having.



Thomas Chatterton Williams

Thomas Chatterton Williams said something similar when he was on *The Manifesto* podcast with Jake Siegel and Phil Klay, who themselves are huge fans of Murray. In fact, Chatterton Williams said in that interview that his purpose as a writer is to bring Murray's vision to fruition. That actually gave me goosebumps. But, again, behind it is a lament—what we've missed out on by not listening to him.

## Greg

I share that sentiment of lament. Murray was a visionary thinker and writer, and a system-builder when the trend was the critique and breakdown of systems via postmodernism. He was aware of the political implications of his work, but left it to others to devise and implement specific policies based on those implications. Also, as a literary man, Murray believed, as he wrote early on in *The Hero and the Blues*, that “literature functioned to establish the very context for social and political action in the first place.”

## Amiel

The last thing I’ll say has to do with parallels between his prime writing years and today. The issues are different. The players are different. And the narratives are different. But one thing that hasn’t changed is this: much of the debate about so-called racial issues is built on clichés and assumptions that are worth testing and, indeed, transcending. In the sixties and seventies was this notion—well, more than a notion, as it filled prominent research studies that liberals read—that the root of all evils, or at least all poverty, was dysfunction within Black American families. Murray called this idea the “fakelore of black pathology.” And, of course, he tore it to shreds.

Today, we don’t hear much about this—perhaps it fell off the map nationally with Bill Clinton’s welfare reform—but we have something similar: the preoccupation of the national media with visceral images of black suffering. We also see it in movies like *Detroit* by Kathryn Bigelow. Imani Perry, who joined you on one of your events with The Stoa, spoke about this on NPR. At some point, watching yet another dark-skinned body get brutalized harms us more than it helps us. Instead of compassion, it produces pity. Instead of “we’re in this together,” it becomes “I need to save you.” And there’s this assumption, rarely stated but right there below the surface, that this experience of being

beaten or killed defines you. It's all of who you are. And therefore it's what I viscerally and intellectually relate to when I relate to you. These are my words, not Imani Perry's, but they're about how many nominally white Americans are responding.

## Greg

This tendency has been called by some "Black trauma porn." It's insidious, especially when factoring in how images connect to the journey of our souls, as per the work of psychologists James Hillman and Zak Stein. Recent examples include the live-action short, *Two Distant Strangers*, which won an Oscar; the series *Them* on Amazon Prime; and the series based on Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Underground Railroad*. The film adaptation, by Barry Jenkins, featured a brutal scene of a runaway slave who was caught and burned alive, as his fellow enslaved were forced to watch, as the plantation owner and guests ate a meal on the front lawn, and frolicked in a macabre celebration.

## Amiel

What you're describing, Greg, can lead to a retraumatization of past wounding that black folks have experienced or that their distant ancestors experienced, something Resmaa Menakem calls racialized body trauma. It's in your body but it comes from great-great grandpa, so you don't have the context. Which of course affects so-called white people, too, because there is the traumatic legacy of abusing others and of being abused yourself. None of which helps anyone's nervous system or frees us to grow out of our fixations and into something resembling mature adulthood, the kind we need to face these big challenges together. All of which is to say: in addition to the fakelore of black pathology that Murray writes about, today we have the glorification in the national media of black suffering. It feels cleaner and nobler, because we aren't criticizing Black Americans. We're ostensibly caring

for them. But this, too, contains a trap: we get blinded to others' full humanity and agency, and this makes it more likely that our commitment to do good, which is absolutely sincere, will morph into benevolent condescension.

I think that's one reason we're having this conversation together. To bring clarity to confusion, nuance to simplistic stances, and humility to what can often seem like overly confident ideological battles. Just like Murray did, but updated for our time and, in my case at least, with a few tablespoons less erudition!

## **Greg**

I hear you! How has Murray's Omni-American vision influenced your outlook on your own identity?

## **Amiel**

To start, Murray gave me a new understanding of what it means to be an American. The very word Omni-American has this strange quality. On the one hand, it's odd and puzzling. As my grandmother might have said in what I think is the Jewish American vernacular, "In a million years, who ever heard of such a thing?" Who ever heard of putting those two words together? Isn't the word before the hyphen supposed to be something particularistic like Irish or Polish, not something universal?

Yet when you check out what Murray means by the term, it makes total sense. There's this blended quality, this amalgamation and interweaving of influences that makes each of us who we are and what makes the United States unique in the world. I remember when I added "Omni-American" to my Linked In profile. It felt like I was embracing and including so many different cultures and influences. Not in an arrogant way, like I'm some kind of expert, but more from a mood of gratitude. It's like: look at all the people and cultures that have influenced who I am! At age 47, that was a new insight, and it came from Murray.



## Greg

Do you think this is the same as the old melting pot theory?

## Amiel

Not quite.

That brings us to the second thing I've learned from Murray about my own identity. Being an American doesn't mean melting away the influence of my family and ancestors until it's no longer recognizable. That's not the idea at all. I can be fully Jewish American and fully American. No need to choose. This is easy to extrapolate from how Murray talks about his own identity. He embraces being an American *and* being a Black American. Both/*and*. If you think these are separate species or at least completely different cultures, Murray quickly disabuses you of that notion.

For example, he writes about how the music and dancing practices of enslaved Americans shaped the culture of the country as a whole—and vice versa. And how these folks not only suffered but also contributed to so much of what it means to be American. And, as you point out, he also gives shout outs—and this comes from Constance Rourke—to Daniel Boone, Native Americans, and Yankees, which Stanley Crouch later expands to include Chinese and Mexican Americans. This fills me with gratitude because it reminds me of what I've received, what we've all received from so many strands within our culture.

What it also does is make me curious: how have "my people," Jewish Americans, helped make America what it is? Not: how were we excluded? Not: how did so many of us make it? Which are both fair questions. But instead: how did we contribute something special to the larger culture? So this is my formal request to add Jewish Americans into the official Omni mix. Now, I'm just starting this inquiry, but the first thing that springs to mind is humor. All those Jewish stand-up

comedians and writers over the years. They're Omni-Americans who've shaped what we think of as funny. Jerry Seinfeld is a great example, but like Beyonce is for Black American artists and beauty, he's emblematic of a whole lot of people that preceded him. At times, like when my nervous system relaxes enough to allow me to be funny, I'm part of that tradition.

So, Murray first gives me this generous stance, this recognition of all the people and cultures who've shaped me. Then we add to it an appreciation for how my own people, my own identity group, has itself shaped and been shaped by the larger American culture. Finally, as if that weren't enough, he offers me a third insight: the metaphor of the hero's journey. Everything I've just described, this interweaving of cultures, has happened in the midst of dragons and demons lurking all around. Much of American history isn't a pretty picture. It's ugly. And Murray doesn't shy away from this. But rather than interpreting this ugliness and brutality as the whole story, he frames it as challenges along the hero's path. This has meant the world to me, because I have a sensitive nervous system. I see danger ahead. I imagine calamities about to occur. It's easy for this to form into a rigid identity that traps me. I'm the person who sees impending doom and has to warn everyone else, which is exhausting, and not the best way to make friends. Or I'm the person who feels resigned to the world going to hell. This isn't pretty either. When I read Murray, I see the same dangers, but they take on a new meaning: challenges along the hero's path. As he says, you can't have dragon-slayers without dragons. I find this infinitely comforting. And, of course, inspiring, which is exactly what the mythosphere, as you call it, can be, particularly in a modern and postmodern world that has lost its sense of enchantment. Murray is enchanting, isn't he?

## Greg

Oh yes he is, which reminds me of Chloe Valdary's Theory of Enchantment. I'm glad she's taken to Ellison and Murray's work; she's of my

daughter Kaya's twenty-something generation, so this is a good sign for the Omni-American perspective. And speaking of enchantment, Murray was very influenced by Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*.

Next question: You told me that a good friend of yours mentioned that the story of Black American resilience makes systemic racism harder to see and can deter resources from flowing to resolve it. Based on your reading of Murray, how do you think he might respond?

## Amiel

I didn't have a chance to meet Murray personally, but I imagine him responding with an "Are you kidding me?" look and then proceeding to puncture straight through the assumptions behind the claim. First, he might remind us that public policy decisions are investments, so if you want to get support for them, it doesn't do much good to hide the positive qualities of who you're investing in. As he writes in *The Omni-Americans*: "Sometimes Americans are disposed to fair play and sometimes they are not. But they almost always invest their time, money, and enthusiasm in assets with promise, not liabilities. Even those who become involved in salvage operations have been sold on inherent potential."

Notice how this contrasts with the assumption that people's commitment to solving a problem goes up the more they see how bad the problem—like systemic racism—is. It's a vastly different interpretation. And it's interesting, because if you follow the arguments of many leading antiracists, they focus 95 percent of the time on documenting the problem. This is absolutely sincere. Yet for Murray, it leaves out a big part of human motivation: investing in something or someone promising.

Now, Murray was up front about the political and economic exclusions that Black Americans faced. You can't read more than a few pages of *The Omni-Americans* without bumping into examples. And for good

reason. I mean, the man grew up in the Deep South and lived for most of the twentieth century. He saw a lot and experienced a lot. But he took a strong stand for separating these political and economic dimensions from the cultural sphere and the character of a people. Not only can you talk about both, but you should talk about both. Because if you ignore resilience, you're setting up a dynamic in which some people feel pity for other people. On the surface, it looks moral and like genuine compassion. And there is real and sincere compassion present, no doubt. But sometimes, also present is a subtle and sometimes not so subtle patronizing condescension. In the psychological language of the drama triangle—which I don't believe Murray used—it's rescuers stepping in to help victims.

If there was one thing Murray didn't want Black Americans to be seen as, it was as victims. Because they weren't and aren't. Heroes aren't victims. They're heroes. They have agency. When they encounter painful circumstances, they make choices about how to respond. And if they're American, and particularly Black American, the choices they make are to persist, to be creative, to improvise, to use every bit of ingenuity they can muster to better their circumstances. Of course, I'm generalizing about a collective cultural trait, but even if we're only talking about thirty or sixty percent of a group, who wouldn't want to invest in this?

## **Greg**

One idea I've stated for a while now is that you can be victimized in a situation without adopting the identity of a victim.

## **Amiel**

Yes, we have the ability—within some limits, of course, like where we are developmentally in our lives--to choose how we interpret what happens to us. Now, we can flip that around a bit and raise another

question I could imagine Murray asking my friend: who do you think loses from systemic racism? Is it only Black Americans? Not at all. Everyone loses. So-called white people lose. Isabel Wilkerson has countless examples of this in her book *Caste*, like the journalist who loses a great story because he doesn't believe that this dark-complexioned interviewee is the prominent reporter she says she is. Or white folks who die in a bombing after police ignore the threat of a bomber because his earlier victims were darker skinned. There's also a great example in the latest book by the historian Timothy Snyder which is called *Our Malady*. Snyder is incredibly sick, on death's door, and has just flown back to the United States. A physician friend of his, who is African American, picks him up at the airport and drops him off at a hospital. She tells doctors his condition is critical and he needs immediate attention. The doctors ask "Who was she? She said she was a doctor?" They're mocking her. As Snyder writes, "They were talking about my friend. They laughed. I couldn't write this down then, but did later: racism hurt my life chances that night; it hurts others' life chances every moment of their lives."

This is mind-blowing stuff, because it's so counter to the way that many liberals and progressives view things, and I count myself in this group. For Murray, revealing this complexity is another way of puncturing the rescuer-victim dynamic and avoiding the trap of benevolent condescension.

## Greg

A year ago, the brutal murder of George Floyd being captured on tape sparked mass worldwide protests. Many nominally white people became aware of the continued maltreatment of Black people by police, and felt called to take action. How do you think Murray's Omni-American vision can support them in their journey to answer the call?



## Amiel

Let's talk first about mood, because this is a crucial acupuncture point or source of leverage for all of us answering the call. When I say the word "mood," I'm talking not about a short-lived emotion but instead about a predisposition for action. If emotions are the weather, then moods are the climate. They're strong. They persist over time. And they shape what's possible—and what's not. Murray's vision invites us into several moods that are positive and constructive, yet all too rare among nominally white folks combating racism. But before we get to Murray, let me set some context by speaking about what's present today.

One mood I observe in many people combating racism is resignation. This is the assessment that nothing I do will make a difference, so why bother trying? This can arise when you immerse yourself in American history in a very particular way: by focusing on the disasters but not the dignities, the horrors but not the progress. If you follow writers who

are purely deconstructing history — showing how it was all a cynical power game where some people won and others got screwed, you can get caught here. If you constantly talk about how we are in a white supremacist society that's really no different than the 1960s or 1860s, you're likely caught here. So much of this is hidden in language that we're not aware of unless we pay close attention to it. That's one reason it persists. Now, you'd think that people committed to making things better wouldn't get caught in resignation because it's so unhelpful to the cause, but they do. We do.

Another common mood is guilt. This is the assessment that I've done something wrong and there's nothing I can do to make it better. If I read about lynching and look at the horrible photos *and* hold myself responsible for this, I'm entering the territory of guilt. The fact that it happened before I was born doesn't matter. I take the weight onto my shoulders. It becomes my burden. Now, it may be that I was in a mood of guilt before looking at these photos, and they serve as confirmation for my existing assessment that I've done something wrong. Either way, it's not a pleasant or helpful place to inhabit, but it's powerful and common. And, to be clear, I'm not suggesting that anyone avoid learning about lynching. That's part of our history. The point—and this feels almost blasphemous to say—is that you're not responsible for what happened before you're born. You weren't there. You didn't do it. Even if your grandparents or great-great grandparents were there, you're not responsible for them, and it's certainly not your fault for loving them. Now, if this sounds like whitewashing, think again. Because these things happened. People were responsible for them —but not you and not me.

What we *are* responsible for is what we do in our own lives, and one place to start is to take responsibility for our moods. Here's where Murray is so valuable.

## Greg

Break it down, man.

## Amiel

As I see it, The Omni-American vision calls for two moods that are important to all human beings and especially useful for what we're talking about. Those moods are determination and curiosity. Determination is the assessment that "I can do this" or "we can do this." It's an emotional tone that leads people to persist through enormous obstacles. Think of it as the mood behind the habit of resilience. The Omni-American vision is all about determination, about battling long odds by improvising in practical and intelligent ways. It's the story Murray tells about Americans as a people and Black Americans in particular.

For white folks answering the call today, we could do a lot worse than inhabiting the mood of determination. It's an alternative and antidote to resignation. And it's a force that can keep us in the game over the long haul. And this isn't easy. Because no matter how dedicated you feel to combating racism and healing the country's wounds, there are a thousand things pulling you away from that. There's the acrimony of the conversation, the shrill voices on many sides. There's the sheer weight of the challenge, which can appear bigger, not smaller, the more you read history and study the problems. And then, beyond that, are all your other life commitments. As the historian Richard Flacks once wrote, there's making history, and then there's making life. If you're like me, making life takes up a big portion of the day. So determination becomes important. The Omni-American vision offers this, but so does Murray's own life trajectory. Here's a man who was an intellectual powerhouse yet, due to work commitments in the military, didn't publish his first book until he was in his mid-fifties. And then he kept going writing, teaching, and mentoring—and the man lived until almost a hundred. That's determination!



And then there's the mood of curiosity. This is the assessment that there's something valuable here and I'm ready to find it. "Hmm, what is it that I'm not seeing?" One of the things I most appreciate about Murray is how much curiosity he stirs in me. That's the beauty of someone with a vision that's both refreshing and unusual. It makes you think, "Wow, this idea that there would be no American culture without Black Americans makes total sense. Never would that particular idea in that particular form have occurred to me, and I consider myself a thoughtful person!" Which then can lead to the question: what *else* hasn't occurred to me? If I'm locked into a particular ideology, narrative or mood, this question can release me from its grips and open up a lot of generativity.

Now, this is tricky territory, because it's this very question that may have launched me on the antiracist journey. Because for years I've been loosely aware of police violence, but never really thought a lot about it, never saw it as central to my life. Like I remember hearing about Rodney King decades ago. And then there was the OJ Simpson trial, and the Million Man March fits in there somewhere. But when it comes to things I think and talk about regularly, police violence hasn't been on the list. Then a bunch of people get killed, and I watch the videos. It's like, wow. How has this not occurred to me? Why have I been ignoring this? And I stay with these questions. I read Ta-Nehisi Coates on the low value placed on black bodies. Then I get interested in the criminal justice system. I read *The New Jim Crow* and watch the movie *13<sup>th</sup>*. I go to rallies. I put a Black Lives Matter sign on my lawn. I start a book club. And I do all of this because I'm dedicated to filling in the gap of this thing that until now didn't occur to me. Taking these actions feels good. It's a new place. I'm correcting my error. I'm better.

But this is a trap. Because now I'm so determined to fill one particular gap in my seeing that I put on new blinders. I see how Black Americans have suffered for hundreds of years but not how they've contributed. I see how racism hurts Black Americans but not how it hurts people

identified as white. I see how Black Americans have been excluded from wealth generation, legal rights, and political participation yet falsely translate this into cultural deprivation. I can see George Floyd but not Louis Armstrong, Breonna Taylor but not Bessie Smith.

Then I read Albert Murray or listen to Greg, and my curiosity is stirred anew. Instead of being subject to all of those assumptions, they start to become an object of awareness. Wow, what five minutes ago I felt certain about now...I'm not so certain about. So I wonder: how have I been influenced by Black American culture? What have I gained from being an American? What if the story of resilience is an asset to combating racism and imagining a better future? What if there is no such thing as universal black culture, but only Black American culture? Asking these questions isn't always easy. It calls for mindfulness and presence.

So, that's mood. Let me speak now about another gift we get from the Omni-American vision: the ability to see how even noble-minded liberals and progressives can get caught in counterproductive mindsets that echo the very destructive ideas we aim to be fighting. As I've said, one thing Murray does really well is take on supposedly liberal thinkers and reveal the hidden pathologies in their thinking. Now, in case you think I'm pointing the finger at other people—well, I am! But I'm also talking about myself. And, again, this isn't shaming as much as naming. It's observing an unhelpful thought pattern that can get lodged in my nervous system and then working to dislodge or heal it.

A good example of this is reading Ta-Nehisi Coates or listening to historians talk about, say, the Lost Cause mythology of the Civil War, which is that it had nothing to do with slavery. When I do these things, I get angry. Really angry. And the angrier I get, the more I want to right the wrongs of history. By itself, of course, there's nothing wrong with this. It's what you might call noble moral outrage. And it fuels me to act. But then something interesting happens. The folklore of white supremacy starts to infect me against my own will. My mind creates a

simple story of history in which black people have been screwed, white people have been largely complicit, and I have to do something to make it better. It's funny, because even as I say this, it sounds like a solid way to look at things. It feels like I'm making good use of my life, way better than 90 percent of the other things I do.

But notice what's happening in the story. Who's the protagonist? Me. I'm the protagonist. As are other good people, liberals and progressives, who, it just so happens, are largely white. Who is largely not a protagonist in this story? Black Americans. They've been screwed, so they're part of the story, but they're in the background without much agency. In this story, they show up as a problem for me to solve, as suffering for me to alleviate. So, here you have the human mind at work: within maybe 5 seconds a perfectly reasonable and noble intention to heal America's original sin has morphed into a paternalistic and even patronizing narrative. Just like that!

Catching myself doing this doesn't always feel good, but it also doesn't bring me down. I don't feel shame or guilt about it. Why not? One reason is that I hold it in a particular way: it's in the air we all breathe. It's the folklore of white supremacy. I didn't invent it. I don't want to propagate it. But it floats all around and sometimes passes through my mind and body, preferably not sticking around for long! A second reason has to do with Murray. He's not just saying that white supremacist ideas are widespread and damaging. He's saying they are false and ridiculous. He's laughing at them. So for me, catching myself in a patronizing view is a bit like realizing I've messed up on a math problem. This doesn't feel morally wrong so much as factually incorrect. And, in a sense, I'm laughing along with Murray.

Let's talk about constructing relationships, especially between so-called black and so-called white people. Murray has good wisdom to offer us here. It has to do with a phenomenon we'll call "coerced deference," not a term Murray used. This is what

happens when we construct relationships in a particular manner that goes something like this: the antiracism struggle is a black struggle. If I'm white, I have a responsibility to support it. Not to lead it, not to project my own ideas or vision, but to follow the lead of black folks. Why? Because white folks have dominated the airwaves for too long. We've talked a big game but not listened. It's time for that to stop. It's time for black people to lead—in the direction they choose, using the strategies they create, on terms they define. I'm white, so I need to listen to what black people want and ask how to support them. This is what a good ally does. This is what an antiracist relationship looks like.

Now, don't get me wrong. There are real truths represented here, particularly the part about white voices dominating. Not only historically but today in many organizations and communities. This is real. But the solution, the relational agreement I've just described, contains distortions that I don't think Murray would like. Let's start with the implicit assumption that black voices are always wise, that they always know the answer. This sounds like a healthy alternative to the racist idea that black people aren't smart, but it's simplistic and doesn't account for the great variety of human beings in any group. It strips people of their individuality. In contrast, consider how, according to Murray, capable white teachers interact with black students: they "will neither condescend to the black student nor cop-out before him, but will check him out...to determine if he is for real or just shucking on the latest kick." Here we have a description of discernment. And it's respectful, because it treats people with dark skin as full human beings like everyone else. When you automatically defer to what another person or group wants, it may feel like respect, but not when you look at it more closely like this. It's actually dehumanizing. To reference Ralph Ellison, it creates invisible men and women. Which is quite an ironic and unfortunate result of an effort to increase visibility, isn't it?

Again, I'm not telling white folks to stop listening to black folks. Do listen, one, because we're all human beings and deserve it and, two, because you may have been conditioned not to. My point, instead, is to not completely give up your voice and just do what you're told. Which brings me to the coerced part of coerced deference. Again, this isn't a term Murray used, but it describes a phenomenon that I think he would critique and challenge us to move beyond. In the Omni-American vision, influence is multi-directional. Everyone gets a voice. Everyone has the opportunity to both shape and be shaped by other cultures and the larger American culture. This isn't possible when you coerce someone into deferring to your vision. On a creative level, you're blocking the flow. You're interrupting the riff. You're taking half the instruments in the band and tossing them in the trash or at least keeping the musicians from playing them. This isn't jazz, and it's not America at its best. So, this particular form of relational agreement fails on all levels. And, as importantly, it's not necessary. Because, Murray would say, we Americans know how to make music together. We can do better than this!

Let me mention one final lesson Murray offers to all of us answering the call. Call it the crap detector. It's the device Murray uses to criticize black nationalists for speaking of "white man's country" and social scientists for blaming society ills on the black family. We could use a bit of that crap detector today. For example, today's equivalent of "white man's country" is the phrase "white culture." As in, there is this "white culture" in the United States, and then there are black folks. A Venn diagram with no overlapping circles. In some groups, believing in this dichotomy is the price of admission. A good crap detector would point out that what they're calling culture is actually political participation and economic power—let's not be lazy with our terms. But if the speaker really means culture, then we can remind ourselves that there is no American culture without Black American culture. So enough with that false dichotomy.

Another example is the story of slavery. That it was a brutal and immoral system is without question. But some versions of the history are simplistic and false. Like the idea that the bad guys were all white, the good guys were all black, and Black Americans were inherently better off in Africa. This certainly was what I learned growing up. And there are many versions of this going around today. When we listen to Murray—or many reputable historians, for that matter—the story is more complex. A good crap detector would point out the following: one, that the Middle Passage and slavery, as horrendous as they were, were not a fall from Eden, because Africa was no Eden. Two, that even in the midst of enslavement, Black Americans were, in Murray’s words, “living in the presence of more human freedom and individual opportunity than they or anybody else had ever seen before.” Not that they were more free, but that they were in a country that, unlike any other, held this out as a promise and something toward which they could strive. That’s how I read Murray’s words here. This is the background for tremendous determination and improvisation, which brings me to, three, that the story of enslavement is also a story of heroism. What’s more heroic than the Underground Railroad? As Murray says, the Mayflower, unlike enslaved people trying to escape, didn’t have anyone chasing after it.

Now, as I say all of this, I can imagine some friends of mine thinking, “Amiel, it sounds like you’re de-emphasizing the history and present day reality of racism.” Because that’s what all this nuance seems to do. But what this is actually about is clearing misleading narratives and false assumptions out of the way so we have a clearer vision of the future we are creating. Because reimagining America works better when it’s built on true facts and grounded assessments. That’s what the Omni-American vision offers us.

## Part Three:

# The Omni-American Heroine's Journey<sup>4</sup>

---

### Amiel

Murray was born in 1916. Although he was ahead of his time in many ways, he was also a product of his time. As he came into adulthood in midcentury America, modern values were on the rise, and postmodern movements like feminism hadn't yet started to flourish. His high modernist worldview, while visionary, came into being before it could incorporate these new forms of wisdom. How might you update his vision for the 21st century?

### Jewel Kinch-Thomas

In *The Passion of the Western Mind*, author Richard Tarnas maintains that the most obvious generalization about the history of the Western mind is that it has been "an overwhelmingly masculine phenomenon." In every aspect of Western thought and language, and in central scientific, religious, and philosophical perspectives, he intones masculinity as pervasive and fundamental. Tarnas says that this has served to evolve the autonomous human will and intellect, the independent ego,

---

4 This conversation draws on several posts Jewel wrote for the Tune In to Leadership Blog

the self-determining human being. However, to do this, the feminine was repressed.

## **Amiel**

When you speak about the “autonomous human will,” I think about the emphasis that Murray places on individual resilience and achievement. It’s not all he talks about, but it’s a big emphasis. And I think you’re saying it’s necessary but not sufficient.

## **Jewel**

Right. All around us systems are failing—collapsing and disintegrating as they no longer serve our highest values and best visions. This breakdown challenges us to dig deep and unearth a community of being. It calls for a radical shift in consciousness. A big part of this is that we need to integrate the masculine and feminine energies within us—to create a “great archetypal marriage.”

Anything that requires us to “do” something, to take any sort of action, needs masculine energy. Feminine energy is one of “being”—a receptive, heart-centered mode that integrates core values like connection, collaboration, intuition, and empathy. Feminine energy allows us to be a vessel of receptivity, striving for qualitative rather than quantitative growth. Understanding the wisdom and transformative power of the feminine (in both men and women) is essential for us to move, individually and collectively, to a deeper awareness of our own inner nature.

We’ve repressed or dismissed the feminine qualities so we need to enfold them, as they are central to the work of transformation and rebirth.

## **Amiel**

What will it take to do this?



## **Jewel**

Richard Tarnas says that this integration is “where the real act of heroism is doing to be.” It will require humility and courage. And also determination, as you mention in Greg’s interview with you, Amiel.

## **Amiel**

I’m guessing that men have a big role to play in this.

## **Jewel**

Tarnas says that the masculine has an “evolutionary imperative to see through and overcome its hubris and one-sidedness, to own its unconscious shadow, to choose to enter into a fundamentally new relationship of mutuality with the feminine in all its forms.”

## **Amiel**

As I listen to you, I think it’s fair to say that nobody is going to confuse Tarnas with Murray. They’re speaking a whole different language. And yet part of our project, an integral project, is to mesh together these great thinkers and ideas. One way to do this is with the hero’s journey. It was central to Murray’s understanding of himself and the United States. The hero’s journey might be thought of as a male or masculine project.

## **Jewel**

As she was being interviewed on Marianne Williamson’s podcast, Jean Houston, the philosopher and author, said that she used to argue time and again with Joseph Campbell about there being a heroine’s journey—which Campbell told her was not possible. Houston argued that it was. Hero or heroine, both journeys begin with a call—a yearning that can’t be denied—that needs to be responded to. Houston says that the heroine’s journey emphasizes the process of becoming—to discover a higher usefulness—to find new capacities and new ways of being.

## Amiel

This isn't completely different from Murray's understanding of the hero's journey as he writes about in *The Omni-Americans* and his novels, but definitely a different flavor. How would you differentiate these?



A scene from the movie, *The Wiz*, a reimagining of *The Wizard of Oz*

## Jewel

The hero's journey is usually a solo undertaking where a male character sets out to fight the forces, break through the barriers, and slay the dragons. The heroine's journey is distinct in that it brings along those who are also on a path of discovery and growth. Jean Houston uses the *Wizard of Oz* as an example. Dorothy sets off on her journey and brings along those who are typically unseen or disempowered. The scarecrow thinks he doesn't have a brain. The lion is afraid of everything. And the tin man believes he doesn't have a heart. Respectively, they find out they are smart, brave, and empathetic. In the heroine's journey, a family is created and a community is built. We can be each other's guardians

along the journey. It's about more than bringing a solitary individual to their growth edge.

## **Amiel**

OK, now, unlike that quote from Tarnas, this sounds like something Murray would agree with completely. I'm thinking of his writing about jazz, both as music and as metaphor for the Omni-American vision. Just think of the scarecrow, Dorothy, tin man, and so on as players in a band. So maybe Murray's hero's journey writ large included more of what you're saying than I'm giving him credit for. He may not have been postmodern but he integrated, particularly when talking about jazz, these values of connection, relationship and communion that you're connecting with the feminine and the hero's journey.

## **Jewel**

Murray demonstrates these values in his classic, *Stomping the Blues*. And that reminds me of our Jazz Leadership Project principle called Ensemble Mindset, which is our term for the bedrock of high-performing jazz ensembles. It is a mindset that drives collaboration, and is fueled by creativity and a sense of shared responsibility and accountability. Jazz musicians create based on a common platform and language, which feeds the cohesion needed to improvise their own voice, welcome syncopation (the unexpected), and swing to the delight of fellow musicians and audiences alike.

The Ensemble Mindset is a space of co-existing and co-creation at the highest level we can manifest in that moment. Inhabiting it prompts you to be constantly aware of how you are showing up and how well you function interdependently.

## **Amiel**

Which brings us right back to the heroine's journey.

## **Jewel**

Absolutely.

## **Amiel**

And what's possible when we follow both the hero's journey and heroine's journey.

## **Jewel**

Yes, it's the integration of masculine and feminine energies. Perhaps this is how we can change the narratives and the patterns that keep us struggling to truly connect with each other and co-create a better world.

## **Amiel**

I know how deeply rooted you are in the arts—not only jazz but all the arts—and wonder if you could give an example of this.



Hannah Drake

## Jewel

One inspiring example of the heroine's journey is Hannah Drake. She is a visual artist, spoken word poet, and activist from Louisville, Kentucky, who for years educated herself about the slave trade there. When she visited the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, she was surprised that the lynching victims from Kentucky were not identified. It was at that point that she answered the call to create the "(Un)Known Project."

Drake wanted to change the narrative and create a remembrance for these unknown people. Her journey brought together artists, designers, sculptors, words from a 13-year-old activist, and community members sharing their untold stories. When complete, the multimedia project, "(Un)Known Project," will include two granite, limestone and steel benches positioned on the bank of the Ohio River with hand-etched images representing female and male slaves, poetry, and metal chains wrapped around the bench legs; four sets of footprints (representing a family) sandblasted into a sidewalk leading to the benches; and a Floating Reconciliation Experience on a steamboat featuring events related to the antebellum South. Drake's call is to lift up the forgotten.

## Amiel

I'm struck by the parallel between this and the Wizard of Oz example you spoke about before. Totally different stories, plus one is fictional and the other very real. Yet they are both about remembering. In the Wizard of Oz, it's about each character remembering that they already have this quality they think they've lost. With Hannah Drake, it's about remembering people who were murdered and including them in our collective history. We're talking about some of the highest forms of inclusion.

## **Jewel**

Yes. Embracing the heroine's journey means that we can find the room to be inclusive and foster deeper connections and relationships. It means, as our tagline for Ensemble Mindset states, "collaborative co-creation through collective intelligence."

# Join Us for the Stepping Up Journey

---



A six-month journey with Jewel Kinch-Thomas,  
Greg Thomas, and Amiel Handelsman  
Starts October 6, 2021

To stay connected and learn more:

- Discover what you'll experience in Stepping Up at [steppingupjourney.com](https://www.stepsupjourney.com).
- Join us at a free live event on September 14: Answering the Call: Exploring Your Unique Response to America's Racial Reckoning. NOTE: hyperlink from the full title/subtitle to <https://www.stepsupjourney.com/answering-the-call>