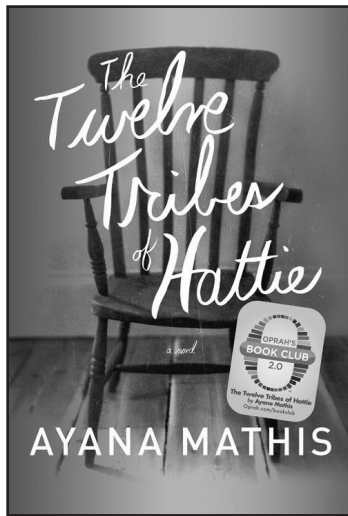


“I BEGIN WITH HUMAN BEINGS”

MICHIKO NAKASHIMA-LIZARAZO



A Conversation with AYANA MATHIS



Ayana Mathis's first novel, The Twelve Tribes of Hattie (Knopf, 2012), was a New York Times Bestseller, second selection for Oprah's Book Club 2.0, and a 2013 New York Times Notable Book. It was also an NPR Best Book of 2013, long listed for the Dublin Literary Award, and nominated for Hurston/Wright Foundation's Legacy Award. Mathis's nonfiction has been published in The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Financial Times, Rolling Stone, Guernica, and Glamour. Her work has been supported by the New York Public Library's Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, and the Bogliasco Foundation. She was a 2020-2021 American Academy in Berlin Prize Fellow. Mathis received her MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and went on to become the first African-American woman to serve as an assistant professor in that program. She currently teaches at Hunter College's MFA Program and is working on an essay series, "Imprinted by Belief," on American literature and faith, for The New York Times. Her newest novel, The Unsettled, has just appeared from Knopf.

This interview took place when Ayana was a featured speaker at Weber State University's National Undergraduate Literature Conference (NULC) in March 2022. It has been edited for length and clarity. Thank you, Ayana!

Coming here has been two years in the making. I'm so grateful to be here. Thank you.

Would you be willing to share an opening statement or something that resonates with you?

Sure. I thought I might read very briefly from *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*. This chapter is called "Floyd." Floyd is one of Hattie's children. He's an adult, but he's a very, very young man when this story takes place. The story takes place in the 1940s. He's a jazz musician, he's gay, and he's not particularly at peace with that. He's left home, really for the first time, and he's traveling around the South to make a name for himself in juke joints. He is also struggling with confronting his sexuality. The other thing to know is that Hattie, the title character in this novel, has lost her firstborn twins to pneumonia early on. So, the novel is sort of prompted by the loss of those twins. (Reads, followed by applause)

So, I actually marked that section. Your imagery is vivid and very descriptive. It made me feel as if I was a part of Floyd and what he was going through and experiencing. I love how you said he was the only person in this world whom Hattie was serene with, because she wasn't described that way with the other kids. So, they had a special bond. Can you talk about that bond, the social mores of being gay, being a Black man, a talented jazz musician, and not being able to share his love?

Sure. This story takes place in 1948. At that time, he wouldn't have had a name for—or the names that he would have had, would have been pretty nasty—for his desires and for his sexuality. The way we would talk about these things now would not be anywhere near the way he would have understood himself or anything about himself at that period. Within that excerpt I just read, there's a line that says he finds himself "drifting further away from reasonable desires." So, I think a good

way to think about it is that he would consider himself, and his desires, to be absolutely out of the realm of reason, or decency, or what is even imaginable. Certainly, beyond random moments of sex that he has with folks that he meets when he's on the road, any furthering of those relationships would have been absolutely impossible for him to even conceive of. In fact, later in the same chapter, he meets a young man, Lafayette, in a town that he stops in. He's traveling around with this woman with whom he's having sex—which would have been quite standard—when he meets this guy, and part of the grappling between them, and one of the central questions of the chapter of the book, is that this young man is the first person with whom he thinks, well, maybe I could be with this person, and we could have a thing—which he doesn't even have a name for, actually. Of course, he realizes that for him that would be absolutely, utterly impossible. They would be pariahs. They would be objects of violence, and he can't deal with that, either from the perspective of what would happen to him, or from the perspective of what he would think of himself. So, it's a difficult moment for him. When he has this reckoning with himself, he concludes that he is both abhorrent because of what he wants and a coward because he is unable to act on it or to accept it. Your point about Hattie, his mother: yes, she is aware of this on some level, but she's just kind of, like, we're not discussing this; I'm not going to acknowledge this about you. But they do have a special bond because at that moment, right after she has lost her children in the first story, she is approachable in her grief.

It was gut wrenching to read that relationship — Floyd not being able to connect with his mother in so many ways, but then also not being able to connect with a possible partner. Lafayette was persecuted, too. He was courageous, he was kicked out, and people already knew about his sexual preferences. I wondered, with all the tribes and the

beautiful words you attach to their description, how do they continue on? Are you going to continue with them in another series, taking each one of those tribes and expanding to see where they're at? Floyd had a long-standing jazz career afterwards, but maybe not. Will you let us know where they ended up, or will you leave them as is because it's already an incredible novel?

I always feel terrible when people ask me that question. (Laughter) Because of the way they arrived in my life and psyche, we had our time together, then they went their way, and I went mine. But never say never, right? Perhaps, one day, long down the line. But I don't think so. These folks are dear to me, although now they seem like people that I knew a really long time ago and I don't really remember them. One of the things that I was interested in while trying to write this novel was to ask questions about what a family of people would look like who do not in any real way rely upon each other. They're not, in any real way, in relationships with one another, certainly not on the page. So, I was interested in this idea of being "alone in a crowd." When you meet each of these folks, they're in some sort of "moment of crisis." And I was interested in what these people would be like in this pressure cooker. So, you meet them in a very particular, singular moment in their lives. This novel veers between characters, and we move through time in that way. And so I don't think I was interested in knowing how their whole lives unfolded, or who they were in the long-term. I was interested in knowing where they had come from, who they were in that moment, who their difficult and complicated relationship with their mother would make them, and how their family life would impact who they were at a particular moment. Their class moment, their moment in history. I was really interested in compressing them into these moments of action or reaction, but I wasn't necessarily interested knowing them in the long-term, if that makes any sense.

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As a reader, I can, of course, fully respect that, but am still going to wonder and make up their life stories in my head. (Laughter) There are also some common themes that impact underrepresented minorities, such as intergenerational poverty and trauma. Can you talk about wealth, or lack thereof, and intergenerational poverty, and their effects on your characters? Alice, for example, "married up" intentionally, and she did so for her brother, and she wanted to drive and invest in her family. That theme is still with us today.

That's a big question. I'll start off by saying certainly those themes are there, certainly there is an inherited pain, both on a psychic level and in the body. There are a lot of physical things also happening with characters in this book—their bodies are very important, and what happens to their bodies is very important. There's the moment in which these folks live—Hattie is born in Georgia, in the early part of the 20th century, as is her husband, August. They migrate to Philadelphia; they are a Great Migration family. When I begin writing my characters, I don't begin with historic history—capital H. I don't begin with trauma—capital T. I don't begin with sociological situations—capital S. I begin with human beings. And so, what I was interested in was creating human beings who were as believable, as real, as full, as I could possibly make them. Certainly, at the same time, if that is your aim, then you are inevitably thinking about their racial situation, their historical situation, their class situation, their gender situation, and their sexuality situation. But those things don't become capital letters; they become the components of who a person is. We can make one of two dreadful mistakes. As a nation and as a people, we tend to believe that history is this thing frozen in time, like a statue, and we look back at it and isolate who we have been and what has happened from who we are now and what continues to happen. So that's massive mistake number one. And then there's another massive mistake on the opposite side of it. I'm probably going to get myself into trouble, but I'm saying this anyway: sometimes in literature, when we want to address these things, we reduce people to their historical categories. And we end up in the sort of place where we freeze people, flattening them into non-entities. We create ciphers of historical realities instead of people living inside of history. History is small-age, a long story about what people did and what they didn't do, how folks reacted to it and how they didn't, who tells whom what, and when they told them. History lives

inside of our bodies and our experiences. So, if you start with the body and the experience and the people, you can expand out and talk about history—capital H. Race—capital R. The sociological reality—capital S. That is the sort of way that I think about these people and the way that I think about writing.

There are no white people in this novel. There are no white people in the novel that I'm currently writing. To quote Toni Morrison, "When I think of people, I think of Black people." That comes out on the page. But I also don't identify people by race. Often in novels, there's John, Jim, Sally, and Kim. And then there's a Black woman named Marjorie. My grounding in how I think about characters, and who I think they

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are, is deeply rooted in an African American way. But the project was not to make African American characters, it was to make people.

Going back to and reflecting on common themes – there’s a strong theme around mental health and the lack of healthcare. There is also the issue of child mortality – the characters don’t have access to penicillin, but instead use herbs and folklore. That’s what embeds us as a culture. I love how you share that it doesn’t have to be contemporary medicine that helped them, yet that’s what kills them off. Then there is the whole complex of World War 2. How much research and time did you spend researching those topics? What was your approach to making sure that you got it right?

I tell the story about the writer Edward P. Jones. He has written two incredible collections of short stories and also a novel called *The Known World*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007. When I was a student at Iowa, Jones came and gave a talk. *The Known World* is set in the Antebellum South, and someone asked him about his research for the novel. And he said, “Well, the thing is, if you tell the reader that you are in Virginia, and it’s 1855, and you’re on a lonely road, as long as you describe it well enough, they’ll believe you until somebody’s cell phone rings.” (Laughter) I thought it was funny, but it was a way for him to describe his research. Every writer I’ve ever known has been a great big procrastinator. They will do almost anything except write things, myself included. I’ll do almost anything except actually writing, so research can become this act of practical, pragmatic, lengthy procrastination. So, to get back specifically to this book, and the process of this book, if I was going into one of the chapters where I felt like I didn’t know anything about the topic at all—for instance, I have a chapter that talked about tuberculosis—I would look into symptoms, what kind of medicine was needed, really minimal research, and then

I would write it. We all have these immense pools of other kinds of knowledge and things inside of us that we don’t really know that we have until we’re sort of forced to draw on them. And then this knowledge comes to your aid in ways that I find miraculous sometimes. So, I just write and then, more than research, I fact check. Because I find that if I research too much, then I’ll just research and I will not write. Sometimes, I can get caught up in attempting to recreate facts in a way that is not necessarily helpful to me as a writer. My imagination gets a bit frozen if I know too much going in. So, I sort of try to know the bare minimum, enough to not make an absolute fool of myself or to make plot errors based on absurdly incorrect facts, and then I fact check.

You are transporting readers into a fascinating, horrible, and oppressive world, which is marked by an impressive resiliency and intergenerational hope. Patty at the end of the novel, for example, is as much resigned as she is vested in caring for her granddaughter. What was your intent in representing this intergenerational family bond, with grandparents taking care of this fourth or fifth generation?

The simple answer is that it just worked to end it there. The more complicated answer would be that one of the things that I was interested in while writing this novel was that it spans the greater part of the 20th century. There’s some movement in Hattie, from a kind of extreme hopefulness of youth to the despair of adulthood: she’s very young when she gets married, she has her children, the twins die. She’s come from a pretty bad situation in Georgia. When her father is killed, they go to Philadelphia. She’s kind of amazed by Philadelphia, she’s amazed by the sort of differences between Philadelphia and Georgia. And then she gets married, and she has these children. And so, she names them Philadelphia and Jubilee—sort of these hokey names, but names that a 17-year-old-girl who was

filled with hope, who was very naive, might actually give her children. And then that's all dashed and the chapters turn into many years of difficulty and sadness, being afraid, and seeing the kind of pressures that are exerted upon her as a human being. She was not very good at accepting help or relying on people. The rigors and realities of her history in that moment speak to the realities of this Black family in this period of time. She kind of rides out sixty years of her life in that way. And then she gets toward the end of life, she's in her 70s in that last chapter when we leave her, and I don't think that she's anything like what you would call "hopeful." But what I do think is noticeable is that she begins to think that there is some possibility that things could be different. She does think it's possible to reject the pain of the past. At the same time, I think that she has a kind of reverence for the past and what has happened to them all. There's not a sort of throwing out, or a "we're moving on," but the path widens a little bit for her.

The book ends in 1980. And I was sort of interested in the way that her journey might loosely reflect the journey of Black people. I hesitate to say that because that's really generalizing. There's sort of a movement from Jim Crow through the Civil Rights Movement. You're coming out of the Civil Rights Movement into the Black Power Movement. This is not to say the problem is solved, or to say that everything's better now, but I know that my generation, compared to my mother's or my grandparents', is able to see that there is a possibility that things can be different in a way that perhaps my grandparents wouldn't have been able to see. My mother is sort of toeing the line about being able to see. That movement of "Blackness" through the twentieth century was me trying to reframe those two things—Hattie's movement as a character and that larger movement—they kind of reflect each other in a certain way.

Thank you. Let me please open the floor for questions from audience members and our livestream attendees.

(Audience Member) I'm wondering where your inspiration comes from for your different characters?

I didn't actually intend to write a novel at all. I didn't intend to be writing short stories, which is in fact what these are. I'm a terrible short story writer. I was in grad school, and I was stuck on a thing that I had been working on. So, I said, I guess I'll write some short stories, but it was kind of embarrassing because I wasn't very good at them. That was the beginning of this book—short stories that weren't complete enough, but they had some characters that were compelling and were in situations that had some juice and were compelling. The chapters in the novel sort of mimic short stories, but they are not in that they are not complete. They're not entirely autonomous—that's sort of their power, if the book has any. These stories work in concert, not as individuals. In terms of the characters themselves—Hattie and August, her husband, are sort of inspired by my grandparents who left the South—not Georgia, but a different place—and came to Philadelphia in the early part of the twentieth century. That said, the book is not them. The book is, in certain ways, a kind of re-imagining. These are first-generation immigrants. We don't think very often of the Great Migration as an immigration movement, but in fact it is. It parallels immigration stories from outside of the country—people who are fleeing untenable, violent terrorism in which their health and wellbeing are completely compromised at every turn, to go to a place where there's the possibility that their lives might be better. The only difference is that this is an intra-national movement instead. Many of those first-generation immigrants mimic the story of many immigrants. There's a silence to them. My grandparents did not talk about the South, they did not talk about their experience there. They did not talk about the lives that they had, they didn't talk about the people they knew. My mother knows nothing about the

South, absolutely nothing. She was born in Philadelphia. There's a lot of silence about where folks came from, and I think—just to expand the conversation out, or actually just to link it to other larger conversations about immigration—you find the same kinds of patterns. The first generation is silent. There's a gap in historical knowledge, there's a gap in cultural knowledge, for the second generation. You were born in the new place, but because of the silence of the first generation—a silence born out of a trauma and a desire to protect, to help that second generation assimilate and integrate and thrive in the new place—one of the things that happens is that the second generation finds itself really unmoored, and sort of afloat. They're in this new place, and there's no roadmap; there's no way to understand yourself, there's no way to understand who you're supposed to be. We find this in the Great Migration over and over again. So, in many ways, to go back to your question, there's a lot of stuff about my grandparents that I don't know. In some ways, this book was kind of me trying to imagine my way into what their experiences could have been, and who they actually were beyond what they were willing to tell me. And then a lot of it's just me making stuff up. (Laughter)

(Audience Member) You talked about Hattie's emotional relationship with her kids. Was that born from the trauma of losing her twins? Or did you already decide to develop her character that way?

That's an excellent question. So much of writing in novels makes it appear as if one knows a whole lot more than you actually know. When a novel arrives to people, finished, and some lovely editors have brought their incredibly big and smart helpful brains to it, and you've done all this stuff, it looks as if, surely, you knew the whole thing. And very often, you have absolutely no idea. You know, Hattie started as a character who appeared in one of my short stories that I was writing. She was

an unnamed, older woman who was tending a sick child who was a grandchild, and she was remembering it. And she was lamenting the fact that she had spent so much of her life tending sick children. And she then had a kind of memory of her own firstborn children who had passed away. At that point, I didn't know she was Hattie. I didn't know where she came from. I didn't know anything about her life. But the story had legs, so I kept it, and I wrote different characters, different stories, and it began to be clear that she was sort of the through-line in these other three or four stories that I wrote out afterwards. I began to understand that if indeed she was the through-line, I needed to understand more about who she was and where she'd come from, and what had happened to her. And it also became very clear that the death of those children had shaped her in a profound way that she would never be able to talk about, that she would not be interested in talking about, because she's a very private woman. Her grief is her business, not yours. But she had this fear of losing subsequent children and had an expectation that the world would deal harshly with her and with her other children. So she had a desire to toughen her other children up so that they would be pre-

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pared for this world that would deal harshly with them. It begins to characterize her mood of motherhood. So, yes, the death of those children, very early on, is really important.

So much of fiction writing is about *you*. When you have shop-talk conversations with an editor about something you're beginning, you've got irreverent ways of talking about things. I was talking to my editor before the book was published, and we had this long conversation that was precipitated by an email with the subject line, "Dead Babies, or No?" (Laughter) There was a huge conversation about: can you kill babies in the first chapter of the novel? (Laughter) But at the end of the day, macabre jokes aside, I did have to kill the babies in the first chapter. Otherwise, you would never understand why Hattie is a hard woman, why she's angry, why she's really difficult. The fact that her children die is not an excuse. I've never been interested in making excuses. But I think that what it does do is give you some context for her, and for her state of mind and how she understands herself in the world and her other children. And I don't know that you would have gotten that context if that had happened later in the book, like a flashback. Dead babies are worth more than a flashback. I mean, if you're going to murder infants, then you need to do that some justice, however difficult that may be.

(Audience member) *What advice can you offer to aspiring Black female authors?*

Let's see, so much. First of all, I will say, read and read widely. We're in a moment, forgive me—I'm going to sound like an old, annoying woman who is terribly analog. We live in the reign of the algorithm. There is a rhythm where we are told you read this, so now read this. You listened to this song, so now listen to this stuff. And it has this narrowing effect on what we read, what we listen to, and what we think—most importantly, what we think. So, read outside of the algorithm.

Read outside of what the algorithm is telling you to read, and where it is directing you to go, and what it is directing you to think. So, that's the first thing. And understand that what you may encounter outside of the algorithm may sometimes be painful, may sometimes be triggering, may sometimes be traumatizing, may sometimes be beautiful, may sometimes be joyous, may sometimes be unexpected. I think that to write and to write well, we have to consume as much art in general as we possibly can. So that's the first thing that I would say. The second thing I would say is—I went to this great talk by Theaster Gates, the amazing visual artist, which he gave at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, one of the largest African American libraries in the country; it's in New York City, in Harlem. So, the audience was largely Black and Theaster Gates is Black. Someone in the audience, an art student, said, "I'm trying to think about what to do about art and representation," and Gates said the most incredible thing, which was: "We [meaning Black artists] are not beholden more than anyone else to represent anything." And

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I think that's really, really important. Because I think that there is a "you," right? Where you are led to write, and what you want to write, and you write what is beautiful to you, or what is ugly to you, or you read your obsessions, whatever those might be. My obsessions are Black people, so that's what I keep on writing. But my obsessions also are things like what a psyche does under pressure, how we understand, there's all these sorts of things. I think that it's very important to not feel that you are limited in any way in your subject

matter. Because I think those limitations that are placed on Black artists, and artists of color, in general, are absolutely as racist as the things that we sometimes think we are writing to combat. I am allowed to think whatever I want. And in fact, I do, that is my freedom. And that is also your freedom as an artist. So, I would say, think widely, read widely, write widely. Whatever it is that you want to write, and wherever it is that you want to be. Yeah, those are the two things.

Thank you so much. This was a great conversation.



Zac Williams

Michiko Nakashima-Lizarazo is the former director of the Center for Multicultural Excellence at Weber State University.