

Nikole Hannah-Jones on Using Narrative to Make Us See the Invisible

This is a lightly edited transcript of Nikole Hannah-Jones' speech from the seventh edition of The Power of Storytelling conference, which took place on October 20-21 in Bucharest, Romania. This year's keynotes and events revolved around the theme "Closer," and the 13 speakers – among them Pulitzer Prize winners Jacqui Banaszynski and Tom French, MacArthur Fellows Sarah Stillman and Nikole Hannah-Jones and World Press Photo of the Year winner Finbarr O'Reilly – tackled the troubling realities of our age – uncertainty, fear, inequality, misinformation – and looked at how stories can explain them, put them in context, while also giving a voice to those that have not been heard.

2017 MacArthur Fellow Nikole Hannah-Jones talked about how we can use narrative to make people see the stories of marginalized people, using examples from her work covering racial segregation in the U.S.

I write about racial inequality in the United States; there is nothing more entrenched that you can write about in my country than writing about race, racial injustice and racial disparity. But the truth is even though this is fundamental and foundational to living in the United States, this is a history and a truth that most Americans are in denial about. It's a history that is very hard to bear and admit when you believe that your country is an exceptional beacon of freedom and democracy in the world, yet you are founded on the forced bondage of millions of people. So what we largely do in the United States is kind of skip over that messy part, and by skipping over that messy part, then we can somehow pretend that the inequality we see today is not our heritage. That it is just a matter of certain marginalized groups in the United States choosing not to live in better circumstances than what they do.

I know you guys are coming from a bunch of different countries, but one of the things that I have learned – I don't know if it gives me peace or if it gives me heartache – is that every country has its marginalized people, that this seems to be a part of human nature. So what I will be talking about specifically – the black Americans in the United States and how to make them visible – will likely translate to your own countries and whoever those marginalized and invisible communities are, wherever you come from.

Those of you who know my work know that my work is deeply historical, so I'm going to start with a brief history lesson, because I can't help myself. I think it's useful to know that when I say that race and racism is foundational to the United States, it is literally foundational. Before there was a United States, we had decided that black Americans were not going to be treated as human beings, that they were going to be treated as property and owned and not have any rights in the country where they lived and the country where their children would be born.

In 1607, the English land at Jamestown.

1619. The first Africans are imported to what will become the United States to be slaves. Only 12 years after the English who will establish the United States land, we'd have already imported people who will be the distinct class of people in the United States.

1776. We have the Declaration of Independence. So as you see, 150 years before we even decide to become a country, there were black people who were held in bondage. Thomas Jefferson, who of course was a slave owner who owned his own children as slaves and didn't free them until his death, originally put slavery in the Declaration of Independence and he believed that slavery was actually the scourge of a nation that was claiming it was going to be a beacon of

democracy. But in order to get the Declaration ratified by a country that was ruled by slave owners, he had to remove that passage from the original Declaration of Independence, and that is why the passage about slavery is not in that declaration.

1865. The Civil War ends slavery. It's been amazing the last few weeks with Charlottesville and debates about Confederate monuments and, of course, the Confederacy in the United States left the Union and fought against the rest of the Union in order to preserve the institution of slavery. Yet in the United States we are still debating, in 2017, whether or not the Civil War was about slavery. The Civil War was about slavery, in case anyone's curious. And the Civil War ends slavery in 1865, and then we immediately enter into a hundred years of legal apartheid, of legal discrimination against black Americans, that denies them their full citizenship rights; and black Americans do not get full legal status in the United States, the country of not only their birth, but their parents' birth, their grandparents' birth, their great-grandparents' birth. Most black Americans have been in the United States before most any other immigrant group who came there after, but those groups immediately were restored with the rights that black Americans were denied.

The last civil rights law guaranteeing full citizenship rights was passed in 1968. That was the Fair Housing Law and that's the act that makes it illegal to discriminate against people and housing, based on their race, their religion, whether they have a disability and whether they have children or not.

1976 is a great year. 1976 is eight years after we finally get full citizenship rights for black Americans and then this lovely young lady is born. (*shows picture of herself as a little girl*). As you see even then, I had a fondness for big hair though I wasn't my own hairstylist back then. I'm born in 1976 and I point

that out, I think this timing is important, because I do think it is important to understand this is not a foreign distinct past. Nine years before I'm born, it was actually illegal in most states for me to exist. Because nine years before I was born is when the United States finally gets rid of the ban on black and white people being married. Prior to that it was illegal in many states for black and white people to be in a marriage. My mother is white, my father is black.

My father was born in Mississippi, which is a very deep Southern state, in 1946, at a time when black people in that state had almost no legal rights, he was born on a shared cropping farm. I don't know if you guys are familiar with that term, but it is a form of land peonage that replaces slavery, where black Americans are bound to the land, I understand that there was something similar to that here in Romania. And what that meant is they had to buy all of their equipment, all of their seed, they had to work the land and they were supposed to get a percentage of the profits made of the land, but of course there were never any profits. And so, every year, black people would be in debt to the land owner and it was basically another form of forced servitude.

Two years after my father was born, it's when black children had to start going into the fields and my grandmother decided she didn't want her children to pick cotton as she had and as her grandmother had and as her great-grandmother had before her. And she loaded my father up and his two siblings on a train – they had nothing but a suitcase and a box of cold fried chicken – and they go to the North, hoping to escape the discrimination and racism of the South. But unfortunately, racism is not a southern phenomenon in the United States, it is an American phenomenon.

They moved to a small town called Waterloo, Iowa, and they found the same type of discrimination that she thought she had escaped in the South. I am then

born into this small Midwestern town, into a very segregated society where I grew up in a segregated black neighbourhood and then would go on to go to a segregated black school.

I loved to read, I was very curious, I loved history. I think I started getting Time magazine in middle school, I remember reading about the Berlin Wall coming down in my own edition of Time magazine that I actually still have at home. I was always very curious about the world, and history always calmed me. I would hear all of the things and I would see media that said black people were living in the conditions they lived in simply because they didn't want better, but then I would see how hard my own family members worked and now they never seemed to be able to get ahead. And I knew that black people didn't like living in poor shabby housing. I mean, logically that just doesn't make sense.

I began to study and read a lot of history. When I got to high school, I started being bused as a young child to majority white schools, as part of a desegregation order. I went to these white schools, and my high school newspaper never wrote about the black kids like me who were bused from the other side of the town. One day I went to my one black teacher I had in high school and I was complaining to him about how I didn't feel our newspaper covered us, and he said, "You either join your high school paper or shut up and don't complain about it anymore."

I took his advice and joined the high school paper and I started writing about black kids like me, and at that point I was hooked. Because that was when I understood what we all understand, which is why we are here, which is the power of storytelling. And not just the power of storytelling but the power of being able to tell your own stories and not allowing someone else to frame how you are seen to the world, but to do that framing for yourselves. That's how I

came to be a journalist. My column was called *From the African perspective*, and I think one of my first columns was whether or not Jesus was black, and I can tell you my early investigation found I couldn't prove that he was black, but I certainly could prove that he didn't have blonde hair and blue eyes, so I figured that was a win.

I knew then that I wanted to write about race. That this was a theme that I was called to do, that if I was going to be a reporter, it didn't do any good for a girl from a background like mine to be writing about business or to be writing about the arts. I wanted to write about this thing that I thought was central to the United States, which was racial injustice. And the lovely and ugly thing about that is there's nothing in the United States that racial inequality doesn't touch. Anything that you can measure, black Americans are at the bottom and sometimes kind of vying at the bottom with indigenous people, who also didn't choose to come and be part of the United States. There's nothing that you can't measure, except osteoporosis. I actually found osteoporosis is the one thing that white people have worse than black people, so there you go. But outside of that, if you look at anything – incarceration, higher education – you can go down the list. So what was I going to cover?

I decided pretty early on that my very first beat as a journalist was covering education. I started writing about education in a majority black, very segregated school system in the South. And it was right at that time that the United States had decided that we had left behind any thought of trying to integrate black students or Latino students anymore. We were just going to hold those schools to the same standards as white schools and the belief was that suddenly you were going to get the same results as the white schools. So I'm covering education and seeing the fallacy of all of this.

The thing about education being so important in the United States is that we were very early a country that decided that we believe in universal education. That if we were to be a great nation it couldn't just be the wealthy, it couldn't just be the powerful's children that would be able to get an education; that we had to be an educated society to be a democratic society. We are one of the first nations that offer universal education to our children. And Horace Mann is considered the father of the American public school, and what he said is that education being on all of the devices of human origin is a great equalizer of the conditions of men. And in our country we truly believe that. We believe that public education allows you – no matter where you come from, or who you are – to get going to the doors of the school and you will come out with the same education as someone who has much more money and much more power than you, and you can change a lot in life through education. Except I was seeing every day that that wasn't actually true, for lots and lots of kids. And what I was seeing was that in fact we had two philosophies of education in this country, really from the founding of public education: educating certain children for democracy, and educating certain children for oppression.

From the beginning of my talk, or if you know anything about the United States, you can imagine who's being educated for democracy and who's being educated for oppression. Because even Horace Mann, when he decides that he wants to convince Massachusetts to open common schools for all children, realizes he has to make a trade-off. If he wants white tax payers and white politicians to support common schools for the white working class, he has to eliminate black people from that equation. Because he couldn't get the support if he were to educate black children in these publicly funded schools.

At the very beginning we have decided that what we really mean by common schools is common schools for white children, and black children would receive

no education unless they could pay for it themselves. So it's because of that that I decided that school education was the thing I needed to focus the most on, because this is where we truly believe that you can change your condition. This is where we believe our most democratic ideals come into place, that this is where the masses mix and they come out with the same education.

I decided in 2013-2014 that I was going to write almost exclusively on school segregation. This was about the time a very important anniversary in the United States, which is the anniversary of what's considered the greatest Supreme Court Ruling of the 20th century and I would say probably the greatest Supreme Court Ruling of the history of our country, which is called Brown V. Board of Education. That ruling happens in 1954 and it outlaws school segregation in the United States. We were approaching the 60th anniversary of Brown [v. Board] and I knew that I had spent all my time in segregated classrooms that looked as if we had never passed this law; and I was going to write a story about this.

The problem was: no one really cared. Which seems to be a theme about many of the things that we cover, those of us who are storytellers here. We're interested in those deeply entrenched things that are so important but no one cares about. And part of the reason they don't care is because they are so entrenched. It's hard to get people to care about poverty because people feel like it won't change, that there's nothing you can do about it. That is just the way society is. And that is how school segregation was seen in the United States in 2013.

I set up a Google alert to see who was writing about it, I wanted to see every report that was coming out, and I could go sometimes a month, two months without a single article about school segregation, even though schools were more segregated now than they were in 1970. I knew that in deciding to do this,

I was going to have a big lift in convincing an editor to let me spend months and months on a project on school segregation, when no one was interested in this anymore. When I say anymore, I don't mean just conservatives. Progressives were not interested in it either, progressives had also accepted that it was too hard and we didn't need to try anymore, and we had basically gone back to the idea that separate was OK as long as we treated the schools the same. I remember when I tried to pitch this story to The Atlantic magazine, they were like, "Yeah, yeah, we already know that story." I was like, "Oh, OK. Tell me." And then it got quiet. People think they know the story, but they actually don't. I think with a lot of the stories that we're trying to talk about – mass incarceration, poverty, the stories that Sarah talks about, war – we think we know the story. Our job as storytellers – if we want to get people to care about things that seem to be fixed in our country – is we have to figure out a way to make them see the story in a different way and to help them understand they actually don't know the story at all.

There's a couple of ways that are pretty standard in my work.

1. My stories have to be **meticulously reported**. If I'm trying to tell you that what you think - which is that segregation is not really a problem anymore because it's not forced by law – is not right, I have to do the type of reporting that makes an argument. That's what I think all my work is doing, making an argument. I have to convince you that what you think is right is actually not right. I'm going to give you a quick example. This was a year-long investigation I did on school re-segregation in the South. I thought it was important to show my work, particularly because this was before fake news, but we can't expect that people will trust what we're telling them, just because we are an authority, because people don't necessarily trust reporters anymore. And they shouldn't; we should have to show our work. I included the source notes for my

investigation. Every single fact in the story, I show you where I got it from. It was a long story.

The reporting has to be absolutely meticulous, reporting that cannot be disputed. If there's a study, if there's a fact, if there's data, I'm going to tell you what that is. I read obsessively on anything that I'm reporting on, I get to the point sometimes where experts are calling me about the research, which actually feels kind of cool.

2. The stories have to be **intensely narrative**, which I'm going to talk more about a little bit later. It can't be a story about abstract concepts, and we all know this. This is a storytelling conference for a reason; this is the original form of communication. If you don't have humanity, you can spend a year on a blockbuster investigation and expose the worst scandal in the world, if people can't relate to why that matters on a human level, they're not going to care. When I'm writing about school segregation, if I'm just throwing out a bunch of statistics, and I'm just showing you that it's happening, no one actually cares. All of my stories do this very common thing, but that actually takes a lot of time, because narrative means you don't just have a narrative at the top and then a bunch of facts and an anecdote at the bottom. Narrative means you're telling a story all the way through, and that means you have to spend a lot of time gathering the information to be able to tell the story all the way through.

3. The third hallmark of my work is that it's **deeply historical**. I'm making an argument that things are the way they are because this is how we have decided that they should be over a long period of time. And all of the effort that went into creating inequality -- if you want to undo it, you have to put an equal amount of effort into undoing it. We like things the easy way: fast-food nation, right? We want to believe that, even though it may have taken from 1619 to

1978 to create this, that somehow if we try it for about 45 minutes, we should be able to do it, and if we didn't fix it, then we should move on.

The running joke in my office is every one of my stories starts in 1619. If you look at my Twitter, that's what I say: I cover race from 1619. And that's just my way of saying this is foundational, which I know I keep saying, but I feel that for my work it is so important to say this is not by accident. We have created this, and this is why it exists. You can take the laws off the books, you can suddenly say, "After 400 years it's not legal to discriminate anymore," but if you don't undo all of that, then it's not going to change just because the laws no longer say it.

From the beginning of this country, when we decide to enslave an entire race of people and give them a status that is particular to that race of people, at this point it is actually illegal to teach those people to read – you could be killed, you could be maimed, you could be jailed for teaching enslaved people to read. Why is that? Because we all understand this is why any time you have a dictator in any country, one of the first things they go after are intellectuals, because if you're reading, you're thinking, and if you're thinking, you're thinking about your circumstances and you don't want to accept them.

The book that I'm working on is basically arguing that we are still educating in the same way. We are educating black Americans to accept their second-class status. This is a quote from a former slave, where he said, "The one sin that slavery committed against me which I will never forgive is that it robbed me of my education."

1954. The Supreme Court rules that school segregation is unconstitutional and the way we are commonly taught this history in America is all of a sudden after

all this time, when the Supreme Court rules, all the white people are like, “Damn, that was wrong, you're right.” And we all hold hands and we're friends and it's all equal and anything that is segregation now is just a matter of choice. What we don't say is that there was violent and massive resistance to this ruling in the United States.

Ruby Bridges is 6 years old and it is her job to become the first black child in the South to integrate in a white elementary school. (*shows picture*) These guys on her side are the U.S. marshals who had to protect her from the angry white mob who wanted to violently hurt her rather than allow her to be the one black child in an all-white school.

This lovely little girl is out there with the mob of protesters, and what you see is a little black baby in a casket that was being carried around as Ruby Bridges is trying to enter the school, as a warning to her and her family of what her fate would be if she dared cross the racial color line.

Where do these people go? Ruby Bridges is 62 years old, she's younger than my mother. You had this type of resistance – and we should say schools were burned down, men were castrated, people were killed, a church was bombed in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four little girls, all to avoid black children being integrated into white schools. These people are still living, yet the way we are taught in America is that racism is gone and we don't have to deal with it anymore. The truth is that resistance lasted nearly 25 years and it's not until the 1970s that we start to see real desegregation in the United States because it is forced by the Courts and it is forced by the Congress and it is forced by the Executive Branch.

There's never been a time where even half of black kids have gone to majority white schools, in a country where black people are only 13 percent of the population. And desegregation peaks in 1988. After we start desegregation, we already start going backwards.

The most remarkable chart to me is a chart of test scores, divided by race. In the United States we call it the racial achievement gap, which is the gap between the test scores of white children and black children. In 1988, at the peak of school integration, that gap was the narrowest; it had actually been cut in half in less than one generation, and that it expands again as we walk away from school segregation in the United States, and we've never got back to that point.

All of this data was readily available, but I was writing about education and no education reporters were writing about segregation or integration, and everyone's trying to figure out: How do we call this racial achievement gap, how do we get black and white children to score the same, to have the same opportunities? And the answer was very clear: This is the only thing in the United States that has ever worked on scale to close the racial achievement gap and it was the one thing that everyone kind of colluded – journalists, politicians, policy makers, parents – not to talk about.

Now I was going to talk about it. Largely because, as a child, I myself was bused as part of an integration program. I got out of segregated schools and into integrated schools because of this program and I believe I undoubtedly would not be standing before you today had I not had that experience. But the experience of most education reporters who are white and who are women was that they went to high-functioning majority white schools and they had children themselves now that they weren't really interested in having to have them attend schools that were being desegregated.

So this is the way I saw the story: 1953-2016. Somehow in America we've convinced ourselves that 1953 was wrong and 2016 is OK. And this particular classroom, these children, they're in high school, they had never attended school with a child who wasn't black, their entire education. (*shows picture*)

One thing that's also very particular to America is America believes that only Southern white people are racist and Northern white people are good white people, but the most segregated city in the United States is actually New York City, where I live; it has the third-most-segregated schools in the country, and the most segregated cities in the entire country are all Northern progressive Democrat-voting blue cities. To this day, after the civil rights movement, black Americans remained the most segregated group of people in the United States, both in terms of housing and in terms of schools. And if you ever come to America and get off the touristy parts of it, it becomes very stark, because most black people are segregated in the large American cities that people love to visit when they come to the United States! they don't tend to see those parts.

Why does it matter? Why does my reporting matter? If segregation weren't harmful, I wouldn't care about it. The thing is, when I go into these classrooms, I see that we are not providing an equal education to black children who have been segregated, as we never have in the history of the United States. And what is true today is the same thing that was true in 1954, when the Supreme Court banned mandatory segregation: that you can predict the resources of an American school by the color of the children in that building. The more black kids in that building, the less likely those schools aren't to have any of the resources that white children have. The reason that integration matters in the United States is because it's the only way that we'd ever guarantee that black children get the same resources as white children get.

Further, the long-term research shows that it has long effects on outcomes for black children. We're very obsessed with test scores in the United States and we believe that equality comes if two children, a black and a white child, can score the same on a test. But the Supreme Court never actually mentions test scores in *Brown v. Board*; what it talks about is citizenship. That the ability to have the same education and not be separated from other children is the ability to be a full citizen in your own country. And we are depriving still millions of black children and increasingly Latino children in our country of their citizenship rights.

3. The other hallmark of my work is that this it is **deeply historical**. We in America are both obsessed with talking about race, and also terrible at it. And so, we talk about race all the time, but it's always some nebulous thing in the sky somewhere and no one's ever responsible for it, and there's nothing we can do about it because it's just there. My work very meticulously tries to show the way that it is intentional.

At the same time, I don't care if it's intentional or not. I think what we also want to do in America, we have this obsession of reading the hearts of people. Did you segregate those children because you hate black children or just because it was convenient? Doesn't really matter to me. You did it and it was harmful and you could predict the harm. And I think we, in America, are so afraid that if we can't prove that you actually did it out of discrimination, then it doesn't matter.

The most important part, of course, is the narrative. Is getting people to see people who are different from them, people who are historically marginalized, to be able to see that humanity – and I hate even having to say that, because why should I have to humanize a human being? But we all know that we do. If I

can't see myself in you, I somehow care less about what's happening to you and your children. I get e-mails all the time from people who say the black community needs to get itself together and do this. And I always respond, "Are they not all of them our children? Are these not American children?"

I decided to do this story on school segregation, and I knew I wanted to tell this long history going back to around 1940 to 2016, and how the hell do you get someone to sit with that much history? Especially in America. I decided then I was going to tell the story through three generations of one family. The young lady in the middle whose name is D'Leisha, she was at this segregated school and she had never gone to school with a white child, but her mother had gone to integrated schools because of court order. Her grandfather had gone to all segregated schools. So it was this beautiful narrative device where, by starting with the grandfather, I could tell the history of segregation, I could tell the mother story, which was the history of desegregation, and then the story of re-segregation through the granddaughter that's going to schools that looked just like her grandfather's schools. In the same town, actually, the exact same schools her grandfather had gone to. It ended up being a very powerful piece because people could care about the past; by telling it through three generations of one family, I was linking the past to this very personal story. It wasn't an abstraction, you could see the impacts of all of these decisions.

And then last year I ended up telling my own story, which makes you very uncomfortable as a journalist. We're not supposed to write about ourselves, this is ingrained in us, that the story is not about us, and I honestly believe that. But I've been at this point writing about school segregation for about four years, exclusively. I did a radio piece that went pretty viral, that *Segregation Now* piece, and I'd made the decision to enrol my own daughter in a segregated, high-poverty black school. Because I felt all the years of writing about this I

would meet activists and reporters who talked about how bad segregation was and how unfair, and then they would do their own privilege to make sure that their own children would never have to go to school with those kids. I personally don't believe my daughter's better than any other child, and I didn't feel like I could write about these children and say that they deserve the same things as our kids, but then make sure my kid never had to sit next to them.

So I enrolled my daughter in a very segregated city, in a high-poverty segregated school, not attempting to ever write about it. It was just a personal decision, and then that school became embroidered in its own integration battle. Our school was a black school under-enrolled and less than a mile away, with a very over-crowded rich white school, that the school district decided it was going to transfer some of those white children into our school for space. How well do you think that went over?

This very Brooklyn, New York, which is known as this very liberal progressive place, all of these very progressive white people were up in arms and holding all of these meetings and saying very ugly things about my daughter's school. It became national news because the media loves a story that shouldn't be, which is, you would think, white people in Brooklyn wouldn't mind integration. I started getting all of these e-mails and calls from people who said, "Are you watching what's happening in Brooklyn? Are you going to write about it?" Of course they don't know my daughter is in that school.

So it came to a point where I had to write this story. And I had to write this story because I just didn't like the way it was being covered. It was the first time when I was not writing about school segregation as a journalist, but as a parent, and as a parent who understands how difficult it is to try not to get every advantage for your child. That's almost antithetical to what it is to be a parent.

This ended up being the most popular piece I've ever written, and people responded to this in a way that I didn't expect. I'm very jaded; I actually don't expect anything I write to ever make a difference. I write about it because I feel like I must, because I feel like we can't ignore these children, I'm not going to let us not see them, but I don't expect things to change.

I imagine this is what drives some of the other storytellers in here. I've never subscribed to the view that the journalist is this objective observer. I'm not, and none of us are. Every decision we make, who we're going to talk to, who we're not, how we frame a story, where we place the story in the paper, whether we give that story 30 seconds or 5 minutes, these are all subjective decisions, they're all value judgments.

What drives me is rage. Because I think what we're doing to children is wrong, and I'm not going to pretend to be objective about it. I think it's hypocritical and I think that it's wrong. I got into journalism because I feel like we have to do better and if we're not going to do better, I'm not going to let us sit comfortably and pretend that everything is OK.

My work is trying to shift the way that we're thinking about things, to shift the conventional wisdom. In the United States, we have a big school privatization movement, we have gone away from the understanding of public schools as a common good and a public good and more now as an individual good – that every person is for him or herself. My work is trying to change that and say, “Let's think about what is that we really want as a society where you can only get the best you can get for your own child and I owe nothing to my neighbour.” But that is trying to change the way that we think.

This is something that I say when I give speeches all the time, and parents email me afterwards and people talk to me afterwards: “How can you not work to the advantage of your own child?” I'm trying to change the way we think about it, that if we're going to be hypocrites, let's just admit that we're hypocrites, because you can't want equality and advantage at the same time. It doesn't really work that way.

I think the most important thing that I'm trying to do with my work is to say: “We make choices. We don't want to sacrifice our own children.” I hear this all the time: “I want equality, but I can't sacrifice my own child.” And so my work is asking: Whose children are we going to sacrifice then? These children? Are they not deserving? These children in this all black school in Tuscaloosa, who are going to go from failing school to failing school and then somehow be blamed when they are not able to compete with other Americans? This young lady who I did a radio piece on, who went to the worst high school in the worst district in the entire state of Missouri, was so bad that that district lost its accreditation and she got access because of that to white schools and all of a sudden it was black kids getting access to white schools that led the legislature of the state to do something? And what they did was try to change the law to force those kids back into their failing schools. Is she the kid that we sacrifice? Or is it D'Leisha, who's the young lady in Tuscaloosa that I wrote about, who was homecoming queen, class president, who was on the mayor's youth counsel, who took every tough academic course her high school had to offer, but couldn't get higher than a 16 on her ACT, while every other kid like her who's a star on a good American high school comes home every day to their mailboxes stuffed with college letters. No college came calling for her. And she ended up going to historical black college, the only college that she got into, not because she did not want better, not because she didn't value an education, but because we don't value kids like her and their education.

I'm going to close with the only thing, I think, that keeps me sane, because I don't expect that we're going to do right by these children, I don't expect that my work will one day...people will read it and suddenly decide that we're not going to sustain a system that is older than our country. But I must keep doing what it is that I do, and as storytellers writing about these issues, we must keep doing what we do. This James Baldwin quote I think is the thing that keeps me going: 'Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it's faced.'