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Episode 4: Tell Me Your Names and I Will Testify: Carolyn Holbrook with Sherrie Fernandez-Williams

<https://soundcloud.com/user-760891605/holbrook>

Host introduction: [*Tell Me Your Names and I Will Testify*](#) is a memoir in essays by [Carolyn Holbrook](#), who summons untold stories stifled by pain or prejudice or ignorance and ultimately demonstrates how creative writing can be a powerful tool for challenging racism. Holbrook was founder of the literary arts organization SASE, also known as [SASE: The Write Place](#) and now leads [More Than a Single Story](#), a series of community conversations for people of color and Indigenous writers and arts activists. She's joined here by [Sherrie Fernandez-Williams](#), a writer based in the Twin Cities and the author of [Soft: A Memoir](#). This edited conversation was recorded in July 2020.

Carolyn Holbrook: Hi, this is Carolyn Holbrook.

Sherrie Fernandez-Williams: This is Sherrie Fernandez-Williams. How are you, Carolyn?

CH: I'm doing well. How are you?

SFW: I'm doing great. I have to say that I love your book so much, *Tell Me Your Names and I Will Testify*. It's beautiful. Congratulations.

CH: Thank you so much. Thank you for being such a part of the book as well. You know, being part of the writing group and giving me so much feedback over these last few years has been just awesome.

SFW: Yeah, it's been such a gift to me. You know, I was thinking about first joining the group and meeting you and what a difference you've made in my life, particularly my writing life, connecting me to a publisher, sharing other opportunities to submit work, all of the facets of my writing career. You've been a part of that.

CH: Yeah, I do feel like I'm your big sister. I was the youngest girl in my family, so I needed a little sister, I think.

SFW: Yeah. I'm very happy to play that role. So, would you be OK if we start with Liza? The book opens up with this prologue, a beautiful prologue of you meeting an ancestor in the form of a ghost who came to visit. And she wanted to tell you to write her story. I feel that she and all of your ancestors would be very proud and that this book is the manifestation of their dreams.

CH: Yeah, I hope so. I mean, that is something I'll never, ever forget. I mean, I was just sitting in the living room alone, you know, getting ready to watch a movie after a long day at work. And I looked up and there she was standing by the front door of my apartment and she told me that, she said, "You have to tell our stories." And then she was gone. So, I've been sort of living with that as not only permission, but as a mandate, as something that I was commanded to do. And I hope she's happy with what I did.

SFW: I'm sure. I wonder, would you like to read a little bit of that section? Just to kind of get us started.

CH: Sure. When I turned 50, I found myself in a financial situation that was just really difficult. That was really hard to deal with. My parents have this beautiful duplex down in South Minneapolis and they rent the second floor. And just when I needed a place to go with my youngest daughter, the others were gone by then, their tenants moved out, and the place was available for me. So, I talk about that at first, just, you know, at the age of 50, having to move back into their house. It's unimaginable. But anyway, so here we go. I'm so glad it was available. So:

One evening a couple of months after we were settled in, I kissed my daughter goodbye and sent her off to whatever teenage thing she was doing that autumn night. It had been a long day of meetings for a new literary arts organization [that] I was in the process of building, [— that was SASE, Sherrie —] and I was looking forward to a night of solitude. I slid a movie into the VHS player and slumped down on the sofa and was about to dig into a bowl of freshly popped popcorn when I thought I saw something shadowy out of the corner of my eye. I didn't pay much attention, thinking it was probably my long-deceased maternal grandfather [who is somebody who visited me a lot back then. He doesn't anymore] ... Visits from loved ones who have passed on were not new to me. Just the year before, my sister called on me to help her decide whether to stay on the Earth plane or to cross over after she had suffered a brain aneurysm. Though she was in San Francisco and I was in Minneapolis, I reached through the veil and held her hand, and I knew the moment the aneurysm took her life. Also, my beloved stepfather paid me a reassuring visit when I woke up from surgery shortly after he passed away in 1984. And, of course, there was Grandfather Robert. But this was the first time a spirit showed up with an explicit command. Once I recovered and could breathe again, my mind was full of questions. Why was I the one she came to? What does she want me to say? What parts of my family's story want to be told, need to be told? Which will demand to be told? Who will be hurt by what I write? Who will be healed? It was impossible to sleep that night, so when Ebony got home—a few minutes past her curfew—I told her what had happened. All three of my daughters are used to hearing my stories of ghostly visitations, but a visit from a spirit with an explicit command was new to all of us. Ebony had questions that mirrored mine. So did my two older daughters, Iris and Tania, when I told them the next day. I knew I had no choice but to follow Liza's command, but I didn't have a clue where to begin. I thought that maybe my first step should be to

try and find out who she was. The next day I asked my mother if she knew of someone from our past named Liza. I was reluctant to share the reason for my question, fearing that she wouldn't believe me or would ridicule me for what she tended to characterize as my overactive imagination. Thankfully, she didn't ask, choosing only to tell me that she didn't know of anyone by that name. I then called my cousin Stephanie and my stepmother, Joyce, both genealogists. Joyce said she had found a Liza in my father's ancestry, but all she could give me was the name; she didn't know her story. Cousin Stephanie, on the other hand, who also receives occasional visitations, said she had uncovered an Eliza in her research of my matrilineal line: an enslaved woman who was living at the same time as the Liza my stepmother had found. Eliza had lived on the plantation of a slave owner named John Lee and gave birth to my mixed-race Grandfather Robert, giving him the surname Lee. She moved to Denver, Colorado, with her son in the Gold Rush era. It is unclear whether Eliza escaped after enduring sexual exploitation or if, perhaps, she was John Lee's mistress. From what we know of chattel slavery, either story could have been true. It is no secret that many of our foremothers were raped at random—often repeatedly by the same man, and then bore his children. We also know that slaves were sold at the whim of the “owner” whose “property” they were. But there are also stories of slave women and children who were taken care of by men who loved them. Based on some of what I know about the history of my people, of my family's history, and also of my own life, I started writing whatever came into my mind, mostly drivel. After a while, stories began to form. Most writers are familiar with the muse who helps us with our writing and the internal critic who tries to put roadblocks in our path. For me, the muse and the critic are the voices of my maternal aunts, both who have been in the ancestral realm for many years. Sometimes when I'm working on a difficult passage, I imagine them sitting on my shoulders: the aunt who held strong religious beliefs sits on my left shoulder shaking her finger and saying, “Now don't you go stirring things up.” My other aunt sits on my right shoulder, a cigarette in one hand and a glass of scotch in the other. She smiles encouragingly and says, “Don't hold back, child. Someone out there needs to hear what you have to say.” Sometimes it is difficult to find the balance between their words and mine, what to say and what to leave out. I do the best I can.

SFW: There's so much happening just in that section that you read. You talk about these visitations, early on, you talk about holding your sister's hand, although she was miles away from you when she was transitioning. And it seems like that's a big part of your life. Certainly, you know, the adult life that you describe in the book, just kind of like having this gift of sight. You might call it a deep intuition or a deep knowing, being just very spiritually attuned. And it seems like that's been the thing that has driven you in your life, the way you raised your children, the way you've gotten to arts administration and involved in community work and literary work and then your own writing.

CH: Yeah, I guess I do manage my life largely on an intuitive basis. I mean, not totally, of course. But, you know, I do know how to add a number or two every now

and then. But yeah, I feel like I have been largely driven to do these things. I've always wanted to write and when I left home, after having had my oldest child at the age of 17 — he was placed in foster care for 14 months — and when I got him back, I just decided, OK, it's time to get out of here. And my biological father was living in Springfield, Massachusetts. I didn't have much money at all. I think I had \$18. I took that \$18 and hopped a Greyhound bus. Packed my kid on my back and went to Springfield, Massachusetts. I think that's when a lot of things began to open up. I somehow landed a job managing a tutoring center. There are a lot of colleges around Springfield and in the area in Massachusetts, there's Mount Holyoke and the University of Massachusetts. There's several other colleges around there. And they sent students a lot to tutor the kids in the neighborhood. I just tended to learn a lot just by being around professors who wanted their students to participate in this program. And also when the students who wanted to participate. In the meantime, this was around the mid-'60s, the [civil rights movement](#) was heating up. There was just a lot going on. And I just sort of tended to weave between being a part of this and a part of that and just learning stuff along the way that I didn't realize I was learning. And I think that's kind of largely how my life has been.

SFW: You're kind of an intuitive learner.

CH: Yeah, I think I am, yeah.

SFW: But you must do a lot of paying attention. I wonder if it has something to do with the quiet spirit as well.

CH: I don't know.

SWF: Well, I really appreciate what [Tatsha Robertson in the Star Tribune said about your work](#). Beautiful things. One of the things she said is that your book is a looking glass into a life well lived —

CH: — she did say that —

SWF: — Yeah. I felt that was that was really, really true.

CH: Thank you.

SWF: I just wondered if you feel that, that came from you understanding what your call was and even if you didn't know the big picture, everything that was going to happen, it seems like you knew at least what the next step would be or what the next step was supposed to be. Or at least, if you didn't know where that step was leading you, you knew it seems like intuitively the direction you were supposed to step. And then all of these things kind of happen in that process. At least that's what it looks like to me, and I think I've shared that with you before, that I felt like there's just magic happening around you and the decisions you make.

CH: I would say it's more that than knowing what steps to take next. I think for me, a lot of it is more of a willingness to step into the unknown or to take the next step. And for some reason, someone has always been there to take me by the hand and lead me once they saw that I was willing to take that next step. If it was intuitive knowing, I didn't know that it was that. I have this, if I can find it, a quote by [Joseph Campbell](#). He said, "We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that's waiting for us." And I think that I've done a lot of that along the way. And in fact, you know, I don't know. It's kind of weird that a lot of times that the things that I plan don't work out. You know, I knew I had to get out of here. I needed to get away from Minneapolis, needed to get away from my mother's house when I was a young woman. And I knew that my dad lived in Massachusetts. And, you know, my plan, the big plan I had was to find my way to New York and become a theater person.

SFW: OK.

CH: That never happened. For one thing, I'm too shy and too introverted to be good at theater. But all these other things happened instead that were like, oh, OK, so that's why I came here, running the tutoring center and then moving to Boston and getting involved in this theater, but not being an actor in the theater, being something else, being more of a costume person. And then eventually, coming back home after marrying this guy and the marriage failing and then starting the [Whittier Writers Workshop in the '80s](#) when I came back home, and I was just so depressed, I couldn't even think. But I know, as I mentioned before, I've always wanted to write. So, I figured, well, maybe this is the time for me to learn how, to take some writing classes. I didn't know at the time that there wasn't anything available for a young woman with no money. So, I did try to take an independent class at the U [University of Minnesota], which was funded. But I also didn't know that I was just too depressed and too unable to focus. So, it didn't work out. I don't think I was able to complete that class. But I knew that Lawrence Hutera, the guy that ran the park center, really liked my kids. And he had all these performing arts things going on. And I just figured, it wouldn't hurt to ask him if he'd be willing to start some writing classes, and sure enough, he told me, "Well, I'll tell you what, you find a teacher, and we'll start the class." And I had started the secretarial service in my home, because before I dropped out of high school, I was really good at the secretarial services. So, I figured, OK, so here we are, broke as a joke, all these children. And my co-parent is not very nice. And I don't want these kids of mine to get into the mindset that this is all there is for them. So, I figured, OK, one thing I can do is this. I start a home-based business and teach them the skills that I had, and they were all really smart kids anyway. Still are. I mean, they're just doing some amazing stuff as adults. And the grandkids are, too.

SFW: Brilliant people.

CH: Ah, that's right. You know a few of them. And so I don't know. And then just one thing leads to another. It's like, oh, well, I guess this is where I'm supposed to go next or whatever, you know. Oh, OK.

SFW: So do you want to tell that story? How all of that came about. So, you would take your kids to the park and then one day you decided to ask Lawrence Hutera if he would offer a writing class, and he said, if you find a teacher, then he'll do it; he'll support you in that process.

CH: Yeah. And then my youngest son — I have two boys and three girls — my youngest son, whose name is Julian, he was in fifth grade then and he came home one day and he told me that there was a poet in his school, in his classroom, and he overheard her telling the teacher that she needed someone to type her manuscript. He suggested that she call me and she did. And when she came to my home, I asked her if she'd be willing to teach a creative writing class in a city park. And she said sure. She taught a six-week class. Lawrence taught me how to write a press release. He had a really strong media list. And we thought there would be just a few ladies from the neighborhood like myself who wanted to write. But people came from all over the Twin Cities, and we had no idea that we had such a large and strong literary community here. We had no idea. And so, after she taught the first class, she agreed to do a second class and also to start introducing me to other teaching artists and the Whittier Writers Workshop was born. And she, by the way, is [Natalie Goldberg](#).

SFW: Yes.

CH: She was a very young woman then. She was writing a book of poems. I don't know if you'd call it intuition or life or whatever. Another way that things have worked is that she doesn't remember this. I've had other experiences now as I continue to grow through life where people have come to me and said, "I did such-and-such because of something you said," and I have no idea who they are. So, that's just how it goes sometimes. And, once when she was here, I introduced myself. I saw her in a coffee shop and she said, "Yeah, who are you? People keep mentioning your name to me. Who are you?" And so, I reminded her of that. It was like, oh, wow, you know, when you're busy doing your life, I think things happen. And some of the stories that you have told me, Sherrie, about some of our interactions, I have no memory of them at all.

SFW: Oh, really?

CH: Yes. So, you don't know whose life you're impacting. You don't know how you're impacting their life.

SFW: Yeah. That's incredible. I don't know. It seems like this otherworldly or divine force is kind of at work putting the right people in place at the right time for the right situation or to create something beautiful. And that continued. And it was

really cool to hear that after you went to work for a literary organization and then you decided to start SASE, there was a thousand dollars waiting that you didn't know anything about; it was donated to Whittier Writers five years earlier and then you were able to use that to start what became SASE in 1993, right?

CH: Yeah, 1993. I was the first person of color to have a leadership position at the [Loft \[Literary Center\]](#), and I stayed there five years and it was really toxic for me. It was toxic for a lot of people back then. But things grow and evolve and change. It just became clear to me over those five years that my values were really different from theirs. But I didn't know what to do about it because my kids were growing up, going off to college and this and that, and I needed this income. And at the same time, I really liked the writers I was working with. So, I didn't know what to do. And then there was a last-straw moment when my oldest granddaughter, Tess, was born. I wasn't able to be with my daughter when Tess was born because I had caught meningitis. And a person that I had brought in to the Loft for one of their mentoring programs told me, he was very observant, too, and he said, "You know what? They've made you sick. Don't let them kill you." And that was it for me. I said, OK, I'm out of here. And I hung on for six more months because, again, I didn't know what to do, but I gave my resignation and they talked me into staying six more months while they tried to figure out what to do next. And during those six months, that was in the '90s, we didn't have email and texting capabilities. So, I was getting a lot of phone calls instead from people saying, are you leaving? Are you going to start another organization? Because a lot of people knew about Whittier, and a lot of people I didn't even know they knew about it, but they did. And they kept asking, are you going to start another one? And I kept saying, no, I'm done with this stuff, no more, ever again, ever. The day after my last day at the Loft, I got all my energy back. So, I called some of those people back.

SFW: Wow, the day after.

CH: The day after. Which to me says, oh, yeah, that was a bad situation for me. I'm happy with my relationship with the Loft today.

SFW: Different time, different place.

CH: Different time, different place, people. I really enjoy my relationship with them now. I called some of those people back, and then 18 of them said, yeah, I'll help you. So, I had a friend of mine who does ideation sessions. He agreed to volunteer to have an ideation session about what would a new organization for writers in the Twin Cities look like. And so they all came. It was elderly people, young people, Black people, white people, queer people, straight people. There was just, they all showed up. And I said, oh, I guess these folks are serious. And, the ground rules were simply no Loft bashing. We're not going to be looking at what's here. We're looking at what can we create. And what we came up with was this little organization, which became SASE: The Write Place. And we had this tiny little

office in Uptown Minneapolis and did all of our programming out in the community, which I think you got involved with.

SFW: Yes, it was the mentoring program. And then later I received the SASE Jerome grant. That was after the merger with Intermedia Arts. But it was still a SASE Jerome grant, which is something that you started.

CH: Yeah. The Jerome Foundation was just really wonderful. We had so much support from so many places, and they were very instrumental; they would sit down with me and others and figure out what do we want to do. And you know, [Sherry Quan Lee](#), right? Yes, she came up with this idea of the writer-to-writer mentorship program where we would meet with an advanced writer. We'd meet with a small group of emerging writers. And this went on for a couple of years with different writers. [Barrie Jean Borich](#), you took her class. That's how you met.

SFW: Yes, she was my mentor.

CH: I actually took some of those classes, too. That was one of the many gifts of doing what I have done is that I got to take writing classes. [The Verve program](#), which was the first program ever for spoken word artists, first granting program. It was started at SASE with me and [e.g. bailey](#). We put that together.

SFW: And you sponsored the [National Poetry Slam with Diego Vázquez](#).

CH: Yep, in 2002, I think it was. Yes. Which is how I knew [slams] already.

SFW: Yes, which is very awesome. You were talking about all of the branches of SASE, and it does seem like SASE was everywhere, especially everywhere needed, you know, to some degree, like you were in the schools, you did the Breakfast Club. There was a curriculum for the deaf community. You even partnered with the [Wilder Foundation](#), the [Sexual Violence Center](#), and then all of the readings at coffeehouses and libraries; it feels like SASE was just so community centered. That's something I definitely wish I had known about even earlier. It started in 1993, and I arrived in Minnesota in 1993. And a really bad situation. Unhappy and violent marriage. And you know, as I mentioned to you before, I just imagine what a difference that might have made in my life as a 23-year-old away from home, no family in Minnesota, that sort of thing. But, at the same time, you know, things happen at the time it's supposed to happen. So I'm just grateful that I got to benefit from the wonderful programs that you had. And I just got a chance to meet you and develop a relationship with you and be able to call you my mentor, my big sister. It's just made tremendous difference in my life. And I think so many people, hundreds of people, thousands of people in this town could say the same.

CH: You said you came here in '93. And when did you find out about SASE?

SFW: I found out about SASE when I was at [Hamline \[University\]](#). I started at Hamline in '99. I don't think I'd heard about SASE, [then] too. Probably early 2000s. I was going through my dark period.

CH: Well, maybe that has a lot to do with it because I was done with my dark period by the time you entered yours.

SFW: Yeah.

CH: Yeah, you had to get through it.

SFW: Yeah, I had to get out of my dark period. And I'm actually grateful that it was after leaving the marriage and reclaiming my name and all of that, that's when things started to happen, and I was coming more into the life I was supposed to be living.

CH: Exactly.

SFW: The journey, right. I'm just amazed that this small organization was able to do so much and touched so many people. You've been a teacher for many years.

CH: Yes. You know, this was all while I was still doing SASE. I got a call from Gina. She was going to do a panel discussion on Black women writers. And someone recommended me to be one of the writers. And I told her, I don't know anything. You know, I'm doing these programs for other people and I am taking writing classes, but all I can tell you is that I've started all this stuff so that I could learn. And she said, well, that'll be a really interesting take for our students to hear. So, I prepared this, I'm nervous, my first time ever being on a panel. Oh, my God. And this professor, [Rose Brewer](#). Do you know professor Rose Brewer from the U? She was also on the panel. And she spoke before I did, and she's very confident and she knows all the million-dollar words. I know a few now myself, but back then I didn't. And she stood up there and she did her thing. And it's like, oh, shit, I got to follow that. You've got to be kidding me. And so, I stood up there at the podium and I said something about being a mom. And I don't remember what I said now. But during the Q&A, the woman who was then chair of the English department asked me, she said, "What can Hamline University do to help a woman like yourself, who's in this situation?" I didn't even think about it. The words just popped out of my mouth. I said, you can give me a job. And it's like, did I really say that? So, she invited me to her office a week later because I guess it was a challenge. In fact, I know it was because the auditorium was full, and everybody there heard it. So, what is she going to do? So, I figured, OK, she's just going to sit me down in her office and do what I had heard and done so many times before, which is OK, I'll give you \$75 to tell me how to be more diverse. And I thought, OK, it's going to be another one of those. But it wasn't. She says, "I want to help you write a syllabus, and teach you how to teach a class." And I've been at Hamline ever since. And that was in 1997; another one of those pivotal people, pivotal moments. And I learned so much about the way

that I like to teach through people like Lawrence Huttera who said you want to do this, I'll help you do it. And I'm never ever, ever, ever going to be a lecturer. I just can't do that. I need to interact with people, and my virgin class was really crazy because I hadn't done any college classes by then. And so, I started feeling like, oh, my God, I'm just going to bomb. I'm just going to "eek." And so, just like I did with those teenagers, I just came clean and I told the students, you guys are my virgin class. What would you like to learn? And we struck up this wonderful, interactive class. And I've been teaching like that ever since. In fact, there was a man who came to visit one of my classes. God, I guess I'd been at Hamline nearly 10 years by then. He was writing a book on teaching. So, he visited my class and probably other people's as well. And he says to me, "You know what? You're never going to win an award for your teaching style." But he said, "It works, it works really well."

SFW: Right. And you won an award for your teaching style.

CH: Yeah, I did. My youngest daughter, Ebony — this was while I was still living in my mother's apartment — that little girl was late for school every single day. I ended up having to drive her to school, I had a car by then. I ended up having to drive her to school every day, almost. And one day when we went into the building, the assistant principal approached me, and I thought, uh-oh. You never get over being in the principal's office, which is where I spent a lot of my high school days, but I thought, oh, man, what is going on? What does she want? She says, "I've noticed the close relationship you have with your daughter. And I'm wondering if you'd be willing to mentor another African American girl." And I just thought, what, you've got to be kidding. You mean, we're not in trouble? Ebony's not in trouble? I'm not in trouble. What? And I told her, "I have to think about it." Because I needed to figure some things out, because Ebony and Tania, my middle daughter, they're very, very close. And Tania had just left for college, and I just didn't know. Ebony had been through some stuff after Tania went to college. And I just didn't want to put her in a position where she would have to struggle even more. And so, I told the assistant principal, I says, "No, I just can't subject my daughter to more problems right now. But what I can do is use my experience because I was a teen mom. And I know you guys have a teen parents program here. What I can do is teach a creative writing course with those kids." She introduced me to the teacher in the MICE program. I forget what MICE stands for now, but it was their teen parent program and she liked the idea. So, I went back to my friend Julie, who had first brought me to her [Perpich](#) class and then had also helped me set up classes with teenagers at SASE. And I asked her to help me put together some sort of curriculum for a 10-week class for teen parents. And she did. We sat down, she gave me a lot of tips. She helped me write again another syllabus, which is before my college syllabus. And so, I went into the class thinking, yeah, this is awesome. This is going to be great. And those kids were like, yeah, right. And they just weren't having it. And one day, one of the kids said, "Miss Holbrook, you're nice." This is exactly what she said. I'll never forget it. She says, "You're nice, but this is boring. You don't know anything about us. You know, you can't come in here and try to tell us something you don't know anything about." And so I just put away my little plan and I told her, yeah, I know

everything about you because I am you. And when I told them my story, they all just livened right up. They knew that I wasn't just somebody coming in and trying to tell them I know better than you. And we had a great, great class. And, one day, this was during the time of [Newt Gingrich and the Moral Majority](#). It was 1995 because the article in the Star Tribune came out Sept. 17, 1995. That's when it was. Yeah. But one day, this boy came to class. There were several fathers that came that were involved, and this boy named Andy, this little white boy, he showed up every single time, never participated, just sat there. And I thought, well, OK, I'm not going to tell him to leave, and I'm not going to try to make him do anything. It's fine, you're here. Great. Glad you're here. So one day, he just out of nowhere, says, "I'm tired of Newt Gingrich and doctors and teachers telling us, what to do. They're telling us that teen parents are bad and blah, blah, blah." Then he says, "I want to write a letter to the editor." So, again, I threw my plan out. And I said, OK, baby, we are going to write a letter to the editor. I didn't know the first thing about writing a letter to the editor, but a year or two before then, I was the interim editor for our neighborhood newspaper, which was the [Whittier Globe](#). It was a really good newspaper back then. But the guy who was the managing editor, I don't know what happened to him. So, they asked me to be the interim editor while they found someone else. And, you know, I'm such an activist, I couldn't just be an editor. So, I invited several journalists from the Star Tribune, the PiPress and several others to just do a class on something. So, somebody did a class on feature writing, someone did one on sports writing, someone did one on food writing. So, we had this whole curriculum for about eight weeks; different journalists came in, and each had their thing and they did their thing and that was it. So, one of them was the op-ed editor, the commentary editor, his name was [Eric Ringham](#). He's at MPR now. And so, when this kid said he wanted to write a letter to the editor, I said, OK, I'm going to see if Eric can give me some tips. And I called him, and I couldn't believe it. He says, "I'll do better than that. I'll come to class and I'll teach the kids how to do this." And then, the more I talked with him, he says, "You know, they don't need to write letters to the editor. They need to learn to write commentaries." So, he came to the class. I couldn't believe it. He came to the class, and he taught those kids how to write commentaries. He listened to what they had to say. And this one girl, who kept putting her head on the desk, being a journalist and an investigative person, he wasn't just going to sit there and think whatever he thought. He wanted to find out what's going on. So, he asked her, "Why are you doing this?" And she said, "Because I'm tired." And he said, "Why are you so tired?" She said, "Because I missed my bus." "So, why didn't you just stay home?" "Because I want my education." "So, did you take the bus then, the city bus?" "I didn't have any money." "So, how'd you get here?" "I walked." "Where do you live?" "Twenty blocks away." And that kid had gotten up at her regular time, missed her bus, eight months pregnant, walked to school because she wanted her education so bad, and she got there and she couldn't stay awake. But it just kind of blew his mind, I think, because he came in with the stereotype too; here's a bunch of wild younguns, who don't care about anything, don't want anything. And boy, did he learn something different just from that one little girl. And the rest of them were just so into this commentary thing. Andy, the boy, who always came to class and never did anything and got mad that day at Newt

Gingrich, took over the class. He became my co-teacher, my co-conspirator. During the next few weeks, they wrote and developed those commentaries. He was very instrumental in giving feedback and taking feedback. And, boy, I wish I knew where he was now. And Eric told him, for all the commentaries I publish, I'll give you each a hundred dollars. But, here's something else I've learned is that I've talked about my eighth-grade English teacher. I was just always in the principal's office, but she saw something else and she encouraged me and I never forgot that. I never forgot her. She still lives in the back of my mind. And I'm thinking that I don't know what any of those kids are doing today, but I know for sure that that experience is in the back of their minds somewhere.

SFW: It seems like all of these mentors and people who've touched you and made a difference in your life, you wanted to continue passing that on. And you've never stopped. You've done that your entire life and you still haven't stopped. And you write about wanting to step away from SASE so you can focus more on your own writing, and beautiful results are coming from that.

CH: Finally. Because I was with SASE for 13 years and a lot of times, people who do arts administration do it because they love the art. Then you get into this day-to-day management stuff. Your art takes a back seat. By the time I left SASE, we had made the transition to Intermedia Arts. I really was a baby writer. And it took a lot of time and a lot of practice and a lot of years and more classes and more mentorship for me to become a better writer.

SFW: You've been teaching at Hamline for 23 years. You teach at the [Minneapolis \[Community and Technical\] College](#) and here, there and everywhere within the community; people are inviting you in and continuing your writing practice all along and producing beautiful work.

CH: I ask myself a lot, what am I doing? I do tend to focus a lot on both the writing and the community work. They're both just really important to me. For me, it's also, it's kind of a form of a healing practice. I'm not a doctor. I'm not a therapist. I'm none of those things. Teaching people to express themselves is so important.

SFW: When I was working at the Loft, you had just received a [Minnesota State Arts Board](#) grant. There's always that culminating event at the end where you have to have some kind of community engagement. You decided you wanted to have a discussion, and you brought African American women to talk about the writing life, share their work and their lives as a writer. And that became More Than a Single Story, which has been going on for five years now, six?

CH: We're moving into our sixth year now.

SFW: That's incredible. So, again, it's you receive a gift, and you always share the gift. That's kind of what you do.

CH: Yes, I had received that grant. And yes, I knew I had to do a community project. And a couple of years prior to that, I was invited to give a reading at [Birchbark Books](#). And I didn't want to just, you know, do it myself. So, I invited you and [Mary Moore Easter](#). A couple of, I think there were three or four of us from our writing group, from our Black women's writing. And during the Q&A, some woman in the audience said that she was really surprised that we all sounded so different. And I thought, oh, my goodness, I can't believe this. Because people tend to lump us all together. And so, I said to myself then, if I ever get an opportunity, I want to do something about that. And then when I got the arts board grant a couple years later and had to have this community event, I had been to I think it was a panel discussion that [David Mura had run with Tish Jones](#). It was a youth program. And I thought, oh, there it is. That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to do a panel discussion with Black women writers. And I sat down with my daughter and here we are trying to figure out who should be on that panel. And by the time we were done talking, we had named 50 women. And I thought, oh, I think this is going to be a series. And so, the first one was African American women. The second one was women with a Caribbean background. And the third was women from East and West Africa. And the point was to talk about their writing. What moves them? What do they want to write about? What do they fear writing about? What does the Black literary canon look like? And things such as that. I made sure to have women from a lot of different backgrounds in each one so it wasn't just [limited]. So there's a biracial woman, there's a lesbian woman, there's a transgender woman. It's just women all coming together and saying, this is who I am.

SFW: Yeah. Showing the diversity within African diaspora here in Minnesota.

CH: Exactly. And for each one, the joint was packed. And I thought, oh, my God, I did it again, didn't I? I have another program. I was supposed to be writing and here I am. It started with women. And then the second and third years, I think we still focused on women, but we expanded beyond Black women and just invited women from the various BIPOC communities. So, what does food look like from the vantage point of a Dakota woman and an African American woman and a Hmong farmer? And it's like, oh, my God, this is so amazing, and all these different topics. And so, now we're putting together an anthology just to celebrate the first five years of More Than a Single Story.

SFW: And you've incorporated men as well.

CH: Oh, yeah. During the third year, I invited David Mura in to help me do a men's program. And that's for a couple of reasons. One, I've heard people call him The Godfather. People have often referred to me as their fairy godmother. So, the God Mom And the God Papa got to do this thing. So, he has put together some amazing programs on discussions with men. I know what women want to hear from men, but I don't know what men want to talk about. So, the point was to have him and a bunch of men, again, from a lot of different communities, talk about what is it you want to talk about publicly. And it's been pretty awesome. So, he and I are

co-editing this anthology that the U of M Press is working with us on. So, I am just thrilled, excited, blown away.

SFW: There've been so many people who've been involved in *More Than a Single Story*. I think I counted 72 individuals, artists and writers and other kinds of artists and scholars and filmmakers, media artists, all kinds of artists had an opportunity to share the stage with you and share their stories.

CH: I think a lot of it has to do with — I'm really shy, and I don't like being out front. I just don't like it. But I love putting people together. I like creating community. Somebody said to me once, she said, "How do you do that? You're quiet." In her experience, leadership is loud and robust and more extroverted. "How do you do that?" And I told her, "I don't know, I just do it." I feel like something needs to be done, and I don't know if I'm the right person to do it. But if I can put people together who have expertise or knowledge or something to talk about it, then something gets done.

SFW: Yeah, well, beautiful things have come out of whatever it is that's driving you.

CH: I don't know what it is. I think it's insanity a lot of times. I was talking to an old boyfriend about a month ago. And he's a Vietnam vet. And most of our time together was him fighting his demons. But he said to me, he says, "You know, you have always had this ability to see things before other people see them." And I said, "What?" I was glad I was sitting down because I had no idea that he could see beyond his own demons. And I said, "Wow, I didn't know that you could even see me."

SFW: Well, in terms of the gift of sight that we talked about earlier, when I was reading your book, I felt like Minneapolis feels like such a character. You know, this is where you grew up. You left for a little bit, maybe a decade or so. A decade or maybe a couple of years. And then you return. And it was upon your return when you transition into this new life, even though there were challenges and that sort of thing. But you started making some decisions, like, you wanted to write. And then eventually, it was you wanted to write and you want to heal and you want to create arts programming. Are you still willing to read that section?

CH: Yeah. Back then, remember, when I was living by the river. We used to have the writing group in the party room. That's where I was living then. I think I started working on this. We had talked the other day, you and I too, about my writing process. And I'm a really, really slow writer. It takes me forever to write a piece. But this one was shortly after Mrs. Rudel [Sally Rudel], the assistant principal [formerly at South High School], had talked with me about teaching that class. And we had had so many conversations about the way that kids are treated in schools. And so, I think I was just sitting there thinking about that. My whole home office at that time was overlooking the three bridges and the river and all of that. So, I was just sitting there watching and so, this is what came out of it:

I live two and a half miles from downtown Minneapolis. However, the city skyline looks like it's right outside my window. On a clear night the skyscrapers remind me of sentinels standing guard over the University of Minnesota's imposing West Bank Office Building, which sits rooted firmly in the ground across the freeway, seemingly touching the distance from my place. Panning slightly to the right, orange lights move in perfect synchronicity, like a chorus line, atop a silo high above the city. Each hooper gets her moment onstage as the lights spell out "G-o-l-d M-e-d-a-l F-l-o-u-r," illuminating the old mill that has been converted to a museum to educate the public about Minneapolis's legendary flour industry. Straight ahead a series of bridges mark the communities on the East and West Banks of the Mississippi River. On the first bridge, the Hennepin Avenue Bridge, an arc of green lights casts mysterious shadows over the next bridge, which crosses the river from Third Avenue. As my gaze moves in closer to my neighborhood, I see two rows of yellow lights slanting downward beneath the Stone Arch Bridge. They kiss the river and tip their hats, alerting night-floating barges of potential danger. Just as the sun is about to make its appearance, caravans of yellow school buses cross the bridge directly in front of my window. One caravan crosses west to east, the other in the opposite direction. As I glance at the children bouncing around inside the buses, I wonder how many of them began their day with a nourishing breakfast and how many are waiting to get to school for free or reduced-price meals? How many were encouraged to do their homework last night? How many witnessed violence in their neighborhood or experienced it in their homes? How many children boarded the bus from a homeless shelter? How many homeless children will miss school today because their families couldn't find shelter last night? Where are the children who have run away from unbearable home environments? Have they found their way to safe places, alternative schools, perhaps? How many children on those buses are native English speakers? Which ones speak Ebonics as their mother tongue? Which children dreaded getting on the bus this morning, knowing they would have to face a bully? And who are the children who couldn't wait to get on the bus so they could harass a child whom they consider an easy mark? I wonder which children will be greeted this morning by a smiling teacher, happy to see them, and which ones will be greeted by teachers who will take the glint out of their eyes.

Yeah, so that's about the city, but it's also, I'm thinking about teachers and children in that chapter. Big time. And what kind of teacher I wanted to be. I'm still surprised when I think about — I taught first-year English for my first, what, 10, 15 years at Hamline. And I'm still really, surprised and sad for the number of students who came into that class scared to death of writing because of something that happened to them, something a teacher did to them. It could have been in kindergarten, it might have been in middle school. Teachers have so much power, I don't even know if they are aware of the power they carry, that can set the stage for a child's entire life.

SFW: Yeah, well, I was thinking about Minneapolis and other places where you talk about growing up in South Minneapolis. It's on the world stage right now.

CH: It sure as hell is.

SFW: Yeah, And unfortunately, due to the horrific [murder of George Floyd](#). But also the aftermath, which has been incredible in terms of the activism and the political action. And I think it definitely says something of the character of this town to some degree. So, we see the two sides of it. It's the horror and the oppressive side. But then there is the spirit of activism and really, imagining a whole new possibility for us as people, particularly, people of color. And I feel like, just reading your book and getting to know all of these folks who've been a part of your life, you're also highlighting the better nature of this place. And it's been a place of nurturing your artistic life and your professional life as an arts administrator.

CH: You know, when a place is home to you, you don't see it the way that others see it. When I left home with my little boy and then came back some 13 years later and really started my life, you could say, I began to notice over the years that this place is really something. It's sort of a "micro something" that just draws people here from both coasts, from everywhere. And you hear about cold Minnesota, [people think it's] as cold as hell in Minnesota [and they say to themselves] "I ain't going there." But then they end up coming and staying. And so, in a way, for me, and this might sound absolutely crazy, but to me, it makes sense that Minneapolis would be the place that change began to happen. Because it has this magical quality that I can't put words to, somebody more eloquent than I could put words to it; [Dr. Bill Green](#) probably could and probably does in his writing. He's pretty amazing. I grew up just a few blocks from where George Floyd was killed. We grew up on 38th and Clinton, right across the street from [Sabathani \[Community\] Center](#). And we used to walk over there all the time. And the neighborhood was different then because it was some time ago. But still, I just absolutely believe that even with, I don't know, with the dichotomies, with Minneapolis being named one of the most literate cities in the nation and highest educated in all of this, and then also being the one with the highest racial disparities. Two opposite ends of the same pole all live here. And it's just kind of interesting to me, and it's a mystery, but it's real. It's very real and it totally, for some reason that I cannot explain, makes sense to me that it would all happen right here in Minneapolis.

SFW: So, and you also talk about you and your family's interactions with the police, negative ways, and then, on occasion or at least one surprising way that you talk about, it is interesting. And I really feel that your book coming out now, it's coming out at the right time.

CH: Yeah. A lot of people don't know that the Minneapolis Police Department has a long history of violence against Black people. My favorite cousin, my two favorite cousins are both boys. But one in particular, boy, he has told me stories. Woof! [Josie Johnson](#) and I interviewed him while we were working on her book because he was in the thick of things when things were popping in the '60s, '70s, '80s. And then,

boy. These things are just sort of hidden from view. But we know they're hidden from public view, but not from our point of view.

SFW: It's not hidden from us because we're experiencing it.

CH: Well, I said my cousins are boys. They're old men, but they used to be boys.

SFW: I hear you. Yeah, we definitely had our share of it in New York for sure. So, I mentioned to you also that I feel like your book really needs to be incorporated into feminist and gender studies curriculum. I believe that very strongly. So, you were coming of age in the '60s and '70s, when the women's movement was —

CH: — I hate to burst your bubble, darlin', but I was coming up in the '50s and '60s.

SFW: Oh, wait. You were born in the '50s, weren't you?

CH: No.

SFW: OK, I'm not doing the math.

CH: I'm a genuinely old lady.

SFW: No. So, I see myself, even though I was born in 1970, I feel like I was coming of age in the '80s and '90s, becoming a young adult.

CH: Exactly. My younger son Julian was born in 1970.

SFW: OK. Alright. Well, you were young still. And you were still an emerging adult.

CH: OK. I like that term, emerging adult.

SFW: The women's movement was happening at that time. But you didn't see yourself, like I think a lot of Black and brown women at that time did not see themselves in that particular movement of what was happening, because it wasn't really addressing your issues and that sort of thing. And that's something I've always heard and by the time I came of age and started reading feminist literature and things like that and hearing at the beginning stages, and even by the time I entered it, it really felt a lot like a white woman's movement.

CH: Yep, yeah. And in many ways, it still does, because — I wonder how many people really know that the [#MeToo movement](#) was started by a Black woman in the Bronx.

SFW: Right. Yeah. [Tarana Burke](#).

CH: Yeah. Tarana Burke. And she started it because she wanted to teach younger Black and brown women that they don't have to put up with sexual abuse and they don't have to put up with these things that hurt them. But again, how often do we hear her name in connection with #Metoo?

SFW: Yeah. [Buffy \[Smith\]](#) was able to interview her at St. Thomas [University] before we all went on lockdown.

CH: Wow. Really?

SFW: Yeah. I think that for a lot of people, that was their first time knowing about her and hearing her. And she was involved in the work of teaching young Black girls.

CH: Yep. That's exactly right. Yeah. So, #Metoo, began with that.

SFW: Yeah. And I think that your story demonstrates or shares the reasons why Black and brown women did not feel like that movement was necessarily really for us. So, your book is like a missing piece to the story.

CH: And interestingly, I think it was a couple of hours before you told me that you thought it should be in gender studies programs, I got an email from a white poet who said, "You know, your book should be in women's studies." I said, wow.

SFW: Wow.

CH: Two different ends again.

SFW: Yes, I think it is essential reading.

CH: I just wrote the damn book. I don't know what to do with it. That should be the last word in the podcast.

SFW: Yeah. I was just going to say that some of the things that I try to learn from you and try to emulate as much as I can is having that courageous humility. I kind of miss the courageous part, I think, sometimes, so I'm working on that. And you've always had this willingness to just say yes, to give it a shot, to try. And you've done that beautifully, in collaboration with others and accepting feedback from others and being mentored by others, but also willing to give all of those things back to other people. And so, you know, going back to the Star Tribune review, you know, " ... looking glass into a life well-lived," I think for me, that explains how that happened from an outsider looking in and just from knowing you. But definitely, the stories that you've crafted so masterfully in this collection really illuminates that. And it's a gift to me. And it will be to anyone who reads it. So, thank you.

CH: Thank you, Sherrie.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.