

Transcription

University of Minnesota Press

Episode 5: “There’s a life that the page gives”: Writings on Miscarriage and Infant Loss

<https://soundcloud.com/user-760891605/episode-5-wgihh>

Host introduction: Miscarriage and infant loss are experiences that disproportionately affect Indigenous women and women of color. [*What God Is Honored Here*](#) is the first book of its kind: a literary collection of voices of these women coming together to speak about the traumas and tragedies of womanhood. Editors [Shannon Gibney](#) and [Kao Kalia Yang](#) are joined here by writers [Michelle Borok](#), [Soniah Kamal](#), [Jami Nakamura Lin](#) and [Seema Reza](#). This edited conversation was recorded in July 2020.

Shannon Gibney: So, my name is Shannon Gibney. I’m one of the co-editors of the anthology, [*What God is Honored Here: Writings on Miscarriage and Infant Loss by and for Native Women and Women of Color*](#). My co-editor is Kao Kalia Yang. And the book was published in October 2019 by University of Minnesota Press. We have some of our amazing contributors here. We have Jami Nakamura Lin, Michelle Borok, Soniah Kamal, and we also have Seema Reza here. And so, we’re going to talk a bit about the book itself. We’re going to talk a bit about what it’s been like, eight months or so now, having the book out in the world. So, thanks for joining us.

Kao Kalia Yang: This is Kalia speaking. Thank you, Shannon, for leading us off. It’s been nearly a year. It doesn’t feel like it’s been a year, partly because we’ve been in a pandemic. After the publication of a book, generally, you spend a whole year, at least, going through bookstores and organizing meetings and gathering folk. This has not been the case. We started out strong by doing lots of readings around different communities across the nation. But for the last few months, it’s been very quiet on my end. This has been the quietest book I’ve had the privilege and the honor of working on. How has it been for the rest of you?

Michelle Borok: This is Michelle Borok. Yeah, time is sort of compressed just in general — I’m calling in from Mongolia. We went into lockdown in January, sort of watching the rest of the world carry on. It was like, “Oh, that would be nice.” But now, here we are. And we’re all in the same boat. But, yeah, time is really compressed, and it didn’t really occur to me to think about what Kalia raised. It’s just that you guys would have continued with the readings and the events, which were just really amazing to see from a distance. You guys had some really great events and conversations at those events, I’m assuming, and it would have been amazing to see those continue.

Soniah Kamal: Hi, this is Soniah Kamal. I’m the author of two novels, [*Unmarriageable*](#) and [*An Isolated Incident*](#), and for the book world, I think it’s been hard in general, but the book world seems to be particularly hit by this. I actually — my second novel [“An Isolated Incident”] was launched in England yesterday. And it’s just because publishing has pushed so many books forward, everyone is

very confused with what to do and how to do it because timelines have all shifted for bookstores, and everyone's still getting their hands on Zoom and how to do things. So, it's been a surreal experience to have. On the other hand, there's also gratitude for those of us who are, you know, able to stay safe and still able to do things at this time.

Seema Reza: This is Seema calling in from Maryland. I'm the author of [When the World Breaks Open: A Memoir](#) and [A Constellation of Half-Lives](#), which is a collection of poetry. The essay that I was able to contribute to the anthology is from my memoir. And it is about my experience with having to decide to have a late-term abortion because my son was very sick. And in this time of being home and watching what's happening in the world and the attacks on women's rights, the events have been so sacred and beautiful, the two readings that I went to. But to put it on the internet feels much scarier. And that's been an interesting thing to be like, well, if I want the world to know, I guess the whole world has to know. That's been kind of a scary and liberating thing.

Jami Nakamura Lin: This is Jami Nakamura Lin and I'm a writer from outside Chicago. You're mentioning that it's been almost a year, and it seems so strange that time has passed because it seems like such a long time; it seems like ages and ages, and it also seems very short that I was able to be with some of you at [St. Kate's \[St. Catherine University\]](#) at the reading, which was such a beautiful moment just to spend time in person. And now, thinking back on what it means to be in community and how most of our community is virtual, I think back on that moment really fondly. And I think the reaction I've had from people has been like a slow burn for this book. Recently, I had a friend who I gave the anthology to and she said, "I know you gave this to me, but is it OK if I give it to one of my friends because I think she really needs it right now" because she had just had a miscarriage. So, it's cool to me to hear stories like that a long time after the book came out, about it going hand to hand, from person to person, to people who need it at that time in their lives. And that woman was also a woman of color. And I think being a person of color, I just felt like there weren't any books that really spoke to me when I was going through these things, which was why it was such a meaningful experience to be part of this book; and to see that it's continuing to be shared with that community is really wonderful.

SG: I like the image of the slow burn, or I think Kalia even called it "trying to light a fire in a damp forest" because nobody really wants to talk about dead babies. It's just that the topic of the book itself is really hard. But that's also why it's so needed. Kalia and I have said before how we are very lucky. There was a lot of local interest in the book when it came out. And so, we had a lot of readings and events, and both of us are pretty well-established, at least in Minnesota. And so, our events typically fill, and that wasn't necessarily the case for this book. But at every event, someone would come up to us and just kind of commiserate. I had one woman at a reading at [Next Chapter Booksellers](#) bookstore, and she's probably in her 50s, a white woman, and she said, "You know, after you read your piece — " and of course, she's crying, a lot of the folks who share their stories with us are crying, and she's like, "I never was able to just say what happened. I was never able to just say, 'My baby died.'" She's like, "The language that I used, I had to dance around it for everybody else because

they just couldn't bear it." And she's like, "And I never realized what a weight that was before." She's like, "I just exhaled listening to your story." And that was just so moving to me. So, stories like that — we were talking in a radio program; there was a probably 50-something Native American gentleman who was talking about how he had a sibling, between him and his younger sister, a younger sibling; his mom mentioned it from time to time. But, you could see that it's part of their family story in a certain way, but perhaps not necessarily in a way that has been as healing as it could have been. So, I think, this book, like so many others, is multilayered. And I think just in quote-unquote, normal non-COVID-19 times, I think that is something that is just going to take a little while to get out into all those hands of community folks who really need it. But I have heard Jami, from quite a few folks in my community, it's so gratifying to have something to give my friend or my sister or somebody in my family that's just experienced a loss. And that's also gratifying as well. COVID-19 times, I do feel like we've had to just pivot. All of us have to be open to whatever is going to unfold. Because nobody really knows. Obviously, it's not exactly what we would have wanted, but it also presents some other opportunities in terms of people being able to engage with the book virtually. University of Minnesota Press has had it on their website all summer for folks to download for free, which is really awesome as part of this racial justice initiative.

KKY: I had a conversation with my dad. My father doesn't ask me very often about the books that I'm writing or the books that have come out. But he was there the first night of the launch events, and he heard me read from my mother's story, from their story. Recently, my dad looked up at me; I was in the garage with him, we were swatting flies. This is an activity that I do often, swatting flies in the garage. And he said to me, "You know that book that you published last year, that's been very quiet." I know exactly which one he was talking about. He said, "I think about it so often." My father said to me, "You know, sometimes, you write the books that everybody wants to read. Sometimes, you're in a place where you have to write the books that the world needs. The world will never know it until it does." And I just looked at my dad, and I said, "I hope you're right." But shortly after that conversation, when [George Floyd was murdered brutally here in Minneapolis](#), the very last words that he said, he called for his mom. My mother, when I visited my mom and dad, my mother broke down and she said, "I'm crying, and I'm crying for his mother. I'm crying for myself. I'm crying for all of the mothers in your book." I didn't expect these connections to happen in my home in these ways, but I think that's been one of the big gifts of this collection. And I've not told you and all of you wonderful, powerful, strong women about this. But I think these personal conversations that are coming forth are changing me as much as it is changing the landscape that I hope this book enters into.

SG: I've had people tell me, "Your most ardent supporters for this book, you're probably not going to hear from them, right?" Like those conversations that you have with your dad in the garage swatting flies. It's not in front of a podium; it's not at some big launch event. It's just the daily-ness of life. But creating a space for that, to me, that's the aim of art, it should be creating space for things that there is not space for right now.

KKY: I'm here because so many of us are writers. Your contribution to *What God Is Honored Here*, how does that differ from the other work that you do?

JNL: I think for me, the piece that I did here launched me on a new path of writing because I was having such a hard time writing about my miscarriage. I was having such a hard time writing about my father's impending death. And then, when I saw the call for this anthology, I knew I really wanted to be part of it. And I started thinking about how I could write about it. And then I started using the lens of Japanese mythology to talk about these really difficult things. And after that, I started using that for a lot of other writing I've been doing. So, it kind of was the launch point or the beginning of me being able to write it in a new and different way. And I've been having a lot of essays that follow in the same vein. I think it has just helped me realize the power of writing about this and how I can use that in my other writing, too. A lot of other difficult topics.

MB: I haven't been writing a lot but I've recently kick-started things again. It's weird because I think my relationship with that essay in some ways — it's like a door closed, maybe I'm saying the hardest thing. And now, everything should be easier to talk about after talking about the worst thing that ever happened. But it's a weird time to pick up momentum again. It was such a heavy thing to write about and then to have published that it's strange to think about what the next thing might be. So, I've done other writing-related things, but I haven't written anything that's been published since. So, it's weird. It's a bit heavy. I don't know what it is.

SR: I'm a performing poet, and I read a lot of uncomfortable things onstage. But this, I had never read before the book launch — this particular tragic and traumatic experience. And similar to what Michelle said, that unlocking of, or breaking down of that barrier of, "Oh, I can give this to a wound up within me." I think it was Shannon who said nobody wants to talk about dead babies. That's just not the way that you necessarily want to be the one to bring that into the space. But similar to what Shannon was saying, when I have brought it up, it's amazing how many other people have this same experience. And what I keep thinking about is what else do I think is so completely privately, terribly my own that is shared pretty widely? And where else can I find that courage in my writing? To put it on the page, to enter through the doorway of the page into that story — and then, maybe find those points of connection in the world, which is why I write. So, it's been amazing to be out in the world with this book.

SK: You know, what I found for miscarriage and things like this is that this is not drawing-room conversation. Like, "Hello, my name is —. How are you? This happened to me." But once you start sharing with people, everyone suddenly starts telling their stories, too. And you realize that as much as there is willful silence around it because it is a discomfiting subject and people are shy about it — not so much *not* wanting to share, but they don't want to upset anyone by talking about it. But I've always found that when it does come up, that the upset factor goes away very fast, and people are actually glad that it was mentioned because everyone seems to have a story, if not of their own, then of their mothers' or sisters' or friend's. And that connection definitely does become very strong. And the conversations just keep going once they're allowed to be out in the open.

MB: My family, my in-laws in Mongolia, don't speak English, so they don't have copies of this book. But it's sort of culturally fairly taboo that I would have even done this; this wouldn't have happened if there was a Mongolian version of Kalia and Shannon, and they wanted to publish this book. They would have had a really hard time. You don't talk about the dead. You don't talk about dying. You certainly don't talk about dead babies when there are pregnant women in your family. You don't talk about hysterectomy — there's just so much. To me, as an American, I see that as well. But living here within Mongolian culture, it's amplified and that was something that was hard to deal with when it happened. But in some ways, it hasn't gotten any easier. With other books that I've been in, and other anthologies, I've been able to share sort of the excitement of, "Here it is, here's my name, this is exciting." And with this book, it's really difficult to do. And I explained to my husband what it was about. And he knew I was writing it. He knew that it was going to be published. But when he saw the book, he was just, like, "Huh, my weird American wife who talks about things that shouldn't be talked about." I don't know. It's a little strange on that level. For my family back home, it's a bit different. There's obviously a different understanding of what it meant to be part of this book and what the book represents for the larger universe of readers.

KKY: I hear you, Michelle. I'm Hmong, and I come from a refugee background. In my community, when we talk about the heartaches, so often it's connected to the war. But I know that every single woman in my life, my grandmother, my aunts, they've all lost children. They've all had miscarriages along the way. And it wasn't until I experienced my own loss that my mother's older sister — she came to visit — and she sat down and she looked at me and I looked at her and she said, "You know that the longer you have with someone, the more you love them." And I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "You know, your baby Jules was 16 weeks. I have never told you, but do you know that I had a miscarriage at five months? I had a stillbirth and then I lost a 1-year-old, and then I lost a 2-year-old, and I lost a 3-year-old." And I looked at her and she said, "Every single one that I lost, the more time I had with them, the harder it was to let go, the harder it has been for the life of them to go." But it was one of the gifts, I think this is something that I'm hearing, again, that once these stories are out, they invite more stories out. But in a community like mine where so much happened because of a singular war, the fact that these women have survived grants these losses a different kind of position. By writing this book, by entering into these conversations, I feel, at times, I am changing the position of some of these losses in the lives of these women who have raised me. And also the woman I'm becoming.

SG: Yeah, that's a lot. I feel like so many stories in this book, I hate to say it this way because it makes it seem like losing a child, losing a pregnancy isn't a big deal, but it's about so much more than that. So many of the stories are about structural and institutional racism in the health care system — and so many of the stories are — Soniah, when I read your piece, your piece is about a lot of different things obviously, but that was the first piece that Kalia and I had read about from a Muslim perspective of losing a child. And what you and your husband, your family went through trying to feel like that life was honored.

SK: For me, it worked on two levels, but other levels, too. But I think for me, the person who is carrying the child, who is pregnant, feels the enormity of that life the most at first. Because you're carrying this baby, this life within you and everyone else, your family members, et cetera, your husband, they just care that, "OK, you're pregnant." They can't really see anything. They can't feel anything. Nothing is changing in their bodies. And I think sometimes for a lot of men, it's not until they see the bump or they feel movement or hear the heartbeat that it suddenly becomes real, and then really becomes real once you're much further term and perhaps once the baby comes out. So, I had had miscarriages before and with this particular one, I started bleeding on the morning of the third month and I didn't panic or anything. I thought it was another miscarriage. I had just returned from the gym, and I went to the doctor, I was expecting to be told, "The baby is not there." And then when she said that the heartbeat is still there, this had not happened before. So, this was a shock to me, and suddenly, it became more precious, and then that carried on for a month. And it was a difficult month because I felt very alone; there were so many emotions as a mother or even as a pregnant mother and you try to keep your child safe as best as you can. And then when we're in these precarious circumstances where we suddenly can't, what it means to be a mother and what it means to carry a child in safety, as well as keeping perhaps the children that you already have safe, you start to question a lot of things. But then the added layer: once it happened, I miscarried at four months and actually into my hands, it was very traumatic for so many different reasons than my previous miscarriages. But I thought I'd put it to rest. And then a month afterwards, I got a call from the perinatal clinic, and they said that there are remains and what do I want to do with them? And everything just came rushing back. And as a Muslim, I had not realized this, or I had, but it hadn't had an impact yet. Muslims believe that the soul doesn't enter a fetus until four months, 16 weeks. And since I was right at the cusp, no one could pinpoint whether it was 15 weeks and one day, or 16 weeks. When we called the mosque to ask about burial stuff, they said that, well, since they don't know if it was completely 16 weeks, there was no soul. And that was just the double trauma of being told that the baby that I had given a name to, bought socks for, had grieved for so badly, was really not considered a human being, a child. That double trauma was very, very, very terrible. And then he went on later to be buried in a mass urn. And that brought up all sorts of things also. So, you talked about layers and Muslim background and stuff. It was a very, very traumatic experience. One after the other. It was a miscarriage, then it was a burial. Then it was where he was finally going to be buried. And for a long time, every time I thought I was healing a little bit, there would be another hammer. And it was very tough.

SG: Thank you for sharing that, Soniah. We had another submission which we ultimately decided that we could not take because we wanted to keep the focus on Indigenous and women of color. But we had a submission from a Jewish woman who, unfortunately, had a loss that I think was around 37 weeks. And reading your piece, Soniah, the response of the rabbi — I am not an expert at all on the particulars of either the Muslim faith or the Jewish faith. But the similarities in the responses of elders in those religious communities and how devastating that was to both you and her. I mean, I think she ended up leaving Judaism because of it. And that was just something, that was a layer. I'm a Buddhist, it's just different, it's more secular for me; that was a layer that I had not anticipated coming across or dealing

with in putting this together. Another piece that I hadn't anticipated reading was this idea of what Seema brought up, because we don't talk about these things, whatever they are, these traumas; you think that you sort of keep these secret, torturous thoughts to yourself. And this thought that "It's my fault. I could have done something." In my case, I had a stillbirth at 41 1/2 weeks. And there was no cause of death. They never determined ultimately the cause of death, like in many, many stillbirths. And it just kept on going through my mind, like, "I did go in to the doctor. But I should have gone in at a week. And a week after she was due. And I should have told them that they had to induce and I should have done this. I should have done that." And that sounds so banal to say. But then somehow, I didn't understand that that was a shared experience of women who go through this. Reading the first-person accounts, so many women had that same sense of profound guilt laced with the loss. And that was so healing for me. I don't know if that makes sense, but it was.

SK: Just to go back a moment to what you said, the whole thing about a mother, and it certainly brings up what it means to be a mother before you have a baby in your arms, because everyone can immediately tell you're a mother then and that this is a baby and everyone wants to protect your feelings, the baby's feelings, life, et cetera. But like you're saying, in cases like this, who has the agency to tell someone at what stage that baby had life and meaning and didn't? And that really was very unsettling, in all cases, in a lot of the stories that I was reading, which is: what does it mean to be a mother when your emotions are so strong, but when others are not honoring those emotions and saying, "It's OK. And you can have another baby and you can get over it. And it wasn't meant to be," and stuff like that from different religious perspectives.

KKY: I think that it resonates so strongly. You know, similarly for so many of us as Indigenous women and women of color, there is this mantle of strength that we're expected to wear. How many men have come up to me after the experience of this collection and said, "My mother had miscarriages. She was so strong." For me, part of the power of this collection is that we're crying. We're weeping. There is no trying to be strong in writing these stories. From my own experience of writing my own story and then my mother's story for this collection, my story felt like a dream. Writing my mom's story felt like waking up in a nightmare. I remember the first time reading the submissions as they were coming in, along with Shannon Gibney, crying and crying for all of the babies that were lost, that have been lost throughout time. Those tears became the tears to the babies now in cages at the borders. The ones taken away by white colonists, the Native babies or African American babies taken away to become slaves or Hmong babies taken away to become soldiers. Soldiers in a war that could never benefit them. That was for me, incredibly liberating, just to say, "I'm hurting. We've all been hurting. And I don't care what you think."

SG: Right, because we're socialized as women to take care of other people first. I mean, that's what that whole strength thing is about. They wouldn't be praising us for being strong, quote-unquote, if we were being strong and taking care of ourselves first and nobody else, which is what men are socialized to do.

SR: Right. The discomfort with other people's discomfort — if we were being strong in a way that didn't let them stay comfortable. And when I received the anthology, I thought I had done my deep weeping already. There's been many years. But when the anthology arrived, I took it to bed. I was alone, and I read it and wept in a way that was so different from all of the other times I had wept — along those lines, I was weeping not just for my loss, but for the universality of the loss. And not feeling like it was a burden on other people, my grief, being part of this act of grief together with all of you across faiths. I hadn't met anybody else who is in the anthology at that time, but it just felt so like, "Oh, this is a line that I'm connected to, a global sort of web that I'm connected to." And that was a really beautiful, powerful thing.

JNL: Yeah. This is Jami. I had a similar experience when I read the anthology as well, of just being able to say that, everyone in this book is acknowledging these losses that often are just not acknowledged or not taken seriously. And just the connections that you were talking about, not just to our losses, but to the things that are happening nationally. And I think one thing that I connected to now is this idea of feeling like people aren't taking your baby seriously or that your loss is not a baby. And I think that for me, one of the hardest parts after my miscarriage was people thinking, "Oh, it's just a miscarriage," or feeling like I was wrong for grieving. And I remember talking about it with my therapist, and my therapist said something offhand like, "Oh, it's 10 weeks. It's not really a baby." And I was devastated because that was in therapy. And she was saying something like, oh, you know, another of her clients had lost a baby in a stillbirth. And that was *really* a baby. But that mine didn't have a soul, and just all these different things that were not helpful at the time. And here in this book, I felt like it was a place where my grief could be seen, and where it was acknowledged, and allowed in a way that didn't make me feel like I had to be guilty or that I was selfish for being sad and for being upset about this loss, this loss of all this possibility. I think that was one of the most powerful things to me when I was reading it.

MB: Going back to the guilt thing. My daughter hasn't been in school since January. We went to the U.S. for Christmas and New Year's and we came back. Coronavirus had been in the news here. But it sort of exploded, and they closed. It was a week after we got back, they locked everything down and then a few weeks later, they shut down the border. And one of the things that they also did was not allow kids out into public spaces. So, it's only a couple weeks ago that my daughter got to come with me to the grocery store again. And so, it's been intense because she's sick of me, and I was sick of her. We were having this sort of tension. And she started bringing up the fact a lot, "I wish I wasn't an only child. I wish my brother hadn't died," and just hitting me with all this stuff. And I was like, oh, God. Like, could it get any worse. And she also is aware — we talked about it more after the book, and after I got a chance to read other stories and sort of process things, and echoing a lot of other people's impressions and feelings when they did so. In the last year or so, we've talked a lot more about all of what it entails. And in my instance, it was a hysterectomy that followed the delivery of my son. And I've spent the last few years feeling the weight of that and just the fact that there's no hope that this body is going to make another baby, and that it's done. And my daughter understands that. So, when she says it, of course, she's 7. She doesn't know the weight of that guilt and the weight of her words. But, oh, my God, was I glad to get her back out

into the world and interacting and not just having to be stuck with her and her only-child misery.

KKY: I feel that keenly. There is a house on our block, and we visited it when we were looking for homes. And when we visited, I was pregnant with twins. I had identical twin boys who are 4, going on 5. We would pass the house and we started talking about our visit there. And the boys said, "Oh, yeah, we've been inside that house." I was like, "You were inside of me," and they said, "No mommy, in the baby world." And I said, "What do you mean?" And they said, "In the baby world, mommy, when you were inside that house, there was another little boy." My poor heart started hammering. I thought, what are they going to say to me? And they are both nodding. And they're like, "There was another little boy. He was a ghost boy, mommy. And he wanted to come, but we chased him away. We said no, there's two of us already and we're here, but we're not going to live here with you. So, we chased him away." And of course, it could just be bantering among children, and their imagination, but in my heart, I was hammering so fast. I thought, what are they going to tell me? Well, what happened inside that place, when the baby was inside of me and maybe for the rest of so many of our lives, there'll always be these moments when things are said in our lives or are around us, where we start wondering if there's a clue there somewhere or there's a way to think of leaving. I'm not sure how it is for the rest of you. But with these little guys, every time they bring up the baby world, I'm tense. I'm very open with them about the loss of baby Jules. And I tried to explain as best I can how these things go in life. But when they start explaining the world before they are a part of mine, to me, I'm like what are they going to say?

SG: And they have a kid's, a child's sensibility. Soniah was talking about how others were not in your body during your other pregnancy. They didn't carry the baby. They have a different relationship to it. My kids, their sister that died, her name is Siannah and they constantly say things like: "If Siannah were here now, we would have to get a new car because there's no way we could fit her in here. If Siannah were here now, she would probably like these hot dogs. If Siannah were here now, she could stay in my room," et cetera. And it's become part of our family story, I think, in a very healthy way. But it does, as Kalia, is talking about, it's like a knife. You're just going about your day and then, oh, my God.

SK: I think what also struck me was that my kids were much younger when this happened. They were in kindergarten and first grade or so. And just to tell them or explain because the ultrasound picture was up on the fridge and we'd named him. And because the doctors kept telling me that he's going to come out and be playing soccer before I know it. So, to tell kids at that age is so different from telling older kids, and they try to process it differently. And as I say in my essay, my son, his best friend, his father had passed away. And I was able to explain it to my son in terms of, the baby's gone where Dylan's father is. But I think having written the essay and then seeing them read it when they were older and seeing their names on the page and seeing his name on the page, there's a life that the page gives that is very unexpected also because suddenly, they are alive in the page and in our memories. But also when others read that, when family members read it or friends or even strangers read it for a moment, that life that was so fleeting comes back to life, so to

Speak, if that makes sense. And I think for my children, watching them process it when they were so little and then watching them process it when they were older and able to read themselves on the page and see themselves in the story, in our family story that is taking place. I was able to have a child after my miscarriage. And, that brings up its own interesting conversations, like, this is so hard. But like when that child asked — because I've written an essay about this miscarriage, it's on paper — so the first time that child asks, "Well, if you hadn't miscarried, would I have come?" It's a very, very difficult question to know how to answer, really, in all its complications. And it just brings an added pain in a way, if that makes sense. You know?

MB: I didn't think about when it happened that my daughter would be grieving, too. It's a whole other thing. And when you talk about your kids being able to read it, I'm excited for that day but I'm also terrified of putting more baggage onto my daughter to understand what that experience was. But the beauty of the anthology is that she's not just going to be reading my story. She's going to be reading all these other women's stories to know that this is something that happens, and how it happens differently and yet the same.

SG: I think the other thing is, it is scary to think about your kids maturing because we know how hard and frankly, often brutal the world can be. And some of the things that we've had to carry being in it. But at the same time, it's like even if my kids were experiencing something differently than me, they always know, kids always know when something is afoot. And I know this is not true for everyone, but I think for me, it has been cathartic to write the stories down in different contexts. I share the stories with my children, too. I haven't shared the essay there with them. They're still young, they're 5 and they're 10. But I have written a children's book called *Where Is My Sister?* And I read that draft to them, and they really liked it. It was a good conversation.

KKY: I have three younger sisters, and they were all at the initial launch event and I saw them weeping in the audience. When I talked to them about it, they said, "We wish we could have read this in college. It would have tied so many strings together." And I just looked at them as their older sister, who loves them very much. I, of course, never want them to have to go through what I've been through, what all of us have been through. But I also know because I know what happened to me, I know what happened to all of you, that these things happen regardless of where we are, regardless of who we are, it happens disproportionately to Indigenous women and women of color. And because these are three young women of color, I'd rather they knew than didn't than live their lives without the knowing. I'm raising children of color, and we're talking about this moment in history in very different ways than the family across the street who are raising white kids in a predominantly white neighborhood, in a predominantly white city, in a predominantly white state, in a predominantly white country. In a world where the power is disproportionately taken by white folk, and I would rather my kids know than not know and somehow chance upon it and fall in the flames that I know are waiting to consume them. I think that's part of the power of this book.

SG: And one book can't do everything, and it can't be everything to all people.

KKY: What about Shakespeare, Shannon? Just joking with you.

SG: OK. You can dog out Shakespeare on your own time. That's one white man whose work I love. True talk! I feel like we make the books — we tell the stories — it's a starting place. And so, again, what I said before, I hope the book opens up space. And another one of my friends, a queer Black woman, has a daughter by partnership who has never given birth or been pregnant. But she said, just the fact that you all said, no, we think this is a topic that is important enough that we're going to have an entire book on this, it gives you pause. That's a powerful statement. Particularly, as women, and particularly, as you know, we know the genre of memoir since the enlightenment forward has been dominated by white men. And so, what does it mean to really not only center those first-person narratives and that genre in the voices and experiences of women of color and Indigenous women's, particularly, talking about pregnancy and infant loss.

MB: When I lost my son, I heard from a friend; she was my best friend in fifth grade or sixth grade and then up through seventh grade, and I hadn't talked to her in years. We spoke a little bit when we were in college. And somehow, through the grapevine, she had heard about what happened and sent me [Empty Cradle, Broken Heart](#), I think is the name of the book? Something like that. I didn't touch it. I've still not read a single page of it all the way through. I opened it to one page. And I read it. And it wasn't for me. It wasn't written for me. It wasn't my story. I just knew. But again, it's like weird feelings of guilt come up. Like, she had tried; she had put herself out there to say, "I feel your loss." She said that she had experienced many miscarriages. That was something for a couple of years, I thought, I'd like to read something about it; I don't have a therapist here. I didn't have the kind of community I had in the US. So, I would normally go to a book or something like that to sort of work through things or hear things and try to make sense of things. And I'm thrilled. I mean, I hate that this book exists, just on principle, and in the fact that these things happened and we wrote about them. But I am also incredibly grateful that if there's a woman like me out there, which I know there is and will be, they'll see that there's a book that is for them and represents a voice or shares a voice that represents their experience. And there's a political aspect that the book that I was sent doesn't even dare to acknowledge. It's not about that, right? It's just about, I don't even know, I can't speak for the book. I can't say what that book is about. I've not read a full, complete page, but there's an industry for this, right? Like, there's a whole series of books that have been written about this. And this is the first that tells a different story.

SG: Yeah, there's a lot of overt, very religious, very Christian — a lot of language that I feel is very overused and familiar, like "my angel," the "empty cradle," "broken heart" — like, what does that mean now? It's been used so many times that it doesn't mean anything. I wanted something — again, people ask Kalia and I about the meaning of the title, like, "Well, why did you title it that." And, going back to Kalia's story of encountering this line in this amazing [Lucille Clifton](#) poem, and sharing it with me. And both of us feeling like this is it — that moment in the middle of the night where it just is like your soul is howling. And there's nobody there to hear it. Your baby is dead. And there's no bringing them back. And then, you ask,

[“What God is honored here.”](#) Now, what is this place that we’ve come to now?” I wanted something that really talked about what happens in your body. I mean, it’s not pretty when you go through something like this; the platitudes just don’t suffice. They just don’t work. And for me, that also has to do a lot with how whiteness is constructed. It’s just repressive force. That’s what I encountered in a lot of the literature about this topic when I went through my loss, and I’m a writer, that’s what I do. I’m a reader and writer: I have an experience, and then I try to find writing that speaks to that experience. And I just was finding nothing.

KKY: Similar to the title, I think one of the hardest things for us in terms of the publishing of this book, I don’t know if you all knew, was the cover. All of the covers that were presented, Shannon and I felt, we didn’t want all of our stories wrapped in pastels; we didn’t want it wrapped in dripping blood; we didn’t want a photo of autumn and snow. And so, the cover that we have, I stumbled upon — a good poet friend is also a wonderful photographer — and he had this photo of this river surging where the mist meets the falling snowflakes. And finally, because we couldn’t come up with the right cover, Shannon and I both agreed that maybe this cover would somehow speak to something that we’ve all felt before.

MB: It works, well-chosen.

SG: People have told me that they have a visceral reaction to looking at the cover, which is what we wanted.

SK: I’d love to know, now that it’s been out for a while, what you might have done differently with it. And what the responses have been, that you’ve liked, just in general, both Kalia and Shannon, because as the editors, I’m assuming most of the responses and everything comes to you guys. So, what have you been finding overall?

KKY: So, the book has been out now nearly a year. I was scheduled to give a talk at the [Alice] [Mayo Society](#), and this was going to be the book that we were going to focus on. They were going to get a copy for a lot of the medical personnel who were a part of the society. Of course, that talk has long been canceled. But one of our hopes is to get this book into the hands of the actual practitioners, the doctors and the medical students and the nurses and the midwives and the caretakers and caregivers. Part of the problem, yes, but necessarily part of the answer. We were very hopeful of that. I am so happy that Shannon and I worked on this book as a team. We’re a wonderful team because we are wonderfully different. But we’re also wonderfully — Shannon would say we are all hustlers, all of us.

SG: We can’t get anywhere as women of color if we don’t hustle. This is the way it is.

KKY: So, Shannon and I will be presenting at [Wayne State University Medical School](#) on this text and this work. I think that this book belongs in the hands of students. Unfortunately, most higher education, most professors are male. And so, the book isn’t quite traveling as far in terms of its teaching capacity as I would like. In a different world, I would do a lot of public talks, and I would focus on this book.

And part of being a woman of color is always, the things that I say and the things that I work on are never quite what people expect of me. So, I am planning, because I believe in the life of this book, I believe that it will live long beyond all of us. And it is a groundbreaking collection. This book is incredibly relevant to our current moment. We are talking about equity. We're talking about racism. We're talking about all of the things that we've been needing to talk about that within our circles we've individually been trying to speak about, and now as a nation for the first time in a very long time. And so, I think that the work the book needs to do is only still beginning. With that aside, every time we give a talk, every time I meet anybody and they've had experience with this book, they say, "How can I tell my story?" Just this morning, Shannon and I were on a call together and an African American woman said, "Shannon Gibney, teach me how to write my story." So, the book, maybe we're looking at the first edition. Maybe this is going to become a much thicker book in time. What do you think, Shannon?

SG: I think as usual, you said it really well. It's really just the beginning. I think it's just so much of the deep, cultural work is about relationships. And it just takes time to cultivate those relationships. The reason why we're doing the "ground moms talk" for the OB-GYN residents at Wayne State University Medical School is because my mom, it's her really good friend that she worked with as a nurse and a McU at University of Michigan hospitals. Her daughter is a third-year in that program. And my mom gave her friend a copy of the book and passed it on to this woman. A majority of their patients at Wayne State in Detroit are lower income, basically, poor, Black women. They have very bad maternal health and neonatal outcomes. And so, she recognized, "Wow, this is something that's so relevant that nobody talks about, that we need to talk about." And I don't know if I told you this Kalia, but my mom's friend — Kalia and I said that we didn't want to be paid, we just wanted each resident who will be at the talk to get a copy of the book — and so, this young woman's mother bought 50 copies of the book and donated them to the program to make that possible, which was just amazing. But it's those kinds of things that it just takes time. So, I feel like the book is penetrating in certain communities. As I said, I've been hearing from friends and other people, acquaintances, et cetera. People have written me out of the blue and gone out of their way to be like, "Oh, my God, thank you so much for this book. I never wanted to need it, but I need it so bad right now." And they have shared the most personal, harrowing stories with Kalia and I. It's just so moving. And I do feel like in Minnesota, we've gotten a lot of traction just because that's where Kalia and I are based. And now, people know who we are, et cetera. Nationally, I think definitely, we'd like to see some more connections made. But I do feel like we're hitting our stride. A lot of folks in the anthology are hitting their stride. And so, the book isn't going anywhere. It's like it's going to travel with us as our careers go forward as well. So, I do feel like it's going to be a very slow snowball to get yet another metaphor in the mix.

KKY: One thing that Shannon and I both agreed on is having a talented team of writers. It was super important to both of us that this book be literary, that the writing be exquisite. And it is. All of you are so wonderful. Michelle, this is the first time we're hearing your voice, and it is even more badass than I imagined. It's been a gift, a friendship of this sisterhood that stretches the globe, made of phenomenally smart, thoughtful, deeply feeling women. That's been the biggest gift.

SG: Yeah, it's been incredible and just to also plug the press, we've been able to bring a good portion of the contributors in for the book launches. We had two big events, and it was so powerful and moving. After I read part of my piece — I was the last reader at the one in St. Paul, at St. Catherine University — and I just broke down crying. And kind of like what Seema was saying, it was a different kind of crying because it was just like, these are people who get it at the deepest level. And I don't have to worry that I'm being a burden to them. I don't have to worry that they're not going to get it, none of that. So, it does feel like a sisterhood.

KKY: I was thinking of my editor, [Erik Anderson](#). He is a white guy. He's experienced his own losses, but he also believes in the trajectory of our vision for the book. And then all of the writers in the book. It's not very often that you get an editor who believes in your vision for something and then the team that you're bringing to the table. So, we've been really fortunate and gifted with the press, the editor, the team. I think that when we think back to this book, all of us, when we think about the body of our work, we'll all be very proud. When all is said and done, when I think about the body of my own work, I'm incredibly moved by this book. It's not a book that the world is excited to read, that people are clamoring to hear, but it is a book with truth. It is a book with necessity. That is the highest standard that any writer can aspire toward — communicating with his humble human experience of life. So, no regrets, no sorrows there.

SG: I just want to thank you all so much for taking time and sharing your stories and your views. So, thank you again.

Host: For more information, please visit z.umn.edu/wgihh.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.