

White Guy Gets Woke

[Opening Music]

Susan Neville: Funding for Naptown is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ayres Fund at Butler University.

I'm your host, Susan Neville. Welcome to Naptown.

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Susan Neville: Our guest for this session is novelist, journalist, and screenwriter Dan Wakefield. Wakefield is the author of nine nonfiction books, two memoirs, and five novels, including the bestselling *Going All The Way*. He was a staff writer for *The Nation*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *GQ*.

Bill Moyers called Dan's memoir *Returning*, "A spiritual journey, one of the most important memoirs of the spirit I have ever read." Of his book, *Island in the City*, the World of Spanish Harlem, James Baldwin wrote, "Dan Wakefield has a remarkable combination of humility and tough mindedness that makes these streets and these struggling people come alive."

Born in Indianapolis, he lived most of his life on the East and West Coasts but returned home several years ago. And in this essay, which originally appeared in *Indianapolis Monthly*, he talks about his recent awakening.

[Transitional Music]

Dan Wakefield: "Old White Guy Gets Woke, with Apologies to James Baldwin."

"I remember the thunder. We were walking uptown on Seventh Avenue from the Village to somewhere in Chelsea, without umbrellas, as the rain was pouring down, drenching us, but we strode ahead, our ways sporadically sliced by lightning.

Jimmy had been invited by his friend Mary Painter to have dinner with a woman she knew who was visiting from France. Mary wanted her French friend to meet James Baldwin and he'd asked me to come along."

"I had met Jimmy, as he was known to all his friends, at the Whitehorse Tavern in 1957. And I recognized him from the photograph on the cover of his *Notes of a Native Son*. The last sentence of his "Autobiographical Notes" in that book had sent a chill of inspiration through me, and I adopted it as my highest and most sacred goal: "I want to be an honest man and a good writer." I told him I was writing my first book, a journalistic account of Spanish Harlem, Island in the City, and he asked to read it and invited me to his apartment on Horatio Street for bourbon and Bessie Smith records."

"Once after he'd returned from a talk at Howard University, he said an old professor there had told him, 'When you finish, you got to have a shelf of books, a whole shelf.' And he pointed his finger at me and said, 'A shelf of books, baby. A whole shelf.'"

Those afternoons at Jimmy's became a sporadic event, a treat during the next few years. I would usually go over at four or five in the afternoon. And around an hour or so later, a few others would join us. When the group grew to five or six, Jimmy would lead us all across the street to El Faro, a Spanish restaurant. We'd all throw in what dollars we had when the check came, and if the bill amounted to more than his guests could contribute—it almost always did—Jimmy wrote a check.

He knew I had covered the Emmett Till murder trial for *The Nation* magazine and he quizzed me about it. I said it was summed up by the last lawyer who spoke for the defense, who said he "Had faith that every last Anglo-Saxon one of you men in this jury has the courage to set these men free.

Everyone knew that the two White men on trial had killed the boy. They later sold their confession to *Look* magazine.

Jimmy asked me what the reaction was when the murderers were set free.

And I said, 'The amazing thing is the people in the town agreed with the verdict. They were glad that the murderers were found not guilty.

Baldwin's great eyes fixed on me and he said in a sentence I will never forget. "You mean the White people in the town?"

He taught me to see more than I was trained to see. I had covered the trial for *The Nation*, a left liberal magazine and I considered myself a good guy. A friend and defender of the downtrodden regardless of race, creed or color, according to our catechism.

Wasn't I writing a book about Spanish Harlem, the largest Puerto Rican ghetto in New York? Wasn't I a trusted friend of Baldwin, who asked me to come to this dinner with him at Mary Painter's?

“We arrived at Mary's apartment soaked and chilled, and she quickly got out the bourbon. The French woman, Francine, I'll call her, was younger than Mary and very pleasant, drinking along with us.”

We talked for a while in boozy, good spirits and drank more until Mary put dinner on the table and we switched to wine.

The conversation was general and light, pleasant and lit with laughter. I don't remember any of it until Jimmy began to speak of his younger sister and his jovial mood dropped to a lower register of concern and apprehension. His sister was having a fashion show in Harlem a week later, and her future hopes were wrapped up in it. She was only 16, but she was serious about her dream of becoming a fashion designer and she knew the odds against her as a Black girl in Harlem.

Jimmy's mood became more intense and troubled as he told us, ‘She is 16. And she is suffering.’

Francine said, "But, Jimmy, all 16-year-old girls suffer. I have a sister myself, a teenage sister. And she's suffering, too.’

Stoked with bourbon and wine, I leaped in.

‘Teenage boys suffer, too!’ I said, thinking self-piteously of my own acne-scarred adolescence.

‘People can only suffer to their own capacity for suffering,’ I added, imagining I had come up with some irrefutable gem of human understanding. Jimmy was sitting on my left, and he turned his great eyes on me with a look of

disillusionment and rage. He didn't raise his voice as he spoke, which made his words more terrible.

‘You don't understand,’ he said. The table was silent.”

He invited me to his sister's fashion show. And I went, bringing a friend, not wanting to face Jimmy alone. I said that Baldwin was a friend of mine, but it must have been obvious that was no longer true. He led us unsmiling around the hall, where the show was held, speaking in a kind of controlled rage.

Jimmy had the greatest smile in the world, all teeth and eyes and soul and I knew I would never see it again, unless in a public performance or on television or film. I was frankly surprised, but pleased, when I got an invitation to the publication party for Baldwin's new book of essays, *Nobody Knows my Name*, a year later in '61.

That party was held at Wilt Chamberlain Smalls Paradise, a popular club in Harlem. Jimmy was in good spirits and he smiled as we shook hands. It was a publication party, not a time or place for real talk, others pressed in around us.

Two years later, I reviewed *The Fire Next Time* for *The New York Times* and extolled it in the way it deserved. In the book, he wrote of meeting Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Black Muslims, who asked him if he could honestly say he had any friends who were White. He said he did and he thought of Mary. I understood.

The only other time I saw him was when I was on a book tour in Chicago in 1976 and I got a call from a radio station, asking if I could change my interview time until later that night and be on the air with Baldwin. He had a bad sore throat and didn't want to have to do all the talking. He told them I was a friend. I was happy to be so identified. And, of course, I agreed.

Despite his sore throat, Jimmy talked with his usual eloquence about his new book that told what it was like for a Black man to try to make sense of the American movies of his era.

“As a boy,” he said, he “rooted for John Wayne to kill the Indians until he realized he was the Indians.”

The book was called *The Devil Finds Work*.

I was there to talk about my own new book about the making of the soap opera, *All Her Children*. A listener might conclude the devil had found work for me.

It was a freezing Chicago weather that night and Jimmy had on the big Russian hat he used to wear to parties. He had his driver drop me off at my hotel, and he thanked me, and we said goodbye. I never saw him again, except on film. I had never called him to try to get together after Mary's dinner.

What could I say? I still didn't understand. *What didn't I understand? What didn't I understand?* Baldwin's question painfully echoed.

It was spoken again in different words that meant the same thing by a Black woman friend who had once probably saved my life when she saw me drunk and miserable at a bar in the Village at closing time and took me on the rattling subway ride clear up to her Harlem apartment, and tended to me, and made me well, and took me back home to the Village in the morning, and put me to bed.

I saw her many times again at her place of work, but I never thanked her, or invited her to have a drink or a cup of coffee and asked how she was doing or in any way showed my appreciation for a lifesaving deed.

After I left New York, I returned again to visit five years or so later and went to see her where she worked as a musician, imagining we were still pals, old buddies. And, of course, another proof of my liberal persona, a colored girl to add to my credentials. I evidently assumed her role was entertainment and lifesaving while I was cast as a beneficiary. Skin color determined our assigned roles.

I went right up to where she was playing And she stopped for a moment and focused her eyes on me. Eyes, it seemed, as large and penetrating as Baldwin's. Eyes that saw into me, knew who I was. And she said, "You're like all the rest of them."

I didn't have to ask who they were. It wasn't just men. I still see her in my mind when I hear certain songs she used to play, songs I always requested.

Sometimes the songs bring a beat of sweet nostalgia. Oh, those good old days in the village. But, it quickly turns to a wince of shame.

She is gone now. God bless her. God forgive me.

Jimmy, I saw on TV and in his actions, as well as his books. Marching with Martin Luther King, going with Lorraine Hansberry to confront Bobby Kennedy, speaking and teaching and always writing, his books always coming. "Remember, baby, a shelf of books, a whole shelf."

I was happy to read that he found a home in the south of France, where he died in 1987 and was resurrected in documentaries, and more recently, in a kind of film reprisal of himself, *I Am Not Your Negro*. I read and admired and reviewed his books so, of course, I assume that I understood them. Yet, I still didn't really know what he meant when that awful night at Mary Painter's, he told me, "You don't understand."

It was echoed by a Black woman musician friend. "You're like all the rest of them." My liberal credentials were only White skin deep.

I never imagined I would find any answer to that when I came back to live in my hometown of Indianapolis in 2011 after living in New York, Boston, L.A., and Miami since I graduated from college in 1955.

Of our mutual hometown, Kurt Vonnegut said in a talk to the Indiana Civil Liberties Union, "I grew up in a city as segregated as Biloxi, Mississippi, except for the buses and the drinking fountains." I believe, in that way, it is not greatly different than most other Midwestern American cities.

"I was asked to give a talk at an annual event in Indianapolis called Spirit & Place in 2015. The theme was dreams. And after my brief talk of a literary dream, I stayed to hear a discussion on dreams for our city with two White and two Black panelists.

The panelist whose thoughts I found most interesting was Phyllis Boyd, Director of an organization called Groundwork Indy, which employs youth to upgrade public spaces. Miss Boyd said her dream was for 'a city where everyone can contribute.' My self-reverential response was, *Great, 'everyone' includes old guys!*

I introduced myself to Phyllis after the panel and I asked if she had seen the film *Something to Cheer About*, a documentary of the Indianapolis Crispus Attucks basketball team led by Oscar Robertson that won the state championship two years in a row, 1955-56, and became the first Black high school in America to win a state championship in any team sport.”

The city rerouted their victory parade; after a brief stop at the circle downtown, where the players stayed aboard their city fire engine while their coach stepped up to receive a key to the city from the mayor.

The photo was taken by the *Indianapolis Star*, displayed in the next day's edition, leaving the impression that the team celebrated downtown at the circle. Though, as soon as the photo was taken, the coach got back on the fire engine and the team was whisked off to celebrate with its fans at a park in the city's Black neighborhood.

The documentary was called *Something to Cheer About* and was produced by my friend Betsy Blankenbaker, another Indianapolis native.

Phyllis gave me her address and I sent her the DVD. I felt I had done my good deed for racial empowerment.

“Three weeks later, I was giving a talk on Jack Kerouac at the downtown bookstore, Indy Reads Books, and Phyllis showed up in the audience. She thanked me for the documentary and gave me a gift in return, a book I had been conscientiously avoiding, since it was published earlier that year, *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. A lot of people were comparing it to the work of James Baldwin, which made me feel defensive, as if I were a self-appointed ‘defender’ of Baldwin's status as the premier Black American writer, a premier American writer of any color, even though Baldwin himself had told me I didn't understand him.”

Well, I had known him. I thought of him as a mentor. Despite our falling out, I treasured the friendship we once had.

Toni Morrison's endorsement of this award-winning new book declared on the back jacket, “I had been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly, it is Ta-Nehisi Coates.”

“Since the book had been given to me as a gift, I felt obligated to read it. *Between the World and Me* is in the form of a letter from Coates to his 15-year-old son warning him of ‘the system that makes your body breakable.’ He tells his son, ‘I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, and that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old child, whom they were oathbound to protect. And you have seen the same men in the same uniforms pummel Marlene Pinnock, someone's grandmother, on the side of the road. And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body.’”

I had seen those things, too. I had seen them on television. I had seen and heard the police shoot 12-year-old Tamir Rice, not once or twice, but 16 times. When I was a kid and played cowboys and Indians, we used the phrase, “I shot you dead.” It only took one shot to shoot you dead. What was it about a person, a child, that required 16 shots to make them dead?

“Maybe these words of Coates reached me on a level that Baldwin's hadn't because I, too, had seen these shootings of Black men and women and children by police, seen them on television over and over. I Googled ‘How many unarmed Black people were killed by police in 2015?’ The answer on the website mapping police violence was at least 104, nearly twice each week. I printed the names and pictures of those killed, Rayshaun, Lamontez, Betty, Christopher, Junior, Keith, Philando, DeAngelo, Brian, Reginald. Names. Names. Names representing recently living and breathing human beings whose skin was darker than mine, whose skin color made them breakable.’”

At long last, after more than half a century, I began to understand what Baldwin had meant when he spoke of his sister's suffering. When the woman from France and I had argued that all teenagers suffered, it was like the contemporary response to Black Lives Matter from White people who answer as if topping that statement with moral one-upmanship: All Lives Matter.

Yes. Yes, all teenagers suffer. All human beings suffer, no matter the color of their skin or their ethnic origin. But, on top of that human suffering that is the birthright of all breathing people on Earth, whatever form it takes for each

individual, there lies on top of that for all Black Americans whose ancestors were enslaved, an added circle of hell.

Like a coiled snake that can strike at any time, the realization that you are not safe, that you are, to use Coates' word to his son, "Breakable,

The basis of White privilege, a phenomenon that is difficult for White people to see and even more difficult for us to accept, is that we don't have to think about being White. We don't think of ourselves as White Americans. We think of ourselves as Americans.

It is only African Americans, Black Americans, Native Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, any whose national and/or ethnic identity requires a qualifying adjective, who recognize the privileged status of those whose Whiteness frees us of such qualifications and concerns.

It does not free us from fear, fear of those who are different from us, who speak a different language, who dress a different way, who play a different music, especially those whose skin is darker.

Two years ago, I saw on *60 Minutes*, a White police woman in Oklahoma named Betty Shelby trying to explain why she had shot and killed an unarmed Black man. The unarmed Black man was shown walking toward his car with his hands in the air, his body facing the window on the driver's side, while police officers followed closely behind, their weapons raised, when the Black man fell to the ground from the shot fired by Officer Shelby.

In her interview on *60 Minutes*, Officer Shelby said, "I was afraid." I believed her. I believed her because as White people in this country, we are taught to be afraid of people with darker skin than ours. I also understand that anyone who puts on a blue police uniform faces danger every day. The officer, at least, can take off the uniform when off duty, but the Black man, or woman, or child cannot remove the skin whose color puts him or her in peril.

Policies of segregation that are built into the structure of this country keep us from knowing one another as neighbors, as friends, as families, as colleagues. Even our history is segregated. How in the world, by any rational judgment, can Black history be segregated from American history?

The Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, Murray Kempton, wrote more than 50 years ago, "The ordinary Negro has spent all his life sealed off from the rest of us. And could it be that we will come someday to know that we have even segregated him in our history?"

As a proud graduate of Public School 80, Shortridge High School, Columbia College in New York City, and a year's study at Harvard as a Nieman Fellow in journalism, I can begin in the certain knowledge of my own ignorance.

Our local PBS station, WFYI, produced an excellent documentary some years ago called *Indy in the '50s*. I was interviewed, along with many other people who were here at that time. We were interviewed individually and our comments edited for the hour long program. So we didn't know how or with whom our words would be juxtaposed.

"One of the questions asked of many who were young in that era was, 'What was it like to go downtown to the Circle when you were in high school?' I talked happily of what fun that was, how much my friends and I enjoyed it. The very next cut was of Oscar Robertson, one of my heroes, who said, 'We were afraid to go downtown.'

I didn't know. I think of my friends and myself in those days as good, friendly, honest, well-educated young people. We would have been shocked and ashamed to know this fact of our beloved city. I graduated in 1950 from high school, before Oscar, though I did see his older brother Bailey play for Attucks. Those Attucks basketball players were the only Black people I saw when I was growing up in Indianapolis from 1932 to 1950."

I did not live in the kind of neighborhood where people had cooks or maids, so I never saw any Black people, except when Attucks played in the sectionals of the basketball tournament. I lived at 61st and Winthrop.

"Sumner, Mississippi, the site of the Emmett Till murder trial, was no more segregated than Broad Ripple." But we didn't know. Some still don't.

A few years ago, Bill Hampton, a guard on the Attucks championship team, was asked what it was like when he and the team were invited to have their celebratory dinner at Fenwick. It was the first White restaurant downtown where they'd ever been free to sit down and eat.

Before Hampton could answer, a White city native leaned in and asked him with genuine puzzlement, "You mean before that you couldn't just walk into that restaurant?"

I was told by a local reporter that Blacks were still turned away from White lunch counters here as late as 1960.

I took Phyllis Boyd for a hamburger and drink at my hometown hang out at the Red Key Tavern and we talked more about Baldwin, and Coates, and ourselves, my writing and her family. I met her husband and their two young children. Phyllis told me she's instructed her 10-year-old son to never play with a toy gun, to never pick up or hold a toy gun.

As we have seen from the killing of Tamir Rice, a toy gun cannot harm anyone except a Black child who holds it. And holding it may get him killed.

Phyllis and I talked about books, and sports, and work, and food, and money, as well as the continuing issues of race. And she recently sent me a transcript of the radio program and podcast *On Being*, in which host Krista Tippett interviewed Claudia Rankine, a Black woman who is the Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry at Yale.

Rankine explained the experience of the daily strain of knowing that, as a Black person, you can be killed for simply being Black.

No hands in your pockets. No playing music. No sudden movements. No driving your car. No walking at night. No walking in the day. No turning onto this street. No entering this building. No standing your ground. No standing here. Not there. No talking back. No playing with toy guns. No living while Black.

She might have added, "No entering in your own house," as the Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates found when he was handcuffed by police in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while trying to open the door to his house with an obstinate key and was assumed to be an intruder.

No amount of education can protect you. No degree, or accomplishment, or title. Not your father, or mother, or minister, or priest, or guardian, can keep

you safe. And this realization is upon, or on top of, all other troubles or fears or challenges of your particular individual, complex, and precarious one and only life on this planet.

“After Indiana went for Trump in 2016, I was invited to a ‘Resist’ poetry reading on the south side of the city. Poets are plentiful here and so is the talent. But that night, it felt as if one poet jumped off the stage and into our heads.

Tasha Jones didn't merely read, but performed her poem. Her whole body seemed to move and strain in the effort to make us not only hear, but absorb the words of her poem, ‘From Pyramids to Plantations to Projects to Penitentiaries,’ a title that describes the descending historical arc.

Jones was also a teacher. She's now going for her PhD in Education at Boston University. And she invited me to come to her class of eighth-grade boys at Tindley Charter School. It was the most disciplined class that I had ever attended.”

The boys had memorized hand signals that Jones had given them for “I agree,” “I disagree,” “I have a comment,” “I have a question.” And instead of shouting, or speaking aloud, or waving their hands like kids will do, they made the appropriate hand signal. The boys in that class would have put to shame the cadets of a military academy.

“Jones also taught the boys the most appropriate, safest way to respond if stopped by police – stand straight, hands out of pockets, clearly visible; speak only “Yes, sir” and “No, sir” to questions; if traveling in a group, re-form in twos.”

Black parents teach their sons and daughters who reach driving age the safest way to respond if stopped by police when driving— hands on the steering wheel. Don't reach for the glove compartment unless you ask and receive permission to open it in order to get registration and insurance information. Answer any questions with “Yes, sir,” “No, sir,” unless asked for information that cannot be answered by those responses. These are part of a Black American child's curriculum of safety and survival.

“We are not speaking of Black children from Chicago, going to the Mississippi Delta in 1955, we are speaking of Black children here, now, in what has been called, ‘The heart of the heart of the country.’

My belated education about my own city was enhanced a few years ago when I met Aleta Hodge, a more recent writer for the *Shortridge Daily Echo*, several decades after my own byline appeared in its pages. She had just written a book called *Indiana Avenue: Life and Musical Journey from 1915-2015*. I first heard of Indiana Avenue as a boy when I was told, as White boys in our city in those days were told on the street and in the playgrounds and parks, that Indiana Avenue was a dangerous place, where drunken or dope-crazed Black men would cut the throat of any White person who entered. In the segregated White high schools of my era, it was a traditional ‘dare,’ to any boy brave enough to drive his car down Indiana Avenue with his windows rolled down and see if he could make it through the alleged danger zone without being struck by a knife hurled at him from the street. No one I knew questioned the notion that local Black men had all been trained as kung fu warriors.

When I learned of this hometown myth as a child in the 1940s, I had no idea that my favorite musical group, The Ink Spots, whose hit record, *If I Didn’t Care*, sold 19 million copies, got their start on Indiana Avenue. I didn’t know that the Avenue was a legendary mecca of jazz and a favorite stop on the ‘Chitlin Circuit,’ the segregated entertainment route that went through Cleveland, Detroit, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Memphis, and New Orleans.

‘Many people ask today,’ Hodge writes, ‘Why didn’t I know about Indiana Avenue?’ Other cities have proclaimed and aggressively marketed their musical heritage. In fact, the city name is tied to the music such as Kansas City Blues or New Orleans Jazz. However, Indianapolis did not proclaim its musical heritage.’”

I suspect the reason that those who ran the city in the 1920s wanted to hide the nationally renowned musicians that were coming into their first great place blossom here was simply that the musicians were Black Jazz was Black music. And the Ku Klux Klan was at its most powerful in Indiana during that decade.

Beginning in 1920, Indiana offered one of the Klan’s most successful recruiting fields according to the book, *Hoosiers: a New History of Indiana*. One scholar,

who has analyzed membership lists, estimated that one quarter or more of the state's native born White men joined, as did thousands of women.

We've now been given four books on Indiana Avenue and internationally acclaimed music. As well as Hodge's book, there is *Indianapolis Jazz* by David Williams, *Indiana Avenue: Black Entertainment Boulevard* by Reverend C. Nickerson Butler, and *From the Avenue* by Thomas Ridley Jr. These four books are all by African American writers. I do not know of any books on the history of our city or state by White writers who refer to that rich heritage.

“Noble Sissle, a Black man who was born and grew up here, studied for the ministry, graduated from Butler, and then wrote *Shuffle Along*, the first non-minstrel Black musical on Broadway, in 1921, giving singer Paul Robeson and dancer Josephine Baker the first stage roles of their internationally famous careers. The musical was hailed by poet Langston Hughes as the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance and, in 2015, was revived on Broadway as *Shuffle Along*, or, *The Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921*, and *All That Followed* and was nominated for 10 Tony Awards. Sissle wrote many other musicals and songs, including the national hit ‘I'm Just Wild About Harry.’”

He served in World War I, lead bands in France and England, accompanied Lena Horne in the 1930s. Oh, yes. He also wrote the Butler University War Song. Does his story not belong to the history of this city and this state?

Among the literally dozens of nationally known jazz musicians who got their start on Indiana Avenue, two are credited with changing the way their instrument is used in playing jazz: JJ Johnson on the trombone and Wes Montgomery on the guitar.

Montgomery's innovation came about because the neighbors complained of being kept awake by his practicing at all hours. He realized that by using his thumb rather than a pick to strum the guitar, he would not only soften the sounds for the neighbors, but the technique would give him a greater range of musical possibilities.

He worked as a welder by day to support his family, and played on Indiana Avenue at night until closing time, and then at an after-hours club called the Missile Room, where Cannonball Adderley discovered him and got him a record contract.

“Beyond expanding my education on the rich musical tradition of Indiana Avenue, what I also found enlightening in Hodges' book were everyday stories of her family's experience trying to survive as citizens of African American heritage in this city, experiences hardly unusual in any cities in America. These brief nuggets of what White people call ‘Black history,’ which, in reality, is part of Indiana history, American history, seem almost snuck in or seeded unobtrusively into Hodges stories of the music and musicians of Indiana Avenue.”

After a section on definition of spiritual music and a section on the White plague of tuberculosis, a neighbor tells the author's grandmother, Estella Hodge, that they're going to close the TB clinic and the Lincoln Hospital Association on 11th Street. Everyone in the neighborhood is upset about the closing. It is the only clinic that accepts colored patients.

As the plague of tuberculosis spread in the 1930s, the plague of segregation barred colored people from hospitals and TB clinics. Quoting from the book, "In Indianapolis, there were outdoor camps such as Oak Hill Convalescent Tuberculosis Camp in the Brightwood area for colored TB patients."

“In a section on segregated community, Hodge writes that the Near Westside neighborhood was not a desirable area due to drainage problems, flooding, and mosquito populations near the canal, White River, and Fall Creek. ‘Due to these inferior conditions, colored people were only allowed to live in this segregated community.’”

This was the area Oscar Robertson grew up in during the 1940s and 1950s. And in his autobiography, *The Big O: My Life, My Times, My Game*, he writes of the house he lived in at 1005 Colson Street:

“The roof was made of tar paper, just strong enough to protect us from the rain, but too flimsy to shelter us from cold, windy nights, or flies and mosquitoes. There was running water, but the toilet was outside.

A big potbelly stove sat smack dab in the middle of the house and there was a bin outside underneath the house's frame to hold the coal. Even with the potbelly stove, there was no heat in the wintertime. You could get under all the covers you could, but the wind would come right through the windows.”

After Hodge's section called "The Roaring '20s" under the heading of "Delivering Babies in a Segregated Community," we learned that Black doctors were not given hospital privileges. According to the *Journal of the National Medical Association*, it was not until 1953 that this so-called "Color Bar" against Negro patients was removed at all hospitals in Indianapolis.

When it was time for a pregnant woman to deliver a baby, the mother or a family member would summon Dr. Henry Hummons and his midwife, Mrs. Estella Hodge, to deliver the baby. Dr. Hummons and Mrs. Hodge were responsible for delivering hundreds of colored babies in Indianapolis. They were classmates from Wilberforce College in Ohio.

Mrs. Hodge had no formal training in midwifery. It was a skill that she learned from the experience of delivering babies. Estella Hodge was the author's grandmother.

A colored family named Greer owned acres of land there, 64th Street and Grandview Drive, and according to Hodge, sold parcels of land to their fellow Attucks alumni. It became a middle class suburban neighborhood with the nickname, "The Golden Ghetto."

The homeowners were denied mortgages by local banks and were forced to obtain financing from out-of-state mortgage companies. Hodge's family and their neighbors could not get a mortgage in the state of Indiana. Families who had been here for three generations and more had to get mortgages from banks in Colorado. This mortgage discrimination was not peculiar to Indiana.

Much of the middle class wealth in this country derives from the soldiers coming home from World War II who had the GI Bill and could get government guaranteed housing loans to buy first homes in the suburbs. But Blacks were excluded from predominantly White neighborhoods and banks would not give loans for Black neighborhoods that the Federal Housing Authority had redlined in maps indicating "bad financial risk."

The Urban Studies expert, Charles Abraham, who helped create the New York City Housing Authority that the FHA adopted a ratio policy that could well have been called from the *Nuremberg Laws*.

The proposed wall on our border with Mexico will not be the first wall our government has created. We have effectively walled off the Black population into urban ghettos. The phenomenon of White flight that shifted populations from our city, as well as most other American cities, was succinctly explained by James Baldwin back in the 1960s. He wrote, "Real estate values don't go down when I move in; they go down when you move out."

Jimmy, I think I get it. I may not be woke, but at least I am blinking and rubbing my eyes, absorbing this information about my own hometown, these simple hints of a vast and unseen injustice this country inflicts on its citizens of color. I look back on your work, your words, to find some clue about what to do, how to find some way forward. And there's a shelf of your books, baby, a whole shelf. I find what rings most true is your story *Sonny's Blues*, about a jazz musician. It describes the music of the group as it reaches a peak.

"Creole, the bass player, stepped forward to remind them that they were playing the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened, and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer and how we are delighted and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell. It's the only light we've got in all this darkness."

Jimmy, you never stop telling us the tale in essays, novels, short stories, plays, movies, journalism. Sometimes I wonder how you kept going, when the tale must have seemed too hard to tell, or you told it before, or it seemed like nobody was listening.

You must have remembered that Bessie Smith record, the one you always played those long ago afternoons on Horacio Street. That record and the Bible were all you took when you went to Paris for the first time, with only \$20 in your pocket. You never forgot Bessie's words, the wise tough words of the blues. "I picked up my bag, baby, and I tried it again."

Susan Neville: Dan, that was a privilege. It was an extraordinary reading of an extraordinary piece. And in the last paragraph, you talked about how James Baldwin could keep going on when you felt he told the story before. And then in the very

beginning of the essay, you quoted from Baldwin saying you “just wanted to be an honest man and a good writer.” And you've had three pieces in *The New York Times Best Civil Rights Writing Anthologies*. You've been writing about civil rights in addition to your fiction for over half a century.

And I just wonder if you could say a few words about writing this essay, which you started and completed just in the last couple of months.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. Well, it's one of the things that I'm very grateful about that I moved back to Indianapolis because I think maybe sometimes you have to see and hear things in your own hometown to make them real, so I'm very grateful that I was asked to give a short talk about a literary dream at the Spirit & Place Festival.

They asked me, by the way, because I had been at the very first Spirit & Place Festival, which could have been titled “Three Old White Guys Talking about Books.”

Susan Neville: It was.

Dan Wakefield: It was me, and Vonnegut, and John Updike. And, I must say, it was a great experience for me. But I think, again, I'm so grateful for having been at that 2015 Spirit & Place and meeting Phyllis Boyd, who is the Executive Director of Groundwork Indy, which employs young people to make public spaces better.

By the way, they've done really beautiful paintings of sheds in Black neighborhoods that really make it come alive, really beautiful. Just one of the things they do.

Susan Neville: One of the things that I guess I think about is that you titled this essay, “An Old White Guy Gets Woke.” or I'm not sure that I have it exactly right, but what amazes me about this piece and about all your work is that you're constantly, as you say, beginning in the certain knowledge of your own ignorance. But it's so hard to get woke, or to stay woke. I mean, I teach college students and I am constantly aware of the danger of not just being woke to race and class but just being awake.

And so what astonishes me is how awake you are in this essay to new knowledge, to relooking at your childhood, at all, you know, every point in your life and the lives of this city. I mean, isn't it tempting to fall asleep or to say, "I'm done with all this thinking and all this reading"?

Dan Wakefield: But there's nothing more exciting than new knowledge, nothing more exciting than meeting people who have something new to say to you. And, you know, I mean, I really thought when I gave that DVD of Betsy's documentary on Attucks to Phyllis Boyd, I thought, well, that's fine. I'll probably never see her again. But, you know, it's nice. And I was amazed when three weeks later, you know, I was giving that talk at Indy Reads Books, which had nothing to do about this subject, which was about Jack Kerouac. And there she was.

And she said she really enjoyed the documentary. And her father had gone to Attucks and enjoyed it. And then she gave me Coates book. And, wow, I was just knocked out.

Susan Neville: Awake for it.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. By the way, I should say that by chance I happened on his book before this, which seems to be rarely mentioned. It's called *The Beautiful Struggle*. Oh, my God. That is one of the most powerful, beautifully written books I've read. And the reason I read it, there was an interview with Philip Roth just before he died saying, "Do you read any current stuff?" And that was one of the three books he named, *The Beautiful Struggle* by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Susan Neville: Thank you. Thank you so much, Dan. The next time, I think we'll hear your stories about Emmitt Till and James Baldwin. And this was a great way to start. So thank you very much.

Dan Wakefield: Thank you.

[Exiting Music]