STEVEN JOHN: Welcome to MPR News Presents. I'm Steven John. Minnesota author Alexs Pate is probably best known for his novel, *Amistad,* which was commissioned by Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks Corporation and based on the award winning screenplay. The author of several acclaimed books, including *Losing Absalom* and *Finding Makeba,* Alexs Pate teaches writing and Black literature at the University of Minnesota. He's also spearheading a program in K-12 schools called the Innocence Project, which works to address the racial achievement gap by focusing on teacher-student relationships.

Alexs Pate spoke earlier this month at the loft literary center about how his experience as an African-American man has shaped his thinking and his writing about guilt and innocence and about hope and bitterness. He was interviewed by longtime friend and fellow writer David Mura. Pate started out talking about his novel, *Losing Absalom,* the main character Sonny is plagued with a deep sense of guilt about his middle class success.

ALEXS PATE: I grew up in inner city Philadelphia, North Philly, and the neighborhood that I grew up in was crumbling. Crack had taken over. It didn't really matter where all that was coming from, whether it was, I mean, the CIA or whatever people thought about that, crack had sort of worked its way into my neighborhood and was killing everything. And you could just see it falling apart. So when I would go back home, I didn't feel like it was home anymore. There was the neighborhood was in despair.

So I wrote Losing Absalom about that attempt to reclaim or that desire to reclaim and build because there's a part in Losing Absalom where I say my dad, my dad told me, you know, your job is to get your education. Get out of here. That was always the push. Get your education. Get out of this neighborhood. Because nothing good is going to happen to you here.

Well, they were right. But what happens when everybody leaves? What happens when you go to college, and you get your stuff, and you go out? Well, it just leaves people who are struggling under pressure. Those are the people who have to figure out how to make it work, and it's hard. So strike move from that moment to me in Minnesota. It's like I remember my first trip here, I'm riding down 494. I'm going to Wayzata. And I'm like, whoa.

[LAUGHTER]

What the hell is going on here? There are no buildings. You can see-- I wrote an essay called The Unobstructed Eye because it was like there was this moment, like I look straight, I could just keep looking. And I came here to work for a Fortune 500 company. I was in a corporate mode at that time. I hadn't really found my writing voice.

I came into Minnesota culture. And when I thought back to my life in Philadelphia and I also think about Henry Louis Gates and figures of life saying that the farther you are away from home, the clearer you see it. And I started to see my home for what it was. The struggle that my family was under. My sister, my mom, my dad, my friends, people being killed, the drug thing happening, the economic poverty. All that stuff was happening.

And I realized I was incapable of having an impact on that. I could go back. But in some way, I had already lost my relevance. And I wanted to capture that in *Losing Absalom.* So his absorption into the corporate culture. And then his dad his dad got sick, just like my dad got sick. And you go home, and you're forced to be there for a period of time. And it just ate at me.

It's really hard to have hope in certain environments. You can't-- you can't accuse people of being hopeless in a hopeless environment. And I would make the case that hope is the most valuable asset that each of us has. I want hope more than anything. Anything. I want to go to bed hoping that tomorrow will come and that it will be better.

And so Sonny's sense that hope was possible in the face of all that I thought was worth documenting. Of course, there was a way in which his hope was cut short. But I don't want to get-- you're not all going to run out and buy the book, so there is no spoiler here.

But just at the moment when Sonny is about to make some resolution, he ends up in a situation he doesn't need to be in, and he's killed. Yeah. Sorry. That was a true spoiler. But there is no-- there is no other answer. That whole thing, you can't go home again. Well, you can go home again, but you may not leave. And sometimes, he had to go back. His dad was dying. And he ends up in a room where there's a gun. He picks up the gun, and the person who didn't want to see somebody else with a gun pulled the trigger on him.

And while the bullet is coming at him, he turns to his dad, who was in a coma but who is next to him in that room. And he says, I thought you told me this was not-- it wasn't going to be like this. And his dad said we did the best we could. This is the way it is.

DAVID MURA: So what did you learn by that ending, by writing that ending?

ALEXS PATE: I didn't learn anything. I learned that I don't need to be going home that much.

[LAUGHTER]

I mean, our culture is really messed up. And you can-- you know, if we talk too long you know I'm going to be going off on how we try to make things look pretty, and sound pretty, and talk pretty, but there's a part of us that knows things are bad. Things are bad then anyway. And hope, again, is the only balance to that?

So how do you hope in a situation like that? You change your life. You take care of yourself. You try to grow. And then you give what you can give in that respect. Like my message, unfortunately-- for some people, I mean, I realize everybody wouldn't agree with this. But for me, this is about liberating each individual person separately and with a focused effort to liberate yourself from a cultural expectation. So that your individuality can serve to save you so you are free to save someone else.

It's very difficult to get 10 people to order even the same pizza. And it's like I came up in the Black Power movement. I've been a cultural nationalist. I've spent time on all areas of Black political empowerment. And I see a lot of burnt out people. I see a lot of struggle. And I see a lot of frustration and bitterness.

And I think bitterness is the absolute opposite of hope, and it has no place in a vibrant life. We should live vibrant lives, every single one of us, all the time. It shouldn't be this like heaviness that we can't breathe. We can't-- It's like that's what my work now is about, is about freeing as many of our children as I can or we can to have lives that are hopeful.

DAVID MURA: I want to talk to you then about a couple of moments in your career as a writer where I see you begin to mount that assault upon pessimism and the lack of it. So as I said, more than 20 years ago, there was that video of the Rodney King beating, and the police who did that were tried and found innocent.

LA erupted in violence. As part of that violence, there were conflicts between Korean store owners and the African American community. And Alexs and I have been talking about doing a show together and doing some sort of collaboration. And when that happened, we just decided we have to do a show together. And if we just stand on stage and go, I'm Asian American, he's African American, we're friends, we would have just moved the dialogue one step forward.

And I'm going to ask Alexs some more questions about that in relationship to today and this past year because obviously, when the Rodney King video came out, people didn't have a lot of cameras. It was just by chance that some White guy wasn't-- he was a White guy, peered over his fence, and saw this thing, and got it on videotape.

Obviously during this past year, the whole culture in certain ways has been, the dialogue has been shifted. Because everything that African Americans and people of color have been saying about the police for years, White people suddenly realize, oh, yeah. This has been happening. We have to stop not seeing this.

So as part of the piece and its portion of it is in this book, Afro Asia, which has a picture of Dubois and Mao Tse-tung on the cover, I really wish it was somebody other than Mao that we had to put up against Dubois. But anyway, I want to ask Alexs to read a piece from that.

ALEXS PATE: This is a poem of sorts called The Outlaw Comes to Know Himself. Have you ever in an instant been jolted by an intense fear? Have you been somewhere, maybe in your car on the freeway, I-94 maybe, and been electrified by an instant trembling of dread? I have. And it has brought me here.

Actually, I was on I-94, mindless, speeding through traffic eyes, focused on the road just ahead, disappearing under the hood of my car. And suddenly, I was full of terror sweating, shaking. Suddenly I realized I was not going anywhere. I was fleeing. I was a fugitive. I was running from you.

I understand you've been looking for me, and that haunted me. At first, I didn't know why, and that haunted me too. But it finally came to me on that day in the car that I killed someone. Murdered someone. In this life or the last, a conscious crime or a dream, but I did it. And now I understand why I always freeze when the doorbell rings. Why I stare police in the eye, a practiced deception. Why I reveal as little as possible why I can't watch Richard Kimble search for the one armed man anymore. Why it just makes me mad he won't simply turn around and tell this mother-[BLEEP].

I did not kill my wife. Is there no justice? But Kimble knew there was no justice, and I think he was afraid he'd confess, just like me. I could confess to you right now. The bombing at the World Trade Center, all the slain police, all the robberies, all the abductions, all the rapes, all the murders, I did it. I mean, I'm a Black man. I'm an outlaw. By law, I could have done it.

When that policeman died, was shot like a paper target pinned on a bale of hay, my life became tenuous. Less solid, more abstract. My picture rode around in squad cars and was distributed from memory everywhere. I was everywhere, and the police wanted me for questioning, or because I knew someone, or because my jacket's blue, or because my brake lights weren't working or something. But they were looking for me, and I couldn't wait until they found me.

I knew they would. I would I gladly surrendered just to relieve the pressure. I'm here now, aren't I? But I waited often in darkness at night as the Mississippi mud falls from my face. I have to steal my shutters, remind myself that no one is after me. No one wants me. And in the moon's black, I cower try to remember what I've done, who I've hurt to make them pursue me so relentlessly.

I am the murderer. I am the rapist. I must be. Why else would I feel their sour breath on my neck? But I am growing tired of the run. Want my picture instead to be enshrined, celebrated, known for its brilliance and strength, so you might know the lines given to me by my mother as they differ from those given to me by my father. But we are so far from that.

I am the outlaw always, even to myself. I frighten myself because I will let you demonize me like Marion Barry, or Iron Mike Tyson, or Michael Jackson, or Clarence Thomas. I will take that too. I will touch you, torture you. I will because it doesn't matter what I do, I'm not like Luke Perry on the cover of Vanity Fair with a gun in his sexy hand posing. I am not the Duke teaching boys the details of cowboy stylin', the subtle relationship between being White and being right, even if you are Jesse James.

People will ride down, will march down small town streets. High school band horns blowing a canopy over a celebration of murder and robbery. Jesse was the ultimate outlaw, and they celebrate him. But me? I can't breathe wrong or poof, I'm the demon. I'm just an extension of my lineage. Nat Turner, Jack Johnson, Richard Pryor, or just that brother sitting over there, outlaws.

But not the celebrating kind. No, sirree. The hanging kind. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I had to learn the distinctions between outlaws, Turner to be hung, Bush to be president, Tyson to be prisoner, Stallone to be star. I had to learn to feel like an outlaw, which is not done overnight.

[APPLAUSE]

DAVID MURA: So can you speak about just a little bit of the circumstances how you came to write that? And then what happened then after you wrote this In terms of your understanding of guilt and the part it played in your life as an African-American man?

ALEXS PATE: Yeah. Well, I'm pretty paranoid. There's just a lot of things I wouldn't do, couldn't do. I do not want to get too far outside the city. When I was doing writers in the schools, I had to pack up my car and go to Bemidji or somewhere, and you're terrified. I'm terrified. The further I get away from the city, it terrifies me. And I truly was on I-94, coming from St. Paul going to Minneapolis, and I had to pull my car over. I was having a panic attack.

And I realized at that moment that all the accumulated images of Black men being pursued, being beat down, had reached its saturation point in my consciousness, and I could not survive it any longer if I didn't come up with a way of responding to that.

So I devised a way to respond to that. I began to meditate on what had been taken from me as a child. But first, you have to outline what it is, where you are, and that's what that was. A sort of itemization of the way in which my life had been affected by stuff that I had nothing to do with. How I did not have a chance to be free.

People tell you all your life, oh, you could be anything you want to be. You haven't done anything-- you've got a great mind. You're smart. You could do anything you want to do. Well, it's not true. It's not true. You have to come to grips. You have to overcome this for that to be possible. But nobody tells you that.

Nobody tells you how much weight you're going to be dragging around by the time you're 14. How much weight you'll have to drag around by the time you're 35. We all, every person of color in here, and it's not just Black folks, every person of color in here has learned how to manage the weight they're dragging around if you don't identify as a straight, White person in this country, if you're queer in any way, you're dragging around weight. And you have to figure out how to do that. And when you do that, you give up stuff.

Freedom is a concept. And so I just made a decision-- and partly, like I told you, this was your fault.

[LAUGHTER]

David, I mean-- this is-- and I'm used to interviewing other people. But David's work, although in a different trajectory, demonstrates courage. I mean, I was kind of a punk. I mean, in the sense of facing what was in front of me as a human being to grow, I don't think I would have had the courage to face it if it hadn't been for you. So I just want to say that too.

DAVID MURA: Well, in terms of this idea of facing, I think it is appropriate now to talk about *Finding Makeba.* And this is Alex's second novel, and it deals with a struggling African American artist Ben Crossfield and his marriage to Helen, an African American woman, and their daughter, Makeba.

Under complex circumstances, Ben leaves his marriage. And when Helen disappears with Makeba, he loses contact with his daughter and never again contacts her until one day when at a book signing, Makeba shows up bearing a journal which she gives to Ben.

Years ago, Alex did a performance piece called *For Children with Missing Fathers.* And *Finding Makeba* confronts this painful rupture of the parent-child bond. In the opening chapter, Makeba also hands Ben a letter, part of which reads, my life has brought me to this moment where I need to talk to you. I need to hear your voice.

No matter how hard I have tried to completely push you out of my mind, I have to admit that I still have a hole in me. Maybe I did need to know why it all happened. Maybe I needed to tell you that no matter how you tell me this story, it could never adequately explain away the most important fact. You left me.

This letter hits the reader hard right in the chest. And as I was reading this novel this week, I was so taken aback by the way the writing confronts the pain and heartbreak of Makeba, as well as Ben and Helen. So can you talk a bit about the difficulties of writing this novel, in confronting the issues that brings up?

ALEXS PATE: This is the problem with having a friend do this.

[LAUGHTER]

Sorry. That book was very difficult for me to write. I think it could be summarized this way. I did write that book, and it was at first a long plaint, like a meditation on my loss, on what I felt like, and my guilt. And I think in order to pursue innocence, which I didn't know that's what I was doing. But I think you have to itemize, you have to inventory all the things that you've done as a way of clearing out all the crap that people are putting on you that you did not do.

You have to face what you are culpable for and make amends, or at least that's one of the things about the Million Man March I thought was valid. It's like you have to accept where you've been weak, and then you have to recover from that. But it also, it should it should bolster you against all the stereotypes and negative things that are being placed on you by the culture.

Well, I wrote that book, and I remember being at the Walker Art Center at the point where I was almost done. And somebody, this couple walked up to me. And the brother who I don't remember said, this is the guy who's writing that book about reuniting with his daughter. And I looked at him, and he said, tell her. Tell her. Tell her the story. And I said, well--

[LAUGHTER]

I'm writing a book about a guy who's reuniting with his daughter. He said, no, no, no, no, no. You have to tell her. Tell her the whole story. Tell her. So I didn't know her or him at that point. And so I start talking. And almost like 30 seconds into my explanation, she starts crying. And she says, my dad doesn't care about me.

And I'm like, no, I think part of the book is about how men are prevented from expressing their loss about the children they're separated from. Because the loss of a child is the loss of a child. Like male, female, it doesn't really matter. If you are not with your child, you may be partying and having a good old time, but you are not disconnected from that knowledge. That knowledge can never be completely erased.

And so I said, no, I'm really trying to give full voice to that. But I guarantee you, your dad may not know how. He may never say. He may never express it. But he has never forgotten you. And so she-- I'm looking at the guy, like he's gone. He's getting drinks. And I'm like, come back and get your--

[LAUGHTER]

But I got home that night, and I decided the book could not go the way it was. Her voice had to be there. Like it couldn't just be a father's voice. I mean, it could be, but it wasn't right. And so I alternated so that it became a book inside a book inside of a book. In which for every chapter, Makeba at that point says, when she meets Ben, she says, yes, I'm your daughter. And here I've read your book, and here's my book that responds to your book. And both of those pieces are in that book. And normally, when I'm teaching writers, I'm like stay away from writing outside your gender. So you'll have to be a judge of that for yourself if you're in it.

DAVID MURA: And when the book came out, what was the reaction to it from African American men and African American women?

ALEXS PATE: Has anybody heard of this book before I just started talking about it? Do you really need to ask that question? Essence magazine, yes. This is a book every African American woman should have on her bookshelf. It got good reviews. But why am I not who you said you thought I should be?

[LAUGHTER]

Because the media because the publishers, because the critics, because the Academy, because of all of that really don't give a crap about what a Black man is talking about if he's not talking about killing somebody.

DAVID MURA: But I know there were Black men who came up to you and said that book was important.

ALEXS PATE: I would go-- Thank you-- I didn't know where you were going. You should have been more--

[LAUGHTER]

When I was on book tour, I'd be in situations in a bookstore where I'm reading, and I'd see these brothers starting to line up in the back. A lot of them homeless brothers. And they would come up after. They would say, I understand what you're saying. You got me right there.

And I came away from that book tour realizing there are so many Black men in this country who felt like their separation from their families was a noble gesture. They knew they couldn't do what they needed to do to be successful and responsible, and they bailed. And whether that's good or bad, right or wrong, that was how they felt.

And so it was like, a lot of these guys were truly homeless guys. And that's why they were homeless. They had left the whole expectation thing behind because they couldn't-- they were on drugs, or most of it I think is probably drugs, or PTSD, or all other kinds of things that would keep them from being fathers, and they ran.

That's what I learned. And yeah. I mean, that was real. And that was a very sad. The book is kind of sad. Although there is this reunion and a reunification, father and daughter. And also, as you know, halfway through writing this book, my daughter who I was separated from found me in a bookstore.

This is after I wrote the story. I mean, she walked in a bookstore with her boyfriend and saw my book *Losing Absalom,* on the bookshelf, and he said, is that your dad? And that began a brand new relationship with my daughter, with my family actually. So I mean, from a writing standpoint, writing heals. Writing makes connections I think you can will things into being.

STEVEN JOHN: You're listening to Minnesota Public Radio News with author and University of Minnesota Professor Alexs Pate speaking with writer David Mura in a conversation recorded recently at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. Much more just ahead.

SPEAKER 1: MPR News Presents is supported by Medtronic, recognizing that building healthy communities around the world starts right here. You can meet 22 local organizations dedicated to leading the way, and learn more at medtronicphilanthropy.org.

SPEAKER 2: Obama hints at being president for life?

BARRACK OBAMA: Under our Constitution, I cannot run again. I can't run again. I actually think I'm a pretty good president. I think if I ran, I could win.

SPEAKER 2: President Obama and the bully pulpit in Africa, next time on The Takeaway from WNYC and PRI Public Radio International.

SPEAKER 3: The Takeaway, weekdays at 1:00 PM here on MPR News.

STEVEN JOHN: This is MPR News Presents. Now back to acclaimed author Alexs Pate interviewed by his longtime friend and fellow author, David Mura.

ALEXS PATE: So I want to talk about *Amistad.* If you know the movie, the movie opens with the slaves revolting on the ship and attacking the Spanish sailors on the ship. You don't understand what they're saying. There are no subtitles. So it opens with an act of violence of Blacks upon Whites. And you don't understand what they're saying.

The film is framed through the eyes of Roger Baldwin, who's a young White lawyer played by Matthew McConaughey. So Alex took this script of this film and really made an African American novel, a black novel. And if you had made a movie of his novel, it would have been a Black film.

Well, when they asked me to do the book, I did a little research, and then I wrote the book. I didn't read the script until-- I sent them a manuscript of *Amistad* based on my story that I wanted to tell. And they sent it back to me and said, great job, but it needs to look a little bit like the film itself.

So I mean, it's really important I think for writers-- I mean, so first, I want to do this quickly. So first, writing *Amistad* was one of the most amazing experiences I had. It changed my life. It changed my career trajectory. It paid off for me. It did a lot of good things. But it wasn't my idea. Therefore, I didn't get rich doing it, and that's the only negative side of it.

The other part of that is that I learned that I was truly a writer because I could be given a story, and I could-- So the way I talk about it is like they gave me the plans, but I picked the molding. I picked the floor. I picked the walls. I wrote this story. But the preface, the early part of the book is the only thing that remains from the original draft that I wrote.

I took this on as a project of sort of embedding in this work a narrative and a theme that they couldn't see. I was really thinking about home and about how most African Americans don't really know what home is. That it's a quandary that home is a vexed place, and it's a place where police can come in, and things can change, and our world is really kind of complicated.

And I was just exploring this whole idea because I was dealing with Africans and African Americans. And for me, it was the first time I had to come up against that dichotomy. It's like what does it mean to not have any guilt within you?

But I was also dealing with the moment where guilt is created. It's like when you think about-- Adam Smith said, the true power of our existence in this culture is property, I mean, from an economic capitalist standpoint, and the only real property is your body. So when you give up your body, you in fact already are walking into an--

So to be a slave-- so it led me back to the middle passage and all the Africans who jumped off ship to keep from being enslaved and how we celebrate our strength and persistence and survival on Sundays in Black American churches. We survived. We survived. And it's a really powerful narrative. I get that.

But what about the people who chose not to even go through? I mean, Toni Morrison tackles this in *Beloved.* It's like that's a really important question. It's like how do you restore your sense of power, and dignity, and strength when you've given up your body?

I mean, I was wrestling with all of those issues. And to me, in some fundamental way, this is where if there is an innate sense of guilt that African Americans carry, if that's true and I'm not sure it is, it starts at that. It starts in that moment when we really consider the fact that we've had to climb completely out of slavery.

I think where we are now, where you have an African American man who is President of the United States, there is a certain way-- I was just listening to Naz. And I mean, there is a way in which-- I mean, he has a lyric where he talks about I didn't change change. Who would have ever expected that change? The change that there would be a Black man in the presidency, it makes me look at the flag. I look at the flag in a different way now than I looked at it before.

And I think we are in a progression. I don't know what it means. I don't know where we are. But that depth of not being ownership, of being the owner of your own destiny, it's a long journey to the place where you are the maker of your own destiny. And all the writers that stand between that reality and this reality have been pushing us forward, trying to help us recover dignity, and strength, and power, and the capacity to make decisions for ourselves that is untainted by the toxicity of slavery.

So we have a friend, Frank Wilderson, who's a memoirist and an academic. And he writes out of this school of thought called Afropessimism. And in Afropessimism, what they argue is that the ontology of slavery continues to exist in the present. And so this ontology views whiteness as human and therefore, a citizen. It views Blackness as non-human and therefore incapable of being a citizen.

As a non-citizen and non-human, Blackness is something which can be owned and sold, which can be fungible is the word they use, which is property. And violence can be wreaked upon the Black body without justification or consequence. So there doesn't need to be a reason to wreak violence upon the Black body. There shouldn't be legal justification. You don't have to declare war. Much more importantly, you don't have much recourse. You don't have recourse.

And I remember when I first read Frank's book, and I thought it was very insightful and useful. It's called *Red, White and Black: US Cinema and Racial Antagonisms.* But I thought, is this really the case? But as time has gone on, I've more and more just said, yeah. Do you read the New Jim Crow? If you look at the last year, if you look at the arguments that we're having about the damned Confederate flag, it's like the past is still living in the present.

So I want to ask you, where do you think we are today, given this year of Walter Scott, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and thankfully, Black Lives Matter. What's wonderful about where we are is there is still hope. I mean, it's like a molting that is taking place in this culture. It's like we're scraping our backs up against wood, trying to scrape off the crap that has accumulated there, so that people can step forward.

I'm not ready to throw in the towel on that. And I think that we just haven't come up with the proper technique of throwing history off. But this is where we come in. Like people need to move. We need to move. So yes, there needs to be street action there needs to be all that. But there also needs to be people thinking about this in a brand new way. It's like we need to move-- we can't go back to the '60s for our tactics for struggle in my opinion. There has to be some innovation here. It's time.

And so I try to keep my focus very limited because I think if you take a big picture look at this, it will lead to a kind of ennui, a kind of emptiness. It's like we're just going around in circles. There is a certain kind of circular familiarity with what is happening. And for those of us who are over 35, 40 years old, we've seen these moves where people are in the streets, there's this response. Everything goes quiet. Then there's something happens. Then there's people in the streets. And we go through-- and I'm tired of that. I'm personally tired of that.

So I'm not an Afropessimist, but the novel I'm writing the slide is based on Frank's theory, like that you can't win. I mean, I would summarize it as saying you can't win in a society that doesn't acknowledge your ontological reality, that doesn't accept you as a human being, and that you have to fight for that recognition before you can get anything else. That's hard.

But I think that's the journey we're on. And I said hope. But I think in my novel, the only way to respond to that-- I mean, in my novel, my main character opens the book in a coma, paralyzed. He's already been beaten. And so the struggle then is how do you pull it all back together to breathe life, and hope, and then love?

And this is BS cliche. I think when you're a person like me, some part of that is you just have to live with the BS cliche part of me that believes that hope and love has value. I'm not buying into the despair of Afropessimism.

DAVID MURA: And so where does *The Innocent Classroom* fit into this?

ALEXS PATE: It is an intervention in that circular, consistent, there's a problem. I'm just going to scream really loud. I'm going to be the squeaky wheel. You're going to pour some oil on it. And then it's going to keep running until it gets dry again. And then it's going to blow up, and then there's going to be a squeaky wheel.

The Innocent Classroom attempts to intervene in the lives of kids, just like that drive where I went into panic attack. It's an attempt to circumvent the panic. It's an attempt to begin working with children of color now, to begin to exorcize disconnect and free them from the negative stereotypes that cover and impact their lives on a day to day level.

So one of the things that I do, as you know, and you've done it too, is I would ask you, what does American culture tell you about the kids if you were teachers? What does American culture tell you about the kids that you're going to be teaching? And I could go to that board, and you would give me a list. And that list would not be a pretty list.

They are thugs, and gangsters, and promiscuous, and single parents, and angry, and lazy, and loud. I mean, I've done this hundreds of times now. And I say to them, because I'm not saying this is how you think. I'm saying this is what the culture tells you about that. And then I say, if you know it, they know it. They know, and they actually know that it. They actually are anticipating your knowledge. They know-- I mean, if you think about this from an epistemological, that is how people think about what they think about, kids are thinking ahead of you all the time.

So my whole thing is is the only way to intervene is to be honest. Let's be real. Our kids know what we know. They know that even though we're fighting, I don't see color. Color is not-- I'm trying not to-- they look at you like, yeah, sure. Because they know that's what's happening.

And the only way to-- So what we've done with innocent classroom is developed a process by which those things can be disconnected. So we help. I mean, we're using the phrase now, free children to achieve. It's like free that child. And if you've read any of Claude Steele's work in stereotype threat and stereotype consciousness, stereotype consciousness being the thing that we all know stereotypes exist, and we all know they exist about us.

Stereotype threat is when you actually take an action where you are aware that that stereotype exists about you, and you try to act differently. Or you surrender to the stereotype. And our kids are presented with that challenge every single day, every time, every minute of the day. On buses, walking into-- we are all presented with that conflict every day.

When I walk into a restaurant, if they put you at a bad table, am I going to go off on you? Because I feel like this is what you do to all the Black people walk into your restaurant you didn't anticipate. I'm going to get a bad table, or am I going to sit there and take it, even though I don't feel comfortable with it? Or am I going to look around and say, well, this is the only table. It's a natural, normal.

But we got to go through this process all the time. This is a wait. This is wait. This is a barrier. And our children have to go through this all the time, and nobody has acknowledged that they have to go through this, and nobody is there to help them. So what we're doing is trying to prepare teachers to help our students operate outside of that paradigm.

Because there is another way. If you don't validate the stereotypes, or if you accept and acknowledge the stereotypes and blow them away and then focus on individual progression, somebody who cares about you and who you acknowledge cares about you has to be the one to help you move past that.

And one of the least ways in which our teachers are trained is to develop authentic relationships with their children, with their students. And so innocent classroom is about helping teachers build authentic relationships with the express, purpose of leveraging those relationships in an effort to help our children not respond to stereotype threat.

DAVID MURA: So what are the barriers that the teachers face to doing that?

ALEXS PATE: The same barriers we've been talking about this entire session, like it's difficult. It's very difficult to go through the process of thinking a kid with his pants around his butt who is talking out of turn, who's disruptive, who's angry who's cursing at you, have something really good, is good, has something really powerful that you can get in touch with, and you can leverage that to change his life. You have to get past that.

And that doesn't mean accepting bad behavior. I'm talking about accountable an authentic relationship. In an authentic relationship, there is accountability. And so it's about getting to the place where you can claim an authentic relationship with a child and then asking them to be accountable to that. Now is time for you to do your homework.

So it was theory. It was theory four years ago. We have documented proof. We have evaluators who have looked at we're seeing changes in test scores, changes in suspensions and referrals, changes in school culture. It's just amazing. And teachers, it puts teachers right back in the place where they should be, which is to be engaged in a child's life in such a way that you can actually teach them.

DAVID MURA: The progress of your work has been towards the reclamation or reconnection with your own sense of innocence and a meditation on the themes of guilt and innocence and the ways that has affected the psyche of African Americans and people of color. And I know that you have gone through your own journey on that. Can you speak a little bit about that and where you are now?

ALEXS PATE: Well, from that moment, that panic, I began to do the inventory and began to think about how many ways why I would never go camping. [LAUGHTER]

There are lots of things that are on that list. And why I shut myself off from the outside world as a way to protect what little bit of innocence I've had. Like I don't expose myself a lot to the outside world because I can't control crazy people or racists. Or like a lot of people are used to dealing with all that stuff I sort of don't expose myself to that a lot while I was going through this process.

I was writing an essay called revolutionary innocence. I've been writing it for 50 years. It led to the development of the innocent classroom. It is a sort of a bringing together of all these ideas. I think being aware of these issues as a Black person as a person of color and charting, I have a list of things.

I took Salah to the children's-- we go to the children's theater at least once a year for a party or something. Not children's theater. Children's Museum in St. Paul. And if you're a Black man and you're with a child, people look at you like you just robbed a bank. What's going on? Why are you here? Are you OK? Is she OK?

You might not believe this, but I talk to a lot of men. And when you're traveling just with a child, people look at you like, wow, I never seen that before. That's really interesting. Is she OK? I mean, this is maybe not what they're thinking, but this is what I think they're thinking. And it makes me really uncomfortable.

I saw you there that day, right? So he was there with Sung, and I was there with Salah. And I got home. I got all the way home. And I looked up, and I thought, I didn't have that feeling that day. And I checked it off my list. I was at a party for a colleague when I was at the university, that dark place called the University of Minnesota.

[LAUGHTER]

And I was at a party for our department, and I had a drink or two, and I had to drive home, and it was way out somewhere, and I got lost. And I saw a cop car parked in front of an apartment building, lights flashing. I drive towards the car, make a U-turn, pull up alongside it. Roll my window down and said, I'm lost. I'm trying to reach 94. Can you tell me how to get there?

And he said, excuse me?

I said, I'm lost. I'm trying to get to 94. He gets out of his car, walks around to my side of the window, says, well, you want to go up there two blocks, make a right turn, and you'll run right into it. I drive off, and once again, I have a panic attack. I pull over halfway between there and Minneapolis, and I catch myself. Just like, I did that. Protect and serve. He was there to help me.

Because normally, you go the other way. Like what am I doing? I'm in a suburb. There's a cop car waiting for me. This is my destiny. When you lecture in front of African American men, that's like destiny right there. I didn't know what it was going to be, but now I know. He's waiting for me.

And when I tell that story to other brothers, they're like, man, you could have been killed that night. That was so dangerous. But I'm like, this is the test that we have to-- this is the test of innocence. You have to constantly press. Constantly the scary is scary. But if you talk about it and think about it enough, you start doing things you didn't know you were going to do, and then you do them, and then it's done.

And I just think when you don't go through that checklist, when you're not thinking that way, and then you get past that point, and you realize, oh, that happened, and it didn't faze me, check it off your list. I'm reaching a degree of innocence that my dad did not, my brother, that nobody in my family-- I mean, it's just hard to live.

I just couldn't keep living that way. And somebody has to blaze this trail for us. I think there are a lot of people out there doing this. Don't get me wrong. But I think we have to do this. Like I think Travon Martin is like the hero, the martyr, because he turned to face that guy. He had done nothing wrong.

There's no reason to be running. You didn't do anything wrong. The guy was not a police officer. There was nothing. He turned to face him. That's the tragedy of innovation, and progression, and heroism. That's how it happens. You're just being stupid and dumb maybe, being out at that time of night, smoking dope or going to, whatever he was doing, I don't really care. The fact is he did nothing to warrant the punishment, the consequence that he engaged in.

But I see him differently from some of those other experiences because he turned. I'm going to turn and face you because I'm not thinking there's anything bad going to happen because why should there be something bad about to happen? I'm done with that. It's hard to live like that. We shouldn't have to live like that. My daughter is not going to live like that. We're not going to live like that. It's time to change.

[APPLAUSE]

STEVEN JOHN: You've been listening to best selling author Alex Pate on Minnesota Public Radio News in conversation at the Loft Literary Center with Japanese American writer, David Mura. Alexs Pate is the author of *Losing Absalom.* His memoir, *The Past is Perfect: Memoir of a Father-Son Reunion,* will be published next year by Coffee House Press. David Mura's most recent book of poetry is called *The Last Incantations.* The conversation is the third in a four-part series on art and racial equity and was co-sponsored by the Givens Foundation for African American Literature. Many thanks to videographer Mark Tang for recording this audio for us. This is MPR News Presents.