

SPEAKER 1: Every night all the kids in the refugee hut that we all lived in we get together. And all the grandmas and grandpas would tell stories until late, late, late in the night, when we run out of firewood. And then everybody is made to go home.

And I like stories that have a moral to it. They don't have to be complex [? tomes. ?] They don't have to be Tolstoy, Tolstoy. I mean, they can just be simple folktale or moral story where there's a point to it. And I get something out of it.

SPEAKER 2: In the Hmong tradition, Senator, is that the basis of a lot of the oral stories?

SPEAKER 1: Absolutely. Sometimes our oral stories are broken down into either to teach something cultural. So the whole idea of the story is to transfer cultural knowledge about our creation story, or why do we have corn and rice, or to explain, why is it that brothers and sisters can't marry each other? I mean, our oral stories, the point of it is to explain things that are important and critical to our cultural practices.

SPEAKER 2: So moving from the oral tradition now to reading on the printed page here, I'm curious, which book or books have meant the most to you?

SPEAKER 1: Obviously, growing up in this country as a young woman of color, there were a lot of identity issues. And the reality is that we live in a country that's pretty unique in terms of our race relations and how we deal with one another, how we struggle to deal with identity and diversity and multiculturalism in this country.

And I grew up in a pretty predominantly white neighborhood. And so once I went off to college, I engaged in a very, very internal process of self-identity, self-discovery. Who am I? What am I about? What kind of political individual am I? What do I want to grow up to become?

SPEAKER 2: Big questions.

SPEAKER 1: Yeah, and which every college student actually goes through eventually at some point. That's the whole idea of going off to college. So I fell in love with a whole genre of books, but particularly anthologies written by women of color, for women of color, about the experience of being a woman of color. And it was really liberating to read the stories and the poems and the reflective pieces because in those pieces, I saw pieces of myself. And I felt less lonely. I felt more connected to a universe of women of color out there who were having some of the similar experiences that I did.

And then I was hopeful because I felt like, wow, so I'm not alone. And there are people out there. And if they can all struggle with this and come to terms with it and make it a part of who they are, then I can, too.

SPEAKER 2: And so you brought today a couple of books, but I'm going to ask you to pick your favorite. It's always tough, I know.

SPEAKER 1: Well, I brought a book called *Making Waves*, which is an anthology of writings by and about Asian-American women. And then the second one, which I would like to read the passage from, it's called *Making Face, Making Soul*. And it's creative and critical perspectives by women of color. So would you like me to share something?

SPEAKER 2: I would love that. Yeah.

SPEAKER 1: OK. It's a poem by a woman named Lorna Dee Cervantes. And the title of the poem is "Poem For the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, An Intelligent, Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War Between Races."

"I believe in revolution because everywhere the crosses are burning, sharpshooting goose steppers around every corner. There are snipers in the schools. I know you don't believe this. You think this is nothing but faddish exaggeration. But they are not shooting at you.

I'm marked by the color of my skin. The bullets are discrete and designed to kill slowly. They are aiming at my children. These are facts. Let me show you my wounds, my stumbling mind, my excuse me tongue, and this nagging preoccupation with the feeling of not being good enough.

These bullets buried deep, deeper than logic. Outside my door, there is a real enemy who hates me. I am a poet who yearns to dance on rooftops, to whisper delicate lines about joy and the blessings of human understanding. I try. I go to my land, my tower of words, and bolt the door. But the typewriter doesn't fade out the sounds of blasting and muffled outrage.

My own days bring me slaps on the face. Every day I am deluged with reminders that this is not my land. And this is my land. I do not believe in the war between races, but in this country, there is war."

SPEAKER 2: That's powerful.

SPEAKER 1: It is. And I think that there are days when-- I may be a state senator at the office. But on days when I'm wearing jeans and just a T-shirt, you would be amazed almost on a regular basis the things that surfaces or the slight or the comment or the things that people feel that because I'm not wearing my senator label, they could feel perfectly free to say in front of me. And some days, at the end of the day, you just sit back, and you say, oh god, I can't believe that we're still engaged in these kind of conversations, or people feel perfectly free to say these things just because they look at me, and they know that I'm a woman of color.

SPEAKER 2: And when you have those instances, do you go back and reread some of these poems?

SPEAKER 1: I do. Or at the end of a long day or when I've experienced a particularly painful experience, I'll go and pull out the book. And I'll flip through. And I'll just read one of the poems to myself.

And then just the fact that I'm not as elegant in my wording as these individuals, and if I can just read something that they've said it so beautifully that reflects my experience, then I say, ah, somebody has said it for me. And then I feel better.