

## Teachin' Books Episode 1.2 - Interview with Joanne Leow / David Chariandy's *Brother*

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

**00:10** Hey! This is Teachin' Books, the podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica McDonald, and on today's episode I am talking to Joanne Leow, an Assistant Professor in English at the University of Saskatchewan. She teaches and researches in the areas of Transnational Literatures, decolonizing literatures, spatial theory. Environmental Humanities, and the literature of Empire.

We chatted about Joanne's approach to teaching David Chariandy's 2017 novel *Brother*, and while we don't get into details from the novel in a detailed way, I will still give you a spoiler warning here to go and read the book, if you like, before listening in on this conversation.

I also want to give you a heads-up that this novel, and our conversation around it, confronts issues like racial violence, police brutality, family loss, and grief, so we don't talk at length or in detail about specific instances of that kind of violence or grief, but we do talk around these issues because they're so central to the novel. With that said, and if you're ready, let's hear from Joanne.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

**01:33 JESS:** So yeah, do you wanna... Let's start by having you tell the listeners a little bit about yourself.

**JOANNE:** Sure. So, my name is Joanne Leow, I'm an Assistant Professor at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of English. I've been here for close... this is my fifth year teaching in this department. And before this, I was a postdoc and instructor at McMaster University, and before that, I was doing my PhD at the University of Toronto. And so those two spaces in Ontario were the first places that I really started doing University instruction. I think, a little bit, I guess, to say... before that, I grew up in Singapore. I was a broadcast journalist there. I worked in television news for a while.

So I think what I'd really like to emphasize perhaps about my history, sort of pedagogically, is that I've really been very, very honoured to have amazing mentors, both during my doctoral program -- my PhD supervisor was an amazing instructor and teacher -- but also for the professors that I was teaching assistant for, for the most part. And so Ato Quayson, Karina Vernon, Robert McGill, Denise Cruz, all these people that I worked with at the University of Toronto, really gave me some excellent models to think about student experience, to think about compassion for students, but also very rigorous pedagogical style, and thinking about how to best encourage students to engage with materials. So I think that, and then at McMaster working with Don Goellnicht, really... just these amazing mentors, like not just graduate student mentoring but I think undergraduate instruction, watching them teach, were really formative experiences for me.

Because I think that what no one tells you is that, for the most part, when you start being a tenure-track professor, or just an instructor, they kind of just throw you into the deep end. That really sort of standardized ways of training you to be a University professor, and it can be very very challenging and really nerve-racking to embark on a career where you've been assessed on your research to get the job that you've been hired for, but actually the bulk of your work is teaching. And that's also why I'm doing it: I find that is really, really an important part of what I'm doing in the university.

**JESS:** I love that you started off with talking about mentorship because... like, okay, so I always hear people talk about, or even students say, and folks who have Education degrees say, like "professors don't actually have formal training in teaching" -- like, they haven't, a lot of the times, gone through an educational degree, or... So, like, learning how to teach through having it modelled for you, and having it modelled for you in hopefully good, enriching ways (of course, you can also learn from other ways, maybe the less good ways). But yeah, that mentorship -- that sort of mentorship, modelling of teaching, that becomes kind of (at least for me) the way that I have learned how to teach. It's not really through formal training, of course, because like I said I haven't gotten a degree in education or something like that, but just simply through internalizing what other people are doing. And that can actually be for better or worse, like I say, because you might pick up habits that are, or you know teaching practices that are, troubling.

One that's sticky for me -- this is kind of going off topic -- but one that's sticky for me is I grew up going to classes where attendance was very important, attendance policies were very important. I therefore started using them as an instructor. But when I listened more to folks in the disability community who are saying "actually attendance policies are really harmful for this and that reason," I really have to question the habits that I pick up. Because even in the last course I taught, I did have an attendance mark and an attendance policy, and I have to constantly be questioning like: what modes of mentorship, what models of teaching, did I sort of internalize that I might have to now trouble, or frustrate a little bit?

**05:39 JOANNE:** Mmhmm. And I hear you, definitely. I think I had to unlearn a lot of things from my education experience in Singapore, actually, where I grew up, which is an extremely competitive and results-oriented system. And I mean I guess that's another part of my kind of history of training or understanding of what it means to be a teacher. I actually just watched a new documentary, the only independent documentary ever to be made within the Singapore school system, just a couple days ago. It's called *Unteachable*, and it follows the story of the people who have been streamed or labelled, the students have been streamed or labelled to the bottom 10% of the cohort. And they're labelled "unteachable." And they're streamed into these classes where their only path is towards a vocational, technical school, which is very damaging.

**JESS:** Mmhmm. That's like the "problem student," you know?, quote-unquote.

**JOANNE:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah. So, I mean, the documentary's excellent. I highly recommend it. For me, my experience was slightly different, on the other end of the scale, but no less damaging in some senses because it was extremely hyper-competitive. And I remember being told, at a scholarship interview with the government when I was 18, that I couldn't qualify for certain government jobs because of the results I had gotten when I was 16 and 18 in standardized exams.

And so, it's really strange to say, but I carry that memory with me, of those gruelling -- you're given standardized exams when you're 12, 16, and 18, and your entire career is dependent on these exams. Your entire life, basically, is based on these results.

And so one of the things I've had to unlearn is to think about... And, you know, students are very concerned about results, even in Canada, obviously, right? I mean, you have students from the sciences who are just like "I need this GPA in order to get into med school." But also to unlearn that part of it and then to think about: what is the process or journey going to be like for you? Especially if you're just taking English first year, am I going to be able to give you a kind of ability to close read and read and appreciate and read skeptically and critically for the rest of your life? And so sometimes I try to tell this to my students, but of course as competitive as it gets, still...

But yes, I've had to unlearn this idea that, you know, results-oriented pedagogies are the way to go. Because they're not -- clearly they're not. And I always try to manage my students' expectations, like... "This is the first assignment. You may not get everything right. That's okay." And I try to do the weightage in my classes to, you know, reward as well continual assessment. You know, discussion boards, or participation in certain other ways, journals -- I find journaling really, really helpful for students, a very low-stakes kind of writing exercise -- but then still trying to balance that with, "Okay you still need to learn how to write this essay by the end of this class. I'm just going to try my best to help you with that. But, you know, it's the first year, first semester, and you might not get everything right. And that's okay."

**JESS:** Yeah, like giving them the freedom to say, like, mastery is actually not the goal here. It's also pretty impossible, at least I feel that way, and that there are -- like something like journaling -- there are methods and there are teaching practices and learning practices that are actually not about mastery at all, but instead about exploration, troubling the notions you come into class with, or unsettling things instead of having a neat learning outcome that you can just check off.

I mean, learning outcomes' a whole 'nother rant for me. I mean, it's good -- it's good for students to know, I think, what they're supposed to sort of get out of a course, and it's very comforting and it can be heartening to, like, "okay I know that by the end of this class, I'm supposed to have this, or by the end of this course, I'm supposed to know this." But at the same time, they really box education into these, like, checkable boxes. So, that's what I think of when I think of your story about, you know, results at 16 or 18, those outcomes, those results, are what later on determine your job opportunities.

**JOANNE:** Which is ridiculous!

**JESS:** Yeah. Like, checking a box is what that comes down to for me.

So, I asked you to come on the podcast today and to talk about *Brother* by David Chariandy. For listeners who might not know about this book or -- yeah, do you want to give a little bit of a spiel about the book?

**10:04 JOANNE:** David Chariandy is one of my favourite Canadian writers. He's a Caribbean-Canadian writer. And he is -- self-professed, he says -- a really slow writer. So, he only has two novels out. The first one, *Soucouyant*, set in Scarborough, Ontario, and the second one, written about a decade later, *Brother* -- the one that we're talking about today -- also set in Scarborough.

David is someone who does think really deeply about memory and diaspora and race and racism, and I think those elements really come through in this particular book, which is about a mother and her son and their missing son, their absent son who has died. And you know this from the beginning of the text, so it's not a spoiler to tell you this. And it's a really elegantly-written novel about loss, about police violence, about growing up as a minority in Toronto in Scarborough, Ontario. And I think all those elements really, you know, I think speak to the students when we read them because the characters -- and it's kind of a bildungsroman, really, structure -- the characters really do speak to my students in the age that they are at, I think.

[cutest meows in the world]

Sorry, you're listening to my cat.

**JESS:** That's so cute! I miss those noises. I haven't had a cat in quite a few years, so that's most welcome on here.

**JOANNE:** The cat also has opinions about the book. [both laughing]

So, I think it's an excellent time text to think about, especially for young people like in their late teens and early twenties, thinking about what the myths of multicultural Canada is, what it means to them. And hearing, I think, a voice from a kind of multi-ethnic neighbourhood, and the complexities of that, and the kind of legacies of, I think, settler-colonialism and colonialism coming to a head in this urban space. And also, obviously, it's a really, really tender story about the love between two brothers who are growing up Black in Canada, and the kinds of racism they experience, the kinds of systemic racism they experience. And so it's a very powerful and sometimes very unsettling and very painful story, but I think it's a very necessary -- I picked this novel in particular because I felt in many ways it speaks so much to minority experience and, especially, Black lives in Canada. And, you know, I just think it's -- in this moment, but even I've I've been teaching this for four years now, it is such an important text to teach.

**JESS:** And I was going to ask: so what kind of classes, or what class, do you tend to teach this text in? Like, you mentioned students are younger, so I'm imagining first-year classes?

**JOANNE:** Yep. So, I've been teaching this in my first-year class. I've taught it twice now in 114 English, 114 which is under the category "Reading Culture." And so the theme for my class is Reading Culture: Reading the City. It's grouped together with a whole bunch of other texts that deal with urban spaces from London, to New York, Toronto, Winnipeg, Montreal, Delhi, Singapore, and then the idea of a kind of future city -- what does that look like? So I've been teaching it in conjunction with texts that talk about the Harlem Renaissance, texts that talk about the Great Migration, the Windrush generation in London.

And so I'm situating it in this -- for first-year students, I mean even for first-year students, I believe that they need to be taught a different arc of history in some senses, a kind of counter-cultural history from the one they've been taught in perhaps high school. And I'm saying high school all over the world, not just in Saskatchewan, for instance, or Canada, but also from the other places that they might come from, like Pakistan, or Nigeria, or Hong Kong, or China. And so I see it... I have been teaching it in the first year, although I can see how it would work in a second-year course, as well, and possibly beyond. But I do think there's the certain vulnerability to the youth of the characters in the book that really speaks to somebody just stepping into University for the first time. And it's also a very slim text, it's basically only 177 pages. The way the story is succinct and yet so powerful is a testament to how he managed to condense this really large story, actually, about grief and memory into this really punchy, kind of really no word is out of place, no sentence is a waste, kind of novel.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

**JESS:** So, it sounds like at least once you have incorporated an interview with the author into your class. What led you to do that and how did your students respond to seeing the author, or maybe videoing with the author?

**15:08 JOANNE:** David is very gracious, and very very generous. And I knew him just in passing from conferences before I taught the text, and then got to know him a little bit better in some of the recent trips I made to Vancouver. And, for me, I often make the joke that, you know, "why did the department hire me?" well, "to teach everybody who is not white and not dead." And so it is very very possible, I think, for the students to come to understand that the texts that they're reading are by real, living authors who are very much invested in the communities that they're writing in, very much invested in the literary and critical conversations that we as a community are having.

And I think it's actually... when I can, and when I have the funds to do so and the authors are available and willing, I try at least to have one or two author visits every semester with my first-year class in particular. Because they're... the opportunity they have had to perhaps go for a reading, or to meet an author, is very very limited. Especially because many of them have grown up in small-town Saskatchewan. These were just simply opportunities that were not given to them. And I sort of talk to the authors before, but most of them are so generous with their time, and really always willing to say "this text is yours now." And indeed that's what David said: it's your... your interpretation counts and matters. And that is such an empowering thing to say to a reader, and I think that is an invaluable experience.

So students have come up to tell me... some of them are too shy to ask questions during these sessions, they're just bowled over and overwhelmed, which I totally understand if you are eighteen and the author of this novel you liked came in and you were like, "woah!" You know, it opens up a possibility -- author visits and speaking to the author about it, while not fixing interpretation of the text, opens up these possibilities of opening up the classroom to the world, in a sense, and to the community in ways that, as an instructor, obviously, I can only do so much.

**JESS:** I love that, in his visit, he also you know sort of gives the class permission to not pay attention to authorial intention, or to put that aside, like authorial intention isn't the be-all end-all and readers make meaning too, but then also gives some insights into his own craft choices and his own creative choices. So, it's such a nice balance, it's almost like the perfect authorial visit to a classroom. It's like, "great! you did exactly what I hoped!" Because you're both giving them permission to make their own meaning, but also providing some, like, background or insight into the choices in the text.

**JOANNE:** And I think the students could really see the love he had for the craft. And I've had that repeated multiple times, whether it's a graphic novelist or a poet, it's something students are very intimidated by, poetry, but when you have a poet in front of you who is just like, "I love poetry. This is why!" It's very hard not to be sort of won over by that enthusiasm.

**JESS:** Mmhmm and I bet that can be really empowering, too, for students who are likewise maybe experimenting with creative writing or poems. I mean, certainly, for me, that is when I hear somebody talk about how passionate they are about their craft, or when I hear people talk with enthusiasm, and also when they're people that seem just like regular, nice people, then I'm like "I can do it, too! The poems I write on my phone could one day be real poems, published!"

**JOANNE:** Yeah! No, I think it's an incredible... And I'm very lucky to have had authors who were very excited to come to class and very excited to talk about their work and share their time with us, essentially.

**JESS:** I guess this is maybe a larger question beyond this novel, but when you go to teach this novel, do you sort of do it thematically -- each day focuses on a different theme -- or do you do it chronologically? Or what concepts or what ideas do you kind of tackle when you get into the novel with your students?

**JOANNE:** Well I think to answer that question, I have to say that because in first year we don't have a lot of time with them, we have 13 weeks, and it's Reading Culture so we're not just fixated on one genre. Very often, David Chariandy's *Brother* for that class is the only novel that they will read. Because they will read plays, they'll read graphic novels, they'll read poetry, short stories, a whole other gamut of genres. So I have to prepare them to read the novel. First, through thinking about form. So they will have encountered some short stories and prose pieces before, but also in terms of contextualizing it within a kind of literary history.

So I mentioned this before, I do sort of take them through this kind of counter-cultural, historical or literary-historical arc, from thinking of things like the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance, the Windrush generation in London from the Caribbean, and then thinking through... That's why I also teach George Boyd's *Consecrated Ground*, which is a play about the eviction of a Black community in Halifax. And that, I think, as well... this idea of displacement and institutional racism gives them as well a kind of handle to think about the systemic racism that happens in *Brother*. But also what I do is I teach this novel, this graphic novel called *War of Streets and Houses*, which is by a queer American graphic novelist Sophia Yanow who spent some time in Montreal studying. And she, she documents the the Montreal Maple Spring protests by the students. And there is police brutality

depicted in that graphic novel. It's a very short graphic novel. But... and I show the students clips from the protests, and I show the students clips of police beating up white Montrealers, white Montreal students, and the general response from students is, "I didn't know that could happen to anyone." And it's this moment where suddenly they... there's this moment of empathy, but it's this moment of connection, where they're just like, I thought it was this other problem that was away from us, that was somewhere in Ontario, that was somewhere in Quebec, perhaps. But when you see this evidence of a kind of systemic oppression that needs to be critiqued, tackled face-on, the idea that apparatuses, certain state apparatuses, they're not out for... it's not just system racism. It's also just systemic oppression. That really contextualizes what happens in *Brother* to them in kind of powerful ways.

**21:12** So, the short answer... long answer... is that I've thought about, or I've had to think about the novel in the context of the class, I've had to think about the novel in the context of first-year students, and then I've had to think about the novel as well in terms of thinking of a kind of longer history of writing from minorities and writing from -- kind of, political writing that enables them to see, to be able by the time they get to the novel, to be able to see it from various facets, and to understand the intervention that its making, while admiring and appreciating and close-reading its aesthetic choices.

**JESS:** Post-summer of 2020, thinking of the kinds of students that I know are at the U of S -- and especially students who are white settlers in Canada in 2020, students who for the first time, because of critical protests about police brutality and systemic racism, students who now are coming to it almost for the first time, or perhaps with renewed knowledge -- I was just wondering if you thought that post-summer of 2020 that teaching this novel would be different or if you anticipate any differences at all. I'm speaking of, like, white settlers students in Canada who seem to have I almost want to say "caught onto" what's been going on for centuries, of course, for almost the first time, or perhaps caught onto it with such sort of engagement for the first time. I'm wondering if that will inflect the way that you teach it or if you think it will play into this at all.

**JOANNE:** I definitely think so. But I think that if I've done my job well, and they've been thinking about the history of Black struggle before this, then it won't come so much as a kind of... it's not "trendy" is not the word that I'm looking for, but a kind of "of the moment," of the kind of pulse of the time, the climate that we're living in. I know there's that -- it's definitely foremost in their mind.

So what happened this -- in the previous years, I've taught, I mean I've taught Langston Hughes' "Harlem" -- you know, "what happens to a dream deferred?" -- which this year took on a greater resonance, I think. And I paired it this year with Childish Gambino's music video "This is America," which in many senses was extremely relevant to this time and the time before. And I've noticed, for me in any case, that the discourse surrounding these texts has changed, with students. There's a lot more sophistication to the conversations that they're having about racism, which is excellent. And I think that doesn't just come from obviously my teaching, it comes from outside conversations they've been hearing, the videos that they've seen of police brutality against, you know, African-American men in particular and women. So there's a kind of sophistication and empathy to the conversation that I did not see before.

But on the other hand, I also try to tell them: it's not just now and it's not just of this moment. So one of the things I do when I teach a music video like "This is America," or in pairing with David Chariandy's *Brother*, I actually taught "Empire State of Mind" by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys, is I give him a brief history of hip-hop and where hip-hop came from and its kind of connections in the spatial sense -- because the text, the class is about cities -- to the Harlem Renaissance, and then moving to Brooklyn and the Bronx and the birth of hip-hop and what that counter-cultural moment was and how it was a kind of critique of the treatment of African-American neighborhoods, as well. And what rap does in that sense.

And so by the time you get to a text like David Chariandy, you not only think about that tradition of critique and political or politically-minded art, you're also thinking about things like remixing, about different aspects of time, about music, about a kind of counter-cultural movement that's not just text, but also all these other visual and oral and musical traditions all into one. So, in that sense, I try to help them see that it's not just this one moment in time -- this one moment that we're sitting on top of. People have been talking about this for a long time. If you go back, all the way to Langston Hughes and then beyond that, and Zora Neale Hurston, people have been talking about this for a long time. And you need to deepen your understanding of how long the struggle has been going on, and even past civil rights, we're not there yet. And it's not, like, my community's story to tell, for instance, but I do think that when you -- when I teach this, and then I teach something like Lee Maracle's "Goodbye Snauq," or the play *Reasonable Doubt*, which is about the Stanley trial and the killing of Colten Boushie, they start to see the kind of intersections between all these struggles, especially in North America.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

**26:09 JESS:** I feel like so much of what you said already, and even in a workshop that we were at previously, suggests to me that so much of your teaching is all about the set-up -- like, the structure -- and the good teaching that you do relies so much on really organizing and lining texts up and histories up in a certain way. And then the other thing that strikes me about what you just said is how important it is, I think how critical it is, to both grab students in this moment of timeliness, but also make them realize that it's ahistorical to think that *now* is the time when everything has ramped up, now is the time when police brutality against Black folks is ramped up. Like, that is an ahistorical and very troubling and damaging view. So, it's like this kind of balance, it seems to me from what you're saying, between the timeliness and the relevance of things that are happening in 22, but also -- sorry, 2020! I think I said 2022, wow!

**JOANNE:** Yes, we're still in 2020 sadly. Donald Trump is still president.

**JESS:** The timeliness and the relevance mixed with making sure to draw out those historical threads and show students who might not be familiar with this fact that these are ongoing systems of oppression.

**JOANNE:** And I think that the burden with that is that very often, in this first-year class but also in some of my second-year classes on decolonizing literatures or transnational literatures, is I find that I actually have to give a political science, economics, and historical mini-lecture next to the actual text that I'm actually looking at. But I found it essential because nobody has taught them about the histories of Empire, not so to speak.

So, if you are in high school in Canada, in Saskatchewan, you will have had some history about residential schools, especially this particular generation. But otherwise, you'll be like, "I'm going to teach texts from the Caribbean. Now I need to tell you about the Caribbean." And half of them won't know the history of slavery and indentured labour in the Caribbean. And without that context, which I try to give them in, I don't know, 15 minutes -- it's very limited -- but at the same time, without that context, they cannot make the required connections in the text.

So, it is... it is not a burden, I would say, but I mean it is that extra labour that has to be done because in some senses I'm not un-teaching them things, but I am, I'm trying to show them that there has been this historical movement that has been running parallel to the histories that they've learned -- the histories of conquest, of imperialism, of world wars, which are all, like, you know, very well, their high school pedagogy and curriculum. But in order to understand the stakes of the text that you are reading now in University in the causes that I'm teaching, you know, I have to teach them things like the secret war in Laos, which gave rise to the Hmong refugee program in the US. Like, all... it's just, having to learn it again. Like, how much do you know about what happened during Partition in between India and Pakistan? So, and similarly for this text: what do you know about minority or Black experience in Canada? Starting from the 1950s, I guess, with Austin Clarke's first novels on Black migration into Canada. What do you know about that? And it's like, nothing. Because these people were never represented in the canon, they were never represented in your classroom.

So... I mean it's not all bad. It's actually... like, it's actually... Like, when I tell the story about what happened in Halifax, to that community there, they're just like "what??" And I'm like, "Yes, this is what happened. They came in and they bulldozed a church at night." And that's what they depict in the play. And they're just like, "How is this possible, in Nova Scotia??" And I'm like: it happened.

**JESS:** It's so intimidating -- especially as an emerging sort of scholar -- like, it's so intimidating, but crucial, how teaching English -- or, sorry, teaching literature I should say, literatures -- doesn't just require you to know the literatures, but also you have to have your hands in so many different pots. Pots, like you said, like economics, history, political science, like geography -- that's a big one for me - I have friends and family who will be like, "Yeah, but you just... you just have to read books, right?" Like, and that's -- I don't actually even take that badly -- and like, I have to do a little bit more than that. Like, knowing the theory behind... or the theory with which to approach a book, or knowing the history behind a particular event that I'm teaching about, or trying to know every single allusion in a text... Which is impossible, right, but just making sure that if I'm asked, hopefully, like if a student asks me, that hopefully I have something to speak to it. It's such an intimidating but crucial aspect of our profession.

**30:55** And on that same note: I remember, in my very first class that I was instructing on my own and that I had designed on my own, the first question I asked was: what is colonization? And then, I

mean, that's too big of a question and nobody answered it, of course. Poorly phrased question! Then I wrote "to colonize" on the board. "To colonize." And I said "well, what does it mean to colonize?" And I'm like, again... this is a lively class, I have to say! But everybody was quiet, nobody wanted to speak up, or if they felt like they knew the answer, they didn't share it, which is absolutely fine. And then I said, "okay well what if I just say to colonize a room? what does that mean?" Like just a room, like the next room. And still silent. And it transitioned into a longer discussion of settler colonialism in Canada. For white settler students, most of whom were in that class, who come into the U of S and have a first-year English class, I wonder if that is sort of the prevailing... Like, "we really don't know what colonialism is or what colonisation is." If it's, if that... I mean, what a huge -- what a huge gap.

**JOANNE:** Mmhmm. Mmhmm. Yeah. And I think it's not just limited to the white students. I do think that new immigrants like myself coming into the country, and if I did not have the training that I did have, or that I'm trying to still learn myself about the histories of settlement and settler colonialism in Canada, you know, we don't have this narrative of us coming into -- I'm speaking for immigrants, all immigrants! [laughs] -- no, I'm speaking for this kind of immigrant experience where you come in and it's just like "Welcome to Canada! Here's this multicultural Utopia that you've been promised!" And it's not. And it's, I think... it behooves new immigrants, as well, my students who have come and they're coming from the Phillipines, they're coming from India, from China, from Pakistan, from Hong Kong, from other parts of the Middle East, coming in sometimes as refugees... And they don't - they're very much like the white students, perhaps even less. They have no basis for understanding this history.

So, I taught recently, last semester, this poem by Joshua Whitehead, "mihkokwaniy," which is about his grandmother, who was murdered in Saskatchewan and he never got to meet her. And the immediate reaction from my Syrian refugee student, coming up after class, she came up to me and she was in tears. She said, "How come nobody ever told me that this happened?" And I mean like, and I said "It's not your fault. Why would have they? When would you have been given the opportunity, coming from Syria, running away from danger and war and trauma and strife? Who would have told you this?" She said, "how can this happen in Canada? How can" -- because I explain what happened with Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women movement, and the number of cases outstanding, and the atrocities committed in terms of investigation or lack of investigation, and she said, "How can this happen in Canada?" And it really shakes them to the core. Because... yeah so not just... definitely yes, the students that I come into contact with who are predominantly white and from rural or urban Saskatchewan, that's also there. I mean, when they learn about residential schools they have some idea.

But I think, and speaking to your question you know, "oh wow you have to tackle the politics of it, the economics of it, the history of it, the sociology of it," one of the questions that I ask my students in the first class of every class I teach, is "Why do you think we're reading literature? Why literature? What's the point? Why aren't you taking a Pol-Sci class? Why aren't you taking a geography class, or history class? Why not philosophy? Why literature?" And I ask them that question at the beginning of class and I ask them the question at the end of class. And they have really great responses! They're just like, "empathy, personal history, history that's not in the history books, emotional connection, aesthetics." They have, like, really great responses! And when you ask them the

question at the end of class, they have similar responses but they go, like, “social justice,” you know, like, “really listening to voices that we’ve never heard before,” “experiencing something that is impossible except through art.”

You know, coming back to the novel, *Brother*, I think because it's told in this first-person, really really intimate kind of voice, they're really -- by the time they get through the 177 pages -- they're really invested in Michael. They really want him to be happy.

**JESS:** Yeah, I think... I don't know if it was in a piece of writing that I read of yours, or if it was just in our previous exchanges, but you had mentioned, like, something about teaching this novel as a way of -- I'm not sure if I'm phrasing it right, so I'll just let you step in -- but like reaching across difference, or building solidarity and relationships. Could you speak a little bit more about how you see your teaching of this novel doing that, if I phrased it in the appropriate way?

**35:57 JOANNE:** Yeah, so one of the things that I'm conscious about is that I'm not Black, and I have no experience of being sort of subjected to the machinery and systems that African Canadians and Black men and women in this country are subjected to. That is not my experience. I have experienced racism, obviously, in this country, but it's not... I always tell the students, we're all vulnerable in different ways. And I always use the example, when I teach the urban texts class, when you walk down the street in the middle of the night, for instance, perhaps because you're a woman and because of some other thing, you might feel differently. But my experience will not be the same as somebody who might be targeted, for instance, for extreme policing, perhaps as an Indigenous person or as a Black person in this country. And I always remind them that we have to recognize those differences, but we still have to look at the text and really work not just to empathy, but a kind of solidarity and understanding of the kinds of ways that the spaces around us, the power structures around us, don't treat everybody equally.

And I think that this text is really important because, first, it talks about family. So, that's one of the first things, this kind of fraternal bond, this maternal bond, parental, that I think students immediately sort of latch onto. That's very easy. Many of them have siblings, all of them have parents, most of them have parents. And so that's something immediately that really sort of speaks to them: this kind of intimacy of the domestic space. But then I think that, you know, once they're sort of invested in that character, and in their voice, and in kind of puzzling out the kind of non-linear narrative of this text -- which I explain to them is due to trauma, the novel circles this traumatic event of the brother's death -- then they sort of... There's a kind of art to this novel where they really really get immersed, they really understand where these memories are circling towards. So by the time they get to the scene in the novel, where it's the death of the brother, they're expecting it. You know we're going to see it. And I always plot out the novel for them, giving them different colours for different flashbacks and showing them how the novel circles toward this major climax and tragedy in the text. They're expecting it but then they're also, I think, grieving with the characters because the novel, it's kind of imbued with loss through its entirety. But by the time you get to the point of loss -- and this is this wonderful thing, right, about this non-linear narrative -- by the time they get to the point of loss, they've been prepped for it, primed for it. And they're really... Their breath is still taken away by it.

And I think that that's that moment where they really understand the stakes that this novel is trying to talk about. And by "stakes," I mean the kind of preciousness and vulnerability of life. When we talk about Black Lives Matter, what does that mean, right? And the novel really talks about this individual life, this individual family, but at the same time it's incredibly expansive. Thinking about the community that this family is situated in and the ways in which, you know, it is just so ground down by this racism. Not just racism of the contemporary moment, but just like... generations of it coming into a settler-colonial space like Canada.

So, this is a very long answer to your question. But I think that's what... I've been thinking about that, and then I've been thinking about that idea family, but I have been also thinking about the idea of music. So, this this particular edition I have of the novel, it has a record player on it, and so you'll know if you read the novel that music and record playing and DJing plays a huge part in this novel. So very often what I do is I start playing clips of the songs that are being referred to in the novel. And there's really nothing quite like a communal listening experience to sort of drive home the... almost like a corporeal understanding. If you play Nina Simone to them -- I play the song "Ne Me Quitte Pas" -- which, you know some of them don't speak French, so I translate the lyrics for them. And I'm like, "Okay, so can you imagine: he's mixing this record, and, like, she's singing 'Don't leave me, don't leave me,' and it's this novel about mourning..." and then I play the track. And then you have these guys at the back of the class going, like, "Can you give me the name of that singer again? I want to Spotify it, I want to put it in my playlist, it's so great!"

There's something that really hits them when, in that moment where it's this communal act of listening, everyone's listening to this song. And you know, I said, similar to their previous education, my previous education, too, nobody ever... It's like, if you take a music degree, you're going to learn all the great Western classics. No one's going to say "go listen to Nina Simone," but you should. So when they listen to it, they're just like... For many of them, it's like, "I've never heard this. I don't know who John Coltrane is. I don't know who such and such -- all the people referenced in this novel." And sometimes when we go through a couple songs, or... I've been playing, the most recent class, I have a Spotify mix tape where I just put up songs that were referenced in the text that I'm teaching or that I think are sort of related, too. And I think it's just another way for them to understand that literature isn't just in the book. It's all around us. Art is all around us. And a really important way for them to as well you know engage with the ways in which the text, as well, opens up to the outside.

**41:38 JESS:** I love that idea of using listening as a methodology in the class. Like, I've done that in other ways before, not in this exact way. And then also it sounds to me like just in the bare act of listening, that there is so much learning... I'm questioning what I'm saying as I'm saying it, but there's so much learning that's happening even as they're listening because it's just that bare encounter with a melody or a song or a voice that they've never heard before, and then that propels them to be interested in knowing more or learning more or, like you said, finding Nina Simone on Spotify or whatever.

**JOANNE:** Yeah. Yeah!

**JESS:** And so, what do you think about... Okay, I guess I'm wondering about individual listening as a method versus collective class listening. Like are there dynamics that make one more challenging than the other? Or are there dynamics that make collective listening especially generative for this kind of book, teaching this kind of book?

**JOANNE:** Well I think it's the difference, for instance, between going for a play, or watching / going to the cinema and watching a film together, or even going to a sports game and being in the stadium versus being at home and cheering on your couch by yourself. There's a reason why we organize watch parties, even in this age of pandemic, where it's like, "Let's all watch this episode together, and let's talk about it!" And I think... And I really do miss this in this moment. I miss that alchemy of being in the same space -- the same physical space as somebody, putting on a record, or in this case launching a Spotify list, or a video, and turning up the volume in my lecture hall, and just letting it permeate the space.

And I've been doing some of my own research, like separate to my pedagogical research, about this - about this impact of sound, and how it's a kind of resonance, vibration... There's something very powerful about being in the same room and listening to music together that enables you to have a conversation about it after. But I think it's almost a collective experience of a kind of resonance, a kind of corporeal experience, that makes it... Even if I play the song at the end of class, and it's kind of like exit music for a film, and they leave the classroom listening to Nina Simone, there's something there that helps them retain the emotion and the memory of what they've been listening to. And then when they see it ekphrastically transcribed in the text, and I explain ekphrasis to them, they come to understand that relationship between text and art, text and music.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

**JESS:** I was also thinking that even just the act of filling a settler-colonial institution's space with sounds, like sounds of Nina Simone or if you're listening to Jay-Z or hip-hop, there's some sort of power in that, too. There's like a reclaiming of space or... maybe not, I'm not sure if that's the right word that I'm stretching for, but there's, like, for the students especially to hear this settler-colonial institution's space filled up with those sounds... I think that there's something going on there. There's some power to that.

**JOANNE:** Yeah, for sure. I think it alters the architecture of the space that they're in for sure. And it makes them... It almost recreates a different kind of space. The space of a recording studio or of a, you know, a jazz club. I play them songs from the Harlem Renaissance, so I was like... When Zora Neale Hurston talks about how the scene was so great and so vibrant and so fun, listen to the music. This is what she's saying. This is what they would have danced to. Or when I talk about how Langston Hughes is influenced by Bebop, and many theorists have talked about this -- let's listen to some Charlie Parker, the sounds... So you can understand the kinds of ways in which this poem is coming at you from different angles and suddenly switching its metaphors up and down. That's what bop does. So I found it to be really useful -- that and artwork -- a really useful way for students to grasp complex concepts that may be very difficult to explain using words.

**45:59 JESS:** And actually that maybe leads me to one of the questions I want to make sure that we get to, which is kind of wrapping up a couple of the questions I had for you but: the difficulties or the challenges of teaching this text -- I think you've talked a little bit about that -- or maybe how students respond to this text, and maybe the challenges are wrapped up in that question or maybe they're not.

**JOANNE:** I think that there is a lot of pain in this text, and I don't... I feel a great responsibility to honour the trauma that is being depicted in the text. And that sounds maybe a little strange -- honour the trauma, what does that mean? But I do think that what David Chariandy has done in *Brother* is to paint this beautiful portrait of this family in pain. And a pain that, you know, is not taken away or healed in the end, completely, but there's a coming to terms with it as progress towards the future.

Essentially, the novel is about being stuck in this traumatic loop, reliving the past over and over again because you can't move forward from the traumatic event of the brother's death. And I think for many students, for my Black students for instance, but also students who've experienced the loss of a family member, this can be very very difficult. I've had students come to me and say, "Actually, I lost my sibling or my parent this past year, and this text was so much harder to read than I thought it was going to be." And that, you know, that to me is always a big challenge because you want to create these spaces in classrooms where we can talk about difficult, difficult topics -- challenging topics, topics that are sensitive and important to our society and our community. But at the same time, you don't want to re-traumatize students, and you don't want to you know end up exploiting their trauma or the trauma that's depicted in the book just for aesthetic purposes.

One of the things that I've been thinking about in teaching this novel is Dionne Brand's concept of the "struggle work" that she talks about in this interview that she did I think in the 1990s or early 2000s, where she says there's this work, this labour that we have to do, anti-racist work, but it's a struggle and it's not easy. And it's certainly not easy for the minorities in Canada at all. And on one hand, you know I... I do think that as one of the few minority faculty in a department, like the Department of English at the University of Saskatchewan, I feel this great responsibility to teach texts like this. I want to. This is part of my work. I find this essential in thinking about the work of decolonizing the English department. It's so important. But at the same time, it's a huge responsibility because in some senses, I'm expected to in some senses speak to all of these experiences in the classroom. So I'm... One of the struggles that I have, and the challenges I have, is to sometimes even step back a bit and either let conversation unfold, or bring an author in so that they can talk about some of the issues at hand, or their work. And try to strike that balance between being respectful and not appropriative, but also providing, you know, the students with an important kind of historical context, and kind of the literary tools in their toolbox in order to look at a novel like this one.

So, in the middle of the novel, or close to the traumatic like climax of the novel, there's this moment where the two brothers, their mother takes them when they're very young to Eaton Centre in Toronto, and they encounter these really racist white boys. And they abuse them verbally and physically. And there's this moment where this really ugly language surfaces in this text. And you

know, in teaching other things like Joshua Whitehead's poem about his grandmother, there's this really ugly, this really ugly language that surfaces in the text, these racial epithets. And I'm not one to use the n-word in class, for instance, and I will tell the students why. But sometimes I will read these passages out, and I say, "Well, this is going to be really hard. But you should know that, for instance, if Joshua Whitehead writes a poem about this, about what he found on the internet search for his grandmother's name, it's because it's there."

And I think that part of the pedagogical challenge I find is to show the ugliness of that in order to confront it with the students. And to show them and teach them how the novel depicts this pain and trauma, for instance, but also that it is not the only thing. So you don't just fetishize pain and trauma, but you also think about all the other... I often talk about, like, look at this beautiful passage about music, look at this ending, look at like... What are they saying? What is going on here? Because I think it's important to balance out necessary stories about systemic racism and oppression with ideas of resurgence, ideas of you know anti-colonialism, ideas of decolonization.

And so... yeah, I'm still, I think I'm still working through that, but from the responses from the students, I think... I had one guy, he's like, "I grew up in a farm in rural Saskatchewan," he's like, "I thought I was going to just read 20 pages of this this weekend, just try and get through it, a real slog." He's like, "I finished it in one night, I gave it to my mom, and then she finished it." And I was like, wow! I was like, really?? So, I think that's a testament to David Chariandy's craft and gift, you know, this... It's really had an impact. And if I can boost its Amazon.ca sales, so be it.

**51:50 JESS:** Oh yeah, that's like another big thing, is like thinking about teaching from the perspective of like, not just whose voices do you want to bolster, and whose ideas and what ideas and books do you want to bolster, but these books are material items made within an economy of often struggling artists, and like... Yeah, teaching books as material items that are wrapped up in an economy of -- in an economy! -- is also like really important think about from a teaching perspective. Like, whose books do I want to... For example, I don't ever plan to -- not that I would have anyways -- but I will forevermore never asked students to buy a book by JK Rowling ever again because I just don't want to even have students invest or give money to her.

That was sort of a side note, but it just reminded me of, like, another way that we structure courses in all of the careful ways you talked about, but you know being mindful of where our money goes or where the students' money goes is important.

So I just want to make sure that at the end here you have a chance to say anything about this work that we didn't -- about this text or about the teaching of it -- that you didn't get around to saying, that you wanted to say, or anything at all that you wanted to add here that we haven't said yet.

**JOANNE:** Mmmm... I'd just like to say that... I don't know. I think that your students, my students in any case, surprise me all the time. And one of the amazing things about teaching here in the middle of the country -- like literally in the middle of the country -- but also in particular, my students who come from Indigenous, who are Indigenous, is that so long I've been taught in post-colonial theory, but to teach in a settler-colonial context, and when colonialism is ongoing, and of course to teach in the context where violence against Black men and women is ongoing, has been an incredibly

challenging but also I think crucial time where, you know, I just... I just feel like these texts must be taught. These texts, these voices, must be heard. And if the students only take two English classes in all of their career in University... I mean I do hope that, you know, that more attention is being paid to whose voices are being amplified. You know, as the character at the end of novel says, "Volume!" It's very important. Turn up the volume! And I really do hope that... I do think that the students appreciate this. I do think that they want to see texts and read texts that talk about the lives that they're living and the communities that they are in.

**JESS:** Absolutely. I think that's such a good place to end, especially since quite conveniently you just referenced the last... the last couple words of the novel. I guess the last word, yeah, it's "Volume, she says," right?

So thank you so much for coming on. I really, really, I always learn a lot from you and I'm just lucky to chat with you, so thank you so much for coming on.

**JOANNE:** Well, it was my pleasure to come. Thank you so much for interviewing me. I mean, it's such an honour to have a conversation -- a long conversation! -- about, you know, my thoughts on teaching. I'm still a work-in-progress!

**JESS:** That's exactly how I feel: always a work-in-progress.

Did you want to plug anything, or can listeners find you or more about your work somewhere?

**55:08 JOANNE:** Well, I mean, you know, I actually want to plug a colleague of mine... So aside from "go out and read everything David Chariandy has written!" You should, I think if you're listening to this from the prairies, you should read Karina Vernon's *The Black Prairie Archives*, an anthology, if you're still interested in thinking about Black writing in terms of its context in Canada. Because there she's done excellent history and anthology of Black writing in the Prairies, which has very often been suppressed and rendered invisible. So that, I think, is a really important thing to do if you're interested in finding out more about this. And yeah! So, I would love to plug that. Everyone should be reading diverse literatures.

**JESS:** Yes. Absolutely. That's a great collection. I second this recommendation!

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

**55:59** Thank you so much to Joanne for coming on the podcast! I always appreciate listening to and learning from Joanne.

To find Karina Vernon's *The Black Prairie Archives*, which Joanne refers to at the end of the interview, check the show notes for a link to it on Wilfrid Laurier University Press, which is, incidentally, one of my favourite presses of the current moment.

This episode was recorded on Treaty 6 territory and the homeland of the Métis. These lands, and the adjacent territories that are held within the so-called “Canadian prairies,” have a long and rich history of Indigenous and Black-Indigenous writing. Joanne highlighted Karina Vernon’s *The Black Prairie Archives* as a text that represents and speaks to this rich history, but I’d also like to point to a recent talk Dr. Vernon gave through the University of Winnipeg English Department. The talk is entitled: “Changing the Prairie Story: Reading Black & Black-Indigenous Writers in the Prairie Archive.” This talk, like the anthology it pairs with and draws from, emphasizes the ways that Black and Black-Indigenous people have been central actors in prairie history on these lands, including in histories like the fur trade. Please check out Dr. Vernon’s lecture at the link I’ll include in the shownotes.

I want to thank, also, Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their work at <https://soundcloud.com/dyallas>.

You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod (no “g” in that teachin’!).

To chat about the podcast, use the hashtag #TeachinBooksPod, which, as I said before, I have started using, though I’m not sure if anyone else has. So, please join me in using that hashtag anytime. 😊

You can also get in touch via email at [teachinbookspod@gmail.com](mailto:teachinbookspod@gmail.com). Please do send me a note, tell me what you like about the podcast so far, or what you’d like to see going forward! I’d love to hear from you.

So, I just have written in my notes here, “sign off”! So, that’s a sign that I still am not really sure what sign-off I might use in the future. Maybe there’ll be no sign-off. Maybe I’ll just cut off while I’m in the middle of talking. Or maybe I’ll change it every time. I’m not really sure yet. But, uhh... since my notes aren’t helping me here, I’ll just say... see you next time!

Wait, I had to come back because that was too inaccurate, ‘cause you’re not actually gonna see me because this is a podcast, and so you’re gonna hear me. So, I think I just have to say OKAYBYEEEE.

[Music: “Homer Said”]