Transcription for Episode 84 - Creative Conversation with Carole Boston Weatherford & Frank Morrison (I, Too, Arts Collective)

Episode Duration: 53:03

Renée Watson: A very short story is that I love Langston Hughes. I grew up in Portland, Oregon. And when I moved to New York, Harlem was the first place I wanted to visit. As a writer, and poet. I just needed to go to Harlem and be in the city. In a space where so many Black authors and poets created. When I came to this space and realized that it was not a museum. It wasn't this space you could actually go into, I was heartbroken. And this was about, I don't know, 15 years ago. And so I had this idea in my head for a really long time that someone ought to do something. And you know how the story goes, we complain and complain that someone else should do something and then you realize you've got to be that person. And so two years ago, I launched the Langston's Legacy campaign with a group of friends who are also authors and poets and visual artists. We raised money to be able to lease this space and having events like this and poetry workshops for teenagers and art classes for young people. Our goal is to purchase this year. So spread the word wide. Let folks know that there's something happening in Harlem and if they want to be a part of this, there's so many ways to get involved. But the most important thing about tonight is this. [points to Carole and Frank sitting down] There are formal bios that I could read, but I, you know, Google that. Find out that they won everything you can win.

(audience laughs)

Renée: They're bestsellers. There's so many books between the two of them. What I wanted to talk about is that as a young writer when you get your first book deal, you're wide-eyed and happy and so excited. There are these living legends who exist that you only know through the books you've read by them. So when you're at an event and you're there, and then you're just like, "I'm in the same room as Carole Boston Weatherford. I can't go say hi to Frank Morrison, you know." Then you meet them. They hug you and say hello and ask you, "What have you done? What you need? If you need advice, let me know. How can I help you Langston Hughes House?" They make beautiful art and they support your work and champion you on. And you realize that you are a part of the legacy of Black writers who are making books for young people, who love our you

ng people. And it's a beautiful thing to know living writers. A lot of people study writers who are

gone. And it's something to say there are people who are making work that matters. And so personally, Frank and Carole are special to me because I feel like I'm standing on their shoulders. That their work has inspired me to be a writer. Not just artistic work, but who they are in real life. It's one thing to write for children. It's another thing to love them and go to schools and being with them to create with them, teach and nurture them. And that is what they do. So I'm very honored to have them here tonight.

How this is going to work they're just going to talk. We're just going to listen to them talk about what it means to be an artist and a poet. And why they wanted to write this book and collaborate together. And then we'll open up for questions. So please be thinking of something you want to ask. And then we'll have a signing. Welcome again, and I'm going to turn it over to Carole.

(applause)

Carole Boston-Weatherford: Thank you, Renée. I'm just glad to be a living writer. (laughter) So that you can stand on my shoulders. And Renée told us she was going to ask the first question and that it's going to be why hip hop? So she got excited. So I'm going to ask, “Why hip hop, Frank?”

Frank Morrison: Hip hop to me was an opportunity to express myself where I did not have to have own a pair of shoes back in the 80s or own a particular product that has to be good. I wasn’t fortunate enough to have all the latest theaters. So we basically grew up with our talents. So I don't know if anybody remembers back in the day, we raced for no reason. You see kids running up the street and running back down to see who was the fastest. It didn't matter what kind of Nike you had. It didn’t matter if you wasn't fast. It didn’t matter. And hip hop was a chance back in those days to express your talent. And it wasn't about what you couldn't buy at the time. You had to actually practice and be good at it. When I saw this book come across. I was just amazed that you wrote this book. You've written so many wonderful books. So as I said, I just jumped on this opportunity to give back to our kids so they can see to it can be inspired the way I was.

Carole: First of all, I just have to give a shout out to give props to Langston Hughes. Because when I was in fourth grade, I was forced to memorize this poem “I, Too.” From that moment on, he became my literary mentor in absentia. That was probably just a couple years before he died when I had to memorize that poem. So through Langston Hughes and through the grandmothers who lived in my household or lived just like two blocks away, I always had a grandmother in the house growing up, I was steeped in oral traditions. My grandfather was a minister I even grew up to marry a minister and was as they call it in the South, a First Lady for about 25 years. So I was steeped in oral traditions as a result of my upbringing. I was not a child of hip hop like Frank was because I think I might be but maybe 20 years older than you. Maybe, maybe 15, 20 years so I was already an adult by the time hip hop came on the scene in the late 70s. I was out of college.

And to be honest, it didn't catch my attention right away. Because by then I had been through R&B and been through rock and had come to jazz. I was raised on jazz because my dad was into jazz. So I had come around to my dad's music to jazz. But I was writing poetry at the time. And I was writing what I would call jazz poetry. I really think then at the time, I was really writing hip hop. But I had no idea that I was writing it because I was writing this rhyming poetry about music. And it was very, very hip and I was doing spoken word nights. Poetry readings we called it then. There was no such thing as poetry slam then. I pretty much ignored hip hop, except when I was at parties, and now it was, you know. (laughter)

Then occasionally, they'll be somebody freestyling at the party. But still I was into to jazz because that was you know, obviously, you know, jazz was the thing for me. And then when I had kids they reintroduced me to hip hop. Because I went for many years when I was raising my kids, I didn't have time for any music. I didn't have time for TV, music, nothing. All I had time to do was raise kids and write. And do my work, my day job. But I had kids and they'd reintroduced me to hip hop. And it was okay with me. And then I started teaching. And because I was so inspired by spoken word traditions, and I was still writing this poetry that maybe it was influenced certainly influenced by spoken word traditions. And I was teaching at an HBCU, an historically black college, historically black University of North Carolina at Fayetteville State University. Then the college had no hip hop course. And I thought, well, hip hop's been around for 40 years. Certainly it deserves to be studied in a scholarly fashion at an HBCU. So I created this hip hop course.

Well, I had written *The Roots of Rap* maybe 10 years before I even started the course and couldn't sell it. And eventually you write these manuscripts and you have them in your drawer, your flash drive. And I said, well let me try again and Sonali Fry bought it. It resonated with her, and she chose Frank Morrison, the wonderful Frank Morrison, for the project. And I just, I just thought that, you know, kids needed to know about the history of hip hop, and not just know the rap that's being produced today. Not that there's anything wrong with that. But I think if you are immersed in something, you need to know where it came from, and know its roots. And so we talked about digital natives, kids who have been raised on computer technology. Well, their kids who are listening are certainly part of the hip-hop nation, they need to know the history of it. Just like we need to know the history of the country where we live. This is the language of global youth culture. I think it deserved a book of its own.

Frank: You know, it's weird because when I was growing up, I grew up with my dad controlling the radio in the car. (laughter) You know how that works.

Carole: Me, too. Me, too.

Frank: I grew up in Jersey so we go on these trips sometimes. We'd go fishing, and we'd always

listen to The Temptations. So because my dad had all these records and not just James Brown. Rick James. The stuff we listened to as kids "Superfreak." I'm like, we're singing that around the house. (laughter) We had no idea what we were singing.

Especially with the Mary Jane girls and all that stuff. So he had a massive collection. He could've been a DJ. We couldn't touch the records because some of them had these risqué covers on. So you couldn't look at all the record collections, you know. So anyways, he kept them to himself but he controlled that radio. It so happened one day, two years ago, a friend of mine came over the record and over the radio.

[00:10:02]

Frank: I'm in the car with my dad, and he didn't turn the station. I'm like, Oh wow. This is Run DMC. It's something I like, and I can relate to it. And he's like, oh he's kind of listening to it. And he's like oh this is your new rap huh? Then you know he has to say, this isn't real music and this and that. He actually started tapping his hands a little. I was like, wow. I saw that generation leap there. He could understand where we're coming from. And then with Sugarhill Gang sampling—Who did they sample? You know the guys. You guys—. Sugarhill Gang, y'all don't know Sugarhill Gang?

Carole: I know who they are, but who did they sample?

Frank: What was that thing they sampled?

Audience: Chic

Frank: Chic.

Carole: "Good Times."

Frank: You gonna hold on to that and make it seem like I don't know what I'm talking about.

(audience laughs)

Frank: So they sampled. I think that really kind of blended a lot because even when hip hop went to jazz, it was almost like these rappers were trying to… hip hop was trying to bring in that other generation and fuse it so that we all can appreciate what's going on. So we, we did pay homage to James Brown. So we sampled a lot of James Brown's records. And I think that's what kind of drew my parents into hip hop. But I remember my first hip-hop song. I was in the back of my grandmother's house, and I had this old radio. And it was like you had a little wire when you

know the antenna where you have to stretch that cord. You gotta move around the backyard, you know, trying to get it. We can only get one little area that could get the station and I heard Planet Rock for the first time. This is like the first time I've ever heard anything has to do with hip hop or rap and it's Planet Rock. And I'm sitting there and it's like something like this hippie. There's like, wow, this is the freshest music I've ever heard in my life.

You know, and then come to find out years later after doing the research on this book and immerse myself into, you know, what was he thinking back then? These guys there was a movement actually happening in New York where hip hop actually was the soundtrack of a lifestyle back in the 80s. And so we had graffiti was art. Dancing was breaking and our music was rapping. We live within that culture, you know. So what ended up happening, I heard how Afrika Bambaataa put that song together from mixing, going downtown to a club that was like a what is that? The rock stars, I think, like the punk rock stars. He went down to this punk rock club, and he started getting that whole vibe. And they came back to the studio and mix that whole beat together and then once again, they're bringing, drawing in from thinking outside the box. You know, this thinking is the next thing. I think that's what hip hop is about. Recreating yourself every day and then trying to be accepted not amongst the community, amongst your peers. And knowing that everybody around you is literally challenging themselves to be better. To be better the next day on the breaking. I don't know if you guys… Anybody breakdance here? You used to break? Good, alright. You could spin on your hand a little?

Audience Member: Yeah. If we got furniture, it always came in that cardboard box. You put the cardboard box outside.

Frank: Oh yeah.

Carole: We're going to move the chairs back a little later for Frank.

Frank: Did you break with a crew? Did you have a crew?

Audience Member: Just my brothers and my neighbors.

Frank: What were your moves? Would you do the uprock? Where you good at popping? What was your thing?

Audience Member: Yeah, popping.

Frank: Popping, right?

Audience Member: I could crab walk on my two hands.

Frank: You could do that, yeah, yeah! Did you practice?

Carole: You learned something, didn't you?

(audience laughs)

Frank: Hold on. Did you battle?

Audience Member: Just with my brothers. We'd battle back and forth. I remember, too, the movie *Breaking Out* came out.

Frank: Oh yeah. The street was you had to wait for someone. Because we didn't go to the movies and TV shows. We had a videotape and it was it like, you had to wait. It was was like someone that was selfish because they didn't want to you to see the moves. They would just, they wouldn't let you know. You had to go to their house to see it or something. But that's what it was, and it was no one. There was no one had to tell us to go out there and play. Go out there and be constructive. Go out there and work out. That's all we're doing is exercising. When we were drawing graffiti, we're actually practicing with, you know, colors. And hip hop actually came in and helped develop a nation, a generation of children to teach them the arts. That would never have looked at dancing. Like I wasn't into tap dancing. Even though the Nicholas brothers were the baddest out. Yeah, yeah. Let's go. But I wasn't into tapping. You wasn't going to get me to tap. And then you want me to go on to look at, actually I hated fine art. I was like Picasso what? Really? He doesn't even know how to draw. With most of the Renaissance art, I was like what really? People flying around in the sky? And Rembrandt cut his ear off.

Carole: Not Rembrandt, Van Gogh.

Frank: Rembrandt died poor. I was like, why would I want to be him? I wasn't influenced, but these guys that was writing on the walls. Yeah.

Carole: And in that respect I think hip hop was very, and still is, very democratic. Because you don't need a degree to do it. You don't need prior training to do it. But you have to have a heart for it. And to break dance. You don't… You don't have to go to a dance studio. You can nowadays because hip hop has come of age and it's a commodity now. And people make money off of it. You don't have to have a PhD in English to write rhymes with a freestyle. Hip hop is literature.

Frank: I think what happens with hip hop is a result of the community. And we were basically "look at the guys that do graffiti." Graffiti is the only art form started by, American art form,

started by children if you think about it. The only American art form started by children. Now it's getting more respect than it ever has gotten before.

Carole: I had a friend when I was in college, I had no idea, he was like one of my little brothers in college, I had no idea that he was doing graffiti because he didn't tell anybody.

Frank: He wouldn't.

Carole: He didn't tell anybody. But it wasn't until his art graffiti. They had the huge exhibit where all these people were lined up in the street, in the 80s for the graffiti exhibit that I was out of touch with him by that point. But when I reconnected, he was selling paintings in Paris and in Europe. He was one of the New York graffiti kings. So yeah, yeah. But I had no idea. So, you know, the hip-hop culture was all around me even though I wasn't aware. It was underground.

Frank: It wasn't really made for us. It was made for kids that grew up in poverty. That's what it was. It was really meant for those kids that didn't have that, that way out. That they didn't have a dad that could take them out of the city. So they found a group of kids, they call their crew. They will come together, and they would be the family. They would compete against each other and they would find positive things to do that way that took those kids that were doing dancing and doing what they were doing, could have been doing other things. They were growing up and in, you know, the worst poverty some of these kids. But yet they could dance, they were drawn to the arts and what graffiti is like, you can send a letter and because it wasn't made for everyone to understand it. It's a code for other artists to understand. It was basically something that you couldn't commercialize. You couldn't commercialize it, couldn't put a pricetag on graffiti. You couldn't put a pricetag on break dancing. And I'm hoping now it gets into the Olympics. Kids are still breaking.

Carole: It just might.

Frank: I'm hoping.

Carole: Skateboarding's in now

Frank: Skateboarding made it.

Carole: It just might.

Frank: Yeah. I'm hoping breaking gets in there. But it was a hidden lifestyle that kids did that just blew up. and everyone started wanting to join into the movement, I guess.

Carole: And now it’s around the world

Frank: Around the world. So when I had to write, I pulled in a lot of— I could rap back in the day. It wasn't good. I had like one line that I borrowed from my brother.

(audience laughs)

Frank: We made that happen. I just kept reciting until my children told me to stop. I didn't go as far as the Gazelles. But I bought a little subway train and you know, I have a ton of books. I love buying books for references. And I studied. I'm just amazed we're going back to those days where I didn't have, I don't know if anybody knows quarter waters, Bazooka Joe. You get the comic thing. You guys ever send in the thing to try to get the toys that would come with it?

Renée: Crackerjacks.

Frank: Crackerjacks, taffy. I went out and bought an arcade game from the 80s. One of those stand-up arcade games, Pac Man. I was trying to get that whole thing empty. Getting old. Telling them I was trying to illustrate a book. When I really went back into the movement that year, the 80s. Today I just feel like hip hop's not the same. I’m going to be honest with you. I just feel like it’s not. These guys are selling something that could kill you. Yeah, honestly man selling poison.

[20:00]

They're not selling. We were talking about the community. We learned about like what KRS-One would tell us about our history. You know I didn't, I hate to say it, I didn't know about AIDS until KRS-One talked about it.

Carole: Wow.

Frank: Now in the 80s, “AIDS attack, so out and get your—” You know you guys know the rest. I didn't know about that, so it was like a public announcement.

Carole: The first time hip hop got my attention beyond just, you know, partying to it. Because I was into Sugarhill Gang, Fat Boys, Run DMC, The Message, Grandmaster Flash, and The Furious Five. I was like, wow, yeah, this is literature. This is really, I mean, this is, you know, social commentary. You know, it's really telling it the way you know, the way people live in the city within an inner-city at that time. those lyrics really got my attention. You know, it wasn't just something to party to. You needed to listen.

Frank: Yeah, they were like some of the first conscientious rappers. “White Lines.” They have a

couple of songs that was just made you think. You really did.

Carole: Definitely.

Frank: Yeah, but now it's just kind of awkward. It's like hip hop has been taken over by another industry that doesn't want to awaken a generation of kids. That's what it feels like. It just keeps you in a circle of this, I don't know, this trap music. I don't know trap music. I live in Atlanta now and I hate this trap music going like, what is he talking about what? Why? Why do you need to tell people you are doing the worst things on the planet? And over a beat. Like why am I— These guys are like drug addicts. I hate to say this, but they sound like drug guys confessing or how much drugs they do everyday and making it seem like it's something great. And now a child is listening to that. And how do you equate that to, okay, I need to study for my test? How do you envision that? Envision these negative lyrics that are constantly put over the radio. And then back in those days we had, I don't know, 20 rappers at one time, 30 rappers? You can go on underground station and hear some more rappers. And now it's down to like three rappers. And it's like Drake and maybe The Amigos and two other cats out there to choose from. And it seems like New York is gone. There's only one, who's the rappers from New York now?

Audience Member: A$AP

Frank: A$AP?

Audience Member: The whole gang. A$AP Ferg. A$AP Rocky. All of them.

Frank: But what else? After A$AP?

Audience Member: A$AP, Cardi B

Frank: Did y'all just say Cardi B?

(laughter)

Frank: That's on your playlist? I mean, where she coming from? That's your role model. Come on. Cardi B? A$AP and them, I know them. My son actually run with them.

Audience Member: Dave East. He lives around here.

Frank: Dave East. Yeah, my sons run with them. But um, but you got you got um, Jay. Nas doesn't really come out anymore. He don't really need to. But what happened? That's it. I mean when we go to listen to authentic hip hop. Like, if I want to go down south. I want to get some

real barbecue chicken. I want to go to some food. I want to come to New York. I want to say I'm listening to some real rap. Where do you go for that? It's nonexistent, you know? And it's like, do you cats like Drake?

Carole: Not even underground?

Frank: No.

Carole: No, you don't think so?

Frank: None. Not in New York.

Audience Member: Nowadays. People are like, like keeping the stream rolling. then there's not really anybody who really raps like that.

Frank: Then it's to the point: Can you make a living from it?

Carole: Right? Only if you sell out.

Frank: Only if you sell out. Now this is the thing about hip hop. We weren't getting paid. We weren't getting paid. And there's a difference between getting paid for your craft, but—

Carole: Once there's money in it, it changes everything.

Frank: It changes everything. You're able to—let's say for instance you're rapping to be the best rapper. And so if you have someone that's a lyric like Big Daddy Kane that comes in and some lyrics. And so you got Kool G Rapper, Polo. And these rappers that come out of that really had lyrics in speech stories or even let's say Tupac and Biggie. These guys really could rap. Now they compete against one another, but they didn't start that way. I mean they didn't, they just spilled over into the industry. They were already battle rappers. They already could rap before that. They already went against people, and they were heard. And that's how they got on and so they continue that. Even when Jay and DMX and all those cats, they could do that before they got a deal. They're not rapping for a deal. You know it's different and so nowadays it's cast, to me, how much can I get? It's not about the love of it. it's about how much can I make from it.

Carole: Often as a springboard to something else. It's a springboard to an acting career. It's a springboard to get endorsements.

Frank: Well, you become marketable.

Carole: Right. It's a commodity.

Frank: Fresh Prince, Queen Latifah. That whole era with the Channel Five and bringing those that hip-hop community, that hip-hop generation to television now. Now we can commercialize them. I'm sorry, go ahead.

Renée: I'm trying to discreetly tell you.

Frank: What? I'm sorry. My bad. My bad.

Renée: We can open it up for questions now.

Frank: Any questions?

Audience Member: Frank, you talk a lot about like the rap and what you're doing but you didn't really kind of give us most comprehensive background on yourself. That kind of brought up to where you're at today. You're always, you know, underselling yourself.

Frank: Oh god. Yeah

Audience Member: It would be nice to hear like how you got started and about your dancing career for a little bit.

Frank: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So back in the days I used to be a dancer. You know we all like to house dance. Anyone used to go to house clubs? Anybody go to the club back in the day? I saw one hand. No one? Y'all have to be over forty!

(laughter)

Frank: I used to go to The Tunnel. I used to go to the Sound Factory. Garage, you know. I wasn't going to The Garage, though.

Carole: I went to The Garage.

Frank: You went to The Garage? Wow! So you talking about The Hustle.

Carole: Like I said, I'm older than you.

Frank: There you go. That's alright. With all the steam coming down. Anyway, we used to go to the club back in the day. I guess it was like the late 80s. And so we would battle. It just spilled

over from hip hop, breakdancing. You get into the graffiti, and next thing you know you got into this house. Hip hop went house. You guys know when Queen Latifah started doing the house music. In house you are with the jungle brothers and all that. And so we started getting into the house music, but we were still battling each other. So we would go from, I grew up in Jersey, so we will come out to Manhattan. We would go to, you guys remember. You guys know 8th Street when they had Antique Boutique? Y'all know about Antique Boutique. It was a thrift store back in those days, a consignment shop. and so when we go over and we'd find flyers. And we'd go into clubs at night. We ate at the Gray's. How much were the hot dogs at Gray's? On the corner? Gray's Papaya? *Y'all don't remember that?*

Audience Member: Fifty cents. A dollar.

Frank: Help me out. (laughter) That would be our weekend. I'm like 15, 16 coming out here like that, right. Fourteen actually and partying like 3, 4 in the morning. You had to wear two shirts. One to go home and one to dance in. You know, it'd be cold walking back to that car. You know how cold it could get walking back to the car after sweating all night. So anyway, back to the story. So anyway, we start battling, and we do it sometimes in Jersey. We battle these cats in Jersey. We went, actually lost. We lost the battle. It was the first time we'd lost. My name was On and my partner's name was Hype. So we was Hype & On. We was getting it. We had it *on*. So after the end of the battle we're outside and this guy comes up to us. And he said, "Hey, you know, we want you to audition." I was like, audition for what? We were thinking, these guys could be weirdos. You don't know, audition for what?

(audience laughs)

Frank: He said this girl named Sybil wanted to actually have dancers. I was like, Sybil? Get out of here. I've never heard of her. She was out, but she wasn't *out*. You know she had just dropped, like the book, just dropped. It was like that weekend. It was the weekend. And so we end up going to Patterson, New Jersey to audition. So we go out there, and we, you know, we're thinking it's nothing. And we didn't even tell my parents. You know you had that one friend that has mom that will support anything she does.

Carole: That's me. I'm that kind of mom.

[29:45]

Frank: She'll drive you anywhere. And so my man Hype, he had that mom. So she gave us her car. And I didn't tell my mom. I was like, I don't even know what's gonna happen. She gonna tell me no anyway. So we drive out here, and we audition. And Sybil comes out and she loves it. And she said okay the tour starts and starts going into details and giving us dates. I was like, I

hadn’t even asked my mother.

(laughter)

Frank: Are you kidding me? Then what made it horrible was Madonna had came out with Vogue. And she was all like— She was this, god. So when I came home, I'm telling my parents who were like old school. I’m like mom, Sybil wants us to dance for her and go on tour and doing stuff and that. They were like, No. What do you mean *no*? And that's what I'm telling my kids now. They went dancing, do all this crazy stuff now. And it’s hard for me to tell them that because I don't want to miss out on opportunities. And so I argued it to the point where I thought I was just going to wake up like next year. I thought my dad was gonna knock me out. And so, they allowed me to dance for her. Mom, I just wanna dance.

(laughter)

Frank: Let me dance, Mom. So I start dancing with Sybil. I’m like 15 years old on tour with Sybil. And she takes us all around United States. We’re dancing and doing these routines and we're having a lot of fun. And then I get the chance to meet with Guy. We go on tour with these guys are doing, you name it. And then we're in Washington and I get a chance to perform in front of like 30,000 people. And we're out there having a great time, and we go back to the hotel and I get a knock on the door. And its road manager, and they're telling us, hey you know they want you guys in Paris. And I’m like, oh great, Texas.

(audience laughs)

Frank: Who knew? Fifteen. They want to go to Paris, and I have to tell them, you know, I'm like, oh. They explained it to me. And I would need passports. I have to tell my mom and all this and that. But that I was a graffiti artist. Now you guys, I feel like I'm telling the kids at the school. I tell this stuff to the kids all the time. So I'm a graffiti artist. So I have to go back to the school, and I can make sure that it's okay with everybody and all my teachers cleared it. And so everyone cleared it except for my one African American teacher. And I thought if I tell her, she's probably got Sybil pumping in her car all day. She's like, go. No one gave me a homework assignment, and it was around Christmas so I would be gone for two weeks so I had to ensure it was clear with everybody. Math teacher, science, everybody say yes. Then I ask this one African American lady. She's actually coming to the show tomorrow. She said, “Well, I don’t know. I don’t think so. You’re going to have to have a homework assignment.” I said, you can’t bring books on planes.

(audience laughs)

Frank: I don’t even know how to say pencil in French. She said well you want me to let you go, and you have to do homework assignment. Guess what teacher it was? Thank you. My art teacher Mrs. Moore gave me a homework assignment to go to Paris. And I had to go to this place called the Louvre and find particular artists. And I don't know if she knew this is, how long to take a walk through the Louvre?

Carole: A couple days at least.

Frank: Three days. Three days minimum. Right? I’m thinking, I’ve never been to a museum before in my life. That was the first museum I’d ever been to. And actually I've ever been to art galleries at that point. And so I get to Paris. Of course my road manager knew about it. My parents knew about it. Sybil knew about it, and I thought everyone forgot because we're there like three days and no one said, go to the Louvre. So I'm like oh great I don't have to do this. Now up to that point like I kept saying earlier I was what kind of artist?

Audience: Graffiti

Frank: You couldn’t tell me about Picasso. Couldn’t tell me about Rembrandt. I could care less because they're not the guys that write the rules in my neighborhood or the ones I admire. So I'm sitting here like, okay so I said all right we're gonna be— I’ll be right back. We had high tops you know, the high tops and all that stuff. So I'm like okay, you know, we're asking for directions and no one speaks English. And we even go to these brothers that were African. I was like maybe, they’re wearing dashikis and whatever. They were speaking African to each of us. I’m like, how we gonna find out? Eventually someone tells us and points us in a direction. I said that can't be it. It looks like a church. That's a whole block. We're not looking for a church, we're looking for the Louvre. And of course, you get there, and the doors are literally the size of this building when you walk in. and I told my partner I was like, Yo Hype, I'll be right back. Give me like 15 minutes.

(audience laughs)

Frank: I'll be right back, man. I don’t care about this stuff. I’ll go in and come right back. Meet us in the front. I get in there and so the doors open I'm done. I'm done. It changed my life. Changed my life. I've never seen paintings, frescoes this large. and I'm looking at Victory. I'm looking at all these. We go around the corner we see David.

Carole: Do you remember what artists you were looking for?

Frank: I’ll ask her tomorrow.

(audience laughs)

Carole: A scavenger hunt in the Louvre.

Frank: I had no idea. I had no idea what I was looking for. But anyway I go in and looking around. And we're just we're just amazed and my mouth. And thank God Hype was into art as well. He was either disappointed or he would be too scared to walk off without me to walk around. We didn't have cell phones back then. We would be like, "Hey, yo! I'm over here." So anyway we walked around for like, I don't even know how long it was. It was hours. But then we get in this line and I'm like, well we're in Paris, so I guess we wait. They may be selling food. And so we get in this line. One by one we walk up. one by one look and everybody staring at this painting. I was like, what the hell is it? What is this?

Carole: The Mona Lisa.

Frank: How you gonna give it away?

(audience laughs)

Frank: The Mona Lisa. This kid from Jersey now was sitting in front of the Mona Lisa. Could care less about Leonardo da Vinci up until this point. And she's got this glass around her and you're about 40 feet away from her. And I'm just sitting there like amazed. For some reason or other Charles Schulz was there with Peanuts somehow. I don't know how that makes sense. I don't know if that was a dream I had. But Snoopy, I don't know why Charlie Brown. We're not far away from that. That changed me. And then that's what got me into why I'm painting now. Yeah, I would be a writer somewhere. But I realized that it took more than letters to be an artist. I knew that there was a history behind art and then just really threw me into it. Then I went back to Paris and you guys saw the movie *Pump Up the Jam*? You guys know? That everybody knows that now. Like you guys know, the controversy behind it. There was a girl that didn't look as attractive so they had to redo everything because they had to make this—she sued. And she was like, well, they had someone stand in for her. And so she wanted to go. She wanted to be a forefront. It was a hit for her. So anyway, we're in Paris and we're at the Cannes Film Festival. and we're seeing all we fly and it has beautiful pastel colors on top of the beach line and shoreline with all the songs. And we're in there. We do our performance and at the end of the performance we meet up with Rosie Perez. You guys know who Rosie is? I can only tell you the story because my wife's not here. We meet up with Rosie. And I'm like, "Hey Rosie, what y'all doing tonight?" She gives me her number. I'm like, whoa, get out of here. And my partner takes it from me. Hype why you take her number?

Of course he loses the number. So she tells us to go to Club A and we go to Club B. And we go

to Club B. And we're looking around and no one's in there. No one's in this club except for these old dudes. And this kid in the corner. And they're playing this music. You got a couple of cats, but everybody's like old. I'm like where are the dancers at? So anyway going back. I see this young kid back there, and he's writing. I'm like, man you're a writer? I'm thinking he's a graffiti artist. He's writing poems. I said, what the hell is wrong with you? We're in club and you're writing poems. You in love like that? Who writes poems like that? Right? And then he dances for Digital Underground. This guy comes up to me and he's like, you guys got it, huh? They were like, yo, Frank, 'cause they knew we was from the New York area. They like do you think this song is gonna be a hit? It's called the "Humpty Hump." They played it for us, and I'm like yeah maybe. That's hot. It ends up being like a smash right? And then come to find out that guy that was writing who was, who was it?

Audience Member: Tupac.

Frank: Tupac

Audience: What? No.

[39:56]

Frank: Yeah, Tupac. Humble guy in the corner, chilling, writing on notebooks. And I'm like, Come on man. Really? And he was scared of us. I was like, okay it was the high top. So anyway, then these other guys come in and were like nah, we're trying to get down. We gonna get out of here. So all these other guys come up in there to see our performance earlier that day. And they said, can you do us a favor? Can you dance for us? We're doing the Apollo. We're doing Showtime. It's not Showtime at the Apollo. We already did that earlier. They're doing this thing called Rap Mania. And that's half the people in this book I met during this event. these guys came up with a song called (raps) "A hip hop, hippie to the hippie, the hip, hip a hop, and you don't stop..." It's the Sugarhill Gang. And so they asked us if we could perform with them on Rap Mania. And so that was actually not too far from here in Harlem on 125th Street. You guys know the Apollo. That was my little hip hop thing that's going on.

Renée: Maybe two more questions. I would love to hear Carole's story. Do you want to talk about your journey with poetry, how you got into publishing them? That might be nice to hear.

Carole: Okay. I started writing in first grade. made up a poem dictated to my mom on the way home. I was fortunate enough to have a father who was a high school printing teacher, and he printed some early poems from the press in his classroom. There was no such thing as computers back then. So that meant that I got to see my work in print at a very early age. Before there was a dawn of desktop publishing. I did not dare dream of being an author because at that time,

because I had never met in real life author. Although I love books, had no idea that the people who are writing them were alive or getting paid to do that work. So I did not decide that I wanted to be an author until after I was published by someone other than my father and someplace other than a school publication in my mid-20s. And I had a poem published that much like that first poem I wrote in first grade came to me out of the blue. The poem was called "I'm Made of Jazz." It was a rhyming poem. And it should be much like this. [holds up *The Roots of Rap* picture book] It wasn't as didactic is this, but it was a celebration of jazz. And it talked about people like Lena Horne, and Bessie Smith, and Louis Armstrong and John Coltrane and the Jasmine Parents. And once that poem was published, I declared myself a poet and set out to be a published author and came to children's books many years, over a decade later, when I became a mother myself. And noticed that there were more multicultural and diverse books for my children than there had been for me. And I decided that rather than writing poetry for adults, I will try my hand at writing poetry for children. And succeeded at it. I got my foot in the door and 55 books later.

Audience and Frank: *Wow.*

Audience Member: How is that possible?

Renée: No for real, like seriously.

(audience laughs)

Renée: Can you talk a little bit of on the value longevity? Like to your point earlier when you were all talking earlier some people just want to get on, right? And those artists don't normally stay. They don't have lasting power.

Carole: In a word, you know, well, it's possible because I've been in the business since 1995. Most people don't have this kind of staying power. But I've kind of carved a niche for myself writing poetry that's informational. So I write poetry that may be biographies, poetry, that's about real life, nonfiction topics. But also it's because I tell kids: Writing is not what I do. It's who I am. So I'm going to write whether it makes it between the covers of a book or not. This is a blessing to be able to do, but I think I was on this planet to do it and to get paid for it. But I'm going to do it whether I get paid for it or not. But I'm able to somehow be able to identify topics that are, one, either have not been written about before for kids, topics that are obscure, such that I think kids need to know about forgotten heroes. My mission as an author is to mine the past for family stories, faded traditions, and forgotten struggles. And I kind of stick to that for the most part and I write, not only about long ago history, but contemporary history. I guess I just have been fortunate. My writing resonates not only with young readers, but also with critics, with reviewers. I've been able to stay in the business. I feel fortunate that I've been able to do that. And this is, you know, this is my contribution.

Audience Member: How long does it take from the time you try to first draft to the time it's published?

Carole: The shortest amount of time has been 11 months. And that was for a book about Obama's dog that was time sensitive and needed to get out before the other books. You know, there was a race to write about Obama's dog. My book was not the first. It was probably the fifth or so. The longest amount of time was in seven years because my book was orphaned, meaning I lost an editor in the process. So yeah… But normally anywhere from 18 months to two or three years depending on the size how large the size of the publishing house. I mean Frank can call on people, too, so yeah.

Audience Member: What poets did you read growing up?

Carole: Langston Hughes! Langston Hughes. Langston Hughes was the first Black poet that I read. I was introduced to him in school by a fourth grade teacher named Mrs. Fuller. Before that I was reading nursery rhymes and other poems for kids in anthologies that relatives gave me. Langston Hughes. And then when I was a young adult, in college, and after college I was reading poets from the Black Arts Movement who had been influenced by spoken word. Nikki Giovanni. Haki R. Madhubuti when he was still Donald Lee and others. Etheridge Knight. And others. LeRoi Jones, Amiri Baraka, Maya Angelou, Eldridge Cleaver. Dudley Randall I was buying his books that were published back to Broadside Press.

Audience Member: You mentioned, you alluded to your work with youth. You mentioned your college professor curriculum and then you took about high school students. I'm curious about your work with young people and what that looks like.

Carole: Mine looks like a job.

(audience laughter)

Carole: I'm a college professor. That's my day job. Teaching is what I can do. Writing was what I was put here to do. So my teaching is my way of sharing. It's another way of sharing that. But I do school visits with kids. And I share my own poems that are influenced by spoken word. I do writing workshops with kids. I do professional development with teachers, both for school systems and also at conferences. But the work that I do with kids who are like in K-12, it looks like fun to me. The work that I do with college kids that looks like a job. It feels like I job. Because I have to grade their work. That takes the fun out of it.

Audience Member: I have a question for both of you. When did you know this is what you

wanted to do? Is there an event that happened with the light bulb went on? You know, you're going to tune everything else out and this is what you're going to do?

Carole: Well, for me, it was the poem that I wrote called "I'm Made of Jazz." It was, as I said, it was the second poem came to me out of the blue. I think the first poem that I wrote when I was six years old that came out of blue. Reciting it to my mother was God's way of letting my parents know that they had a child who had a gift that needed to be nurtured. I was into many, many other creative endeavors from painting to sewing and fashion design, photography. I was into photography and my parents, my mom was that mom who supported anything I wanted to do. Okay, we get will take you to lessons here. And this was in the segregation era, too. And also in an era when kids weren't pushed as hard and overschedule, then you can really find things to channel your child in if they were interested in arts outside of school. So that first poem, I'm six years old, and then 24 years old, the poem "I'm Made of Jazz," came to me out of the blue at the moment when I was about to pursue what I thought was a very practical career because I had not been able to find a job. and the career that I trained for in undergrad was public relations. I had decided, well I'm going to get a Master's in public administration.

I got a full ride to graduate school, had a fellowship. And then this poem came out that some the summer before I was to start, it was published. And I saw that poem. And I went to school. And I got my stack of papers from the professor that I was supposed to be doing research assistant work for. I had a research assistantship. I can't even remember what the research was, but it was a stack of papers, and there was some numbers and yeah. I went to one class, and then I walked away from the fellowship and said, I'm a poet. So it was seeing that poem "I'm Made of Jazz" in print. I think that poem that, as I said, came to me in a piece out of the blue the same way that first poem had that was God's will get my attention to sit, wait a minute, I put you here to do something else. If you do this, I will look after you.

Frank: Mine's nothing like that.

Carole: And then 15 years later, my first book was published so it wasn't an overnight success.

(audience laughs)

[50:03]

Frank: Mine was different. It was weird. It happened exactly the way you said it. It's gonna sound corny, but especially. I was watching the Essence Awards, and it came on and this is probably like 1993. I was drawing, but I was paying more attention to the awards than what was on my drawing. And something told me, if you're going to take this serious, turn the TV off. For some reason or other, that just resonated with me and it just made me block out anything that was

going to distract me from becoming an artist. And so I saw at that point I signed with Essence. I don't know if you guys remember *Essence* magazine, the Essence catalog. I don't know if you guys know I'm a fine artist, so I have like hundreds of images on the markets. I've been doing this since I was since I was, I've been painting since I was (exhales) when I started I was published at the age of 17. That's when I signed with Essence art.

Carole: Oh you're a late bloomer.

Frank: So I signed with *Essence* at 17. And something told me literally just to take it serious. Today I just go off into a corner when it's time to paint or draw. Tonight I'll be painting 'til three in the morning. I just built that work ethic. I'll paint and paint. When I'm working on a picture books and just go on for hours. But it's just some point in your life you realize with children, that's what I try to teach them, let them know is that we all have a talent. You all have a talent and it's about hearing that calling and paying attention to it and doing what you need to do to progress and become who you want to be in life.

Carole: I had a child ask me yesterday, "What if you don't have a passion or a talent?" He might have been a junior or sophomore or something. Well he wasn't a junior because no juniors were there. He probably was a sophomore. But I said everybody has a talent. It's not always evident at first and you might be six or you might be 17 or you might be 70 when it becomes evident. And every talent, every gift, every passion is not something that you can channel into a career to make money either. You know, some people have the talent that might be being compassionate and being a good listener. It's not always something that's going to be very real practical necessarily. But yeah, I think everybody has a gift. Everybody has a talent of some sort.

(applause)