CONVERSATION · NYBALF 2026

The People We Make Family

Myriam J. A. Chancy and Angela Flournoy in conversation with Sony Ton-Aime

FESTIVAL	NYBALF 2026 (second edition), The Village in the Book: Literature and the Near
DATE	19 September 2026
VENUE	Harlem Stage, New York
RECORDING	1:14:46 · youtube.com/watch?v=4i5j36VGJ4A
PRESENTED BY	Harlem Stage. Supported by the Open Society Foundations

Sony Ton-Aime, who had brought both writers to Pittsburgh before he thought to put their books side by side, sets two novels of friendship in conversation: Myriam J. A. Chancy's Village Weavers, which follows two Haitian girls from 1940s Port-au-Prince through the Duvalier years and exile to old age, and Angela Flournoy's The Wilderness, which follows five Black women in New York and Los Angeles over twenty years. Chancy explains how her novel grew from her mother's lifelong friendship with a half-sister, and Flournoy describes writing hers across a decade that began in her late twenties.

The conversation turns on conflict as a condition of lasting friendship, on class and colourism within Black American and Haitian life, on migration and the word "dyaspora", and on the ways social media changes how friends quarrel and present themselves. Flournoy describes the friendship between her mother and the woman who helped raise her, and her doubts about the term "fictive kin"; Chancy draws on James Baldwin and on the Simbi, the Vodou spirits of connecting waters, to describe the love that holds her characters together. Audience questions turn to fractures within the diaspora, the claim to be "foundational", getting back to community, and friendship after the loss of a mother.

CONTENTS

0:00 Friends before we met
2:18 Why friendship sits at the center of both novels
6:15 What makes a friendship last decades
9:21 The case for conflict
12:49 Class, colorism and who gets to be family
20:51 Migration, new money and the diaspora
29:58 Distance, technology and memory
37:23 When to let a friendship go
41:44 When friends become family
47:17 What fiction can hold
53:29 Solidarity and what we owe one another
1:00:01 Q&A: the fractures within the diaspora
1:06:52 Q&A: who claims to be foundational
1:07:40 Q&A: getting back to community
1:08:50 Kinship across difference
1:10:36 Q&A: friendship after losing a mother
1:14:12 Thank you

0:00

Friends before we met

SONY TON-AIME 0:03

I'm so happy to be here, not only because I'm part of this wonderful festival, but because I get to share this stage with two of... my amazing friends, my friends, people that I admire deeply. And I admire them before I ever met them. So I felt like I was their friends before they knew who I was. And to tell you, Angela Flournoy, when I read The Turner House, I fell in love with it. And I was telling your agent... about it and I kept saying, "When is the next book coming out?" For years. Before the book was even announced, right? And she reached out to me and said, "You're in luck." Angela has the book coming out.

And then, as director of Pittsburgh Arts & Lectures, I had the honor of inviting... her to Pittsburgh. And same for Myriam, I was at a festival and I was giving a talk and I was gushing over her work and telling folks how much I had my work without knowing that her wife was in the audience. And when Natalia came after, she was like, "Oh, me? I'm an Instagram partner." And I was like, "No." And then we had a phone call, a FaceTime call. And a couple months later, you were in Pittsburgh.

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 1:34

A little longer than that, but I think, yes, we FaceTime.

SONY TON-AIME 1:39

Yeah, so the friendship would be in that, but I did not really put your two books together until Efe Paul, which I have to say that as a curator you are amazing to see that and to put those two folks in conversation. So thank you so much for that. This is going to be about friendship. I believe that language differentiates from the other animals. Storytelling makes us humans, but friendship is what keeps us alive. And I'm really thrilled to have this conversation because your two books are centered around friendship, around sisterhood.

2:18

Why friendship sits at the center of both novels

SONY TON-AIME 2:23

And I wanted to ask you, if you do not mind, why did you choose friendship to be the center of your novels?

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 2:33

Well, thank you for that question. It's a joy to be here and thank you for the festival for having us here and everyone who's been organizing and shepherding us. I just want to thank you for your attention. For my novel, really I started working on this novel after my mother passed away in 2019 and her entire sibling group passed away within two years of each other. And these were individuals who were born in Port-au-Prince in the 20s and 30s. And I realized with their passing away that an entire generation of memories of Haiti and in particular Port-au-Prince given the state that Port-au-Prince has declined into in recent years or decades that people didn't remember anymore.

And at the basis of the story was also something true. This is fiction, but something true, which is that my mother's family was comprised of half-siblings as well. And so at the center, or the inspiration for the novel was a friendship that my mother had had as a child with another child who it turned out was her half-sister. And then what happened when the families discovered that they knew each other, then became the fodder for the fiction that I then created around that. But a friendship that was undying, unlike the fictional characters, those sisters in real life, my mother and her half sister, did reconnect in the sixties and were lifelong friends until my mother passed away.

So I imagine a different story for the novel, which is what are the complications to a friendship that is based on something more than blood but yet is interfered with because of very different understandings of what that friendship represented and what it means to be family in the Caribbean context, especially when issues of legitimacy are brought into it to bear.

ANGELA FLOURNOY 4:36

I started writing this novel, Sony mentioned asking my agent about this book. It took about 10 years to write it. So I'm sure my agent didn't say anything to you for a long time. But I started writing this novel when I was in my late 20s. I was interested in I was living in New York and I had a lot of very close friends and people would just like older people especially they would just tell us how lucky we were to be in each other's lives and there seemed to be a sort of suggestion that like that would change that would not always be the case and I was interested in what would be required to for this group of friends, these young women, to stay in each other's life.

And so the novel is about a group of Black American women from their 20s into their 40s and kind of imagining them just moving into middle age in the contemporary moment. So it's also about the last 20 years of American life and what particular challenges they face, both just in general, what it is like to

come into middle age, but also to be doing it right now in this particular moment of uncertainty. And I just happened to take... too long. So I had this idea that it would project into the future and it does but now only like a year because it took me 10 years to write it.

6:15

What makes a friendship last decades

SONY TON-AIME 6:15

Talking about the time, the lifespan of the friendship between your two novels, it's almost 90 years of friendship not between two people but different characters, right? And some 60 years of friendship, some 20 years of friendship. And I wanted to ask you, what do you see as the necessary ingredients to have long lasting friendships?

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 6:42

Well, there's something magical, I think, about certain kinds of friendships that are not... created out of transactional needs or dependents or just proximity. You happen to live on the same street or your kids go to the same school. The friendship I imagined in this novel between Cece and Gertie is that kind of magic that we see with children where they just meet on the playground and there are no questions about what family does what. Children just automatically gravitate towards kindred spirits. And so I wanted to capture that kind of kismet, that intensity that children have and having seen it modeled in my own life with my mother and her half sister, how we can survive regardless of that constant connection.

So that 60 year span in Village Weavers, you meet Cece and Gertie actually in old age, very in their 70s, reconnecting after decades of silence and you'll... just absolute silence. But a recognition, at least on the part of one of the sisters, Cece, that she has only had that intense kind of love friendship with Gertie. And so that the call that she gets to reconnect reignites that excitement, that love that she felt. What has interrupted the friendship... is the world, right? Is life, is, other family members who don't want the illegitimacy to be known, the regime, the Duvalier regime. So the novel takes you from the 40s, which for most Haitians if you remember that far back was a heyday moment.

It was between, a coup happened in '49 during the expo, but we had the expo that brought international superstars to Haiti and made stars of local people, local singers and entertainers. And so there was this sense of hope in the '40s that then was dashed by the regime which started around 56, 57, and the girls go through that. And then one ends up in the Dominican Republic, another in France, and then they find themselves in the United States in middle age. And so the novel is really about reflecting on how they have very different views of friendship an identity because of where they end up in exile, but that the origin of their friendship actually remains unspoiled by all of that. And that's what they have to find their way back to.

9:21

The case for conflict

ANGELA FLOURNOY 9:22

One thing that I was thinking about when I was reading your novel was the importance of not just from like a narrative perspective but to answer your question, Sony, for what do I think creates or contributes to lasting friendships the importance of Being able to weather conflict. One thing, one feedback that I've gotten from readers a lot in the past year is that... like these friends are mean to each other and sometimes they are just straight up mean but a lot of times what people I think are receiving as mean as these are women who are not afraid to be in conflict with each other they do not think that like they try to be constructive in their conflict they don't always succeed but they bring their grievances to each other right they don't let them turn into resentment or something that they can't really like surmount because they can't bring it up and There is also a sister in my novel of one of the friends who they are estranged for a large portion of the novel because they are not able to, one of them has resentments and she is not able to figure out how can I have any kind of constructive conflict conversation about this.

I have decided that I know what you're going to say already and it's too hurtful so we just got to be separate, right? And that is the thing that I think about a lot in my own life, just to answer your question is What is the point of conflict? It's very useful on the page. It keeps people like engaged readers engaged, but it's useful in our lives and I think so many of us have been trained, especially a lot of women, to think that it is something you're supposed to avoid at all costs. But on the, often just thinking about estrangement when I was working on my novel, talking to older people in my life and my family who, have brothers they haven't talked to for however many years or friends they fell out with, it is because... they couldn't risk the uncomfortable conversation. So they just never had any conversation with them again, essentially.

SONY TON-AIME 11:29

Yeah, I agree completely. And that is something. If there was one big thing I learned from reading both of your novels was that was the need to have this conflicts and to move past it and to recognize it. And that made me think about I was telling you earlier the families that we inherited, like our brothers and sisters, and then the friends that we have, they become family. And I think that is the thing, right? With our blood families, right, we do not... care to manage this conflicts, right? Because they were stuck with them. And right. And then we can just stop talking with them the more that we move. But with friends to stay friends with them, right?

Whereas family, you wrote stay friends even though you do not speak, but to stay friends, you have to walk through that conflict. And that's what I was thinking, for one to... for your family members to really become your family member, they have to become your friends first. And that's when you will be family members. But I never connected that to the conflict. And I wanted to ask you both about that to...

12:49

Class, colorism and who gets to be family

SONY TON-AIME 12:50

Tell us a little bit more about the conflicts. And I know in Village Weavers, for example, class and colorism are part of it, right? And same with, in the wilderness, class is very important there. And I wanted to ask you about the disrupt, the disruptors for a friendship like when it comes to class and colorism and maybe gender as well, to friendships, how you see that.

ANGELA FLOURNOY 13:17

Yeah, so I think that of the things that... I think maybe there was a time when it was useful, but it's not useful anymore. One of the things that I have experienced is... this, even when people were thinking about how they were going to market my book is that they would just be like, we want black women to read this. And I'm like, we'll say more. And they're like, well, black women readers. I'm like, yeah, but like, what kind of black women readers? There are so many different kinds of black women readers, like black women readers of what age, black women readers of what income level? Like there we are so diverse. And but there's a way that I think that we just sort of live under this umbrella of like, which can foster like a feeling of solidarity, but it also there are specific needs that like lower income black people need that don't necessarily get addressed because we're all in this sort of big mass together.

And when I was thinking about the ways that I've seen class come up in my own life, I realize those are things that having those conversations with other black women become deeply uncomfortable because we're supposed to be all the same. But I'm like, you got a house on the vineyard we're not all the same, but and that's one of the things that I wanted my book to think about is the ways that especially in this country, I think because we all want to believe we're just one, bootstrap tug away from having more wealth that these kinds of class distinctions are not really discussed and they are one of them, like they can be a reason that a friendship separates, especially in your 20s.

It's cute and it's easy to pretend that we're all the same, right? Nobody's really spending that much money on anything. It doesn't cost that much money to get a drink, but in your 30s, you suddenly you have friends, black friends even, it's like, how did you buy that apartment? Like how? Or suddenly, it's clear that you have different expectations for what it looks like to be a grown up. And where are these expectations coming from? They're coming from how you were raised. And so now suddenly you've got to get married tomorrow, and everything else is not as important. Your friends who supported you are not as important. And it's really exciting for me to think about the ways that we can get past that.

We can get past some of these resentments about who has what and who doesn't and how also Again, it is just another way that people have to figure out how to be constructive when they talk about what's bothering them. Because class in this country, it feels like you're supposed to be above it, right? It's trivial. So if something feels like it's not important enough to talk about, that doesn't mean you're

not going to be bothered about it anymore. But you're going to create another issue. You're going to create something else to talk about instead of the issue being how did you just buy this apartment? Yeah.

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 16:31

That's really interesting. I think for me, one of the comments I have gone with Village Weavers was, "Why do I know so much about the elites in Haiti?" Which I think is an interesting observation. And one of the things that I've tried to do in all of my work, especially in the novels, is to really shed light on the different layers in Haitian society. So that from the outside people think most people are impoverished and then there's an elite, 1%. But there's actually a fairly wide middle class and working class in all kinds of subdivisions. And I happen to be from one of these families where we have people in every part sector of a society.

And in terms of thinking about this part of my family that has passed away, they were, some were in the elites, but my mother, my own mother was one of the outside children. In the outside world, I grew up in Canada partly, she coded as a white woman, but in Haiti she came from a poor working class background. And it was my father who was a dark skin man who came from a middle upper class family. And so with these reversals and inverses, and going back to what Angela's saying about what we are taught, I was taught a very different kind of universe than most Haitians which was that if you were light-skinned, you were not more privileged than other people.

If you were dark-skinned, it didn't mean necessarily that you were from the lower classes. Issues around language and Creole and speaking Creole and what do these things mean. But interestingly, the stigma of being an outside child... was very, very profound. You know, that is something that, irregardless of what my mother was able to accomplish, was something that was a stigma that she had to live with. Now, she did well in life, and so as she got older, then she was recaptured by the legitimate family that wanted to merely claim to her. So the hypocrisy was something that I also witnessed. And one of the things that I also grew up with was a realization that it was the middle and elite classes that really fostered issues around class differentiation and colorism.

Very, very pronounced to this day. And so I wanted the novel to voice that reality that class and color can interfere in one's relations, even family relations. So, and then the other thing that I also wanted to look at was the fact that often when people come out of poor backgrounds in the Haitian context, there is this kind of attitude like, well, those, this family is not going to know, it's not going to have certain kinds of values. And that isn't true. In fact, the less a family has, my experience in Haiti has been, the more generous they are, the more they're willing to claim strangers as family. Not the case in the more comfortable sectors of the family.

So you're not family, I don't need to know who you are. So the kind of conflict that comes up in my novel has more to do with these kinds of frictions and the fact that the girls inherit this. So Gertie, who is darker skin, but more middle class, upper class, doesn't realize because she has experienced colorism that she is a bit of a nationalist. So she, in the Dominican Republic, she marries a wealthy

Dominican, black Dominican. She meets him thinking that he's a Haitian and that he is not of the same class, right? And then he has to break down those barriers for her. So I wanted to examine the way privilege however form it takes, often is the hardest thing to dismantle.

And then the child who doesn't have all of that to dismantle but appears on the surface to have certain privileges has actually been educated in a very different way and does not use those, quote unquote advantages against other people.

20:51

Migration, new money and the diaspora

SONY TON-AIME 20:51

I'm going to stay with the class for a little bit, but I would say that when it comes to the colorism, I agree with you completely when it comes to the middle class. I think because we know there is a bottom where we can fall, and I think that's the fall of capitalism. So we hold into those things more. I was raised in the middle class. I'm the darkest one in my family. So I was seeing and then a lot of the things that happened in the book happened to me, right? Like friends of the family come into my house and thinking that I'm the servant, I'm the guest of it, right? Asking me to do things, ordering me around with while not doing that to my siblings, right?

But here's where the thing is complicated. I'm the only one in the United States. I'm the diaspora now. And that comes with its own... super idea of wealth and class as well. When I go back to Haiti now, I'm not only the darkest one, but I'm the one in the United States. And I wanted to ask you about both migration, right? How migration affects this kind of friendship and relationships, but also... How newfound wealth affects the friends we have and the way we navigate society.

ANGELA FLOURNOY 22:20

So in my novel, there is a character named Nakia and she is, my novel is set primarily in New York and Los Angeles and Nakia is a restaurateur. She basically decides she wants, she goes to culinary school and she decides she wants to open a restaurant and she comes from a moneyed background so she gets money from her parents to do it and she does it and she is successful. One of the reasons I chose that Nakia's parents are from, they are not from the West Coast, they are from New Jersey, they are sort of described in the book as a They are descended from like a family of first blacks like first black head of this hospital first back like post postmaster at this post office I'm from Los Angeles and one of the sort of, again, talking about the kinds of difference in black American class that people don't talk about, nobody has money like that in Los Angeles.

People have money they got from Hollywood, right? But people, most of the people who, my... Grandmother came to Los Angeles from Oklahoma in the 20s. Most of the people who were great migration people came to Los Angeles. They worked in defense where they got civil service jobs. There were a few sort of like well-to-do black Angelenos, but not the majority of them. So this idea of having generational wealth is something that's kind of alien. It's a new money town. And Nakia has... She tries

to wear her like class lightly, but there's a way that she has a kind of like East Coast established like class expectations. There's another a member of this friend group who decides that they want to pivot from being a librarian to being a social media public intellectual.

And make of that what you will. And Nakia has a lot of problems with that, right? Because she tries to say, oh, I'm worried about what your life is like now that you're spending your whole life online. But Monique knows it also has to do with like, you think this is déclassé, this is not a way that a person makes money, right? This is not a profession. And It's one of those things that until Monique says it to Nakia, she doesn't, Nakia has no way of realizing that is how she is receiving, how she is making her judgments because it is a thing that we don't really talk about. It's really interesting. I was not in the country for most of August, but seeing all of the discourse is I guess now our new August tradition about people in Martha's Vineyard.

And now the discourse is like the real wealthy black people are not even there anymore. They're not there in August. And it's just, I find it to be just really, it's still kind of just like scratching the, like, the tip of the iceberg of like having a real conversation about class in like black America. But it is something that, is deeply fascinating to me because I feel like there are a few seminal works like Margo Jefferson's Negroland or Our Kind of People about these upper class elements of Black America, but there are all these other classes in between, right? Did you have an ancestor that was a Pullman porter? Like, did you have an ancestor that like had, like was a postman versus an ancestor who was a sharecropper in that same generation?

Those are these like micro differences to me that I see playing out still just through the way that people I know move through the world in 2026.

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 26:12

Yeah, I think for me, so I think I would have to qualify the answer. There's a different answer. You know, meet myself Myriam, somebody born in 1970, as opposed to my parents' generation born in the late 30s at the end of the US occupation, because I think the term "dyaspora" was not something I heard until, a decade in a decade of my being in the United States, and then going back to Haiti and somebody asking me if I was a diaspora. And I didn't know what a diaspora was, this kind of thing. Dyaspora meaning diaspora. And so for people of my parents' generation, often leaving was a necessity. And it wasn't as tied to class in terms of a perception of you're gone, therefore you must be… doing really well even though I learned after my mother passed away and my parents were both teachers so working to middle class people in Canada.

And but they did send a lot of basically anyone who stayed in Haiti was somehow financed and somewhere over by my parents to have whatever business that they have had, whatever success they have had. But I also realized that because they were not the wealthiest people, it also meant that they could never go back. So there was a kind of you have to leave because of the regime or things that you're not willing to do under the regime. But those who want to stay, you're going to do whatever you can to help them, succeed but that means you have nothing left over, you know? For the characters in the novel, I was really focused on both that idea of having to leave, of necessity.

But for example, Gertie, who's middle class and grows up in a wealthier family, that means that when she leaves, she becomes working class, right? Because she becomes a social worker. So she has means, her husband has means, but she becomes a working woman as opposed to someone who could have stayed and just… had a lot of means, you know. And Cece marries a white American in France, comes back with him to the United States, but then realizes because she can be taken for white that she is passing. And when she realizes that she is passing, and that's something that she doesn't realize because she's not brought up in an American context of what that means, is because she has a child and she wants to pass something on to that child, and she realizes she's not cooking.

Haitian food. She's not speaking Kreyòl. She's not educating this child to know that side of her heritage. And then she realizes how much she has lost. But having said all of that, I come back to the point that for people of this generation, leaving was almost not a choice. I don't want to say it wasn't a choice because obviously there were people who couldn't leave at all, but there was a kind of impetus because of the politics and economics of the time. But what's fascinating to me about that generation is that they never behaved as if they had left entirely. There was always a want, a desire to return and the native land, going back to Césaire, was Haiti, but there was never a sense that they were completely assimilating to whether it was France or Canada of the United States, assimilation wasn't part of the picture.

So if you would call somebody my parents' generation, my father is now 92, and he's lived in Canada longer than anywhere else, you were to call him a diaspora. He's like, what are you talking about? What does that mean? He's a Haitian man who lives in Canada.

29:58

Distance, technology and memory

SONY TON-AIME 29:59

Another thing that I love about your work, both of your work, is the way that you deal with distance. Right? And I know it's different cities, different countries, are saying the distance and how people stand touch. Right? And one is… Technology is always present, but the way that we see technology and the wilderness is different than the way that technology is and because of time, like the letters and I wanted to ask you how does technology affect friendship, especially right now and the span of distance.

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 30:43

Well, I don't know. I think today we were just talking before at break that we have a sense that we are more connected, but in many ways we're more disconnected that we'll post something on Instagram and you'll get in touch with a friend and say, "Oh, things are difficult." And my friend will say, "Oh, but I saw your pictures on Instagram. Everything looks like it's going so well." So we're not talking as much.

We're not calling people as much. We're WhatsApp-ing people. We're texting people. And in previous generations, people were sending letters. My grandmother was my pen pal when I was a 10 year old. I was waiting for those letters that smelled of her perfume when I was a 10 year old.

It would take three, four, five months to get a letter. - For me it was cassettes. Ah, cassette, okay, you're a different generation. High tech. Yeah, and so in the novel, I tell the story of how, one woman receives a notice of her mother's death by receiving a picture of a mother in a casket when she thought the mother was coming, to see her. What it does, I think, is that it refracts time. So I think what I would want to say is that… We have different technologies of communication today, but it seems to me that in the past, decades ago, there was more communication in some manner, more effort to stay in touch, more calling your cousin to find out how auntie so-and-so and grandma was doing, and a kind of circularity in that connection.

And so I think one of the things I tried to do in the novel was to really think about memory and how memory works and how, of course, memory is faulty how we remember things is inefficient. And maybe that is a technology, but it's a technology that we need to hold on to. And this is where some repair can occur when some friendships break apart is to because what you end up having in the novel is insight into how both of these women remember their childhoods. And what they remember of each other and of their lives is very different. But it's through reading those very differences and then if there is an overlap of an incident that they both were present at that they don't remember it in the same way and then the technology becomes, I guess, the narrative, the novel, or the ability to then talk to the other person to find out why there is a difference or why there has been a breakdown in that communication

ANGELA FLOURNOY 33:25

When I started writing or thinking about the wilderness, I knew that I wanted to have the character Monique sort of pivot to being an influencer. And one of the reasons I wanted to do that, not because I thought that is like a sort of universal experience that somebody in your friend group has over 100,000 followers, but unless you live in New York, and maybe that is, but the way I wanted to be able to kind of like blow up the way that In addition to just technology changing the way we communicate to each other, social media is also changing the ways that we navigate or avoid conflict. We can be having entire proxy wars with our friends, we're sneak dissing them online, but also the ways that we can present.

Like it becomes another, a screen between a person that you believe and then the person that they are presenting and becoming in this parallel space. And so as the years progress in a novel, the other friends in this friend group, they have to contend with the Monique that they know who shows up in front of them, but then also whoever she is sort of carrying, presenting herself to be online. And Sony's heard this gripe before, but I have a particular gripe that if I leave you with nothing else, I want, I just thought about a lot when thinking about the internet while researching this book the ways that we are getting often unsolicited relationship and friendship advice from just whoever is making those little boxes on social media.

So those boxes, those infographics. The text box of like friendship death is what I call them because they are often so transactional and they are not village-minded, to be on theme. They are not necessarily about restoration. They are just about self first at all costs. So these boxes say things sometimes innocuous like there are seasons in your life where you can pour into others and there are seasons in your life where you can't have your cup drained, right? And it's in those times you should just walk away, right? And it's always something that is about centering the self and if people can't slot in the way you want then you just leave, right? You don't ever have the hard conversation with them.

You just pack your bags and you go somewhere else. And-- you would think that those things don't like seep into your brain but even my aunties who are even on Instagram they're just on Facebook I've heard them in recent years just describing like fallouts with their friends using that kind of language this is language they hadn't even had access to 15 years ago and Some of the people who are creating these infographics, like some of these, whatever, even if they have degrees, but these social media psychologists, they're terrible people. There was like a New York Times expose about one of them very recently, and she was pushing her partner down the stairs. And this woman is... like the queen of these text box.

And it's just one of the many ways that, people talk about a literacy crisis and how no one's reading. Well, we are reading, but we are reading thousands of words that are kind of, some of them just passing by, 'cause 20 seconds have passed, that are been created by who knows what for who knows what purpose, and they are impacting the way that we move in an IRL. That is my rant. -

SONY TON-AIME 37:17

That makes you think. I was not planning on asking this question, and I'm thinking, why didn't I think about it?

37:23

When to let a friendship go

SONY TON-AIME 37:23

Is it ever good to just give up on a friendship and when do we know?

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 37:30

Well, I think we know from the quality of love that's behind the connection, I think because I think we do have friendships that are transactional or we don't mean them to be but they might be or that there's not love behind it and I'm saying this also because I'm teaching a course on James Baldwin right now so I keep trying to let my students know that's what he was about was love, right? It's not only about strife and violence and racial violence, it's about how do we get to love. And one of the things that I haven't said about Village Weavers that was really important to me was the spiritual basis for the connection between these girls, you know.

So I was using, as I do in different fictional pieces, but looking at a Vodou trope that I could use as a vehicle to talk about what that connection is. And these are the Simbi who are the gods of the rivers that connect bodies of water to one another, including the ocean. And I use that as a metaphor because the Simbi are also they protect, they connect, but it is about equality of life which is about love. And so what brings these those two girls together, it's not just that they're half sisters, it's something greater, it's something bigger, it is love. So why can't they give up on it? In the end, it's because there's a realization that there was a love lost.

So I think maybe that would be my answer is that we don't give up on friendship when we realize that there is a love lost. However, the caveat is that, there are two sides to the friendship and not everyone wants the love back or perceives the relation in the same way. So.

ANGELA FLOURNOY 39:27

I've been ghosted by friends. I've never ghosted a friend, but I am a middle child, so perhaps that's why. But I. I am anti… I'm just anti-ghosting because I feel like… I, again, maybe I'm just a person who is pro-conflict. I'm like, I'm at least going to give you that last good conversation, right? Unless I have maybe put just perhaps just been fortunate. I have never. I have been in a friendship with somebody who was going to be violent or harmful in that way. I have broken up. I'm consciously uncoupled with friends, but I have never just ghosted a friend and I have been ghosted. And I think that the love I think is… absolutely central, but I also think it I've been thinking a lot about I had a reader talk about when she heard me and my spiel about conflict she pointed out that there are people who grew up in different kinds of conflict traditions If you come from a household of explosive conflict where conflict can end in harm or people just saying the worst thing they can think about to a person, you can become a person who is averse to that.

You can become a person who thinks, "If I go there, I will explode," or somebody will explode at me. And that is, when I think about perhaps one of the persons who have ghosted me before, perhaps that was behind her decision, like, I just have to cut it off because if I go there… I'm not going to be a person I like or maybe the fear that I wasn't going to be a person that she liked in that trying to work through whatever. It's still a mystery to me because I was ghosted. But what I can only guess was the reason. But absolutely, I mean, I think. I don't necessarily always agree in the like, there's a season for everything, but I do agree that if it doesn't feel good, you don't have to force it. Yeah. -

---

41:44

When friends become family

SONY TON-AIME 41:43

Well, for the title of the talk, the people we make family. So when does friendship become family? Kinship and how do we know?

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 41:57

Well, I think what distinguishes some friendships from family is that we feel, so we were speaking a little bit earlier about the fact that my perception of Haitian families, we have a tradition of being a family in Haiti is that there is loyalty and especially if you grew up in a very patriarchal family and that is the Haitian tradition, but there is a sense that you owe certain things to family members, especially older family members, in a way that sometimes can be damaging to the individual. And so friendship is maybe goes back to your earlier question about, family really becoming something potent when we are friends with family members. So I would think that friends become family when there is that level of loyalty, but not in the negative sense, in the sense that you would do anything for that individual, for that friend.

Going back to what I was saying before about the love paradigm, there's a certain level of love there that… you would extend to a friend as you would family but not because of obligation. And so sometimes some family fall into that friendship group and vice versa. That would be my answer.

ANGELA FLOURNOY 43:29

I mentioned one reason why I wanted to write about friendship in this novel, but a second reason that I don't think I realized until my mother passed away in 2020 fully didn't realize that was why I was interested in the and particularly like a Friendship among women and how it can endure over decades was that my mother's her closest friend basically raised me like I was her niece and my life was basically made possible because my mother's friends treated me like their family and that was something that was not… It wasn't something that I didn't understand was the norm until I got older. You know, people call that, in like black studies, people call that fictive kin.

I have. The fictive part I've always been very curious about in I understand how it's sort of being used as like created. But when I think about what formerly enslaved people have been through and the idea or the sort of expectation that they have the luxury of always prizing blood relations over other relationships and bonds they needed to make to survive. I feel like it's a kind of distinction that is, it doesn't feel like how I grew up or how my life was sort of formed. But I think… Part of that had to do with just they had a symbiotic relationship my auntie and my mother They were friends for 51 years until my mother passed away and it was a friendship that was necessary so that their children could thrive and that they could support each other.

My auntie was a real estate agent. She had a little bit more money and a little bit more free time. My mother was like climbing the corporate ladder was always on the freeway we lived in LA so she got she left in the dark she came home in the dark and I would not have had the same opportunities and the same home life if it wasn't for my aunt but my aunt also had an only child And what my sister and I provided was companionship for that child. So it wasn't just like a, the cup wasn't just being drained, to put it in the box again. And I think that the part of that had to do with being vulnerable though.

I imagine now, and I actually, I asked my aunt about these things too. At what point did they decide that they were going to live around the corner from each other? At what point did they decide that we were all going to take the bus together? Even before we lived there, we were just going to use our

address so that we could go to that school and take the bus together. At what point did they decide that was going to be the arrangement? They were real questions that were asked. It wasn't just that my mom was dropping us off at 6.30 saying it was one time, right? These were real sort of agreements that were made and things that felt natural, but I think especially in this country, especially in like, sort of post-war America and this focus on like a nuclear structure that… Now we see it really just didn't benefit a lot of people.

This was something, in the 80s and 90s, they really didn't see anybody else doing, but immigrant communities and black women, right? But like the white people, they knew they weren't doing that. A lot of other people that they knew were not doing that. But I grew up in the San Gabriel Valley, which is like outside of it's in LA County, which is a majority immigrant community. So to me also outside of my home, that seemed normal because other people were doing it. But as I got older, I realized, oh, there are people who are making this hard distinction between who is blood and who is not, blood.

47:17

What fiction can hold

SONY TON-AIME 47:17

Thank you. I'm happy that you mentioned the fictive part of friendship here because I wanted to ask you about fiction. How does fiction capture friendship, the intricacy of friendship, and what does fiction have that the other genre, non-fiction poetry, does not have to capture really the essence of a true friendship?

ANGELA FLOURNOY 47:49

I just read, and I recommend to everyone, Marlon James's new novel, The Disappearers.

SONY TON-AIME 47:56

How is it? So good. It is so good. It is really this novel of this century.

ANGELA FLOURNOY 48:03

It is, what? Dwight Garner did not exaggerate. I'll say that. It is that good. But one of the characters in it talks about how people like to say that fiction is about, pretending and not being real, but it is, or like it's artifice, but what it is like it's generative and it's creative. And the I, it's imagining the act of even if it's something terrible as like there's like, there's like gay bashing in the 80s in Jamaica, that's like the center of this novel. But creating a fiction out of it and imagining these lives is about construction. And there's something sort of optimistic and hopeful in there, even though at the same time that it's about like documentation, right?

Documenting this thing, filling in the gaps for something that like… was heard about but was not ever really sort of investigated and put on in the archive. And that's how I think about fiction, even when some people tell me that the end of my novel upset them or they don't know if it's hopeful. I always think the act of writing the fiction itself is hopeful, especially in 2026. I dare to hope that there will be

a future where someone might be interested in what it was like to be alive right now and that they will still have the facility to read and the interest in picking up a book and reading. I feel that fiction more and more every day to me feels like a really sort of like radical and hopeful act.

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 49:43

Well, I also teach memoir writing occasionally. And one of the things I discuss a lot with my students is what belongs to them and what belongs to other people in whatever story, non-fiction story that they want to tell, something that they are preoccupied by, that they want to relate to others, because it often implicates other people, but there is a limit to, how you can navigate other people's stories as your own. And we try to really think about that because I think we are in an age where publishers, editors, agents are pushing many people to write memoirs, right? Like write about your life, tell it all, and then you read these memoirs where often, at least maybe it's also age-specific, but I read memoirs and I think, "Oh my, I wish they hadn't talked about that," or "I feel very badly for the mother in the story or for a friend."

And the last time I taught memoir class, I had the writer Aube Rey Lescure come to class. She's a novelist, River East, River West. Some people might know this book, but she also writes a lot of nonfiction. And in terms of my students, she's written quite a lot about, gender issues on campus, date rapes and things of that kind. And she talks about the fact that she often will give copies of those essays to whomever is implicated in those essays so that she doesn't trespass on their privacy, what it is that belongs to them. And so that was a very interesting conversation, you know. And so what the novel will do that is different, what a novel can do, what fiction can do.

Well, first of all, what a novel does separate from short fiction is that it imagines a world, it situates you in a world whether it is fantastic or social real, futurist, dystopic, a world that you can in some way understand from the basis of your own life, but it is all about relationality. The novel, I think, exists to put characters in relation to one another, even when it's a first-person narrative, to uncover what it is that single person cannot uncover on their own. So it's not all about friendship, because it can be about conflict, it can be about abuse, but it is about relation how we relate to one another and the misunderstandings or joys that are occasioned through that.

And I think even though we can write poetically, it does not do the work of poetry which is almost I think mystical. You can only answer that question, Sony, maybe, but we'd have to ask you that question back. There is something mystical about poetry that sometimes can escape our understanding of the relation between not only human beings but also nature and spirit entities. And so I think there's also friendships that go beyond like the human. But I think for me, that's the joy of, I sometimes think I'll write a short story. And of course I never do because I want to know about, the partner and the father and the mother and then I have to decide which of those characters will have voice in the novel.

But I'm interested in that world that has impacted, the main characters that I'm writing about. So yeah, not so much friendship, but relationality. So it is then, of course, it was a joy to explore friendship in this particular novel, but not all novels will do that work.

53:29

Solidarity and what we owe one another

SONY TON-AIME 53:29

Yeah. I know we have a lot of questions in the audience, so I have only one last question. Another thing that I really love about your novels is how solidarity, how we… become friends with people in different classes. So I, for example, Nakia and this really deep relationship that she had with the manager of the restaurant and having to leave the family. And then, in Village Weavers, Gertie and Emmanuel with David and Iris. And I wanted to ask you about solidarity and what we owe to one another. Even folks we will not see as deep friends.

ANGELA FLOURNOY 54:20

One of the projects outside of just thinking about how friendship has shaped my life, one of the projects of this novel was to think about, again, in an effort to be hopeful, to think about what it will be required to meet the challenges of the future, like both on a macro and micro level. And that is, I think people are going to have to figure out how to be more expansive when they think about who they are willing to be in community with. It is just simply what is required when we think about, in the winter and Minneapolis, and we think about how that media blitz sort of like fascist takeover of the city did not work there the way that the administration had planned was because the optics were a lot of people who are supposed to have nothing to do with each other, nothing in common with each other decided that no, we are all in a community together and we are going to work together to figure out how to try to keep all of us safe.

And it wasn't just optics. Like everybody I know who was in Minneapolis at the time was delivering food to people who didn't want to be kidnapped if they left their house, who were doing laundry for people, dropping people off at school. And, some nice white ladies who I didn't think had anybody on their phone who wasn't a nice white lady besides me, right? Even them, they had figured out ways to… look beyond what we think of when we think of who we can be in community with, not just people who worship like them or shop like them. And that is why the administration had to change tack because it was not just compelling, but it was also pretty successful.

And I think that is something that Americans are going to have to figure out how to do more of. It's something that gives me hope.

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 56:30

It's a really interesting question and it actually brings me back to your earlier question about exile and diaspora because in this novel what I explored was what happens when those Haitians end up in different shores, who do they connect to? And so, Cece who I mentioned before is more light skin ends up in Paris, but she ends up in Paris at a pivotal time when the Algerian resistance movement is going on. And her best, another best friend from childhood is there, fighting for Algerian resistance. And so she is mistaken for Algerian. She becomes part of the Algerian cause. It turns out that she doesn't have the mettle for it. So I also wanted to explore people from this generation who made choices about

solidarity around whether they were against the Duvalier regime or whether they were for resistance elsewhere in terms of the colonial movements sometimes did not have the political mettle to be in the front lines.

And then Cece later on, she does escape to the United States through that marriage I mentioned, but she decides to be an illustrator of children's books and to educate children on these issues around color and so forth. And then as you mentioned, Gertie with her husband is friends with Emmanuel and Iris who are two Haitians of, Dominicans of Haitian descent who are stuck in the DR without papers. And Emmanuel is a lawyer who in his off time is helping Dominicans of Haitian descent get their papers. And you have to remember the setting of the novel is in previous decades. So we're looking at the 70s, 80s around this time. Because I wanted people to think about the fact that often for Haitians, people who are not Haitian will also will only think about Haiti in terms of a revolution.

But if you are Haitian, and particularly from this generation, you connect to other people's resistance movements because the long history of the Haitian Revolution and how people fought to be free. And so… Solidarity then is a way in which we can move through the world and I think being Haitian even as our own country goes through all of this turmoil is a way of showing up in the world, I think, as Angela is saying, in a hopeful way. So that solidarity is not about just saving yourself, but saving a greater humanity because something about what not having solidarity looks like. And just finally, I will say because of the denationalization of Dominicans of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic, which has just become more pronounced in the last couple of years, that I would hope that people find out more about that and the fact that we do have to have solidarity between Haitians and Dominicans and in all kinds of other ways.

SONY TON-AIME 59:34

We are going to take your questions, but before we do, I want to tell you do not work, but one, get your copies of these books and they will be signed in after you want to read this box. And before we open it, I want to ask you to give a big hand to Myriam and Angela for us. And now you can get some questions. Any questions?

1:00:01

Q&A: the fractures within the diaspora

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1 1:00:01

Thank you so much. This conversation is enticing and you sold your books. Definitely. My question is to you, but anybody in the room really, how do we reconcile the fractures, the contemporary fractures within the… Black diaspora within class, language, accent, education, and national differences that often separate us. Especially when you look at previous generations who had traditions of really strong transnational solidarity and who really understood collective liberation. I'm going to keep it there because I have a whole number of questions that are related. And I think They emerge from, as a pan-Africanist and with all these structures that are happening currently, I find it difficult to understand

black and African as entirely like separate entities with wanting to be committed to the work that they do to seeing difference as a generative and a diverse and a beautiful trope, concept, existence, to learn from each other, to even when we argue to not have difference as something that separates us. Yeah, I'm gonna leave it right there.

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 1:02:12

But I think this is a great question and I think, being at this festival in some ways part of an answer because I think that it has been beautiful to see how this festival has been connecting Africa to its diasporas and having us think about what is the relationship that we have to one another. So I'm remembering the keynote about Morrison and Toni Morrison being inspired by African writers and infusing her work with that sense of retention in African American culture. For myself on my academic side, but I'm sure it bleeds into my fiction, on my academic side, I've been arguing that we really need to think about a reading practice. So when I teach black literature, I don't even think of it as black literature.

I think of it as African and African the historic literature, but is in conversation with itself in completely different terms, which doesn't have to do with trying to somehow become legible to a white world or a white audience, right? And so if then we think about that relationality And I also think it is about knowing one's history. The less we know about where we have come from, both the difficulties and the gains, the less we're able to relate to one another in a positive sense. And I think this is where the assimilation of different groups to... a kind of Western American Canadian, what have you point of view has impoverished us, you know. But if we are able to see that we are in relationship and we have so much in common, right, in terms of where we come from, the traditions, the foods, all of that, then it enriches us to know about each other's cultures. That's where I'm coming from

ANGELA FLOURNOY 1:04:06

Blame the internet. I'm not joking. I really just... I just, when I see Namwali in her keynote yesterday was talking a little bit or in the Q&A's about like the sort of like diaspora wars that like happen on social media. I just wonder like who this benefits and also again like living in, I do, I live here in New York City. It just does not reflect, I live in Harlem, it doesn't reflect black life in New York City. Like if you are a black person, whose ancestors were enslaved in this continent, and you decide that means that you are not in community with any other black person, how does that work in New York City?

Like, it just doesn't work because New York City is a diasporic city. It just is. Like... You're not gonna get your hair braided? You're not gonna eat no jerk chicken? Like what are you doing? Like it's just not working. But I do feel like, the same. I'm not gonna say it's Russian bots, but I do like the people are especially to My family my roots are in like American slavery and the people who feel like they need to communicate to us that we are separate and Somehow I don't know owed more than everyone else those people They just don't have our best interests at heart. It's just so obvious, but I feel like it's it is a literacy crisis It has to do with that, but it also has to do with they I believe these people are bad actors that have figured out, this is the grievance we can give to them.

When we live in a time of political grievance, we have figured out a grievance for them. And just like these grievances are not helping working class white people better their lives, this one will not help these black people better their lives either, but it is something to hold on to. And-- I do feel pretty relieved though that I have younger siblings, I have young cousins who don't spend a lot of time on the internet and this is really not an issue for them. I do think it is a thing that it's like if you spend a lot of time online, it has been communicated to you. But if you were just in the real world enjoying being a part of a beautiful diaspora, it's not a problem. But the problem is a lot of people spend a lot of time online.

1:06:52

Q&A: who claims to be foundational

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1 1:06:51

Just a quick, and you don't have to answer it, there's a concept of the foundational. -

ANGELA FLOURNOY 1:06:58

Yeah, I didn't use that word for a reason. Because what is the foundation of this place that you're so proud of? That might be okay too. I leave it all the time. But to try to, I understand the feeling of want to instill a pride in oneself, but to be the foundation, to want to claim to be the foundation of this country, that means that you are holding claim to all of it. And I don't want to hold claim to all of it because there's been a lot of things that were not done in my name and I'm not going to retroactively try to pretend like they were. Two flags, though.

1:07:40

Q&A: getting back to community

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2 1:07:39

Thank you. What I really like when you talked about the long relationship your mother had with friends, right? And now in the internet world, it's-- it doesn't exist anymore because you could see people with their phones all walking down the street and they're on their phones but they're not having community and speaking to that lady's question also is When you get stopped by a cop as a black man, he doesn't ask you what country you come from. He don't ask you what type of black man you are. He says black male. So I'm wondering. How do we get back to community per se more than anything? Because if we don't get back to that community aspect, we will all die as individualists. You know, if that makes sense.

ANGELA FLOURNOY 1:08:35

Can I just commend your voice? Just, are you a DJ? Do you have a radio show? Okay. Real quiet storm. If you want to say something. We have, yeah. Ready to clean my whole house.

SONY TON-AIME 1:08:48

Wow. What a voice.

1:08:50

Kinship across difference

SONY TON-AIME 1:08:50

We have five minutes left, so I can… offer one because that's what I kind of do with my work. One thing that I wanted to touch on is same with the with what you ask is we sometimes identify ourselves in opposition to people who are honest. For example, Myriam and I, we recognize ourselves as kin, but at the same time, we're from Port-au-Prince, I'm from Ouanaminthe. But if someone from Jamaica would come in, and we'll see ourselves Caribbean, but we say like, "Oh, we're Haitian, you're Caribbean." Right? And then someone come in from Africa and say like, "We are all black." And then we would say like, "Well, we're Caribbean, but you're from Africa." And that, I think if we recognize it as the same way we recognize conflict, we can grant the only thing is to expand our community more where expanded in such a way that we all become kin and we can see ourselves and the differences will not be too pronounced that there will be problems for us, right?

So I think when you think about community, definitely that's the thing. For us to expand our community more and to see more of the things that… get us closer together than the things that differentiate us. And knowing that there are things that will always differentiate us. I'm better looking than my brother, right? But he's my brother. He's not. He's better. But no, he's my brother. Why? But for us to be able to see that and then to know there are things that are bigger that connect us. I think we have time for one more question.

1:10:36

Q&A: friendship after losing a mother

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3 1:10:36

It's more on a personal level for the two of you. I wanted to know about the relationships with your friends after your moms passed, right? My mother passed in 2019. And I think you said yours did too when yours passed in '20. And that made me examine every relationship. And as a result of that, I started cutting people off. So I just want to know if it was the same for you as it was for me.

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 1:11:10

I think there were things. When my mother passed that I did not know about her life that came up in terms of, for example, finding out the kind of funds that she gave to so many people. I was very certain things I was surprised about in terms of the breakdown of relationships, family relationships. My mother was in her early 80s when she passed a sense of not celebrating the beautiful person that she

was, very private person, very loyal person who had given so much in her life, but was not someone who was legible in any way. You know, so in that way she did share something with a character I talked about, Cece, who wasn't somebody who put herself in a front line.

But behind the scenes, she was doing so much for so many people. The half sister in question who's not the girdy in this novel that the story was premised on did come to her funeral. And it was almost as if I had become my mother in that moment, like I was the last thing that was left when she came. And the beauty of that friendship was still there. It was still there for me to see. Now that sister also passed away within like a year of that, of my mother's passing. So there is really a bad generation, there is no one left on my mother's side. So, but I do think, what I went through after my mother's passing was a kind, I don't know how to explain it, but I know a number of people have gone through this, is a kind of a... You know, it's like in Sufism when people have a kind of coming together with something transcendent.

I had this moment with my mother's passing, like a very clear sense of why we are here and how why we are in relationship with each other. And I didn't have the effect that you did in terms of breaking with other people. I feel like they were already broken away in a certain sense from my family, from my mother's generation. But it gave me clarity on what had been in the past and it allowed me to write this novel with a sense of clarity even though this is not the story of my mother and her sister, a kind of clarity about what it is that we lose when we do not understand where we have come from, how we have been formed by people around us, and what it is that we need to leave aside what we need to abandon because it does not serve us and it will not serve a better future. I do think that depth in this way can be illuminating in that sense.

1:14:12

Thank you

SONY TON-AIME 1:14:12

Thank you so much. Looking at the time here, I want to thank you all for being an amazing audience. I want to thank the New York Black and African Literature Festival. And most importantly, I want to thank... Myriam and Angela for this wonderful conversation. Thank you, and these are my books, so go get yours.

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY 1:14:35

They will be signing. Thank you, Sony, for moderating.

ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was prepared by NYBALF from the verified caption track of the published recording and lightly edited for readability. The recording remains the authoritative record. Section headings are editorial. Timestamps refer to the recording on YouTube.

PARTICIPANTS

Myriam J. A. Chancy is a Haitian Canadian American novelist and scholar, born in Port-au-Prince and raised there and in Quebec City and Winnipeg. Her novel Village Weavers (2024) won the 2025 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature. She holds the Hartley Burr Alexander Chair in the Humanities at Scripps College and is a Guggenheim Fellow.

Angela Flournoy is the author of the novels The Turner House (2015), a finalist for the National Book Award, and The Wilderness (2025), which follows five Black women across twenty years of friendship. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she was raised in Southern California and lives in New York.

Sony Ton-Aime is a Haitian poet, essayist and translator from Ouanaminthe, and the Executive Director of Pittsburgh Arts & Lectures. He previously directed literary arts at the Chautauqua Institution. His poetry collection Konbit was published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in 2026.

HOW TO CITE

> New York Black and African Literature Festival. “The People We Make Family.” Myriam J. A. Chancy and Angela Flournoy in conversation with Sony Ton-Aime. NYBALF 2026, 19 September 2026, Harlem Stage, New York. Transcript, 2026. blackandafricanlitfestny.com.

USE

Published by the New York Black and African Literature Festival for reading, teaching and research. The words spoken remain the work of the speakers. For republication or any other use, please contact the festival through blackandafricanlitfestny.com.