

# LaTanya McQueen:

## When the Reckoning Comes

**Lissa Jones:** What if plantations became event centers? What if enslavement in the history of the United States were erased? And what happens when Black people decide, make up their minds to clap back? Join me in this episode of Black Market Reads, where we hear from author Latanya McQueen about her debut novel. When the Reckoning Comes.

**Derek Emery:** For Black writers and all their readers and audiences who are smart and free-thinking. Black Market Reads is a series of conversations highlighting the Black literary voices of today. Black Market Reads is produced by the Givens Foundation for African-American Literature in partnership with iDream.tv .

**Lissa Jones:** Welcome to Black Market Reads. On this episode, we hear from Latanya McQueen about her debut novel. When the Reckoning Comes. Latanya McQueen is also the author of And it Begins Like This, a collection of essays exploring the legacy of slavery and its relationship to contemporary Black female identity.

She is an assistant professor of English and creative writing at COE college in Iowa. Welcome Latanya. I'm so delighted you're here.

**Latanya McQueen:**

Thank you. Thank you.

**Lissa Jones:** Thank you. I'd like to start out by talking a little bit about your book When the Reckoning Comes. In a nutshell, what's the book about?

**Latanya McQueen:** I describe it as a literary horror with elements of supernatural. And it's centered on this protagonist Mira, who at the present of the book. She is going back to her hometown of Kipson to attend the wedding of her childhood best friend, Celine who is white. And the wedding is being held. [00:02:00] , plantation that has been renovated to provide guests with that antebellum era esq experience complete with reenactments.

It's also rumored to be haunted by the ghosts of slaves who are seeking revenge on the descendants of those who enslaved them. So that's the larger premise.

**Lissa Jones:** Very complex. I'm excited for you to introduce this book. So if you don't mind, would you give us a reading to start?

**Latanya McQueen:** Sure. Celine was getting married. They hadn't needed to keep in touch from years to know how much this wedding meant. As teenagers Celine filled their space, their spirit conversations, with talk of gowns and decorations, flavors of cake and themes. Mira entertained the fantasy with her. They had such little in their lives that the dream of a wedding felt extravagant.

They'd linger in the magazine aisle of the supermarket, flipping through the bridal pages as the scan, the dresses, sheath, or A line, mermaid or ball gown, sequins or lace. [00:03:00] Celine searched for the perfect one, always thinking she found it to later find another. They were all beautiful. Mira told her they were all already perfect.

But for Celine, it was about more than the dress. The wedding was a chance for her to be seen as someone worthy. As beautiful. As deserving of the attention. Still they weren't teenagers anymore and had been a decade since she'd seen Celine. Almost as long as the heyday of their friendship. They hadn't been friends for a long time. But Mira wondered about all of those years in the beginning. How long did this sense of obligation to someone last? Does she owe it to Celine to come to her wedding? They had once been friends.

Oh, I don't know what I'll do if you're not there. Celine continued on the phone and then a knot of guilt wrangled inside of her.

Celine told her the wedding would be during the height of summer. Mira, mentally mapped out the logistics of the trip, allowing herself to entertain the possibility. Of course, she'd have to find something in her closet to wear. Buy a dress on [00:04:00] sale if she couldn't. A summer wedding meant she wouldn't have to take off from teaching.

It was not a long drive from Winston-Salem. It would take a couple of hours if she didn't hit any traffic. A half day at most. If she left early enough and wouldn't be so bad. A new dress, the cost of gas and the expense of a hotel for a night or two. She could afford all that. So it wasn't a question of if she could or couldn't go.

The real question was if she wanted to, and she couldn't say she did. Not with any real sense of authority.

If it's the money, don't worry about it. I'll pay for your room. I can send you money for your travel too anything you need Mira. Just let me know. All you have to do is come.

Mira bristled. Was this another insult hiding underneath? She couldn't be sure. You don't have to pay for my travel. I can afford it.

Oh, I didn't mean, I know you can afford it, but free is always better. What about your room? It's the least I can do. They've made these [00:05:00] sweet size cottages on the property. I'm sure you'll love it.

Wait, Mira said it hadn't occurred to her to ask where the wedding would be. She'd assumed it'd be at the country club right on the border of the town. You had a golf course in the old moneyed homes, but the mention of cottages threw her off. Where are you having it?

This millionaire bought and renovated the old Woodson property. It's become a pretty popular touristy place since it opened. We're going to be first to have our wedding there, which is a little exciting when you think about it.

Celine, you can't be serious. Mira blurted. Refusing to hide her disapproval. You can't possibly be having your wedding at that plantation.

You wouldn't even recognize it now. Celine responded missing Mira's point. The property has been completely redone. Celine should have known, it wasn't about what the place looks like, but then Celine hadn't been with them that day only heard the story afterward. Like everyone else, Mira and Jesse were the ones who'd snuck off. And in the time, since who knew [00:06:00] what it had become.

The history rewritten, erased, having become something entirely new. This was what Celine was trying to convince Mira of as she pressed the phone against her cheek and thought back to a past she'd hoped to forget. To the girl she'd been into the friend she'd loved.

**Lissa Jones:** That was Latanya McQueen reading from *When the Reckoning Comes*.

Thank you, Latanya. When we asked you to choose a reading, can you tell us why did you choose this one?

**Latanya McQueen:** Part of the book for me is this Central relationship between Mira and Celine as well as, another character Jesse, who I hadn't mentioned earlier. And how, when you are friends with somebody and then you like lose touch with them, and then you are becoming reacquainted, you begin to think about like what that friendship was.

And part of this book is thinking about the past and thinking about how the past affects the present, Mira thinking about how this friendship that she had with [00:07:00] Celine and how Celine saw her, has affected her present moment. And then also too this excerpt sort of, kind of gets at the larger plot as well.

Right. When she's having to go back, to visit her friends..

**Lissa Jones:** Thank you. The remaking of a plantation. How did you come up with the remaking of a plantation?

**Latanya McQueen:** A couple of years ago, I was working on another book, a collection of essays. And as part of that I've visited a number of plantations in the south, in Louisiana, in the Carolinas. A lot of these places they're like this, maybe not to the point of the air conditioning, but you know, I didn't have to stray too far from a present reality, really, they are, have been, renovated to be tourist attractions. And that's where a lot of these communities make their money.

They're a huge source of income. So when I went to these places, I remember I kind of thought about how there are tourist attractions there also to attracting people from outside of the U S often.[00:08:00] And then this is their, this is their experience of what slavery was like.

This sort of revised touristy thing and then often a lot of them will have their own sort of pitch in terms of the type of story they want to tell. They often focus on the owners. They rarely, if ever talk about slavery, or the slaves who built these places, and if they do, it's usually an afterthought. And I was interested in this idea of how history is often revised, and forgotten and how that can affect, how that also do can affect a person's sense of self and how they understand their place in the US.

**Lissa Jones:** You know, I find it fascinating to interrogate it anytime, but I think it particularly poignant right now at this moment in time when the country

is arguing about what's been reduced to critical race theory, but it's the erasure principle. It's the erasure of Black life. It's the erasure of Black history.

It's the erasure of our real history. And you are arguing that there's an effect that, that has on people and how we shape our narrative. Let's talk a bit about hierarchy. If you don't mind. I was thinking about it in terms of the aristocratic whites, who didn't make their money, they made long time ago on the backs of black people.

And then the white people that would be equated with Celine and her father. And then of course, Black people being under and according to Isabel Wilkerson, the very bottom rung, but then Black women being particularly the bottom rung. So sort of Celine, Jessie and then Mira, did you intend to show hierarchy in your writing?

**Latanya McQueen:** Yes. And that was one of the things that really interested me about Celine. Because all of these characters are affected by the white gaze and how it affects how they see themselves. And Celine was interesting to me because she's somebody she's poor. And she's battling this hierarchy between she's a poor white person, but also she she's somewhat higher than Jesse and Mira because Jesse and Mira are Black and poor. But also she is wanting part of her own sort of issues as she's wanting to be a part of like the elite wealthy class, that exists in this town. And later on in the present, part of her desire to have this wedding at this plantation, like to her, it is representative of this idea of wealth, this idea of class and this idea of belonging. Whereas suggesting to Mira, it's something completely different.

It's the history that has been forgotten it's pain. It's their ancestors who were enslaved. But yes to your larger point. Yes. I was trying to, to think about, but that hierarchy between black and white people in the different levels of class and how that intersects.

**Lissa Jones:** Absolutely. And thinking about how people are reflected and how they see themselves. Mira's mom, seeing herself as "not those black [00:11:00] people" can be one manifestation of erasure. Why did you choose to include that perspective in Mira's mom?

**Latanya McQueen:** I wanted also to write about the politics of respectability. Mira is somebody who believes herself has these ingrained leaves where if she. If she acts a certain way and she looks a certain way, like if she, she does these certain things that she'll be absolved from racism. And a lot of that is she's been taught by her mother in the book.

And so I wanted to show this the way in which these behaviors and these thoughts can be passed down, can be inherited, as well as ways in which we are like socially conditioned to think these things. And then Mira, right?

And we see how she because of those beliefs, like how the effects, not just how she sees herself, but like how she sees it other black characters in our streets, they're black characters. So she treats Jesse, both in the past and the present, but then also to how she, how it interacts with her job too.

And part of the overall reckoning of this book is her own reckoning and thinking about the ways in which history has led to this thinking.

**Lissa Jones:** Yeah. You know, I wrote "follow all the rules, stay hidden, still can't escape".

**Latanya McQueen:** At the beginning, Mira or I, like, she believes that she can, but she can't write, like, there's no, no matter what you do, you're still going to be seen how you're gonna be seen. And fully realizing that, and then deciding not to care and deciding that there's more than being beholden to white gaze, like there's a power in that. And so that's part of like what her own trajectory is.

**Lissa Jones:** This book is fantastic. I'm in conversation with author Latanya McQueen.

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**Lissa Jones:** Latanya would you give us the privilege of doing another reading?

**Latanya McQueen:** They are coming in life heavy was the crown of chains meant to keep their bodies down, but their spirits soon will rise. They're coming with their shackles, wearing them like armor fuel that reminds them of their purpose.

They bring the chains made from raw iron used across the wrists and ankles as they were stolen onto ships. They bring the iron collar placed on as punishment. It's four prongs sticking out to keep them still. They bring the leg irons two horseshoe shaped rings, cuffed around the ankles with a bar between. The metal [00:14:00] once rubbed against their skin, causing it to bruise and break. They're

coming with the branding irons shaped with the initials of the men who seared their flesh forever marking them with their names.

Their own names were taken erased, but they have them back now. The iron is hot from the burning flame. The skin will flush red after. The dermis deep enough to easily slough off. What remains will be the mark of the men and women who once own them. They come bringing tools to slaughter and maim. One holds a gelding knife, his hand tightens around the handle.

Ready. They're coming with the whip with its nine knotted lashes, their hands carry glass jars of what will be rubbed in after. Turpentine, lime juice, hot brine, piss whatever will make the flesh sting. Virtue you preached came from being beaten, redemption from blood, but the knotted whip raised high. You delivered your sermon, the strike of the lash, cracking the skin.

In return, the faltering pulse. Nearby, they watched in the fields as you then held your son's hands, teaching your boys to practice the whip on the trees flesh. Aim for the middle. You taught. Imagine the trunk is the space between the shoulder blades, the safest spot to do the most harm. They come wearing the clothes they died in. Clothes worn day in and day out when they were alive. See the house servants with their castoffs. They are barefoot subjecting themselves to blisters and cuts rather than suffer, wearing anything that would make them hotter. They were quantity errors, soften offsite, cut to the shape of a foot and tied together with string.

They were the shoes bought by their masters. Children in Calico slacks, men tipping their straw hats to the women as they move further along. Women in their Christmas clothes. A few with ribbon tied in their hair. How long did you think after all of this, it would be before their souls finally came for you in the night is men and women.

Remember they remember the sight of their husbands and sons hanging from the trees they worked under. They remember the feel of a cold metal on their ankles. If you remember the taste of it as the iron bit was forced in their mouths, you remember the taste of their own blood mixing with their saliva as it drips down their faces, soaking wet rags of clothes they wore. It is too late to speak of such stories now for they are coming ready to sneak into your rooms, tiptoe through the familiar hallways, defining you and your loved ones in their beds. And maybe some of you will sense a shift in the air, something unfamiliar in the room, and maybe you'll open your eyes to see.

But it will not be long for make no mistake. They will not flinch. They will not hesitate. They have come for you. They have come. And as you open your eyes, the last thing you'll see is the axe as the blade strikes down, do you see them hovering in the shadows. They are out there hiding in the thickets and behind the darkness of the trees. Hush. And you can hear.

**Lissa Jones:** That was Latanya McQueen reading from *When the Reckoning Comes*. Thank you Latanya. I have to breathe a moment. I often did. Every time I read the italicized text. Why did you choose to italicize the text,

**Latanya McQueen:** Part of it is it's a way to distinguish that these, this is a separate story. A separate narrative as well as the should of linking between the storyline of the slaves with the present narrative of Celine.

**Lissa Jones:** I'm thinking about the eternal threat, the idea that's proposed by the invention of whiteness that black people will respond in kind. And ultimately, this is what you put potentially in the book that black people might come back and respond in kind to the current, to the cruelty that we've experienced in this country. Cruelty is currency. Were you trying to have that effect? It's almost a horror story in a way.

**Latanya McQueen:** Yes. That was one of the things that I was interested in using and thinking about how for a lot of people that's the. core premise, right. That black people are going to rise up and take revenge.

And so the book is operating in these different levels. You have like that as a horror premise, but then also too, for me, like there's the fact that the way in which we have erased history. Even for me thinking about the scenes where Mira's at the plantation and seeing how that has changed and how that has been how history has been commodified and that in this way, that's the type of horror, but also to, for Mira, the way how other people see her and how she's let that affect how she sees herself. And she doesn't know herself because. That to me is also to a type of horror. The way in which place and how the different characters connection to place. It's been interesting cause a lot of people have read this book and felt that sense of dread from some of the earlier sections because they know, they have this [00:19:00] connection or they have this particular associations with plantations.

And so. You feel that dread, they feel that fear, right? Because it has this meaning for them. And so it is, it is horror for them in that way. But then also too, it's operating in this other way because there's this, this fear, this white fear, right. That black people are going to rise up and historically, policy decisions

have been in, had been created right out of this fear sphere. Depicted towards African-Americans has been because of this fear. I don't necessarily think of it as horror. I can. It is because of all these reasons.

**Lissa Jones:** I think I'm glad you said that you don't consider it horror.

I would just say it's horrific to read. It's horrific to understand the experience of our ancestors, the retaking of our names. Well, Hmm. Why was it important to include.

**Latanya McQueen:** Cause it's type of an eraser, right? Like it's this, this book is one of the underlying elements of this is just the ways in which there has been an erasure.

Right. Mira. She doesn't she's know her history. And she's, in some ways also to really kind of curious about her own history and what connections she has to this place. And a lot of that has to do with names and and the tracing of names. Right. And how that gets erased. So. Part of it. It was just a larger section of a larger piece of the, just the ways in which there's a eraser kind of that play.

**Lissa Jones:** In fact, erasure, she sees the chain gang, she sees the men digging what she perceives to perhaps be their grave, but she can't see their faces.

**Latanya McQueen:** I remember that chapter, there was, we had a lot, I had a lot of pushback and trying to shorten, or even to get rid of that chapter or that section. And I really wanted to keep it because it's a further illustration part of what that the beginning of the opening chapter is doing is showing the connection of the past and present. Right. And the, how, like the changing is just another form of slavery. And we don't like to think about it. And we try to ignore it, but it's just, it's just another form.

**Lissa Jones:** When I think about it, there was an experience that Mira had. Was very personal to me when she went into the bar by herself and she's trying to get a salad. She's surrounded like, in Get Out. She's the only black person there who's not in a service role and she is costed and aggrieved by a man.

And no one pays attention, no one notices because they don't see her. And yet here she's left with this experience. And he basically tells her you're lucky. They don't basically have time to deal with this right now. Otherwise you'd really get it. Did you have that experience too?

**Latanya McQueen:** Throughout my life? I have been aware of the ways in which I have been seen.

I worked in bar in Boston and men sort of, yeah. Would often like get drunk and sort of exoticize me and sort of make comments and things.

So in that way I wanted to be very clear about showing the ways in which racism affects black women specifically as well. And this kind of erasure that happens. The violence that happens where black women too.

So showing it from that perspective as well, sort of, we see it with Jessie tears from a black male perspective. Yeah.

**Lissa Jones:** That's fascinating to me because that's my experience as a black woman. And it just came off of the pages and resonated to me all the things about a ratio, the fact that people were coming in their Christmas clothes that you described so viscerally. The head gear. I was just in Charleston, South Carolina, and I saw that very terrible piece of metal. Why did you choose to be so descriptive?

**Latanya McQueen:** Those are loosely based or that I think we would read and. Recognized as like a horrifying element are things that are based in truth.

Like, you saw these right. They exist. And so like, I was motivated by this desire to write a book. About history, and all that, like all of it is, you know, all of it is that's true. Even the leader elements that feel unsure or things that have happened.

I didn't, I'm not creative enough to make them up, but yeah. So that's why I was motivated by this desire to tell a truth.

**Lissa Jones:** I'm so glad you did. Before I ask you about influences, [00:24:00] I'm thinking about White Rage? Mm. Yeah. You could have then describing what happened at the Capitol. You could have been describing what happened in so many places right here in America today, and you described it.

I mean when the father quickens all the people and goes and gets the townspeople. I mean, I'm sick inside. My stomach is churning. I can't breathe. I'm I don't know what to do. I feel trapped that white rage is so enduring. How did you describe it so eloquently?

**Latanya McQueen:** Reading about history and looking at how people were. You look at the lynching postcards that existed, or you read news articles. The rage exists. You don't even have to even go far in history. I was looking at Cori Bush, she tweeted about basically harassment that she gets and it's, it's the same sort of rage. It's just this horrible violence, I didn't have to make it up cause the exist in there they're everywhere. And I think I'll like, Black person on some level has experienced it.

I grew up in Kentucky, but my family is from North Carolina and have had interactions with the Klan. The, like I think the, the largest where they are, there's like a, like the headquarters or something it's near, where they grew up. You know, I, in Kentucky, I grew up and had like saw Klans.

Like they would have rallies and stuff, you know, and I'm going to, I'm coming home from school and there's rallies. I went to, I did my PhD in university of Missouri and I did it during the student protests that made national news. Right. And I saw with that, especially rage The students protesting towards the football players protesting.

And then I also got to see on this public stage, right? Like how this was being how people were responding. So on a personal as well as like this larger level. So you don't have to go far to see it, to experience, receive this. And, but as well as history, like just looking at, looking at the past and seeing,

**Lissa Jones:** Seeing that behavior. Latanya. I [00:26:00] wish that I could spend hours talking to you because there are so many layers in your book. I have recommended your book to everybody. I know before I let you go, though, I always ask what are you reading?

**Latanya McQueen:** Oh, that's a good question. I'm reading *The Other Black Girl*. I think it's Zakiya Dalila Harris.

Yeah, it's getting, it's getting a lot of attention. I'm reading her book. Cause it's also being billed as a type of horror. But it's also showing black experience and his black experience and publishing, which of just interesting.

Right. But yeah, I'm, I'm reading, I'm reading that right.

**Lissa Jones:** Well, I bet that she's reading you and everybody I know soon will be reading you too. Latanya. Thank you for your powerful book. For the soul exploration that has caused the many ripples that it will create as I go through my life teaching about what you have put forward in the world.

And I look forward to the next thing you write. I'll be watching.

**Latanya McQueen:** Thank you.

**Lissa Jones:** Thank you. Latanya. You take care of yourself.

**Latanya McQueen:** Thank you, you too.

**Lissa Jones:** That was Latanya McQueen. She is the author of *When the Reckoning Comes*. She also has a collection of essays. You'd be wise to check those out too. I'm your host Lissa Jones.

This is Black Market Reads. We hope you'll check us out at [blackmarketreads.com](http://blackmarketreads.com) where you can find this interview and to Go Deeper section with author McQueen. We'll see you. Next time.

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