A Mecca for Conversations

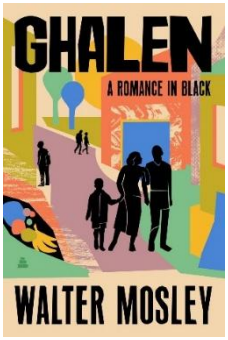
on Books, Politics, Social Justice, and Literacy in Martha's Vineyard

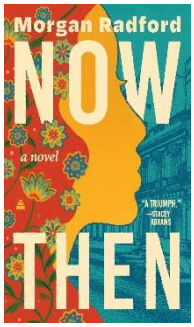
By Dr. Brenda M. Greene

A haven for those seeking a summer vacation and a respite from their daily life, Martha's Vineyard is and has been a hub for intellectual activity, conversations, book talks, literary, social justice, and political forums, art exhibits, and music festivals. It has become a mecca for Black educators, civic leaders, lawyers, doctors, entrepreneurs, artists, writers, and elected officials, a multigenerational place to commune and to work towards creating "a Beloved Community" with thought leaders throughout the country.

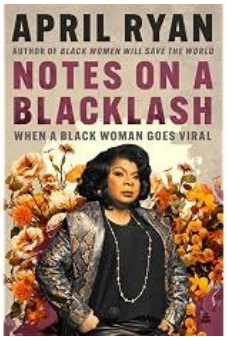
My experience in Martha's Vineyard in summer 2026 was highlighted by attending author talks with the award-winning writer Walter Mosley, the scholar and professor Kimbelé Williams Crenshaw, the renowned journalist and political writer April Ryan, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Eugene Robinson, and the NBC News anchor Morgan Radford. I also attended educational forums that included a showcase and discussion of the documentary *Belonging Beyond Brown* produced by the Morehouse Center for Excellence in Education (MCEE); the Charles Ogletree Forum: "Truth Under Fire, Defending Black Woman Journalists, and Freedom of the Press" with journalists Rehema Ellis, Joy-Ann Reid, April Ryan, Errin Haines, and Christina Greer; and a forum on the Hutchinson Forum: "Balance of Power-Redistricting, Courts, and the Right to Vote" with former Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Professor of Law Melissa Murray, Congresswoman Terri A. Sewell, and American Elections Attorney Marc Elias. And lastly, I helped to organize a forum: "Liberation through Literacy,"

presented by the Committee for Literacy & the Friends of Black Literature, Research, Culture & the Arts, Inc. During the forum I moderated a conversation with L. Joy Williams, President of the New York State NAACP Conference of Branches, and Professor of Law: UCLA and Columbia University Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. “Liberation through Literacy” also featured collaborative models for improving the education of Black youth by Consultant Dr. Traci Lester; Community Empowerment Strategist, Dr. Lenetta R. Lee; Founder and CEO of Mythik Camps, Dr. Crystal Bobb-Semple; and me, Founder and Executive Emerita of the Center for Black Literature.



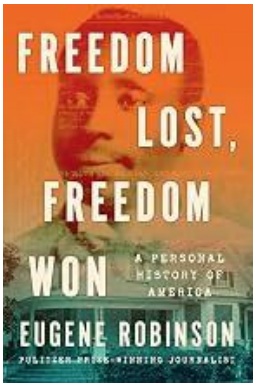


Many novels are autobiographical in nature and writers naturally draw from their personal experiences. Walter Mosley’s novel, *Galen: A Romance in Black* (Amistad, 2026) and Morgan Radford’s novel *Then and Now* (Amistad, 2026) intrigued me. Both novels focused on coming of age, and Morgan and Walter’s discussion with each other on a panel moderated by April Ryan reiterated the ways in which fiction can be used to portray autobiographical elements in the lives of authors.



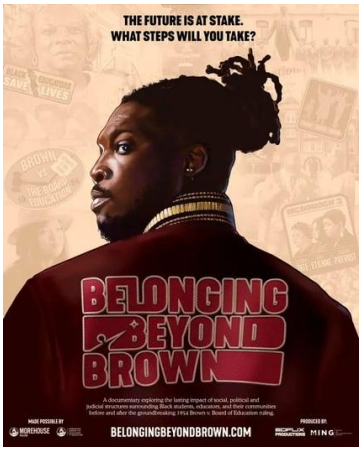
April Ryan also discussed her forthcoming memoir *Notes on a Blacklash: When A Black Woman Goes Viral* (Amistad 2026). It is an account of what happens when the world's gaze lands on you and a rendering of her resilience and strength while facing an ongoing attacks. In her words:

> I am witness to American power, reporting as history unfolds, sometimes in shocking, soul-bruising ways. Though I've been trained to maintain objectivity and deliver facts, there's no armor thick enough to deflect the toll it takes when you're forced to face the raw, unfiltered ugliness of power wielded carelessly or cruelly, especially when it is close to your identity (10).



Eugene Robinson's memoir *Freedom Lost, Freedom Now* (Simon and Schuster, 2026), recounts the history of his family over the last 200 years. It is both the story of his family and the story of race relations in America. His recounting of past events such as the impact of the

role that Black Union soldiers played in the victory in Charleston, South Carolina, the Great Migration, the Civil Rights Movement, and the February 1968 Massacre in Orangeburg, South Carolina was stirring. The conversation, moderated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., underscored the value of tracing one's roots.



Dr. Nina Gilbert, the Executive Director of the Center for Excellence in Education at Morehouse College, is the co-director of the documentary *Belonging Beyond Brown*. I believe that this film should be viewed by all those involved with educating Black youth. Through emotional and stirring interviews with students, teachers, and community leaders, it explores the origins, impact, and results of the Brown vs. Board of Education 1954 Supreme Court decision. Although the decision declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional and overturned the separate but equal document, Brown vs. the Board of Education did not end segregation, underfunded schools, and inequity in education. In fact, it eliminated the jobs of many Black teachers and deprived students of having role models in their classrooms and teachers who valued and uplifted them. Viewers will come away from this documentary, understanding the need to create environments that provide young people with their history,

role models, and strategies for developing and exercising leadership skills in a society constructed by race.

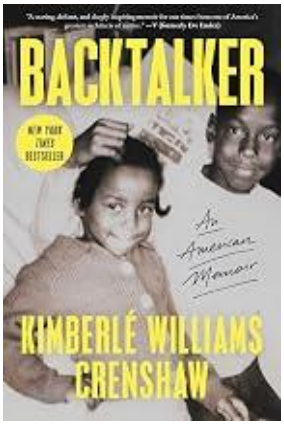
One of the most riveting forums I attended was "Journalists Under Fire." Rehema Ellis moderated a discussion with Joy-Ann Reid, April Ryan, Errin Haines, and Christina Greer that shed light on the scrutiny, threats, and attacks faced by Black women journalists. The speakers underscored the lack of integrity that has surfaced as a result of the current administration's coordinated war against the press. Journalists are concerned for this country, and in their view, the media and newsrooms have been complicit in the Administration's silencing of voices and normalization of attacks on Black journalists. There were major take aways from this forum: the public must expand the ways in which they receive the news; podcasts, independent news outlets, and essays on Substack provide alternative perspectives on the news; journalists have a responsibility to be truth tellers; the public has to support those journalists who are on the front-line; everyone is at risk in a totalitarian system; and everyone is a potential truthteller.

In the 2026 Hutchins Forum, Professor Melissa Murray unpacked the immediate impact of the Louisiana vs. Callais Supreme Court decision that eviscerated Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. Republican controlled states immediately led efforts in partisan gerrymandering,

and Republican lawmakers, and the Trump administration have attempted to suppress the vote. The fight against this erosion of our democracy is ongoing. Congressmember Sewell emphasized the critical importance of voting and mobilizing for the potential loss of seats in the Black Caucus. Attorney Marc Elias summarized what to expect and how we move forward. He asserted that voter suppression tactics will be used in the 2026 midterm elections; the Supreme Court is unbalanced and advocating for court reform should not be treated as "a third rail;" voters must use 'the town square' to hold meetings and to get out the vote; coalitions work and civil rights groups need to coalesce, mobilize, and plan for the long haul; young people lead movements and must be actively involved in getting out the vote; and civic education must be embraced.

The forum, "A Call to Action: Liberation for Literacy, "could be also called "Empowerment through Promoting Social Justice, Culture, and the Arts." The current climate where we are witnesses to banned books, attacks on the curriculum, free speech, and DEI, as well as lower reading scores reveals that there is an educational crisis in this country. A Texas high school teacher named Darius Williams recently circulated a video titled "They Can't Read: Teacher's Tearful Cries;" the video went viral. He described how he cried in the classroom after

he had asked seniors to read two paragraphs and they had difficulty reading the text. He cried again after the class session and created a video that demonstrated his frustration and despair. There are a number of factors as to why this may have occurred: the impact of underfunded schools, the results of decreased classroom instruction during COVID, the systemic inequities in the school system, the failure to identify learning disabilities, and the lack of adequate teacher preparation are just some of the possible reasons for this. However, the fact that this teacher felt a need to share this situation with the public illustrates that this is a fundamental problem in our educational system.



As part of the Call-to-Action literacy forum, I moderated a conversation with Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw and NAACP NY State President L. Joy Williams. They shared their origin stories and how they had been raised in environments that emphasized the importance and value of being change agents and servant leaders in their communities and public spaces. Their parents, church communities, and schools had emphasized this. Prof. Crenshaw has become one of the most influential public intellectuals in the country; her memoir *Back Talker* chronicles her journey as a pioneering scholar and writer on civil rights. L. Joy Williams has

devoted her professional life to advancing civil rights and advocating for social justice. Her origin story is faith-based and on her view that Jesus Christ is a model change agent.

The uniqueness of this forum was that attendees were given theoretical and philosophical premises and practical strategies for empowering youth. Prof. Crenshaw discussed the Critical Literacy workshops that she has conducted over the years and highlights of the "Legacy, Literacy, and Liberation Summit" that she and Attorney and Activist Bryan Stevenson convened in July 2026. L. Joy Williams discussed her Black Agenda for New York and her strategy to start Freedom Schools across New York State. Consultant Traci Lester provided a comprehensive listing of funding sources for literacy-based programs. And Dr. Lenetta Lee, Dr. Crystal Bobb-Semple, and I identified Tool Kits they we created for literacy programs: Literacy through the Arts, Empowerment through Social Justice, and Literacy, Identity, and Community.

As I reflect on the experiences that I have had at Martha's Vineyard this summer, I am reminded of Dr. Martin Luther's King statement that we need to create a "Beloved Community." Martha's Vineyard is home to generations of Black families who have built communities and safe spaces for their families and loved ones and who have accumulated the resources needed to create the "Beloved Community." During the summer Martha's Vineyard is enhanced by many who visit and who also have the resources to provide for and/or expand the "Beloved Community." Distinguished University Princeton Professor of African American Studies Eddie S. Glaude Jr. reminds us in his book, *We are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For* (Harvard University Press, 2024), that the time is now for the people to take action in creating a more just and democratic community. Martha's Vineyard is a natural space for

embracing this belief and practice. We also have to ensure that we continue to offer young Blacks substantive experiences in Martha's Vineyard.

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