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SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is *Trending Globally.* I'm Sarah Baldwin.

On this episode, Watson economics professor Glenn Loury talks with writer Thomas Chatterton Williams. Thomas's 2010 memoir was titled *Losing My Cool, Love, Literature, and a Black Man's Escape from the Crowd.* It combined cultural criticism with his own personal story of falling in and out of love with hip hop culture growing up. His forthcoming book, *Self-Portrait in Black and White, Unlearning Race,* continues his exploration of race, culture, family, and his own story.

Thomas visited Watson this spring, and Glenn sat down with him for a wide-ranging conversation about race, literature, family, and life in Paris. Here's Glenn.

GLENN LOURY: I'm here with Thomas Chatterton Williams, writer extraordinaire. His new book, *Self-Portrait in Black and White, Unlearning Race,* coming out in the fall. Thomas happens to be coming through Providence, and spoke to my class this morning. I have the pleasure of being able to speak with him again this afternoon. Hello, Thomas. Welcome.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: Hey, thanks for having me.

GLENN LOURY: You're welcome. OK, so *Self-Portrait.* It sounds like it's about you. Another memoir?

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: Yeah. I realize that two memoirs in under 40 years might raise some eyebrows. But it's actually not a memoir. I find that oftentimes, I jump off from personal experiences, and I try to use things that I observe and things that have happened to me as a way of getting into a conversation about more universal things. And so I certainly wasn't out looking for a second memoir.

But I spent my whole life really believing the dictum that a drop of black blood makes a person black. And my first memoir is very much about navigating the cultural pressures that come with a black identity, trying to achieve a racial authenticity.

And then I married a white woman. I'm already a black man of mixed-race heritage. And somehow, though I assumed my kids would be black in an uncomplicated way, they came out

looking rather white, you could even say almost Scandinavian looking. And so this kind of racial diversity in my family that I had not really allowed myself to think was there made me begin to question the racial divisions and the racial constructions that exist in this society at large, outside my family, too. And so the writing started from this personal point, but then it became essentially a first-person essay against race, against the way that we box ourselves into these abstract color categories.

GLENN LOURY: I see. I think the listeners should know that your first book, *Losing My Cool,* is a coming-of-age account of your moving away from the parochial and more toward the universal, if I may say so, coming out of suburban New Jersey and a very cool African-American middle-class milieu, and finding your way now to Paris. I assume you're speaking French pretty well.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: (LAUGHS) I'm trying. I'm trying.

GLENN LOURY: You know what a baguette is by now.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: I know what a baguette is now.

GLENN LOURY: But OK, so it's not just navel-gazing, you writing about your life, it's you using your personal experiences as a platform to make more general points. And it sounds like you're against race.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: I didn't start there, but I ended there. I don't see really what good can come out of these kind of inherited identities that have been passed down to us from the slavers of yesterday. I don't see how you're going to transcend racism so long as you believe in the racial categories that came out of the collision of Europe and Africa, and the oppression that resulted from this exchange. I think that we need a new way of conceiving of ourselves and of each other, a new way of belonging to each other, a new way of orienting our societies that take into account the kind of complex mixtures that have always been there, but that we've kind of simplified into the white-black binary that dominates American social life.

GLENN LOURY: I got to ask you a question. And I apologize in advance. But I can hear the critic. So let me channel the critic here. You would never ask Jews to give up Jewishness on behalf of the project of killing anti-Semitism. Why are you asking black people to give a blackness on behalf

of a project of killing racism? Like the Jews, blacks are not responsible for the racism and the hatred that they must endure. Why must their identities be fashioned in such a manner as to negate something that's not their fault?

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: That's a good question. But I would never say that I'm asking blacks to give up their racial identity and for everybody else to continue business as usual. I think that white people have to give up whiteness, and that's even more important and crucial to the project of a racially transcendent humanism.

But I do think that blacks should be incentivized to stop buying into the racial system as it's operating now. I don't see much of what you get out of forming your identity out of the perceptive habits of the oppressor.

I was very struck that you had already-- many things that I realize that other writers have arrived there first, but I was very struck that in your *Commentary* magazine piece in 1992, you used almost an exact same phrase that I thought I had hit upon on my own.

But forming yourself out of the perceptive habits of the oppressor seems to me just like a very bad way about going about creating a self. So I think that blacks have every reason to reject it. But I think that whites, Asians, and people of goodwill across the spectrum also have a lot of incentive to stop buying into the farce that is race in the absence of human races.

GLENN LOURY: Let me continue channeling the critic. Solidarity of black people on behalf of collective political ends is one way to counter the very real negative consequences of racism. And that solidarity I'm talking about-- voting for the right candidate, I'm talking about community organization and service on behalf of social goods and stuff like that, I'm talking about marrying within the race-- that kind of solidarity is instrumental to securing freedom. Without a benign racial affiliation, the capacity for us to act collectively on behalf of goals that no one else is going to pursue would be severely undermined.

Can't we envision a world-- I mean, when there's no longer whiteness, there's no need for blackness. OK. But we're not there, and we're not anywhere close to there.

Meanwhile, there's a need for kids to be adopted who don't have parents. There's a need for Big Brothers and Big Sisters to befriend those who are coming along looking for some guidance. There's a need for churches that plant themselves and that minister to communities based upon affiliation, which will, as a matter of cultural and historical reality, often be along

racial lines. The African Methodist Episcopal Church is a real institution. It's 200 years old. And it comes out of the reaction of African-Americans to their racial oppression.

Long and short of it is that black people need to be able to act collectively on behalf of black interests. There are such a thing as black interests. And collective action is something that you see other groups exhibiting in the world. So again, I want to ask, in this world without race, how is it that black people can mobilize themselves to act effectively on behalf of interests that no one else will act for them?

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: I'm not exactly sure that black people's number one interests are black as such. I think that a lot of interests that we tend to think of as racial or ethnic are actually class-based interests. And I think that it might not be such a bad thing if a lot of groups, including blacks, started to organize their interests along those lines as opposed to strictly biological categories.

In the book, I have this moment where I go down to West Baltimore canvassing for Barack Obama. And I'm with a Jewish friend and a German friend. And we're walking through this neighborhood where it's mostly black. Most people haven't heard of either Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton. They have a lot of things going on in their lives that have nothing to do with kind of theoretical concerns. And as I look back on this experience, I wonder if the essential thing that's unifying these people and somehow unifying me with them is a color category, is a racial identity. It seems to me that what they're dealing with and what is going on in their lives has a lot more to do with class, and that what I'm experiencing in my life, and what's separating me from them is a lot more than what's unifying us, based on some genetic slice of a 23andMe pie chart.

So I think that we can still have the same concerns, and we can still have political concerns. And certainly, I don't think that always your political interests are best served by sticking with a strict identity group.

GLENN LOURY: But I wonder how that plays out in the reality of American contemporary politics. Barack Obama gets himself elected in 2008 as the first black President of the United States. Imagine trying to persuade somebody who's determined to vote for Barack Hussein Obama because he's a black man, and there's never been a black president before, and they feel tremendous pride in that, that they're allowing one dimension of their complex humanity to overwhelm all the others, and that's going to seem otherworldly to such a person.

THOMAS But race is such a fungible concept to begin with. Obama's an interesting example, because

CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: when he first came on the scene, most blacks overwhelmingly supported Hillary Clinton compared to him, because they didn't consider him black, because black in this country, for a lot of African-Americans coming from Southern slavery, was not about having an absent Kenyan father and a white Kansan family and being reared in Hawaii.

So he was an outsider from the black community or from the way that we construct blackness until he was able to sufficiently convince enough members of the black community that he was one of them, and until he was able to win in Iowa. But prior to that, writers like Stanley Crouch were saying that he's not really black. Most Americans to this day respond to questionnaires saying that Barack Obama is mixed-race. And whether they mean black by that, whether they buy into hypodescent or not, I'm not sure. But most Americans, white and black, say Barack Obama's mixed-race and don't say that he's uncomplicatedly black.

So I think that he's a perfect example of the way that race becomes what is most useful for it to be. A person's racial identity-- it was useful for Barack Obama's identity. It fit this narrative that I, myself, was certainly swept away with. It's much less seductive to say that we had the first partially African descended American presidency than it is to say we had the first black president. But the fact is that Barack Obama doesn't have a racial or an American experience that correlates to most African-Americans' lived experience.

GLENN LOURY: You're living in Paris now. What's it like being a black man in Paris, if I can put it that way, black American in Paris? How do you contrast the lived experience of race as an expatriate American living in France with what you know to be the social patterns that we are used to here in the United States? Do they have a more subtle, supple view about racial identity, the French? I'm asking.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: They have a different view. Race is like politics. It's local. It's made where you are standing.

And so one thing that I've certainly picked up on that's been written about a lot by writers like James Baldwin is that in France, being a black American can be quite liberating, because you're not black, you're just American. And oftentimes, certainly in previous eras, if you were coming from America, you didn't really have an American experience. You only had a black experience. And you didn't really know what that felt like until you got out of the country. Richard Wright said that in one square block of Paris, he felt more freedom than in the entire

United States of America. I don't think anybody that I've ever met coming from former colonies in Africa or in the West Indies feels--

GLENN LOURY: Living in France.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: --living in France feels quite that way.

But in my own experience, being a mixed-race black man and being visibly mixed, the French have different perceptive habits than Americans do. I'm not often-- that my internal racial identity is not often what institutions and individuals I interact with reflect back to me. So I often have this jarring experience of perhaps being received as an Arab, because that's what my physical characteristics more closely track with for my French interlocutor, or simply by opening my mouth, having the ability to be a swarthy white American or whatever people mistake me for without really thinking that hard about what I am because I've got a blue passport and I'm not the other in its problematic form as it can be in France.

And that was a new experience for me. When I first moved to France-- not in Paris, in a less cosmopolitan area in the north on the border of Belgium-- when I was right out of college, people would often come up to me in the street or in a kebab shop and just begin speaking Arabic to me. And it took me aback, because it was the first time I'd ever had my identity so clearly misread. I didn't really know how to react to that. Nothing like that has ever happened to me in the United States of America, where we have the perceptive habit of kind of understanding what a highly Europeanized black person is like, and where whites and blacks basically accept that this is another aspect of blackness in America. It's not exactly the same in France.

People often, once they knew my background, would ask me, but yeah, but why would you define yourself as black? Once they know that I have black ancestry, because it didn't necessary follow in their French way of seeing the world, that one would have to or one ought to even.

GLENN LOURY: OK. I want to ask the question about marrying out. You have a whole chapter under that title, as I recall, in the book. You're married to a French woman, which means you're married to a, quote, "white woman," close quote. I know many African-American women who would judge you harshly for marrying out. They would say, so many brothers are dead, in prison,

unemployable, unmarriageable. Here we have a good one, and he takes his goods and he goes over to the other side, or something like that. Are they completely off base in that thinking? And I know you spend some time writing about this in your book. How would you answer them, if you feel that you're obliged to answer them at all?

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: I did feel obliged to answer that, because I do think that there's an enormous amount of pain wrapped into that question. And black men marry out at rates that are only surpassed by Asian women. Black men marry-- 25% or so marry out of the race, and it gets much more than that the higher you go up the education ladder. That leaves quite a lot of people like an ex-girlfriend of mine that I write about in the book without a black partner.

And so I reached the conclusion that you have to live your life, and you have to live your life on your own terms, and that it might even be quite a radical act of defying the racial color caste system by refusing to play by its rules, by refusing to let its rules orchestrate your thinking. But I do think that it's important not to be glib about that, and not to dismiss the fact that the real result of the kind of sexual marketplace is that black women and Asian men often get left-- when everybody takes their seat, get left standing.

GLENN LOURY: How'd you meet your wife?

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: Through a mutual friend. I had spent some time in Paris working on *Losing My Cool.* Borrowed a friend's apartment, and made a group of friends that trip in 2008 that when I returned in 2010, one of these friends brought my wife to a bar, and we briefly met, and I said, if you're ever in New York, shoot me an email. And about a month later, she did.

And then she came back. She found a work reason to be back in New York a month after that. And I was in Paris a few months after that. And then a few months after that, she came back to New York with me, and three days into the trip, I proposed. And it was a pretty quick decision, but it was a good decision.

GLENN LOURY: Well, congratulations then. Not everybody is that lucky, I think.

I once knew an African-American woman who had fallen in love with a Frenchman. And he took her home to the family's estate in the countryside, and they didn't accept her. And the relationship, unfortunately, came to an end, because he wasn't prepared to defy his parents. I think there was some inheritance issues involved. And she wasn't prepared to be, as it were, in the closet with him, but not able for him to take her home. So I'm wondering, did you find

acceptance with Valentine's parents?

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: I did. I expected it. And I also found immediate acceptance, although I found myself, in retrospect, giving her father and also her grandmother a lot of credit simply for having been really decent in these interactions. And I kind of had to question why I was giving them so much credit simply for treating me as I'd given them every reason to treat me.

Her father, when we told him that we were engaged, his reaction was simply to jump up and kiss both of my cheeks and tell his younger daughter to go out and make a reservation at a table down the street so we could drink some champagne. I thought that was really-- it was a wonderful reaction. It was a normal reaction. It's how I would think that I would react to anybody my daughter would bring home.

Her grandmother, too, from a very different time than we live in now, could have raised an eyebrow or something like that, and she didn't. Although in the book, I write about in her grandmother's house, there can be kind of artifacts of what would be called, in today's discourse, there can be microaggressions that speak to a kind of racial discourse of domination, that were I to allow them to, of could kind of set me off in a way that, I guess, I don't find worth it to be set off. She has the head of a kind of a slave woman or something on her coffee table. And you open the head, and you have, like, lollipops and stuff, or you put your keys inside. And it's kind of a grotesque artifact from the colonies that I don't understand why anybody would want it. And that's, like, standard definition of a microaggression, you know, like, visual language of oppression.

But I've talked about this with my wife a lot. My wife and her cousins, they're ashamed of this thing. They hide it when people come over. But in the here and now, I'm interacting with my grandmother-in-law as an equal. We're actually making a multiracial family that works and that I would go so far as to say that actually loves each other.

And she's from another time. And she has an artifact. And am I strong enough and am I capable of getting through my day knowing that she has this porcelain sculpture, and moving on about my business, making this family work, and not really being asked very much beside that. And I basically came to the conclusion that that doesn't really hurt me that much. I'm actually strong enough in both my self-conception and my life that I can survive that and it's not a big deal. I certainly will talk to my daughter about it if she's old enough to see it, if it's still around.

But it hasn't really derailed my sense of self, you know? And I guess that was important for me to give up the anger, because speaking of performing, when I first married my wife, I found myself getting into arguments with her about the bust kind of performing a role of outrage that really wasn't my outrage. I came to wonder why I saw myself so much in this bust that was staring at me as opposed to seeing myself in the real interactions that were happening day in and day out in which my dignity wasn't being demeaned.

GLENN LOURY: Yeah. That bust sits there like a prop available to be used at any moment that you intend to seize to exploit your-- you've got a ready-made outrage prompt there for you. So you've chosen not to play that card.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: It didn't seem worth it. And it still doesn't seem worth it. And I think that she wouldn't even fully understand what the outrage was about.

GLENN LOURY: She wouldn't even know what you were--

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: She'd be mortified. She'd be really embarrassed.

And so I sometimes wonder, if you can get to a point where you're already living the kind of social relations you want to live, why not accept that as opposed to keep pushing? I find a lot of the discourse today is about continually finding and unearthing gotcha moments.

A few weeks ago on Twitter, John Wayne was trending. He's been dead for I don't know how long. He was trending because a 1971 *Playboy* interview was unearthed in which he had said some really racist and misogynistic things. We already recognize that those things are wrong. At what point, can you just move on instead of constantly pulling off the scab? I find that there's a kind of exhilaration of reawakening the wound, of exciting the wound. And I don't want that in my own life.

GLENN LOURY: Have you thought much at all about the political implications of embracing in a full-throated way the kind of transracial or supra-racial sensibility that you advocate? What happens to the Democratic Party or whatever? What about affirmative action, reparations, and all this kind of talk? There's a lot of people who've invested a great deal in seeing the world in this particular way who'd have to completely reorganize their ways of thinking if the sensibility that you seem

to be advocating were to be more broadly embraced. I'm just wondering if you've thought much about that.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: And I think that's absolutely right. I think it would do the Democratic Party some good, actually. Mark Lilla makes the point most powerfully in *The Once and Future Liberal.* He takes a look at the Republican National Committee's website and the DNC website. The Republican website, for all its problems, it has one platform that applies to anybody that wants to get on-board with the Republican Party. They just have a list of values and interests.

The DNC website has 17 different platforms depending on your identity, whether you're Latinx or trans or LGBTQ or black, what have you. It's fragmented the party into a constellation of interest groups that might get together at times when a candidate like Obama comes along. It might splinter to the point of putting Donald Trump in office when a centrist like Hillary Clinton comes along that doesn't fully unite or excite their identity receptors.

I think that this is a bad way of doing politics. I think that for the Democratic Party to align itself around more universal values, perhaps class-based values, would be a much more winning strategy. We'd be able to grow the tent even more than kind of trying to keep all of these identity groups together under a cloak that doesn't quite fit. So yeah, I see an upside to that, to embracing that.

And you've made this point, and it's quite persuasive. Identity politics is a sword that anybody can pick up and use, even those whose identity you don't agree with, like white supremacists. And I think that if you don't like the Richard Spencers of the world making an identity-based argument, you have to model what the opposite of that looks like, whether it's fair or not, that he's white and enjoys privilege or not.

GLENN LOURY: Yeah, I want to underscore Mark Lilla. The book is *The Once and Future Liberal.* And he does make a very full-throated critique of identity politics. And he thinks that the Democratic Party is losing its way, I think, just as you explained.

And he has this phrase there that I love, really. He says identity politics is "Reaganism for lefties." And what he means is Reaganism is just straightforward conservative view that the government should be small and we're all on our own. Every tub on its own bottom. Don't bother me with your social program. Cut my taxes. And identity politics as Reaganism for lefties in the sense that it is, too, the enemy of solidarity across the lines necessary in order to enact collective programs that are strictly the safety net, taking care of people who need to be

taken care of, and so forth and so on.

So the white people in eastern Kentucky or southwestern Ohio or whatever who are catching hell might find common purpose with black people in central city Baltimore or Detroit or Los Angeles who are catching hell and get themselves some health care or some universal pre-K or a tax system that is more supportive of working people or a more pro-union kind of sensibility in labor legislation or whatever the program might be. But if we're all tending mainly to our particular identity group, it's harder to achieve that as a political outcome.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: And I would just make the caveat that working-class solidarity has often been undermined by white racism. So it would require some real reaching across the aisle from whites. It really is something that I don't think that this is something that can be achieved by minorities alone willing it into being. I think that well-meaning white people really have to step out of whiteness for this to really be able to function.

GLENN LOURY: OK, I think we might want to be calling this to a close. But let me ask you one final question, because you're a writer, and I'm wondering about who of amongst contemporary writers, fiction or nonfiction for that matter, but who, in the pantheon of the great writers of our time, do you think are treating this subject of race and racial identity with the subtlety and the sophistication and the sort of respect for universal human values that you would be prepared to affirm? Who are you reading that is getting it right?

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: I think Zadie Smith gets it really right, especially in the essays that are collected in *Feel Free.* I think that she sees through a lot of the identity nonsense. And I think she has a kind of a similar conclusion that I'm trying to get towards. Paul Gilroy, the British sociologist, author of *Against Race,* has profound ideas about finding new ways of belonging to each other and getting rid of, like, bio racial concepts of self.

I was really inspired by Barbara and Karen Fields, two sisters who are academics and wrote a very, very brilliant book called *Racecraft.*

GLENN LOURY: Oh, yeah, I know that book.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: And they make the argument that race essentially functions in modern society the way witchcraft functions in certain African societies and functioned in the West in the past, where there's no such thing as witches, but you can die for being a witch in a society that believes in witchcraft. I think that that book is almost scandalously overlooked. It should have been a

much more influential book. And writers like Coates have drawn from it, but without really that book ever getting the attention it deserves.

In the past-- I consider him a kind of contemporary, he just died a few years ago-- Albert Murray in *The Omni-Americans* was getting at a lot of these ideas, too. James Baldwin was also making a lot of these points. Early Baldwin.

GLENN LOURY: Yeah, the early Baldwin. Yeah. *Everybody's Protest Novel* Baldwin.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm.

GLENN LOURY: Yeah. All right, I've been here with Thomas Chatterton Williams, writer extraordinaire, who's passing through Brown University, resident of Paris, author of the forthcoming book, *Self-Portrait in Black and White, Unlearning Race.* This is Glenn Loury, Watson Institute, Brown University. Thanks very much, Thomas.

THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS: Thanks for having me.

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SARAH BALDWIN: This episode of *Trending Globally* was produced by Dan Richards and Jon Maza. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

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