Transcript of Imagine A World, Episode 1

Kay Barrett (00:14):
And I think that's really the power of the word, is not letting you look away, making you really reckon with what's being described and what's being represented there.

Lydia (00:24):
In my case, what it meant to go to a place like Yale and New Haven from rural Texas where schools don't even release metrics on how many students from rural areas they have.

Taylor (00:42):
Welcome to the Imagine A World podcast from Knight-Hennessy Scholars. We are here to give you a glimpse into the Knight-Hennessy Scholar community of graduate students spanning all seven Stanford schools, including business, education, engineering, humanities, law, medicine, and sustainability. In each episode, we talk with scholars about the world they imagine and what they're doing to bring it to life. Today we're speaking with Lydia Burleson and Kay Barrett, both PhD students in the English department at Stanford. During our conversation with this dynamic literary duo, you'll hear about their respective journeys to Stanford KHS, the life and challenges of being a PhD student, some literary hot takes, and so much more.

Lydia (01:34):
Hi, I'm Lydia Burleson. I'm a member of the 2022 cohort and a second-year PhD student in Stanford's English PhD program.

Kay Barrett (01:44):
I'm Kay Barrett. I'm a member of the 2022 KH cohort and I'm a second-year PhD student in Stanford's English department.

Lydia (01:51):
I imagine a world where everyone, no matter their background or lived experience, sees themselves fully represented in the world, whether that's in the things we read and watch on TV, in higher education or in any field or industry.

Kay Barrett (02:06):
I imagine a world where we celebrate and act on Black visions of the future.

Willie (02:11):
Hi, what's up everybody? We got two special guests today on Imagine A World. We've got Lydia and Kay as you heard in the intro. And I got to say to both of you, and Taylor can attest to this, I was really excited to have both of you on in this special format of having two guests at the same time because you both, as you mentioned, are pursuing PhDs. And I feel like all my friends who are pursuing PhDs, every time I ask them a question you can tell they've ruminated, they've stewed on that question and the answers, the citations, the credit to other scholars is on another level. So I'm really excited about having that intentionality and that reflection shown in this episode.
And also, you two are probably some of the people I'm closest to in my cohort based on just conversations we've had and me seeing the work that y'all are doing. And I feel like I'm so excited and privileged to just share this space with y'all such that the rest of the world can hear the brilliance and the spectacular thought and lives you've lived on display. So as we get into this beginning part of the conversation, you talked about the world you imagined. So let's talk about the world you were born into and have experienced thus far. Kay, tell us about where you're from and what your journey was to Knight-Hennessy and to Stanford.

Kay Barrett: Thank you, Willie. And thank you so much for inviting us to be on the podcast. I too see you as a dear friend, so really appreciate that amazing setup. That's how I would talk about where I'm from. I'll connect it to several people, places, and also how I have entered these different places and these different relationships.

Starting off, I grew up in a Black Southern Christian family. That is a very specific experience that I would characterize having an emphasis on togetherness. I also say it's having an emphasis on family and also an emphasis on being the best version of yourself. My mother used to say all the time was, "Be particular." That is be particular about the people you choose to be around, be particular about the places you choose to go and the experiences you choose to be a part of.

In Nashville, Tennessee, I was in a predominantly white educational environment. And having that Black Southern Christian home experience coupled with the predominantly white educational experience really pushed me to have to figure out how I defined my own Blackness and how I defined my own Black identity. And so it was very important for me to root that in my Black family, the Thanksgiving experiences, the 4th of July experiences, all, and bring that into how I was approaching my education.

So when I was a high school student, it was really learning the roots of that and not necessarily knowing when something was perhaps racially insensitive or when I was being singled out for being a Black girl. But it was training basically of what was going to be coming after that. There I went to University of Virginia, so still remaining in the South and still at a predominantly white institution. I would really characterize this as developing my critical racial consciousness. That's when I was becoming very attuned to the fact that, "Okay, I'm the only Black person in my English courses. I am the only Black voice in this club that I'm a part of. What exactly does that mean and how does that impact how people look at me and how they interpret what I'm saying?"

So I would really discuss that phase of my life as starting to take the experiences from being an adolescent and put them into practice and really trying to forge the type of student and leader I wanted to be that is thinking from a very purposeful place and is thinking from a place also too of presenting and foregrounding Blackness. So when I was at UVA for the first time, I was in an all-Black theater group. That was a really important moment for me because it was all Black people, but coming from different places and having different relationships with Blackness, discussing what it is like to be Black at a predominantly white institution. One of the plays that I was a part of was called the Black Monologues, which was something that was written, produced, and acted entirely by Black students at the University of Virginia.
And having that community when Trump was elected, for example, and when the white supremacist marched on UVA's grounds was very important for, again, crystallizing what exactly do I view as Black consciousness and my Black identity and how am I bringing that into being a leader and artist. UVA and Virginia specifically, it was very much so a coming back for my family because my grandfather on my dad's side had grown up in Ruckersville and had grown up with the idea that UVA was a place where he did not belong. So the fact that I ended up going to UVA on a full-ride merit scholarship and that he was alive to see that was really meaningful and put into perspective for me that anything that I am doing in the educational and academic space is not just for me. It is something that's tying back to generations in my family. And yeah, doing honor to my grandmother and my grandfather and everyone from that generation, really importantly valued.

And then the last piece before coming to Stanford was I went to the UK to do two master's degrees as a Marshall Scholar. I thought I had been in predominantly white institutions. Those were really predominantly white institutions. So building off of that Black consciousness that I had been developing as an adolescent and as an undergraduate student and then thinking what does it mean to be a Black American abroad, what does it mean to be part of the Black diaspora but is taking on many different challenges but also some of the same challenges because this too was overlapping with the real height of the Black Lives Matter movement, right? Talking about 2020 through 2021.

A decision then to come back to Stanford was definitely infused with all these things, infused with wanting to still be connected to this familial togetherness and also honoring what my family really values and trying to see now what it means. I've worked so much on myself to then reflect that back outwards. How can I put that back out into the world going towards the space of being an educator and being an educator and also being a researcher.

So I think a huge reason why I chose Knight-Hennessy and why I chose Stanford specifically is because it's a program and it's a department that's really dedicated to interdisciplinary approaches to the humanities all to look at what's been done in English literature so far and say, "What can I do differently? How can I go outside of the tradition and really revise the way that we look at literature and representation for specifically Black American individuals, but also members of the Black diaspora?" And so I feel really happy about the fact that I'm able to take this transition from really working on myself and having other people mentor me and help me along that journey to now being able to reflect more of that to the outside. That's my journey.

Thank you so much for sharing that with us, Kay. It's been such a privilege to have come to Stanford and to Knight-Hennessy with you and to have had you as a partner in this journey through our education and specifically thinking about how we're both committed to addressing some of the structural inequities that we see both in our field and in the larger world abroad.

There are other things we share. So where I'm from, I'm also from the south and from a small town in rural Texas. For the vast majority of my life, I grew up in towns that ranged from populations of 15,000 to just 150 people. So it was a very rural space. The first two decades of my life were very much defined
by rural poverty. My family, both of my parents are disabled. And so for the majority of my life we lived paycheck to paycheck, regularly taking out small loans just to pay for food and necessities.

The vast majority of people in my town weren't very educated. I think 30% of my high school graduating class dropped out before graduation. And of the percent who did end up going to college, it just wasn't the norm there. And neither of my parents had gone to college. And so my older brother and I were actually the first people in our family to do. I really chose a big college to go to. I ended up going to Yale, and Yale was one of my first times on a plane actually. And I found this unspoken divide and lived experience between me and my classmates that I hadn't experienced before being from an area that was so rural and so insular where everyone had very similar experiences because we all were incredibly poor.

But because my community was so poor and so insular and because they had very little idea of what my peers' lived experience had been like going to a college that regularly educates some of the most privileged people in this country and in the world, I realized that I had little idea of what their experience had been like. And the same was true for them about me. Poverty, especially rural poverty in America, isn't an experience that's easily accessible to folks who haven't lived it. And the poverty that you see on TV isn't the poverty, that was my everyday life.

And so when I was in college, I was really facing this disconnect face to face and I felt the discomfort of it and I kept asking why this was happening, why there was experiences that I was having at a university full of opportunity that people around me weren't having because they had access to funds. The university undergraduate life wasn't necessarily constructed with poor people in mind. And again, just walking into spaces and knowing that there were people who literally gawked in my face when I said that I was so happy to be making $18 an hour. And they said to me, are my parents supposed to be impressed by that when I told them that they should consider getting a job also to make money in college?

That experience very much drastically shaped what I ultimately think my life work will be. So I am very interested why there weren't more poor rural people in higher educational spaces. And I'm very interested why there was such a discomfort, such a disconnect between my experience growing up in rural Texas and my ability to understand other people's experiences. So that very much shaped my desire to continue to graduate school where now at Stanford I specifically study how different groups of people, especially minoritized groups of people, are represented or misrepresented in the things we read and watch.

I specifically have an interest in representations of poverty and how America in particular reckons with this class underbelly that the American dream refuses to acknowledge. So my research, like Kay was saying, definitely benefits from the freedom that our department gives us to really push boundaries and to think interdisciplinarily, to think about the ways that the field hasn't fully represented different groups and different experiences in the past. And having Knight-Hennessy in conjunction with that has been a great opportunity to think about how my work as an English scholar is very much relevant to what's going on in the world and is very much connected to pursuing social good. So right now my research aims to better understand how writers and artists in the past have subverted stereotype to humanize different lived experiences. My long-term goal is to make full representation that captures
someone’s day-to-day experience as opposed to categorical representation. I want that full representation to be the norm and I don’t want full representation to stop there. For this to occur, I think we need diverse voices and experiences in every space, and this is just the start of that.

Taylor (15:04):
Thank you both for sharing your stories so authentically. That was really amazing to listen to. As a person also from a small town in the South, I really appreciate the perspective that you all bring Knight-Hennessy. And as a musician, I’m really excited by the fact that you choose the arts and humanities as a medium for social change. I want to dive a little bit deeper into something Lydia mentioned at the end of your answer. Why do you continue to choose English literature as your medium for your work, as a medium for representation? And in a world in which we see all these headlines about the death of the English major and questioning of the validity of the humanities, where do you see yourself in the community of social change? Why continue to use English literature as a medium for representation?

Lydia (15:53):
I think the tongue-in-cheek answer to that question is you and I are communicating in English right now, so English is very much something that is so deeply ingrained to what it means to be human. It’s how we communicate with each other. And there are so many biases or stereotypes or things that we’re not necessarily even questioning that are baked into the language that I’m very interested in pulling out and thinking about why, for example, we... Like the Norman English is to say that there has to be subject verb agreement where that limits a subject to he or her, he or she, or so many examples like that. (16:33):
I think one of the really great things, again about studying English at Stanford is we’re not just limited to books. I’m very interested, and I know Kay is also very interested, in English, broadly defined thinking about English as in literature, literature as in film, literature as in TV shows. There are so many different ways you could define it. I think the Nobel Prize for literature even went to Bob Dylan. So these categories, there are things to question, but yeah, I’d love to hear more from Kay also about why English and also thinking about all of the different ways that we define English, especially with your work with film and TV shows.

Kay Barrett (17:13):
Yeah, when I hear the question "Why literature?" my mind definitely goes to similar space as Lydia’s has, of thinking about literature in a very broad sense, literature being about the power of the word. And the word can be music, the word can be novels, poetry, film, television shows, or even stage performances as well. And to answer the question of why literature, for me it’s very personally rooted in what literature has done for me. (17:44):
I remember reading Beloved by Toni Morrison in a high school English class thinking about how amazing it was that her descriptions of enslavement and the fear of being captured again after you have fled from enslavement. Description both captures it but also makes you experience it as a reader, immerses you in that environment to the point where you cannot look away. I think that’s really the power of the word, is not letting you look away, making you really reckon with what’s being described and what’s being represented there. (18:22):
Let's say relating that to film, especially now with what's been done with special effects and with how we're breaking down barriers in film and allowing more people of different backgrounds to create film, you are really able to visualize and fully experience what it is like from a certain background. So I'm thinking about, for me, watching the movie Moonlight, that was another really incredible experience of being able to sit down and watch a movie and say, "Wow, I really feel as though I am witnessing part of the Black American queer experience." Power is something that as a scholar I really want to harness in my own writing and I want to show others, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, how they can turn to literature, film, plays, et cetera, to see that validation, to see it as a way of, "Wow, this is how I can see myself in the world and this is how I also can put myself into the world by creating those things myself."

Willie (19:26):
These responses are deeply reflective and evidence to people who really live into the scholar piece of Knight-Hennessy scholars. So I really appreciate the mention that you just put on the importance of words because it is something... Actually, it's something I realized about both of you all on separate occasions, both of you come up with different parts of Toni Morrison. I think it's two different events in Knight-Hennessy and it is really evocative when it comes to... Even Toni Morrison talking about, I remember in her documentary, The Pieces I Am, why she got into writing because of a story of someone writing a word, I believe, on her mother's postbox or something and seeing her reaction, right? It speaks to the importance of how do we make people feel in the 21st century.

(20:10):
Kay, you were talking about this past, present earlier when you talk about your grandfather and going to UVA and what that means and how you want to focus on the future when it comes to Black media. And Lydia, you were referring to this point of representation. It seems if there's almost an inherent tension in what is acceptable representation in the world we live in today. And so I'm wondering in all of that, where's there optimism and hope for the work that you're trying to do?

Kay Barrett (20:37):
A very charged word, also a very beautiful word. I've been thinking about a lot recently because the main theory of thought in Black studies right now, I would say arguably, is Afro pessimism. Afro pessimism is basically this theory, this lens for understanding the reality of Black negation or not being, that is the normativity of anti-Blackness in order for the world as we know it to exist. So if you've heard any phrases like the afterlives of slavery or read anything by Saidiya Hartman or Christina Sharpe, these are all operating in the mode of Afro pessimism. So we hope though is I think the work of Afro pessimism has enabled us to start thinking about Afro optimism, and that is the task of finding Black hope, joy, resistance and refusal despite Black negation and Black non-being.

(21:28):
So when I'm thinking about Black utopian thought, Black science fiction and a lot of work of Black feminist scholars, that's what gives me hope because these works of both fiction and non-fiction are really asking the question of, "How do we go on despite the normativity of anti-Blackness? How do we as a community within the Black diaspora still find hope and joy despite that?"

(21:54):
Specific examples, I really enjoyed watching Black Panther, right? Just thinking about Afro futuristic world that exists without being defined against whiteness, that to me is Afro optimism. And then thinking of a scholarly example, the work of Katherine McKittrick talking about Black feminist
geographies, thinking about ways that Black women have been trying to find ways to reclaim their bodies and to reclaim spaces in order to own what being a Black woman really is instead of having that being defined by masculinity or by white supremacy.

(22:32):
Lastly, I'll say I also get optimism from other people that are doing work like this. And Black studies are doing work in any sort of underrepresented sort of area such as Lydia, right? People who are saying, "I refuse to accept the way things are and I'll be the change that I want to see in this field and in this world."

Lydia (22:52):
Yeah. I really want to echo what Kay was saying. I think there's a lot of optimism reading the work and seeing people like Kay in our department doing this type of work, knowing that it's still very much alive and that we still have a lot of energy and fight left in us to continue pushing for these things. I also think there is, especially like you were saying, Willie, thinking about representation, especially representation of groups that are typically categorized in the media through a negative lens, whether that's thinking about it from how poverty is usually depicted. It's usually described as something that is inherently negative, is all consuming.

(23:44):
When you hear the word poverty, you think bad, right? For me, and this is actually an opportunity where the Knight-Hennessy programming allowed me to push back against that expectation, all of the first years in Knight-Hennessy are given the opportunity to tell a story to our cohort for five minutes after receiving some quarters of training from people who are in the theater and performance studies department at Stanford. I specifically chose to tell a story about all of the happiness that I remembered growing up because doing the work that I do, thinking about how often being poor or thinking about what it means to have no money in a country that's defined by money, how often that's described negatively, I can forget that there was a lot of joy in my life in those first few decades.

(24:43):
And so thinking about the power of storytelling, Taylor, you asked the question of why English and Kay was saying the power of the word, well also the power of the story, what it means to tell someone something so that they feel like they're standing next to you in that moment so that they can see that things are more complicated than a two-dimensional representation, that there's some texture, there's some feeling to it. I see glimpses of the type of representation that there to be more of in the media today, and that gives me some hope, that gives me some optimism.

(25:16):
I'm thinking specifically of Min Jin Lee and her book Free Food for Millionaires and how she represents poverty and the Korean immigrant experience in the Bronx. I'm thinking of Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's depiction of Dystopic Late Capitalism. Those are two people who are writing today, specifically writing in Min Jin Lee's case from a Korean American perspective, and from Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's case writing from a Black perspective in America and pushing against what it means to be an Asian American writer or what it means to be a Black American writer in really powerful ways.

(25:54):
And thinking about how I specifically got interested in this work, there was an essay that I read by James Baldwin that was written in 1949, the Preservation of Innocence. The Preservation of Innocence is an essay that Baldwin wrote, specifically interrogating how constructions of categories in American
literature specifically inherently dehumanize people and are incapable of capturing full characterization of a human. At the end of that essay, there's a quote where he says, "A novel consistently demands the presence of humans who cannot ever be labeled. And once a novelist has created a human, he has shattered the label." And when I read that in, I think it was my senior year, in a James Baldwin class with Jackie Goldsby at Yale, it just completely changed the way that I thought about literature looking at someone who was writing in 1949, a queer Black man at a time when being queer, being Black, there was not space to do that type of writing in the '50s.

(27:04):
And then to see the work that has subsequently been done since then, thinking about like Kay was saying, Toni Morrison specifically writing about the Black American woman experience. There's a rich tradition of this work and my goal is to hopefully make it more mainstream where that is the norm. That is not the exception. And that is the place of optimism for me, I think, thinking about how there's work that needs to be done in the research space that is being done. There's work that needs to be done and the representation space that is being done. And then there's also work that needs to be done in the structural space, thinking about what structural changes need to happen to address racism, to address economic inequality. And those things are also things that I'm very much committed to as a scholar, as a writer, as someone who is committed to fighting for social change. And so I'm optimistic because I still have life ready to keep going.

Taylor (28:03):
Lydia, thank you so much for taking a bit of a deep dive into what full representation looks like to you. And Kay, I wonder if you could pick up on that thread. I would love to hear about examples of what full representation has looked like in your life, whether that's in academia or in media or just your life in general. Could you pick up on that thread?

Kay Barrett (28:22):
Absolutely. I'm really interested in reaching a point where there is so much Black representation that we no longer are afraid to really engage with it. A really insightful article that was interviewing multiple Black cultural critics about the fact that since there are such few Black cultural critics and then such a small pool of Black media, it can be very difficult to engage in a critical way when you're thinking about the risk the producers, the higher-up saying, "Oh, you didn't absolutely love this? Then we're no longer going to cosign Black media anymore." We want to have a future in which there is so much Black media that we no longer have to worry about that problem.

(29:03):
There is space for there to be good and great Black representation. There is space there to be bad representation and there's space representation to fall in between those two lines, and that can just be normal. That is the norm representing heterosexual experiences and it has not been expanded to other groups of people. A good representation in fiction, I find, I already mentioned Moonlight. Moonlight to me is a great example of full representation, really diving into the minutia of what it is like to be a queer Black man.

(29:31):
So then switching over to representation in academia. When I'm thinking about representation in academia, I am thinking about specific people then. And for me, I have two cousins that are each professors at Washington and Lee, Dr. Lena Hill and Dr. Michael Hill. Lena actually is the provost of W&L. Look at their trajectory. It really inspires me to keep going forward because only 6% of the university
professors are Black and high-profile denials of tenure for Black academics, right? Cornel West and Nikole Hannah-Jones were both denied tenure initially by institutions that they had graduated from. I'm thinking about my cousins and where I would like to end up as an academic and as the representation that I too want to be once I finish my time at Stanford as a PhD student. I'm really trying to emphasize the importance of both fictional representation in order to be able to see yourself in the world, but also real representation. I do not think that you can have one without the other. You need to have both in order to actually create that social change.

Willie (30:38):
Appreciate that reflection. Something I'm gathering from both of your reflections is that the journey so far into PhD-dom, I don't know if that's actually a word, but I'll go with it, has been inspiring. It sounds like in some ways reassuring, it sounded nutritious, intellectually at least to say. Something I want to get both of your thoughts on are what are some of the challenges of PhD life? I think when it comes to looking at the academy, when it comes to looking at Knight-Hennessy, when it comes to looking at even in a place like Stanford, what are some of the things that are also challenging about being here and how have you all navigated that?

Lydia (31:30):
I can take the first stab. So I think I had a really roundabout way of getting into Stanford. So I had originally applied a year prior to Knight-Hennessy into a slew of PhD programs in the height of the pandemic, and I was rejected across the board. And so I think on the one hand, one of the things that was so difficult about that experience and came with me when I applied again a year later to Knight-Hennessy and to Stanford and then got into both is just recognizing how much I as a first-generation low-income applicant to graduate programs didn't know about the ways that I was supposed to present my research, the ways that I was supposed to present the things that I'm interested in the field, what the field even was just because I didn't come from a place where academics abounded. (32:34):
I came from a place where my step-parent worked at Walmart, if my parents had a job at all, so I didn't know how to do it. And there is a specific type of way to do it to be legible, which is rife with racism. It's rife with prejudice, with stereotyping. It prioritizes heterosexual white men from privileged backgrounds who have had access to resources, who have professor parents. And if you don't know that knowledge, then it can be incredibly difficult to succeed here and to learn. (33:12):
When I applied the first time and got completely rejected, and then when I applied again, it was incredibly challenging, battling the feelings of imposter syndrome, feeling like I didn't belong here, I wasn't good enough to be here. And then when I finally got here, feeling still again that there were new challenges to face because just because I got in didn't mean all of those lived experiences that I had in rural Texas went away. I still didn't necessarily know how to succeed in these elite environments and I had the privilege of going to an elite undergraduate degree, so I was better suited to do it by the time I got here than other folks are. But there is a specific type of academia and part of it is learning the language. Part of it is finding your community, finding people who share experiences that you also have, especially if you are from an underrepresented background. (34:11):
So for me it was really important to be a part of the formation of the first-gen low-income group in Knight-Hennessy because mine and Kay's English department, our cohort only has six people. And so
there wasn't any other first-gen people in our cohort. So I had to go elsewhere to find that community. And that was something that was really important to me, knowing that I had space to talk about what it meant to not have money and to be in a place surrounded by money, to have people make assumptions about my background because I was now at this place, to reckon with the fact that I now have a slew of privilege being at this place.

(34:51):
So it was a balancing act. I feel like I'm still learning, but super grateful to my cohort. I'm super grateful to Knight-Hennessy and to the people, both the people who share my experiences and the people who don't and to are willing to listen and willing to be allies. That has been a really great experience. But that is a challenge of the PhD, just getting here and then figuring out what to do once you're here. So yeah, that's what I'd say. I don't know. Kay, do you have anything you want to add?

Kay Barrett (35:21):
Something for me, I've contended with forever I would say, but have become conscious of it ever since high school, is an assumption of inadequacy. Though no matter how many accolades or stamps on my CV that I receive, there are going to be assumptions made about the quality of my opinions and the quality of my research and my racial background. That's something that externally and also comes internally from just what has happened to me in the past and then making projections of what is happening currently. I think one part that makes that difficult too is when you're in a class setting and something occurs, afterwards having to explain why that's something that occurred hurt in a certain way or why a certain comment that was made towards me perhaps when I've been made towards a white individual. That sort of burden of explaining or choosing not to explain and just taking care of it on your own, a really difficult thing to manage while you're also just trying to get the work. As Lydia mentioned, those of us who are from underrepresented backgrounds in these smaller cohorts can really feel that.

(36:32):
And so the fact that in my department, this year there were five Black students studying Black studies. The number will stay the same because we admitted only one Black student who's focusing on Black studies in the incoming class. Very small intellectual community, right? So that makes it difficult too because you feel like at a certain point, "How am I able to bounce off these different ideas about Black studies from a Black perspective if my intellectual community is going to be so small within my department?" One challenge too has been trying to look at other departments at other universities to try to grow that network of Black intellectuals that are working in Black studies to make that world feel a little bit more interconnected.

Taylor (37:19):
Amazing. Thanks so much for sharing more about your personal journeys, especially when it comes to the challenges that you face in your respective programs and how to deal with those. I think it's really helpful for people to hear about how you've reacted to and dealt with adversity even with your academic programs. I think something else people might be interested to hear, given that we have the advantage of having a couple of literary experts, is a couple of opinions. I'm sure that y'all being very well-read and very thoughtful people. Y'all might have a few hot takes about literature. And so I think maybe if we start with Kay and then give Lydia some time to offer any hot takes about literature that you think you'd like to share with the world.

Kay Barrett (37:59):
Okay, I'll start like this. As a literary person, I really hold my hot takes near and dear to my heart. One of my favorite questions that I used to ask people over at Oxford in my degree was, "If there was one book that you could kick out of literary canon, what would that book be?" And my answer to that question has always been Jane Eyre. I really think that Jane Eyre is one of the worst most popular books of the Brontë sisters. I pretty much so prefer Wuthering Heights. I think it is an amazing gothic novel, whereas Jane Eyre has been marketed as a feminist novel and to this day I cannot get behind that characterization.

(38:40):
My second hot take that tends to get me in a lot of trouble, I really dislike Where the Crawdads Sing. I think that if you're looking at some of the stereotypes of Black minstrel seed, they completely map onto how those characters are treated. The fact that she may or may not have been involved with this murder that happened when she was living in Africa, so there's that part too, the author that is. One sticking point that I'd love to point out too is that there's an animal in Where the Crawdads Sing that has a name and that name is the same name as the Black chef that worked for the author in Africa. And that right there in and of itself, inexcusable.

Willie (39:20):
Real quick, Kay. Where can people find the rest of these hot takes? Because I'm not going to lie, I found copious hot takes that existed on your social media profiles. So please let the people know where they can digest millions of Scoville units of hot takes.

Kay Barrett (39:33):
To hear more of my literary hot takes, head over to Instagram @barrettbookreviews. You can find lots of spicy content.

Willie (39:43):
Hilarious. So Lydia, those takes were very picante. Now, I'm unsure if you have any hot takes or just other reflections just as Kay was sharing about the hot takes, but any other aspects of English literature that you feel like either might be less known about or that you have a unique in particular and including distinct view on?

Lydia (40:07):
I first of all want to get behind both of Kay's hot takes. I think we're both reading right now for our qualifying exam, so we're really getting a deep dive into what other people have said the canon should be, which is a great opportunity for us to problematize why those things are the canon in the first place.

Willie (40:30):
And real quick, as you're mentioning that, for people who might not know, what are even qualifying exams and where does that sit in the PhD process?

Lydia (40:38):
So for Kay and I, we are both going to be reading 150 novels or other types of texts this summer going into our second year, which is aimed at giving us the breadth of the English literature canon. Jane Eyre is on that. Where the Crawdads Sing is thankfully not, but a good compliment to Jane Eyre is Wide Sargasso Sea, which is told from the perspective of Jane Eyre's husband's ex-wife who lives in the attic
and she is a Creole woman named Antoinette Causeway and they met at the Caribbean. So that is a nice way to round out some of our engagements with these texts. It gives us a lot of really fresh access to texts that I would rather not read. For me specifically, that's Shakespeare and that's a really hot take and that is what I'm immersed in right now, but I don't understand why he is so big. Really don't.

Willie (41:44):
Those are some great hot takes. Obviously, if people want to know more, you got to reach out directly. I don't want to get Lydia and Kay in trouble with the departments before the qualifying exams. What, Kay? Were you going to say something?

Kay Barrett (41:55):
I was going to say you don't want to start fights either because I love Shakespeare.

Lydia (41:59):
No, I cannot.

Willie (42:00):
I'll let y'all handle that offline. But before we get into our closing, actually Lydia, I want to follow up on something that Taylor and I talked about in getting to know more of your story, preparing for this conversation and know that coming from a small place in Texas and then going to New Haven where I don't know what the multiplier was, but I know Sofa Springs is around 16,000 people and New Haven is definitely at least two or three times that size. I don't even know the recent popping up.

Lydia (42:31):
I think it's like 10. 10, 15 times.

Willie (42:34):
Okay, cool. You've been reflecting on this, so a little bit implicitly about this access to education and what role that plays in people's ability to navigate these spaces more fluidly than others. So I'd love to get your thoughts real quickly before we get into the closing of just how you've been reflecting on access to education as someone who, if we use metrics like distance traveled, has gone a really long way and come a really long way to get to here.

Lydia (42:59):
Yeah, I think access to education is one really important part of what I would consider my ecosystem of service or the type of work that I want to do to enact social change. And so like Kay and I were both speaking to earlier, it can't just be representation on the page, it can't just be representation on the screen. We need to have people who are from these different backgrounds. In the writer's room, we need to have people who are from these different backgrounds. In academia, they need to be the scholars. They need to be in every single room and they don't need to have other people speaking for them. And so when you think about it from that perspective or why that representation hasn't happened thus far, part of it is because of access to education.

(43:53):
And for me, one thing that I am very much concerned with is what are the different pathways to increase access to education for folks from these backgrounds who have historically been denied that
access. Specifically in my case, what it meant to go to a place like Yale and New Haven from rural Texas where schools don't even release metrics on how many students from rural areas they have, where they do release metrics on how many first generation students they have.

(44:28):
One of the things that also thinking about it at the graduate level, that is yet another checkpoint where there are people at the gate preventing you from entering. If there are things that I have learned because I've come from this background in rural Texas because I was successful in getting into Yale, getting a full ride, because I then applied to twice and second time was successful with Knight-Hennessy and the Stanford PhD, then there are things that I want to share with people because certain folks from opportunity-rich spaces are guaranteed that information. They have the guidance counselors, they have people, their parents, their friends, their family, their community networks who can help them.

(45:17):
With some other folks that I met at Yale, we actually founded social enterprise called Sphero Education where we are doing this work to increase access to education. So for every three students who pay for our college advising, we fully fund one low-income student to receive the exact same services. This cycle, we actually got one of our scholarship students into Princeton, which is just incredible.

Willie (45:46):
Congratulations.

Lydia (45:47):
Thank you. Yeah, it's just incredible and we're so happy to already see the impact of our work within the first few years of this company's founding. And then it also is an opportunity for us to share our knowledge with folks who can pay for it knowing that what they're also paying for is increasing access to education for people who might not have otherwise had it.

Willie (46:09):
For sure. And it also begs the question to me of what are then the... For institutions at the time of this recording, we're coming off of the Supreme Court doing a bunch of stuff, making a bunch of decisions just laying waste to a lot... Or depending your perspective, lay waste to a lot. I want to be mindful of different perspectives. And it does bait the question though, like, what are the things that organizations and institutions can use to understand the breadth and depth of the communities they're building, right? You mentioned people from rural backgrounds for example, right? Or I've heard Harlem Capital talk about tenacities, like, "How many times did you apply to this thing? Is that actually a metric?" It's a little different with university obviously because that's one hitter quitter.

(46:51):
But something that you mentioned leads us into a little bit of our closing time, and that is... Taylor, do you want to start playing closing time? I'm on the guitar right now if you... But that question is, Lydia, you mentioned the people who are trying to get into these spaces and are knocking on the door and trying to get in. To that end, Kay and Lydia, what advice would you have to people who are seeking to apply to Knight-Hennessy and be at a place like Stanford?

Kay Barrett (47:24):
Wow. For those who are thinking about applying to a place like Stanford or for Knight-Hennessy I think is to imagine yourself there. I think sometimes that can be really hard if you're not seeing anyone who
Looks like you or seeing someone who's studying what you want to be studying or is coming from a place similar to where you're coming from, you can believe to imagine yourself there is really brave, it takes a lot of courage and that energy can propel you through what can be a pretty draining process.

(47:57):
Also say that taking the step to reach out or even respond when others are reaching out to you is something that can be really important as well. For me, when I was deciding whether or not I wanted to apply for UK fellowships honestly, or whether I wanted to apply for the Mayor's Scholarship at UVA made a difference when I just spoke those dreams into existence around people who were interested in supporting me. Anyone you can find that can be part of that support network, and sometimes it can be in unlikely places, tap into that energy to propel you through this process that is not developed to be kind, but you can be kind to yourself in the process of doing it by really believing in yourself.

Lydia (48:44):
And just to hop onto that, I want to echo everything that Kay just said, like having that support network, both applying to graduate school and then once you're here is so important, especially with PhD programs that oftentimes have less structure than other programs because each person has the ability to really dive into their specific research interests.

(49:09):
But the one piece of advice I would have for folks applying to graduate school, especially folks who come from backgrounds like mine where you don't necessarily know many people, if anyone who has a PhD or who has any kind of graduate degree, even if you have no idea how to get started, know that you can, know that there are people who share similar experiences with you who have been through the same process and know that there are people on the inside working to make it easier for the next group of people working to get in.

(49:43):
I was fully rejected the first time I applied, so keep trying, especially if that's what you really want to do because it can eventually happen. And then advice specifically for Knight-Hennessy, it's a separate application from your graduate school application. Knight-Hennessy is looking for something different than what your graduate program is looking for. And so, as you go into your Knight-Hennessy application specifically, one of the questions that was really helpful for me was asking, "How does my research relate to social good? What real world impact am I hoping my work will have?" And if you can shape your Knight-Hennessy application and that, maybe that will also shape what you ultimately want to study in graduate school. But thinking about those two applications as two separate things in conjunction with each other, working complimentary to each other, would be my biggest piece of advice.

Taylor (50:38):
And I think the advice that y'all are both giving in terms of the Knight-Hennessy application sort of relate to this idea of telling your story and revealing yourself authentically through the application. One of the things that I like the Knight-Hennessy does in terms of a novel approach to information gathering and storytelling is the Improbable facts section. The Knight-Hennessy application prompts you to share improbable facts about aspects of you experiences, traits, skills that are unlikely but true. And I think that can potentially reveal some really interesting things that might not be covered in other more traditional application prompts. I would love if y'all are comfortable with sharing, if you could each share a couple of improbable facts that you shared in your Knight-Hennessy application.
Lydia (51:20):
The first is I can hip thrust 300 pounds at the gym, and a video of me doing this got 800,000 views on TikTok. And then my other improbable fact was I pride myself on being a Coke carbonation aficionado. I know the difference between McDonald's carbonation levels from subpar competitors and I feel really strongly about this. So if you ever go anywhere with me and get drinks, just know that is something I'm thinking in the back of my head if I do not explicitly say it.

Kay Barrett (51:53):
Improbable facts. For one of them, in undergrad, I was in a Broadway-themed acapella group. Within that acapella group, I arranged a Sutton Foster medley. Sutton Foster was in Anything Goes, dated in musical theater workshops with Broadway stars and performed a mashup of Hamilton's Wait For It, and Fallout Boys' Centuries for Leslie Odom Jr. The original Aaron in Hamilton.

(52:20):
Another improbable fact is that I was one of 47 candidates chosen by my peers to live on the lawn at UVA. And if you're not familiar with the lawn at UVA, that is the center of the campus or as we call UVA grounds, there is no indoor plumbing, there is no air conditioning, and you sleep on bunk beds. But you have the bunk beds to yourself as one person. So basically, it is the most unglamorous place to live on grounds. It is also the second most expensive place to live on grounds, but they've made it into this whole honor where you're chosen by people in your fourth year to live there. So yeah, I had to put on a robe and go to a bathhouse when I wanted to shower during my last year of undergrad.

Willie (53:05):
My goodness.

Taylor (53:06):
That's crazy. Y'all both contribute so much to our community and are so passionate and it's really evident with just your humor and your ease with which you talk about what you want to do in the world. So thank you for everything you contribute to Knight-Hennessy community. Thank you for sharing with us and we're so excited to have people hear more about your stories and get to know y'all better through this episode of Imagine A World. Thank you all so much.

Lydia (53:26):
Yeah, thank you both. And just like Willie said at the beginning of the conversation, Kay and I cite our sources, so I want to give the credit to you, Willie and you, Taylor, for making this happen. And thank y'all too.

Kay Barrett (53:39):
Plus one on that. Thank you all so much for making this happen.

Taylor (53:46):
Thank you for joining us for this episode of Imagine A World where we hear from inspiring members of the KHS community who are making significant contributions in their respective fields, challenging the status quo, and pushing the boundaries of what is possible as they imagine the world they want to see.

Willie (54:03):
This podcast is sponsored by Knight Tennessee Scholars at Stanford University, a multidisciplinary, multicultural graduate fellowship program providing scholars with financial support to pursue graduate studies at Stanford while helping equip them to be visionary, courageous, and collaborative leaders who address complex challenges facing the world. Follow us on social media, @knithennessy, and visit our website at kh.stanford.edu to learn more about the program and our community.