INTRO: This is part 3 of my interview with Joshua Stephens. If you have not yet listened to the first two parts of this interview, I highly suggest you go back and do that first because they provide some really important context for this episode. Those first two parts were episode #156 and #157. If you have already listened to the first two parts, then please enjoy the conclusion of my interview with Joshua Stevens.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to talk to you now a little bit about your writing. And one of the things that you tend to do that I have noticed is you will take a topic, seemingly, perhaps from a macro level, as a non-political topic and you will interweave politics into the article. For example, while you were in Thailand, you wrote an article for Standart, which is one of the top coffee journals in the world, and you wrote an article for them about the coffee scene in Thailand. And I just want to read folks a real quick excerpt from it, this was at the very beginning, maybe the second paragraph or so of your article from Standart.

You wrote, "*complexities buried beneath official narratives resurface here like bodies of exiled dissidents in the Mekong. There are myriad unutterable yet open secrets, akin to the ghosts to which residents make daily offerings at the spirit houses to be found on every street in the kingdom. Such contradictions extend to the simple cups of coffee that that fueled daily life in the most visited city in the world*". And then it goes on and it's a long form article.

And your writings over the years that I've been following have really struck me in the way that you'll get commissioned to write a piece, whether it's about soccer or it's about coffee or it's about skateboarding or something. And then you will interweave politics into those articles and then place an incredible piece of prose in a very prominent journal and really provide a political education in addition to the topic that you're supposed to be writing on for the audience. And I'm wondering maybe just to start off this conversation, if you can share a little bit about that technique in particular and also maybe give some additional examples of how you've done that, just so folks can get a feel for some of the types of topics that you've written on.

Joshua Stephens: It comes from an appreciation of my own experience as a reader, and I've been an avid reader since I was 14 years old or something. It bears saying, I didn't just drop out of American University. I haven't graduated anything since kindergarten. I have been a beneficiary of being an autodidact, you know, and seeking out reading on my own, but also seeking out mentorship and guidance from people who had a lot of experience or a lot of expertise. But one of the things that I really love to encounter in writing is when somebody makes me fascinated with something that I didn't know I gave a shit about prior to that. And it's not just writing either. Sometimes it's interviews in podcasts or news shows or something like that. Somebody starts talking about something, I'm like, man, I would have never guessed that I gave a fuck about this. And now I'm fascinated.

So, like, a really good example is the Blizzard, which I did a piece for a couple of years ago. They published this piece about how I think it was in 1956, there was a Champions League game that Manchester United played in that was somewhere in Europe, maybe Budapest, I think. And on the flight back, the plane crashed and it killed half of Manchester United's squad. Massive trauma for the club, massive trauma for the fans. Still a thing that, like Manchester United fans grieve and mourn and, you know, talk about and have rituals around and whatever. What's talked about less is that also aboard that plane was about half of the people in England who covered soccer. So, about half of the journalist pool died on a flight overnight. It was cut in half. And the newspapers, the

dailies, and all of these that were covering soccer somehow had to reshuffle the deck to put people in place to cover what was happening, whether it was Champions League or the English League or whatever. And they had to bring people in from other beats and other desks. So, they brought people in from the arts and politics and human interest and crime. And those people had no acumen for covering sports because sports journalism was a relatively new thing at that time.

And so, they started imposing techniques and approaches that they had used in their other beats and their other spheres and at their other desks. And so now you have things like pitch side interviews and post-game press conferences and all these other sorts of things that we now take for granted as part of sports journalism. But the origin story was a plane crash. And I started reading this piece and I was just like, I'm not a Manchester United fan. But it's like that Ferris Bueller scene. He's just like, I did have a test today, it was on European socialism, but I'm not European, I don't plan on being European. So, who gives a crap if they're socialists? I had the same sort of thing reading the story, like, I'm not a Manchester United fan, I don't give a fuck about a plane crash, right? But then I'm like, holy shit. This tiny little thing reshaped this thing that we're all familiar with in some way, that kind of approach, approach to writing. I enjoy it as an experience when I read it, but I also feel like it's a really powerful way to stage a political intervention because it's a sort of, I don't know, it's kind of a bait and switch. It's like, oh, let me tell you about the history of drinking coffee outside the home in Bangkok. Surprise.

The first places that we're doing that were the result of Chinese migration. And the Chinese were the first people on the list when absolute monarchy was ended and guys who had a huge hard on for Japanese imperialism and Mussolini started looking for ethnic minorities to crack down on. So, you can't talk about drinking coffee outside at home in Bangkok without talking about the influence of Italian fascism on the Thai military and new constructions of what it means to be Thai and thus and the official application of Thai as a language and as the fact that it went from being Siam to being Thailand, which was the organization of the society around this one ethnic group and all these things. It's sort of like you, I got you in the room by making you think that we're going to talk about coffee. But the reality is what I'm about to do is refuse to participate in this bizarre compartmentalization of politics from these conversations.

And just refuse to say that there is some bright line between this thing that we're talking about and what is politically consequential for people's lives, and particularly the people who are adjacent to or engaged with whatever topic we're talking about. And that could be football, that could be coffee, that could be food. Like, for instance, football in Italy, they don't call it football, they call it *Calcio*. And *Calcio* comes from a game called *Calcio Fiorentino* or *Calcio Storico*, which was a game that was played in Florence. It's kind of like rugby. It's incredibly violent. Huge revival among fascists right now. But football was brought to Italy by British sailors who had ported in Genoa. And when Mussolini took power and was trying to construct this national identity around being Italian and whatnot, he could not countenance that the most popular sport in the country, which was like a religion for people, came from foreigners that was just not on the table. So, what he had to do was rewrite history and say that what people were actually excited about this game didn't come from British sailors. It's just a different version of this game that was played in Florence.

And so, the name that is used to refer to football in Italy is a historical revision that comes from the construction of Italian national identity under fascism. And so, it's impossible to have a

conversation about that without talking about that, without talking about the consequences of that. It's impossible to have a conversation about carbonara and not talk about that. It emerged as a way to basically lure American soldiers who had money to burn into restaurants after the fascists were kicked out of Italy. All of these things are always related to and influenced by and in conversation with things that are politically and historically consequential. And I really love sort of trying to convince people that this thing that they care about is political, that this thing that they care about is attached to something else and has a relationship with this other thing, and that this thing that they care about is instructive to their own worldview. Then they're already invested, right? Like, if we try to have a political conversation with them, you'll be like, fuck you. I don't do politics. I don't care. It's like, oh, but you're really into coffee, right? Let's talk about coffee.

And then we're not having a conversation about politics, we're having a conversation about coffee. And same with football, same with film, literature, poetry. All of it is embedded in our historical and political tailwinds. And so, I really love using what people perceive to be apolitical sorts of topics or concepts as a delivery system for critical conversations. I like being subjected to that bait and switch, even if it's not a political one. So, I enjoy that and I appreciate that, and it seems to be a really effective way of doing politics, particularly because these are spaces where these sorts of conversations are not typically happening. I'm not speaking to the choir when I do this sort of thing. I'm not interested in speaking to the choir for the amount of energy that I have to put into it. It feels like a much more consequential intervention to have that conversation with people who aren't anticipating it.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk about how traveling or being in transit or relocation or dislocation has impacted your writing?

Joshua Stephens: Yeah, I think dislocation is probably the defining and dominant thread in my life, generally. Just in as much as the perfectly normal and standard question that people ask of just like, where are you from? I can't answer that question. My life unfolded in a way that there's not any particular answer that I can provide that feels true. The place where I formed my memories is a place that I don't have citizenship. It's a place where I don't even speak the language fluently and at the time, didn't speak the language at all. The place that I lived in the United States before that, the place that I was born, I have no relationship with that. The place that I spent 15 years, which is the longest that I lived anywhere, I didn't move to until I was an adult. And so, I don't have a good answer to that. And at the same time, it's like, oh, you were raised in Sicily, so you must be able to get, like, Italian citizenship. Nope. You were raised in Sicily. That must be where your obsession with coffee started. Nope.

There are just so many sorts of discontinuities in that. And the fact that those discontinuities have been central and present in my life means that I think I'm much more intimate with the fact that those discontinuities and disjuncture's and dislocations are present in everything that we just sort of have this shorthand that we've gotten lazy with of. Just like, oh, well, you grew up in Italy. That must be why you're into coffee. No, these are just cliches. Right. And if we just dig slightly deeper, there's going to be a much more interesting story there. And I think that that is a feature of just how I see the world. When I wake up in the morning, I'm really fascinated with why a certain thing happened a certain way and whether the sort of going narrative about that thing is meaningful or interesting. And also, I really reject and resent the impulse to reduce things to simple answers

because we as a species are just so messy and so complicated, and the reality of what happens around us is so much more dynamic and unpredictable and unexpected.

And on some level, by not acknowledging that, by opting out of that and opting for these lazy, reductive explanations of the world, we. We deprive ourselves of the opportunity to experience wonder. The thing that always jumps out for me, and I still obsess about, is I worked for the language learning app Babbel for a number of years, and a computational linguist that I worked with there was doing a research project on something, and she stumbled on this little piece of trivia that she recounted to me, which was that until hip hop arrived in Japan, Japanese apparently had no concept of rhyming. To think that there was a language in the world that didn't have a concept of rhyming until the 90s is bananas. But especially Japan produced haiku, one of the most revered and predominant forms of poetry that the world has ever engaged with. But the reality is that haiku is organized around meter. It's not organized around rhyming. So, it's perfectly plausible that this language didn't have rhyming.

It's still paradigm fucking. But like, the fact that that was possible means that there are so many other unlikely narratives and unlikely turns and unlikely explanations for things that we're not taking into consideration. And I think that taking into consideration and absorbing those sorts of things, it's almost like that conversation that I had with those Israeli activists. It's just like, whoa, whoa, aren't you worried about how homophobic and sexist these Palestinians are and whatever? And I was just like, my man, if you think that there aren't Palestinian feminists or queer Palestinians, man, you have really missed the fucking memo about humanity. Because those harder acknowledgments and those more complicated explanations for things and those more complicated realities, the sort of wrinkle that is always present in things, that shit is really profoundly socially and politically consequential.

And I think the fact that I was living for my teenage years, for the most formative years of my life, as this foreigner in this culture that I couldn't really access because of the language barrier. And in this context, where, like, the people that were most like me and that I was most sort of equipped to engage with, I fucking hated and wanted nothing to do with. I had to figure out how to be in that messiness and that complexity. Even when I was growing up, gaming was really starting to take off. Nintendo, Sega, all that shit came out of, like, the mid-80s, right? In Italy, they had to completely rebrand the marketing of the Sega gaming system. Because in Italian, the word SEGA is the word for saw, like a hacksaw. In slang, it's the word for jerking off. And so, they were running these commercials, they would say things like, Sega buona entertainment. And it just was like a laughingstock. So, they had to rebrand it. So now if you go to Italy and talk to somebody about gaming, they're SEGA which is, in terms of Italian phonetics, completely incorrect. But that was the thing that happened because they were trying to brand this thing that was about jerking off.

And those sorts of things are so fucking fascinating. And I just feel like we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to experience wonder and fascination about how complex we all are and how messy we all are. And I think that that discontinuity and those wrinkles and those disjuncture's and those spur in the gears is oftentimes a rich opportunity for political intervention. And I gravitate toward it because it's like the thing that I know, it's the thing that I grew up in. It's the thing that I feel most intimate with. And when I see it, I'm like, yeah, that's my thing. For me as well, my option was that or these fucking idiot fascist narratives of the military community. It was that or the Gulf War. Those

things that are sort of stick in the spokes or the discontinuity or the thing that's counterintuitive. That was always the place of possibility for me. And so now when I think about writing, I'm always looking for those places of discontinuity and the things that don't seem to be connected. And knowing right off the bat that if I start digging and looking for a plausible connection between those things, the story is very likely to be fascinating.

Matt Bowles: What are some of your main sources of stylistic inspiration for your writing? And how has your style of prose evolved over the years?

Joshua Stephens: So, my first book, it's like an industry memoir. Let me take you behind the curtain and show you what a person working in this trade sees. And again, that was a covert delivery system for politics. It was like, I'm going to get you in with this dog on the COVID and surprise, the book's not really about dogs at all. It's about the way gentrification operates and labor exploitation and all of these things that at the time I was observing and now are front and center in gig economy stuff. So, writing that, I had had those stories kicking around in my head for a long time, and I had been chewing on the possibility of doing that book for about four years. Have you ever read any of, like the situationist stuff?

Matt Bowles: Nope.

Joshua Stephens: Okay, so the Situationists were this avant-garde Marxist group in France in the 50s and 60s. And they're known for this sort of abstract, esoteric, very wordy, arty manifestos and whatnot. And I actually think that that's the least interesting thing about them. They issued this pamphlet in the 60s, before the Paris 68 uprising, called On the Poverty of Student Life. And it was about the desperate situation of students and the bleak sort of possibilities in front of them. And it is this very wordy and complicated and sometimes inaccessible language and whatever. But in this pamphlet, there's a passage. I wish I committed it to memory, but it basically is like a string of sentences about all the ways in which students are exploited and the capitalist mechanisms and all these other sorts of things, and the place of education in a hyper capitalistic economy. And like all this stuff, it's like a bunch of paragraphs about this. And then there's this one line that says, the university only stops buggering the student long enough to come around and shit on his face. That's the actual line, verbatim, in the middle of this really impenetrable Marxist text. And they did that all the time.

I have plenty of critiques of the situationists, but I loved that about them that they could hook you into these sorts of things where you're reading what feels like really dense political analysis and political theory. And then there's just this like string of obscenities that stops you in your tracks. And I really liked that and its place in political writing. And then at the same time, when I was initially writing for like punk magazines and stuff in like the late 90s, early 2000s, there was this website in LA called Buddy Head that was one of the first widely read music blogs. And they were famous for a monthly gossip column that they did. But the way that they wrote this stuff was so tightly wound, it was so caustic, so funny, so confrontational. So irreverent and there was just no fat on it. It was perfect prose. And I don't think anybody at the time really appreciated. Like, everybody talked about their irreverence. Everybody talked about how they didn't get. They weren't scared of anybody and they weren't buying into any of the cliches or hype or anything, but nobody really talks about it was brilliant writing. In the same way that if you look up Russell Brand's writing for The Guardian from nine, 10 years ago, some of the most tightly wound, well executed prose you'll ever read in the

English language, he wrote an obituary of Margaret Thatcher that is fucking incredible. Like, it is an excoriation of her legacy, but in a brilliant piece of prose. And I really appreciated Buddy Head for that.

And so, when I wrote my book, I wrote it in that voice. That was my reference point, was, how would this feel if it was the gossip column on Buddy Head? And people who reviewed it even talked about that. They said, like, sometimes it feels like getting swatted with a rolled-up newspaper. And I empathize with that because that was actually partially what I was trying to do. Now I'm not so invested in being that confrontational. I have, in not so recent years, done a few blog pieces, like for the Melville House blog, where I kind of did the same thing. Very snappy, very punchy, very abrasive. But nowadays I really just want to create experiences for people. I really relish writing that makes me forget that I'm reading. I really relish writing where I'm not aware of the fact I'm reading. I'm just experiencing what's happening. And it doesn't matter if it's fiction, nonfiction.

And so that's really where my attention goes when I'm putting things together now is kind of thinking about what sort of experience am I creating from for the person who's reading this or the audience that's reading this? And in what ways can I leave them really shook by the end? In what ways can I leave them breathless by the end of it? In a way that they're still thinking about a week later or two weeks later or months down the line? Like, how do I construct and organize this information in a way that that that's the end result. And sometimes, you know, maybe that's about comedy, sometimes maybe that's about something deeply emotional and even sad. Or sometimes just about, like, being shocked and surprised or having just experienced something that felt very cinematic but completely unexpected. That's kind of where my head goes now, because that's the kind of writing that I really enjoy. That's the kind of experience that I really appreciate having. And that's kind of what I want to put out in the world.

Matt Bowles: What tips do you have for writers or aspiring writers on honing the craft and really taking their writing to the next level?

Joshua Stephens: They're going to sound really rudimentary and incredibly simple, which I apologize for. But I promise that the things that pushed me as a writer were, first of all, read. It's a process of osmosis. It's the same way that we learn language. We learn language because we mimic the speakers that we hear around us. And that's how we figure out how to organize thoughts and even organize the thoughts that we have inside our heads and how we talk to ourselves. So, read as much as you can. Read everything. Read things that you're not interested in. Just read constantly. Don't stop. That's the first thing. And I know that's something that anybody who writes will tell you.

But when I talk to writers, a lot of times I'm doing editing for writers who come out of social movements. And writing for social movements, there are certain expectations because it's almost like a religious community. There's certain orthodoxies and certain truisms and certain forms that are expected. And if you don't conform with that, then people don't necessarily take to it. And for people writing for social movements, there's an impulse and a sort of self-imposed obligation for whatever you produce to be immediately usable, immediately instrumentalize, that it should be a toolkit. If that's your orientation going in, you have radically narrowed the possibilities for what you can execute. If somebody, say, like a coder or like a web developer or something, says, what would you recommend? If I wanted to become a better writer, I know it sounds shitty, but I just say subscribe to the New Yorker and read it cover to cover every week. Read the things you don't think

you're interested in. Read the book reviews, read the theater reviews of plays you'll never go to in New York. Read all of it and just keep doing that for six months. And then try writing something because you're going to absorb a really highly calibrated approach. I mean, the style guide for the New Yorker is legendary.

So, I'll make that recommendation. Just absorb the habits that make that what it is. And then additionally think about scope. I think the big mistake that a lot of people who want to write, whether it's something they're assigned or like something they take up is they think that the measure of a good piece of writing is it being comprehensive. Because they're anticipating the critique, they're anticipating the rebuttal. They're anticipating the flaws that people will find in it and the ways that people will say, well, you didn't talk about this, or you didn't cover this. The thing is, no piece of writing that any of us is ever going to do is the only thing that's going to be said on that topic. It's probably not the only thing that we're going to say on that topic. So, you don't have to do everything. And if an editor says to me, you've got 1800 words to do this, I know that with 1800 words, I can probably cover three things with an interesting level of depth, tops. And that means that I then have an economy that I have to work in, and I have to start making decisions about what to include, what not to include, how those things work together and what they do in combination, and whether the end result is greater than the sum of the parts.

But for me, when I'm making those decisions about that economy, my thinking is, what's going to create an experience? Like, what experience am I trying to create for people? And what combination of elements creates that experience? So, understanding, scope, and giving yourself permission to focus on what you want to focus on and not cover every base is huge. Because I think that that's a lot of what accounts for writer's block for people is they're just like, well, I don't know how to start because I don't know what to cover. Just focus on what you think is going to create an experience and think about what you want that experience to be. And that's the point. And then the other tips are really kind of rudimentary. One, don't start two sentences in the same paragraph with the same word. Just don't people spot it. And what happens when you do stuff like that is you remind the reader that they're reading, because instead of actually experiencing what you're talking about, they're taken out of that experience to acknowledge, oh, I saw that word, like two lines ago.

The other thing that I do is I say, and this was something that was beaten into me in writing classes and stuff, just even high school English classes. And it's not really a hard, fast rule, but it's a good guideline, is don't end sentences in prepositions. And, you know, when I was taught that, it was because it was like, improper grammar or something. And now, rightfully, we're more loose with that because it is how we speak. We know what we mean. We're not really losing meaning by doing that, but by precluding yourself from doing that. What happens is you're forced to construct sentences differently. When you can't end sentences in to with about, it forces you to construct prose differently. It forces you to think harder and be more deliberate and creative about how you string words together, how you organize information, how you order information, whether the order of information and the grammar that you're using causes interference on the channel, whether it corrodes the meaning, whether it loses information, and then you have to go back and rework it again to get as much of that information through in that sentence as possible.

And by simply disallowing yourself the option of finishing that sentence and a preposition, you're forcing yourself into that process. And so, I think those things in total is just like, read. Write about

what you know. Write about what you're passionate about. Don't worry about what you think people want to hear about. And then avoid repetition and give yourself hard boundaries that force you to construct prose differently. And right off the bat, it's not going to change your life or anything. But over time, as you become more conversant in and dexterous with that, I think you're invariably going to start to produce better writing. And I think constraints are a big part of that. You know, that preposition thing is a constraint. Constraints aren't always limiting. They're just productive.

And saying, I'm going to write a story about my neighborhood falafel guy, I'm going to give myself 1600 words. That's a constraint. And that means that you have to create the maximal sort of outcome within 1600 words. Don't start a piece and be like, I'm just going to write until I'm done. That just becomes a morass. It has to have constraints in order for it to have intelligibility and in order for your objective to have intelligibility. So, I think, like, imposing constraints on the process is super important. If an editor gives me a commission for something on a topic, the first thing I ask them is, what's the word limit? Because if it's 5,000 words, it's going to be a much different piece than if it's 3,000 words. And I need to know what the sort of ecosystem I'm working in or what sort of economy I'm working in in order to really organize that in a way that's going to be an effective experience for someone.

Matt Bowles: I know you've been influenced and inspired by a lot of different people. One that I want to ask you about, though, in particular is the impact that James Baldwin has had on you. And you can speak about that either in terms of writing, in terms of political analysis, in terms of his travels, however you want to handle that question. But how has James Baldwin impacted you?

Joshua Stephens: Small footnote to that. Do you know who told me to read James Baldwin?

Matt Bowles: Who?

Joshua Stephens: Steve Aoki.

Matt Bowles: Steve Aoki, the mega DJ?

Joshua Stephens: The one. He was a straight edge punk from Southern California and played in a bunch of bands. And he booked shows at the Biko House, which was this, like, lefty student organizer house. He did a degree in women's and gender studies. His biggest band's album was called Murder in the Audubon Ballroom. He was super into people of color, liberation movements, intersectional politics. And I had a year, actually it was 2002, where I was just like, you know, I've read a lot. I think my reading has skewed to white authors. Like, I've mostly read white people. And so, this year I'm just not going to let myself read white people. I'm only going to read things. I'm not putting any other constraint on it, but it's just like, I'm just not going to read white people this year because I need to balance that out a little bit.

And Steve and I were friends back then because he was not DJ Steve Aoki yet. And I was chatting with him online and I was just like, man, you're really into a lot of this stuff. What do you recommend I read? And he was just like, dude, James Baldwin. Just read James Baldwin. And so, I did. I read a lot of James Baldwin that year. And yeah, I mean, talk about somebody who had incredible focus in his work, but who also was really deep with the complexity and messiness of people and his ability to convey that in ways that were both spacious and sort of acknowledging the

historical context that people were entrapped in and the ways that they were conditioned and how that made them flawed and all of these things.

In one of his essays, he talks about the first time he went to the South, I think to cover either desegregation of schools or maybe it was like voting rights stuff. I think it was desegregation of schools. That's what it was he was covering. And he's talking about interviewing this principal at the school or this superintendent or something, and how the things that this guy was saying were so condescending and paternalistic, even though he didn't intend them to be. And he describes it as the fraud and folly of good intentions. And I just. Oh, fuck, man. I just thought, that's everything that's ever gone wrong in every political meeting I've ever been part of.

There's a certain fraud in the performativity of really shallow sorts of versions of deep politics. And then there's also just the folly of being naive and over enthusiastic. And it's all swirling around good intentions which mean nothing. And his ability to synthesize those things. He has moments of rage. He has moments of blinding rage. You know, you read notes of a Native Son and you're just like, I don't know how every black man doesn't just rip the throat out of every white person he passes on the street. Genuinely don't know how that doesn't happen. That was my thought after I finished that. And at the same time, a really deep humanity. And also, like, a capacity to critique people who were his peers. And the ways he went at Richard Wright and stuff like that. Just incredible, fearless sophistication. And then his novels are all over the place. Everybody touts, go tell her on the mountain.

And I'm just like, am I the only one that felt like that was like a David lynch movie? Like, I don't even know what the plot to that book was. It's just a fever dream of generational trauma and people's fucking dark backstories and all this crazy shit, right? But, like, there is no, like, beginning, middle, end to that. It's just this roller coaster of sensory overload of trauma and darkness. And then you have another country, which is ensemble anthology, something akin to some of these Netflix series, where every episode is a different story, but the characters kind of overlap and they're all set in Chicago or something. And it's this similar sort of thing. And you get to the end and you realize that everybody in the story except for one person, was at least bi. Cause they're all fucking each other. These incredible sorts of entanglements and self-discovery and catharsis and like, all these things going on in this.

And then in the end, he says, love is another country. Love is this space that we step into that forces us out of what we know and forces us into that discomfort of unfamiliarity and vulnerability and disorientation. And love is being dropped into a thing that you don't know and that you're not prepared for and you don't know how to navigate and you're going to fuck it up, and you're probably going to hurt people, and you're going to get hurt, and you're not even going to have it fully made sense of until you're out of it. Just that line is like, fuck, how did you land on that? Yeah, every turn. And he never loses his cool. The one exception is that book of conversations he has with Margaret Mead. There's a moment where he talks about. He's just like, yeah, fuck America. Burn it to the ground. It's irredeemable. Like, whatever. She's like, you don't really mean that. And he's, like, going off the handle, making these really sweeping sort of negations, and she's just like, you don't really believe that. And he's, I absolutely do. And it's a total departure from everything else he's ever said. But he just has this one moment where he loses his cool.

Everything else about what he does is this Bruce Lee level of composure. And I can't think of very many people who have such a deep command of how to draw that experience out in us and at the same time be so prescient and so penetrating and so humanizing. I think Arthur Miller had something he said where he was like, if you're going to make me seasick, at least show me where the railing is. And I think, like, Baldwin was really good at that. He made you incredibly fucking nauseous. And at the same time was always like, this nausea that you're experiencing is not an excuse for fatalism. That there is still some redemptive potential. There is still this thing that we can access, and I'm going to show you what that is and where to access that and where to channel that. And I don't know of anybody sparing, maybe Audre Lorde, who did that so beautifully.

Matt Bowles: Well, Baldwin was also a world traveler and spoke a lot about the impact that those travel experiences had on him, personally and politically and impacted his writing and all that. And I'm wondering for you, as you reflect back on all of your years of travel, how has travel impacted you and why do you choose to continue to travel? What does travel mean to you?

Joshua Stephens: Hmm. I think part of that intimacy with discontinuity and the sticks and the spokes and the things that gum up the gears and disrupt conventional narratives and inherited wisdom and all those sorts of things, I think that being so saturating in the formative years of my life. I think that that has cultivated in me or planted in me a sort of deep and Passionate curiosity for its own sake as an end unto itself. I am just always hungry to be staring in wonder at something. And sometimes that's really little things. You've been to Istanbul, right?

Matt Bowles: Yep.

Joshua Stephens: So, you've taken the ferry over the Bosphorus, right? So, like, the Asian side?

Matt Bowles: Definitely. Yep.

Joshua Stephens: Presumably you have sipped tea out of one of those glasses on that boat.

Matt Bowles: Yep.

Joshua Stephens: Top three experiences in my whole life. I'm not kidding. It's so simple. Taking a ferry from Europe to Asia for the price of a Metro ticket and sipping tea out of a glass next to that window on that hard wooden bench. I've done that ride multiple times. I told someone I loved them on that bench, at that window, on that ferry with a glass of tea in my hand. And those sorts of moments of deep presence. It's very easy, I think, to get caught up in our own heads and caught up in our own sort of community experience. I had this habit of doing that, and then I would be somewhere and I would just. It would just hit me. I'd be like, holy shit, I'm in Santiago. How fucking unlikely. Nobody else in my life right now is in Santiago. I nearly got kidnapped in the Sinai in 2013. And I was standing in the middle of the desert next to a barricade of flaming tires. I was the only foreigner on that bus, so I knew if they came for anyone, it was going to be me. I had $50 to my name tucked in my sock so that if they took my wallet, I didn't lose my money.

And I'm standing there, and I'm not sure if I'm even going to look live to see the morning. They're Bedouins. And the Bedouins have a reputation for pretty cushy hostage situations, so I know my odds are good. But in that moment, in that experience, probably smart to not to take anything for granted or be particularly cavalier, because people do get killed. And so, I'm standing in the fucking

desert, and this is a moment where I've sold my body to science and run my life into the ground and been effectively homeless for the best better part of a year in order to, like, chase down these Arab anarchists and interview them for interviews that nobody back home gives a shit about and cares about. And the few people who are ready are like, fuck this guy. And here I am, and I'm like, what was all that for? If it all ends tonight, what was all that for? It accomplished nothing. And I'm standing there in the desert, and it's the Dead of night, there's not much to see in any direction.

And I swear to God, out of sheer boredom, I just looked up and I saw the Milky Way for the first time. I mean, the night sky in the Sinai is one of those things where you go, holy shit, this is why people invented gods. How, with an historically primitive set of reference points for anything. Could you look at this and not think that there were celestial beings? This is fucking unreal. And all of this has been around me my whole life, and I didn't even know it. And I had this moment of, like, nobody else in my life is looking at this right now. And then I had the thought, man, fuck it, if they behe ad me. I got to see this. That's kind of what it is for me. Inject that into my fucking veins. You know, like, that drive is really central for me.

And I think part of it is that in the phase of my life, when I was coming into what I would be as an adult, I was surrounded by a language I didn't understand. I was surrounded by conversations that I didn't know what was being said. I was using a currency that I didn't grow up with. I was eating foods that I had never encountered. I was seeing refugees from North Africa, and my apartment in Sicily looked out of this, like, hill down to the coast, and right off the coast are a set of rocks jutting out of the ocean or jutting out of the sea that, according to history, were thrown there by the Cyclops. I don't know. That's the shit that makes me feel like I don't know anything. And something about that feeling like I don't know anything feels like home, because that was what I grew up with. That's what it is for me.

Matt Bowles: I think that is the perfect note to end this conversation and move in to the final part of the interview. Joshua, are you ready for *The Lightning Round*?

Joshua Stephens: I believe I am ready.

Matt Bowles: Let's do it. All right. I normally ask people to name one book, but since you are a writer, I'm actually going to ask you to recommend three of your favorite books.

Joshua Stephens: Yeah, so the first on that list is, for sure, Sister Outsider by Audre Lorde, for a variety of reasons. One, of course, is that I think it was probably kind of the inaugural sort of opening in which intersectionality really got elaborated in a. In a meaningful way. But also, you know, that book contains essays like the Uses of the Erotic, which is like a roadmap for how to establish meaningful priorities in your life. The central place of passionate conversation or what if your life was organized around having passionate conversations with people and like, how would that change your life? That kind of stuff. I read that book 20 years ago and I still think about it and it still influences my decision making.

And then the second would be a lesser known and less celebrated of John le Carre's novels. It's called Our Game, and it's told from the perspective of a British intelligence handler who I believe is retired. And he gets a visit from some police who tell him that a bunch of money has been embezzled from his former workplace under credentials that are his. And he finds out that it's this

asset that he had handled and converted and recruited out of leftist movements and kind of corrupted. And additionally, his much younger girlfriend has also gone missing. And so, he has to undertake this journey to kind of clear his name, but in the process is learning how he ruined these two people. And it's a really unflattering portrait, this journey through this guy, discovering how the way he had spent his life had completely broken to people in ways that caused them to hurt him. And I still think about it all the time. And nobody who's like a John le Carré fan, no article I ever see about John le Carré ever talks about this book, but I think it's incredible.

And then the third would be Gut Symmetries by Jeanette Winsterson. Again, like a less celebrated work of hers, she's mostly known for Orange is the Only Fruit and the Passion and things like that. But Gut Symmetries is people, research novels, research characters, research material and stuff. And in order to be able to provide context for a story or whatever, this book is about a love triangle passed through the dual prisms of an incredible command of the intricacies of physics and digestion. And for one person in one lifetime to have accumulated the understanding of either one of those two things that is on display in this would be astounding. And her command of both of them is incredible. And the fact that she uses them as these sorts of prisms for talking about this love triangle is incredible. Left me breathless. I still remember sitting on a plane when I finished it and just being like, what the fuck did I just read?

Matt Bowles: Well, you are also one of my consultants when it comes to coffee. You write about it. I know it's also a central piece of your travel experiences when you are visiting or living in different places around the world in terms of coffee shop culture and so forth. And so, I want to ask for Your recommendations for your top three favorite coffee shops anywhere in the world.

Joshua Stephens: Top of the list is Ant Day in Bangkok. There's a place in Bangkok on the bank of the Chao Phraya called River City. And it's basically by all appearances a shopping mall, multi-story, very glitzy, like whatever, but instead of being a shopping center, it's a bunch of art museums and gallery spaces rented by artists. And almost all of it is free. And on one of the floors of this place is this laboratory of coffee called Ant Day, which is a weird translation of a word in Thai, Moan, which is a word that describes the experience of being so immersed in and intoxicated with an activity that the day passes without you noticing. Which I can't believe we don't have a word for that. I love that the Thais have a word for that because it's such a great concept. Probably the best coffee in Asia, maybe even the best coffee I've had anywhere. And the fact that you can take it and then walk-through free photo exhibits and art galleries and stuff is magical.

The second would probably be Nomad Coffee in Barcelona, one of the better known, higher profile places in Barcelona. But what I like about them is the baristas are really willing to talk you through what you're looking for, what kind of notes you're looking for, what kind of experience you're looking for. And they'll do this in Spanish, Catalan, English. I've sat there multiple times and watched them really gregariously and non-condescendingly walk people through a really rich experience of coffee. And I just think that that's such a diamond in the rough that I would have to put it at the top of my list. Like anytime I'm there, I go there.

Matt Bowles: And number three?

Joshua Stephens: Timeless in Oakland. Timeless is a coffee roaster, cafe and vegan bakery run by some vegan straight edge folks in Oakland. And it is phenomenal as a space. The best vegan

cheesecake I've had anywhere. I used to spend stretches in Oakland and I would go sit there and write and in the course of like three hours I would see half of the people I know in Oakland. So, I would just post up there just to like see people because I didn't have their phone numbers or didn't have their emails and not being in the U.S., I miss being able to go there.

Matt Bowles: All right, of all the places that you have now been to, where, what are your top three favorite travel destinations you would most recommend people check out?

Joshua Stephens: Barcelona. I just feel like at this point my end game is growing old there. Every time I'm there, I just think, why don't I live here? So, Barcelona, top of the list. Ho Chi Minh City. Very Barcelona. Like, actually, but Ho Chi Minh City for sure. Diamond in the rough. I don't feel like many people talk about it, and it's fantastic. And then Buenos Aires. I spent a month in Buenos Aires in 2002 and have not been back since. And, man, if I die without going back to that city, I'm going to be really bummed.

Matt Bowles: All right, what are your top three bucket list destinations? These are places you've never been highest on your list you'd most like to see.

Joshua Stephens: Until recently, I definitely would have said Beirut, but given the situation there right now, I think that is probably out of the running for some time to come. I would say. You know, generally speaking, I don't think about travel so much in terms of specific locations as much as sort of vicinities and places that are in proximity to one another and what the relationships are between those places. And so, Indonesia comes to mind. I am fascinated with that place. And it is such a vast archipelago, and just like so many different things happening and such incredible history. 100% Want to go to Indonesia.

Same goes for the Caribbean. You know, I lived in Bermuda for two years, but Bermuda is actually technically in the Atlantic, and I've never been anywhere in the Caribbean. And so, if I could live on a boat for a couple months and just, like, shuttle between Jamaica and Cuba and the Doctor and fuck it, I'll go to the Caymans, any of it, I would absolutely do it in a heartbeat. And then the last one is Iceland. I have passed through that airport so many times and never left the airport. And again, it's a place that's kind of an interest, this. Right? Like, historically, like, it's that space between Europe and the United States and Canada, and there's so much history that passes between and through that space that, yeah, I 100% want to stand in it.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. Who is one person currently alive today that you've never met that you'd most love to have dinner with? Just you and that person for an evening of dinner and conversation.

Joshua Stephens: This young writer in London named Joel Golby, who probably nobody has heard of. He wrote initially for Vice, and then he did a book, and now, I think has been doing a lot of pieces for The Guardian. I guess it's fair to say he's a more abrasive version of David Sedaris and much less autobiographical to give you some context. There was this viral video years ago that went around of a confrontation between a driver and a cyclist in London. And the driver chases after the cyclist who is filming and tries to kick the bike as the cyclist is running away and loses his balance and eats shit and just face plants on the street. And this video went viral and it was called the Peugeot dad video. And Joel Golby wrote this piece for vice versa that breaks it down like it's a Renaissance painting. And it's one of the funniest fucking things I've ever read in my life. He like describes the moment

where this guy kicks and loses his balance and he goes, but his foot, his Judas foot. And it's like some of the funniest shit I've ever read. And I would be fucking love to have dinner with that guy.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. All right, final question. Knowing everything that you know now, if you could go back in time and give way one piece of advice to your 18-year-old self, what would you say to 18-year-old Joshua?

Joshua Stephens: I would say your inability to control everything is not a failure of character. The world's just bigger than you. And further, that like acceptance is a grammar for living. Knowing what you can't beat or can't change, no matter how hard you struggle against it, is an opportunity to get deep with the things that are actionable and the things that are available to you. And that includes creating things that have never been done before. And I think I spent a lot of time feeling like everything was a life-or-death thing and if I failed to exercise control over it, then I was somehow a lesser person. I might also tell 18-year-old me that exercise isn't just for jocks.

Matt Bowles: Awesome advice. All right, Joshua, I want you to let folks know how they can find you, follow you, connect with you, read your writing. How do you want folks to come into your world? How can they find more of you?

Joshua Stephens: I think probably through Twitter and Instagram are probably the places where you're probably going to encounter most of me. A lot of my writing lately has ssbeen print only and I'm perfectly happy about that. But I'm on Twitter, *Joshua Stephens*. And then you can search for me on Instagram, but I have such a generic name. There are probably a million people, but my handle is, it's *jshua_stephns*.

Matt Bowles: Okay, we are actually going to link up in the show notes all of your social media handles. So, folks could just go to one place at themaverickshow.com go to the show notes for this episode. There they're going to find your social media handles. They can just click on them and follow you that way. We are also going to link up all of the book recommendations, coffee shop recommendations and other things mentioned in this episode. So just go to one place at themaverickshow.com, go to the show notes for this episode and there you will find everything we discussed today as well as how to connect and follow Joshua. Brother, this was an unbelievably epic and amazing and inspiring conversation. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Joshua Stephens: Dude, thanks for having me on man.

Matt Bowles: All right, good night, everybody.