

# FROM 'I' TO 'WE'

Cultural critic Margo Jefferson speaks at UO on the role of the 'citizen-critic'

Pulitzer Prize-winning cultural critic, journalist, author and professor Margo Jefferson speaks at the University of Oregon 7:30 pm Wednesday, May 30. The Oregon Humanities Center will host Jefferson as a part of its yearlong "We the People" series.

Jefferson is the author of *Negroland: A Memoir* and is professor of professional practice in Columbia University's School of the Arts. *Eugene Weekly* caught up with her before her lecture.

**Your lecture at the University of Oregon is called "From 'I' to 'We': The Role of the Citizen-Critic." What does being a citizen-critic consist of?**

We tend to think of the critic as, "I'm looking at books. I'm looking at movies. I'm looking at a particular art form." The citizen-critic is also looking at what role each form of art and entertainment plays in the culture, how it influences and is influenced by. By politics, social change, it's always tracking that relationship between the culture as we think of it in art and entertainment and media terms, and the culture as we think of it in social and political terms.

So, yes, as the critic you're always bringing that individual e-y-e and your ear and that particular point of view to it, but we should be thinking about these larger group issues as well, about the relationship always between an individual and their various — not just tastes, but identities and principles.

**On the topic of "From 'I' to 'We,'" how do we come together and have educated discussions in a society and a political atmosphere filled with such divergent viewpoints?**

I can't give a comprehensive answer on that, but I certainly feel that one way we can at least communicate is through these conversations about media and art and entertainment, even sports. These are things that we are passionate about, but can also enjoy talking about in the way that you're not going to — I will try my best, but I'm not going to enjoy talking with a serious gun supporter or someone who's against abortion, but maybe we can say some interesting things about [Beyoncé's album] *Lemonade* or even about Kanye West.

But there are some groups that just aren't going to be able to communicate with each other, and I don't think we should be kind of namby-pamby, chipper, "Oh, we can all talk!" We can't just all talk or get along, but I think it's a question of finding those spaces. And I think the online community, even though it can be poisonous, can also be liberating.

We keep looking for those spaces where we're interested in exchanging opinions and trading opinions, and that's not always a ballot box; it's much more likely to be in various aspects of the culture that we consume and live in and absorb and are absorbed by.

**What are your thoughts on objectivity as a black journalist? Do you think there's such a thing as true objectivity in a world that is as politicized as it is right now?**

No, I don't. What I think objectivity is — particularly for a critic, but I would say in general — it's a combination of doing your research on the subject thoroughly, and that requires a kind of taking in of all views, and, you know, thinking seriously and clearly and being able to separate in your own mind the intellectual from the emotional and proportioning them correctly when you write. I think those tasks, those processes, all add up to a type of fairness, and that is as close to objectivity as we are going to get.



MARGO JEFFERSON  
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**Growing up, and as a young adult, you were witness to the height of the civil rights movement. What's it like seeing similar fights for racial justice and equality, like the Black Lives Matter movement, alive today?**

If you're looking at something like Charlottesville or all the killings of young blacks, it's horrifying. Disheartening is too mild of a word. If you are looking at the strategies and resourcefulness of movements like Black Lives Matter, like #MeToo, like all of the lobbying and action around DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals], that is exciting because these movements have all really learned a lot from preceding movements and they're making alliances and they're just increasingly resourceful. They are not reliving all of the mistakes. They are taking that idealism and that passion and they're being very contemporary and resourceful with it, and that's exciting.

**Your memoir, *Negroland*, is about your growing up in a privileged, upper class black experience. What was that like? Did you ever feel left out or separated from the black struggle?**

We were very aware of class division. In that sense, one felt separated in certain ways, socially separated though not always geographically — all classes of blacks often lived very near each other. I would also say particularly as civil

rights and black power emerged, we who were a part of this black elite were able to develop a kind of analysis of the ways in which our separation was linked to a kind of snobbery and we began to look more fully and deeply into the ways in which we were part of a vast canvas, a vast black life-world. I think also you can look at the history of the black elite as a story of class privilege. That is very true. You can also look at the ways in which that group did really fight and lobby for civil rights and black progress.

**A little over 10 years ago now, you wrote a book about Michael Jackson. What current celebrities do you find yourself interested in right now?**

I'm interested in the landscape they're all on. How could I not be interested in Beyoncé or Kendrick Lamar? But celebrities are one thing. There are also less well-known black artists I'm interested in. I love the jazz singer Cecile McLorin Salvant. I'm fascinated by all the outbursts, the explosion of incredibly good black actors in movies and on stage. Everything from *12 Years a Slave*, *Atlanta*, *Moonlight*. Phylicia Rashad's daughter Condola Rashad is now playing Shaw's *Saint Joan* on Broadway. I mean, it's everywhere, this incredible explosion of black craft and super talent. ■

*This interview was edited for length and clarity.*