Welcome to the New York Public Library. Tonight we present another in our series of virtual conversations from the Coleman Center, a present nation collaboration with live from NYPL. Past Coleman Center fellow Edward Ball will discuss his new book, "Life of a Klansman," a family history in White Supremacy. He's joined by Saidiya Hartman. Both Ball and Hartman are members of the Coleman Center.

I'm Salvatore Scibona. As some of you know, the Coleman Center selects 15 fellows a year for a nine-month term. Fellows receive an office and common center, intensive access to our collections, and a living stipend so they can focus exclusively on their work during their fellowships.

The fellows are some of the best and most promising academics, independent scholars, poets, playwrights, drama, and fictional writers of the day. They come here to write the books of tomorrow. The program was founded in 1999. To date, it has supported the work of more than 300 fellows.

We are now accepting applications for the 2021/2022 year. Anyone interested in applying is welcome to visit the Coleman Center's website and submit an application by September 25th.

The next event in this series will be Monday, September 21, when we present a conversation between Scholar Nicole Fleetwood and the new bookmarking time, Art and the Age of Mass Incarceration, which is about how the prison turned ordinary objects into elaborate works of heart. It's currently and previously incarcerated inmates.

Edward Ball's books include The Inventor and the Tycoon, About the Birth of Moving Pictures in California, and Slaves in the Family. An account of his family's history of slave holders in South Carolina which received a National Book Award for nonfiction.

He is also the recipient of a Public Scholar Award from the National Endowment for the Humanities. He worked on "Life of a Klansman" in 2015/2016. Saidiya Hartman is the mother of Lose Your Journey Along the Slave Route and Scenes of Subjection in 19th Century America. She's a professor of literature and has been a Fulbright Scholar in Ghana, a Whitney Oates fellow and a critical professor in Chicago. She was named a genius fellow last year. She worked on her book Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments, which won The Book Critic Circle Award in 2019 during her fellowship in 2016/2017.

If you haven't already, you can purchase "Life of a Klansman" through the library shop. Go to our website.
This event is being recorded, not you, only the event itself, that is to say, myself, Edward, and Saidiya are being recorded. Edward will take some of your questions at the end. You can type them in the Q&A section in the Zoom app and we'll get to as many of them as we can. Now please help me welcome Saidiya Hartman and Edward Ball.

>> Hello. It's good to be here. Hi, Ed.
>> Ed, I believe your mic is muted.
>> Yes.
>> So, Ed, can you hear me?
Yes, okay.
>> Will you try using the built-in mic on your computer, Ed?
>> Okay. Come on.
>> You're good now. No. So once Ed gets his mic --
>> We're going to get him on in just a second, he's got a microphone problem that I know that we are going to solve momentarily. We had it solved a moment ago.
>> Testing my microphone now.
>> You're right there, Edward.
>> Okay. I'm so sorry for the delay. Hello, Saidiya, it's nice to see you. Sorry to keep you waiting.
And, we are on.
>> Yeah.
>> Very good. Well, it's good to be with you. Thank you for doing this.
>> It's great to be back home in the virtual NYPL in the virtual Coleman. So we thought we would actually begin our discussion by having Ed read a bit from the "Life of a Klansman." And then you all can contextualize it a bit and then we'll just start our discussion.
>> That sounds good. "Life of a Klansman" tells the story of a foot soldier in the Ku Klux Klan during reconstruction the years after the civil war. A great, great grandfather of mine named Constant Lecorgne who was a French speaking carpenter. And he appears to have begun his most active phase of Klan activity with a group in New Orleans called the Knights of the White Camilla. Which was a corollary to the Ku Klux Klan. And I have a scene which depicts the night that he joined this group in New Orleans in a mass meeting in uptown New Orleans. And here is a description of what took place.
There's a series of induction rituals to join this group, as there was for clan activity throughout the deep south. Candidate there are is the candidate -- candidate Lecorgne asking for membership. Candidate says, I am here. The commander of the outfit.
Will you under all circumstances defend and protect persons of the White race and their lives, rights, and property against all encroachments or invasions by any inferior race especially the African?
Candidate, yes. There's no room for deviation from the script, no place where a person questions or shows doubt. It is a road to obedience.
The candidate consents and raises his right hand in the oath. I swear
to maintain the social and political superiority of the White race on this continent always and in all places to observe a marked distinction between the White and African races. And to protect and defend persons of the White race and their lives, rights, and property against the encroachments and aggressions of an inferior race. When the meeting ends at Odd Fellows Hall, the group walks out and fans into the night. The random killings spread. According to a report of the Friedman's bureau in early June, after the White Camilla reading, a colored man name unknown is killed on the road by a Frenchman. Cause unknown. Also in June, a man kills a colored man, name unknown. Outside New Orleans, a number of freed people are whipped and burned and two women are ravished by four white men. Gangs using the name Ku Klux Klan went to the northern part of the state. They have thousands in the parishes. The White Camilla launches Guerrilla cells in saint Landry, and others. Many the White Camilla are Creole and they are merciless. By September, the White Camilla claims a membership of 15,000 men in New Orleans and the near parishes, Jefferson, Jalmette. The White Camilla raids Black villages. Guerrillas humiliate them by hurting them in front of their wives. Sometimes they whip them and rape them. They are White tribal stories.

I began this book about six years ago. At the New York Public Library. And I started initially to write a novel about this man Constant Lecorgne, my great, great grandfather, because I thought there was not enough of a paper trail to write a piece of history. And after writing three or four chapters, I decided that they were inadequate to the task, and I decided to write history instead. By that time, the events of Trevone Martin and Alton Sterling and hundreds of others names who we now know had transpired. And it felt as though the story of 19th Century Klansman was coming more and more into synchrony with the events of public life in this country. And I was mystified and enraged as much as anybody by this. Especially I found it enigmatic in the extreme. In the end, I wrote a story that is set in the 19th Century, but which tells a life that bears a harmonic resemblance to the lives of Americans today when White Supremacy has surfaced in a series of geysers around the country once again. So that's where I would like to start it. Saidiya.

>> Yeah. Yeah, my first question was actually going to be about the time of its writing, because, you know, over the course of its writing you and I would have conversations. And I guess I wanted to hear you talk about what it meant to write this book under the Obama Presidency versus under the Trump Presidency, and to have it come into the world this, you know, summer, our summer of, as you say, White Supremacists, pandemic, brutal economic and inequality, but also with, you know, the -- a spring and summer of resistance, of protest, of rebellion. So were there times when it seemed more or less relevant, more timely or less?
Yeah. When I started writing this book, it was during the last two years of the Obama Administration. And friends of mine said, well, why do you want to write about this subject? I mean, it seems so anachronistic. And then of course, 2016 happened. And it was as though the world was turned again upside down. The massacre in Charleston, South Carolina, in June, 2015, that the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church was a pivot point for me writing this book. It was a pivot point, I think, nationally and it seemed to open a gate through which White -- White Supremacists ideology and violence flowed into the public sphere. And I estimate that, you know, in the past five years some 300 people have died in mass shootings connected directly to supremacist activities. And yet this book is published now during the summer of discontent and it seems to fall in step with a period of guarded optimism, I think, that I certainly feel -- I mean, it appears from the media evidence that several million, if not tens of millions of White Americans and non-Americans are experiencing a kind of race consciousness shift at the same time this summer. It appears that way. And it appears that large numbers of White folks are able to see themselves as a racial group. Perhaps many of them for the first time. And I find those painful steps hopeful. And they are full of -- for the future.

At the same time again, we know that as there is a progress narrative in which one sees, you know, the diminishment of White domination of social life. 50 years ago during the Civil Rights Movement, the progress narrative named the great fuel of legislation in the Civil Rights Act and the Housing Rights Act and in Affirmative Action Plans that unfolded in the 1970 at the same time there is a progress narrative, White Supremacy becomes more sophisticated and takes new forms. And we see that also. The -- well, I'll leave it there.

>> And I wanted to ask you, so you decided not to write the novel, but why this mode of family history and intimate history rather than more straight -- you know, nonfiction book about the history of the Klan? I think the power and difficulty of the book is absolute connected to -- to its intimacy not only it being, quote unquote, your family story and, of course, White Supremacy as our national bedrock, but also intimacy in terms of its mode narration. So what were you hoping to achieve by kind of framing this history of White Supremacy as a family story?

One of the things that's unsettling as one reads the book are terms like my Klansman, our Klansman. And certainly for the White reader, they're solicit and implicated in particular ways as they read.

>> Yeah. Right. Well, I write family history, which is kind of the stepchild in historical scholarship, a family history is regarded with condescension by professional historians. I write family history as a way of gaining access to history with a capital "H," because the personal relationship to characters in the
story enables identification. It enables access for readers and for those who hear stories of this kind recounted. It's -- it sutures people to the emotional fabric of -- of the story. And I do that intentionally because I do want to, in the final stage, help people to see American history and its difficult parts as stamping their footprint on to the personal lives of all of us right down to the present. And I do put myself in this book using the first person I quite a lot responding to events often. I do think that writing this way gives larger numbers of people access to the political and ideological flows of -- of the times that we're trying to represent. And, it helps people to see their relationship to the lives of the living, such as us. I mean, [ away from mic ].

>> Edward, we've lost your mic again.
>> Are we back?
>> Yes, we're back. And --
>> When did I drop out?
>> The last sentence.
>> Well that's all right. Why don't we move on to the next subject.
>> Yeah, I was going to ask you about, you know, was it a difficult book to write?
When you'd speak of this, you know, of the intimacy with your subject? And certainly as I was reading it, it was a difficult book to read. And -- because part of the work of speculation and creation, you know, that's unfolding in "Life of a Klansman" is actually having to recreate the world, the thought, the feelings, the desires of Constant Lecorgne. And that's, you know, this racist's vision of the world so often one is inhabiting the world and seeing it through -- through that lens. What was it like to -- to do that?
I know that there were, again, moments where it was so difficult to read precisely because we are feeling not only, you know, it's not that he is, quote unquote, a terrible person as an individual, but he is a representative person. So there's this one average man who's a carpenter who has a world view. And then we see the way in which, you know, the great thinkers and philosophers are producing that world view. But what is it like to produce a world from inside his skin?
>> Well, it's uncomfortable the more so because spending so much time inside the mind of a White working man of, you know, 1870 Louisiana, I began to see the world through his eyes. The reflexive reaction of many folks to a story like this is, oh, we don't have anybody like this in my family tree. Or, you know, I wouldn't have not have been a militant supremacist had I lived at this time. And yet the world in which White -- White society was in full and violent command of its surroundings began to make sense in the most perverse way.
You mentioned the philosophers, the great philosophers. I recount how early American science, the very first texts of American science emerge as a way of chronicling the races and their difference. The study of geology and the study of bones and the terrible resentments and bitterness that the White South felt when their premiership was ripped out of their hands by the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of 4 million Black people becomes a kind of understandable fuel for the rage or violence that ensures during reconstruction.

I was exhausted and -- and physically made frail sometimes by inhabiting this world. And yet, I wonder if there is not some sort of useful -- use value to extracting the component parts of White Supremacy, which persist, but which is unrecognizable in many ways when compared with its most violent late 19th Century forum.

There's some utility to how it looks and functions. Utility for us today, I think, I hope.

I mean, I think that one of the, you know, things that the book achieves is -- is really by saying White Supremacy isn't an aberration. You describe it as a current or a river that feeds our national life and it's fundamentally entwined with, you know, a foundation of the republic. And in doing that, it forces the reader to think about how normalized White Supremacy is rather than thinking of it as an aberration.

I was wondering if you would read three paragraphs on page 206 to 207 where, again, you're writing about Constant, but you're letting us know that his history is our present.

I don't know if you have those pages before you?

>> I do, indeed. Yeah.

>> If you could just -- Constant Lecorgne is one of those people. Those four paragraphs, I feel like so much of the critical labor of the book and its achievement is articulated there. I don't know if you can share that.

>> Sure.

Right. Well, this is full of storytelling and then there are moments of reflection and assessment and here's one. Constant Lecorgne is one of my people. He is one of my family. How I can respond to the discovery of what he seemingly did in several ways?

I do not feel responsible for the crimes he seems to commit. I mean, legally responsible for the reason that the living cannot control the acts of the dead. In the frame of the law, I do not feel culpable for the mechanics institute massacre. However, as a matter of conscious, I feel implicated. I feel associated with this cruel and merciless festival of violence. I feel a part of it because he acts on behalf of his family, our family if you like.

I have a feeling of wretchedness and shame. The family I share with Constant is remote. He is a great, great grandfather of mine. Everyone has 16 great, great grandparents and Constant to me is one of those
Tradition and customs and stories are the drivers of family history. I have a few stories from Constant's granddaughter. My Aunt Maud Lecorgnes. Disavow like this is a stage of grief. To disavow to know something is true and terrible and yet to desire that it not be true and act as though it is false. To disavow is to push away a horror. Constant is one of 16 great, great grandparents. The thought has a distancing effect. The reality is that constant, my grandmother's grandfather is a murderous actor on behalf of his family, on behalf of us, and it is a vile taste in the mouth. I must own it in some way. He was a fighter for our gain, for our benefit. To say anything else is to prevaricate. It is not enough to say that his rampage 150 years ago helps in some immeasurable way to clear space for the comfort of Whites living now, not just for me and for his 50 and 60 descendants, but for Whites in general. I feel shame about it. That is not the distortion either. I am an heir to Constant's acts of terror. I do not deny it and the bitter truth makes me sick at the stomach. Whites are my people, my tribe. They were Constant's people, his tribe. In that way he belongs to us and to hundreds of millions. I know the honest way to regard race violence is this. American history is full of it. It is pandemic. The United States was founded upon racial violence. It is within the core of our national identity. Here is a way not to see these events. The marauders are immoral object and abject people. They are not like us. They belong to someone else. It is truer to say this. The marauders are our people and they fight for us. So is it true, is it true the marauders are our people and they fight for us? You see, I can't speak for all White people, as Black people are often inclined to say about blackness. >> I mean, for -- for me, the power of that is to say that it is White legacy. And partly it positions, then, the reader and the White reader. Because obviously Constant is not in the fight for me, his fight is against me. And that's why one fuels the charge of his language and his views as you are reading. So it seems that -- that that's -- I don't know. Is it to have a certain set of expectations of what might happen for the reader? What is -- so what do you want to happen for the White reader of this book? What do you hope that they know or that they do or that they think as a result of reading "Life of a Klansman"? >> Well, I have the hope that at least some will experience recognition of looking in the looking glass and seeing the outline of us. I use the word tribe in this book a lot. I came to the conclusion that whiteness is a thing, it is an entity that creates a tribe out of us 260 million White Americans, so very different in so many ways. It creates a kind of unity in this radical diversity.
And, my dim hope is that some might see, as I came to see, the building or creation of this tribal self. And, you know, White Supremacy had to be coined and created. And that happened after the Civil War and not before, not during the slave period, but after the Civil War when whiteness was confronted the first time by the challenge of Americans exercising power of African Americans finding political power, entering the social in large numbers. And this challenge to whiteness provoked the -- the creation of a constellation of thought about White racial identity that had not previously existed. And this constellation was honed and perfected and made into an idea that was ultimately nacionalized and shared throughout the country. So, the tribal aspect is one thing. And the second thing I would hope people to take away is -- is the ability to see this formation, this kind of White racial identity as it was assembled in this period of American history. >> I mean, it's interesting that you say that, because we know, I mean, there's, you know, that there's a racialized order, but you are accounting for -- I mean, some might say like a belated narration of the emergence of whiteness. But I do think I understand what you mean, because when we talk about the transformation identity, he what the end of slavery meant was that every White person assumed and internalized the power of the police, right? So we have this property order and there's all of these differentiations between, you know, Whites who are slave owners, the minority versus, you know, White farmers. But part of the kind of counter revolution or the southern redemption that Constant makes happen is, you know, everyone gets their kind of symbolic endowment of whiteness. >> Yes. >> And so I don't know if you wanted to say more about that symbolic endowment. I mean, the book, you know, is clear about the violence that's necessary to produce that endowment. But what about the cost of that endowment for White folks? Or is there a cost? I think another interesting example of your -- in your book is the descendants of the free men of color, the publisher Lewis -- what is his name? >> Louis DeNay. >> There's an interesting moment where he's talking about racism and whiteness. Initially he says, well, you know, racism, it doesn't kind of hurt me. But then he has to account for his position in a racist order. So I guess to think about the symbolic of whiteness, do most Whites think there's only the costed on there's only the privilege of it? >> Yeah. >> Well, the phrase that they use is the rage of Whiteness. Which is to say kind of materialist, material benefit of -- >> Ed, I'm sorry to interrupt. You're microphone is breaking up. >> Okay. I'm right here again. Are you able to hear me?
DeBoise talks about the wage of whiteness and there's a material benefit of whiteness, and yet any -- any person of sensitivity examining the subject can also see the mutilation and truncation that has fear and repulse of exclusion, this is part of -- part of the embedded fact of being raised White in this society. And I believe this goes back to the period that I write about in this book, is to be raised into a kind of sequestered space which is ringed by psychological fences and antagonisms towards others. That's -- that's the psychological cost of whiteness. I remember as a child being raised in the deep south and although I lived as a child for, you know, 20 years in societies that were about a third to 40% African American, the radical separation line between Black and White people in my experience, and I believe this was not uncommon and perhaps it's not yet uncommon, was pronounced. And our visits when I was a child, my father was an Episcopal priest, he would from time to time -- and of course his church was White only -- from time to time he would take us as a family to Black churches. And it was almost as though we were going on a kind of research mission to experience the lives of -- of others. So, yes, the cost of whiteness is -- is quite high.

I think the last question that I wanted to ask before we take questions from the audience, earlier you were talking about the resonance of this period of, like, the 1860 and the 1870, which is at the heart of, you know, the book, the revolution of, you know, abolition, of reconstruction and then the counterrevolution. What are the lessons of that moment for us now as we're perched on what seems like a kind of abyss? What is it we should think about when considering that moment? How might that moment actually inform our actions?

Ed, I think that your cable may be damaged. It was crackling. Can you change to the built-in microphone on your computer?

I can give it a try.

Thank you.

Hello. Are we hear together?

Yes. I don't see you, I hear you but I don't see you.

Okay. I'm starting up video. Starting up video, there we go. You mentioned, Saidiya, a kind of reconstruction. And what happened was the Civil War ends in 1865 and [ away from mic ].

Edward, I'm sorry, we lost you again. I'll send you a note in the chat.

And so, okay. Ed, can you -- yeah. So we have a first question. And when Ed returns, I will pose the first question from the audience, which is actually a great one. Ed, can you hear me?

I can hear you, yes.

Okay. So, a question from the audience. My family was interviewed
in Harlem by Ed for his slaves in the family's book. Anyway, my question is is there a northern U.S. equivalent of the Klan and, if so, how different or the same is it? If Ed asks, this is from Vincent James.

>> Oh, Vincent James, yes, how to you do?
Nice to hear you.

The first generation of the Ku-klux was principally in the post Civil War South. And it erupts in 1866 and goes out of business after what White Southerners called the redemption, which was the restoration of White Supremacy to the political life the southern states. And that happens in 1877.

The rest of the country doesn't have those kinds of militias until 50 years later, in the 19 teens when a revived Ku Klux Klan spreads throughout the United States and recruits millions upon millions of members, upwards of 5 million in all the states. They are not as interested in targeted racial violence of the kind that the southern Klan perpetrated. Although there is quite a lot of corollary activity at the time in the campaigns, the lynch campaigns. But without going on too much about it, I have a theory that the South is, in many ways, a teacher for the rest of the country. By which I mean the South creates this thing of white Supremacist ideology. And then the South creates this thing of campaigns of violence against Black communities and then exploits it. And they are taken up by the rest of the country in subsequent decades. As African Americans find their way out of the prison house of the southern states.

>> And there's another question. So how have your family members responded to your research and responded to this book in particular?

>> Yeah. My family in New Orleans, and I have quite a lot of them, were not particularly excited to have the story of our Klansman made public. But no one tried to stop me from -- from telling it, from writing it.
I think a common feeling in our group is he was a bad apple. He was the bad seed. And we're not like him and only a couple of us were ever like him.

And I believe that this is a -- it's a familiar reaction of distancing one's self and one's people from the worst and the most uncomfortable subjects.

But, you know, I discovered an unusual fact which is that it appears that approximately 1/2 of White Americans have a Klansman in their family tree somewhere. And I say this, I demonstrate it with the following demographic projection.

The Klan of the 1920s recruited some 5 million members, they claimed 5 million members. If you suppose it, there were actually just 4 million. And the descendants of 4 million White Klansmen from 1925 a hundred years later by simple demographic projection amounts to about 135 million people. Which is 1/2 of the White population of the United States.

Now, not -- not many living Americans know that this is the case. But if they would like to know, it can be found out. And it's -- it's not a freakish -- freakish thing to have a Klansman
in the family.

>> What do you want even us in the North, to take away from your book?

>> I would like to ask the permission of Black people to unpack stories with which many African Americans are familiar in family lore and/or by study, to unpack these difficult narratives in public for the benefit or education or new knowledge of White Americans. That is an indulgence that African Americans can understandably not be enthusiastic about extending because to hear stories of White Supremacist violence is not -- is not comfortable. It's -- it's demoralizing and I understand and accept that. So, I ask -- I ask permission, if you like, for this symbolic act of revelation. For the symbolic act of revelation to -- for the benefit of the wider social group.

>> I mean, I think when I was reading I was thinking about that in terms of antiracist work.

>> Yeah.

>> Because you're involved in this labor that White people should be involved in, which is actually owning and acknowledging these histories of violence and brutality. But that's not, then, the work of Black people to witness or to bear. And it is injurious because we're still in a structure of White Supremacy. So it made me think about distinctions between forms of practice that are against race six and about the questions of alliance, you know. So that's a point that's appreciated.

One question, please discuss how White women in your family enable the Klansman. And a related question was did you find that poor Whites had the same sort of racism as slave-owning or more affluent and wealthy Whites? So women in the Klan and the difference between the working class and the affluent.

>> Uh-huh. Yeah. Well, it appears that many women were not in the organizations either in the inception of the Ku-klux during reconstruction or in its regeneration during the 19 teens and '20s. But, played many different roles of tacit support. For example, in working class Creole communities that I write about in "Life of a Klansman," the women were at home making the disguises, making the costumes, the hoods and the disguises. And I found no evidence of a -- how can we say? A resistance movement that was voiced by White women of conscience from that time.

The Klan then 150 years ago and the Klan one hundred years ago to the teens and '20s and the Klan 50 years ago during the Civil Rights Movements always is driven by working class in the rank and file and elite class of propertied Whites in positions of leadership. And that's what -- what I found in writing this story, "Life of a Klansman."

The figures at the head of this group, I mentioned earlier, Knights of the White Camilla, were propertied Whites. Whites of means. It was a rich man's campaign and a poor man's fight.

>> And, I guess, the last question is this is a unique narrative, a
national history, a family history, a personal reckoning with White Supremacy. Can you let us know, were there any books or writers you looked to as models for inspiration?

>> Yes. I'm talking to one of them right now, and that's you, Saidiya. As a comrade who -- who helps to show the way to tell stories about people in the shadows for whom the archive has not been generous. And -- and the way of imaginative reconstruction as a path into historical memory and the way of using indirect narration as a way of summoning the states of mind of people who are long gone and who never themselves put their -- their thoughts to paper.

So, yes, I can think of one, and that's Saidiya Hartman.

>> So, on that note, I'm going to say, you know, thank you for a wonderful conversation, despite our technical difficulties. And I would remind our viewers that you can purchase "Life of a Klansman" in the library book shop. So please do so.

It has been a pleasure.

>> And a pleasure for me. Thank you, Saidiya. And thanks to the New York Public Library.