

Interview with Cinelle Barnes

[00:00:08] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. Today, I'm talking to Cinelle Barnes, the editor of the anthology *A MEASURE OF BELONGING: TWENTY-ONE WRITERS OF COLOR ON THE NEW AMERICAN SOUTH*, which is out now from Hub City Press. For a full transcript of this episode. Check out the show notes on readingwomenpodcast.com. And make sure you're subscribed so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:39] **Kendra** The moment I heard about this anthology, I knew I wanted to talk to Cinelle about this book. And Cinelle Barnes was shortlisted for the Reading Women Award, I believe back in 2018, for *MONSOON MANSION*. This anthology is a very much-needed anthology. And you know, recently—well, throughout our podcast history—but recently I've especially wanted to highlight regional authors. And this anthology offers the opportunity to highlight twenty-one writers and their work, including Kiese Laymon, Toni Jensen, and Natalia Sylvester, who was also shortlisted for the Reading Women Award for fiction the same year Cinelle Barnes. So that was really a fabulous coincidence to see such amazing writers all in one anthology. And so today I talk to Cinelle about how this project came to be and her thoughts on the South and moving from the Philippines and ending up in South Carolina and the Lowcountry down in Charleston. So I am just so thrilled to be able to talk to Cinelle today.

[00:01:50] **Kendra** So a little bit about Cinelle Barnes before we get started. Like I said, she immigrated from the Philippines to the United States and now lives in Charleston, South Carolina. She has a memoir called *MONSOON MANSION* and an essay collection called *MALAYA*. And those are out from Little A Publishing. She has also published essays and shorter pieces in a wide range of publications. And of course, all of her information will be linked down in the show notes if you want to go check that out. But without further ado, here is my conversation with Cinelle Barnes.

[00:02:28] **Kendra** Well, welcome to the podcast, Cinelle. I'm so excited to finally be able to have you on.

[00:02:33] **Cinelle** Thank you so much. I am a big fan of Reading Women, and you guys have been so good to me and just so supportive of my body of work. And I'll never forget the day I heard that Reading Women discussed my first book, *MONSOON MANSION*. And so it's been a great journey with you guys.

[00:02:56] **Kendra** Huge, huge fans. And I haven't read your essay collection yet, but I believe Sachi read it and really enjoyed it as well. So for listeners, definitely go pick up all your books. And I'll make sure to link them in the show notes so that people can go check it out and see all of that discussion. But I guess I always start asking, how are you doing? How are you holding up right now during the chaos that is 2020?

[00:03:21] **Cinelle** Believe it or not, I feel great right now, but that's because I think we were hit really hard by everything that's going on earlier on. My family, my siblings and their spouses, many of them got sick with COVID back in March, and some were hospitalized. And so we really felt it during the lockdown. And then we were going through several other changes in our family and in the writing world. And so it was truly a perfect storm right around March and April. So I feel like we've come up for air now. We're

learning how to mitigate situations. Maybe, I don't know, just this feeling. . . . I think just having something to look forward to like the release of this anthology helps.

[00:04:26] **Kendra** So I'm very excited about this project. You just mentioned being excited for the release of *A MEASURE OF BELONGING*. So you've written a memoir and essays already. What inspired you to want to put together this anthology, which seems like a totally different kind of project?

[00:04:46] **Cinelle** Yeah. In the introduction to the book, I talk about this specific experience from about a decade ago where I felt uninvited to my new home, which is South Carolina. I had moved from up north in New York City, where all the hustle and bustle was, to a much smaller city—still a city, but much smaller—and felt immediately that some of my thoughts or some of my beliefs or some of my ways were not going to be welcome here. And instead of letting that deter me or letting that get to me and doing what others predicted I would do—which was turn right back around and go back to New York—I thought, well, you know what? I am actually going to be the big person who will not be like this person that made me feel unwelcome here. I will use what I have and use what I know to welcome others, and invite others, and invite them, and make them comfortable enough to share their stories with me. And so, really, this book came out of feeling rejected a decade ago and following that feeling with offering others the opposite, which is acceptance and comfort and hospitality. Right? We always talk about Southern hospitality. So this book, really, you'll see that it has a very strong sense of place in every essay. I wanted to make hospitality something completely different from what others might expect or others might have experienced in this region.

[00:06:50] **Kendra** I really loved your introduction where you talk about also where the title came from, *A MEASURE OF BELONGING*. Was that always the title of the collection? Or did that come after you'd already decided to embark on this new project?

[00:07:11] **Cinelle** Yeah, the title came actually after we had assembled all the essays together. We had placed them one after the other. And I had begged for a twenty-first writer. We thought we were going to publish twenty essays. And there was just this one that I begged the publishers to include because it was going to be the perfect ending to the book. But "a measure of belonging" came from Toni Jensen's essay. And it had popped out to me and to Meg Reid, who is the director of Hub City Press, when we were both giving the essays a final read. And the working title was just "Here," the word "here," pertaining to the South, pertaining to the region that's just rife with, you know, a lot of the things that you hear about in the news these days and a lot of the things that people actually also don't hear about. And we thought, well, that's just a little bit too on the nose. And we're still talking about a physical place as opposed to—the way I put it in the introduction was "make this place a 'we' rather than an 'it.'" And we just thought that line was going to be perfect. Right? And that phrase is so telling of what we wanted to do and what we didn't quite expect we would actually accomplish. The word "measure" can mean so many things. And the word "measure," it's true to what the writers in this anthology have done. We vary in how we feel about the South. And we vary in how we found our place here. And we vary in style and writing style. And we definitely vary in voice. We even vary in form. Each one of the essays here is a measure of our lives here. Right? So it gave it a little bit more fluidity. And it gave it kind of this tension that I think we're trying to discuss in the book.

[00:09:32] **Kendra** So how did this project end up at Hub City Press, which seems like such a perfect home for it?

[00:09:39] **Cinelle** Yeah. So most of my. . . . Well, my two books are with Little A. My first two books are with Little A. And most of my other essays are with New York based publications. And I thought that, you know, the book would be a miss if we didn't go with a regional publisher. I wanted to be very conscious about every single decision that went into this book, whether it was the selection of the writers or the way I assembled one essay after the other, or whether it was the book cover or how we placed the contributors' bios in the end, who the book was going to benefit. Many of the writers in A MEASURE OF BELONGING donated their writer's fees to a nonprofit that serves and protects Black, Indigenous, and people of color in the South. And it just felt right to also make a strategic and wise decision to support and be supported by Hub City Press. Lately, they are really doing such great work for writers and readers in their region. And they shared this mission with me.

[00:11:10] **Cinelle** And it was almost serendipitous when I had lunch with Meg and Betsy of Hub City. When I presented the idea to them, it was almost verbatim the idea that they were presenting to me. And so I think this book had just been . . . the idea for the book had just been growing in many people's minds. And the doer that I am just happened to be that person to finally pull that trigger. And the book is about home, right? The book is about here. And this book needed Hub City to be its home. Also, Hub City was actually the first place to publish anything that I had written. A long time ago, they published a prose poem of mine called "Kumain," which is the Tagalog word for "to eat with hands." And that came out of a workshop that they were hosting. And so it just felt right to come home, in that sense, and bring to them a project that may or may not have burgeoned out of that writing exercise from a long time ago.

[00:12:36] **Kendra** It's almost like a full-circle kind of experience there.

[00:12:40] **Cinelle** Yes, certainly.

[00:12:41] **Kendra** And I love what you said about how each decision that you made with this book, you were going to do it with intention and awareness. And you mentioned, you know, how that also includes the contributors. How did you go about finding all the different contributors for this essay collection?

[00:13:01] **Cinelle** This is going to sound cheesy, but the answer is that it was just people I love to read. You know, people that my husband or the folks at Hub City or my literary agent or my writing group love to read. And I remember doing. . . . So I had already built a list. And if you don't know this about me, people, I am very type A. I know I write lyrically, but that lyricism comes out of a very structured office manager persona. So I had already compiled names on a Google spreadsheet. And I thought, you know what? This is a community-focused project. So I should involve the community more. And I remember doing a call on my Instagram stories just saying, I have a secret project. I can tell you this much. Who are your favorite writers of color in the region or writing about the region? And people just fired away, you know. And there were some names I had never heard of. Some names that I'm like, I can't believe I missed that one. And some names I'm like, yeah, they want this person, and that person's already on the list.

[00:14:32] **Cinelle** And some of these writers were my own teachers. Some of these writers have been in my workshops. I've taught them, or they've taught me. So I think that's part of the awareness and intention that I brought into this book is to make sure that this book reflects the generosity and the kinship of writers in general, but Southern writers

too. And Black, Indigenous writers, writers of color. I also wanted to show that we have this very natural kinship. And we are naturally generous to each other. Whether it's by giving each other writing advice or reading each other's work or publishing each other's work. So I wanted to give readers a feel for that as well.

[00:15:32] **Kendra** So you had this theme of belonging, of here. And I imagine as you were editing the collection that that was always in the back of your mind. But in addition to that, what were some of the themes or ideas that you saw recurring in the essays? Or something that you noted like, oh, of course. Or anything that you learned from putting these essays together in this anthology?

[00:16:01] **Cinelle** Yeah, some early readers have told me that they felt such a sense of movement, you know, whether it's big gestures or small indicators of some kind of change or move or some kind of destination. And that wasn't planned. And that just came about as we started gathering the essays. But I remember thinking when someone brought that up, "Well, that's natural because we're talking about place or places." And places have memory, and places have pulse, and places breathe. You think that a house is a solid structure; a house breathes. A house moves, and it makes room for other things to grow and other things to be dynamic. And so that's definitely a sense that you'll get throughout.

[00:17:01] **Cinelle** Another sweet, sweet surprise was how every one of their writers kind of brought their own cadence to the anthology. You'll hear the music that they probably were listening to while they were writing these essays or music that maybe they grew up with. Even the essays that have nothing to do with music, I think you'll get a sense for the cadence of the writer's heart and mind and their environment. And you'll feel the beat, definitely. You'll feel some kind of rhythm in each one.

[00:17:45] **Cinelle** So another sweet surprise was I wanted to make sure that we showed diversity within diversity, that we all sound different. We all write differently. We all understand the essay form and use the essay form differently. And each writer kind of has their signature way of writing nonfiction. And I expected that. But when I started receiving the drafts, I remember being so pleasantly surprised at how much more diversity and how much more nuance there actually was. It was almost like I was expecting to get a five-ingredients movie. And instead I got a thirty-ingredient wine. And it all works together. And it was such a gift, like this . . . the process of putting this book together and editing them at the developmental but also line level. It's been such a gift for me. I learned so much. You know? I always. . . . I've told all the writers that, you know, it seems like I'm supposed to be teaching you something, or I'm supposed to be holding your hand, or I'm supposed to give you notes, but really, I'm on the receiving end. And this is a gift to me. And that was such a good sign because I knew that's what it was going to be like for the reader.

[00:19:27] **Kendra** I love that. And I think for many people who don't live in the region or who might just live outside the United States and not really are as aware of the different regions of the United States, besides, you know, what they see on TV—there's incredible amount of cultural diversity in the South. And one of our co-hosts, Jaclyn, moved to Texas from Australia. And so we talk a lot about the South. And I moved here from Appalachian Ohio. So while I might be kind of related, we might say, to the South from Appalachia, it's very, very different. And I love how this is a measure of belonging of people of color writing here in the South. And so I thought we might be able to talk a little bit about the South for you and why. . . . I mean, obviously, this is inspired by a love of a region, even one that wasn't entirely accepting. . . . So what about the South, for you, makes it, I guess, makes it special and makes you . . . I want to say maybe "demand space" . . . but basically, yeah.

Be like, I am here; this is also mine as well. And just have that conversation with this text, which is something that was very much impressed upon me when I was reading it.

[00:20:49] **Cinelle** My husband grew up here, and his imagination was shaped by the place. And as difficult as it's been at times, I've told myself, how can I not love the place that shape the imagination of the person who gets my imagination? You know? The odd thing is that I grew up in the Philippines, impoverished, living in a house that was abandoned, basically, and he grew up. . . . He actually grew up in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and grew up in a military family from a long line of Presbyterian ministers. So our childhoods could not have been any more different. But I will never forget the day we met—at a rooftop on 36th Street and 6th Avenue in New York City—thinking, "Oh my gosh, this is the person that I wish I were childhood friends with. He's like my imaginary friend from childhood that came to life." And I remember thinking, "But how can that be? How can it be that someone who grew up in a place that's seemingly so different from my childhood home be kin to me?"

[00:22:31] **Cinelle** And for the past decade, it has been a discovery of that "why." Is it because it's humid here like it's humid in the Philippines? Maybe that's why I claim this as home. Maybe. Is it the storms? I mean, my first book was—for crying out loud—called MONSOON MANSION. Here we are in the middle of yet another storm. And if it doesn't storm here, or if it doesn't rain here, they're saying there's snow rip current. I almost don't know this place. Right? Is it that? Or is it the the social stratification that is so familiar to me because we have that in the Philippines as well. Or is it just people's love for food? Is it the fact that they grow rice here too? I don't know! There's just so many little reminders of home and markers of my identity that I've found here, that I've stumbled upon, that I didn't expect to be here. And I think that again is reflected in the anthology. That these little kernels of wisdom or little gems and pebbles. . . . Or it's like this shark's tooth that you find during your walk, your morning walk at the beach. You don't know how it got there. You don't know how old this shark was. You don't know if the shark is prehistoric or what. But you have found it. And so I think, I think that that's what it is. It's in these little totems that I've been finding along the way.

[00:24:27] **Kendra** I think the South is such a. . . . It's such a fascinating place with so much diversity like you're talking about within it. I find learning more about the South, I learn more about the South every day. There's so many interesting things here. There's so much culture here. And I love to see that celebrated. And that's something that I think that is really special about this collection, is that people from the South—in particular Black, Indigenous, and people of color from the South—can see themselves celebrated and included in a way that, unfortunately, is not always the case. And that's just something that I think makes this special and makes it a book that I just want to walk down the street and hand to people. The word isn't "magic," but it's just something that I think is something that's been needed and something that is just really well done with the collection.

[00:25:25] **Cinelle** That gave me goose bumps because that's what I'm hoping people walk away with. . . . is, they read it. They learn a thing or two. They feel seen. And then they feel activated to pass it on. This is that kind of book. This is the book that you share. Like I was talking earlier about, the generosity of the writing community. . . . I also believe in the generosity of the reading community, especially right now. It's these acts of compassion. It's these acts of generosity and selflessness and of desiring to live outside of ourselves that I think will help us live another day.

[00:26:22] **Kendra** I definitely think that's something that's unique about this book. And I really love that it comes from the region, and it's something that this definitely hits the spot. And one of the great things about an anthology is that it introduces you to a whole range of new writers. It's like a buffet. And then if you like what you read, you can go back, and you can find more. And it's sort of like just getting a sample of all the amazing writing that you can go and find.

[00:26:50] **Cinelle** Yes. This is just a teaser for the wealth of knowledge and wealth of skill and depth of skill that's out there. Yeah, and I'm so glad that you said that because it's so true. I learned of new writers. I am pretty sure you would say this about yourself. I think I'm a pretty avid reader. I think I'm pretty well read. But to discover, right? That's why we read. We read to discover, and we read to connect. And again, this is. . . . The word might not be "magic," but that's kind of the magic of the book, is you get to meet people.

[00:27:42] **Kendra** So we've talked a little bit about how this book has a sense of place, a deep sense of place. But what are some of the, I guess, places of this book? And what can readers expect to find there?

[00:27:56] **Cinelle** Yeah, this is really the places that I love the most about the South. Everywhere from a basketball court—so there's college sports, which is pretty much the heart, I think, of Southern culture—from that kind of place to something more mundane like the DMV. It's people's front porches. It's a recording studio. It's someone's car. It's a classroom. The places that I think readers find themselves in, day in and day out. And maybe they didn't know that there was a story there. Maybe they didn't know that a place as mundane as the DMV could be that setting for a little bit of tension. Yeah, it's all these mundane venues, mundane places of work and places to pass time. And then more unexpected places like someone's specific car or a recording studio.

[00:29:19] **Kendra** I really love that when people can make everyday things something fascinating and make this really dramatic or, like you said, have that tension in that kind of essay. I think that's . . . I don't know . . . it just takes an incredible amount of talent to be able to work that. But it's beautiful when you find it. So that's great.

[00:29:37] **Cinelle** Yeah, you'll never walk in and out of the DMV the same way again.

[00:29:44] **Kendra** Before I let you go, I wanted to ask you maybe what are some Southern writers of color that you would recommend that weren't included in this anthology, but you would also highly recommend to our listeners?

[00:29:57] **Cinelle** Yeah, I mean, Jesmyn Ward just released this heartbreaking yet so beautiful essay in "Vanity Fair." Of course, her whole body of work. She's got all the accolades, but I highly recommend her. As far as essays, I also recommend Karen Good Marable, who I had the pleasure of sharing a writing residency space with very recently. And she was a music journalist for a while and has been writing a lot about home as well, being a Brooklyn girl now in Georgia. So she writes a lot about that as well. Crystal Wilkinson and I met because we did an event together in New York about our memoirs. And again, kind of like with my husband, she grew up in the South, and I grew up in the Philippines. And we both had written these family stories. And as different as our families were, we found so many similarities between us and our families. And yeah, outside of that, there's also a lot of great writing on art, other art forms in the South by Southern artists and essays coming out of the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art. That's a great

source. And, you know, anything really that "The Bitter Southerner" or "Scalawag" publishes also is a great introduction to a plethora of Southern writers.

[00:31:57] **Kendra** Love "The Bitter Southerner." Their Waffle House photo essay situation happening is amazing. I went to the first Waffle House ever, like last year because I'm gluten free. So, like, you know. But once you go in, and you start talking to the people, it's like, oh, it clicks. Like, oh, this is why. This is why it's like . . . I don't know . . . food houses of worship, kind of.

[00:32:26] **Cinelle** That is very true, particularly of this region.

[00:32:31] **Kendra** All right. Well, the last question I have for you is, in addition to events for A MEASURE OF BELONGING, what's on next for you? Are you working on any exciting projects that you want to share? Anything like that?

[00:32:44] **Cinelle** Yeah, I have a little project that's getting started. I just went away for ten days at this writing residency to get some research work done . . . or at least research work get started. Hopefully that means there is a third book in the future. And so if you read MONSOON MANSION, which is about my childhood and my childhood home, and MALAYA, my second book, is about my immigration story and adoption story into the United States and my story becoming a new mom in the South. This is kind of a continuation of that. And it might even involve a trip back home, which I'm equally excited and terrified about, given that I haven't been back to the Philippines in almost twenty years.

[00:33:48] **Kendra** Wow, that sounds really exciting. Well, good luck with your next project. And, cross our fingers, I look forward to reading it whenever that may be.

[00:33:59] **Cinelle** Thank you so much. And you guys are always so kind to me. And I'm always excited to just have any kind of affiliation and really friendship with you all. And I'm always excited to be able to just say hello to your listeners.

[00:34:18] **Kendra** Well, we love saying hello to you too. And thanks for coming on.

[00:34:27] **Kendra** I'd like to thank Cinelle Barnes for talking with me about the anthology, A MEASURE OF BELONGING, which is out now from Hub City Press. You can find her on Instagram (@cinellebarnesbooks). And of course, all of her information will be linked in the show notes. I'd also like to say a special thank you to our patrons, whose continued support makes this podcast possible. You can find Reading Women at readingwomenpodcast.com and on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). You can find me (@kdwinchester). And thanks so much for listening.