

ANDREI CODRESCU

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Welcome to another production of the Center for Emerging Media, and I'm Marc Steiner. The other day an old friend and colleague and poet, Andrei Codrescu stopped by for a visit, and we talked about a lot of things that day. You might recognize his voice from all of his commentaries on NPR. You might have read one of his many stories or poems or essays that he's written over the years. We sat down for what was a really casual conversation. I asked him about some of his most recent work, including *it was today*, new poems, and his new novel *Wakefield*, where he wrestles with the Devil, and a collection of writing about his adopted and loved city, *New Orleans, Mon Amor*.

When I was reading, I didn't finish this yet. But I really was getting—I got into it. I read this and I just got these a couple days ago. So one of the things that hit me as I was reading all these three books is that uh, this is weird to say I don't know how to put this—it's almost as if you, you're like a mystical materialist. [laughs] The way you look at the—at the world.

Wow.... that's really right. I mean, can—can I quote that on the back of the book?

Yeah, you—you can use it.

I remember when, you know, was warning his followers about something he called “spiritual materialism”

Uh-huh.

Which, uh, became quite manifest in the spiritual communities because uh, everybody felt sort of holier than thou so he warned them against being, uh, you know, spiritual, you know, wealth, uh, [laughs] you know, gathers or, you know, having egos too big for their practice, you know, which was humility. But I think, you know, you read it some other way. I mean, you know, this. the New Orleans stories were these sympathetic stories about living in New Orleans for a very long time and New Orleans is a very strange, uh, city. I mean, it's old, and it has uh, that comforting feeling of uh, history when you sit down in a restaurant and you know that somebody sat in the same place and died, well—so, it feels good. It's been—it's there. And, so, uh, and you know it has a spirituality, it's a diverse—you know the Catholics are really—a lot of them Voodoo practitioners or at least Voodooistic in some way, uh, after one of the big storms uh, I think was it was Ivan who didn't quite hit New Orleans but everybody's expecting to and they had an evacuation that was relatively successful. But, uh, I met a priest on the street with a little girl and the girl's father and they'd just been to, uh, one of the convents to turn the statue of the virgin in toward the storm because it apparently had worked in the past, whenever the city was under attack by a storm or a war or a yellow fever, there is this thing they do, which is they turn the virgin, which worked pretty well until Katrina, of course. But maybe they didn't get to it in time. Uh. You know, things of that nature, you know. Uh, I read a book called, a novel written in 1848 by a German, uh, writer, a Baron Ludwig von Reizenstein—

Yeah, you wrote a lot about him in this, great.

Yeah, oh, an amazing guy. He uh, 1848 his father sent him to New Orleans to get him away from the revolutionary troubles in Germany

Right.

So he comes to New Orleans and founded a German language newspaper—uh, there were two of them. The time—this was *Louisiana Staats-Zeitung*, which was, uh, the Bohemian paper, which was artistic and hip and he started writing a serial called *The Mysteries of New Orleans* and it was very accurate in so far as the city and the streets and, uh the current scandals went because his readers checked them, they read it every day, but then he just took off and made his magic, you know, there's a thousand year old guy, the seeds of the yellow fever come from the, uh, Red River, and there are, uh, you know, these two

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sisters then he describes but they're not really sisters but they're lovers and he describes lesbian sex for the first time in American literature. In German.

In the 19th century.

Oh, yeah, 18—we're talking

That's amazing.

...before the Civil War, yeah.

Right.

So—and there's all kinds of, there's, uh, a sadistic priest who kills children and I mean he's just, you know, it's just filled with extraordinary drama and magic. And so I wrote a, uh, novel called *Messiah* in 1999 and that was, you know, I was picking up on all sort—all sorts of fantastic stuff, and then I read, uh, *The Mysteries of New Orleans* about a year after and I'm—man, you know, I'm in the same city, same place, same feeling, you know, so, the city does, uh, does have materially something spiritual screwed in it, you know.

Something's going on there. But you—you also write about uh, coming back to von Reizenstein in a minute, you made me think about that piece that you wrote about synchronicity in this kind of strange world that we live in, how these things connect with this—was this true, you told about this young girl there's a quote you did, you had and then, you met this young girl in a bar and she had the quote and her lesbian lover came and snatched her away and they went back to your place...

Well that was one of the weirder true things about the entire writing of *Messiah*, because, uh, I was stuck in the book and I typed a sentence from the Nag Hammadi, the Gnostic Gospels. I just opened the book and it said "Our Sister Sophia, she who is a whore."

Right. That was it, that was it.

And so I closed the book, I typed it and for no good reason I went to the bar around the corner—Molly's, I was sitting in the window, and then this little girly twig put some couple of leaf hands over my eyes and said "Guess the name of my new band," and I said, uh, I didn't even know who it was, I'm not a young people's band, and I said, okay, I didn't know who it was, I said, well what is it," and she said "Our Sister Sophia, she who is a whore." Literally. And I just sort of—everything stood—turned and it was this girl that I had seen there before but I didn't know her. Michelle. And so I said, "Where did you get that?" And "Oh," she says, "It's from the Gnostic Gospels." She said "I've been reading them ever since I was thirteen years old." At which point this, you know, rather, you know, hefty, not hefty, but you know, vigorous and muscular, uh, person came and just grabbed her off the stool, was about to take—

It was a woman, though—a woman, right?

A woman, yeah, about to take off the door with her so I just kind of followed them and you know, I said, what's the story and this was Nurse Susan who was, who'd been following Michelle around for a while because Michelle is out of control. And so I took them both back to my apartment wherein Michelle proceeded to sort of recite full parts of my character which I was writing and so I threw out everything I was writing and sort of transcribed her hallucinations. Well I knew her after, several times we met, and she didn't recall any of this and every time I bring it up she just puts her finger to her lips and says "Shhh."

What do you—what do you, what—when you contemplate that, what do you make of that? What is, what do you think goes on that, like I said, that you stumble into these things, become part of your life? What do you think this is?

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Well, with that one I had about three scenarios. One that somehow the page printed itself and it blew down the street and Michelle found it. Totally impossible. Or somebody kind of stole my computer and traveled in time—I don't know. It doesn't make any sense, it never did, you know. I never to this day figured it out. But you know, people in New Orleans you tell them stuff like that they always say, oh yeah, I got to tell you about this thing. You know. And it's usually something equally, you know, un—uh, unprovable, and, uh, unbelievable. You know, so. The city does have that kind of—this little black hole, this worm hole that you travel.

Yes.

And then this business about synchronicity, is that, you know, I'm—you know, so much happens that is not explicable that—in that way, I figure that part of my job is to fight them, you know, don't let it happen man. Cause maybe everything is connected perfectly, and if you really knew it then you'd just have no choice but, you know, to, to, to take heavy doses of Demerol or something.

Then I couldn't do any work if I did that though. [laughter]

Well now Demerol stops--it'll stop you from figuring it out.

I mean, do you—if that's, you know, it's been a while since I read your stuff, so when this came the other day I really got into it, started reading it, as much as I could consume before I knew we were going to get together, and—I mean, what I said about you earlier about you being sort of a mystical materialist, it's a word I've used for years for other things, but there's something about the definition of this world. You know, people are either mystical and spiritual and don't believe in a material base, or they're like my old communist friends, all materialistically based and the mystical, they don't believe in it. But somehow to me, what your work does is—has been helping me work it through—is the connection of the two. How they actually meet and are really a part of one as opposed to being separate worlds.

Well that's very uh, that's a—very kind way to say it, you know. I never, you know, I was born in a small town in, in Romania—a very provincial place, and uh, you know, I mean, from Sibiu to New Orleans is kind of an underground, personal route, you know. So things that happened to me whether they happened, you know, I mean like they happen for everyone. I always endowed them with a little more significance because they seemed like a big deal. Especially when I was younger. I wrote an autobiography when I was 23 years old, you know. [laughter] Not that much had happened to me. But. The few things that happened seemed really important, you know. I mean, I wasn't nery enough to actually write it in the first person, you know, I didn't say—I said “he,” like, I was the hero of my own story and this thing had happened to me—

Out of body!

—you know, to this character. But in, in doing that and in writing a book I created kind of an initiatory structure that had to be there. I mean, you know, your “he,” the hero, he encounters various terrible things, and adventures and reads certain things and does certain things and then wins something. You know, in this case, just getting out of Romania and uh, you know, having the chance to start another life in another language, really being literally born again. So. Uh. Paying attention to kind of everything that happened, you know, it became sort of significant when I write it, it's because I think probably it's uh, you know, it means something. You know. So I'm never—I've always had a feeling that things mean something, and they are not just chance, all though, you know, I would be very hard put to, uh, defend that because I'm not a mystic or a uh, a believer particularly and, uh, I just did uh, an interview, a long interview with a Romanian Theologian, a guy from a, from a town called Arad, Robert Lazu, and it was great doing it because he's not, uh,

You were interviewing him?

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No, he interviewed me from—via email. And, uh, he was asking questions a literary person wouldn't ask. They had to be—to do with various ideas and, uh, he'd have most of the interview, I did from uh, Andrew Cohen's place in, uh, in in the Berkshires. I don't know if you know his community.

Oh, yeah.

Yeah, and they publish a magazine called *What is Enlightenment*.

Oh, yes, yes. I have deep connections to the Berkshires, I'm there a lot. Right, right.

Alright. So Andrew invited me to have a series of talks there with him and they gave me a beautiful little apartment in this manicured quad in the fresh air, I mean it was heaven. And with wifi. So.

Uh-huh. With wifi.

AC Yeah. So. These are really plugged in spiritual people. So. Uh, you know I was uh, I was talking to Andrew and with some of his people and talking about things like creativity and, you know, how, how certain things work in ways that are not—explicable with a materialist, uh, philosophy or take. And I was answering questions at the same time from this Romanian guy who uh, was trained in the school of

Mircea Eliade and Jung and uh, really a sort of archetypal psychology and folklore and—

Was he Orthodox, or was he—

No, actually he's Catholic, which is really strange, because he's Roman Catholic in Romania which is mostly Greek Orthodox country.

Right.

But he's a theologian, so he had, you know, but he studied Eliade and he was a folklorist too. And he collected, uh, folk tales and myths, and uh, so it all—it all fit in very nicely and was a good uh, time to examine that question, you know, for what is in—inexplicable. Andrew and all these people believe in, uh, “evolutionary consciousness” is what they call it, and uh, they're uh, philosophy is fairly basic, in a way, I mean, just to say that people are the result of 2 billion years of evolution and there is a reason for that, and that we're still evolving and these—these are the ways in which we're doing that and so his job and these people's job is to open a dialog on that subject, you know. So. I mean, I'm very skeptical so I did play the Devil's advocate the whole time and I said, you know, “Yeah, but...” you know. [laughter] So.

You see, but you do that, but you have to also be affected by it. You can't have these conversations and not on some level be affected by it.

Well, there was a very beautiful woman who was working on spirituality and uh, feminism there, and they had long discussions so, you know, I was very attracted so there was a definite material base to the entire--[laughter] to my spiritual interest, you know. Which reminds me that in the 60s, you know, I was often very holy in order to get laid.

Well, who didn't?

Yeah. [laughter] My hair wasn't really long.

You didn't have long—you didn't have long hair?

I did, I did.

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Yeah, okay. We had—yeah.

But it was symbolic.

So what—you got here what year, to America?

Well, 1966, March 1966 to Detroit, Michigan on a very cold day.

Detroit—Detroit. That's right. Detroit.

Yeah. It was, uh. I was in Rome and it was hot and warm and actually beautiful and things were in flower and I got to Detroit and there's nothing but sleet and mud and cars. Until I met John Sinclair and uh—

John Sinclair!

The Artist's Workshop.

Yes, right, right, right, right.

And um, then my hair sprouted and, you know.

I've been in email connect—connect—talking to him over there, over the years.

Yeah, he's uh, he makes the, he's been to Amsterdam and New Orleans quite a bit.

Right—in New Orleans?

Yeah, he was a DJ for WWLZ and just played fantastic music there.

That's right. John's a good guy. He's a really interesting guy.

Oh, he's wonderful.

He was hear last summer? Summer before last as well. He was—we, we hooked up. I hadn't seen him in a long time.

Somebody actually told me, was it Barry Gifford? He said he hadn't seen John in about 15 years and he was walking in New York and John was sitting on a stoop in the Bowery. And uh, he looked up and Barry said, "John?" and John said "What took you so long? [laughter]"

He was a good man—and he still is a good man. [laughs] So I, you know, I would, when was again looking at this last night again, before—I mean I had to read a whole lot last night of this stuff to make sure I knew some of the new stuff you were writing, and uh, it forced me to consume more wine than I wanted to at night to stay awake—but it worked.

Welcome to company. I was going to bring you some țuică, it's Romanian plum brandy, in Romania it would be okay to do it now but, uh

[laughs] We could, we could do it now, it's okay! So, uh, have you been aware or written about the Baltimore New Orleans connection? I mean the fact the Cajuns came here first before they came to Louisiana?

I didn't know that.

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Yeah.

So they were here and they were, uh, they weren't welcome?

The British kicked them out of Nova Scotia.

Right.

The ships came up the Chesapeake, dropped them off here. Downtown Baltimore—uh—on Baltimore between Pratt and Lombard is called French Town. 'Cause that's where a lot of them lived. Baltimore accepted them, some of the counties hated because there was all this anti-Catholic going on, anti-French stuff. And so they were here for like ten years. And then they went from here to New Orleans. And the other connection is that Baltimore—I thought this as you came here and left here and went to New Orleans—Baltimore's also—and New Orleans are both the centers of Black Catholicism.

Right.

You know.

I knew that. I, I just wasn't aware that the cajuns had actually,

Yeah, they were here.

...They made a stop here.

The 1750s. And then they left and went to Louisiana.

Right. Well there's a whole revival of that culture now because, well, among other things the French government has been—uh, through Francophone studies department, putting some money into reviving the language and publishing some, uh newspapers and uh, suddenly the Cajun kids who didn't speak any French are picking up the language again, so. Uh. Of course the music is kept going and the jokes and the fairy tales and all of that.

So now, you—I mean, you really have adopted Louisiana and New Orleans, it really is—I mean it—like, Romania might have been your home as a child, this is really your home.

Well it is now, I mean it's been 25 years and, uh, but it's not—I mean, it's southern Louisiana, which is very different than Northern Louisiana, which is more like Mississippi and Baptist and, uh. But uh, yeah, I really do love New Orleans, I mean, this thing that's happened there has changed the city,

Katrina.

Considerably. But it's still New Orleans and there's something there, a spirit of place, you know. It's kind of uh, they called uh, you know, the Romans said, they said, you know spirits of place, you know. And they're definitely there. Uh, so, I live in the French Quarter.

Are you—is that where you live now?

Yeah. Well I have an apartment there.

Are you still teaching on Baton Rouge?

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In Baton Rouge. And, uh, you know, it's—I live in the Quarter and I don't drive, so I feel like I need a passport to go across Canal Street. But uh, yeah. It's, it's a home. But then I also, you know, uh, feel that it's uh, it's become a kind of uh, scary, rude, naked kind of bare knuckles city, right now. It's not—I'm not talking about just it being dangerous being on the street because it always was, but uh, just that there are so many pigs in the trough in the political scene. And all the well meaning people who make plans for the city, for rebuilding and reconstruction, uh, are actually being screwed by investing developers, and uh, the best people in town are young volunteers. A lot of kids who've given up their school breaks to come to New Orleans to rebuild and—

Right.

—Habitat for Humanity, and even the churches have been doing a great job. Pat Robertson's Operation Blessing did alright. And uh, and then they meet the, in French Bureaucracies—at all levels—the city, the state, and the Feds and uh, right now it's just uh, a bunch of money with lots of hands grabbing it and uh, the casinos getting the people's money, and the politicians also getting the people's money and doing with it God knows what.

Is it—is it—do you think New Orleans is done? Do you think that—done in a sense that the spirit of that place that people are in love with, even with the dangers inside of it—is over?

No, I don't think it's over. I think it's going to be a small city. You know. It already is half the size of what it was so, population-wise it will be small. The people who really made it interesting were the poorer people, because they were the one who kept the culture. I mean, the music comes from poverty, it comes from you know. Poverty is art. Because uh, you know. It's one of a kind. If you can't buy it at the store, you make it yourself. And that's what this music and this art was all about. And some of the young artists are coming in, not really meaning to do that, but the rents have gone—there's less housing. Rents are through the roof. The real estate crisis that's hit the whole country didn't go anywhere near New Orleans because places are more expensive there. And so it will be a—the battle is between a Disneyfied version of New Orleans, which would provide however jobs for musicians who never could make it in New Orleans, always had to leave because there weren't enough places for them to play—but they go Disney they'll have enough places to play, which is a paradox. Uh, the, you know, uh, cacophonous specter that you got as soon as you got out of the French Quarter or uptown and you went someplace—you know, like my friend Jim who came to visit and ended up staying for three weeks with some people he didn't know—that New Orleans, you know, is unfortunately, uh, you know, severely diminished, it is.

And the poor people aren't back, or most of them aren't back, they're still scattered, right?

Well, no—I mean, yeah, they're scattered, they're gone, I mean, both from St. Bernard Parish and certainly the 9th Ward, you know—and I could say for them, if you look at it from their point of view, you can't buy the, the kind of uh, racial discourse either. You know that they're black and poor and uh, they should come back to New Orleans because if they are somewhere where they can put their kids in better schools and they don't have any reason to come back to New Orleans, and spend twenty years, uh, hustling with the bureaucracies so they could build a house five feet off the ground, I mean. There is, there is definitely a kind of human, you know, just a simple human thing involved, it goes beyond you know, New Orleans rah-rah. I mean, I know the New Orleans tourism bureau always wants you to put on the good face, you know, and say, oh, great things are happening,

Yeah, right.

Because, you know, we're rebuilding. But you know, then you talk to the people and say it's a shit hole, and it's always been a shit hole.

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But there was soul in the shit hole, and the question is—is the soul gonna be—soul gonna—be able to control the, the culture and kind of the, what pushes the city, what pushed the feeling in that city, you know.

Well, that's, you know, that's really—I have to become more mystical than materialist, because I kind of believe that that's going to happen, but I don't have any fact. The facts are pointing the other way.

But, you know, I—it's hard to say. I mean, one of the things—one of the things you wrote that, you know, I was reading last night and this morning was, uh, there's "My City, My Wilderness"—that you wrote in '95.

Yeah, right.

To me, when I read this when I was reading this maybe I'm wrong about this, Andrei, but it seemed, on some levels, this is like almost at the core of the book in a way.

Right. That definitely the core of the book. And that's the part that actually doesn't take prisoners because there is a lot of the bad stuff about this city in there too.

Right.

I mean, there's poetry, but then there's the fact that it's a gruesomely brutal city that, you know was the worst slave market in America and it was the you know, northern end of the slave and rum and, uh, you know, route that started in Martinique, uh, in the south. You know, so. You know. Uh, so slave, rum, and sugar, really.

Right.

Cuba—you know, Martinique, Cuba, Jericho,

Haiti.

Yeah, Haiti. So, you know, that's always been there and that's why you have those really good blues and you do have that really good deep music. It's not just the Mississippi Delta, but it's—it's New Orleans. It's where that got perfected and made into the American sound.

You know, it's really funny. Because without—I was thinking of this with a friend of mine here that we came back from a jazz concert, and that's Woody Curry, he's an African American Vietnam vet, a really good guy. And I—I said. "You know, without the pain of slavery, the horror of slavery, we'd never have the American culture. We'd never have jazz and blues. We'd never have the writers we ended up with. We'd never have a lot of things if it wasn't that part of our history." It's that weird...

Well, you know, that's what Baudelaire called that Les Fleurs du Mal. you know, that you have these flowers that come out of the swamp, you know, out of pain. You know. All of a sudden you have this—blossoms, you know. I mean, I've had students who've come from really tough situations and their just incredible writers. Olympia Vernon who's a novelist, very talked about now, and she comes from a trailer from the depths of Louisiana and she's just extraordinary, there is no—that soil, that nourished her, all that pain and all that stuff. And that's recent. I mean, you put that back a few decades in the century and then you get you know, the ways in which people tried to escape and that was music, and that was, you know, style, it was culture, you know, the city—the city was hospitable to it in the sense that the French has already made a laissez-faire atmosphere there in which they had black or creole mistresses that—who had children who were educated in special schools for the, for, you know the illegitimate children of the French aristocrats, up to a point because then some of recognized them and took them into the family.

And some of them owned slaves then, too. Creoles.

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AC And some of them owned slaves. You can see all this history in the cemetery. It's all written on the tombstones, really. But. So you have that, so the idea that there's anybody in New Orleans—there's nobody white in New Orleans, for one thing. Because it's just not possible. So, you know, it's a city of color.

Right, right.

Of various kinds, and so what you can maintain in some insane way is, is color lines, but you know you can't say that there is a race, you know, kind of a clear race war going on, the battle of any kind. So the music and the art and all of that stuff was common properties. Sure, the French had an opera house that burned down, and the, the museum in New Orleans that caters to the uptown mavens who likes to, like to go there and, you know, to their balls and their carnival cruises that are still segregated to some extent. You have the white Rex parade and you have the parody, Zulu, which is actually bigger and is not a parody anymore. So you know. I mean, these cultures have played off of each other and interplayed. So to anything that's maintained in the sense of an old establishment of white or white establishment is really kind of an illusion like Mardi Gras. You know, you put on a mask and things change.

So, Andrei, I—we'd be remiss if we do this—if we didn't get you to read some stuff.

Sure.

And I don't know. Do you have anything special—I mean...

I—I don't know. Why don't you just ask me some questions and I'll open the books and answer them with wherever my eyes fall. It's called oracular reading, and uh...then

Okay, okay. Let's start with *Wakefield*, then.

I do this all the time. *Wakefield* is the story of a guy, me, but it's not supposed to be me, in my apartment.

Are you "he," or are you the Devil?

No, well—

I'm just kidding [laughter]

Girls always ask that...But he comes to take the guy and the, the guy says well just give me a year so I can read, you know, so the Devil makes a deal and he lives. So. It's the story of *Wakefield*, that's the novel.

It's a great story, I gotta tell you. I've only gotten a quarter of the way through it, I just got the books the other day, so I'm reading it. I love it, I love it. I love the beginning of the book with the Devil, just comes and he asks for a scotch—to discuss—

Well the first place, the first scene is in my apartment in New Orleans. So I describe everything.

So you wanna open a piece of that book and just read, and see what you end up with?

Yeah. Okay. Is there anything special we ought to know about the Devil, New Orleans or me?

Yeah, I suppose. What is it that—I mean, again, it's this mystical materialism for me, again, of you. Because of you and the Devil just popping up together.

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"The voices of God are everywhere heard loud and clear under the hum of the ticker tape. In all these miracles and speaking Gods and the mysteries left homeless by the architecture of speed and moving forward, onward and ahead. Wakefield throws his hands into the air as if to sprinkle fairy dust on the room. He is evoking the richness of a place always ready for miracles." [laughter] It's a pretty good book, huh?

It's—yeah, it is.

My idea is that if you ever ask a book a question and it answers it, then it's a good book. And if it doesn't, then you throw it away. [laughter]

Which is why you keep the Gnostic Gospels and just open it—

Right.

—to any place.

Right. That's surrealist, it's an old surrealist trick. Everything connects at some level.

It is. Wow. I suppose growing up in Romania, in this kind of strange country as a little Jewish boy, you have to be surreal.

Well, you have to...

You have to live in it.

You have to first wonder how you survived, because how my mother and her generation survived, because the entire—my grandmother's sisters who were killed at Aushwitz and the entire Hungarian Jew—all the Hungarian Jews died. So that side of my family's gone, killed by the Nazis and the Romanians. And then the other part that escapes made it, you know—

How did your parents survive?

Well, the way my mother tells it is that she and her sister and her sister's husband and my Grandmother escaped over the mountains—the night that the Germans took over Hungary. And so they were—they escaped the partition because they were, they were in Romania, and the Romanians were pretty anti-Semitic as well, but they were very ineffective compared to the Hungarians, thank God. That's why—why I have a fondness for a little bit of corruption, you know.

[laughter] It's good, it's good. People who are not effective anti-Semites than ones who are effective, right.

Right. So they were able to sort of bribe their way to survival until the end of the war, so, you know, God bless the, you know, slightly corrupt authorities of Romania. You know, that's how. So I was born right after the war.

Right. '45?

'46.

'46. Same year, I thought we were. Okay. So, let's go somewhere else. Let's go to—I'll shut this book so—and we'll see—

We can do some poems, if you like.

We can do some poems.

ANDREI CODRESCU

In the same fashion?

In the same fashion, sure. I guess—the question is, is the power of New Orleans in what keeps you so rooted there?

"I saw some writing in a stream. I couldn't read what it said. It said: Lu Li, Lu Li, Lu Li, there is a gray hair among your black ones. It said that I couldn't read it." Now, [laughs] I have to explain that, 'cause...

Please.

This—middle of the poetry book is, uh, is a sort of a channeled section, written by two lovers from China in the 13th century, Lu Li and Wang Li, who didn't, who didn't—who were maybe brother and sister, maybe lovers, or maybe both. And Wang went to war and Lu Li stayed behind as a courtesan, and they wrote each other poetry letters, which they may or may not have seen. So I got up every morning, one year, it was in the late nineties and I wrote Lu Li and Wang Li poems, and I was convinced that I was writing these Chinese poets. I even had them translated into Chinese.

Did you really?

Chinese scholars said, well they seem a little modern. I said, well... [laughter] They had to travel a while on the way. So this is Lu Li speaking, the one who I just—

So where did you find them? How did you stumble onto them?

Well, I was, you know, I was very much in love with my wife, Laura, and I would write her a poem before she got on—

Your second wife, right?

Yeah. And—then I would write her a poem, and I was impatient. I wanted her to write a response, but as soon as she didn't get up on time I wrote her response, too. [laughter] So I ended up writing most of them in the book. Some of them are hers, though.

Are you and Laura still together?

Yeah.

Oh good. That's good. Just checking. I didn't know—

AC Since the 13th century

That's right! That's good, since the 13th century.

Yeah.

So—let's go here. I mean, so—I have an off the wall thought—since you mention the 13th century—so are their Jewish vampires?

I think there's, they're actually—I don't have to look at a book to tell you they're one and the same thing. Because in the—the vampire figure in Romania was created was the quintessential figure of the other. So —there were vampires based on Jews.

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Vampires were based on Jews.

Yes. The vampire was another who comes in the night and sucks your blood, and you remember the blood libel,

Right, right, right.

...which was used very widely in Russia as an anti-Semitic slur—that Jews made matzo with the blood of Christian children. It's—all of that's incorporated into this figure that was quintessentially "other." Who wasn't one of us. He came in the night and when you look at pictures, the first depictions of vampires that are made like Jews and then Jews are made to look like the Devil, so the Devil, the vampire and the Jew are exactly the same thing for the lovely kindhearted people of Eastern Europe. So.

The sweet people of Eastern Europe.

Right. So here is another answer. "Death was the theme this year, now—the carnivals, the krewes—pick themes every year. So the Krewe du Vieux Carre, my favorite 'cause they make fun of everything and their—their theme this particular year was death, so the Krewe du Vieux Carre chose death as its theme this year. We paraded funerarly through the French Quarter. Black chiffon angels, executioners, coffins, wreaths and a guillotine. That isn't all that unusual in this town, and death enjoys a respect and familiarity. Where people bury each other to the tune of jazz bands and live as if there were no tomorrow, which could pretty well be the case if the levees break." This was written before Katrina, needless to say.

But not the—the death plays a big part of what you write about in New Orleans, whether your writing about—somebody should do a story about, you said about how many restaurants are near cemeteries, how that—where you said, as you sat down one of the first things you said here was, you know, when you're in New Orleans and you sit in a seat, you know, someone who either long ago or now recently has died—just sat in that—sat in that seat. The notion of death is—

Well that's always present in New Orleans, I think it's been there for a very long time because the fest—the carnival itself is a blow out before Ash Wednesday, and the word 'carnival' comes from 'carnival' which means 'farewell to the flesh.' So you get to party and then you get to repent. And so you put the ashes on your forehead and you, you know, supposedly have died symbolically and gone somewhere else, but, you know, people are so Catholic and so dedicated to carnival so they, they do both by staying up all night on Mardi Gras, and then putting the cross of ashes on their forehead from the ash tray in front of them instead of going to the church, so. That's all there, you know. That, uh, makes a very strong—it's a strong presence. When you are—the cemeteries are very important. People do the day of the death, dead business by going to clean the tombs of their ancestors. I used a cemetery near my house as a coffee house for a long time, 'cause I would go have my coffee, it was very quiet in the morning. And actually I took a Polish artists, a visiting Polish artist, to have coffee in LaFayette cemetery in the uptown, and we're having our coffee and then he told me how during communism he was a high school teacher, he was a history teacher, and he took his students to the main cemetery in Warsaw and he taught them history by pointing to the graves of various important historical personages and tell them, really teaching them the true history, not the one in the manuals that he was forced to teach.

Right, right, right. So, the—one of the stories in here is I think, if I have it remembered right, a fellow Romanian who made alligator picante?

Oh yeah. [laughter] This guy was a trip. But he—well I just got a call, and this guy said well, come by. I'm Romanian and I own a little place called "The Golden Crawfish" in Baton Rouge, and I said, oh, well that's interesting. So I went to see him and he told me that he—this was during communism actually—he met a Swede on a train who drew a picture of a crawfish for him and said do you have these in Romania? And he said yeah, sure. And he said well, the Swedes love to eat them. And so he organized coll—collectives of children to pick crawfish and ship them to Sweden until he figured out how the Swedes like to eat them,

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so then he cooked them and made a sauce and started shipping them prepared and he got—you know, a good source of revenue for the government and himself—but they ran out of crawfish. They fished out the country. So then he started flying all over the place, to—for crawfish, and eventually—I'm not sure how, he stopped in Louisiana and didn't go back to Romania and opened a crawfish restaurant. And while he was talking, he's pointing in—up in the air and saying see, there are planes full of my crawfish overhead right now. So. He said "If you ever need money for anything like a movie or something, I'll get it to you," his wife looking horrified, you know. [laughter] He's crazy, he's crazy. So, but we, we—I don't know. He turned out to be an interesting guy. His daughter worked there, it was a family restaurant, it's not anymore but, you know. That's how Romanians got to Louisiana.

I love that.

Not like cajuns, but...

Right, different, different trajectory.

But, anyway, I'm working on, on a book called *Lenin and Tzara Play Chess*. And it takes place in 1915 when both Lenin and Tristan Tzara the founder of the Dada movement were in Cabaret Voltaire and modern art, they were both in Zürich, in 1915, Zürich, Switzerland was neutral, Lenin was in exile, living under a pseudonym. There were other Russian revolutionaries there like Rykov and Zinoviev.

Right.

They were all living there. Tzara was living there, Hans Arp, Marcel Janco, Dadaists, artists, Romanians, so they all hung out at a cafe called La Terrasse. There is a—

All of them, even Lenin really did?

Yeah. They all, Lenin and Cabaret Voltaire and Tzara lived on the same street, Spiegelgasse, and the James Joyce was there at the same time.

Really!

Yeah, the whole—all of them. And I found out that Lenin and Tzara played chess quite a bit. Lenin was a big, big chess, chess aficionado. There's a famous game he played in Maxdorf that you can find online—you can play it, I did—

You played it?

Yeah, it was interesting. And, but Tzara and Lenin played chess and the game seemed very symbolic to me. And there is a play Tom Stoppard called "Travesties," which actually has them all together. Lenin, Tzara, and Joyce. But I'm just concerned with Tzara and Lenin, because it's just before the Russian revolution. It's 1915. Tzara just founded this violent art movement, this avant-garde movement that overthrows everything we know about art. They think all western civilization art is shit, and they are going to, to destroy by all means possible and they are creating uh, simultaneous poetry, they are making masks—theater masks and having a hell of a time and disturbing the good, the peace of the good citizens of Zürich. Lenin is much quieter, and he's there plotting the Russian Revolution. So there are two, the chess game is symbolic, it's sort of the anatomy of a scene like they do this thing on TV where the director talks about it and the makeup guy and the actor and, you know, so they play this game of chess and it's a game between art and ideology. It's really a game between a new kind of art making new forms, being spontaneous—working outside the rules, and there is Lenin, who is systematic, whose metho—methodical, who's developing a tactic for the revolution. And writing essays about Marx and Hegel and they're playing this chess game. No the game itself, it has rules and it's completely insane. And it's played for some reason by all kinds of people who love power. There's a dictator right now who's built a whole chess city somewhere in one of the former Soviet Republics. And you have Bobby Fisher, you have a lot of nuts who

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get into chess in a very obsessive way. So. I mean, Marcel Duchamp ended up playing chess instead of making art in New York for years. So Tzara and Lenin play chess. And it looks for a while, historically, that Lenin's ideological game won because in 1917 the revolution wins in Russia and it lasts for almost a century. And Dada is—however, changes entirely our idea of art and is incredibly effective—in—in—in getting us out of the 19th century and making new forms for art, but sort of overshadowed really by ideology and ideas of different kinds of ideas of social engineering so in 1989, officials take—communism collapses. Leninism is dead and guess what? Dadaism is still going strong—it's a new Dada. And all of the Dadaists sense that what we're making, creatively and spontaneously, is the actual revolution of the spirit and you got to keep it alive in this any way you can. And not to rege—regimentalize it is, the—is alive and kicking. So Lenin lost the game, Tzara won the game in my opinion. So this is an essay I'm writing, this—

This is an essay, or a book?

It's a book essay.

Right, right, right.

It's a long essay. Yeah, Princeton is going to publish it so hopefully we'll get some photographs and all that. It's never clear that Lenin and Tzara actually played a game, but Tzara said they did in an interview in 1959, on the radio, and then Hans Arp, I think, mentions the fact that they played chess at La Terrasse, which was this place. So I've found that to be a really crucial moment, 1915 in neutral Switzerland.

Yes. I love that. So did you go to Zürich?

I'm going there, I'm going there, see... June.

Just to kind of walk the streets and kind of be there or what?

Yeah, I mean the Swiss have made little, you know, shrines around where Cabaret Voltaire used to be in. There's little signs, but there's still—I mean, it's all very understated because the Swiss don't like to make a big thing out of it. And at the time, of course, the neighbors called the police all the time and the Dadaists were making a lot of noise playing drums and screaming and they didn't bother about Lenin, you know, who's a quiet Russian, you know. [laughter] He didn't bother anybody. He was living there actually under a, a pseudonym. What was it—Jacob Richter. He'd taken a German Jewish name, which was really interesting too. And he used the same pseudonym in London when he was do—he

Right.

He was doing his studies at, at the British Library.

Right. I remember that. That's right. Right, right.

Jacob Richter. And he was was one quarter Jewish, as it turns out.

Lenin was.

Yes.

We're just insidious, we're everywhere, aren't we.

We got a gene, man. [laughter] It's a Messiah gene. I don't know what the hell it is.

Maybe they're right, that's why they come after us all the time.

Vampires, devils, and utopians!

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And now we've mingled with black people in America, it's a terrible thing.

Thank goodness. Miscegenation, that's my religion.

Mine too!

Creolized Crayolas.

So, I have—a couple more questions and we'll let you go do kind—you have things to do today, and you've got things to do—so—

Sure.

Off the wall questions. So, will miscegenation rule?

"Ultra realist depictions of time and place, complete with nose hairs, cataracts, swollen feet, warts, intestinal distress, political opinions and social codes." Yes! [laughter]

And—so, will the spiritual form of the Dadaist actually take hold, or can it never take hold because of what it is?

"Lying on my back, the emperor's astrologer on top of me, I thought of the stars. Years ago, they foretold this. They could not tell that their astrologer's labors were in vain. Even the stars have no say in who works for them."

Perfect!

The books...

The books! That's great, that's great, that's great! Alright. Andrei, thank you so much man, it's really....

It's a great pleasure, always.

It's really good to see you.

You've been listening to a production for the Center for Emerging Media. This podcast was produced by Jessica Phillips and Justin Levy, and we'd like to thank Carr Kizzier and The Creative Writing Form at the Community College of Baltimore County in Essex for bring Andrei Codrescu. And thanks to Clean Cuts Music & Sound design for studio space. And from the Center for Emerging Media, I'm Marc Steiner. Take care.

-Transcript by Judith Lloyd