

From Portland State University's Oregon Public Speakers Collection: "Black Studies Center public dialogue. Pt. 2," May 30, 1975 (<http://bit.ly/1vO2hLP>). Part of the Public Dialogue on the American Dream Theme, via Portland State University Library (<http://bit.ly/1q8HG3h>). Morrison's speech is entitled "A Humanist View."

[6:50] TM: Thank you very much.

Right after *pitch* and *rice* but before *tar* and *turpentine*, there is listed the *human being*. The rice is measured by pounds and the tar and the turpentine is measured by the barrel weight. Now there was no way for the book entitled *The Historical Statistics of the United States from Colonial Times to 1957* to measure by pound or tonnage or barrel weight the human beings. They used only headcount.

The book that I'm referring to, *The Historical Statistics of the United States*, is full of fascinating information, not the least of which is a series labeled Z-281-303, which documents in chronological order and by point of destination of import and export, those humans who came to the United States from 1619-1769.

It seems that every effort was made in compiling these charts and graphs and lists, to assure accuracy. Underneath the neat little columns of figures are footnotes, for whenever there is some equivocation or some number that the Census Bureau's not quite sure of, they identify the fact that it is incomplete.

[9:09] "We are very sorry," they seem to say that; "Our information is not complete; you understand that the country was just getting itself together. And we did not have expert means of collecting data; things were not very efficient then. And you can sense the reasonableness, the gentlemanly assertion everywhere in those pages.

[9: 36] But it is a reasonableness without the least hope of success, because the language cracks under the weight of its own implications. Footnote 3, for example, under *Slaves*, clarifies the ambiguity of its reference with the following words: "Source shows 72 Indians imported. Of that [indecipherable] number, 231 slaves died and 133 were drawn back for exportation." *Died* and *drawn back* are very strange words to find in an index of imports and exports. They are words you could never use to describe rice.

Footnote 5 is very civilized. It says "Number of Negroes Shipped." Not "Those Who Actually Arrived." There was a difference, apparently, between the number shipped and the number that actually arrived.

And then the mind gallops over to the first unanswered question: how many? How many were shipped, and how many did *not* arrive? And then, one thinks about the next question, the really vital question that withers all of the others: Who? Who was absent at the final headcount? Was there a 17yo girl there? With a tree-shaped scar on her knee? And what was her name? You say "Please [glass clinks], Mr. Inspector-General of the United States Census Bureau: What was her name?"

[12:07] Historical statistics [missing] are not required, certainly not expected to provide that kind of information. Its job is done, and very well done, and 153 years of Black history is dispatched on pages 769 and 770, which is about twice the amount of space devoted to rice.

Now that's simply what economic indices are like. But it's also very frequently what American history's concept of Blacks is like. It certainly isn't the fan-shaped spread of rice bursting from a gunnysack. It's not the thunder

roll of barrels, turpentine cascading down a plank. And it's not a 17yo girl with a tree-shaped scar on her knee and a name.

Pretty much like the historical statistics is Black American history: a separate book, a separate chapter, or a separate section of origins and consequences of slavery, all of which is related to production and legislature, very seldom to the very fabric of life and culture in this country. History is percentiles. History is the thoughts of great men. And the description of eras.

[13:45] Does the girl know that the reason that she died in the sea, or smothered in a 60-foot slop pit on a ship called *Jesus*, was because that was her era? Or that some great men thought up her destiny as part of a percentage of national growth or expansion or pre-industrial revolution or colonization of a new world? Does she know what part she played in [the] minds of great men?

I'd like for you to listen, for just a minute, to some of the words of this country's great, great men.

[14:32] In December of 1833, Andrew Jackson wrote the following: "Indians have neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire of improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition. Established in the midst of another and a superior race, and without appreciating the causes of their inferiority or seeking to control them, they must necessarily yield to the force of circumstances, and, ere long, disappear." [Papers shuffle.]

[15:05] General William Sherman: "We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women, and children. Nothing else will reach the rook [?]. The more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed the next war. For the more I see of these Indians, the more convinced I am that all have to be killed or maintained as a species of pauper."

[15: 38] In 1854, the *New York Tribune* editorialized as follows: "The Chinese are uncivilized, unclean, filthy beyond all conception, without any of the higher domestic or social relations, lusty and sensual in their dispositions. Every female is a [clinking glass] prostitute of the basest order." [Glass thunks on wood.]

[16: 07] Richard Pike, Boston, 1854: "Catholicism is, and it ever has been, a bigoted, persecuting, and superstitious religion. There's no crime in the calendar of infamy of which it has not been guilty. There is no sin against humanity that it has not committed. There is no blasphemy against God which it has not sanctioned. It is a power which has never scrupled to break its faith's solemn piety wherever its entries seem to require, which has no conscience, which spurns the control of public opinion, which obtrudes its head among the nations of Christendom, dripping with the cruelty of millions of murders and haggard with the debauchery of a thousand years, always ambitious, always sanguinary, and always false."

[16:54] Sam Houston. 1848, he addressed the United States Senate. His words: "The Anglo-Saxon must pervade the whole southern extremity of this vast continent. Mexicans are no better than the Indians, and I see no reason why we should not take their land." [papers thump on the desk]

Ulysses S. Grant. LaGrange, Tennessee, 1862: "An order to Major-General Hurlbut, Jackson, Tennessee: Refuse all permits to come south of Jackson for the present. The Israelites especially should be kept out."

December 8, General Grant, 1862 to General Webster: “Give order to all the conductors on the road that no Jews are to be permitted to travel on the railroad south from any point. They may go north and be encouraged in it but as such— but they are such an intolerable nuisance that the department must be purged of them. —a general order from Ulysses Grant on account of the scarcity of provisions, all cotton speculators, Jews, and other vagrants having no honest means of support except trading upon the misery of the country.”

More recently, Theodore Roosevelt, 1901; he speaks to Owen Wister: “I entirely agree with you that as a race and in the mass, the Negroes are altogether inferior to Whites.”

And then, finally, a few judicious excerpts from William Byrd of Virginia, 1710-1712. The editor of his diary described Byrd as Virginia’s most polished and ornamental gentleman, a kindly master [sips], who in—[coughs] inveigled in some of his letters against “brutes who mistreat their slaves.”

2/8: Jenny and Eugene were whipped.

4/17: Anaka was whipped.

5/13: Mrs Byrd whips the nurse.

5/22: Moll was whipped.

6/10: Eugene (a child) was whipped for running away, and had the bit put on him.

9/3: I beat Jenny.

9/16: Jenny was whipped.

9/19: I beat Anama.

11/30: Eugene and Jenny were whipped.

12/16: Eugene was whipped for doing nothing yesterday.

7/1: A Negro woman ran away again with a bit on her mouth.

7/8: The Negro woman was found and tied, but ran away again in the night.

7/15: My wife against my will caused little Jenny to burned with a hot iron.

8/22: I had a severe quarrel with little Jenny and beat her too much for which I was sorry.

8/31: Eugene and Jenny, beaten.

10/8: I beat 3 slave women.

11/6: A Negro woman ran away again.

11/13: The Negro woman fugitive was found, dead.

1/11: I quarreled with my wife for being cruel to Suky Brayne.

1/22: A slave 'pretended to be sick,' but I put a branding iron on the place he complained of and put the bit on him.

2/2: My wife and little Jenny had a great quarrel in which my wife got the worst, but at last by the help of the family, Jenny was overcome and soundly whipped.

3/20: I beat a Negro woman.

4/30: I had 2 male slaves beaten.

5/1: I caused Prue to be whipped severely.

8/4: I was indisposed with beating of Prue, and tired.

9/26: I had several people whipped.

9/28: Eugene was whipped.

12/13: My wife whipped a slave while a guest is present. I disapprove.

1/10: A slave pretends he fell and hurt himself. He is forced to wear the bit for 24 hours.

2/5: My wife causes several slaves to be whipped.

3/2: My wife beats Jenny with the tongs. I disapprove.

3/3: Billy is beaten.

3/15: Peter again claims to be ill, and the bit is put in his mouth once more.

4/9: My wife causes Molly to be whipped.

5/22: My wife beats Prue very violently. I whip Anaka severely.

6/6: Found Prue with a candle by daylight, for which I gave her a salute with my foot.

6/30: Three women and one man is beaten.

7/25: Billy is whipped.

7/30: Molly and Jenny are whipped.

8/21: Billy is beaten.

9/3: My wife gave Prue a great whipping."

[21:40] And last, Benjamin Franklin. "Why increase the sons of Africa by planting them in America, where we have so fair an opportunity by excluding all the Blacks and Tawneys, but increasing the lovely White and Red."

[22:00] Those great men said other things. But they also said *that*.

No one can blame the conqueror for writing history the way he sees it, and certainly not for digesting human events and discovering their patterns according to his own point of view. But it must be admitted [glass on wood] that conventional history supports and complements a very grave and almost pristine ignorance.

[22:35] Because the very nature of history is to make *large* distinctions, it encourages the intellect, therefore, to forgo finer ones. Because historians must deal with rice in bulk, rather than grain-by-grain, heavy dependence on the conventions of that discipline lead us to do likewise in human relationships. If such history continues to be the major informer of our sensibilities, we will remain functionally unintelligent. Because, after all, it is the ability to make distinctions—and the smaller the distinctions made, the higher the intellect that makes them—by which we judge intellect.

[23:23] We judge intellect in several ways. One of the most important is by the ease with which it can tell the difference between one molecule and another, one cell and another, between a 1957 Bordeaux wine and a 1968, between the color mauve and orchid, between the words *rest—r-e-s-t—* and the word *pry—p-r-y*, the difference between the word *butter* and *clabber*, *buttermilk* and *clabber*, between Chanel No 5 and Chanel No 16.

So it would seem that to continue to see race of people, any race of people as one single personality is an ignorance of gothic proportions, an ignorance so vast, so public, and perception so blind and so blunted, imagination so bleak that no nuance, no subtlety, no difference among them can be ascertained. Which may explain in part why in 1975 we are left with pretty much the same mental equipment we had in 1775—the equipment that hadn't the curiosity to record the names of human beings in a ship's manifest, hasn't the curiosity to examine the medieval minds of scientific racists, theologic [sic] racists, historical racists, literary racists; an intelligence that is so crippled that it could in all seriousness ask W.E.B. Du Bois, in 1905, in pursuit of some study as a White professor from Clark University did, whether colored people shed tears. It's the same crippled intelligence that grants foundation money to educational careerists to study the cause of riots rather than the source of racism, to study the genetic influences on intelligence in a race that is so mixed, genetically mixed, that the experiment should fall apart at step 1.

26: In spite of improved methods of collecting and storing data, and an increased amount of data available, with the exception of the deep probe of three or four historians, American scholarship has done virtually nothing to erase the ignorance that I have described. On the contrary, studies designed to confirm old prejudices and create new ones are really on the increase. Of the several areas of ignorance, those concerning Black people and their relationship to this country are still, at least to me, the most shocking. Some of the ignorance, of course, is willful. Some is simply the consequence of boredom that accompanies all mention of ethnic pride in anybody other than oneself. Most, however, is the fault of the disciplines that cannot or will not accommodate cultures outside the mainstream, or examine interrelationships between co-existent cultures.

If education is about anything other than being able to earn more money, that thing is intelligent problem-solving, and humans relating to each other in mutual constructive ways. If it was homicidal in 1674 to limit the truth and embalm the intellect in that way it is certainly suicidal in 1975.

History, the social sciences, and the humanities, are the chief carriers of this malignancy. Any one of those studies, if it was honest, would acknowledge that the major part of history in this country *is* the history of the minorities and the Black people in it, how they influenced those who were first and how they influenced each other.

The economic history of this country *is* among other things, the study of generations and generations of free labor used to make the country grow. The *legal* history of this country is very heavily weighted with the courts', particularly the Supreme Court's, relation to Black people, and the legislation designed specifically, deliberately, to keep them oppressed.

Anthropology *is* the study of the colored peoples of the world; they don't study anybody else. Social studies itself was founded and funded by the Mellons and the Carnegies and those people who were interested in the deviates who were not like them. It got its first money from those people, and they never studied themselves. *Urban* studies is the study of Black people, and the approach, vigorously held [29:27] to in these studies: Blacks as wards of the state, never as its pioneers.

It does take two to hold a chain: the chained, and the chainer. And it takes two to make anthropology: the student and the studied. And though no group has had more money spent on it to have its genetics examined, its fecundity stopped, its intelligence measured, cross-acculturation is consistently neglected, and I would like to know who *are* these people who know our sperm count, but they don't know our names.

[30:12] That being the case, it is time, way past time, for the studied to examine the student and to evaluate its own self. And the fruits should be of immense value to us, to all of us. And the first job for the scholar, and particularly for the artist, is to destroy the source of that mindlessness, to focus on the hysteria and greed of those whose business it is to manipulate us and to keep us anonymous or peripheral to the events of this country. [Papers]

[31:02] The second responsibility of artists and scholars is to bear down hard on those generalities: the statistics and the charts, and make them give up the life they're hiding. Racial apologists would have us believe that Black children have to sit in a room with White children to learn anything; that Blacks have to go to Harvard Business School before they can open up a grocery store; that Blacks have to read Descartes to be literate, in spite of the fact that the New York Times is written and has always been written on a 6th grade level; and that the ego of Black people is a thread of jelly needing constant cement.

[31: 49] More important, accurate scholarship and free, dedicated artists would reveal a singularly important thing: that racism was and is not only a mark, a public mark, of ignorance; it was and is a monumental fraud. Racism was never, ever the issue. Profit and money always was. And all of those quotations from William Byrd to Benjamin Franklin to Andrew Jackson to the *New York Tribune*, the threat was always jobs, land, or money.

[32:49] And when you really want to take away, to oppress, and to prevent, you have to have a reason for despising your victim. Where racism exists as an idea, it was always a confidence game that sucked all the strength of the victim. It really is the red flag that the toreador dances before the head of a bull. Its purpose is only to distract, to keep the bull's mind away from his power and his energy, to keep his mind focused on

anything but his own business. Its hoped-for consequence was to define Black people as reactions to White presence.

[33:48] Nobody really thought that Black people were inferior. Not Benjamin Franklin, not Mr. Byrd, and not Theodore Roosevelt. They only hoped that they would behave that way. They only hoped that Black people would hear coon songs, disparaging things, and would weep or kill or resign, or become one. They never thought Black people were lazy—ever. Not only because they did all the work. But they certainly hoped that they would never try to fulfill their ambitions.

[34:44] And they never, ever thought we were inhuman. You don't give your children over to the care of people whom you believe to be inhuman, for your children are all the immortality you can expect. Your children are the reason that you work or plot or steal, and racists were never afraid of sexual power or switchblades. They were only and simply and now interested in acquisition of wealth and the status quo of the poor. Everybody knows that if the price is high enough, the racist will give you anything you want. [papers shuffle]

[35:46] It's important, therefore, to know who the real enemy is, and to know the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. *It keeps you from doing your work.* It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up.

None of that is necessary.

[36:42] There will always be *one more thing*. The strategy is no different than bombing Cambodia to keep the Northern Vietnamese from making their big push. And since not history, not anthropology, not social sciences seem capable in a strong and consistent way to grapple with that problem, it may very well be left to the artists to do it.

[37:15] For art focuses on the single grain of rice, the tree-shaped scar, and the names of people, not only the number that arrived. And to the artist one can only say, not to be confused, [sigh] not to be confused. You don't waste your energy fighting the fever; you must only fight the disease. And the disease is not racism. It is greed and the struggle for power. [Audience member murmurs in agreement]

[37:55] And I urge you to be careful. For there is a deadly prison: the prison that is erected when one spends one's life fighting phantoms, concentrating on myths, and explaining over and over to the conqueror your language, your lifestyle, your history, your habits.

And you don't have to do it anymore. You can go ahead and talk straight to me.

[38:40] To avoid the prison of reacting to racism is a problem of the very first order. Where the mind dwells on changing the minds of racists is a very dank place. Where the spirit hangs limp in silk cords of the racial apologists who want soft and delicate treatment for the poor victims is a very dim place. And where the will that you allow to be eroded day by day, day by day, by consistent assaults from racists, then the will just settles into a little tiny heap of sand, and you just have a second-rate existence, jammed with second-hand ideas.

[39:45] Racial ignorance is a prison from which there is no escape because there're no doors. And there are old, old men, and old, old women running institutions, governments, homes all over the world who *need to believe* in their racism and *need* to have the victims of racism concentrate all their creative abilities on them. And they are very easily identified.

[40:16] They are the petulant ones who call themselves proud, and they are the disdainful ones who call themselves fastidious, and they are the mean-spirited ones who call themselves just. They thrive on the failures of those unlike them; they are the ones who measure their wealth by the desperation of the poor. They are the ones who know personal success only when they can identify deficiencies in other racial and ethnic groups. They are in prisons of their own construction: and their ignorance and their stunted emotional growth consistently boggle the mind.

[41:11] But the artist knows that we are human, and the artist knows, if he is free, exactly what every 3yo child knows: that the whole business of reproducing and dying by the billions is unsatisfactory and clumsy. He also knows that we have not yet encountered any god who is as merciful as one Black man who flicks a beetle over on the street. There's not a race in the world that behaves as badly as praying mantises.

[42:06] We are the moral inhabitants of the globe. And to deny it is to lie in prison. Oh yes, there's cruelty, and cruelty, because it destroys the perpetrator as well as the victim, is a very mysterious thing. But if you look at the world as one long brutal game between "us" and "them," then you bump into another mystery. And that's the mystery of the tree-shaped scar, and the canary that might sing on the crown of a scar.

[43:01] And unless all races and all ages of man have been totally deluded, there seems to be such a thing as grace, such a thing as beauty, such a thing as harmony—all of which are wholly free, and available to us.

Thank you very much.

[Applause]

[John Callahan, Judy Callahan, and Lloyd Baker respond with reference to Morrison's book, *Sula*. Baker asks Morrison about her call to artists to eliminate racist rhetoric given White media ownership.]

[1:10:45] There were several parts to your question. I think you were asking about methods, how was it possible for Blacks [the Black artist] to exercise any influence or control given the media is controlled by White people. Et cetera et cetera.

[1:11:11] I think there's a layer underneath your question of assumption about what the media are and what its influence is. One has a tendency to have some enormous awe for *it*, as though it were some magic, television, play, or a book review. It really is of no consequence when it comes to doing important work.

[1:11: 45] The media originates nothing; it simply digests what exists. It can enlighten, and it can distort, but it does not initiate and it does not create. The best analogy for that for Black people, I think can be found in music. I was talking to Dr. Harris earlier: Black people's music is in a class by itself and always has been. There's nothing like it in the world. The reason for that is that it was not tampered with by White people. It was not "on the media." It was not anywhere except where Black people were. And it is one of the art forms in which Black

people decided what was good in it, what was the best in it; no one told them. And if you want to be a Black musician now, you have to do what the best have done. And all of the mediocre musicians (Black) were blown off the stage [inaudible] and ridiculed by Black—by other Black musicians. So what surfaced and floated to the top were the giants and the best. And it was done without “the media,” in spite of the control et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. That is true of any art form that is (a) not imitated, (b) it does not seek to justify or explain anything; it talks—artists—the Black artists must do what all the other artists do: talk to each other.

[1:14:00] I *love* Latin American literature and Russian literature. It never occurred to me that Dostoyevsky was supposed to explain something to me. [Audience chuckles] He’s talking to other Russians about very specific things. But it says something very important to me, and was an *enormous* education for me.

[1:14:24] When Black writers write, they should write for me. There is very little literature that’s really like that, Black literature. I don’t mean that it wasn’t necessary to have the other kind. Richard Wright is not talking to me. Or even you. He’s talking to some White people. He’s explaining something to them. LeRoy Jones in *the Dutchman* is not talking to me. He’s talking to some White people. He’s explaining something to them. It may have been very necessary. It certainly was well done. But it wasn’t about me and it wasn’t to me. And I know when they’re talking just past my ear, when they’re explaining something, justifying something, just defining something. [Glass thanks.]

[1:15:28] But when that’s no longer necessary, and you write for all those people in the book who don’t even pick up the book—those are the people who make it authentic, those are the people who justify it, those are the people you have to please, all those non-readers, all those people in *Sula* who (a) don’t exist and (b) if they did wouldn’t buy it anyway. **But they are the ones to whom one speaks.** Not to the New York Times; not to the editors; not to any distant media; not to anything. It is a very private thing. They are the ones who say “Yeah, uh huh, that’s right.”

[1:16: 10] And when that happens, very strangely, or rather, very naturally, what also happens is that you speak to everybody. And even though it begins as inward and private, and gets its own juices from itself, the end result is it’s communication with the world at large.

[1:16:40] I don’t really care about that control. Life is short. Freedom is in *my* mind. That’s where one is free. There’s always some other constriction. But the very important point is to do the work that one respects and to do it well, and to make no compromises in its authenticity, and to do it better the next time. And what Primus said is the key: an artist’s role is to bear witness, to contribute to the record, the real record, of life as he or she knows it, perceptions that are one’s own. That way it will work whether or not we have become Black presidents of RCA may—that may be important; I don’t know that it is... it may be... it certainly would be a nice thing to chat about—but I’m not sure it really has anything to do with anything that is real. To be much more pragmatic about it in terms of economic, obviously it works outside the realm of the artists also.

[1:18:24] When they build buildings that don’t have Black construction workers and plumbers, then the building doesn’t go up. And you exercise control only when you *assert* control. I personally wouldn’t ship my child 20 inches to attend an inferior White school because it *looked* better. But what I would do is sit in the hallways of my Black ghetto school with every mother and father in a radius of the school district. We would get the money for the Black school. We would throw the inferior teachers out; they would have a very difficult time.

[1:19:29] We are responsible for our children. I am responsible for my children. If they're going to a school, I'm not putting them on a bus: it's going to be better where *we* are. And that's not new. That's the way Black people behaved in the country since they set foot here. [Audience murmurs] They have always done that. It may *seem* as though the world began for Black people in this country since 1964, but it's not true. There were first-rate Black schools. And if there are first-rate Black schools in Boston, Whites will be banging the doors to get in there. You will have to bus them away. [Audience laughs.] Whenever there's a first-rate anything.

[1:20:25] But the dependency on some magic media, some magic government is hopeless, ridiculous, childish, and it's an affront. A total affront.

[1:20:35] The other one—let me speak of a recent, a very recent Black dream: The waiting for the Messiah, some leader. Now nobody—Martin Luther King did not tell Rosa Parks to stay in her seat. That came first. Then he came. She just didn't move. We didn't used to have to wait for the word. And the history of Black people in this country is those people who got up and moved, all over this country. And there wasn't any media then. People didn't even write letters, they sent by word-of-mouth, and it took three months to get there. And those were *really* difficult times, really difficult times.

[1:21:32] And really what it is, is you go into history and you pull from it that which is useful. And you use it. You do it for economic purposes. I remember being a young girl in Washington, D.C., and all the waiters in that town were Black. My friend had a father who was a doorman at the Sheraton, and he earned \$20,000 a year, in that uniform, with that epaulets. In 1950. After Washington desegregated itself, everyone left the waiters and went into the Census Bureau where they made half as much money. All those jobs then went to somebody else and somebody else and somebody else.

[1:22:22] Take a classic example: the porter's union. You ever see a White porter on a train? When you are all one, you exercise control because you have it; you're there; you own it. And it has nothing to do with rank, and so on. But that kind of thing, on the one hand, artists, on the other, people—*people*—who together own their profession, own their craft in their areas, and it is excellent: the work is not sloppy; the work is consistent. This is a capitalistic country; there are very few places where that kind of thing can take place. So that White control doesn't have anything to do with it. White—that would be easier said than done if it were true that— [pours] All of the popular music in this country stems from us. And what they were able to do is first imitate it, then buy shares in it, and then try to become it. The catalyst was not theirs.

[1:23:35] So all of the things that I described, I not only believe they are possible; I have seen it all of my life. And it is only distressing to me that it seems to have been forgotten.

[Dr. Harris, audience member asks Morrison question about artists' political responsibilities.]

[1:25:08] I'm not sure I know quite how to answer that question, although I understand the question perfectly. The first thing I would say is that I do not make a distinction between politics and art in this sense. To me all of the best art is political, all of it, whether *Guernica* or *Ana Karenina*, it's all political: [A pen or mic scratches.] it has to do with the society and what's wrong with it, and methods for its correction. Also I do not make a distinction between the artist and the other world, the "real" so-called work-a-day world. I do not subscribe to the theory of the artist as a sort of separate aesthetic being in the ivory tower suffering and talking about

beauty. It is work, hard work and there's a lot of it, and there's a lot of it that needs to be done, but that's exactly what it is. It is not sitting under willow trees and being inspired et cetera... [Audience chuckles.]

[1:26:10] It has something to do with work. I am not sure that it's *better* work, as a matter of fact, than any other kind of work. I'm not convinced that it is. I think it has been *handled* and *received* more elegantly, but I'm not sure that it's *better*. I'm not sure that I wouldn't be just as happy if I were capable, and I am not, of making one perfect chair that would hold a human body properly. And I approach my work the same way I expect chair-makers to approach theirs.

[1:26:42] If I'm gon make a chair I have to find out about the wood, huh? Know all about my craft. I have to look at the human body, see how it looks when folded into a seated position, try to construct a chair that holds it et cetera, try to make it beautiful and comfortable, and try to make it long-lasting. And that's what writers ought to do: find out all they have to know about their craft. Instead of looking at lumber, they look at publishers. [Audience laughs.] Find out all you need to know about *that*, and then do your work.

[1:27:32] And, nevertheless, as a human being you have responsibilities to the community, period. I don't care what you do, whether you make a chair or make a book. It doesn't separate you. You know how it was in Africa [where?], they would make beautiful sculpture and they wouldn't even sign it. It didn't have anything to do with signing. They also had to raise a family and bring the crops in. The marketplace separates art from the people. The marketplace does that, and makes an artist separate and special. And he's separate and special because (a) he has a vision, which is alright because other people have visions; but also [b] because he's worth something.

Now academically and aesthetically, the art world has been separated from the poor. In spite of the fact that all arts emanated from the poor: dance, theater, all of it, started with poor people. In religious rites, whether it's in Elizabethan England—it all started there. And people who can weave tapestry but can't write a word are somehow made to feel they cannot go to the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts and understand anything.

[1:28:26] So that that separation is artificial. The separation of the artist and politics is an artificial one, wholly dependent on finances. When you have huge collections that are bought up by the rich and others are not, and people making distinctions outside of the tradition of art—it's like the gold—the diamond miners just keep the diamonds off the market and make them very valuable. Not industrial diamonds, but decorative ones. Industrial diamonds *are* valuable. The decorative ones are pretty. But that's where people put their money when they want to keep money consistently because they have artificially created something that holds its value upwards and is inaccessible to the poor. But again the poor are the ones who take it out of the ground in the first place.

[1:29:25] The same thing is true, I feel, about art: that there are no political responsibilities and then artistic ones. They are all the same to me. [Mic scratches on table.]

[Audience member asks about the focus of Richard Wright and other writers on assuaging popular ignorance: what happens to the ignorant Joe if Black writers speak to themselves rather than to others?]

[1:31:-5] I think that when Black artists speak to each other, what I said was that what happens is that the message is received by those who need educating outside the group better. Richard Wright made a very significant statement: "It didn't do any good." It didn't do anything at all except, change the maybe change the

language a little bit. Use a different word, a different label, a different put-down. It may have changed the metaphor, but it didn't change anything else. It didn't change anybody's heart or mind at all. At all.

[1:32:04] So the question is "What do you do...?" Well, **educating the conqueror is not our business**. Really. But if it is, if it were, if it was important to do that, the best thing to do is *not* to explain anything to him, but to make ourselves strong, to keep ourselves strong. Actually, the man next to me, hitting me on my head [chuckles]...

I have a bad habit, y'know, when I meet people who are incorrigible racists [Audience giggles], I like to leave em that way. [More giggles] I never do anything to change their mind. I want em to stay just that way: dumb [Audience laughter]. And I take great, great personal and private pleasure every time I run up against one. I shouldn't enjoy it that much because it's a little malicious, but it never occurs to me to behave another way so he won't think x, y, z. I want him to stay just like that, always. But of course I'm not recommending that at large because some of those people are dangerous, if they're in positions of power, particularly: they're dangerous.

[1:33: 42] But two things are true: one, you can't consistently think of the power as a formidable power. It's really nothing; it's really isn't anything at all. I really have to tell you that. I don't know where your little symphonies are, but I was interested in the course of the war in Vietnam for a long time, because it occurred to me that the Vietnamese who were what—brown "*gooks*"? "*Slant eyes*"?—whatever, those were the racial epithets for it...

[1:34:24] Never said one word explaining to anybody that they were equal to Americans or anybody. They never said "But our civilization is very old and wonderful. But our language is beautiful. But our music is excellent. But our—" They didn't say nothing. At all. They never said yet. I haven't heard em say it yet. "We're just as good as you are." They didn't say it yet yet. What they did was hang in there, for 30 years. Thirty years. And they had a long, long view.

[1:35:10] And it doesn't really matter whether they equal or not equal. Or anything. It doesn't matter. They didn't have to explain anything because that wasn't the problem. The problem was the land. They wanted their land back, and they were worked for that, and they willing to do anything including meet their maker. They said "We'll meet our maker."

[1:35:50] There's this funny story about the Russians and the Chinese quarreling over a border, and the Russians say to the Chinese, to Mao: "That is ours and we'll keep it." And Mao says "You may have it now, but we'll get it back. If it takes 10,000 years, we'll get it back." And the Russian laughed and said "Isn't that a long time?" "Ok, 9,000." Had nothing to do with his life span.

The man sitting next to me, and is bothering me, because he's a racist, or not because he's a racist but because he's in some way interfering is troublesome. But I recommend to you—something I very seldom do—is something in a book I wrote called *Sula*, in which I was talking about the way Black people look at evil, the way they deal with it. They do not annihilate it, kill it, stone it; they wouldn't take little Hester Prynne and beat her in the ground. They may not like her; they wouldn't do it to Sula; they ain't like her either. But they thought that evil—it wasn't any good, but it was natural, it existed. So you tried very hard to avoid it, but if you couldn't avoid it you'd to deal with it, more important that you triumphed over it... But it's *in the world*. It's in the world. And those people that I was talking about: they're in the world. It's *in the world*.

[1:37:50] But I'll tell you one thing. In South Africa, anybody who's not White is inferior, ranked: colored... Asians are also inferior to White people in South Africa—all Asians. However, the Japanese have been able to do what apparently no [new] country is supposed to do without resources (they keep telling you if you live in the Caribbean): they have an industry. They make all these little things that everybody needs [indecipherable] and they make everything up under the hood of a Dodge. [Audience chuckles] And so therefore they're necessary. And South Africa happens to need them. So they made them "honorary Whites" [audience chuckles] in order to buy their products and have them come into that country. They made them "honorary Whites."

[1:39:00] What happened to the racism? What happened to it? They inferi—it doesn't mean a *thing*. It has a—it doesn't mean a thing. I'm not saying that now and then [in] a personal confrontation you don't have to open your mouth. But in terms of the collective experience of people, and I don't care what minority—whether Irish people, who would go into a profession, or Italians, or Indians, or Chinese people, or whoever you are. I read you—it don't make a difference *where* you come from in this country. If you come here looking for work, you got to take somebody's land, you in trouble. And obviously, you know the skilled people were already here. The Black people been doing all the work, making all the little tools, and putting all the levees in, and making the quilt, and farming, and organizing everything into a unit whereby they could execute a lot of work and agriculture from [it]; that had *never* been done in Europe, ever; never worked that way in Europe, never. Nobody had, but they did.

[1:40:09] But then, come time for the Industrial Revolution [laughs], y'know, they passed a law: No Black people could work on the river, [not] any navigation of us at all. That had nothing to do with racism; that has to do with somebody's *job*. You see it now: when the recession is going on—I understand it'll be over in a year—you see at that point the rise of scientific racism. [Indecipherable] couldn't exist at any other time. Racism didn't exist before the 12th Century! And it was rampant in the 15th Century; you need it then; you needed it. They needed it then. People were not one thing or another; they came to Black Popes, Black everything; people belonged to their tribe, they belonged to their country. When Myrdal, the young one, Jan Myrdal talks about explorers going to Africa, you read their letters. They say, well, they don't say "It's so hot I can't stand it." When the first British people went to India, they did what the Indians did. They put on little loose clothes, right, because it was hot, and behaved like they had some sense [Audience chuckles]—but as soon as they took over that country, they changed their costume. They put on a [pith] helmet, those shorts, hot ties and things, to emphasize the fact that they were different, that the sun was "too much." Obviously if you were an ordinary Indian and you put a little diaper on, you would turn brown, and then you'd be like everyone else. You'd eat the food, you'd get the diseases, raise your children; so you'd be like everyone else.

[1:41:46] But if you want to emphasize difference, because you own the country, you do it symbolically. So you wear some little funny clothes that are very uncomfortable, for *you*, and you maintain your little separate-this and separate-that. And then the other people who sit—this is *their* country—thinks this: they're genetically, biologically, spiritually, racially different. You see what I mean. So you're *different*, and the differences are emphasized. And the women can't stand in the sun and they wear this, right? And the whole thrust has been, y'know, bleaching out. Bleaching out... into nothingness, into, y'know, blondes, into absence, into erasure, in order to emphasize the difference.

[1:42:40] Without differences, without differences, you can [indecipherable], you see? And it's only useful in economic terms. You just cannot look a human being in the eye—give you an example. I know I'm going all over the lawn, but I do that anyway. Here's an example. Uh, Mr. Calhill [?] was talking a little bit more, earlier about slave narratives and so on. They're utterly fascinating, utterly fascinating. A woman nurses. And when I say "nurse," I don't mean "she took care of." I mean she fed, from her breast, a White child. Always, y'know, that was common practice. Because the mother—wet nurses were common: you nurse a child. Y'know, in spite of the fact that in 19—chuckles—70, you have to send your Black children to Head Start nevertheless you are perfectly capable of Head Starting everybody else's children, who subsequently become presidents of the country.

[1:43:46] But they nursed these children, and feed them and take care of them. And they loved them. They did. Because they were children. And there's one little story in there, about a woman who, uh, did something her mistress didn't like, and the mistress sent the son into the woodshed to whip the slave. The son was about 14yo, and he came in there with a whip to whip her, and she was doing something, and she stopped and said "But I nursed you. [5 second silence] Don't you understand? I nursed you."

[1:44:31] He ain't never get the point. So she took the whip away from him and she beat him. [Audience laughs] The point is—she had to run—she left. [Audience laughs again] The point is it is not possible for a 14yo boy to go into anybody's shed and beat anybody whose breast he suckled at. It ain't possible to do that unless you have done something in your mind to yourself in order to make that act possible. I have seen—I have a huge quarrel with feminists, White feminists in this country—I have seen every little town in this country that has a problem with school integration besieged by White mothers. Females. Mothers. Who can, somehow, spit at children, throw rocks at them—children ain't doing nothing to em, right?—they can turn buses over, they can burn em; they can kill those children.

[1:45:56] Now I bet you I couldn't get four Black women in the United States, *any*, I couldn't get four. From the madhouse, from the streets, [Audience laughs] from the gutters, nowhere, to go anywhere, to throw anything at a White child who wasn't bothering them. I couldn't get them to do it. And I would love to know why. *I* can't do it. I cannot even imagine myself doing it. And maybe I thought it's because I—if I have a child, I can't do that! I can kill *you*, under certain circumstances [laughs] I'm sure. But I lit—physically, I cannot do it. But they can. They can do it. Do you remember those faces at Little Rock? Now they can do that. And the feminists don't say a word about it. Not a word about those "mothers."

[1:47:10] At which point I'll close; did I answer your question? [laughs with audience. An audience member asks for TM's definition of racism and to clarify her view of whether Black artists have a significant thing to say about the distraction of racism and educating white people]

[1:50:13] We could. Going back to that part of your question about "educating White people" We certainly, I suppose, could say a lot about it. We have said a lot about it. I don't think, however, with all the things that we've done, that should be one of our burdens. I really don't. I'm not—y'know, White people aren't stupid. They can educate themselves. They know none of that's true, if they feel like it. They have a responsibility too, to educate themselves and their children. They really do, and they have to assume it.

Now, I cannot—I'm a writer, and I'm supposed to be able to visualize, or project myself into other kinds of things—but I do believe that if I were a White person and I had children, I would prefer, for the safety of my children, just for the well-being, that my children grow up around happy, well-fed, chi—Black children. Rather than unhappy, ill-fed, angry ones! [laughs] I would prefer that my children be in a world in which everybody had access to the things they needed in order to pursue life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I would want it so much for my children that I'd give up something. I would, if I thought—I mean for purely selfish motives, nothing to do with that other person. I would just rather, that that would be the way—

[1:52:11] I wouldn't be so greedy that I had to take it away from that group in order that I have more, and then they *is* over there mad. I wouldn't do it to a neighbor, because that's a threat situation, it's an angry situation, it's a hostile situation for me. It's not good *for me* to be surrounded by those people who hate me. I'd do it for that reason. So that—they know that. They gotta know *that*. That's *their* job. We have another job. And at some point, the jobs are the same. I don't know where that point is. It happens in separate situations as we move through life, where my work and a White colleague's work, or my work and White friends' work come together: it's the same work. But in historical terms, it happened a little bit, y'know, in the 60s where it *seemed* to be everybody's [laughs] work. It ain't that way; it's not that way anymore, I don't think, except in certain places.

But you have to—y'know each group is responsible for itself, like each family, each person, so that you do that. The interesting thing about doing the *humane* thing is that it is better for you. Really is. To me, it just happens to also be more interesting, it's just more challenging and more interesting. Morals aside, the thrust to be good or civilized or responsibility or human is a more interesting idea than not being it. Anybody can do the other. I mean, not only *anybody*, but it doesn't require anything. The other does, so it stimulates me more.

[1:54:07] But even apart from that as I say I'm not—I am not suggesting, uh, some sort of separate world in which the Blacks will be doing their little business; the Whites will be—but I am saying that in terms of what the job that is to be done, there are different things to be done for different reasons, different psychologies that one is working with, different psychologies, so that—different methods, different approaches, different solutions. And it ends up, perhaps, if the world works out the way it would if I were running it [audience chuckles] that, y'know, the two things do come together and there's a final merging of interests—it's the human beings on the planet. All of us.

[1:54:50] **All of us are born, and all of us are going to die. And the point is to do something worthwhile in between.** That's all there is; there's just—You're already born; ain't nothing you can do about that. You're going to die, you know you are. You got a little bit of time. You got some dragons to slay? Pick the ones you want to slay. Make it worthwhile. Make it worthwhile. Somebody might ask you one of these days, what did you do? What you gonna tell them—you bought a car? [Audience laughs] You have to do something! If you have to do something you might as well do the best thing. No point in fiddling around with third-rate life. Do the best! You're not going to win it; so what? So what? It's not about winning. [laughs]

[Final audience question: about how Black artists can exercise control over their creations when under contract with White record companies.]

[1:56:17] Their lives may be a economics [sic], but their thing ain't controlled by nobody. Uh, that's true that a lot of Black people don't own their own music and so on and so on. Some of them do and so on. That's changing

a lot—I mean, you know, all the music from *Ironsides* [sic] and all that's done by Black people, and—all of it, music everywhere. But the point is that it's true that somebody Black radio station [?] and the Black this, Black that... That's not ownership. You can't own nobody's spirit, nobody's creativity, nobody's work. It's nice if you—write your own music, own it, buy it; Duke Ellington did it and he earned \$70,000 a *month*. A *month*. Because he owned his own music. [laughs] And didn't sell it to anybody.

[1:56:58] That's important to do, to know that one can do it, and to do it. But as far as what it does, what the music does—nobody owns that. Nobody owns it at all. Used to be—there were people who couldn't even play it, let alone own it. They couldn't even make the sound. That's the control: you don't believe it? Stop it. Don't play nothing, at all. And then see who owns what. You ain't got to work for no record company. You don't have to do none of—You really want to exercise (laughs) control of something that you *know* you own, withdraw it. Just don't do it. If it's a really a big money-making operation, you'll get some of it. You don't like the show? Walk off. They need you? You'll come back. They'll get you back; they'll get you what you want, they'll give you what you want. More than what you want. You already own it! **The meek have already inherited the earth. They already have. They just don't know it.** They don't know it yet. They already own it. That's what makes it *scary*.

[1:58:16] Did you ever see that documentary of Martin Luther King, just before he died when somebody blew him off the face of the earth? Just before he died, he had this poor people's stuff; he stopped focusing on racism and stuff, and he had convinced all these poor White people that their problems were the same as Black people's problems. And they were sitting in that little church in that film, like lightning had struck em. All of a sudden, the *nigger* wasn't what they were about. They were all starving to death! That's scary. When all the little White students from Columbia went down uptown to Harlem and sat in the tenement houses, and said that Columbia University is gonna tear down the poor people's houses and build—wouldn't you know it—a social studies building. [Audience laughs] So they could “study” the poor people after they took the houses and threw them out, they gonna study em.

[1:59:09] So the little White students came and sat and said “No, you're not gonna tear em down,” and the Black folks said “No, you're not gonna [indecipherable]”—that's very scary business. When everybody put down the stupidity and found out what's going on, and when that happened, everybody got busy and blew them off the face of the earth, sent em off into the hills to “commune” and take drugs and do whatever else you're do when you ain't doing nothing. That's what—They bought that revolution up, put it on television. But that's scary, when the people discover who they are.

[2:00:01] I tell you, the message of Elijah Muhammad said one thing, [glass thunks] I don't know much what he said but he said one thing I'll remember all my days; he said: **“If you knew who you were, you would get up off your knees.”** [Audience murmurs] If you knew who you were. That goes for everybody in the country, wherever they may come from. Nobody has to put up with that. So my position is that they don't own anything at all, they don't own nothing. But you have to be willing to say no. And mean it, and walk off. You have to be willing to do that. And do something else. You know you own it; it's yours. When you're really good...—you—look at sports, they do it all the time. They don't wanna play... for the Jets: “I don't wanna play for the—”. They go through it every year. The doctors' strike. They don't have to do nothing, just have to get some people to agree, and if you do it by yourself, tell em “No. Absolutely not.” They'll tell me at Random House I have to do it one way... I say “No. Do it yourself.” [Moderator closes; audience applauds] -----**Transcript ends.**