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## "Black Heritage"

Alex Haley

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Alex Haley  
"Black Heritage"  
February 25, 1969  
Portland State University

PSU Library Special Collections and University Archives  
Oregon Public Speakers Collection

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HOST: ...He's currently working on a book which is nearing completion, tentatively entitled *Before This Anger*, which involves seven years of research and is going to form the basis for what he talks about here today. His most well-known work, of course, is the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and a couple of weeks ago that book went over 1,000,000 in sales and it was found that, through a survey, that it is the most read book on the American college campus. Its influence on those who read it, I think, is immeasurable. Its influence on the course of American politics, along, of course, with the influence of Malcolm X himself, is something that I don't think also we can truly measure, at least for a long period of time. I'm personally very proud at this time to introduce Mr. Alex Haley.

[applause]

ALEX HALEY: I thank you all. I'm very glad to be here. I was told that when I came in this morning, late, there's an organization from which I have heard about even back East, called Air West, and you have some problems when you get booked on it. [laughter] I think what I will do is just get right into what I hope to share with you here today. And I always do this with a feeling of sharing, because it is kind of a slice of the human story that we have not previously known. It does have to do with the book that I am presently working on, and it involves, as he says, the seven years of research on some three continents. And I know that last year, I guess one of the most graphic ways I can illustrate how much I have been around—it shocks me even looking back upon it—was that for tax purposes, last year they figured up how much you spend

going places, and for the air fare alone involved in the research it had exceeded 31,000 dollars. And what this is involved is the searching out of the Black stories, it's looking at Black history in a way that none of previously have been able to see it.

It just simply is, almost a... I see it as a succession of miracles that I have experienced, which I shall try to share with you. In the looking back upon the story of us who are so much in the news, so much in all of our minds and in our dialogue today. It has a great deal to do also with something that we are hearing a great deal about, is the teaching of Black history. Why is it necessary? My own appraisal to this by now is less really subjective than it is simply objective, that I think as a scholar I could be as white as a sheet, I should like to think, and if I were thinking in scholarly terms, I would be kind of appalled that for generations we have known virtually nothing about the biggest single ethnic group within this nation of immigrants. Among whom we happen to be the only unwilling immigrants. I think that it is high time that we begin, for no altruistic reasons at all, but simply practical reasons, to dig out, unearth, in every possible way we can, the Black story.

The one I have been dealing with... by now, I tell you when I'm on a plane now, by the time I'm strapped in, I'm working on this book before we have taken off. It's urgent, it's pushing, driving me; there is an expression, maybe you heard that writing a book is "something like having a baby." And that being the case, you are looking at a man eight months pregnant right now. [laughter] This book will be finished hopefully in about four months; it will become a major movie, the arrangements are already being made. I was just in Hollywood this weekend, and it purports to be a four-hour epic film telling the Black story like it was, like we say, for the first time. With that, I will just go right into telling you how this whole thing came to be it is a look not only at Black history, but parenthetically for those of you who may be interested in writing as a career possibly. It's something of a look at how a writer may work in the development of an idea into a tangible thing.

It began for me when I was about four or five years old. I lived in a little town of which you've never heard, called Henning, Tennessee; about 500 people, half Black, half white. My parents and I lived there with my mother's mother, my grandmother. And every summer, that I can remember in that decade, my grandmother would have visitors. Sometimes she had as few as two, sometimes as many as a dozen at one time. She obviously had a big house and a big family. They were always women: her sisters, cousins, aunts; and they would sit around in what was called a living room, and every single night that I can remember of those summers they would talk about the same thing. And one thing that has to be understood is that this was a time, we recently... we are now sort of getting away from that but in generations past, just one generation past on back, there was a tremendous emphasis upon people, families in particular.

Entertaining each other simply by talking with each other. Now we have television, radio, and many, many other distractions, and we're getting more and more away from that. But my grandmother very definitely was of the era of people who believed in self-entertainment by talking, and in their case they didn't even diversify their talk. They always talked about this story that had come down the family.

Some nights it would be about one individual; sometimes it would be about one place; other nights they would hop, skip, jump all over the whole thing. As a little boy sitting there listening, my initial attraction, I would have to say, was not any interest whatever the story, but the fact that on these summer nights nobody ever told me, "Boy, get up and go to bed." I was permitted to sit up until the ungodly hour of 11 o'clock or something like that, listening. And so I listened; my ears were wide open, I drank in what I heard. I didn't really understand much about it, because I was not oriented to understand many of the things that were germane to their stories; such as, I didn't know what "ol' massa" was; it had no meaning for me, "ol' missus," I didn't know what that was. I didn't know what an overseer was. A plantation: I was vague about it and in time I got some impression, it had something to do with a farm or was something like that. This story that they talked about constantly had to do with the family going back across slavery, generation after generation going back, back, back to a person whom in the stories of my grandmother and these others, they always referred to as "the African."

And I have to tell you something of this story, to sketch it very quickly for you to understand what it was about. They told how this African had been brought to this country on a ship to the city of Annapolis in Maryland, and off that... he had been bought off that ship by a man whose name was John Waller who had a plantation in Spotsylvania County, Virginia. And on this plantation this African had kept trying to escape. I'd like to interject out of the research I have done since, I certainly know very graphically that one of the big myths that we have been sold about slavery as a general era was that the slaves, by and large, were a fairly contented lot who went around lifting that hoe and that bale and singing hymns. That's a lie. The fact is that the escaping of slaves probably was the biggest single worry of the whole slave-holding South. There were thousands every week who were being sought by professional slave hunters, by others.

It seemed that particularly in the first generation the Africans fresh from Africa would just bolt away from where they were. They were not familiar with the topography, they didn't even speak the language, often times, so they were easily caught and they were brought back, almost always. And finally, in the case in this specific African, the fourth time that he escaped he was caught by a professional slave catcher, who brought him back with a group of slaves who had escaped fewer times than he, and chose to make an example of him. I grew up hearing how this was done, he gave this slave before the others, on the spot, the choice either to be

castrated or to have a foot cut off. The slave chose the foot. And I grew up hearing how his foot was put on a stump and with an ax was chopped off. It was a very hideous thing. It was by no means an uncommon thing during slavery; this was an everyday type thing during slavery. But because he had been so maimed, there occurred something that was very germane to the existence of the perpetuation of a story, and it was that in this time, in the 1760s-type era, these slaves were sold back and forth just about the same as today—how they were bred and sold back and forth—about the way we breed and sell beef cattle back and forth, and with just about as much dispassion.

It was so prevalent that rare did a slave child know who his father was. It was very common that they did not know who their mother was. Many, many narratives I've seen of old slaves had no concept of parents at all or family. They just grew up on some plantation and were sold as property, they really did... they were regarded as, they were recorded as, they were dealt with as *things*. And that was the whole perspective of the time. Anyway, the case of this particular one, when he had been maimed, his foot had been cut off, he did live. And his master determined that his value had been so depreciated, in money terms, that it would be better to keep him on the plantation. And he could do such work as he could do hobbling about the yard and the house. A male slave in good condition in that time, the 1760s, was on the market worth about 750 dollars. Maimed and the way this one was, he would have been about less than 100 in value. And so that was how he happened—a very rare thing in slavery, at that... early in slavery anyway—to be kept over a period of years in one place.

Now on this plantation, the Waller plantation in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, the slave mated with, and... a person who was described in the story as the big house cook, and her name was Belle. Belle in time bore a daughter and a girl who was given a name Kizzy. Slave children were sold willy-nilly as well. But this girl, as it happened, was under the relatively protective mantle of her mother, who was an immediate body server. It was for that reason that this girl was kept on that plantation. As it turned out, the girl Kizzy was not sold away from that plantation until she was 16 years of age, and when she was sold her parents still were on the plantation. So what it gives is a thing that was almost impossible to find in that era of slavery, and that was that the father, relatively fresh from Africa, was on the same plantation for quite a number of years with his daughter, who was with him, say, for 16 years.

Now we take the first eight years, and we can assume reasonably that two things happened which were perfectly normal: one was that the girl grew up and learned to speak the language spoken around her, English. The other was that the African, like all the Africans freshly brought from Africa, gradually, haltingly learned to speak a word here, a phrase there, of the new language around him. We can reasonably assume that in eight years he would have advanced

enough, and of course she would have learned enough, that they could communicate. As I was told about over, and over, and over by my grandmother and the others. They would tell about how this African had a complete passion for every chance he got, he would take that girl, his daughter, away from the immediate house, yard area of the plantation and take her out in the perimeter area, the fields. And he would point out to her... and my grandmother used to tell how he'd take her by the hand and take her out, and he would point out to her natural objects: a tree, rock, cow, sky, river, various other things. He would tell her the African word for these things; in time this girl began to get phonetic sounds that she associated with objects, much the same as you might take a child today and expose the child to Czechoslovakian, or to French, or Greek, and they would begin to learn sounds and associate them with objects.

In time the girl was fairly aware of a number of sounds. My grandmother and others used proudly to say "Kizzy talked African," That's not true, of course, the girl did not speak African, she didn't understand African, but she knew phonetic sounds, and an increasing number of them. The African, when he was able to talk a little bit better, to communicate a little better, would tell her fragmentary stories, one of which... he told her how he had been captured. He told her repeatedly that he had been away from his village, not far from the village, chopping wood when he had been set upon by four men who had overwhelmed him and taken him and had sold him to "Toubab." Another thing that he told her and all the other slaves that he occasionally talked with was you see, like all the Africans brought to this country, he had been given an Anglicized name by who ever bought him. In his case, he had been given the name "Toby." But he always strenuously would reject this name, and he would tell his daughter and all the others his name was "Kinte," a sharp angular two-syllabic sound. And the girl Kizzy grew up with all this happening to her.

When she was 16, as I've said, she was sold away. By that time she had a fairly wide repertoire of African sounds and stories from her father, very unusual at that time when most children did not even know their fathers. Now Kizzy was sold to a man whose name was Tom Lea, who took her away from the Virginia plantation into North Carolina, and Kizzy's first child was a son who was named George. As the boy grew up, I would assume at about the age I'd begun to hear this story from my grandmother, his mother Kizzy began to drill into him stories of her father, his grandfather. And the boy, when he learned them enough, began to move around among other slave children and discovered none of them knew anything about a grandfather. Most of them didn't know anything about a father. Now you see, it has to be understood that slaves had very little to make them feel singular; slaves had very little to make them feel apart from others, to give them status. And so this boy began to realize he had something special, and he became very proud of that story about his grandfather. My grandmother and others used to say that he

would buttonhole anybody he could get his hands on and tell them all about his grandfather and his mother with great pride.

George, as it turns out, was apprenticed occupationally to an old slave who handled the master's fighting game cocks. There developed a tremendous affinity on the part of slave boy for this sport, which was about like prize fighting today in its popularity in the pre... antebellum South. And the boy, in his early teens, acquired a nickname that he would take to his grave, and that was "Chicken George." When Chicken George was about 16 he married, a slave woman whose name was Matilda, and in time there were seven children. My grandmother and the others used to tell how every winter, in particular after the harvest, the family, Chicken George, his wife Matilda, and the seven children would sit around the hearth and they would roast sweet potatoes in the hot ashes and over, and over, and over, the stories were told of the family going back now in meticulous detail back to something as incredible among slaves as a great-grandfather. And the whole family, now it was a family coalescing around a story, with immense pride. And in those children, one of whom was Tom, those children grew up and married and had children as children will.

And Tom had happened, married Irene, and they had seven children, now around another set of fires, hearths, baking sweet potatoes in hot ashes. The story of the family was told over, and over, and over; all the more wondrous because now it went back to a great-grandfather, almost unheard of among slaves. And of that second set of seven children, it turned out the youngest of them was my grandmother, Cynthia. And I have told you how she told it to me. So that's the way the story came down from the African, who said his name was Kinte, who said he was captured; he had been captured while chopping wood, who called the names of many natural objects, one of them being a river that ran contiguous to this plantation in Virginia. Every time he was around that river he would tell his daughter a sound which went rather like "kambe bolongo"; she knew that along with many other sounds. It came from the African, to his daughter Kizzy, to her son, Chicken George, to his 7 children, one of whom was Tom. His and Irene's seven children, the youngest of whom was my grandmother, who relayed it to me, in the first 15 years of my life. Until sitting there hearing it, night after night after night for a decade, much as the same that they had around the fireplaces, I had learned it much the same as they had.

Now, when I was 15, my father who had been trained as a professor went away and took us—I had, by now, two younger brothers—and we went off to school wherever he taught; we were kind of "faculty brats." And then came World War II, and I was one of the many people that thought that joining the Coast Guard would mean I would walk the coast somewhere. [laughter] And I wound up on an ammunition ship on the South Pacific, and it was on that ship

that purely by accident—there is certainly no other design that I can see—I became a writer. I had no idea of being a writer, I never thought about it, it never crossed my mind once. And when I look back at it now, I truly believe the only reason that I am a writer, certainly a similar reason, is that when I was in school I had learned to type. My parents believed students should learn how to type.

And so on the ship I had a portable typewriter. I had been a mess boy, this was a time when—in the beginning of World War II—when if you were Black and you went in the service, it didn't matter if you'd come out of college or what, automatically you were a mess boy. You cleaned toilets, waited on tables, so forth, and that was the way it was. Your path of ascension was to be a cook. So by the time we had been out in the South Pacific for a while I had been promoted to cook. I wasn't a very good one. But I was sort of a curiosity as a cook that could also type. [laughter] And at night, we and the ocean out there all these weeks at sea, and there was nothing else to do, I would go in the hull of the ship and I would write everybody I knew. I would write letters to them. And a ship is a very tight community, and people get to know something about everybody on the ship; and about me, if someone had called my name, the thing would have been said is, "He writes all those letters". We went to foreign posts, Australia, New Zealand, various places. There were lots of young fellas on the ship. I once later wrote a unforgettable character for *Readers' Digest* about the old cook I worked for; he was big, about 240 pounds, jet black, his name was Scotty. He was an old "Jack Tar" type sailor, a cook, in everybody's business; knew what was happening on the ship and nothing got by him if he could help it. He was the kind of cook... I remember one of his most... one of his early admonitions to me as a young cook was, one day we had soup, dinner and all that, and I rushed up to him with great alarm, I said, "Scotty, we just ran out of soup," and he stopped and looked at me and I will never forget and he said, "Boy look, as long as you got running water, never run out of soup and gravy..." [laughing along with the audience] That kind of thing.

And that was the variety of cook Scotty was. In any event, one day we were in Brisbane, Australia, and Scotty—who as I say, was in everybody's business—I remember very well I was sitting in the galley shelling peas. And Scotty came barging in the galley, furious, and in one hand—a big paw—he held a small square pink envelope, and in the other hand dragging behind him he held a small downy-cheeked white boy who had gotten this letter. Scotty had somehow heard about it, that a girl had written the boy a "Dear John" letter; she was sorry but she'd met somebody else and so forth. And the irony was, Scotty had gotten mad about it; *he* was gonna write the girl. [laughter] He knew I typed, and Scotty was the type of person once he decided something, don't get in the middle of him and something that he wants to do. And I knew what he'd do to me, and he told me to type what he told me. He'd seen the captain dictating. [laughter]



And Scotty dictated a very blunt message to this girl, and it was like, “Here I am out here in this adjective, adjective ocean, full of so and so submarines and sharks... [laughter] And you back there with some adjective, adjective [laughter] so forth and so forth...” [laughter] I was really just terrified. I knew enough to know all the ramifications of what he was doing, and I was a party to it. He didn’t know. And the happy thing, he didn’t read well enough to realize I had cleaned the letter up a little bit [laughter] in passing. And he got... he thrust it to the boy who was as terrorized of him as I was, and the boy signed and Scotty licked it and mailed it. [laughter] And that was it.

And I knew we were headed for the brig, I knew it, a court-martial. But as it happened, about six weeks later—and I’m telling you the literal truth of how I happened to become a writer—about six weeks later we were back in that port. I was again in the galley and this same little white boy came in the galley with 32 teeth showing, with another pink envelope. The girl had received that letter and had prostrated herself, begging forgiveness; she was back in his arms. The word got on the ship like wildfire... [laughter] it turned out lots of other young fellows who’d had “Dear John” letters and hadn’t told anybody. [laughter] And so Scotty became regarded as kind of a Svengali and I was his tool, and I began to write answers to these letters. And from there, it got into me writing love letters for many of the crew. [laughter]

And you know, now I’m a chief interviewer for *Playboy*, and last... as a matter of fact I was just with Hefner and Bill Cosby; we were talking about this just last Friday night at the mansion in Chicago. And I was telling Hef that... you know, the first interviewing that I ever did was on that ship, that it got to the point that in the evenings I would sit at the table with my typewriter and three-by-five index cards, and my clients would line up and I would interview them. I would say they... what she looked like, one guy said, “Her hair is blonde.” I would write letters tailored around information like, “Your hair is like the moonlight reflected on the rippling waves,” and so forth... [laughter and calling from the audience] And after two or three of these letters had reached the girls, then when we went back into that port the guys would have just fantastic results, and I became extremely popular on that ship, and that was the way I went into trying next to write women’s confession stories... [laughter] and they never sold.

I’m telling you the way it was... and then I went into sea stories and they never sold. And I went into—what I really had begun, quite by accident as I have told you—that thing it is said, that you need to write... you must write a million words before you ever sell the first word. When I look back, you see, people have the impression that if you say writer—a professional writer, a successful writer, whatever that is—the image that jumps into most people’s mind is “Wow, talent!” It isn’t. I can tell you, this, it isn’t; talent is not by any means the first requisite by any means. It’s important, it’s helpful, but you develop it. The first requisite, without which talent

will never come to light, is extreme self-discipline. It is the ability, somehow, to make yourself work harder, longer, than anyone ever would ask you to work.

When I look back upon being a writer now and becoming one, I remember nothing more vividly than that I wrote every single day, seven days a week for eight years before I sold the first story, I'll never forget that. Anyway, that's digressing, but deliberately so, because that was the way it was with the story I originally set out to tell you about. In the 1950s—by now I was still in service about to come out—and I was selling now occasionally to *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, [...], not enough to live on by any means. But just now and then I was a selling writer, and still in the service. And then began to happen two things in the world that activated in me what I have come now to know as one of the most vital things in the kit bag of the writer, and that is the subconscious. One of these things is that in Africa, there began to be emerging African nations; another one was that in this country, there began to be the first stirrings of something people were calling civil rights.

And for both provocations, millions of people, rather abruptly, had begun thinking about and talking about Black people in Africa, Black people in this country, a great deal more than they previously had, and also in a somewhat different light than previously, a somewhat more aggressive light than we had previously occupied. And I was not unlike other people; I just thought about us more than I had before in a somewhat different way. In terms of thinking about Black Africans, Black Americans, somehow, I don't remember exactly how, but one day the association came... well, you know, that story that I used to hear so much, the African and all the rest of them were Black Americans. And when I thought about it, I had realized that I hadn't thought about that story one time in probably over 15 years. My first reaction was I was very ashamed; I was embarrassed, I was abashed that I had become distracted with other things and hadn't given a single flicking thought to that story that had meant so much to my grandmother, whom I loved so dearly, who'd passed on and that I'd grown up with the early part of my life.

And I began to think about it as I went around doing other things, other stories. About this time I came out of the service, too. And I would just have a little mental exercise trying to remember details of that long-ago story. It was rather like trying to remember some details of a vivid dream at one time. And I found I could remember that African had been brought to that place in Virginia, but I couldn't remember the details of where, and other little sketchy things. And what I could remember most of was about the Murray plantation in Alamance County, North Carolina, near a place called Company Shops. And the reason I could remember about that was because my grandmother had been born on that plantation, and they had of course talked a great deal about it. One day I went down to Washington, doing a story for the *Readers' Digest*.

I forgot even what the story was about. And on Saturday, I had a free evening, and I had been thinking a good deal about this, and I went over to the U.S. Archives. I wouldn't tell the attendants what I was interested in, because I really would have been kind of embarrassed to have it admitted that I was going to see if maybe I could find something in the records about slaves. And the thing that would have embarrassed me was not that they were slaves, but the fact that my image was that any record of us was so relatively non-existent that you'd seem stupid even to be trying to find it.

I went in and I used an oblique of course and told the man I was interested in the 1800s: mid-1800s Alamance County, North Carolina. And I got lots of little rolls of microfilm, you know; they have them in the little aluminum canisters, and you thread it into a machine. And you know you have to run all the way through it, turning the whole roll, trying to figure out what's not on the roll. I went about three hours turning rolls, and finally I found myself looking down through that scope at the illuminated picture of old-fashion census taker's handwriting, and there was Murray, Thomas, Blacksmith. My grandma, all my early life, my grandmother proudly talking about her father Tom the Blacksmith. Right underneath his name was Irene, comma, Wife. And there were three children, beneath their names; they were the elder sisters and brother of my grandmother. My grandmother hadn't even been born yet.

And there it was. It was a kind of weird feeling. I guess the best way to describe my feelings when I went back to New York was that I was deeply bemused by that whole idea that there in this place where they had many, many, many records of this country's history on microfilm, had been my own family. My great-grandparents and children, and by about this time I began working with Malcolm X. I had done an article about the Black Muslim, the Nation of Islam for the *Readers' Digest*, and I did one about them for the *Saturday Evening Post*. In each case Malcolm X was the spokesman. Finally, I had done the *Playboy* interview with Malcolm, and then a publisher saw that and asked if he would tell his life story.

And it was—I'm telling this very quickly, but it took some time—and Malcolm selected me to be the writer, and we began working. He would come down to my place in Greenwich Village about three to five nights a week, and spend three to five hours each night in the interviewing process. And when I couldn't see him, he could tell me in advance when he had to be some other city or something, I generally would go to Washington. I worked in the U.S. Archives, I worked... finally I moved out and began to work in the Library of Congress in county records, plantation inventory records, things of this nature; I branched out and went into the Daughters of the American Revolution Library. Now they didn't know what I was doing in there... [laughter] but I was finding things. And I went into the Virginia and North Carolina state archives. And I'm running... telling this as quickly as I possibly can, and I would love to go into

the little side details of things that are fascinating to those interested in research. But in about three years, sporadically, I had been able to, literally, to document the narrative that had been told.

One thing I forgot to mention was that I couldn't remember much, but I went to my younger brother—you know, everybody's family, yours too no doubt, has someone in it who knows where all the cousins are—and I had been to my brother, who was that person, in our family. And he told me where the surviving old ladies... I had been to see all them, they all knew the story and I had collected all kinds of data from their memories, and it was with that that had guided me into where to search and what to seek out. The central key I found about the specialty of Black genealogy—which is a specialty—is that you don't look for people, you look for property, because that is the way the slaves were regarded and that's the way they were recorded, as property. You'd find slaves in a plantation inventory: mules, cows, wagons, slaves, like that. You would find them in a master's will, willed to his children. You would find them in county records. Things of that nature. Abstract records.

And anyway, I was able to find the family to document it for the time it spent in the United States going back to the Waller Plantation in 17... the late 1760s. Where had been brought this African who said his name was Kinte, who called the river "kambe bolongo," who said he was captured while chopping wood and so forth. It was at this point, for the first time, that I went to my agent; I by now was fairly deep into the Malcolm X book. Our interviewing went on for one year and then the writing of the book from the material took another year.

I went to my agent Paul Renssler, a rather distinguished member, not rather, but a very distinguished member of his profession, in New York literary agents. And Paul's characteristics include, among other things, a mustache that would twitch if he's excited. And I told him about this thing in great detail and the mustache crawled. Paul told me that there never had been a Black genealogy going back seven generations documented as I had gotten it. And he thought this would be just great as a project, as a book for me to follow once the Malcolm X book was done. So I said fine, we went on over to Doubleday and talked with Ken McCormick, the chief [...] and Ken got pretty excited and a fairly small contract at the time was issued. That I would, after doing the Malcolm book, write this book.

It was—the Malcolm X book was—the manuscript was done. He went through it, making such changes that he wanted to make. And that was finished about two weeks before he was killed. And then when he was killed, there was this vacuum thing. I had worked with this man, very, very closely for two years. We had developed a very empathetic relationship; it's almost like analyst and patient when a depth interview is done for the period of a whole year. And then a

man's life is being put together paragraph by paragraph across the whole span of his life. And now he was gone, in that way; it was a... with a feeling of the great shock of it, the great loss felling of it, that I sat down the Monday following his death on Sunday and began to write at white heat that which is now the epilogue. That's the only thing I ever wrote in my life... that was written just the way it came out of the typewriter was the way it went to the publisher. I never touched it with a pen, I just had clips and stuff, and wrote everything I could write in one day. It was mailed... 30, 35 pages every night to the publisher, and it was written raggedly, and it reads kinda raggedly, but it was the urgency quality of it. When that was done, it's like you see, when you finish a book and it's gone, it is kind of like having had a baby. There's an empty vacuum sort of feeling, and it was then I began to turn to the second book, doing the things that writers do, really to keep from going to work again: thinking about it, sifting through the material, writing false leads. I'd do 11 pages, 12, 15, and tear them up the next morning.

And then is when it happened, the first of what since has been a succession of things that make me feel that this book really, however it sounds, has been missioned to me. It feels that way because there have happened a succession of things that had seemingly had no relation to what I was doing. That put me in contact with something I would not otherwise have had anything to do with. One of them that could scarcely seem at more odds with Black history was that about in this period, *Playboy* called me up and asked me if I would fly over to London and interview Julie Christie. So I said, "Okay," and I got on a plane and went over. They were shooting a picture called... in fact, it sort of... over at home I just spent this weekend with Warren Beatty and Julie Christie in Beverly Hills, I was telling her about this thing. When I got over there they were shooting the movie... what was that... *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The weather was bad; they had to move the set from one side of England to the other. And I called *Playboy* and told them that this was no time to try to interview her; she was uptight and everything was in a mess. So *Playboy* told me, "Stand by and see what happens."

And here I was in London, where I'd never been before—I who love history and everything connected with it—and I was just in rapture because I had free time and I was doing just like the Class A Tourist. I was on the tour buses, the historical sites, I was in libraries, archives. And it was just to me utterly fascinating to see things I'd always read about. One morning, I was just in a reveling state in the British Museum, things like the Elgin Marbles, all this. And I came upon about 11 o'clock that morning something I had heard about, had read a little about, and had a vague image of it... it had something to do with translation. Something called the Rosetta Stone.

There was this stone, which, when it had been found, had three sets of inscriptions chiseled into the stone. One was Greek; anybody who knew Greek would have recognized it as such. The other two were at the time unknown. Except that one of them was recognizable as the ancient

hieroglyphics. A French scholar had performed a masterful feat of looking at the second set of these carvings in the stone and figured out that they meant the same thing as the known Greek. The text was the same. So, that was how it came to be identified that which we call the demotic. And then in a really super-masterful feat he had taken the hieroglyphics, that people always had recognized as such, and had been able to find out that they meant what the other two meant. The text was the same.

So, the world had gotten its first understanding—reading understanding—of the ancient hieroglyphics. It was at this point that they begin to develop in me something that most rather seasoned writers could tell you, and maybe a number of people who have done other forms of research, maybe a doctoral dissertation, I don't know if so, but I imagine that would be true for some of them: when you get deep, deep, deep into something, you immerse yourself, your empathy, your whole thing becomes so much quest for facts. There begins to develop something almost... it really is the subconscious, but it's something almost like a second person, invisible. A second you that sits apart from you and kind of like gets on your shoulder and is always in your mouth, in your ear, yammering with its mouth. About, "You should do this..." it bugs you. It will wake you up at night. I guess the best way to describe it, I came to regard it rather as something we hear usually in another context as a "monkey on your back." And it's with you all the time.

It was at this point that this monkey kept bugging me in London about that Rosetta Stone. I couldn't figure it, I couldn't shake the thing, I was always thinking about it. I was on a plane coming back here when it finally came to me; it was a bad analogy possibly, but I kept thinking that this fellow had some unknown carvings in stone, and he matched the known with the unknown and he found out the meaning of the unknown. And then finally it came to me that now I had something. They never had been carved into stone anywhere, but I had these sounds. Always, every time I had heard that story from the time I was five up until recently, everybody, the old people who told that story were always included these phonetic sounds this African had said: "kambe bolongo," "Kinte," "toubab"; various other sounds. The story, the chopping wood when captured, and all. And I got to thinking now obviously the African... if I could just match these sounds up with some country in Africa then I could give my book—and you always look for something to make your book a little better—I could give my book a first chapter, telling the history of whatever country that was. I could find this history from a number of sources. And in the second chapter I could open up, now, if I had that, saying this African who said his name was "Kinte," who called the river "kambe bolongo," who said he was captured while chopping wood, apparently had come from that country. And then I could go forward and my book would have that strength of the first chapter.

They were African sounds, obviously, so it seemed to me what I had to do was get ahold of some Africans, obviously. To find out the meanings, the country if I could. And I was telling this up at Harvard not too long ago, and one of the very esteemed members of the faculty came up to me and he said, "I'm just fascinated with your methodology." And I told him, the honest, sincere truth: "Sir, if I had known what methodology meant, I never could have done it." [laughter] And that's the truth. It's the absolute truth.

I went to the United Nations; that was the way I saw to get to some Africans. About quitting time, people pouring off the elevators, through the lobbies, making it to their cars. Diplomats, staff members, all kind of National Guards; and it wasn't hard to spot the Africans. And I would corral everyone I could, and I would say to him very quickly something like, "Sir, I wonder if you would be good enough to listen to some sounds and see if they have a meaning for you." I guess in two weeks I corraled about two dozen Africans. Each of which took a quick look... a quick listen at me and took off. [laughter] New York is full of kooks, and I know I qualified as one trying to tell them some African dialect in a Tennessee accent. [laughter] I didn't get anywhere at all, so I went in another avenue of search.

And I found that one of the ranking African dialect linguists in this country, and by all odds the most expert oral historian in the world, a Belgian by birth and very interestingly is Dr. Jan Vansina at the University of Wisconsin. I contacted him and asked if I might see him, and he gave me permission and I flew up to Madison. I told him the whole story; it took me two and a half hours, and he listened, and when I finished he said, "Would you tell it to me again?" I sort of arched an eyebrow, another two and a half hours. And then he went to work on me. I had never seen a methodologist at work.

He had a total recall it seemed to me. He began to query me about just little cornflake details of the story, hither, yon, all over. He was particularly interested in the method of transmission of the story down across generations. By 11 o'clock that night I was decidedly irritated, because I was thinking to myself, I was surely thinking, "Look, I came here to ask you something. And you're just bugging me." He didn't tell me anything. Midnight he said, "I wonder if you would be good enough to spend the night here in our home?" There was nothing else to do, so I stayed in their son Bruno's room. The next morning Dr. Vansina, it was Thursday morning, Doctor Vansina said to me, "I wanted to sleep on it."

He said, "The method of transmission as best I can see is impeccable, because never was the family separated; the elders physically knew the children and vice versa and the story always transmitted directly." And then he told me, "Now, the sounds that you bring here I believe it is safe to say that they are of the Mandinka dialect. And we say Mandingo." That was the point...

at that point, when he said that word, that now another phase of the incredible had entered. I didn't realize the significance of it yet. But I got to that point where when you... a thing happens, you act on it. You don't question anything, you just go act on it. He began to guess translate sounds: this probably meant sky, this probably meant tree, the single syllable "lo" meant firewood as we call it. This meant something, that meant something else, and he finally came up on this sound "kambe bolongo," and he said, "I believe that is the way that in that dialect they would have identified the Gambia River."

Well, that was Thursday morning, and I had never realized the thing that had built up in me in the research I'd done of the family. Monday morning I was in Africa, there was nowhere else to be; I just had to go. In course of going there I had found out there were 20, about 20 Gambian students in this country. The nearest one to me was in a place called Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, I had never heard of that either. I hit that campus like a wind and practically snatched Ebou Manga out of class and put him on Pan-America and we went to Dakar, Senegal. And we got there, we got a light plane over to Bathurst, the capital of the country the Gambia. When we got there Ebou Manga introduced me to officials of the country, and right away they irritated me. The sound "kambe bolongo," that my family had to nurture for seven generations, and I'd traipsed all over New York with it, the United Nations lobby, Madison, Wisconsin, hither, yon... they poo-pooed it, like that. "Of course it meant Gambia River." They said, "Everybody knows that!" [laughing with the audience] And I thought, you know, no, not everybody knows that! Then what they reacted to was something that I had brought in the story that I never would have given a second thought to because it hadn't meant anything to me: it was enter phase three of the miraculous. They said, "But now you say, this African said his name was Kinte; now there is significance in that, because our very old villages tend to be named for families which began them centuries ago." And they say, "You say his name was Kinte?" And they showed me a map. Now here is the village of Kinte Kunda, and near it is the village of Kinte Kunda Janeya.

And they showed me other villages that had spun off from those villages, and then they told me something that I had never known about African history and how it's kept then and now. That almost every very old village contains a very old man, in some places called the "alkalo" in other places called the "griot," whose mission on earth is to be rather like a walking book, an encyclopedia of the meticulous history of that village back to its very beginning. He has learned it, he heard it for 30 to 40 years from older men before he became the incumbent. And he trained from four to five successively younger men who tell the story. That is the way that history has been kept in Africa back literally for centuries. And then they told me that virtually every old major family clan has also... somewhere in the country has an old man, a griot, an



alkalo who tells the story of that clan. It was just staggering to me in all concepts; they said they would try to help me.

And I came back to New York. I read... it seemed that I was in a complete confusion, I was thinking about things I almost wouldn't talk about, it seemed so unbelievable. And about six weeks passed, and I got the cable that in essence said come back to Africa. And I thought I was ready for anything, but I wasn't about to be ready for the next phase of what happened. I got over there and they told me about how the word had been put out in the back country and an old... a laborer of the Mandinka tribe had come down, and he had found the committee members, and he had told him that he knew of a man who told a story of the Kinte clan. And this man was named Kebba Kange Fofana, and they had checked out and found that this was solid and they sent the cable.

I was absolutely fit to be tied to get to this man. My experience as a writer is, "Why you don't have me with a public relations man, so we can get to work." "Where is he?" And they looked at me oddly and pointed again at the chart, "He's in his village." And what I had to do, what I wasn't at all prepared to do, was in the next two days—just absolutely incredible—I had to get together literally a safari. I had to pull... finally it was a launch to get up the river, a lorry Land Rover to get around the back way to carry supplies; finally 14 people, three interpreters, one each an expert in the Wolof, the Jola, the Mandinka dialects that we will meet in various places along the way. Three musicians because the old chief wouldn't talk without music in the background, kola nuts, barrels, so forth.

And on the third day, we're on our way up the Gambia River. The switch was now it's me in the pith helmet, and I just remember going to that river thinking to myself, *How on god's earth did I get here?* It was like baboons, monkeys, crocodiles, 110-degree temperature, mosquitos that acted like sparrows, and just unbelievable. And we went up this river, up, up, up; it wasn't really as far as one gets his mind as a safari, but it's so tough to get short distances in some localities. We got to a village called Albreda and there we went ashore, and from that point we went overland to the village of Juffure. There's a saying called... there's an expression called the "peak experience"; that which no emotional experience can transcend. I think I had it that day in Africa. It began when we got... the first of our party got close to this village; there were about four or five little boys playing on the edge of the village and they saw them and they just went poof. They disappeared. By the time the body of the party got up there, all the occupants had poured out of their huts.

The interpreters I had had gone to work on the old man, I saw him and they were telling him all about, obviously about me. And then, I was standing there and about seventy-five people of

this village were clustered around me in kind of a crescent. And they were staring at me as if I was a bug under a microscope. And I was staring at them. And there happened to me in quick succession in three emotional experiences I could never had anticipated if someone described the situation in advance. The only thing I can do is tell you them. The first one was—and I don't understand it, I just know it happened—I had never before been anywhere that everybody I saw was pure black, and somehow that hit me like a sledgehammer emotionally. Right on the heels of it, was I had a overwhelming feeling of being hybrid, that I was the impure among the pure and that hit me like a sledgehammer. And the third thing was that I have never felt blacker in my life, however ambivalent that may sound. It was all *wham*. And one of the interpreters, his name was A.B.C. Salla, I remember, came over he saw the way they were staring at me and he whispered in my ear, "The reason they stare at you so, they have never seen a Black American." And that hit me. I began to realize it wasn't me, it was not Alex Haley individually they were looking at, they were looking at the symbol of all the 25 million of us over here they never had seen. And that's the way they understood me in that context.

When the old man was given to understand about me he turned to the people—and in Africa nobody gets up and says, "I've decided this is what we're going to think and do"; it's discussion—he communicated to the people about me, and then I could tell they were discussing and understanding collectively. And when they finally got together their consensus opinion, the old man just kind of whirled and he walked right up to me and he clattered at me in Mandinka as if he felt I should understand. And the translation came from the side. And I will never forget the feeling that those words, the way they saw me as a symbol of all of us here, should have been carved or chiseled in some rock somewhere. 'Cause what they said was, or what the old man said for them was, "Yes, we have been told by the forefathers that there are many of us from this place who are in exile in that place called America and in other places." And that was the way they saw. And the old man then began to tell me the story of the Kinte clan, what I'd come to hear.

He talked about three and a half hours, Mandinka translation; it was mesmerizing. The story was very biblical in the translation, it would come back like, "And so-and-so took as a wife so-and-so, and begat and begat and begat," and so forth. And every now and then he would name someone beget and he would stop and just because it was a little detail in a meticulous long story, he would tell some little thing about that particular person, such as "In the year of the big water he slew a water buffalo," or some such thing as that. The story that the man told was lateral, which is to say, he'd name a person and go through uncles, brothers' uncles, cousins, on... unbelievable. I could hear names, I could tell when he was calling a name. And I remember thinking to myself, "My god, we who descend from these people don't even know the sounds of the names of the people we came from. We don't know anything about ourselves."

Emotionally it was just too much. I remember telling myself, *Don't try to think, just record, try to remember; you can think about it later. Just do that.*

In essence, the story the man told about this particular Kinte clan was that the Kinte clan had been begun by a man name Kairaba Kunta Kinte who came out of the country of Mauritania about 1700. He was a marabout, which is to say he was a holy man. The marabout in Mauritania on the average got his certificate of training from the master marabout under whom he'd studied when they were about 35. The marabout as a class of people tended to be loners, wanderers, voyagers; they never traveled in pairs or any kind of groups, they would always go alone. A number of them traveled, trekked down into black West Africa, where the villagers coveted them. One reason was the black West African villages felt that a marabout's prayers could render a village invincible. A second reason was that it was felt the marabout's presence made a village more important in the hierarchy of villages.

This particular marabout, Kairaba Kunta Kinte, came down to the village first of Pakalinding, and he stayed there while he went to the village of Jifarong, and then he went to the village of Juffure. And in the village of Juffure he took his first wife a woman whose name was Sireng. Sireng gave to him two sons, whose names were Janneh and Saloum. He took a second wife whose name was Yaisa, and Yaisa gave him a son whose name was Omoro. When the three sons came of age, Janneh and Saloum went away from the village of Juffure and founded the village of Kinte Kunda Janeya, the second one of the villages that was pointed out to me when I first went to Africa. The third son, Omoro, stayed in the village of Juffure until he had 30 rains, which is the African way of saying 30 years of age. One rainy season a year. And then he took as a wife a Mandinka maiden whose name was Binta Kebba, and Binta Kebba gave to him, between 1750 and 1760, four sons. Whose names in order of arrival were Kunta, Lamin, Suwadu, and Madi.

When the old man had come down to the point of naming them he had been talking about three hours, and as he talked maybe 50 times... stopped maybe 50 times that morning, and told about somebody slew a water buffalo or some such. He waved his hand below the village and as casually as you please, he said that which came back in the translation, "About that time the king's soldiers came." Now I interject to say, later in London I went feebly searching to find what was he talking about, the event that would fix the time. And I found it finally, in the records of British Parliament, that it was a group called Colonel O'Hara's forces that had been sent to that precise part in the Gambia River to guard the Fort James slave fort, and the time was right on. The old man said about the time the King's soldiers came, the eldest of these four sons, Kunta, went away from this village to chop wood and he disappeared. And the family

searched and searched and searched and they could never find him. And they assumed the “toubab” had gotten him. And he went over this story.

He had no way to know I was sitting there with goose pimples all over. He had no way to know he had just told me the exact meshing thing with what I had grown up in Henning, Tennessee hearing six, eight, ten, twelve years old, about the African who said his name was Kinte, who said he had been captured while chopping wood. And had called that river “kambe bolongo.” And here this old man and I sat not a thousand yards from the “kambe bolongo,” with him telling me this out of African history. I was just about wiped out. I got to the interpreter, Salla, a little article I did over here before I went there, telling what the African on this side said. He communicated to the old man, and the old man to the people, and it was like—I wish I had a film. They were all barefooted. All of a sudden their feet began to go like that [taps twice] against this hard-packed clay, dusty earth. And they began to move out in a circle, and the circle accelerated in speed, and I was just standing there with just my face hanging open, it was just too much. And all of a sudden as they’re moving, now, there were about 12 women with little infant type babies. And the first one, daughter in hand and she had this baby thrust out, as if to say catch it, it will fall.

And instinctively I took the baby and clutched it. And as soon as I would get it clutched she’d take it and another lady with another baby, and I guess I clutched a dozen babies in two minutes. At Harvard, Dr. Jerome Bruner told me that “what you were involved in and didn’t understand was one of the oldest ceremonies in mankind, called ‘the laying on of hands.’ That in their way, they were saying to you that through these our flesh, we are you and you are us.” The day I would love to describe in detail as much as I could remember, ‘cause I was really just kind of mute, in a sense. They took me—as I told you they in that section of Africa predominantly are orthodox Muslim in religion—they took me to their little mosque. And they prayed, and the crux of the prayer when I heard it translated was, “Praise be to Allah for one lost long from us, whom God has returned.”

That was how they saw it. And then we were on our way out. A little party of us going back toward the mainland. And the word was ahead of us: in every village they would have strung up before the walkway, the roadway, big ciboa leaves; they are like that: [demonstrates visually] great big glossy green leaves that they use for umbrellas. And the wind was rustling, or what little wind there was, and we would stop in some of the villages and the people would wave and say, “Mr. Kinte,” that was what they were calling me. I didn’t know. I was filled with humility; I was filled with pride; I didn’t know how to feel. I was just full, is just the main thing. We would stop in some villages and if I had any emotional capacity left, that got wiped out with

one more thing that would happen. I had in my bag an *Ebony* magazine that I had happened to bring other with me, and the interpreters would say to me, "Show them your book."

So we would stop, and this thing, this *Ebony* would be eagerly leafed through. And what I saw happen—I wish every Black person in America could see it happen, and white people too—was these people who knew nothing almost but their own culture, their own past, looked at this country vaguely... they know very little. It's a very shocking thing to go somewhere where somebody doesn't really know much about America. They would look at these pictures, and if I saw one I saw a hundred black fingers with cracked nails touch on the face of somebody who lives here. And like that they would clip out a name of a tribe. That's what they saw, was tribal features in our faces. Everybody that every looked at me would call, they say that which translates to "a proper Mandinka." They saw whatever are the Mandinka features in my face.

And I came on back here, and I was just about done for as you could imagine. And I got myself together again and went to the publisher and told him, "Ken, this isn't a family story." I said, "This is a Black saga. The reason is, it is the story... the symbolic story of every single one of the 25 million of us here. We all came the same way, behind every single one of us is a tribe, a dialect, a village; somebody got captured, a slave ship, and plantations, and caprice since. That's the story of us all." So this is—and he understood when I told him—I had to do now what was, what is called in the writing business "saturation research": go everywhere in the world that has anything relating to it.

I went next after the... I'm looking at this, because I always talk overtime, I'm sorry, I just do. I went next after the... another miracle. I had seen miracles, and I believed maybe I could get another one. I knew where that ship had come in. I knew in Africa I'd find out the only place a person from that village would have been put on a ship. And in studying maritime history of slavery, I had been able to deduce fairly well how long it would take a ship to cross from that point in Africa to Annapolis. And I wanted to see if I could find that symbol which had been so germane to all of us who are Black people as that ship that brought that forebearer, in whose seeds we came. And I went to Annapolis; I found a lot of slave ships, but no way to know what ship. I went to Washington; I found a lot of them. And this monkey I tell you about, that was riding me, was really bugging me.

I got on a plane and I went to London for no reason more than in 1760s this was colonies and that was the mother country. And I had in my studying found out that if England had anything it had a lot of, it was civil servants, and they were all writing to justify their existence and so they had a lot of records, more than we have. And I was on that plane and I was about an hour... we were about an hour out of Heathrow Airport when a name popped in my head. It was that

monkey, I know it was. It had come out of all that reading about maritime history. [audio skips] It's a thing, you act on it; and we got there and I walked in the lobby and looked up at the directory board. It was just like in the movies. There were names of officials and there was R. F. C. E. Landers. And I got on the elevator, they call it the lift, and went up to his office. And I saw, on opening the door, a lady, and I knew instantly what the situation was.

You know the English are stiff and staid anyway. This woman was probably in her 50s, and I knew on sight she was the kind of secretary who exists to keep people out of that man's office. [laughter] And I knew I had to do something to shake her up to get in there. And I began talking—I never have done this before or since—I began to talk absolute gibberish. And the only thing I said that she could understand very clearly was "U.S. Coast Guard," and I said, "*Reader's Digest*." And I knew she knew what both of them meant, and I had been affiliated with both of them, I wasn't lying. And the lady never said a word; she got up, finally she just stood up, and she went in the man's office and she confused *him*.

And she came out and she told me very sternly, "He is a very busy man. You know you have no appointment, but he will give you five minutes." So, I walked in and I said, "Mr. Landers, I want to say the outset I have used a ruse to come in and see you. But you have given me five minutes and I would like to tell you a story." And I went in before he could open his mouth, lacing it heavily with the maritime details. In three minutes, you can watch a man. In about three minutes, I would guess, I knew I had hooked me a maritime history buff... [laughter] and I kept talking for maybe 25 minutes and when I stopped, he stood up.

And he said, "Young man, the facilities of Lloyd's of London will try to help you." And it was they who one way or another got me access to the British maritime records. This room wouldn't hold just the slave ship records of that vast compilation of maritime records. I had gotten three girls from the *Reader's Digest* to help me isolate the slave ship records for the years 1765-68. I knew they were the bracket years. And I went into one of the most traumatic research periods I ever have known: seven weeks. They're records in there that haven't been opened for 100 years: boxes, parcels, boxes that have an inch of dust on them.

I would go home every night to the hotel in terror that I had it in my hand and let it get away. The records ranged from little slips of paper to huge foldouts. All kinds of slave ships, all kinds of descriptions of movements of them. I began to get horrified about it, I really did. I would open up that place in the morning and I would close it at night. And seven weeks passed of this. And one afternoon about 3:30, I was in the 1,023<sup>rd</sup> crate of slave ship records, and I picked up a thing, and it was a movement of 30 ships, the movement reports. And I came down looking as I

had at literally thousands of them. And I got to number 18. And my eye went out to the right following, and I tell you the truth, that monkey on my back said, "That's it."

Now there was no way to prove it but somehow I just knew. When you research enough, you get back there, you are there. And it was funny, I remember saying to myself, *that's it all right*. Just like that. And I wrote the little stuff down, and I went out and I got me a cruller and a cup of tea. I remember it very well; I could almost see the little shop in my mind, I sat there kicking my foot like it was all in a day's work. And that lasted about an hour, and then I just went crazy. [laughter] I came up from there, I didn't even stop to go to the hotel to get a toothbrush; I got a cab, told him, "Heathrow Airport" and he got me there just in time to make the six o'clock plane to New York.

The following morning I took an Eastern Airlines shuttle to New York to Washington. I knew the book I had to get to, and I was there when the Library Congress opened. And I got the book and read one paragraph that confirmed that it was that ship. Then I went to Annapolis, and that began a period... in the next ten days I crossed the Atlantic Ocean three times round trip. It was that, it was feverish. I couldn't wait for a letter, a cable, anything; I had to go personally and get it. Somebody might not do it right. You see, you get possessed when you start getting in this depth of research.

I remember in the British Maritime Museum, a Mr. George Nash told me all he could about a type of ship. And then he said to me, "But young man, the greatest expert on wooden sailing ships in the world is in your own country at the Smithsonian." And that was the night I caught another plane back to see that man the next morning. And then I went right back to England. I know now more about that ship than its captain. I've been all over, you can't name a place I haven't been. She was the *Lord Ligonier*, the symbol ship that brought us all over here. She was built in this country in New England in 1765 and sailed in 1766 to England with a cargo of rum that she sold, and the proceeds were used to buy slaving things. Shackles, chains, so forth.

She was about to leave on her African run—this was her maiden voyage, she'd been built as a slaver—when she went over into a protected cove area known as the downs. At the time I'd tracked her up to here, then I began to realize something that's very germane to depth research, and that is whenever you open one door in research, you also open another door. And I began to realize you couldn't really intelligently go deeply into dealing with slave ships unless you knew something about the weather. Not only slave ships, but any other ships. In this time when there were no engines, motors, ships only moved by wind and the sails. And I realized I had to know some more about the weather. I went checking around and found that the British meteorological headquarters is in a city called Bracknell, England. So I got on a train

and went to Bracknell, and marched in there one morning and told them what I was doing. I said I would like to know something about the weather in 1766.

And they looked at me and they sort of said, "Well, we would too." [laughter] It was just... it knocked me down that they didn't have it. I couldn't believe it. And I came back to London and I realized the reasonableness of what they're saying—there was no weather report—they didn't know a thing about that, that old. But this monkey kept bugging me; he kept saying, "There's got to be a way. You've got to have it." That was the thing, every time there was some issue that I had to get, I didn't know how; I just *had* to get it.

Finally I sat down and began rationally deducing... now, yes, they did have to have wind. So, they regarded and recorded wind. I'd been in the service, I'd stood watch. I knew every four hours you had to make the reports in the log. So, I dropped the whole research I was in and went to work for weather. I got me a big meteorological chart, blank, and I studied every major port in England in the 1760s where most shipping had gone out. Liverpool, Hull, various others. And I got on trains and I went to them. I searched in libraries, private collections, everywhere I could possibly find anything that had to do with that. And every now and then I was rewarded with the log of a ship that had been sailing in the time and in the area I had blocked out. I had blocked out the area April to September 1766, and that stretch of ocean between England and Africa. And every time I found a log of a ship that had been in that set of months in that space of the Atlantic, I took out of it its weather readings and put them in a fine pen or pencil on that chart where the ship was located when it made the weather report.

About two weeks later, I went back to Bracknell, kind of slower with my chart under my arm. And I found two Royal Canadian meteorologists, and I opened this thing up and there a professional went to work. They said, "There was a warm front happening here." They had 480-yard weather readings on it now. "And a cold front, this direction..." that, and so forth. And it intrigued them, so they called in colleagues. And in two days, I'd guess maybe there were a dozen of them working at one point or another. They had been able to recreate for me the weather in which that ship had sailed. And I know now, along with a lot of other things, about this symbol ship that brought us. It was on Tuesday, July 15, 1766 she raised her sails in the downs, off from London. The temperature was 66 degrees, the wind was west-southwest, the millibar reading was 10:10. The storm that had originated over the continent was moving southwesterly over England. And she went on out down the channel, past the White Cliffs of Dover, and on down to that place known as Lizard's Head, from which she went into the open sea. And she passed the Maderas Islands, the Canary Islands, and finally went to the point in the estuary of the Gambia River, Africa where you put that baobab tree two points off the starboard bow and she went into the river.



She began slaving, she stayed ten months. I thought that was a mistake when I first found it. Ten months seemed an undue time for any ship to stay for any cargo. But such was the property of slaving, that sometimes ships stayed as much as a year and a half to get a cargo. The problem chiefly was that very often a ship would get a third full, a half full of her human cargo and she would be hit by one of the plagues that ambled up and down the African coast. And all the slaves would die or become deathly ill, and they would have to throw them overboard to the sharks and start afresh. And slaving literally became a race to keep... to get the living people in crew and take off with them.

This ship, finally, after ten months, got a cargo of twelve hundred fifty elephant tusks, 800 pounds of raw cotton, 800 pounds of beeswax, four ounces of gold, and 140 slaves. And she set sail July 5, 1767, it was a Sunday. An interesting thing I found in all this research was that for some perverse reason, the slave ship captains and those who are at the administrative end of slaving went to great lengths trying somehow to manifest that they were acting in a Christian capacity. One of the things was that it was considered right and proper that a slave ship, when filled, should sail on the Sabbath. One of the ironies of a song that we often sing in our churches today, "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds," was written by a slave ship captain, John Newton, on his ship waiting off the African coast for it to be filled so he could sail.

And this ship came on across, rather uneventful in time terms, crossing to Annapolis, and she arrived September 29, 1767. And she had... I went in there, I remember leaving London and went to Annapolis to find out and I went into the records. One set of records you can always find back to the time of Christ, and that's tax records. [laughter] And I went in to the entry records of this ship, and I found she declared on entering the same cargo with which she left Africa, except that of the 140 slaves of which she left 98 had survived the crossing. And that was about average for the slave ships. And then I went later into the Virginia archives, records of deeds, and I found a deed where a man named John Waller had a transfer of goods to his brother William. And there was on the second page between two commas, "And also one Negro man slave named Toby," which brought it full circle. It was nine generations, it was 260-odd years, and it is the symbol story of us all.

I'm running late, but I want to tell you... I think it's up to 2:30 when I'm supposed to stop. So I got four minutes and I want to tell you this. I could sit up here and talk and love it for six hours, this thing, it's just too much. The last phase—there were four phases of research. The first was tracking the U.S. side of the family, the second was finding the African family, the third was finding the slave ship, and then finally a thing by now I knew, I had the Black saga to tell for the first time, documented. And a thing that came to me was that there's nothing we need worse told, worse known by ourselves and by all others, than something that will thoroughly refute

the image that has always pervaded us for generations of culture in this country and in fact around much of the world about historic Africa, that Africa from which we came. You know the image, you all know it, we all had the same image: was somehow, if you brought up the subject of historical Africa, you thought about tom-toms, witch doctors, tigers, jungle, and somehow in some strange way, the king of that jungle came to be Tarzan.

And I became very interested in how... what really was the culture in the 1700s when these slaves were being brought out? And I went back and retraced steps, you can't name an archive. If it's the Gorée archives in Senegal, Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris—I found some beautiful stuff in Amsterdam, Haarlem and the Hague—wherever you want to go, wherever there is information about slaves, I have been there. And I'd find a sliver here, a sliver there, sunk in old narratives, letters that men wrote who were in Africa in the 1700s, family collections that archives had gotten and so forth. And every time I found anything relative to the culture then, told from these primary sources I got it out. And now I have in the second chapter of the book which opens of the birth of the baby Kinte going up through his 16 years. I tell parenthetically the culture that I have found that existed, the truth of it for the first time. And one of the things that moves me so much and it will move you—I'll tell you even before I tell you—is: so ironic against us who know so little about ourselves, because this culture has dictated that our culture would be cut away from us.

In Africa 1600s, 1500s, 1700s, that era: those people saw, our forebears saw as scarcely second in importance to the birth of a child, they saw the naming of that child properly. And there was a ceremony rigidly followed, which went this way: when a child was born, for the next seven days the father didn't do anything but go around pondering the matter of a right, proper, meaningful name for that child. On the eighth day, in a small village everybody gathered, and in a big village it would be the immediate family and friends invited, along with them were the village jaliba, the drummer who for this occasion had a small drum called a tan-tang, and the village almaamo, the religious figure. When they gathered, the women would go, and the mother was holding the 8-day-old baby, and the women would physically admire its well form and so forth. And then the drummer would give a little roll on the drum, and everyone would come to attention. And now, with everyone intently watching a ceremony they all knew had been revered, the father would go over and he would lift up this eight-day-old infant, and he would raise it up, so that its ear was very close to his mouth, and into its ear he would whisper its name, the first time that name ever had been uttered.

Their thinking was that in this way, this individual always would be the first to know who he was. Then the father would go and whisper the name to the mother, the first time she ever heard it, and she would smile. Another roll on the drum, and now the father would whisper the

name to the village alama, the religious figure. And the alama would position himself before the people, who were rigid, and he would announce like the town crier the name of this infant, so-and-so, who is the son of so-and-so, who is the son of so-and-so, and take it back at that moment 8 to ten generations. And that was the way the child was identified in the African culture that we have been given to understand was so savage. And it's only one of hundreds of incidents that exists in this world of myth... that has been so hidden by myth.

I was saying in the car, coming from the plane—this is running a little over now—that I hope after this book, whatever weight I may be able to exert, one of the things I want to do in this Black history context is I want to encourage as many as possible young Black people to go to Africa. We talk about Black history and now it's up to us to get it. To go to Africa... and don't go as tourists, but go and join tribes, literally join a tribe, stay there five years, learn the dialect, learn to speak it. There is incredible... there's not a word to describe the history that lies waiting now to be collected, but only if you can speak in the idiom. And that is one thing that I think would be absolutely necessary for a number to do, to draw out of these old men back there that which has been with them for centuries and which they take for granted.

So it sort of comes to the situation now that is the story behind all of us, the 25 million of us here. I don't think much needs to be said about what is happening now in terms of social upheaval; it is that among us has come a generation who has said, is saying in various ways, "That's it; no more. It stops with us, we are going to be a part of this country or not." And I think, put in fairly obvious terms, that unless we become assimilated into this culture as equal beings in it, then this group of us, who are the biggest single ethnic group among us, at least psychically will shake this country's images of itself pretty much to pieces. Because we like to think of ourselves as a democracy for one thing, one of these chief images. And you see we're coming down now to that hard acid time when there is becoming applicable one of the great truths in this world, be you black, white, pink, or speckle polka dotted, and that is that if you do not deal with the reality, then you be very certain that the reality will deal with you.

And the thing that has come now that the reality is, it is gonna change this country's image of itself as a democracy whose first mandate—any democracy's first mandate is that whoever is considered the so-called "least among you," either... if they are not equal you don't have the democracy. So that's the one thing on the one hand. And we can now hopefully begin to rectify this. There is this opportunity; it still is open. And I think if it happens—and I hope it will happen, that's my hopeful note—that this country then is gonna see one of the most wonderful things that ever happened to it. And that is that from among us, in will come what has been dormant, kept dormant, kept squelched, kept thrown in the ash can for 200 years. There will come from us, I believe, in the next 20, 30, 50 years, the greatest burst, the greatest flood of

talent that this country has ever known from any single ethnic group within it. And this country, America, will become the beneficiary of the legacy of it. And if that happens—and only if that happens—I think then we will see for the first time as it always could have been, this country, America, become for the first time as I say, literally the greatest nation on the face of this earth. And I've talked over. I thank you.

[applause]

HOST: Mr. Haley has to be over at College Center in a few minutes. He said he would take a couple questions before he leaves, if there are any?

[question in background]

HALEY: Oh, the young lady asked, as many people do, "What is the name of the book?" It has had the working title *Before This Anger*, but I know that title isn't going to survive. I've gotten to that stage now where I've gotten dissatisfied with it. And I'm going to... what I'm searching for is some one-word title that connotes people moving history. Like if a guy hadn't snatched it already, I would love to use the word *Odyssey*. [murmurs from the audience] Or the word *Exodus* or some such thing. But I will be... it will come out of the typewriter, out of the head three o'clock some morning. So, I don't know the title yet, but the thing is you would know the book by the description of what it's about. That sort of thing. Yes, sir.

[question in background]

HALEY: He asked, "Who do I think killed Malcolm X?" I'm always asked this, and I don't know. I don't think anyone does know except the people who were immediately privy to it. There are theories, of course one is the Black Muslims. Another is that some governmental agency engineered it and didn't do it exactly. And there's another theory that I think is... all I'll say about this is I think it is as valid as either of the other two. And that is I know that Malcolm X was about to attack dope in Harlem and when you... if Malcolm X had done this, it's reasonably easy to extend it that he with his charisma, his following in Harlem, would have had people coming out of the woodwork to tell him things that were happening in the dope world. And Malcolm could have called press conferences, had headlines anytime he chose. This would have automatically caused the narcotics enforcement people to have to make wholesale dramatic arrests, which altogether would have cut into the vast income of the people behind the dope picture. And back of the scene, the people who never get caught when they pick up the pushers and the so forth are the people who notoriously are not given to negotiating with you if they

feel they are threatened. And all I'm saying is I think that is as valid as either of the other theories. Yes, ma'am.

[question in background]

HALEY: The lady asked, "With the desperate need for Black historians, is any effort being made to bring Black historians from Africa?" I do not know of any concerted effort that is being done in that direction. I know of a few individuals, like three or four, who have one or another way gotten involved with programs here; most of them, for some interesting reason, work in England, who are equipped. I don't know. I guess the best answer that I can give to you in a body sense is, "Not to my knowledge." And there would be many reasons for this; it's not as simple as that, really. The fact that one is born and reared in Africa does not mean necessarily he knows African history any more than in this country. Not in a teaching way.

[question in background]

HALEY: Well, I think that's one facet; that students here should go there and study. And I'm talking about not what might be taught in the best African history course we have today. I'm saying that students who would go there, who would join tribes, learn the dialect, would get things to add to what we have to teach. There would be, well, just like this thing I have been able to dig up. Something that nobody else has ever heard of. And god knows I hadn't, and all the people I talked with, they haven't either. And I was able to interview, to dig only that kind of thing that one can kind of sort of lift off the surface. But beneath that is just tremendous Black history.

And I think that another that should be done in this term of what might be called a time of emergency need of Black history is that students who are relatively gifted in the subject should be employed to teach it to those who are not. I just don't think we should apply the same fairly rigid standards we do to other things to this thing right now, because we need to get it proliferated more. That's what I think. Yes, sir.

[question in background]

HALEY: Insofar as I know, it is, sir. I know some other cases; I know of some cases where people... I know of two cases where people have been able to go, literally go back and find their African family. In one case it was a family who slave antecedent had come over just before the slave trade ended, so it covered much less time period. And that would be reasonable to understand. And another case, it was a man who was in the West Indies who had been able to track his family back some distance. I don't know how far, but I know that as far as I know in

this country, it is unique in terms of its length, range, period. Yes, sir. One more, the man says, and then we go. Yes ma'am.

[question in background]

HALEY: Well, this is true. And this is not... what you're saying, I'm glad you feel good. It makes me feel good that you feel good. [laughter] In fact, I wish I didn't have to rush off to San Francisco today. [laughter] But it is not just a Black thing, it's a thing that needs I think to make us all, white and Black, feel good. Finally, hopefully, we have come to the time that we are beginning now to try and put the picture straight, to tell it like it was. Because, see, this is a hard thing maybe to face, but the hard fact is that American history as we have known it up 'til now has been a lie by omission. It has not told—the story of it has not included, not even scarcely a morsel of what has been contributed to it by the biggest single ethnic group in it. And nobody can say that is untrue. That's right, but now we are trying to put the record straight. And when we all know the truth, when we deal with the reality, we'll all be better off. Yeah. Mm-hm. I guess that has to be it. I'm sorry, but we have to go somewhere now this minute. Thank you again.

[applause; program ends]