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## "Black Studies Center Public Dialogue, Part 2"

Portland State University

Toni Morrison

Primus St. John

John Callahan

Susan Callahan

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**Speakers**

Portland State University, Toni Morrison, Primus St. John, John Callahan, Susan Callahan, and Lloyd Baker

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"Black Studies Center Public Dialogue," Part 2  
Portland State University  
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PRIMUS ST. JOHN: [in mid-sentence] ...the format will eventually be that Toni Morrison, who will lead off the discussion, and there will be short discussions following her, but the [clearing throat] of the panel, and then the discussion will be opened up to everyone and we hope that there will be a dialogue. So please feel free to ask questions, and don't worry about how important your question is, because probably every question is important. So please feel free to exchange your views.

I feel very fortunate, and I feel that Portland State University is very fortunate as well as the Oregon Commission for the Humanities, in being able to attract the presence of a person like Toni Morrison to our meeting today. Ms. Morrison is a graduate of Cornell University, which I imagine makes Cornell very happy, and she has taught at Howard University and Texas Southern University. She is also, in my opinion, an outstanding American novelist, the author of *The Bluest Eye*, as well as *Sula*, her most recent novel, which was nominated for the National Book Award. As well as actually conceiving a book project which was published by Random House called the *Black Book*, which is kind of a scrapbook of historical and cultural events and happenings. That book was also nominated for the National Book Award as well. So Toni Morrison has established herself as an outstanding novelist, as a sensitive and [noise on microphone] most likely an extremely important editor as well. She is in the process of completing a project which is the biography of Muhammad Ali, which will be called *The Greatest*, of course. It's written by a man by the name of, I believe, Richard [...] That, I hope, takes care of some of the [...] information.

To her left is Lloyd Baker, from Portland State University, a graduate assistant in English. To his left is John Callahan, an associate professor of English at Lewis and Clark College, and to his left is Susan Kirshner Callahan, also a professor of English at Lewis and Clark University [sic]. So, whatever John says, she'll be right there to make sure that he says it correctly. These are our speakers and our guests. I'll be functioning primarily as a moderator, and I don't know what a moderator does, but in thinking about the event, I started scribbling some things down. I think I'll just say my little scribbling and then leave the rest to all the talented people here.

It's really going to be very short... but as I was thinking about what the [...] theme that was presented for this program, the idea of America, or the American Dream, a kind of unfinished revolution, and perhaps how does the artist specifically, the novelist perhaps, fit into this picture, and what contribution could they have? I started jotting some things down, and I hope this will establish some kind of context which will be useful to [...]. One of the first observations that I was making was essentially this. I said to myself, Perhaps the artist is one who bears witness, one who bears witness to the way the world is happening. If we believe this, it seems that we can say that a work of art is a testament that describes our vision of what is happening around us and to us. [...] thought of saying, it is the way Marvin Gaye attempts to engage us with the question, "What is going on?" Of course, there is a wonderful problem within this orientation. That is, there is the world, a place of things and events, irreverent of our egos, and there is our ego, or one's vision of things, depending on what one's needs, or what one needs to see.

Tonight, we will have either the audacity or the intense curiosity, which some people call courage, as it manifests itself on the issue of a national or cultural vision. We will be looking at the vision of a people, the vision of an American, or the vision of an America, with an avowed commitment to liberty and justice for all, and ponder on this long eve of our bicentennial on some of the questions our novelists have asked. Just when I thought I was absolutely finished with statements this afternoon, after talking to Toni Morrison it occurred to me—I began to think of things like, perhaps, I didn't mention objectivity and compassion. And I just jotted down: and finally, perhaps, compassion and objectivity, those two rumors we hear so often, are the realizations that we do not own this story life tells, but that we belong deeply, directly, and vicariously to its story. With this, I'd like to turn everything over to Toni Morrison.

[00:06:55]

TONI MORRISON: Thank you very much. Right after "pitch" and "rice," but before "tar" and "turpentine," there is listed the "human beings." The rice is measured by pounds, and the tar and 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 by barrel weight the human beings. They used only head count. The book that I'm referring to, *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 and import, and export, those humans who came to the United States from 1619 to 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 is not quite sure of, they identify the fact that it is incomplete. "We are very sorry," they seem to say, "that our information is not complete, you understand, 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 in the gentlemanly assertion everywhere in those pages. But is a reasonable list without the least hope of success, because the language cracks under the weight of its own implication. Footnote 3, for example, under *Slaves*, clarifies the ambiguity of its reference with the following words: "Source shows 72 Indians imported; of that [...] number 231 slaves died and 103 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 that you can 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. 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 head count? Was there a seventeen-year-old girl there? With a tree-shaped scar on her knee? And what was her name? We say, Please, Mr. Inspector General of the United States Census Bureau, *what was her name?*

Historical statistics, however, are not required, are 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 page 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 gunny sack. It's not the thunder roll of barrels of turpentine cascading down a plank. It's not a seventeen-year-old 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 on the origins and consequences of slavery. All of which is related to production and legislation, and 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. Does the girl know that the reason that she died in the sea or was smothered in a sixty-foot slop pit on a ship named "Jesus" was because that was her era, or that some great men thought of 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. 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."

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 root in this case. The more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed in 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."

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 prostitute of the basest order."

Richard Pike, Boston, 1854: "Catholicism is, and it ever has been, a bigoted, persecuting, and superstitious religion. There is no crime in a 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 interests seem to require it, which has no conscience, which spans the control of public opinion, which obtrudes its head among the nations of Christendom, dripping with the cruelties of millions of murders, and haggard with the debaucheries of a thousand years, always ambitious, always sanguinary, and always false."

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."

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 orders 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 they are such an intolerable nuisance that the department must be purged of them." A general order from Ulysses Grant. "On account of a 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 Lister: "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 the diary of William Byrd of Virginia, 1710 to 1712. The editor of his diary described Byrd as Virginia's most polished and ornamental gentleman, a kindly master who inveigled [sic] 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. 5/23 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 be burnt 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 whipped three slave women. 11/6 The Negro woman ran away again. 11/13 The Negro woman fugitive was found dead. 1/11 A quarrel with my wife for being cruel to 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 two male slaves beaten. 5/1 I caused Prue to be whipped severely. 8/4 I was indisposed with the beating of Prue, and tired. 9/26 I had several people whipped. 9/28 Eugene was uppretends 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 Anama 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 are beaten. 7/25 Billy is whipped. 7/30 Molly and Jenny are whipped. 8/21 Billy, beaten. 9/3 My wife gave Prue a great whipping."

And at 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 Tawnies, and increasing the lovely White and Red?"

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 that conventional history supports and complements a very grave and a very serious, almost pristine ignorance. 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. 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. 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 an orchid. Between the words "wrest," w-r-e-s-t, and the word "pry" p-r-y. The difference between butter and clabber, buttermilk and clabber. Between Chanel number 5 and Chanel 16th.

So it would seem that to continue to see a race of people, any race of people, as one single personality, is an ignorance of gothic proportions. An ignorance so vast, so public, a 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 racists, historical racists, literary racists. An intelligence that is so crippled that it could, in all seriousness, ask W.E.B. DuBois in 1905, in pursuit of some study as a white professor from Clark University did, whether or not colored people shed tears. It's the same crippled intelligence that grants foundation money to educational careerists to study the cause of riots, as opposed to racism; to study the genetic influences on intelligence of a race that is so mixed, genetically mixed, that the experiment should fall apart at step one. In spite of improved methods of collecting and storing data, and increased amounts 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 other thing is intelligent problem-solving and humans relating to each other in mutually constructive ways. If it was homicidal in 1674 to limit the truth and to 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 the fact that the major part of the history of 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 court, 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 deviants 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 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 although no group in the world 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?

That being the case, it is time, way past time, for the study to examine the student, and to evaluate its own self. And the fruit 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 keep us anonymous or peripheral to events of this country.

The second responsibility of artists and scholars is to bear down hard on those generalities: the statistics and the charts, and to make them give up the life they are 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 sixth-grade level. And that the ego of Black people is a thread of jelly, needing constant cement.

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. In all of those quotations, from William Byrd to Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Jackson to the *New York Tribune*, the threat was always jobs, land, or money. 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. 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.

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 you work, or plot, or steal. Racists were never afraid of sexual power or switchblades. They were only, and simply, and *now* interested in the acquisition of wealth, and the status quo of the poor. Everybody knows that if the price is high enough, the racist will give you whatever you want.

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. Someday says you have no language, so you spend twenty 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, so you dredge that up. None of

that is necessary. There will always be one more thing. The distraction is no different from bombing Cambodia to keep the North Vietnamese from making their great 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. 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 artists, one can only say not to be confused. 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. And I urge you to be careful, for there is a deadly prison, a 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, when you don't have to do it anymore; you can go ahead and talk straight to me.

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 the silk cords of the racial apologists who want soft and delicate treatment for the poor victims is a very dim place. Where the will that you allow to be eroded, day by day, day by day by consistent assault of racists, then the will just settles into a tiny little heap of sand. Then you just have a second-rate existence, jammed with second-rate ideas. Racial ignorance is a prison from which there is no escape, because there are no doors.

There are old, old men and old, old women running institutions of government, 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. They are very easily identified; 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 stunted emotional growth consistently boggle the mind.

But the artist knows that we are human, and the artist knows if he is free, exactly what every three-year-old 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 flips a beetle over on his feet. There's not a race in the world that behaves as badly as preying mantises. We are the moral inhabitants of the globe, and to deny it is to lie in prison. Oh yes, there is cruelty, and cruelty, because it destroys the

perpetuator 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 is the mystery of the tree-shaped scar, and the canary that might sing on the crown of a skull. And unless all ages and all races 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]

[00:43:33]

ST. JOHN: We’re going to begin by... [...] with Susan and John and Lloyd, and then the floor will be open. We’re not going to begin with Susan and John and Lloyd, but we’ll begin by John and Susan [laughter] [off microphone and unintelligible]

JOHN CALLAHAN: I want to salute Toni Morrison for bearing witness so eloquently to the facts of American history, many of these facts which were denied in the textbooks, and also by suggesting that much of the work to be done assumes the error of some of these premises and assumptions, and assumes the commitment on the part of artists and scholars that equals the commitment on the part of people, ordinary people living their lives. I think that’s one of the things I want to talk about. I thought I was going second, so I really have to get into the improvising mode here, and see what I can do.

One of the things I want to talk about a little bit is the way I think that Toni Morrison achieves, in the lives of people and the lives of the folk, if you want, achieves some of the things that she was talking about tonight. Before I do that, though, I’d like to make a few comments about—I want to keep that watch facing me, so I don’t run over here—a few comments about the topic that Primus has given us tonight, and that is the unfinished American revolution. I want to cite a few things taking off from the context, the intellectual and historical and aesthetic context, and the really social context that Toni Morrison presented to us.

I suppose I want to begin by what I take to be one of the most important controversies on all levels, and in American history, and that is the controversy between Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison. I suppose I ought to shorthand this, because most of you know this stuff, at least as well if not better than I do. Douglass, as you know, escaped to the North. He escaped out of slavery, and his escape was very difficult; it was very individual. He had to do most of it himself. He wasn’t able to take advantage of stations on the Underground Railway, really, until he got to Philadelphia. He escaped and he went off and ended up in Massachusetts,

and worked in the abolitionist movement in Massachusetts, and met Garrison, for whom Douglass had enormous respect. I think in many ways their relationship typifies the kind of arrogance that Toni Morrison was talking about, that is, on the part of Garrison.

They wanted to use Frederick Douglass—the Northern abolitionists wanted to use him—they said, *We'll run you out and you can talk in the meetings, but we...* So Douglass did, and he was very eloquent, a very eloquent speaker. He was very interested in laying some conceptual groundwork about race, and about what kind of society this country should be moving toward. Well, Garrison and some of the others, but especially Garrison, didn't want Douglass to talk about that. He said, *Frederick, we have complaints from people that really don't think you were a slave. Your English is too good, and you're too eloquent, and you're just too damn smart. If you'd talk more about the whippings, and tell us more about what life was really about down there on the plantation, we'd really be happier, and you'd serve the cause better.* Well, again, as you know, Frederick Douglass said... it was a kind of variation in his day of Ellison's *Invisible Man's* realization, *I am what I am.* Douglass said, *No, I'm going to continue to do what I have to do,* and he did it.

Again, Douglass traveled to England, and got away from the abolitionist movement in the North of this country, and when he came back, he quar—he didn't quarrel with Garrison, but he differed with him on certain fundamental issues. This is what I want to do with the topic Primus has given us here, I want to bring my comments to bear on this notion of the unfinished American Revolution. Douglass wanted—he set up the North Star, I think it was in Rochester. He wanted to found his own paper. He thought there was a need for a Black person to write, and own, and control, and run his own, their own newspaper. So he did this, and Garrison didn't like it, of course, but that was all right. Garrison was willing to tolerate that. As you remember, Garrison's position was one of those kind of evangelical either/or, absolutist positions. He said that the American Constitution is a document that is really a document of the devil, and it's a document of damnation, and it ought to be a line that we all agree on that this Constitution is evil and we will have nothing to do with it. Well, Douglass—and this is one of the traditions, I think, that Black folks in this country have typified and really have given to us as a kind of example for what we have to do in this country. DuBois talked about it as “double consciousness,” Ellison talks about it as “invisibility,” and then the... the need to siphon off electricity from Conrad Edison to consolidate... in order to light up the heart of darkness. He does that in *Invisible Man*, as you know.

Anyway, Douglass said, Look, maybe we can use this document [the Constitution]. After all, it isn't completely closed. The founders did say you can have amendments. And they set up a procedure whereby you could make amendments to the Constitution. So Frederick Douglass

said, *I think Garrison's view is a dead-end view, and I'm going to talk about—I'm going to say that what we have to do is somehow convince enough people and obtain enough power so we can really turn this country around, and turn it around on its own terms.* Of course, that's what Douglass did. Well, Garrison wouldn't talk to him and wouldn't deal with him. And I think what that controversy is all about—of course, my own bias, and on every level in this particular controversy, is with Douglass, and it isn't even a matter of bias, because I don't have to make up my mind. All I have to do is look at the way that American history vindicated Frederick Douglass' view, look at what happened after the Civil War, the way the Constitution was amended, and then subverted again. We really ought to add some new amendments, and enforce the amendments that we have.

I think what this controversy is about is the refusal of Garrison, this white leader and white man of talent, to grant on his own turf, that is turf of thought, the turf and terrain of the intellectual; to grant, on that level, the fundamental equality which he was willing to grant in abstract terms. I think that's a fundamental question. Certainly, that's the issue that's at stake in the letter from the teacher at Cornell who—to DuBois or Clark, I'm getting confused with Hartford here, [...]—when he says, *Is it true that Black people are not able to cry?* and so on. I would develop this a little bit, I think, and I think that... one, I was thinking when Toni Morrison was talking of a reading list.

It seems to me that there is a tradition of heroic literature in this country, and I don't really think it's *Moby Dick* or even *The Scarlet Letter* or *Huckleberry Finn*. If you think about it, Ahab's dream is really to kill the whale, and annihilate and insult the very principle, so much as he can see it, the life principle of the universe. While it's an important novel, we have to come to grips with these questions. It's not really a vision I think we can do anything but disagree with and differ with, and contradict. *The Scarlet Letter*, of course, you have the Puritan community, and what they are about is punishing this woman for being a woman. That's not a vision that we are really very happy with. Now, there are other things going on in the novel, and I am trying to make a point that is somewhat rhetorical here. In *Huckleberry Finn*, the vision offered about community, about brotherhood and equality, is contradicted in the end, or at least fuzzed-over in the end, when you have the last line in the novel, "I guess I'd better light out for the territory ahead of the rest," and that means, of course, ahead of Jim. We don't really know what happens to Jim. He is a man who has passionately talked about joining up, about escaping from slavery so that he can go back and get his wife and children and get them free as well. That's fuzzed-over in the novel; that's not something which we return to. Instead, we return to the very adolescent American dream of the young man getting away from women and getting away from society, and going off to the frontier.

I think the problem with this, of course, is that these novels in the tradition of the American dream. I guess I would be happier if we stopped talking about the American dream, and left... There are universal patterns of dreams, but we usually dream alone, we don't dream in the company of other folks. We might, but not directly anyway. I guess I'd be in favor of saying, leave people's dreams to themselves, and we'll really talk about the principle. I think much of the best account of the principle that this country is based on is to be found in the writings of Black writers, Black people. Of course you have the heroic tradition in American literature that certainly has to do with the slave narrative. You read the three versions of Frederick Douglass' life and you are really talking about a man who is a heroic figure in the 19th century in this country. Part of that heroism lies in Douglass' generosity. I'll just say one particular thing about that in his encounters with Abraham Lincoln. One of the things that Douglass accomplished in his life was to play a major role in the transformation of Abraham Lincoln's mind and sensibility on the issue of race. I think that's a very major accomplishment. You read Lincoln's early stuff, and you read the accounts that Frederick Douglass has of his conversations with Abraham Lincoln, and finally you come to read Lincoln's second inaugural, where he begins to see race as a total human question, and he begins to have to make a commitment that is not simply political or military, but that's a total human commitment.

Then you have the anecdote, of course, that when Frederick Douglass goes to the reception for Lincoln at his second inaugural, and the guys try to rush him out—they bring him in and tell him—Douglass creates a stir, and finally they say, "We'll let you in," and they let him in and then they say, "This way, the President is here," and then they have him go out the door on these planks, they're refurbishing the White House and they say, "This is the door," and he goes out the door and they close it on him. He comes back in, and finally sees Lincoln, and they have an encounter which I think is an encounter between men who acknowledge each other as equals and who follow it out to the next step; who really do, in this encounter, as Douglass tells it, love each other. I think that is something that we find very often lacking in what Toni Morrison referred to as the mainstream. I'd add to that the mainstream of American literature.

I suppose what... well, let's see, I would... going to talk about Teddy Roosevelt, and maybe a couple of references, in a sort of development of what Toni Morrison was saying. I think she is correct, that if you think about the sensibilities and the personalities of these so-called great men in American history, that they really didn't believe either assumption. They didn't believe that all men were created equal; neither did they believe that white people were superior to Black people. I think that somehow they wavered, they didn't really know where they were at on these questions. I think that's a point that is very important. You see, for example, Jefferson exchanging letters with Bannacre, and the letters themselves testify to the issue. Or Teddy Roosevelt going up San Juan Hill, and he wouldn't have made it to the top, he would never have

lived to have the discussion that Toni Morrison refers to except for the Black folks on either side and in front of him on that expedition. We could talk about World War I and the achievements of the 369th-370th Regiment. We could talk about all of these things.

I guess what I'd like to close with is a few references to *Sula*. I think *Sula* is in the tradition of an American literature which recognizes that the major premise of the American dream is false. I think the major premise of the American dream is that life can be painless. I think that's why we have much of the difficulty and violence and oppression that we have had in this country. In *Sula*, of course, there is a reference very early—and it's one of those references that DuBois talks about, the veil—and I've found that metaphor, that reference, cropping up several times in *Sula*. One of the things about a novel like *Sula* and certainly like Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, like Ernest J. Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, these are novels which are as rich in tradition, I think richer than anything else in American literature. Their traditions are ones... they're very muted traditions, too, I think, that's the interesting thing. Toni Morrison doesn't feel that she's going to—she's not going to say, Now I'm going to use this veil, and I'd better mention DuBois when I use it—she just mentions it, slips it in there.

Early in the novel, there are a lot of facts and jokes about the bottom, in this town of Medallion. The voice of the novelist says that the valley men would hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain of these people. I think that's one of the things that this novel is about and one of the things that the novel does really brilliantly, and that is to involve everybody who reads it into a kind of total human context. A context which is really crafted in terms of race, very often, but which of course, as she suggested, gets down to the human bedrock, which exists with race, but which is also about other things which flow from race and ethnic realities.

I would want to say two more things about the novel. One of them, something that I am very interested in, the way that Toni Morrison deals with this notion of the American dream. She talks about it in terms of hope, and I guess I am much more comfortable with hope than I am with a dream. Hope is kind of a last stand. The next thing after hope is despair, so it's a modest expectation. She talks about these people in the town, and she says, "The same hope that kept them picking beans for other farmers kept them from finally leaving, as they talked of doing. Kept them knee-deep in other people's dirt, kept them excited about other people's wars, kept them solicitous of white people's children, kept them convinced that some magic government was going to lift them up, out and away from that dirt, those beans, those wars." Then she talks about the objective situation in the community, which really seemed to feed a certain kind of hope, seemed to encourage it. And that situation was a simple, ordinary situation that's repeated again and again in people's lives, and that was the tunnel or the bridge, the construction project in the community which people hoped would enable Black people to work,

make jobs for Black men and certain kinds of human recognitions would follow. Well, it doesn't, of course. The novel goes on to suggest "Their hooded eyes swept over the place where their hope had lain dead since 1927. There was the promised leaf, dead. The teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought, the rush-stuffed mattresses, the broken toilets, the leaning porches, the slurred remarks and the staggering childish malevolence of their employers. All there in blazing sunlit ice, rapidly becoming water." And the people go into the tunnel, and there's a combination of ice melting and so on, and many of them die in that tunnel. I think in some ways that's comparable to what Ellison does with the people who burn down the tenement at the end of *Invisible Man*. *Sula* is much starker about catastrophe, and the real possibility of catastrophe.

What strikes me about this is the way in which this particular dream, or if you want, the hope of people and their hope of community, is really expressed in the small things, which are the important things of people's lives, and not in anything which is really very abstract. In fact, another thing I admire about Toni Morrison's work is the very particular quality of it, the richness of the language, the natural simplicity of the language.

The last thing I would say, I hope it would bring together a few of the things I've been saying, and that is word about the ending. I'd like to read the last sentence of *Sula*, and suggest that there is a way in which Toni Morrison in this novel, like Ralph Ellison at the end of *Invisible Man*, and Ernest Gaines at the end of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, and also, I think, Alice Walker in the end of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, is saying something to us about the blues and really what every American can learn from the blues. It has to do with the capacity to absorb pain and survive, and not simply survive, but beautify one's own life. What I want to do is simply quote the last sentences of each of these novels. Remember, at the end of *Invisible Man*, the last sentence is, "Who knows but that on the lower frequencies I speak for you." In Gaines' novel, "Me and Robert looked at each other there a long time; then I went by him." And Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*: "O, you poor thing, you poor thing, he murmured finally, desolate, but also for the sound of a human voice, bending over to the ground and then rearing back, rocking himself in his own arms, to a final sleep." And finally, the end of *Sula*: "O Lord Sula, she cried, Girl, girl, girl, girl, girl. It was a fine cry, loud and long, but it had no bottom, and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow."

[unintelligible comments in background]

SUSAN KIRSHNER CALLAHAN: Well, I guess it's like the Army. [laughter] I guess as I understand it, Primus asked me... [microphone noise]

ST. JOHN: Why don't you just come over here...

[microphone noise]

CALLAHAN: I guess that Primus asked me to talk specifically about Toni Morrison's work and to respond to what she said as... I hesitate to say, as a woman. It's also impossible, because everything that Toni Morrison said is equally applicable to men as well as women. What I would like to do is to talk about one thing that interests most about what she said and also about the book *Sula*, which is that she warned not to be distracted. That racism is an enemy which distracts us from doing our work. It seems to me that that's an extremely valuable thing to know, and that it is also true that women tend to be distracted, particularly these days, from their work by similar, although not the same, ideas of being outside the mainstream of what the American dream is about. But what I would like to do is to go maybe to the novel *Sula* and to talk about a couple of the examples where Sula shows just how clearly she does not allow herself to be distracted.

One of the examples I'd like to look at is when she returns after ten years, and she's talking to Eva, her grandmother I guess... Grandmother, yes. And Eva is trying to tell her that she needs to settle down, that that's her problem, that she needs to have some babies, and it'll settle her down. And Sula's response is, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." I think that's a very important line. There's nothing that will distract Sula, whatever else you want to say about her. Then, later on, when she is dying, she talks to Nell, who has come to visit her and who is an old childhood friend and they have gone through a lot together. Just as Nell is leaving, and she's just told her that she won't return again, Sula whispers to her, not very loudly I guess, she says, about who was good. How do you know it was you? Nell has done the conventional thing: she married, she had children, she's been good in the conventional sense. Sula has been... I suppose the community comes to think of her as pure evil, and they are all sort of relieved when she dies. But here is Sula daring, while she is dying, she is daring the conventional to say about who was good, how you know it was you. I think that's really an incredible thing to say, because it indicates again just how much she refused to be distracted from who she was and what it was that her life was about.

Actually, I think I would just like to leave it there and turn it over to Lloyd.

LLOYD BAKER: Primarily, I don't have much of a statement to make; mostly I have a lot of questions to ask. Some I had formed before tonight and some listening to Toni's talk. One of the things I was thinking of, one of the questions I was considering was what... how does the Black artist, given the assumption that he has to be instrumental in making a change, how does

he go about making this change, given the circumstances that we are in? That we are controlled by whites, and historically we have been for years, as Toni mentioned in the talk. We don't have access to the media which is a great leveler, more or less. In trying to obtain access, we are going to run into the same problem, whereas the white power structure realizes what's... can see where we are coming from, more or less, before we get there. So that is one of the primary questions that I was entertaining, is how is a Black artist going to make the change over from... refocusing from Black cultural awareness to obtaining economic parity, assuming that's what you meant by... I'm not eliminating some of the rhetoric, and that sort of thing. [passing the microphone] Would you like to respond to questions.

MORRISON: There were several parts to your questions. I think you were asking about methods; how is it possible for Blacks to exercise control [BAKER interjecting: For Black artists.] ...for Black artists to exercise any influence and control, in spite of the fact that the media is controlled by white people, etc. I think there's a layer underneath your question of the assumption of what the media are, and what its influence is. One, there's a tendency to have an enormous awe for "it," as though it were some magic in television or a play or a book review. It really is of no consequence when it comes to doing important work.

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 because it was not tampered with by white people. It was not on the media. It was not anywhere except where Black people where, and it is one of the art forms in which Black people decided what was good in it, what was the best in it. Nobody told them. If you want to be a Black musician now, you have to do what the best have done. All of the mediocre musicians—Black—were blown off the stage, [...] and ridiculed by other Black musicians. So what surfaced is what floated to the top, was a giant, and the best. And it was done without the media, in spite of the control, etc., etc., etc. That is true of any art form that is a) not imitative, b) it does not seek to justify or explain anything; it talks... the Black artists must to what all the other artists do. Talk to each other.

I love Latin American literature. And Russian literature. It never occurred to me that Dostoyevsky was supposed to explain something to me. He is talking to other Russians about very specific things. But it says something very important to me, and was an enormous education for me. When Black writers write, they should write for me. There is very little literature that is 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 is talking to some white

people. He's explaining something to them. Leroi 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.

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. They are the ones to whom one speaks. Not to the *New York Times*, not 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." 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 its communication with the world at large.

I don't really care about that control. Life is short; freedom is in my mind. That's where one is free. There is 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. 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. That may be important, I don't know that. 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 economics, obviously, it works outside the realm of the artists also. When they build buildings that don't have Black construction workers and plumbers, then the building doesn't go up. You exercise control only when you assert control. I personally wouldn't ship my child twenty inches to attend an inferior white school because it looked better. But what I would do is sit in the hallway 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. We are responsible for our children. I am responsible for my children. If they go to a school, I am 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, they have always done that. It may seem as though the world began for Black people in this country since 1964, but it isn't 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. [laughter] Just as whenever there's a first-rate anything.

But the dependency on some magic media, some magic government, is hopeless, ridiculous, childish, and it's an affront. A total affront.

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 use 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, and people didn't even write letters. They said it by word of mouth and it took three months to get there. And those were really difficult times, really difficult times. 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 dollars a year, with that uniform on, and those epaulets, in 1950. After Washington desegregated itself, everybody 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.

Take a classic example, the Porter's Union. Did 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 and 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 could take place. So that white control doesn't have anything to do with it. That would be easy enough said and done if it were true that... you know, all popular music we have in this country stems from us. And what they were able to do was first imitate it, then buy shares in it, and then try to become it. The catalyst was not theirs.

So all of the things I have described, I not only believe are possible, I have seen it all of my life. And it is only distressing to me that it seems to have been forgotten.

ST. JOHN: At this point, I think I hear the audience coming to life... [...] I'm not attempting to discourage you at all, Lloyd, but I think your question has opened up what the panel was supposed to do, reactivity of the audience, and I wish people would at this time raise some questions, make comments, and [to Morrison] you can also get in those second, third, and

fourth questions in the process. OK, I have two hands here. First, Dr. Harris, then Rudy, and then after those two, I hope the right-hand side of the room also [...]

DR. HARRIS: In your opinion, Toni, what if any are the political responsibilities of the Black artist? To the Black community?

MORRISON: I'm not sure I know quite how to answer that question, although I understand the question perfectly. The first thing that 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 it's *Guernica* or *Anna Karenina*. It's all political. 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, workaday world. I do not subscribe to the theory that the artist is a sort of separate aesthetic being sitting in an ivory tower, sort of suffering and talking about beauty. It is work, it is hard work and there is a lot of it, and a lot needs to be done, but that's exactly what it is. It is not sitting under willow trees and being inspired, etc. [...] It has something to do with work. I am not sure that it is *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 is *better*. I'm not sure that I wouldn't be just as happy if I were capable—and I'm 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. If I want to make a chair, I have to find out about the wood, know all about my craft; I have to look at the human body, see how it looks when it's folded into a seated position, try to construct a chair that holds it, etc., try to make it beautiful and comfortable, and try to make it long-lasting. 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, [laughter] find out all you need to know about that, and then do your work.

And, nevertheless, as a human being, one has responsibilities to the community. Period. I don't care what you do, whether you make a chair or you make a book. It doesn't separate you. You know how it was in Africa, people would make beautiful sculpture, and they wouldn't even sign it. Wouldn't have anything to do with signing. They also had to raise a family and get the crops in. The marketplace separates art from the people. The marketplace does that. It makes an artist separate and special, and he's separate and special because a) he has a vision, which is all right 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 art emanated from the poor. Bands, theater, all of it started with poor people. In religious rites... what was it, Elizabethan England, and so... 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 Art and understand anything. So that separation is artificial, the separation of the artist from politics is an artificial one wholly dependent on finances. When you have huge collections that are bought up by the rich, and others that are not, and people making distinctions outside of the tradition of art. It's like 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. 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 it's inaccessible for the poor. But again, the poor people are the ones who take it out of the ground in the first place. The same thing is true, I feel, about art. That there are no political responsibilities and then artistic ones. They are all the same thing.

ST. JOHN: Rudy?

RUDY: In the beginning of your speech, or your talk, you spoke about the tremendous ignorance that has been [...] in this country since 1775 and [...] [noises on microphone] we are here in 1975. And you mentioned Richard Wright and how Richard Wright and also Leroi Jones often times did not speak to you, but he speaks to the white person behind you, and he's explaining something to that white person, and he is trying in his own way to make his ignorance less damaging to those around him. To, in some way... [Morrison interjects: Educate people.] ...sensibilities. And you said later that we should speak to each other, but then you were most impressed with Dostoyevsky because he spoke to the Russians, and that the Black artist should speak to the Black people. If the Black artist continues to speak to Black people, then what's going to happen to the ignorant Joe who [...] connect to us, and keeps hitting us over the head? We're talking to each other... I mean, what are we going to do with this fellow here? Ignore him? I mean, are we to hope, or what?

MORRISON: Well, I think that when Black artists speak to each other, all I said was 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 it changed the language a little bit. He used a different word, a different label, a different put-down, a different something else. 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.

So the question is, what do you do with him. 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 way to do it is not to explain

anything to him, but to make ourselves strong. To keep ourselves strong. Actually, the man next to me hitting me... I don't want to say "hitting me on the head." [laughing] You know, I have a bad habit, when I sometimes meet people who are incorrigible racists. [laughter from audience] I like to leave them that way. I never do anything to change their minds. I want them to stay just that way. Dumb. 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, or Z. I want him to stay just like that. Always. Well, of course, I am not recommending that at large, because some of those people are dangerous. Within positions of power, particularly, they are dangerous. But, two things are true. One, you can't consistently think of the power as a formidable power. It's really nothing. It really isn't anything at all. I really have to tell you that.

I don't know where your little sympathies are, but I was sort of 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-eye, whatever those little racial epithets were, 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." They never said, "But our language is beautiful; but our music is excellent..." They didn't say nothing. At all. They haven't said yet. I haven't heard them say it yet. "We're just as good as you are." They haven't said it yet. What they did was hang in there for thirty years. Thirty years, and they had a long, long view. It doesn't really matter whether they're equal or not equal, or anything. It doesn't matter. They didn't have to explain because that wasn't the problem! The problem was the land. They wanted the land back. And they worked for that, and they were willing to do anything, including meet their maker. They said, "We'll meet our maker."

There's this funny story about the Russians and the Chinese quarreling over a border. And the Russian said to the Chinese, to Mao, "That is ours, and we will keep it." And Mao says, "You may have it now, but we'll get it back. If it takes ten thousand years, we'll get it back." And the Russian laughed and said, "Isn't that a long time?" He said, "OK. Nine thousand. But we will get it back." It had nothing to do with his lifespan.

The man sitting next to me who is bothering me because he is a racist, or not because he is a racist but because he's in some way interfering, is troublesome. But I recommend to you something—and I very seldom do—it's 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 into the ground. They may not have liked her. They wouldn't do it to Sula, either, and they didn'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, and if you couldn't avoid it you'd have to deal with it, and more important than that, you triumphed over it. But it's in the world. It's in the world. And those people that I was talking about, are in the world; they're in the world. 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 little country is supposed to do without resources, they keep telling you if you live in the Caribbean, they have an industry. They make all those little things that everybody needs to [...], and they make everything up under the hood of a Dodge. So, therefore, they are necessary. And South Africa happens to need them. So they made them "honorary whites." [laughter from audience] In order to buy their products, and have them come into that country, they made them honorary whites. What happened to the racism? What happened to it? It doesn't mean a thing! It doesn't mean a thing. I'm not saying that, now and then, in a little 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 they're Irish people who would go into a profession, or Italians, or Indians, or Chinese people, whoever they 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've got to take somebody's land, you in trouble. And obviously, you know, the skilled people are already here. Right? The Black people have been doing all the work, making all the tools, and putting all the levies in, and making all the quilts, and farming, and organizing everything into a unit whereby we could execute a lot of work in agriculture and farming that had never been done in Europe, ever! They never worked that way in Europe, never. Nobody had. But they did. But then, come time for the Industrial Revolution, they passed a law, no Black people could work on the river. At any navigational post at all. And that ain't got nothing to do with racism; that has to do with somebody's job.

You see it now. In the recession that's going on, although I understand we'll be over with it in a year, but you see at that point the rise of scientific racism. [William] Shockley couldn't exist any other time. Racism didn't exist before the twelfth century. And it was rampant in the fifteenth century. You need it then, you needed it, they needed it then! People were not one thing or another; they came, there were Black Popes, Black everything. People weren't belonging 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 and they say... 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 they behaved like they had some sense. But as soon as they took over that country, they changed their costume. They put on a pith helmet, and little shorts, and hot ties and things, to emphasize the fact that they were different. That the sun was too much. Obviously, if you weren't one of the Indians and you put a little diaper on and you walk around, you will turn brown. And you'll be just like everybody

else. You eat the food, you get the diseases, you raise your children, so you'll be like everybody else. 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, but they're you. And you maintain your little separate this and your little separate that, and then the other people who are still—it's *their* country, thinks they're genetically, biologically, spiritually, racially different. You see what I mean? So you are different. And the differences are emphasized. And the women can't stand the sun, and they wear this, right? And the whole thrust has been bleaching out, bleaching out into nothingness, into, you know, blonds. Into absence. Into erasure. In order to emphasize the difference. Without differences, without differences you can love, you see?

And it's only useful in economic terms. You just cannot look a human being in the eye. I'll give you an example. I know I'm going on a little bit long, but I do that anyway. Here is an example. Mr. Callahan was talking a little bit 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, that was common practice. Because the mother—wet nurses were common. You nurse a child. In spite of the fact that in 1970, 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 this country. 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 did something her mistress didn't like, and the mistress sent the son into the woodshed to whip the slave. The son was about fourteen years old. He came in there with a whip to whip her, and she was doing something, and she stopped and she said, "But I nursed you. Don't you understand? I nursed you." And he didn't ever get the point, so she took the whip away from him and she beat him! The point is—she had to run, she left, she rode off out of town—but the point is, it is not possible for a fourteen-year-old 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. Female mothers, who can, somehow, spit at children, throw rocks at them... the children ain't doing nothing to them, right? They can turn over buses, they can burn 'em, they can kill those children. 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, 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 have a child, you can't do that! I can kill *you*. Under certain circumstances, I'm sure. But I physically, I can't do it, but they can. They would do it. 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*.

At which point I'll close on that note... did I answer your question? [laughter]

ST. JOHN: OK, I'm hoping there will be some questions from the right side of the room. I'm not forcing anybody on the right side of the room to ask a question, but...

AUDIENCE MEMBER [in background, indistinct]: Primus, I don't know how to ask this question, I'm not an artist... I don't know just what I am, but... I'm kind of mesmerized by the speaker, and maybe I missed the point. What was your definition, [...] of racism?

MORRISON: What is my definition of it? [unintelligible] [laughing] I'm scared to define it, I might leave out something. [audience member speaking in background] Ask your question, I'll think of a definition!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [off microphone, indistinct] I was very interested in years past in [...] and I was really active in [...] program here. I remember Toynbee's study of history, he said that in America, he saw the vision of the Black minister becoming very, very important. Because the Black minister believes us [...] And shortly afterwards, Martin Luther King [...] But shortly afterwards, we [...] activists on the part of the Black community [...] but from what you've said, do you feel that it might be the burden of the Blacks to not only educate whites by action, not necessarily words, against racism? Because I do not really feel that Black people are capable of turning over buses or being racists, I think the rhetoric deals with the economics of the matter, the struggle for power, those things which we lack a great deal. All of it. Every rhetoric deals with the main thing. Now, I suppose the question would be, do you see the Black artist, the Black people, because of the way we are, having significant things to say about the distraction, or do you think it's worthwhile?

MORRISON: About racism?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes.

MORRISON: You could... Yeah, going back to that part of your question about educating white people. We certainly, I suppose, could say a lot about it, and have said a lot about it. I don't think, however, that all the things that be done, that should be one of our burdens. I really

don't. I'm not... 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... you know, 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, for their well-being, that my children grow up among happy, well-fed Black children. Rather than unhappy, ill-fed, angry ones. I would prefer that my children be in a world in which everybody had access to... [...] to pursue, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I would want it so much for my children, 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... I wouldn't be so greedy that I had to take it away from that group in order that I have more, and there he 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. It's not good *for me* to be surrounded by those people who hate me. I'd do it for that reason! So they know that. They've got to 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 a white friend's work come together as the same work. In historical terms, it happened a little bit in the sixties when it was assumed to be everybody's work. It ain't that way, it's not that way anymore I don't think, except in certain places. But you have to, you 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. It really is. To me, it just happens to be also more interesting. It's just more challenging and more interesting. Morals aside, the thrust to be good or civilized or responsible 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. It stimulates me more.

But even apart from that, as I say, I am not suggesting some sort of separate world in which the Blacks are going to be doing their own business and whites are going to be... but I am saying that in terms of what the job is to be done, there are different things to be done, for different reasons and different psychologies that one is working with. Different psychologies. So that different approaches, different methods, different solutions... and it ends up, perhaps, if the world works out the way it would if I were running it, that the two things do come together and there's a final merging of interests. These are human beings on the planet! All of us, 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. You're already born, there ain't nothing you can do about that! You're going to die, you know you are. You've got a little bit of time. You've got some dragons to slay, pick the ones you want to slay. Make it worthwhile. Make it worthwhile. Somebody's going to ask you one of these days, "What did you do?" What are you going to tell them? You bought a car?

You have to do something! And if you have to something, you might as well do the best thing. There's 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. [laughter]

ST. JOHN: Could we maybe have one final question [...] could we just have one final question here? Do you have a question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER [off microphone, indistinct]: Just... you made a few comments about music. How do Black artists exercise control over something like that that they create, when they are controlled by white record companies?

MORRISON: Their lives—maybe their economics—but they ain't controlled by nobody. That's true that a lot of Black people don't own their music and so on, and some of them do [...] that's changing a lot, I mean, you know. All the music from *Ironsides* and all that is done by Black people. All of it, music everywhere. But the point is that, it's true that some have a Black radio station and Black this and Black that. That's not ownership. You can't own nobody's spirit, nobody's creativity, nobody's work. It's nice if you, right, you [...] own it, buy it, Duke Ellington did it and he earned 70,000 dollars a month. A *month*, because he owned his own music and didn't sell it to anybody. 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. It used to be very few people could even play it, let alone own it. They couldn't even make the sounds. That's the control. You don't believe it, stop it. Don't play nothing. At all. And you'll see who owns what. You ain't got to work for no record company. You don't have to do nothing.

If you really want to [laughing] control something that you *know* you own, destroy it! Just don't do it. If it's a really big money making operation you'll get some of it. You know, you don't like the show, walk off. They need you, you'll come back, they'll get you back, they'll give you what you want. Give you what you want. More of 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.

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 those 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 at Columbia went down, uptown to Harlem and sat in the tenement houses, and said that

Columbia University is going to tear down the poor people's houses and build, wouldn't you know it, a social studies building. [laughter] So they could study the poor people, that's why they took the houses and threw them out, they gonna study them. So the white students from Columbia came down and sat there and said no, you're not going to tear it down, and the Black people came out and said no, you're not going to [...] That's very scary business. When everybody put down the stupidity and found out what was going on, and when that happened, everybody got busy and blew 'em off the face of the earth, sent 'em off into the hills to *commune* and take drugs and whatever else you're doing when you ain't doing nothing. They *bought* that revolution up, put it on television. But that's scary, when the people discover who they are. I tell you, the messenger, Elijah Muhammad, said one thing. I don't know much, but he said one thing I remember all my days. He said, if you knew who you were, you would get up off your knees. 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. 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... look at the sports, they do it all the time. "I don't want to play... for the Jets. I want to 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 them no. Absolutely not. When they tell me at Random House I have to do it one way, I say no. You do it yourself.

[applause]

[program ends]