



**ANGELA DAVIS AND TONI MORRISON**

**October 27, 2010**

**LIVE from the New York Public Library**

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**Celeste Bartos Forum**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Good evening, good evening, good evening. This is marvelous. This is marvelous. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. As you all know, my goal here at the New York Public Library is quite simple. It is to make the lions roar, it is to make a heavy institution dance, and when I am successful to make it levitate.

I would like to quickly tell you some of the programs coming up this season. I asked my designer to give me a new menu, and he took the words quite literally, so you might want

to look at the menu. If you like tacos, you'll come and hear Edwidge Danticat; steak, Lady Antonia Fraser and Oskar Eustis; wine, Zadie Smith; cupcakes, Jay-Z, who I will be interviewing together with Cornel West; bananas, Keith Richards. When is that? Look at your program, look at your program, now you'll see it! Keith Richards, I have to tell you, sold out in forty-two seconds, so there are no more tickets available to that. I would like to encourage all of you, so that we can be in business tomorrow, to become Friends of the New York Public Library. For just forty dollars a year, which is a pretty cheap date, you will get discounts on all LIVE tickets and much more. Tonight's program is being telecast in real time by fora.tv, so anyone can be live for the conversation by tuning in online.

Now, Toni Morrison has been the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature **(applause)**, the Pulitzer Prize—that seems little compared to that—and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her novels include *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*, and *Love*. She is the Robert F. Goheen Professor of Humanities Emeritus at Princeton University, my alma mater. She's also on the board of trustees of the New York Public library, a lifetime board member, and it is always a pleasure and a great honor to have her here at the New York Public Library and again, back again tonight for the second time, LIVE from the New York Public Library. Toni Morrison.

**(applause)**

Through her activism and her scholarship over the decades, Angela Davis has been deeply involved in our nation's quest for social justice. In recent years a persistent theme of her work has been the range of social problems associated with incarceration and the generalized criminalization of those communities that are most affected by poverty and racial discrimination. She draws upon her own experiences in the early seventies as a person who spent eighteen months in jail and on trial after being placed on the FBI Ten Most Wanted list. She has also conducted extensive research on numerous issues related to race, gender, and imprisonment. Her most recent books are *Abolition Democracy* and *Are Prisons Obsolete?* about the abolition of the prison-industrial complex, and a new edition of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Having helped to popularize the notion of the prison-industrial complex, she now urges her audiences to think seriously about the future possibility of a world of prisons and to help forge a twenty-first-century abolitionist movement.

**(applause)**

I would like to give a big shout-out to City Lights, a truly independent bookstore, and most particularly a warm thank-you to Greg Ruggiero for helping make the connection and making this night become a reality. **(applause)** So thank you Greg, very much, and I would also like to thank our independent bookseller, 192 Books, for selling Angela Davis's as well as Toni Morrison's book, thank you very much. They will sign books after the event. And here is to the independent bookstores all around the United States. A big round of applause.

**(applause)**

City Lights' vision when publishing a new critical edition of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* featuring Angela Davis's lectures on liberation was to introduce a new generation of young people and educators to the abolitionist version of democracy that Douglass and Davis have dedicated their lives to. It is their dream that Angela's edition of Narrative be taught in schools as a step towards a model of liberation and democracy that is fully conscious of the nightmare of U.S. history but is based on the ideal of our library system, dedicated to creating a better world by advancing literacy, advocating self-empowerment, knowledge, and equal access to all irrespective of race, class, gender, or resident status. In the mid-nineteenth century, Victor Hugo wrote "Ouvrir une école, c'est fermer une prison," "to open a school is to close a prison."

**(applause)** And when I invited Keith Richards to come to the library I did so because Keith Richards states that when he was a child he wanted to become a librarian. His past may have erred a little bit from that path, slightly. He says that when he grew up there were two institutions that mattered to him: "the church, which belongs to God and the public library, which belongs to the people. The public library is the great equalizer."

Angela Davis and Toni Morrison are old friends. I don't know when they last shared a stage. Perhaps they will tell us. I do know, though, that this is the fortieth anniversary, this month, of Angela Davis's arrest in New York, a story which is described in Angela

Davis's autobiography, which Toni Morrison edited. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome warmly to the stage, as you have already, Toni Morrison and Angela Davis.

**(applause)**

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Good evening.

**TONI MORRISON:** Good evening.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Hi, Toni.

**TONI MORRISON:** Hi, Angela. I'm sorry about that entrance. I wasn't doing it for theatrics, but I do have a brand-new, spanking-new hip. **(applause)** I love it, I love it, I love it. But the rest of the body hasn't caught up yet, **(laughter)** so we go slow. So nobody's moderating us.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** No, we're just talking.

**TONI MORRISON:** We're just talking, ooh.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** We're talking about Douglass, libraries—

**TONI MORRISON:** Literacy—

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Literacy and liberation.

**TONI MORRISON:** Yes, absolutely. Let me start with literacy. Because I have this document here which I want, you know, other people to know about it. We'll read it. I'm interested, obviously, in literacy. I am impressed with what I've only recently discovered, which was that this country is unique in the world in terms of the distribution of libraries throughout the country. You cannot go in rural areas in Europe or in Africa or in Asia, rural areas and find libraries the way you can here, every little town, not to speak of the huge university libraries that just jump up out of nowhere in Indiana, or someplace. In Pennsylvania you go for a hundred miles and there it is, you know, this enormous university, with more books actually than Cambridge or the libraries in Rome, so it's really an extraordinary thing.

The other thing is about literacy which I'm sort of interested in which is on one hand the power of reading and of course understanding the meaning of what one reads and what I like to think of as visual literacy, visual literacy, which in addition to print or maybe without print, what do people who are literally illiterate do to negotiate around the world, minus people who they depend on? And I don't mean just uneducated people, I mean people like myself, say, in Beijing, and I don't read the language, I don't understand it. How do you negotiate and what are the visual signs that you need to travel? What are the colors, the shapes, the sounds, smells, all the other senses, and it makes for—if you have that plus the ability to read—you have this third dimension, an artist's true dimension of

how to read your world as well as how to read texts, and I wanted to begin, because I wanted to describe—I don't know—the explosive, the perception of reading, particularly certain kinds of novels, as not just explosive in a dangerous sense, but explosive in a way that could be lethal.

And my documentation for this, Angela, is this thing that Paul made me bring from my house in my guest bathroom, **(laughter)** you know, downstairs by the front door, that one, over the sink there's a letter asking me would I be willing to come and receive the Nobel Prize for Literature and write a speech. On the opposite end, over the toilet, is this.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I know, I said, "I've seen this many times," I was in your bathroom, Toni.

**TONI MORRISON:** Well, what it is it was sent to me by an editor from Knopf. The title is the "Publication Denial Notification." **(laughter)** The title of the publication is *Paradise* by me. "The above publication has been reviewed and denied in accordance with section 3.9 of the TDC rules and regulations for the reasons checked below." Now, there are five reasons why a book would be banned from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. **(laughter)** The first reason is "the publication contains contraband." The second one is "the publication contains information regarding the manufacture of explosives, weapons, or drugs." The fourth one is "a specific factual determination has been made that the publication is detrimental to prisoners' rehabilitation because it would encourage deviant criminal sexual behavior." And the last one, "publication contains

material on the setting up and operation of criminal schemes or how to avoid detection of criminal schemes by lawful authorities charged with the responsibility for detecting such illegal activity.”

And I skipped the third one because that’s the one that *Paradise* is accused of.

“Publication contains material that a reasonable person would construe as written solely for the purpose of communicating information designed to achieve a breakdown.”

**(laughter)** Not just your average breakdown, but a breakdown of prisons through inmate disruption, such as strikes or riots. This is February 20, right after my birthday, 1998. I was amused to get this but I was also thrilled. It seemed like an extraordinary compliment **(laughter/applause)** that *Paradise* could actually blow up into a riot in a prison. So I thought that in addition to my inquiry about expanding literacy to visual literacy as well as print I wanted to make some connection between prisons, their organization, their prohibition, and what they understand to be lethal or dangerous, like reading, like literacy, like understanding.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I actually wanted to begin on that theme by talking a bit about the inaccessibility of libraries, and I’m thinking about my own childhood, when I saw this incredible building in Birmingham, Alabama, made out of Indiana limestone. It was the Birmingham Public Library, but of course it was only for white peoples. The one black library that existed was run-down, very few books, and I tell this story because I first entered the doors of *this* library in 1959, and I can remember how it felt to actually walk



into a real library, because although I had used the library in Birmingham, it was very lacking in resources. It was broken down. Finally they built a new one.

**TONI MORRISON:** Years later.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Yeah, many, many years later. So I think that as we talk about the democratic impulse of libraries and the accessibility of libraries it's also important to talk about those places where books have a hard time penetrating. And your example of the Texas State Correctional System is one. Just before the event, I had an opportunity to look at some of the items from the archival collections here, and I saw—I saw a wonderful collection of a periodical that was actually published by prisoners at Rikers Island from I think 1939 to 1940-something, and I was thinking about, you know, what was required in order to be able to do that. This is, for those of you who don't remember, a period when we didn't have Xeroxing or, I looked at it and I said, "This was mimeographed," I think—is that the word, mimeograph? And the prisoners who put this together, and the books that they had to read in order to put this literary publication together was quite astounding, so I really like to thank the librarians for allowing me to see these documents.

And I also had a brief conversation with—the head of the correctional—Nicholas, Nicholas, that's right, you were there, too, Nicholas, who coordinates relations between the New York Public Library and Rikers Island and the women's and the men's detention facility there, so I was actually telling him about my experience in the Women's House of

Detention here in New York—I'm having all of these New York memories. **(laughter)** I was in jail in New York—I don't know, did you mention that I was in jail? Some people don't know. And one of the first places I went, I was able to go, in the jail was the library, and I didn't see very many interesting books there, all right? I mean, I had just finished my studies in philosophy, and I went to the library expecting something very different, so what I did was I had people send books to me when I was there, and I wanted to share those books with all of the other women, there was something like a thousand women there. I was not allowed to do that. As a matter of fact, in the library there was a big cardboard box.

**TONI MORRISON:** You could receive the books.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I could receive the books and I could read the books myself. It was okay for me read them, but don't share them. And one of them was George Jackson's book, *Soledad Brothers*, that was not allowed at all, although we did—you know, one of the things I learned when I was in jail there was how to secrete certain kinds of things, so we were able to—so we had these clandestine reading groups with books that were smuggled out of that box in the library, and it kind of reminded me of Frederick Douglass and Frederick Douglass's effort to get an education, to learn how to read, and his idea that education really was liberation.

**TONI MORRISON:** Absolutely. That scene, I'm sure people who have read the autobiography, of the master saying, "don't teach him," and the mistress wanting to, but

being afraid to, but he uses an interesting phrase of describing her, which was “irresponsible power,” and I thought that’s, it’s just not having the power, it’s the irresponsibility of how you manage it. And his hunger was overwhelming, cause he knew, as we all know, that that was freedom, and the people who did not want blacks to read knew that. I mean, that’s why, you know. If it had been simple fairy stories, it would have been quite different. Not even that, there is power, if you can’t read in a place like that they can teach you and beat you and the other route is extraordinary. The things people suffered in order to read.

I remember in trying to figure this out within a novel I wrote, *A Mercy*, how would that child learn to read? Well, she was in Maryland, which was a state Charles bought, King Charles, as a haven for the Catholics, who were being beaten up and and killed and persecuted during the Restoration in England. The Catholics had a different idea about the soul of black people than Protestants, some Protestants did, and not that the consequences were terribly thrilling, but they just sort of reshaped the definition of who is a human being and who was the other so that priests would frequently defy the Virginians, for example, who were Church of England people, and teach people to read, slaves to read, children to read, not that they wanted them to read the bible but just so that they could do the catechism and perhaps read some religious tracts, so there was that kind of priest in addition to other kinds which would not teach you to read, but there were exceptions in the way in which they interpreted enslaved people, and I also wanted to emphasize in that book I wanted to separate race from slavery, it wasn’t really the same thing.

We assume all slaves were black and that does not reflect truth. They called white slaves “indentured servants” in order to get them legitimate, they weren’t chattel slavery, although they functioned that way. If you had an indentured servant, you could extend their contract forever, any little infraction, you could add another seven years, and if they dropped dead and happened to have children, you could use the child to pay off the debt, and there were many instances in which white indentured human beings worked right alongside black slaves on plantations, and I always remark on this one incident in that book and what I learned was this thing called Bacon’s Rebellion, when this group was called the People’s Army, some landed gentry, some indentured servants, some black slaves, and some Native Americans, indigenous people, all, you know, got together and deposed the governor of Virginia. They ran things for a month, they weren’t so nice themselves, but still—I don’t want you to think they were this noble group going forth, they were just another group. Anyway, when the governor returned from England, they killed them all, but the interesting thing is they established these laws. And the laws were very, very interesting. They said things like “no black shall be allowed to carry a weapon, ever.” Second, “any white can maim or kill any black for any reason without being charged.”

Now you see what that did to the indentured servants who were white. Now, they’re better, freer, more powerful. They’re in the same situation, they’re still enslaved but they’re not. They can carry weapons and they can beat up black slaves without punishment. So they have this little margin of status, nothing else, nothing else but that

little margin, and that little margin has worked its way through this country since then. That was in the seventeenth century. And you know the Southern strategy, you know all these things in which you, you know, flag race and racism as a cause, or even a goal, you know, racism is not a goal, it's a path, it's just a route to power and money. That's what it is, that's what it's for. Whether it's via war or segregation, what have you, the thing itself is just a manipulation, and a tool, and its purpose is what I just described that went on after the Bacon Rebellion. How'd I get there?

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Well, you know, I was thinking as you were describing, when you were describing the conditions then, you were talking about *A Mercy*.

**TONI MORRISON:** That's how I got there.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I was thinking about you know Frederick Douglass's another passage in the narrative where he kept hearing this word abolition, and he didn't know what it meant, and he heard about the abolitionists, but he had no idea what it meant and he said that at some point he realized that it was connected to something that he really oughtta be interested in. **(laughter)** And then eventually—he describes this painstaking process of learning, you know, learning how to write—learning how to read and learning how to write by looking at the markings that were placed on the boards to be used to build ships, so one would say something is forward, starboard, “f,” “s,” and then he learned those letters, “f,” “s,” as a result.

**TONI MORRISON:** Right, it's amazing.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** And then of course he talks about bribing the white boys to teach him how to read and write. He says at once point he dares a white boy who was around to prove that he could write better than Frederick Douglass himself could. Now, Frederick Douglass really didn't know how to write that much, so the white boy could write a lot more, so in the process he learns what the white boy was writing. So but the point that I was making about hearing this word and knowing there was something about this word that was so important, but he had no idea what it meant.

**TONI MORRISON:** But he was attracted to it. He knew it was important.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Abolition. Abolitionists.

**TONI MORRISON:** Sounds like—sounds important.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** And then of course he becomes the most powerful abolitionist of the era. But that kind of curiosity that really is only possible through a process of education. You know, where, which is not to say that people who don't know how to read and write don't have that curiosity but learning how to read and write opens up a whole new universe, opens up a whole new dimension, and this is why these Texas people did not want the prisoners to read. Yes, exactly.

**TONI MORRISON:** But why *Paradise*, I mean, really.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** And then you know when you consider that there are now 2.5 million people behind bars, and what can they really do, what can they do that's significant? You know, reading and writing really allows for the possibility of inhabiting a very different world.

**TONI MORRISON:** But the control of those 2.5 million people—I don't know about all—but it's such a profit-making thing now. I mean, you have whole cities, I know in Upstate New York, that are living off the benefits of a brand-new prison, employment of the guards, the cooks, you know, all the paraphernalia that goes with imprisonment. I don't know how they—Oh, I read about somebody in one of those prisons in Texas, privately owned prisons where the prisoners get out and owe money.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** When the prisoners get out they get no—

**TONI MORRISON:** They owe.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** They owe money, yeah, because they have to pay for their own room and board.

**TONI MORRISON:** Right. They're in college.

**(laughter)**

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Yeah, it's just like the students, right?

**TONI MORRISON:** Room and board, you get out and have this bill, if your family can't pay, not only have you paid in time for whatever, and then of course the kinds of laws that are, you know, heavily weighted in certain communities for minor offenses and so on, not to speak of. But I was interested in your book because I'm not sure I understand fully that separation—well, that's not, well, the implication is that there's a difference, well, there is a difference between vengeance and justice. But justice itself has some unpleasant consequences. We have to assume that if we want justice for some bad activity by a bad person we want punishment, we want restraint, we don't want rehabilitation, and that assumes that there is something called "the other," there is a stranger, that your neighbor or the criminal, the so-called criminal, is some other thing, is an other.

Now, I was thinking along those lines when I was trying to figure out another area that is of great interest to me and has always been, but I have never had the patience or maybe the intelligence or maybe the research to kind of follow it through, which is what the impact of torture, enslavement, and violence has on the birth rate. Therapists don't seem to be terribly interested in that, but when I mention the other possibility, it seems to me that when you destroy somebody through vengeance and/or severe forms of justice that



the real object of the pain really is the self. Don't have to go there with me, but you're really—that's why it's so—the menace is so mundane in a way.

So I'm thinking about these slave owners. I'm thinking about say, women in slave quarters, who were pregnant, lying on the ground, and they'd make a hole for her stomach, or any other, you know, sort of savage response that even the one that Frederick Douglass speaks of. It's very clear in his case when he finally confronts that Covey. Who is Covey fighting? He's destroying something that is in himself. It's not that that person is animal or soulless or inferior. If you're strong enough, you know, it's the fragile personality, the fragile personality, not the strong one, but the fragile, almost erasable personality that can do that. Because there's already the self-contempt and the self-loathing, and it's in that area that I, well—well, I couldn't say I'm working—but I'm just looking at these various forms, it's so easy—racism obviously is the easiest thing you can do. It's so easy to block off those so-called criminals, and they're away from us, they're not with us. We don't even have to be tolerant, because they're over there, but if they're us. If we're doing that in order to corral a certain kind of behavior whether it's scaled as high or low in order to redeem something in ourselves, that's a whole different operation, entirely different.

So I want—I've read a couple, two, diaries, appended diaries, not these sort of little what “let me tell my grandchildren what to think of me”—of slave owners when they're not showing off, they're just marking how many barrels, writing up and down sequences and so on, and it's really interesting because they're not cruel. I mean they do cruel things,

but they're not cruel people but what they obviously are doing is working out some relationship that is so damaging to them, really damaging, it's really a form of self-destruction, it's a powerful form of self-destruction that I don't care how big the spectacle, you know, whether it's Germany in the thirties or forties, it's still a spectacle, and it is about one's own self-loathing and fragility that you need that spectacle. Well, that's my lecture for today.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I've had a number of thoughts.

**TONI MORRISON:** Oh, you have, good.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** One of them I want to put in parentheses, because I want us to come back to it and that relates to something that you said earlier about the profitability of punishment, but I want us to think about the privatization of libraries.

**TONI MORRISON:** I beg your pardon?

**(laughter)**

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Well, you know, just as we have experienced over the last several decades the privatization of health care, we are witnessing the privatization of education, and I won't talk about *Looking for Superman*, or *Waiting for Superman* or whatever it's called. The privatization of prisons, but there is a now a company called Library

Services—Library Systems and Services that is taking over libraries in some communities. California, for example.

**TONI MORRISON:** Who pays for that? How do they make money?

**ANGELA DAVIS:** They make money—they make money because they hire nonunion staff. They either don't allow the employees to continue to be members of the union or else they hire entirely a new staff, and they probably also cut back on services, because the only reason for such a company existing is its profitability.

**TONI MORRISON:** But what about a person who wants to go and borrow a book? Do I have to pay a fee for joining a library yet, or haven't they thought that up yet?

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Well, not yet. But who knows what will happen in the future? And it's very dangerous, the privatization of everything is what we're in the process of witnessing, but that is what I said I wanted to put in parenthesis. The other comment I wanted to make is the fact that—I've been looking at the work of this woman from New York, NY, her name is Fay Honey Knopp, she was a Quaker and helped to publish a book in 1976 which was called *Instead of Prisons: An Abolitionist's Handbook*. So she was one of the key figures in the prison abolitionist movement in the seventies. She was a Quaker who had also been involved in the antiwar movement and I just saw, there's a film with Yuri Kochiyama called *Mountains that Take Wing*, some of my students are here from Syracuse, they saw it, and apparently. And Yuri Kochiyama of course was

the—is an amazing activist, Japanese American activist, who was in an internment camp and she lived in Harlem for many years and met Malcolm X and was responsible for introducing the survivors of Hiroshima to Malcolm and as a matter of fact she was in the Audubon Ballroom when Malcolm was assassinated, and there's this incredible photograph of her leaning over Malcolm's body. That's Yuri Kochiyama.

The woman I've talking about is Fay Honey Knopp whose daughter told me the other day that her mother Fay Honey Knopp worked with the same group of survivors of Hiroshima that Yuri Kochiyama introduced to Malcolm X. K-N-O-P-P, not like Alfred.

**TONI MORRISON:** I was thinking of Alfred.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Well, the point that I want to make is that she came to the conclusion after doing all of this work on prison abolition that the only way she would and the whole movement would be able to move in a progressive direction would be to demonstrate that it was possible to address some of the horrendous problems that imprisonment presumes to address, so she started to work with child sex abusers, and she spent the rest of her life, you know, working with these mostly men who had sexually abused children because she felt that they had to answer the hardest question and she also felt that if we continued to be incapable of confronting those horrendous acts of violence that human beings inflict on each other, that it would never be possible to get rid of the prison because what we do now is we say that when someone commits such a horrible act, put them in prison where

we don't have to think about them anymore. We don't have to think about the perpetrators, and we also don't have to think about the problem.

And it continues to replicate itself, so in a sense addressing it in that way has guaranteed that there would be this reproduction of the problem from one generation to the next and you were talking about the diaries of slave holders, of people who committed horrendous acts, who weren't necessarily—. Somebody has a cell phone that's ringing. We'll wait. Good. And so, and you were saying that they weren't necessarily evil people, they committed evil acts, and I think this is something we have a hard time recognizing today.

**TONI MORRISON:** Somebody calls it a case of mistaken identity. Who was that who said that suicide is a case of mistaken identity?

**ANGELA DAVIS:** That suicide is a case of mistaken identity. I see. I see. Because you really meant to kill somebody else, you don't recognize yourself.

**TONI MORRISON:** You don't know who you are. So it may be the same thing, you know, in a nutshell, in a theatrical way, when we put that aside we don't have to address the problem anymore, that the activity, whatever the behavior is, is somehow beyond the pale, it's not us, because I'm getting a little weary with that notion of the foreigner, I did a whole thing at the Louvrew, that whole thing that it's all the foreigners' fault. The foreigner is home.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** At the Louvre in Paris.

**TONI MORRISON:** This is his home. He owns his home, because a lot of foreigners. In Africa, they were treated like foreigners, right? I mean, that's what colonization is. You become a foreigner in your own home, and certainly it's true with African Americans who were besieged, many, many of them, people who came here.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** And Native Americans have been demonized.

**TONI MORRISON:** The foreigner's own home or the foreigner is home, but the notion of the foreigner is not just linguistic or geographical or community, it really is a kind of severance, deliberate maybe for status maybe just because of another group that is not—doesn't have the advantages you do. One of the reasons, back to this last completed work of mine about *A Mercy*, is I know, as everyone does, that no one in the world is born with those attitudes and prejudices—no one. You can learn them early as long as you're taught in an environment in which such ideas can flower. But it's not in your DNA, it's not natural, it can become environmentally, you know, necessary or, you know, live in a certain world in which there is none or there is.

Okay, that innocence of a human being I wanted to compare with the—you know, this romantic notion of the “innocent American.” Americans are always innocent, you ever notice that? There are hundreds of books, *The Innocent American*, *The Innocent Abroad*, so I want to go back before the institutionalization to see whether, you know, these were

people who were leaving Europe who needed money or resources or they were scared to death. I mean, you had to have a lot of something horrible going on to risk two to three months in some raggedy ship, I mean, most of those things sank, crowded aboard, you were down there with the animals, that's who they were really shipping, there were cows and pigs and things and few human beings next to them and you would come to this country with probably nothing, and it was bountiful, it's certainly that, but what were they running from? Usually religion or poverty. But the point was that they did not come over here—I mean, Italians who came over to this country were not Italians after a while. They were white.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** But it took a long time.

**TONI MORRISON:** It took a long time, you're right.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** It took a long process of becoming white.

**TONI MORRISON:** It is a process, you can't just—ufff!—and become this, you see, but I wanted to get back to that notion, this country, particularly with the political flavor and poison now, to look at what it was like then, when every country wanted a piece of this place. I mean, we could be speaking Dutch now or Spanish. Did you know there was a Swedish empire? I didn't. I mean, they were all in here, doing what they did, you know, obviously in Africa, taking little bits to claiming this. Towns' names changed every five years, somebody else would say, it's not "Neu York, it's this." "It's not this, it's that."

They changed names constantly. That was the big thing, but the people who were settling here who were really refugees came here with some other ideas, so what made this outrageous, the necessity for the level of enslavement and racism in this country was what I said, money and profit.

I mean, this country entered the Industrial Revolution like in I don't know three decades. Other countries took a century. This country took three decades. Why? Because they had slave labor. Instantly. You don't have to pay them, you don't have to do anything, just feed them and corral them, and then look at someplace where they were making sugar in Cuba, and the people were dropping, they kept bringing slaves over, bringing slaves over. Cuba's a little island. Why did they need so many, you get, I don't know, a thousand slaves to cut sugar, two thousand, why were they keeping? And then I learned they were dropping dead, they died so fast.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** One dies, you get another.

**TONI MORRISON:** That's right, you just replenish them, they'd hold you another year or two. They tried to get younger and younger ones who might live four years, so you're replenishing them like putting coal into a furnace. So that all of this is my trying to figure out not just the consequences of race, which I did in the first book I wrote, but other things around it, since it seems to have a hole, you have to be ferociously against it, or apologetic about it or the victim of it or the perpetrator of it and I just wanted to get rid of that discourse which doesn't go anywhere, and find out what the origins are, what its



purpose is, not just the scapegoat purpose, but it has a real function, which is power and control, and money, that's what it's for.

It's not something that oh, yeah, this group of people are like this, I mean we all know that's ridiculous, and that's why the phrase, "One of my best friends is . . ." because we all know one who's not quite like that and that's part of the staple, you know, I'm not really, but there's something in the diet, the intellectual diet and the ignorance, you know, of well-meaning people in even their own work, and I was serious when I said I don't understand why therapists ignore it, or ignore it the way they do. That's a powerful thing, you know, in the mind. Angela's experience in the library, and somebody else was talking about having difficulty going into a library.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I think it was Alice Walker.

**TONI MORRISON:** That she just could not because—

**ANGELA DAVIS:** She said that she finds it difficult to enter into libraries today. I was so hungry for the experience of the library that I never experienced that difficulty, and I haunted libraries all over the world for a very long time. But Toni—

**TONI MORRISON:** I thought they were my home. My first decent job other than scrubbing somebody's floors at twelve was to be a page in the library, which I got because my sister was secretary to the head librarian. So she brought me in and they

quickly—they didn't fire me, because I was very slow, I mean, you'd read the books, put them on the shelves, so they moved me to another department.

**(laughter)**

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Toni, before you move on, I have a response that I want to share, because I always love listening to you talk and I could, but I realize that I'm also here to participate in the conversation **(laughter)** so I can't just sit back like I usually do and absorb, you know, all of your brilliance, but this summer I was in Colombia, as a matter of fact in September, Colombia, and visited a community of people outside of Cali who live in this mountainous area, Afro-descended people, people whose ancestors were enslaved four hundred years ago, who were brought to Colombia to engage in gold mining and they still live in the place where their ancestors settled when they escaped slavery, so it was initially a fugitive slave settlement, like a Maroon settlement, and the people who live there now live on the same land and do the same work that their ancestors did four hundred years ago. They still mine gold in this very different way. The women are miners and the children are miners, and the women talk about mining in this incredibly passionate way.

**TONI MORRISON:** What do the guys do?

**ANGELA DAVIS:** The guys mine, too. **(laughter)** They all mine, but I mean it's interesting that the women say, "I've been a miner since I was in my mother's womb." So

the point that I am making is that now, even though they actually own the land. They were able to get the title to the land, but not to what's in the land, the subsoil, the minerals, and there are a number of big mining concerns that are trying to evict them so that they can institute these new industrialized modes of mining, strip mining. One of the mining companies, this kind of complicates our notion of what counts as racism in this day and age, and its relationship to power. One of the mining companies is called AngloGold Ashanti, and it is headquartered in South Africa. The CEO of the mining company is a black South African.

So there we go. And it's also about the way in which racism has its own dynamic and its own momentum regardless of who the people are or what the people think. I mean, here's a black South African, who just how long ago experienced freedom from apartheid in South Africa and who is now about to kick these people off their land, people who have lived on the same land for four hundred years. So what kind of a story is that? Everybody should write the new president of Colombia. That's one thing we can all do this evening. What is his name? He just got elected. What is his name? Uribe was the last president, and a new president was just elected a month or so ago. Santos? His name is Santos. But you can Google it and write a letter of protest.

**TONI MORRISON:** What time is it?

**ANGELA DAVIS:** So do we want to take any questions from the audience, a few, okay, it's about—it's a little after eight now. How long have we been talking?

**TONI MORRISON:** An hour, a little less than, about fifty-five minutes. We have about twenty more.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** About fifty-five minutes. So we'll take a few questions. That'll be good.

**Q:** I want to apologize for that phone. It was from Death Row in Pennsylvania. If we're talking about prisons and talking about how inhuman it is and how we are being deprived of so many brilliant minds that are in prison that should be helping to lead the country, can we talk about Mumia and all the political prisoners that are in prison who should be amongst us, please?

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Well, first, I would say that, you know, speaking of literacy and libraries and liberation, Mumia Abu-Jamal has made such an amazing contribution to all three of those categories. This is something that we have to—we have to save Mumia's life. We have to save Mumia's life (**applause**) and it's also about the relationship between learning and freedom. It's about the uses to which we put our literacy and because of the fact that there's been this mobilization against Mumia by law enforcement all over the country it has not been possible to build the kind of campaign that we see in other parts of the world. As a matter of fact, Mumia is an honorary citizen of Paris and there are streets named after him all over Europe. In Germany everyone knows his name. That's a good question, what can we do? There's a big demonstration on November 9th

And also I think we have to do the work that needs to be done to build movements, that is to use all of your contacts to encourage people to think about this case, tell people about Mumia. If you have kids who are in school ask the teachers to talk to the children about the meaning of living in a so-called democratic society and using capital punishment as a routine mode of addressing a whole range of issues. This is the only industrialized democracy in the entire world that puts people to death in this way, and Mumia more than anyone has been the face of the campaign to expand democracy in this country, to abolish capital punishment and the death penalty. So thank you, thank you very much.

**Q:** Good evening, my name is Kazim Bey and the first thing I wanted to say that the Women's House of Detention is now the Jefferson Market Library, on Tenth Street and Sixth Avenue, it's awesome. My question is Professor Morrison you mentioned the self, and I am also wondering if that can also translate into the current anger that we're seeing in terms of immigrants but specifically around the gay youth suicides and bullying as well. And I'm wondering if there's any thought in terms of the connection between gender expression and race and the hatred of the self, in terms of your research, and in terms of yours, also, I know Professor Davis, you've also done a ton of research on that as well, if you could comment on that.

**TONI MORRISON:** That's clear to me. The homophobia—it's so obviously—the violence connected with that, it's so obviously a destruction of the self, I mean it's just blatant, you know, to me, this others, or maybe people don't realize it so much, but calling people names and beating them up and hanging people off of fences, I mean it's

just so self-destructive, you know. The more vicious it is toward the so-called homosexual person, the more violence there is toward oneself in that, and I think that that, you know, distributes itself in other kinds of scapegoats. And I don't know, Mexicans, please, or I read somewhere that someone said when the Berlin Wall came down, my prognostication was oh, the end—theoretical, not real—the end of communism is also the end of capitalism, if one goes the other goes also, and I have been proven right.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** You said you have been proven—

**TONI MORRISON:** Correct. I mean capitalism is not dead, obviously, but it's crumbling. Yes it is, they don't know it, I know it.

**(laughter)**

**ANGELA DAVIS:** It is, it is. But most people don't know it.

**TONI MORRISON:** They're horrified by the notion of not having it.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** And I think capitalism penetrates into our very emotions in ways that it was never able to do and when we look at the privatization of libraries—

**TONI MORRISON:** Everybody's mad. It's not going to last. I tell you it's decaying. It's scrambled.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** How do we speed up the demise of capitalism, that's what I want to know!

(applause)

**TONI MORRISON:** First thing you have to do is keep those Republicans—you have to keep those Republicans out of office, because they're hanging on tooth and nail (applause) to capitalism in its rawest form, not even its sort of civilized form, but the rawer the better, so that's one thing. I may not live to see. I'm going to be eighty next year, but you will, my dear.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I'm not that far behind you, Toni.

**TONI MORRISON:** So that's one thing. The Berlin Wall—interesting thing is when the Berlin Wall fell—this is how we talk all the time.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I know.

**TONI MORRISON:** All sorts of other walls went up. The one between Israel and the West Bank and then the wall in the south, Mexico, it's the border. I mean, all these other walls jumped up, and then they're not physical walls, but there are other kinds of imprisonment walls, I mean we are just constantly separating—in some instances, the

Berlin Wall was so people couldn't get out, now we're building walls so they can't get in. So you know it's a constant. This shift looks to me long-range, like part and parcel of what I am certain, is, you know, it's the disconnect, you know, it's really crumbling. When these people say "I want the government out of my Social Security," it doesn't matter, it's all incoherent.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Since you're talking about capitalism and communism, I want to acknowledge Charlene Mitchell, who's sitting over there.

**TONI MORRISON:** Hey!

**(applause)**

**TONI MORRISON:** It's good to see you Charlene.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Charlene was the first black woman to run for the office of the president of the United States of America. She was on the Communist Party ticket.

**(applause)**

**Q:** You know, I was actually, my first job was also a page in the library on 96th street, and I'm also a writer, so you've made me feel really good tonight about my prospects for accomplishment. **(laughter)** My question is, actually I have two questions, and one is



about your ideas around visual literacy, I immediately thought about movies, particularly in the context of how movies now are being adapted from books and the type of literacy that we get from movies versus what we get from a book, always, I would hope, the director is walking a fine line, although, even with something like *Eat, Pray, Love*, the general masses were outraged, I think that becomes even more complicated when you talk about black movies, about black women and black movies, particularly like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and now we have *For Colored Girls* . . . coming up, and I just wanted to know your thoughts on adaptation and film and also if you would flesh out some more of your ideas in the realm of visual literacy in the realm of film adapted from books.

My second question is a lot easier, how did you two meet? And how did you end up writing her, editing her autobiography or it's the other way around?

**TONI MORRISON:** How does it work, I don't know what she was doing. I had a job at Random House and she was an acquisition that they were very proud of and so we got to know each other. I think I had published one book or two—

**ANGELA DAVIS:** You had published *Bluest Eye* already. And you were working on *Song of Solomon*, because I can remember you would write three or four lines, we would be driving from your house to the city, across the George Washington Bridge, there would be traffic, you'd pull out a little notepad and write, or you'd fix breakfast and you'd write a little bit here, and then when the book finally came out, I said, "I cannot

believe it.” It was so magical. It was wonderful. **(applause)** But also I really should say that I really appreciate what I learned about writing from Toni. When I wrote my autobiography I was somebody who was used to writing philosophy, and so I didn’t think about writing in the same way. Rather than, like, writing it for me, Toni would say, “well, you know, what was that room like, you know, what did it look like? What was in there? What were the colors?” And so she made me understand writing in such a different way, and I’m forever grateful for that. We also had fun. Do you remember when we went to the Virgin Islands and I made you walk from one end of the island to the other?

**TONI MORRISON:** There was nowhere in the United States where Angela could feel safe and write, so we went to the Virgin Islands for a long time, it was like a month or something. We worked.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I remember we were going to stay at the Holiday Inn hotel, but it wasn’t finished yet when we got there.

**TONI MORRISON:** It was incomplete, so we went someplace else.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** And remember we went to Finland and Sweden and Denmark?

**TONI MORRISON:** Helsinki. The photographers came out and these women—was that in Helsinki?—these women formed a circle, a huge circle, and they held hands, with Angela in the middle, and I was sort of there, to keep the photographers and the

journalists and the cops or whoever, they just formed this tight circle, it was amazing. I should have had a camera.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** This is really wonderful.

**TONI MORRISON:** What was that question?

**ANGELA DAVIS:** How we met each other. The question was visual literacy, movies and adaptations.

**TONI MORRISON:** And what do I think? I think that most of them are pretty awful.

**(applause)** I don't know if there's fear of doing something. You know how creative, say, African Americans have been with music, I mean nobody told them how to do it. I was just reading about bop coming out right after the atom bomb, it was so chaotic, I mean, everybody's building shelters and saying "oh, my God, what is this" and the music changed, right away into something where, you know, odd notes, screeches, new language, you know they just took off.

Anyway, back to the movie thing, it's as though they're fearful of powerful and different creativity, how to do something wild and different, or they follow a certain pattern, you know, I mean, you know from the first scene everything. Now, I understand that the business requires certain kinds of formulas in order to get the money and to get them out.

I understand. It's such an expensive project, I'm surprised anybody does anything. I was stunned, looking at the—this doesn't have anything to do with African American films.

I saw, what was the—*No Country for Old Men*, my God, there was a movie with no score. None. I didn't have to—they didn't tell me “duh de duh duh.” **(laughter)** The guy just blew his head off or something like that with no sound. There was just some Mexicans, you know, on the guitar, that was all you heard. It was thrilling. It's like they trusted me. You know, it was frightening, it was different, but I wasn't urged by the music, pushed—“this is going to be scary, this is going to be happy, this is going to be . . .” you know, and I thought, “isn't that interesting?” So that's a little bit I know about the movies, but what I'm saying is that I wish it were possible to do more inventive, creative, nonformulaic Hollywood films.

It's possible in the movies—hey, think about *Passing Strange*. **(applause)** Wasn't that something? I have never seen anything on Broadway that literate and that musically inventive and staged that way, that was really a leap for me. I thought it was fantastic, so it is possible, and I just want to say that I have been unhappy, not unhappy, but I'm not wholly excited by and satisfied by a lot of the films and musicals that are going on, although they're well-intentioned. For me, well-intentioned isn't good enough. It's like happiness, that ain't good enough, don't rest on happiness. It's okay, I hope you all are happy, but we gotta do more than that, more than that.

**Q:** Hello, first of all let me just say this is an incredible honor just to be in front of two of my literary and life heroes. I'm about to have my own breakdown without even reading *Paradise*, **(laughter)** but I have two questions as well. The first being you've talked about, you know, writing a letter to Colombia, you know, you're talking about in protest to what's going on with the miners there, what do you think in this time when lethargy and cynicism has risen so high it's almost, you know, choking us, how do you feel—what do you think the role of written protest is? I mean, does it still have an effect, the written letter of protest? The other question I have is also in these times, what do you think the role or the importance of the storyteller is?

**TONI MORRISON:** Well, Angela, I want you to answer both of those questions, **(laughter)** but I have to say, preface my observations—you know, we live in this fast food nation, Americans just want it now and a lot, and they sort of like deserve it, you know, politically, everything, with all the problems, like if you don't hand it to me right this minute like at McDonald's, you know you just drive by, tell the little machine what you want, give the man your money, get your food and go on home, and it seems like that is you know this sort of constant behavior so that actually sitting down and writing a letter, mailing it, telling three other people to do the same thing and organizing, like actually get on the phone call some people, it takes too long. It may take a while, it may take a while, that's my version.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I totally agree with you, because we've forgotten how to write letters. I was going to say for those of you who will have problems actually sitting down

and doing a letter and putting it in the mail, you know, find out how much it costs to mail a letter—

**TONI MORRISON:** And what the man's name is.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Right, and all of that, you could perhaps figure out how to e-mail him. But let me see if I can answer that question and slightly more complicated way and it has to do with the previous discussion we were having about capitalism and the extent to which we assume that as individuals we are powerless, which is in part a consequence of neoliberal individualist ideology. We only think of ourselves as individuals. We don't think about possible connections, broader connections with communities that are not only in the U.S. but that are in other parts of the world as well.

It seems to me that this is the real challenge of this period even for people who consider themselves progressive in a country like the United States of America, because we also are—we also imagine ourselves as somewhat different from the rest of the people in the world, you know, American exceptionalism has its impact even on those who pretend to be most radical, exactly. And so what would it take, what would it take to create a connection with that community I was speaking about? There are about seven thousand people, Afro-descended Colombians, many of whom still have African names because they have created a history and a culture that goes back to resistance against slavery and they're still resisting. As a matter of fact they received an eviction order for August 18<sup>th</sup>, and they refused to leave. And writing to answer your question is—written protest is a

process that could perhaps help us feel as if we are making community, we are reaching out beyond ourselves and that we have emotional connections with people who live on this mountain, in this village called La Toma.

**TONI MORRISON:** I have this mantra in connection with what you said, Angela. When I was young they called us citizens. We were American citizens or we were fighting for citizenships.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** First-class or second-class. We were second-class citizens!

**TONI MORRISON:** The word was citizen. Now, citizen suggests some relationship with your neighbors, your block, your town, with the village. After World War II they stopped using that word and we were consumers. That's all you could hear, the American consumer this and the American consumer that. And we bought things for status and that's what we were supposed to do. Now, what are we? We are taxpayers. **(laughter)** All of a sudden, it's about my little tax, my little money, I don't want to give it to the government, those people who should not have it. You know, the people, we talk about capitalism sort of seeping into the blood, they just change the language and redefine us and we go for it. My driver was fussing about his taxes. I said, "so what? You pay taxes, so what?" But you know, all of a sudden we lose who we are, or are redefined. And when the language changes, we change. The labels change, so all of a sudden it's about taxes. If I hear any something else about taxes—but if we were still citizens, that's a different thing. We feel some obligation. We don't pass by people.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** And citizenship not narrowly defined.

**TONI MORRISON:** No, largely. And no losers. I remember when hobos were romantic.

**(laughter)** Remember Hemingway stories, and they were on these trains and they did stuff? Now they're the homeless losers, who, by the way, don't pay taxes, you know?

**(laughter/applause)**

**ANGELA DAVIS:** **(laughs)**

**Q:** Actually there were some great blues players out there on the railroad, playing some fantastic, fantastic music. Ladies, this is an honor. I can see your hair up in a fro in a book that have that I was looking for and you brought Ida B. Wells alive for me.

**TONI MORRISON:** I did? How?

**Q:** Yes, you did.

**TONI MORRISON:** Paula Giddings?

**Q:** There was a program.



**TONI MORRISON:** Yeah, me and Paula, she wrote the book. Correct. My memory—

**Q:** I'm sorry.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Many people don't acknowledge how important Toni Morrison was to the emergence of what we now call a black feminist literature. **(applause)** And I just I mean, I say this to my students, I don't know whether I've ever said it to you. I remember when she was publishing Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayl Jones—

**TONI MORRISON:** And Lucille Clifton, all of them.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** So, you know, what we know as that black women's writing that took shape in the seventies and the eighties would not have been possible had Toni Morrison not insisted as an editor at Random House on publishing these works, so let's **(applause)** and you published Paula Giddings, and she published Paula Giddings's first book, too.

**TONI MORRISON:** Paula Giddings's first book, Angela's first book, oh man.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** She didn't realize that she was doing this really historical—

**TONI MORRISON:** And in case there was a hiatus, I sort of was writing in between myself, you know, and they didn't like that at all. They didn't hire me to write books, they hired me to edit them, but what can I say?

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I'm sorry, I interrupted you.

**Q:** No, you're exactly where I wanted you. Speculative literature, fiction, sci-fi, how does it relate to the third world women and the movement through literature? As a student of anthropology, always rooted into what's real, but I look for fiction for ideas to how to make what's real elicit, you know, illuminating. Show me the reverse, where are we in the third world, writing back, speculative soft sci-fi about what's going on socially.

**TONI MORRISON:** It's not—sci-fi is Octavia Butler. You've got somebody coming here. This is a good story. I hope I don't steal her thunder. Edwidge Danticat (**applause**) and she's just published this book, *Creative Dangers, Creating Dangerously*, or something, anyway she gave a speech at Princeton and she was describing something that happened in Haiti. I was overwhelmed by this, and I hope it answers part of your question. She said that during the really tough times in Haiti when the Tonton Macoute was running around chopping everybody up, they established a rule if somebody died—your son, your neighbor, a stranger, on the street, if, you know, they killed him, you couldn't pick him up, you could not go out and get the body, even if it was yours, I mean, a relative. At some point a few days later, a garbage truck would come along and pick it

up and put it in the garbage, do whatever they did. So if you went out to pick up a body to bury it or whatever, you would get shot.

So everybody was afraid. She—I hope I’m not missing, I know this is part of what she said, at some point in her neighborhood, and somebody organized a little theater in her garage, and the local people came to participate in this play, some to be in it and some to watch it and they did it every night and the Tonton Macoute would come by and check you know to see what they were doing and walk on by, but what they were doing, get this, the play was *Antigone*. **(applause)** I mean that to me was the most extraordinary thing, it provided the solace, it was about the subject, the conflict between the government and the burial of the armor and so on, so I was thinking not only about your inquiry but also about the visual literacy thing, there are many, many ways. There’s no one way. The letter is a beautiful thing and important and permanent, I mean, it’s there, it can’t be erased, it can be burnt but not erased. The same thing is with theater, the same thing is with portraits, I mean the same thing is just as we were saying, try to think what it’s like in the world if you can’t read. What other kinds of things jump out at you? You know, use everything, everything, you know, to become, you know, the best human being you can be. **(applause)**

**ANGELA DAVIS:** I also just noticed the lights are on now, and I noticed that Amiri Baraka is in the house. There he is, right there! **(applause)** Look! Look! He’s behind there. Thank you!

**TONI MORRISON:** Thank you so much!

**Q:** Good evening, I'm very honored to be standing in front of you you are my idols. I represent the resistance in New York City, the black and Latina mothers who believe in public education, who use the libraries, who are so opposed to mayoral control and to the privatization of our schools, **(applause)** and I want to give a shout-out to the parents in Chicago who have just sat in for a month in order to get a library for their children.

**(applause)** There was a field house that was going to be torn down, and they sat in because they wanted a library. I am speaking to you because, as I said, you are my idols, and I was greatly influenced in the seventies and the eighties and the literature and being able to use now the Internet to be able to hear you give speeches and to speak in front of the New York Women's Agenda or the Ms. Foundation or the New York Women's Foundation, where mothers like me, women in the community, don't have access, and so I'm asking now if you can give the women, the MANY, the Mother's Agenda New York, the women that I represent, can you please give us some words of encouragement and inspiration so that we take that back to the community and we continue our fight, our struggle, for a proper, quality, human-rights-based education, public education for our children.

**(applause)**

**TONI MORRISON:** Give us our e-mail do you have e-mail? Yeah, give me your e-mail.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Let me say—let me say that what you said in that minute that it took you to explain who you were that I'm sure inspired so many of the people here in the work that you're doing **(applause)** to resist privatization, so the message that I would give you to you to take back is to continue doing what you're doing. You know, we all need—we all need to follow your leadership. We need to all be involved in this campaign to prevent privatization from taking over our lives and especially from taking over the public education system, so thank you, thank you very much.

**(applause)**

**Q:** Hi, this is a question for Angela. Before we saw the Shepard Fairey image of Obama, even, you know, in the context of all these Che Guevara shirts, you have this iconic image of Angela Davis. I'm wondering how does it feel when you see people, you know, using it on posters, putting it on T-shirts, does it feel like it's you, does it feel like it's co-opting your image, or does it feel like it's spreading sort of what you were trying to say?

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Well, okay, you know, I'll tell you a story. Because it did begin to bother me, somewhat now. It's so easy to create the possibilities of proliferating images. Anybody can do a T-shirt, and then it goes on the Internet. So I was a bit disturbed by that, and I asked a young woman who was a high school student who had one of those T-shirts, "what is the whole point? Why are you wearing that?" I mean I thought that it went out in the seventies, because then there was a reason. The reason was to help to

create this campaign to free me, okay, and I said, “well, this is the twenty-first century, right?” And she says, “Well, I wear this T-shirt because it makes me feel powerful. It makes me feel like I can do anything I want to do.”

I don't know whether she knew anything about me, really, but that made me recognize that people bring their own interpretations, and that image is an image not so much of me as an individual as it is of an era during which millions of people came together, you know, all over the world and demanded my freedom. As a matter of fact, Charlene Mitchell was the executive director of the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis, **(applause)** so yeah, I mean, I can't stop it. So, you know, why not see what is, what might be a possible productive and positive interpretation. So, who knows?

I do get kind of upset when people think that I'm the only black woman who ever wore a natural. **(laughter)** I mean, you know, I can remember when I was a high school student in New York and I saw Miriam Makeba and I saw Odetta. And then later of course Toni had a natural, a beautiful natural. **(laughter)** So why do they keep picking on me? **(laughter)** That I don't understand! But thank you for the question.

**Q:** Hi. It's a pleasure. I'm here representing my Concordia classmates and professors and I'd like to ask you if you think which is worse being internally imprisoned or being imprisoned by society, and do you think it is possible to be internally free while being imprisoned by society? I'm referring to slavery and just being in prisons recently.

**TONI MORRISON:** You're really asking about freedom, internal, external. I have a very small short answer about internal freedom. I'm from Ohio, near— **(applause)** No kidding. Always ten, they come to New York and make good. Near on Lake Erie, it is a working-class town that had steel mills, shipyards, and so on, so a lot of people came there, African Americans from the South and Mexicans, and Europeans and so on, I mean, a real diverse, as they say in the world, community. The only common thread we had was poverty. But, again we were citizens.

You know, the Polish lady next door would bring us those little cabbage things with meat in them, you know, if we didn't have any, and if we had something, we'd bring her and everyone had gardens. I'm not trying to make it sound like it was thrilling, because but although we were too young to know, we were miserable. So at any rate, my experiences about race are very different from many other black people. One is because I grew up in a mixed neighborhood. Didn't mean people didn't call me name, but you know, they were calling each other names, so what? I remember coming home and some little boy called me a wicked name, he said "You Ethiopian, you." **(laughter)** I said, "Ma, what's an Ethiopian?" **(laughter)** and she said, "Well, Ethiopia's a continent in Africa and this and that and I think the original human beings were born there or something and we all came," so I thought, "What is he talking about?"

So, but, here's the thing. There were little minor things like that and sometimes from adults, but I never felt, and this is curious, and I think I know why, but I never felt it the way it was meant, and I think the reason is because I always thought those people were

deficient in some way. Always, even as a little, I thought they were deficient, like they had a big sort of racial moment when I was working for some white family just before I got my job as a page, I was working after school just doing housework for two dollars a week, one of which went to my mother and the other I could keep but she had some complicated—for me, complicated equipment like vacuum cleaners, I never saw one, and a stove that had other things, and I didn't know how to work it, so she would curse me out, "what's the matter with you?" Told my mother, "I gotta quit, she's too mean," and my mother said, "Quit," I only get that one dollar, right, so I told my father, and he said—"I said, Daddy, she's so mean," and he said, "Go to work, get your money, and come on home, you don't live there."

So I didn't have an employment problem since. It was not—my life was not there and also I didn't have to disdain or be afraid of or neglect any person who had an advantage, a skin advantage, over me, whoever they were. I never felt that. And when I wrote the first book I wrote, *The Bluest Eye*, I really wanted to know why that girl felt so bad, a real-life girl who said she wanted blue eyes. We were talking about whether God exists, I, of course, was persuaded that he did and she was persuaded that he did not, and her proof was that she had prayed for blue eyes for two years, and she didn't get them, so obviously he wasn't up there. But when I looked at her and thought about how awful she would look (**laughter**) if she got them, and then I thought the second thing was how beautiful she was at that moment, you know, she was just incredible—but I didn't even know whether she was beautiful or not until I thought I about what she might think and then the third thing of course is why does she want that, you know, what makes her think that's an



improvement, and that kind of self-loathing which is real when you don't have any support, made me think of that as a real subject for a book, not some "oh victim," but really how it works. How you can—but I lost your question.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** It was about freedom, too.

**TONI MORRISON:** So that internal thing. I had trouble when I first went, traveled south. Not with white people, yeah, maybe, but my inability to perceive how Southern blacks who were, you know, their whole lives were oppressed, like not feeling comfortable, not being able to go into the library, I mean just anything like that, not knowing, you know, is this place safe or is that place safe, or knowing where the safe places are, and what that might do. How to escape from that, how does one internalize that, or does one, you see, and if you do, you know, how do you get rid of it? So all of those questions, but I never—But I always thought that those people whether they were adults or children, like he called me Ethiopian, that was, like, so stupid. He had sort of complimented me in a way, that I could not, you know, feel that degradation I was supposed to feel or the self-loathing, and I always felt that inside, which I suppose is called arrogance, **(laughter)** uppity, but I think it was the way in which my family responded to it. They were both from the South, Deep South, Alabama and Georgia, but they instilled in us some other thing.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** Maybe I could just add a couple of things to that. Is this the last question?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Please add something.

**ANGELA DAVIS:** And it's actually on a different kind of register about freedom, internal freedom, external freedom, what do we mean by freedom, and we've been talking about Frederick Douglass, and freedom had a certain historical meaning then. It was about abolishing slavery, and as I thought about this new edition of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, I thought it would be important to point out that in a sense as incredible and as brilliant as Frederick Douglass was, his imagination of freedom was historically constricted so that in a lot of ways it was about manhood. And that fight with Covey proves his manhood, and in the process it provides a path towards freedom, and so the question is, well, what about women, and what about little girls, how could they imagine freedom?

And so I want to say, I want to say this in response to one of the earlier questions that I didn't get to answer about homophobia and the suicides of young gay people today and it's about how we think about freedom and the historical—the deeply historical character of our own imaginings of what it means to be free and what did it mean to be free in Frederick Douglass's time? What did it mean to struggle for freedom during the civil rights era? You know, what does it mean to expand our notion of freedom today? We've talked a lot about immigrants, you know, Toni, you were talking about the wall in Mexico, you talked about Palestinians, so how do we bring Palestinian freedom into our frame, how do we bring the freedom of immigrants into the way we imagine freedom

today? How do we think about transgendered people? How do we think about gays, lesbians, bisexuals, within the frame of freedom? And what does that tell us about the extent to which our own framework of freedom is quite restricted?

So I ask myself sometimes a hundred years from now how are people going to be talking about the struggle for freedom? Because I don't think we're ever going to get there. I don't think we're ever going to reach a point where "we are free, right, we can rest, we can stop now. We've won." And so it seems that in the very process of struggling for freedom, of reflecting on freedom, of writing about freedom, we constantly challenge the framework within which we develop that imaginary of freedom, so—

**TONI MORRISON:** I think it is. It's powerfully imaginative. In a certain period it's this, in another period, it's something else. I think of freedom as—a major part of it for me is knowledge, maybe wisdom if you get there, but certainly knowledge, and then I'm reminded that the first sin, Genesis, *the* sin, is knowledge. The acquisition of knowledge. That's why they get thrown out of that little kindergarten they were in, **(laughter)** that little playpen, nah nah nah, you know something, and the literal words at least in one of the translations, the King James, it's "they may become wise," so stop that. They knew and in many other religious forms, that's why faith and belief are so important, and not knowledge, faith, belief, just instant, which is, you know, I'm not complaining, I'm just suggesting that there's something so powerful, so attractive, so liberating about what we call science, knowledge, that you can't have any, which is the same sort of thing that we were talking about with this document from the Texas Corrections Bureau and what

Angela is talking about when she talks about the necessity of reading, literacy of all kinds under constrained circumstances. And what Frederick Douglass did, having an intellect like Mumia in prison, all of this works into the same thing. The big horror, they have led us to believe, is knowledge, because that will set you free.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** On this note of knowledge I would like to thank Angela Davis and Toni Morrison. Thank you very much!

**(applause)**