Interview with **Ossie Davis**
Date: July 6, 1989
Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.
Camera Rolls: 1124-1127
Sound Rolls: 156-8
Team: A

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[sound roll #156]

[slate]

[wild sound]

00:00:13:00

Interviewer:

Before we start, we're gonna work, I'm gonna work on, I'll give it to you in advance and then I'll ask it again. They'll never hear my question because we don't use 'em on television, but he wants to know, do you remember when we started calling ourselves Black and, like, how'd you grow into that?

[camera roll #1124]

00:00:28:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Ossie Davis:

Mm-hmm.

00:00:29:00

Interviewer:

And how do you think Black people grew into that?

00:00:31:00

Ossie Davis:

Mm-hmm.

00:00:36:00

Interviewer:

So, do you remember when we started calling ourselves Black and how we grew into that?

00:00:36:00

Ossie Davis:

Roughly, yeah.

00:00:38:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about how you grew into it.

Ossie Davis:

Well, I grew into it because—

Interviewer:

Give me a full sentence, I grew into calling myself Black—

00:00:46:00

Ossie Davis:

I, I grew into calling myself Black because I was aware of what was involved in the change, both from my own feelings inside and also from an understanding what the historical context

was. Those who are around remember that Malcolm X made the term negro rather unpleasant for us and he kept pounding away on so-called negroes, ha-ha. He himself indicated by his own name that he certainly wasn't a negro. He didn't know who he was. He was an X, but at least there was a certain honesty in that. And Malcolm's pounding away at us, you know, made us examine what we meant by the term negro. It also made us aware that we did need a change of name. Negro was a title that did have a specific relevance and meaning at a certain historical phase in, in our struggle in America. We needed something else. Now in '64 along comes Stokely Carmichael and he starts talking about a relatively new concept, Black Power. And I, I was amazed at the response the two, the, the terms got, and upon reflection I can understand why. America has always looked upon Black as potentially frightening no matter what else they feel about it. And to some degree America still feels that something in the Black thing is scary. Stokely combined Black, which was a frightening concept, with power. Oh God, that's too much. So, everybody sorta, tended to sorta run away from Black, but the more people ran from it the more we thought, hey, [laughs] this, this shakes things up. So, we will no longer be negroes, we'll be Black. But even the term Black has its own place in the historical struggle. Now we are looking for a new definition. We call ourselves now African Americans. And as long as there is a, a, a contradiction between how we define ourselves and how we are defined by White America, we will keep looking for that definition that satisfies both, both us and them. We haven't found it yet. I don't think Amer—African American is the final answer. It serves a need. It moves us closer to our goal, but we're going call ourselves something else.

00:03:20:00

Interviewer:

And that's entirely different from our identity because we, we, we, we've known—

00:03:23:00

Ossie Davis:

Yeah, we've known who we are, but, you know, how do we present who we are so that the rest of the world will respect us for who we are?

00:03:32:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down now.

00:03:33:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[beep]

[cut]

00:03:39:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

OK. [inaudible]

Interviewer:

You told me—

Camera crew member #1:

Sit back, please.

00:03:45:00

Interviewer:

Sure. You told me you first became aware of the Nation and of Malcolm through a film called *The Hate that Hate Produced*. Describe your reaction to that documentary. It's six—it's '59, '60 or so.

Ossie Davis:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Tell me about that.

00:03:58:00

Ossie Davis:

Well, I don't remember very much about the documentary except that young man with his flaming, well it wasn't red hair, you know, lean and gaunt and quite capable of using language to, to open wounds. I was amazed at his capacity to communicate and at the naked honesty with which he expressed his feelings about Black people, about White people. He scared me. I, I'm sure he intended to. But certainly after I saw him in *The Hate That Hate Produced*, I know, I, I know that, I knew I would never forget this man. Now, I had known a little bit by reading and other things that there was, you know, the B lack Muslims. I had heard about them in general terms, but it was that film that brought it into focus. Plus the fact that Ruby and I knew Louis Lomax. I had grown up as a boy in Georgia in the same town that Louis came from and knew his family and his uncle. And we also got to know Mike Wallace on a personal basis, and they talked to us about what was happening, you know, behind the scene and everything like that. But the film did make an impact on everybody and it introduced Malcolm to a national audience which gave him a great opportunity, which he took full advantage of.

00:05:29:00

Interviewer:

Now, do you recall your first encounter with this lean, gaunt man?

Ossie Davis:

Yeah, I do in—

Interviewer:

Tell me about it.

00:05:34:00

Ossie Davis:

I do indeed. Ruby and I had been invited in 1968 to come to a platform in front of the Theresa Hotel in Harlem where we were going to celebrate with the NAACP the eighth anniversary of the 1954 Supreme Court decision. And, no, it was '64, I think it was. Yes it was '64. And we, we sat on the platform, but for some reason nobody was permitted to speak. There was a tremendous furor in the people who gathered, and when the regular speakers got up, a, Roy Wilkins and others, everybody booed and made us all sit down. I think I even got up and tried to say a word and I was booed roundly. In other words, that, that rally came to naught. As we were leaving the platform, I was aware of several young men standing and they were neat and they were clean and they had their hair cut and all, and I knew that these were Black Muslims. And I thought that it was the Black Muslims who had organized the disruptions, so I spoke to one of the brothers, Well, you and me— you and Malcolm, you've done it, you've, you know, disrupted the, the rally. He, Oh, no, brother, no. That wasn't us. That wasn't Malcolm. That was some someone else. We don't disrupt rallies. You know, and

I was rather impressed by that. I said, Hmm, hmm, I better check this out. Meanwhile, Ruby's brother got to know the Muslims very well and became interested in them and talked to us about Malcolm, about Elijah Muhammad and what they were they were trying to do and persuaded us on one Sunday afternoon. Well, he'd been talking to us, but after the Harlem thing his invitation to go to the mosque one Sunday afternoon and listen to Malcolm X, we decided to accept it. ***So the first time I actually saw him was in the mosque in Harlem one Sunday afternoon as he preached one of his sermons.*** It was, of course, a long-winded sermon, but every minute of it was interesting, bubbling, full of excitement and stings, [laughs] and his, his capacity to rip the hide off everybody within sight, you know, was, it was beautiful. [laughs] And, and he said, I can smell the hog on ya. You know, he, [laughs] he, he, he wa- he was the master at putting you at a total disadvantage, you know. ***And he described how we as Black folks smelled, he described how we looked, he described how we felt. Then he described what caused us to feel that way. You know, The chains of slavery are still in your minds and in your heads and you, you, you, you look at the White man and, and you love him.*** That's what ***you, you, you, you, you, you, you hate the fact that he let you go from slavery, you want to go back there. You know, But, but no, the honorable Elijah Muhammad is here now and we're gonna change all that, you know, the righteous Black man is on the scene and we're not gonna be satisfied with you and, and your shuckin' and jivin', the time has come.*** I was impressed by the man. You know, I wasn't converted, you know. I, I knew a, a trick or two myself, but I was impressed with him.

00:08:46:00

Interviewer:

Now, when, later when you got to know him, you invited him up to your home to introduce him to others because, I, I imagine there was a lotta curiosity, like your curiosity, about who this was and what this was about and the kind of impact it was having on people. Can you describe to me that first time?

Ossie Davis:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Or an occasion?

00:09:04:00

Ossie Davis:

Yes. Malcolm, as I said before, had created a lot of excitement in the Black community, but also we were aware or felt that it was somewhat dangerous to be too, too closely associated to Malcolm. He was saying some pretty rough things, particularly about Whites. And those of us who wanted to keep peace with the White world, some of us, you know, had our jobs

out in the White community, we didn't really wanna get too close to Malcolm. Also, you must remember that in the '50s during the red-baiting period, everybody had learned to be a little wary of everybody else, ten-foot poles were the style of social intercourse in those days. So, but I did have friends who asked me, say, Hey man, we saw pictures of you and Ruby with Malcolm X. What's that all about? And we couldn't answer. We talked to our brother-in-law, but he didn't, you know, he wasn't a scholar, he just knew Malcolm and, and admired him greatly. And we had gone to the mosque, to the restaurant at the mosque and had met him for lunch and discussed various things and were impressed with him. And we'd ask him questions and we said, Hey a lot of people, you know, wanna know what you, what you really are about, but they are afraid to come to the restaurant or to the mosque, but they, they're, they're still curious. And he, he jumped at that. Nothing pleased him more than going out, you know, to proselytize and to convert, he was a missionary of the first water and any opportunity he had to talk to anybody, he grabbed it.
So, we invited him to come out to our house in Mount Vernon one afternoon. He came and he brought with him Herbert Muhammad who had his camera and went around taking pictures. And Sidney Poitier was there, John O. Killens was there, Lonnie Sattin and his wife, Tina, were there and a few other people. And we sat down and said, Hey Malcolm, now look, you know, brother, we understand the game. You know, you're gonna shaken up White folks. OK, we understand that, but what's your program for Black folks? You know, What's your economic program? Is everybody going to have to become a Black Muslim in order to share in this kingdom? I mean, are you really convinced that six or seven states in the South would be viable? I mean, is that where you're really going? You know, you know, come on, level. Ain't nobody listening, the cameras are not here, television is not here, come on.

[roll out on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:11:35:00

Interviewer:

We got roll-out. We're gonna have to pick up on—we're gonna pick that up.

Ossie Davis:

OK.

[beep]

00:11:38:00

Interviewer:

All right.

[cut]

[camera roll #1125]

00:11:44:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:11:47:00

Interviewer:

OK, you got the brother up at the house. You're talking to him about, asking him what's the program for Black people, tying him up into knots.

00:11:54:00

Ossie Davis:

OK. [laughs] Yes. I think I should mention that my memory has played tricks on me. This was really in '62, not even in '64, and that becomes important as I'll explain later. But we got Malcolm to the house and we thought we had him cornered. And we asked him all the questions that we thought were pertinent. You know, What is your program offering Black people really? Do we all have to join and become Black Muslims to participate in your kingdom? Or is there a program that you have that affects all Black folks ba-basically, you know, because we're Black? He never really answered that prob—that, that, that question. We learned later, of course, that he, that, that whatever economic program they had was a rather limited one and, you know, wouldn't really solve all of our problems. And he had some thoughts, but he was very careful not to let his thoughts get ahead of what he thought was Elijah Muhammad's thoughts and policies on the question. And when we would, you know, we, we'd run him into a corner, he would say Well, the honorable Elijah Muhammad says. Hold it brother, hold it now. We're not talking to the honorable Elijah Muhammad. We're talking to you. What do you think, Malcolm, we should do? And on one occasion he said, Look, I am like the man who goes inside the lion's cave to rescue the brother that is supposed to be the lion's next meal. Now, the brother wants to know what you gon' do. And the bro—the man, you know, I can't tell the brother what my plans are, how I intend to rescue him because the lion is listening. So [laughs] we, we have ideas, we have plans, but we can't tell everybody now because the enemy will find out. Well, the truth was that, you know, they had not really worked out a sufficiently broad economic plan. But it did indicate to us the kind of person Malcolm was, and those of us who were there became his friends 'cause we knew there was an honest, earnest, dedicated young brother. And we had seen many leaders, White and Black, and had been able to gauge their integrity, their honesty, and their degree of

commitment. And while we loved all the leaders and we worked for all the leaders, Malcolm was by far morally the most pure person that we ever ran across.

00:14:27:00

Interviewer:

Now, go forward in time. So, that was '62. Go forward to the March on Washington and tell me about how Malcolm was there. I'd never heard that before. Go ahead.

00:14:35:00

Ossie Davis:

Yes. Well, before I get that let me say something else that happened in '62. At that time, we were doing *Purlie Victorious*, my play on Broadway, and the Muslims did not believe in theater. They did not want their membership to participate in theater or go to those places which were a waste of time. Malcolm somehow managed to come to see a matinee. He came by himself, and I think he had sorta sneaked away because Elijah Muhammad probably wouldn't have wanted him to show up at the theater. He saw *Purlie Victorious*, which of course had a lot of laugh, laughs in it, and he came back, he said, You know, I, I think you're trying to do with laughter what I'm trying to do by other, any other means necessary. [laughs] You're really, you're really zinging the man and I appreciate that. He said, Man, I, I, I, I saw the play and I liked it. I'd do anything I could to help you, except that if I said something in favor of the play, no White folks would ever show up at the box office again. So the best thing I can do for you is to keep my mouth shut. But I really enjoyed the play. That was in '62. If, if you remember now, in '63, one of the biggest events was the big March on Washington that took place in August. Bayard Rustin had asked Ruby and me to serve as master of ceremonies at the Washington Memorial, Washington Monument part of the program and we had agreed. And when the time, when time came for us to go down to Washington the night before the march, we, part of our responsibility was to report to a hotel room where Bayard was going to run all of us through what the program would be for the next day, in a hotel room. A. Philip Randolph was there, Whitney Young was there, Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, John Henry Lewis were all there. Everybody except Jim Farmer was in that particular room. Now, when Ruby and I came to the hotel and we were, we, we got off at the floor where the conference was to be held and we were going through the hallway to get to the room, to our great surprise there standing in the hallway talking to a reporter was Malcolm X. And this amazed us because Malcolm had made statements against the March on Washington. How this integration, these so called negroes, and then made a deal with the Kennedys, and all that sort of thing, and they should be out doing other things. No, here we are marching and all that demonstrating. Here was Malcolm in the hallway. And we listened to the reporter who was baiting him, you know, and, and talking, Why, why did you show up? And Malcolm was saying, Well, whatever Black folks do, maybe I don't agree with any of it, whatever Black folks do, I'm going to be there, brother, 'cause that's where I belong. We went on into the room and participated in the meeting, getting ready for the next day. The reporter came in and, after the, there was a break and announced that Malcolm X

was out in the hall and he was castigating the Black leadership and talking about the march and how did that, how did that effect, how did we feel about that? How did Martin Luther King feel? How did all the other—Roy Wilkins, of all people, told the reporter, said, Look, we know Malcolm X and we're not surprised that he's out there. And whatever he says, you know, it doesn't insult or hurt us. We have business to take care of, and if that's all you can bring from the meeting with Malcolm X, the, the, the conversation is closed. Please, leave. We got work to do. They understood, although nobody articulated it then, that a part of what Malcolm was involved in was a part of a grand strategy. Malcolm, I mean ***Martin and the regular civil rights leaders were presenting to America our best face, our nonviolent face, our desire to be included into American society. And we wanted to show the world that we had no evil intentions against anybody. We just wanted to be included. But they also understood that America, in spite of our reassurances, would be frightened and hesitant to open the doors to Black folks. So Malcolm, as the outsider, as the man they thought represented the possibilities of violence, was the counter that they could use. They would say to the powers that be, Look, here's Martin Luther King and all these guys. We are nonviolent. Now outside the door, if you don't deal with us, is the other brother, and he ain't like us.*** You gonna really have hell on your hands when you get to dealing with Malcolm. So it behooves you, White America, in order to escape Malcolm, to deal with us. That was the strategy. And to some degree it worked. And Malcolm was always involved somewhere in the struggle. And, and I remember near the end, in January of 1965 when he attended the funeral of Lorraine Hansberry and he was asking us, Ruby and myself, to arrange an introduction to Paul Robeson who was there at the time. And I think it, maybe it was that same month that Juanita Poitier set up a meeting at her house for the regular civil rights leaders to meet with Malcolm X, to work out the differences between us so we could come from that meeting with a common platform. Once again, A. Philip Randolph were there, Whitney Young was there, Dorothy Height was there, Malcolm X was there, several others were there. Martin Luther King couldn't make it but he sent a representative. And we spent that day discussing Malcolm's philosophy, the mistakes he made, what he wanted to do now and how he could get on board the, the, the s—the people's struggle that was taking place. You know, no, he, he, he, he moved, he grew, he developed. And at that meeting we saw that Malcolm was truly dedicated to the progress of Black people and to the point where he was prepared to modify even his philosophy to the best of his ability, to take back what he had said against the White folks, although he did say, you know, I do not think all White folks are evil now, but some of you are, and I'm going to keep on at it until you, whoever you are, grant us the respect that we're due as fellow human beings.

00:21:17:00

Interviewer:

Well, now at that meeting, do you recall any exchange between Malcolm X and anyone else that wouldn't betray a confidence or anything?

Ossie Davis:

Oh, yes.

Interviewer:

Something that you can tell me?

Ossie Davis:

Oh, yes.

00:21:24:00

Interviewer:

Tell me more.

Camera crew member #2:

[unintelligible]

00:21:29:00

Camera crew member #3:

Yes, we have—

Camera crew member #1:

Cut and change rolls.

[cut]

[camera roll #1126]

00:21:37:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

Interviewer:

You were—

Camera crew member #1:

Wait just a second.

Interviewer:

Out.

[door closes]

[laughter]

Camera crew member #2:

Go ahead.

00:21:49:00

Interviewer:

Thank you. You were telling me about this meeting and I asked you if you recall an exchange between one of the, if you will, mainline civil rights leaders and Malcolm X.
00:22:00:00

Ossie Davis:

Well, this exchange was between Lorraine Hansberry and Malcolm X. She, of course, was not a mainline civil rights leader, but she did have a bone to pick with Brother Malcolm and she picked it well. Lorraine was married to Bob Nemiroff, who is White, and Malcolm had made some very, you know, [laughs] some statements about Blacks marrying Whites, you know, that were devastating. You know, he, he was against it and that that was against the law of God and all kinds of things like that. So she took him to task about that. And he looked at her and he apologized. He said, I said that because that's what I thought at that time. Said, But I'm sorry that I said that because I see now that that's wrong, and I hope you will understand and forgive me because, you know, I've changed my thinking and I'm, you know, I'm bold enough to say that I've changed my thinking. I'm sorry about that, but that's what I believed at that moment. And she was prepared to forgive him. Now, the other civil rights leaders, in no instance was there any contention or even debate among them and Malcolm. You know, nobody was out trying to shoot Malcolm down because remember, he himself, you know, had just gone through a very devastating time. He had been read out of the Nation of Islam and was suffering a great deal from his rejection by Elijah Muhammad, so nobody, you know, wanted to take advantage of that. What was discussed was what were the practical ways in which Malcolm could begin to get on board with the regular civil rights leaders but at the same time retain enough threat to serve his old purpose, you know. How can Malcolm be a part of us and at the same time serve the function of being outside saying, Look, if you don't deal with them, you're gonna have to deal with me. So, tactics were at issue. And he was a brilliant man, he could be an overpowering man, but, but at that meeting

he was very deliberately a student, listening and asking very polite questions to those leaders, but determined at the bottom line to be included. He wanted to be a part of that struggle.

00:24:32:00

Interviewer:

Fantastic. Now, tell me something. You were telling me something about how, at the break with Elijah Muhammad, he visited you. Here.

Ossie Davis:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Tell me that story.

Camera crew member #2:

Do you wanna hold for frame?

Interviewer:

Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't even hear it.

Camera crew member #2:

OK?

00:24:46:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, let's cut. That's good.

[beep]

[cut]

[sound roll #157]

[slate]

00:24:50:00

Camera crew member #1:

All right Pete, little more.

Camera crew member #2:

Some more? Sorry.

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah, that. Second sticks. OK.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

Second sticks.

Interviewer:

You ready for me?

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

00:25:01:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about after—Malcolm, after the break, he visited you at this house. Tell me about that. Tell me what happened.

00:25:07:00

Ossie Davis:

Well, we had kept pretty close touch with Malcolm all through the time after we first, after he came to our house the first time. And so, it was, you know, when he was excommunicated, so to speak, we were some of the people to whom Malcolm would come to talk. John O. Killens, Sylvester Leeks, myself, and, and some others. So, he, he knew that he could trust us and we knew that, that we could trust him. And we talked to him on the phone, and when he went to Africa he wrote us letters and things like that. And then when he came back and it was approaching the end and he sensed, you know, that his time was not going to be too long, one day, I forget who, at whose behest this whole thing was, whether we called

him and invited him or whether he called us and said he wanted to come up, but one day he came to the house here, in this very room, and he was alone.

00:26:25:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop. Sorry.

[beep]

[cut]

00:26:31:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:26:35:00

Interviewer:

And he comes up to the house.

00:26:37:00

Ossie Davis:

Well, the meeting was for ten o'clock, and ten o'clock exactly he knocks on the door and we let him in. He comes into this very room and he sits there and we talk to him. He says first of all that he had arrived early, but because he was ahead of time, he'd driven around the block couple of times. He wanted to be exactly on time, and he was. We sat and listened. We didn't have any questions. We knew what the anguish was, we knew what was happening. And he just seemed to need a friendly ear, so we let him talk, and he talked about his time in prison, he talked about the times when he first heard of Elijah Muhammad and the change it made in his life, the things that happened, the things that he saw, the wonderful feeling when he finally found something that told him, in spite of all that America had said and done to him, that he was a man, and he could never forget that. And he could never forget the picture of Elijah Muhammad as he came to him in prison in his imagination. This man who had lost his own father, I think, in a str—accident in a street car by the Ku Klux Klan or something, who needed a strong father figure, and there, in the depth of his prison degradation, he comes across this one figure that reaches down and says, Malcolm, my son, you're a man. And Elijah Muhammad remained a father figure to Malcolm. And as he sat there, it was evident

that if Elijah Muhammad had just done that at that moment, whatever the differences were between them, Malcolm would've been off and running. He expressed that deep hurt within him that his father had rejected him. And in describing his situation, you know, he went all the way back, talked about revolutions, talked about the American Revolution, talked about the Russian Revolution. And he had read about the revolutions and knew the Founding Fathers and the theories. He knew what Lenin had written and all that. And he said, You know, to some degree what's happening to me and to other Black Muslims is not unlike what happened at that stage in the Russian Revolution. When the time came for it to make a change, some people had to go no matter how loved and important they had been in the initial stage. And now I guess it's my time to go. We'd, you know, we'd never heard him quite as subjective, and though he wasn't defeatist but he was philosophical. He put into perspective for us his life and his death, which he prophesied, and what it meant and what it should mean. And we sat, we talked, and sometimes we felt close to tears and other times he had us laughing. And then, you know, after about 30 or 40 minutes we chatted on and he, he, he left. That was the last time he was at the house and it still is vivid in my mind. I, I'd never quite had an experience like that with a man, or with anybody. Somebody so open, so vulnerable, but not helpless, you know. He, he solidified his meaning to us as a son, and as a brother at that time. And I've know a lot of leaders and been close to a lot of leaders, but not—none, to, to none have I been as closely bonded as I was at that moment to Malcolm X.

00:30:44:00

Interviewer:

Yes.

00:30:45:00

Camera crew member #1:

Cut.

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:30:48:00

Interviewer:

And you mentioned that, that you laughed with him. He was good at getting, he was warm. You said he was good at getting people to laugh. Talk to me about his warmth. Talk to me about his, his, if you remember anything that gives you, gives us or gives our viewers a sense of his, his, his humor.

Camera crew member #1:

Take seven.

Interviewer:

Don't force it, but if you can.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:31:11:00

Interviewer:

You remember I was telling you on the phone that one person who took a look at the film said, For the first time I saw Malcolm X smile and that's something I'll take away with me when I see this movie.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

He, he, he caused you to laugh a lot. Do you remember anything that gives me an idea of his humor?

00:31:25:00

Ossie Davis:

[laughs] Yes. Malcolm had access to folk humor and street wit, you know, which he used magnificently. And he described often debates or encounters he had with traditional civil rights leaders. And I will leave them nameless, but his capacity to, to imitate, you know, to give you a, a thumbnail feeling of who they were and where they came from wa—was devastating. And one of the, one of the things he, he spoke about was about somebody who was, you know, so Black, you know, this is the Blackest brother who ever lived and he went to the man's house and knocked on the door and the brother stepped out, man, and greeted him Blackly, you know, and it was so Black, you know, the sun could hardly get into the hallway. And then he introduced him to his wife [laughs] who was White and blonde, and Malcolm laughed that the brother had these two different standards of what was beautiful.

His humor always had a point, a political point, a cultural point. To help us regenerate ourselves from the degradation he felt that we, that was imposed on us by living in this exploitative society. His humor was never cruel, it was never denigrating in that sense of the word. It always meant to help you get rid of some illusion, so you could move on up a little higher.

00:32:54:00

Interviewer:

Now, you call the brother—

Camera crew member #1:

Let's, let's cut.

Interviewer:

We're out?

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

We're gonna be out. Good, OK. [laughs]

[cut]

00:33:00:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

So, it is turning out to be hair-raising experience I thought it was gonna be.

Camera crew member #2:

Got it.

Interviewer:

No, this helps a lot.

Camera crew member #1:

Ready to go?

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

Interviewer:

'Cause it feels personalized when you say [inaudible].

Ossie Davis:

Mm-hmm.

Camera crew member #1:

Lacy.

Interviewer:

Yes.

Camera crew member #1:

Ready to go?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:33:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, let's—

Camera crew member #2:

I already did.

Camera crew member #1:

—oh, you're rolling.

[laughter]

[camera roll #1127]

00:33:21:00

Camera crew member #1:

Roll, please. I mean mark it.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

Interviewer:

All right. You described him as a surgeon who sought to lance the boil of self-hatred. How, how, how, how was that true about him?

00:33:36:00

Ossie Davis:

He was keenly aware of the nature of the oppression under which we operated in American society. He was keenly aware that the truly operative chains were somewhat like that other two-thirds of an iceberg under the surface, that most of us Blacks, or negroes as he called us, really thought we were free without being aware that in our subconscious all those chains we thought had been struck off were still there and there were many ways where what really motivated us, motivated us was our desire to be loved by the White man. And that we would do anything, destroy ourselves, our mothers, our sisters, our societies, our communities, if only the White man would smile at us. And that some of our leaders, some of our greatest leaders were guilty of this sickness and this disease. Malcolm sought to excise, to dig out that boil in our psyche, you know. And he used humor because traditionally, we Blacks have always had recourse to our own sense of humor to keep us on track. Malcolm would use that, but he definitely meant to lance that sense of inferiority. He knew it would be painful. He knew that people could kill you because of it. But he dared to take that risk. Malcolm insisted that we be men even if it killed us.

00:35:13:00

Interviewer:

Now, way, how did you learn of his death and what was your reaction? I mean, how did it make you feel?

00:35:21:00

Ossie Davis:

Ruby and I were with Lerone Bennet at a meeting, Study for the, Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and we came from there to Ruby's mother and we were sitting watching the television. I think some Russian ballet was on or something like that on that Sunday. And then the program was interrupted and the announcement was made that Malcolm X had been shot. It was, we were less than 10 blocks away and, as a matter of fact, had we had not had this previous engagement, we would've been at the, that, that, I forget the place now, the Aud- was it Audubon? Because we knew that Malcolm was supposed, on that day, to reveal his new program, the one that we had tried to get him to spell out way back at 5 Cooley Place, but we couldn't make it. But Malcolm at that time was living at Ruby's brother's house because his house had been fire bombed. So we knew that Tommy Wallace was gonna drive the family to that meeting, because Malcolm, of course, wasn't living at home. We heard the news and we sat stunned, as everybody was stunned. ***And that night we went into the Harlem community to walk and mingle with the people. There was a kind of sense of loss, and as we passed people, some who were even strangers, we would stop and greet each other and, and, and say what this man had meant to us.*** And I felt in Harlem a determination to say something about who the man was, because at that time the headlines were full of so many awful things. He was being described as a mad dog whose violence had killed him and all that sorta thing. There was a feeling in the community that this was not so, that we had to do something to let the world know what we, in Harlem, thought of this man. That we loved him, respected and admired him. And the week after his death, we in the community went around trying to come up with something by way of a funeral that would refute all of this negativity and say once and for all who this man was. I was approached ultimately by Sylvester Leaks and Percy Sutton who said that they wanted me to give the eulogy at Malcolm's funeral. I said, Why me? I'm not a member. I'm a cl—I'm a friend, but why me? Well, you're the least controversial person we can think of. The Muslims would accept you. The, the left wing will accept you. The right wing will accept you. The Black folks will accept you. The White folks will accept you. So you're it. I said, All right, and I accepted that. Meanwhile, we went around with Sister Betty Shabazz's blessings, trying to find a house where we could hold the funeral. And a lot of the churches in Harlem, though the ministers knew and admired Malcolm, would not open their doors. And we could understand why. Because Malcolm was killed on Sunday, on Tuesday night the mosque was fire bombed and everybody feared that at the funeral some big explosion was going to take place and nobody wanted his church to be the place. Finally, there was a place on Amsterdam Ave—Avenue that opened up, but the expectation that violence was going to take place pervaded the whole atmosphere. You know, it was like an armed camp. Ruby and I arrived early that Saturday morning for the funeral, walked through the community, which was quiet and still, you know, and the police were everywhere. And we went in to the, to the church

and the body was there. But there were police there, you know, and we didn't know what was going to happen. People were being searched and, you know, all kinds of things were taking place. As a matter of fact, the night before the funeral, Ruby's brother had called and said, From what I hear on the streets, I don't know what's gonna happen. I suggest that you guys, maybe you shouldn't go. And we sat up, you know, in that kitchen until three or four o'clock in the morning deciding whether we would go. We decided to go and I sat down and wrote a few words that I would say. And we went in and our job was to sort of announce who was speaking next and where this telegram came from and various other things. And then it was my moment to deliver the eulogy to Malcolm, and there he was, you know, lying before me and all of us, this beautiful, magnificent spirit, you know, and it was all I could do, you know, to keep my own personal emotions out of what I was saying because, of all the leaders that I knew and loved and admired and had walked with and walked behind, this one, as I said before, had been closest to me. I felt I was losing a son. But I had an assignment and that assignment was to say something that would let the world know what Harlem felt about this moment and about this brother. To dignify the occasion in a way that was worthy of a man who stood with the greatest leaders we ever produced. And, so it was that I said what I had to say at that time, and I suppose in terms of the total effect it, it, it, it did the job. ***When the funeral was over and Malcolm was taken, we, he was stripped of his Western clothes and then the Muslims came and dressed him for a proper Muslim burial, they had a service,*** and after that the coffin was closed. We all got in, ***we went out to Ardsley, the cemetery, and when we got there, you know, the professional grave diggers were standing there with their shovels, but some of the Black brothers said, No, mm-mm. We can't let you do that. We dig this grave, you know, we cover this brother with dirt. And it was a moving moment, and I was proud at that moment to be Black and proud that my community and people, no matter what had been said by the outside world, said to the brother, we loved and respected and admired you. And, so we buried him, and there it is.***

00:42:22:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[beep]

[cut]

[sound roll #156]

00:42:27:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:42:30:00

Interviewer:

Of the few words you wrote about Malcolm in that eulogy, the ones that stand out are, he was our manhood, our shining Black prince. Tell me about that and relate it to anything you wanna relate it to anything you wanna relate it to concerning Malcolm.

00:42:44:00

Ossie Davis:

Well, it seemed to me that Malcolm spoke directly to the emasculation of the Black male in particular. And Malcolm wanted to heal that emasculation. He wanted to teach us how, in spite of that, to be men again. So, I thought that I would like my children and generations to come to know this most important aspect of Malcolm X, that he was indeed our manhood, you know, our shining Black prince who didn't hesitate to die because he loved us so. I thought that in honoring him we honored the best in ourselves, and I wanted that to be a part of what the world would remember when they thought of Malcolm.

00:43:32:00

Interviewer:

OK, we can stop down.

00:43:34:00

Camera crew member #2:

Can, can you hold the pole and let me get airplane tone?

00:43:36:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[laughter]

Interviewer:

Just a suggestion.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:43:41:00