Black Power Chronicles: E. Ethelbert Miller

The conversation delves into the Black Arts Movement, focusing on key figures like Ron Karenga and Dr. Stephen Henderson. It explores the ideology of Black art being functional, collective, and revolutionary, and the debate over the accessibility of art. The discussion highlights the impact of political events, such as the Birmingham church bombing, on the movement. It also touches on the role of Howard University, the influence of Malcolm X, and the significance of black visual artists. The conversation emphasizes the need for preserving black history and culture, mentioning figures like Marion Barry and the importance of institutions like Howard University in shaping the movement. The discussion also explores the complexity of identity, referencing Audre Lorde's multiple identities and the evolving nature of black identity in the U.S. and Cuba. The role of Black Lives Matter and its intersectional roots are discussed, along with the importance of navigating identity in professional settings. The speaker emphasizes the significance of poetry in capturing these experiences and the need for critical scholarship to preserve historical contributions.

E. Ethelbert Miller: Maulana Ron Karenga has to be seen as a key person, as a theoretician and thinker that is helping us to define the Black Arts Movement. What happened? When you go back to the 1960s—and everyone's got their nice little devices—back then we had the paperback books that we put in our pocket. And we talked saying, "Hey, sister, this is what Malcolm [X] said." [laughs]

Then you had what we had in our pockets, *[The] Quotable Ron Karenga*.[1] Because it's called Karenga, it was easy, sort of like a diet light. What happened was it was a way of getting your Blackness, like instant, you see. So all you had to do was memorize these things like the back of Black Panther Paper, those points, then you're good to go, right?

But that's dangerous because you guys are in classrooms, and you know that's dangerous in terms of a movement. And if you look at some of the statements in this Quotable Karenga—I'll just throw out two of them as I'll read this here with you—you can see how they became problematic for an entire generation.

Let's go to these. Okay, the first one: "Black art must be for the people, by the people and from the people. That is to say, it must be functional, collective and committed." Now look at this next

[1] *The Quotable Ron Karenga* refers to a collection of quotes and ideological teachings from Ron Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa and leader of the US Organization, a Black nationalist group in the 1960s.

quote: “Art for art's sake, is an invalid concept. All art reflects the value system from which it comes.” That's another one.

I like this one: “There is no art in the world you should have to go to school to appreciate.” [laughs] You don't need a Howard degree to understand Jacob Lawrence. So you go to the Phillips Collection and say, “I don’t understand this. What’s this Romare Bearden doing?” If it takes you that long to understand it, then what's happening? Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence must be wrong, not you, because they should create work that is understanding for the people. Okay?

“All art must be revolutionary. And in being revolutionary, it must be collective, committing from the seat of a revolution, or it must be revolutionary.” There's another thing in here I find where they just totally dismiss the Blues, but that's another term paper.

These little quotes here become a key foundation for when we begin to say what is this Black Arts Movement? What is Black art? Here, now comes the discussion about the Black aesthetic. So to give you an example. How do you define Blackness? For example, you know you hear some singer, you say, is that person, white or Black. You don't know. Is there a form of structure that you say, I know that that's a black Bable because you got five legs. Something that’s concrete.

Or something that you know is uniquely Black. This is where another person comes in a little later in the movement, Dr. Stephen [E.] Henderson. Because what happens is that when you look at his book that comes out, another important anthology, *Understanding The New Black Poetry* in his introduction, he's looking at things as structure. Is there something that's Black, that is definitely Black, and we know the structure. That's when he goes to the Blues. You know that the Blues is linked directly to the Black experience. No slavery, no middle passage, no Blues.

That's our gift, and it has a structure. Everything's there that you can say this is a Blues poem, this is a Blues aesthetic. So now you begin to see as the [19]60s moves into the ‘70s and into the’ 80s it becomes a question. Are we Black or Blues? That became the key question. But what happens? The artists are key in trying to define an art form, but at the same time, they cannot ignore what's happening politically.

So this is for example, when you say, what leads up to the Black Arts Movement? If you take my date of a beginning in [19]64 then you've got to say what happened before saying? What I was saying about the Harlem Renaissance? What happened the decade before? Well, key things, one thing is the Cuban revolution when you see a direct link which turns into LeRoi Jones [now known as] Amiri Baraka going there.

Another key event that radicalizes people is the bombing of the Birmingham [AL] church [referring to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing]. We sometimes think of just the bombing and the four girls being killed. But you know, what the real sad part about it is? Is that it comes 18 days after the March on Washington.

You can see that there was a high and then a low. The death of those four little girls have a definite impact on people that we will see later on, if I'm not mistaken, Condoleezza Rice, Angela Davis, you know these are, like the family sort of connection there. And you can say that those deaths are almost similar to Emmett Till's death.

But with the bombing, what happens is that it's little girls, it's innocent kids, and it's also in a sacred place, the church. See, just like we saw in Charleston [2015 church shooting] when you go into a church and shoot people up, then you have to say, it's because of a problem here.

You know those Godfather movies, right? And guys are shooting out? There's a code, "I will kill you, but I will not kill your children." You know, there's a code. If you were driving to Howard and you had your kids in the backseat, I wouldn't detonate the bomb. You get out. You know, I shoot you. But there's a code. Even among criminals, you see. And somebody said if you are going to do this, you don't blow up the little churches. I'm not going to do that.

Now one person key to the Black Arts Movement who will write a very important poem about the bombing of that church is the poet and publisher Dudley Randall. Dudley Randall will be key, because when we talk about this Black Arts Movement, someone has to be responsible for getting the poems and stuff out to the people, and that becomes Dudley Randall with his Broadside Press.

When you look at all of the Black Arts Movement poets that begin to emerge, look at the days between 1966 and say 1969. In 1969 Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, all of them are coming out of Broadside Press. And then the person who will make a real transformation and really build up the press is Gwendolyn Brooks, who will leave a white publishing company and give her work to Dudley Randall and that's a major move. That's a major commitment.

Then when you look at Gwendolyn Brooks, just as a woman. The radicalization Gwendolyn Brooks, just look at her here, when she gets an afro? And just look at her work during the Black Arts Movement. She received a lot of criticism from some white critics: "When we gave Ms. Brooks the Pulitzer Prize her work was [indistinct]. What's this Black influence on her work? I just don't understand. It's just filled with anger and hatred and rage. Give me back the Pulitzer."

When you look at Black artists, even Black athletes making these key decisions without being pushed to do it, but on their own? Then you begin to see how important they are. One person

who is still living, I have the highest regard for is Jim Brown. When we talk about Muhammad Ali, the other person, Jim Brown. Let me tell you, this is Sunday, right? There's football going on. Let me tell you about Jim Brown.

Back in the day when the Cleveland Browns football team was winning games, the quarterback is Frank Ryan. Jim Brown's back here, right? There's a blitz. They go right past Jim Brown and tackle Frank Ryan. They asked Jim Brown, "why don't you block?" Jim Brown said, "they don't pay me to block." And you ever see Jim Brown run? Jim Brown is funny. He's running backwards, man. And then he had this thing where you tackle him right?

He couldn't play with Tom Brady in this hurry up offense.[2] He can't do that because he'd always be upset. Jim Brown would get up slow and go back. That's how he had that thing. And what I didn't realize is that he quit at the top of his career, and I didn't find out what he quit for until this year.

He was over in England filming *The Dirty Dozen* movie and the owner of the Browns [Art Modell] told him wait, wait football, get back over here. Jim Brown said no. I thought it was [someone] on the movie crew. No, it was a fan [who told the owner]. Somebody said, you better get your boy out of here. Jim Brown said, "you don't treat me like that." And this is back then, you see.

When you look at this Black Arts Movement, you've got to look at all these events and these individuals, you know, Cassius Clay, Jim Brown, all these individuals. And then these events, like the bombing of the Birmingham church, the Harlem riot. Now you move past [19]65 and you're [19]66 and that's when you get the Black Power.

You find Willie Ricks [Mukasa Dada] running around here. What happened is that Willie Ricks is the one in [19]66 after that [James] Meredith march [March Against Fear] failed, and he's the one to get the crowd up and then Stokely Carmichael, Kwame Ture [indistinct]. [19]66 becomes key.

Then [19]67 all hell breaks loose. The best documentation of 1967 and the scope of all the riots in almost all the cities across the United States is the book *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, by Robert Allen. That's a good account of what was happening in terms of all the cities. But then we reached the key point, which is 1968.

But let me go back and do something which is important, because I go back to [19]65. As I mentioned Baraka, going to Cuba and then coming back and listening to Malcolm X in a

[2] The hurry-up offense is a fast-paced strategy in American football where the offense minimizes huddles and quickly executes plays to keep the defense off balance.

different light. Let's look at Malcolm X, and I mentioned he was not in Harlem when the Harlem riots were taking place. When Malcolm X is assassinated and killed in February [19]65, this is where art comes in. The artist elevates Malcolm X to an iconic sense. And who elevates Malcolm X to an iconic sense? Ossie Davis does the eulogy.

If you go to the eulogy of Malcolm X, by Ossie Davis, every thing you see about Malcolm X, is in the eulogy. So this whole thing about manhood. Malcolm was a man, or the Black Shining Prince. All of that comes from the eulogy. But there's one problem with eulogy. You know what that is? How many of you were giving the eulogy of the funeral? Well, that's good. [laughter] We should tell Donald Trump this. "You see, there are people that's not all shooting—some people have never given a eulogy." Just joking. You see how the stereotypes occur.

If you do a eulogy, you know you're really summing up the essence of a person. You're really summing that up. This is a beautiful eulogy. This should be taught in every single class, but there's one thing missing. What do you think's missing?

You actually go through the whole thing, he says in here that you associate with all the anger and stuff and he talks about you never could associate Malcolm with that. That was not what you associate him with. The key thing that's distant from the eulogy is that there is no reference to Islam. No reference to Islam at all. Which is key to—in fact, if we don't include Islam in the eulogy, we're dealing with Malcolm Little. Then the other thing to remember is that Malcolm has two funerals. So he's actually buried as Malcolm X, but then he's also buried as el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz.

That's why, when we teach Malcolm, we teach the Malcolm X that we want. But Malcolm had two funerals, but the eulogy makes no reference, as if he just popped up. You know it's because of how he was shot, he was killed. You can't mention that in the Nation of Islam, but you make nothing until you even authorize this, which to me, is key to eulogize somebody.

But the key thing in the eulogy—and Ossie talks about this, you can go online to find this. Why he eulogized Malcolm X, and it had a lot to do with the fact that Malcolm was a man. Even though Ossie, who was a popular actor at that time, had lots to lose. He felt he was a man and that he had to do this. And that just shows you what Malcolm X meant.

If you look at the interview with Coretta [Scott] King—and you saw this in the movie Selma. They never really met, except here. Let's bring the dates in. Mookie from the Spike Lee movie *Do the Right Thing?* There was a picture of Malcolm and Martin Luther King. You're the photographer, you know what's happening. If you brought Donald Trump in here right now you probably wouldn't get a picture.

I remember when like [Louis] Farrakhan came in and nobody liked it. Salman Rushdie, nobody. So when you see a photograph, the key thing is that the picture exists. You see. Now, let me show you something. You see Michelle Obama had an impact this past week. We're about to pick this up. She ain't taking the pictures, but she did something else. Remember how Laura and George [Bush] were invited into the White House? They come around back. They came around back. The last person that come around back was [Benjamin] Netanyahu or something like that. She's not gonna take a picture. You see that little thing that, no, she's not doing that.

But when you look at this picture of Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King. The fact that the picture takes place, that they're not afraid to be with each other, and then what happened, when you look at the photograph, they're laughing and smiling. And when you go and find the transcript, Malcolm's telling a joke. But you could see the picture takes place.

Let me tell you what I want. Maybe you guys can find this out. If you ever get a chance— I'll leave my email so you can tell me the answer. I want to find out what George [W.] Bush is saying to Michelle Obama when he's leaving the White House on the lawn. Because you know—that Black woman laugh? Like that deep laugh? As they're going to the helicopter. George is saying something. Michelle is bending over, and then he hits her again. Whatever he was saying was hilarious. I still want to know what that is.

But when you go back to this picture of Martin Luther King and Malcolm, the fact that it's together, it means that you as teachers can't teach the movement as if it's this and that you see? And that's how we teach it.

I'll give you another example. Here's [W.E.B.] DuBois. Here's Booker T. Washington. Who's in the middle? So really should be teaching DuBois and Booker T. Washington just to get the full picture. And that's it. Now, what do y'all want to do? I'm going to stop here so you can ask me questions.

Interviewer: This has been a wonderful entry into this conversation, and I'll just take a moment. My name is [indistinct] of the English department, and this is the Black Power Chronicles interview with E. Ethelbert Miller on November 13, 2016, and before we go into questions, I owe you an introduction so the students have a broader sense of your resonance here.

E. Ethelbert Miller is a writer and literary activist. He is the author of numerous collections of poems and two memoirs and the Board Chair of the Institute for Policy Studies. For 14 years, Miller has been the editor of *Poet Lore*, the oldest poetry magazine published in the United States.

He was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Literature in 1996 by Emory and Henry College. In April 2015 Miller was inducted into the Washington DC Hall of Fame. In 2016, he received the AWP [Association of Writers & Writing Programs] George Garrett Award for outstanding community service and literature, and the DC Mayor's Arts Award for distinguished honor. His most recent book is *The Collected Poems of E. Ethelbert Miller*, edited by Kirsten Porter and published by Willow Books. Just another round of applause. And we do have some questions.

Faculty Member: I'll start with the baseline. In terms of DC Black Power, one of the initiatives is to kind of uncover the local history of the movement. Which you've given us is a broad overview, but what specifically was it about DC and Black Power that you want us to understand in relation to the Black Arts Movement?

E. Ethelbert Miller: You know what I'll do. I'll take it back. I'm 17 years old, and I graduated from high school at an early age in the South Bronx. I got a job down in Greenwich Village at a place called Bookazine, which was a wholesale book company. I'm 17 years old, the first little job I had, and I met a number of African Americans who were like big brothers to me. And these are individuals who were coming up from Washington, DC to New York City to Bookazine to get their books. And they were all attached to the Drum and Spear bookstore here.

Now one of the other things we were dealing with, with the Black Arts Movement and Black Power period, major cities, had a key book store. For example, in New York, a key book store was Mr. [Lewis] Michaux's bookstore on 125th Street. At that time, I met Mr. Michaux because he was getting his books to take up his store in Harlem.

But I also met these guys who were coming up from DC and I remember clearly because they were so nice to me. Charlie Cobb, Courtland Cox, Tony [Anthony] Gittens. I'm assuming maybe I might have met [Ralph] Featherstone. But these are the guys that I was meeting, and they were like a race man, I didn't really realize that, because I really wasn't in tune with it, with the movement.[3]

It wasn't until I came to DC and I packed a few books. Two books I packed were *Black Power* by Stokely Carmichael and *The Medium is the Message,* Marshall McLuhan. When I got down here, I actually went to Drum and Spear bookstore, because I was doing the invoices, I said okay, let me see the store. I think at that time they were located maybe like 14th Fairmont, 14th Euclid.

[3] The term "race man" is a historical phrase used primarily in the 20th century to describe a Black man deeply committed to the advancement, dignity, and rights of Black people. It was often used to characterize intellectuals, activists, and leaders who dedicated their lives to racial uplift and social justice.

And there, working at the store at that time, was [indistinct], Ivy Young, those individuals. Across the street, there was The Center for Black Education.[4] This was very important for Howard University, because at that time, people like Jimmy [James] Garrett were involved. And right around [19]68, [19]69 on the campus of Howard University, [19]69 is the Black University Conference. And that's very important.

If you want to know a lot about that a person who has a lot of documents is probably Acklyn Lynch. Acklyn Lynch was one of the radical professors at Howard. Looking at Howard at this time—and I'm coming in the fall of [19]68 right before I come here, Howard had one of the most successful student movements. And this is why, when you go back and you study the 1960s people look at the student movement, and they always think about Berkeley or Mark Rudd at Columbia University.

But Howard had the most successful student protest. Up at Howard, I put together a conference, maybe in 1978 and I brought everybody back together at that time, Michael Harris [president of the freshman class], I remembered a lot of looking back at the student movement. The movement was so important that other schools were calling Howard to find out how things could be done.

And one of the beautiful things about the Howard movement was that there was no property damage or anything like that. The demands were met. The key thing, when we look at that student movement at Howard, is the fact that one of the major demands was being involved in the ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps]. So when you say that, don't look at the movement and think it's like [indistinct]. That would happen. But the key thing is, if you see it's an anti-war movement, Vietnam is going on, and people do not want it but, it was mandatory.

If you were a young man, and you got accepted to Howard University, you were taking ROTC. It was mandatory. Things like the Freshman Assembly were mandatory. So all these issues were taking place. When I came there right after the Black University Conference was key because, at that time, they wanted to rename Howard University. Somebody on the Cultural Night, which was in the gym—all the angry brothers were there, getting people in, and they wouldn't let Sterling Brown in because they thought he was white. [laughs]

And that was my introduction to Ron Karenga. It taught me something back then. It made me figure this out: how come all [indistinct] have Mike Tyson voices? [laughs] They sound like Karenga. "See what we need, is an ideology. See, brother, you're laughing. The reason you're laughing is because you don't know yourself. If you knew yourself, you wouldn't"—you know, that type of thing, right?

[4] The Center for Black Education (CBE) was an institution founded in Washington, D.C., in the early 1970s by former members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other Black activists.

When you're young, you've got that picture, that wicker chair, that sense of Black masculinity. Your sister is like, "Okay, just let that brother out. I could get married." You get all that stuff happening, and then you're let down when you [indistinct]. You know, Huey has a high voice.

But having these images—see, when you deal with the whole body image—it's funny. It's like, Mike Tyson will hit you hard, but he's got that nice little voice: "I hit you, I knock you out." And I never figured this out. I'm saying this because our movement has to discuss these things on these levels. Because something about it has to do with how they're shaped. And this is where we haven't gotten into analyzing people from a certain perspective.[5]

The same way, you know you gotta analyze [Donald] Trump. You know something's wrong. But nobody wants to say. When I go back to the Black Panther movement, I knew Eldridge Cleaver was crazy. I could go down the list. Especially in some of the Black Panther Party. Max Stanford? He was crazy. Okay, they were just—they ran amok in the women's dorms and stuff like that back then. It's just—they were crazy.

Some were good people. But when you study this movement, okay, you can't romanticize it. At this point, you have to ask the critical questions, okay? And what I learned—and this took me years—you're responsible for this… what happened a few years ago? I think it was when you started this project with SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]. I think you had a meeting in the [Howard University] Browsing Room.

I come back from lunch, and I looked into the Browsing Room. I remember seeing young people in there, like everybody was there—Bob [Robert] Moses, everybody, Bernice Reagon. I looked in there, and I said, wow, these people changed the South. I mean, you sit there and take it in. These people change the South. And then what you saw, you could feel the energy.

There was this degree of humility. And you can see there was a closeness, you know, like how you bring a team back together—yeah, we won back in 1985, you know, we went all the way. It had that sort of closeness, you know? Like, how, you know, if you were—I never was in the service—but you get that thing where you've been through something with people. I guess you could see that in sororities, or if you played for somebody, or something like that.

And this is why I always felt like Howard University—well, it did change. I was insistent that if you came in with your class, and you were, like, two credits short because you didn't take gym or swimming because you didn't want to mess up your hair—as soon as you graduate, you graduate with your class, okay? Because what happens? Who knows that you're two credits short? And it's so important because these are the people you came in with. You know, you'll get your degree in marketing, but it's not the same.

[5] The contrast between Tyson's high-pitched voice and his physical dominance is used to humorously critique the way voice and image shape perceptions of masculinity and leadership. Similarly, Huey Newton had a soft voice despite being a militant leader, challenging assumptions about power and presence. The speaker suggests that analyzing identity, masculinity, and leadership styles is crucial for the movement, acknowledging how stereotypes and expectations shape perceptions of Black leaders.

You probably say, “Well, mail my degree,” but that whole bond—this is what you get in terms of that experience. It started in high school. I used to tell people this back then: everybody who graduated from Howard had a lifetime subscription to Jet Magazine. So you know what's going on. Because the thing that would happen, if you stay in touch—it’s different now because you go online—but at one time, that’s how you could document what was going on, and Howard was that important for me.

I remember my first month there. I walked into Stokely Carmichael. You know, you’re reading, and then you walk together. And that was the beauty of probably being at Howard University.

I remember in 1974, my friend and I were touring the South. We went to Jackson, to one of the schools out there in Mississippi—Alcorn State, places like that. And I remember we were doing a talk like this, and we asked the students, “Could you name some Black poets?”

And they were like, “Oh, Phillis Wheatley,” and we were talking about the Black Arts Movement. And she said, “Phillis Wheatley? They ain’t never seen Sonia Sanchez or Nikki Giovanni?” And that's why you can take this movement and realize that some places are certain hotspots and some spots they miss.

Okay, I was a visiting professor at UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas] back in ’94, and I couldn’t get past the Jheri curls. Number one, I thought, “Jheri curls?” I mean, that went out with—what movie?

And then I remember one of my students walked me to the post office on campus, and she said something. She said, because she’s a Black client, “When are they gonna put some Black people on the stamps.” I said, “You never saw a Black person on a stamp?” And she didn’t.

See, and this is the thing I realized—and it finally increased. There are certain things that you’re not going to see, okay? And this is what happens sometimes with Black movies. You know, this is why, when you’re a filmmaker, this happens. This happened to Spike Lee—you have a good film, but it’s not going to show on that many screens.

That’s why, you know, when you look up, it's not on many screens.

In some neighborhoods, you’re not going to see certain movies. You have to come to Howard, see the movie, and then go home and tell somebody about it or wait for the next one. But you’re not going to see it on screen. And that’s when you look at this Black Arts Movement, look at how [indistinct].

Faculty Member: There’s something that you mentioned that I think we need to capture, especially for this city. You talked about how the students wanted to rename the institution, name it for whom? And why was he so critical in terms of framing the Black Arts Movement, not only for Howard students, but for people in this city?

E. Ethelbert Miller: They wouldn't have renamed it after Sterling Brown. But that was the name they came up with when they wanted to name it after Sterling Brown. You know, that becomes very interesting. I remember a number of years ago the great poet, Simon Ortiz, Native American poet, visited me at Howard, and we walked in Founders Library. He said, "Oh, is that General Howard?"

He couldn't believe it. He said, "this school's named after General Howard?" Because we know Howard, General Howard with the Freedman's Bureau, things of that sort. But General Howard goes out West, and Native Americans have another position on General Howard.[6]

But you know, when you talk about the Black Arts Movement, I'm just talking about literature. But when you look at the images, what Black visual artists did in terms of giving us those images that changed us it's so very important. And that's the thing that happens when you look at movements like AfriCOBRA [African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists].

Or if you study the history of Howard University and A.B. Spellman I think, back in the 1970s, wrote an article in *The Washington Post*, which is still one of the best critiques, I think, about the Howard University faculty show. And basically, what happens is that he highlighted something—that when you walk through Howard University, you don't see. Everybody in that art department had a national, international reputation. You can't do that—I don't know who's down in the math department counting numbers, but you cannot do that at one time.

When you look at the importance of the people coming through there, that needs to be in the curriculum. The same way under James [E.] Cheek. James Cheek had that project, The Cheek Project.[7] One was the mural project with murals on all the buildings.

In Cramton Auditorium—I forgot who the artist was. They had the leaders, Harriet Tubman and something like that. They took the leaders down and put the AfriCobra – But you gotta stand on Georgia Avenue and [indistinct] a donut from [indistinct] and look over there to see it. You know, taking the leaders down.

But at one time, all the buildings at Howard University, in fact, if you [were] in the group of art, you got the [Richard] Hunt sculpture you got, I mean, [Elizabeth] Catlett, and that needs to be taught. I remember Brother Yao [Glover], who opened up Karibu Books, okay? When he was hiring people, he did something that we should do with the visual arts at Howard. When he was opening Karibu Books – hiring somebody, he would bring the person he wanted to hire back to

[6] General Oliver Otis Howard (1830–1909) was a Union general during the Civil War and later the founder of Howard University (1867), an HBCU established to provide education for newly freed African Americans. He was also the head of the Freedmen's Bureau, an agency tasked with assisting formerly enslaved people through education, employment, and legal support. As a military leader, Howard was involved in westward expansion and conflicts with Indigenous nations, including the Nez Perce War (1877), where he led U.S. forces against Chief Joseph and his people.

[7] To better meet the university's future needs, several important construction projects were put on the drawing boards.

Howard's campus and say, "Look, right on the corner of Fourth—I had a stand. We were selling cantaloupes and books. And if you can work for me, you need to know that."

Okay, no one should graduate from Howard University unless you've actually, physically touched—I know you're not supposed to do that—but touch the art. I touched this piece of Black art. This is Catlett. Inside, you've got Jacob Lawrence—you've got enough work that's just there. The one that shocked me just a few years ago was in a school social. It was a [Alexander] Calder. We've got a lot of art that's visible.

But then, the poet Ted Joans. Ted Joans, in maybe the '80s, came up on campus, and he was looking for a very famous painting by an Afro-Cuban artist Wilfredo Lam. We went over to the art department to look for this Wilfredo Lam. And this is what you have to fight in terms of protests and stuff. I wish we hadn't found the painting.

I wish we hadn't because what happened? It was like leaning up against the flag, you know, no climate control, nothing. It's just like this, you know? And I said, "wow, we've got these things, and we're not taking care of them." And this is when you go down to the Black Arts Movement. We're talking about building Black institutions and preservation and history and culture.

And what happens is that to some point, we fail. At some point, we fail. This is why, when I dealt with Ta-Nehisi [Coates] in his book *Between the World and Me* – because he talks about spending time in the Moorland-Springarn Center, reading and stuff, I think if we went and into the Moorland-Springarn I'm saying you can think about this right now when you go in the Founders Library, especially now.[8]

If you're hot and it's sweating? Imagine if you're a book and you've been sitting there for how long. That, to me, is not good. See, I'm a literary activist, but my collection is in that house, and you can access my collection online, and people say, "Why did you give this to GW [George Washington University]?" Because one, I was on the board of the library at GW, and then also I created a literary archive and they said, "Oh, we want to do this." That's why my collection is over there.

But what happens is that I look at the fact that you can access my stuff. What I made sure I did so looking at scholars coming along, I gave things to Howard University that I didn't take with me. So I made sure all my stuff from Sterling Brown is at Howard. So if you become a scholar you can go to one place. If you go to the Moorland-Springarn Center – because it's been recorded, I documented this – nobody will say it... the Kwame Nkrumah collection is here because I put it there.

[8] A renowned Black history archive housed at Howard University, containing rare books, manuscripts, and artifacts related to African American and African diaspora history.

June Milne was still living. She was Kwame Nkrumah's secretary after the coup.[9] When Nkrumah was kicked out of Ghana. He set up a press, PANAF [Pan-African Publishers] press. June Milne was in charge of it. I'm in touch with June Milne and I go over to England, and June Milne wants to give all this stuff to Howard University, and I come back with all this.

I got to Howard and like, there was no interest, and I had to [indistinct], and there was no interest… and she had everything down to his diocese. And then Ethelbert made a decision, you know, which I don't like doing. Mrs Milne, was going to turn over all of the copyright of Nkrumah's work to Howard University.

Okay, this is where we take the intermission. You know that Howard University press is [indistinct]. So there's a hardship. If you look at Walter Rodney, first of all, Pat [Patricia] Rodney—Howard University had the rights to [indistinct] how he runs himself after. Mrs. Pat Rodney was trying to get her husband's rights so [indistinct] getting it back. No response.

And you know what the joke was? Howard University didn't know, and people may not know. Walter Rodney's sister is on Howard's campus, you don't know that she played it very low key. I know her well, you know. And so what happened when they got into the real thing? I was the one pushing some people in the kitchen.

This woman needs her husband's work back. But then I also told them, I said, you may not be able to give it to her. Why? Because you might set a precedent. But what happens is that you may want to do certain things. And this goes back to the Black Arts Movement. We wanted to build these institutions, but we didn't build them right. That's something that you have to look at.

This is 2016 and you want to build something? There's only two people around you who know how to raise the money. One is Lonnie Bunch. We have good ideas, but we can't raise the money. Or we raise the money, and all the money is for salary, and not the showcase: 'Pay myself first.' And that's a problem.

Or what happens? Somebody's working really hard, dedicating their own life, and then there's no baton. You see, there's nobody else that's going to want just as hard. You see, you know, sometimes when you see gentrification on the street, it's because some of the kids didn't want the housing.

You can look at the Younger family you know, *A Raisin in the Sun*, [they] change into the Younger family. And what happens [to some] people that's all they have. It wasn't in the house, and the kids don't want the house. And so the neighborhood changes like that, and those are sad stories.

[9] Nkrumah was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup on February 24, 1966, while he was on a diplomatic mission to China. After his removal, June Milne remained his secretary and editor, helping him publish books and writings in exile from Guinea, where he lived until his death in 1972.

Or when you look at the Black Arts Movement and Black Power, look at how this city changed, because there was a generation of people empowering themselves. They got into real estate. They just are making money out in the suburbs. They don't care what's happening to the neighborhood.

Interviewer: So the sort of failure to preserve, to process and to venerate those Howard things, whether they be symbolic, whether they be a text or in individuals like Sterling Brown. We lose the opportunity to do that and there are some students here who belong to the Sterling Allen Brown English Society.

I wonder if you could – you mentioned your work on Sterling Brown, and I wonder if you could elaborate on his presence here, not just as a faculty member, but as a poet, sort of catalyzing, or helping to catalyze that movement at that time.

E. Ethelbert Miller: What people know about Sterling Brown has a lot to do with that. If you go back and document when the Institute for Arts and Humanities was created, Sterling Brown was a senior and I was a junior, but it started before, when I was a student at Howard University. I was at Cook Hall, and I was next door to Steve Jones.

Steve Jones was working with Margaret Burroughs at the DuSable Museum in Chicago, and she wanted something concerning like this pipe or something. So I went with Steve Jones over 1222 Kearney Street with video equipment, because the Afro American studies department was the first unit of Howard camp that had video equipment, so I took the camera and went to see Mr. Brown.

All of the sudden, we're shooting, and he's talking now, certainly he wants to talk about the camera. But what happened with the document? We didn't have any experts. I had no knowledge about oral history, but I knew that this is what we do.

Now fast forward. Those tapes that I'm filming get transcribed, Joanne Gabbin, she's over there at James Madison [University], had the first book because of these tapes. Now I'm a literary activist. When you go over to 1222 Kearney Street right now, there is a plaque on the house and says not just Sterling, but Sterling and Daisy [Turnbull Brown], because Daisy was key to getting that plaque.

And this is from me, being a student, and I wouldn't be here if I had not walked the first campus and heard Sterling Brown read. I didn't know anything about poetry. You're a freshman—you've got your little beanie on your head. You don't know anybody; you can't get anything. You sit next to someone in the cafeteria and think, "Oh, there's art, I'll go get me some." And that was that. Then I got pulled in, you see. And then something began to happen.

And of course, we did. When Sterling was in the news and stuff, they were saying, “Sterling Brown was the Poet Laureate [indistinct].

Bless Marion Barry and Effi Barry, okay? He knew Sterling Brown. I mean, nobody could get Sterling Brown out of his house. It was Effi Barry—maybe [indistinct] a textile museum series over there—but Sterling wouldn’t come out.

And what happened? This speaks to how you honor your elders: make them official. Okay, make them the point. When we put that through, definitely. And I tell you, we had the ceremony on Capitol Hill. We had [Ras] Baraka come down and do it to be the keynote speaker.

But in the midst of all that—and keep in mind, we’re talking about Sterling Brown. People, going to his home, listening to records. And people hated filming, and many people from SNCC—it’s just pictures of that, documenting, and that’s important.

And so here is this high point in terms of still not being found. I remember putting him in that cab. We had this little black, you know, medal. He was so happy—it’s like an older Black woman voting for Obama. I lived all my life for this.

If you have a parent, grandmother, or mother, you do this for them. Let me show you this. And this is a key person here. Fast forward to today: Carla Hayden is the head of the Library of Congress.

Okay, now Carla—Carla and I go way back. We played together a long time ago, back at Howard. In fact, all the librarians used to sit together. And what happened? I got to know Carla. I got to know Carla’s mother. And there was a rumor a couple of years ago about her taking this job. She said, “The only job I’m taking right now is taking care of my mother.” That’s the first thing.

I bumped into her about a year ago—I have a picture on my phone—at the [indistinct] Literary Festival. We were talking, and I asked her again, “Will you take that job?” She came back to me and said, “Okay, we gotta talk.”

And I said to her, “Look at your mother. Take this job. You can put a smile on your mother’s face.” Back and forth we went.

Fast forward to the footage—the video that the White House released—and her mother is in the Oval Office with Obama. And boy, when you see that, if you want to talk about the importance of a Black president, what about the importance of a Black family? That's what you want to do.

And I'll tell you this. Some of you might be the first to go to college. I know I was. And this is why I remember two credits short. I wasn’t supposed to graduate from Howard. I failed like

economics, incoming something, type of thing where it was economic, right? And what happens is that I call my mother and say, “I'm not going to graduate.”

[Indistinct]. They don’t know what your major is—you know what your major is—but it’s that day, the sun is out, that cap and gown. And that’s what it is, man. I tell people, “Don’t take that away from Black families.”

Man, if somebody is a few credits short, let them march. It’s so important that they have that photo. Nobody wants to know you got a mail-order certificate six months later—you want to be out there with your friends, celebrating. That’s it, you see?

But when you see some of these pictures, when you can bring that happiness to the faces of your family—that’s part of the Black movement. That’s part of the Black Power that’s common. Those are the pictures you want to have and share with your own story.

Those images, anybody talking about that picture of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. We know that. Every household can have pictures like that [indistinct]. But I realized that in my family, the women dressed and carried themselves that way, and I need to be reminded.

Interviewer: The importance of lineage, right? Whether it be political, literary, biological, or familial—lineage is so important to the movement. And there’s a student question related to that. This one is from Kalia Peterson, a senior English major and French minor from Newark, New Jersey. She asks, “Is it possible to argue that the seeds for the Black Arts Movement were planted in the late ’30s and early ’40s with the protest literature of writers such as Richard Wright, particularly with his work *Blueprint for Negro Writing*?” Thinking about lineage is an important question.

E. Ethelbert Miller: You know, one of the things that when you go back to the lesson by Larry Neal, one thing he mentioned—and I can quote it right here—he said, “We bear witness to a profound change in the way we now see ourselves in the world, and this has been an ongoing change.” That’s really important—it’s been an ongoing change.

And so, acknowledging this, that’s why what I do is share this feature. It is there, but something happens in the [19]60s, and that term 'revolution' becomes key—in terms of consciousness, in terms of the importance of African folklore. It is that sort of sense of issues, you know protest—that’s what we inherit. I mean, we don’t want to confine every writer to write that way, you know?

You get people to feel the same way. For example—and this illustrates it best—you wouldn’t confuse Wayne Shorter with Marvin Gaye. You wouldn’t confuse a musician. They wouldn’t all sound alike. But what happens is when you go back and look at people like Frank Marshall Davis or Sterling Brown, you find that same anger and rage.

In fact, I gave a talk at the Lincoln Theatre, and I knew Alicia Garza was in the back. I said, "Okay, I'm reading Sterling Brown because Sterling Brown had a number of poems about police brutality." And so, it's not like this is a new issue popping up in our literature.

That's why what happens is that in the classroom, we have to know that chronology. But we also have to know that the political and social settings are completely different. And this is where you get into Baraka talking about the *changing same*.[10] But, you know, there is an ongoing movement.

This is why, when you sit in the classroom, you have to realize that you're part of it. See, I just—I think I finished last week interviewing Paul Buhle. We did a long discussion on C.L.R. James. and Paul reminded me how much I dealt with C.L.R. James. When I would see C.L.R. James, you know what struck me? This guy talked to [Leon] Trotsky.

When you see that, and you realize it's kind of like a token of someone like that. I don't take that lightly. I mean, that's something where you say, "Okay, how does that play out?"

And sometimes within your family, you have individuals who are that important, and you have to remember—that's what your family is about. And I remember clearly, May Miller.

In fact, what we tried to do, we wanted May Miller to be the second Poet Laureate of DC after Sterling died, but then May died. But May was funny, because May was Kelly Miller's daughter and she told her how she was on a date downtown. Kelly Miller's family always sat down for dinner together, and she told her date, well, I got to be home. And then she said he didn't understand.

The Miller family sat down. And that's something—she upheld that. I brought May Miller up to campus. She had never been on our campus before. May Miller did a reading, and that cemented our lives together. People never knew whether we were mother and son, lovers, or whatever. We always joked about it. We were Millers, you know.

But what I learned from that woman—which is important—I learned a sense of this Black, middle-class sensibility. See I'm from the South Bronx. So, my whole thing of like cotillions and sororities—I did not know. In fact, during my first week on campus, I went into the dining hall and it was grits and stuff.

We wouldn't eat that, you know? And so this thing was, were new things to me, but within your family, roots in history. We have to know this. I didn't know I was really West Indian until I came South. And I tell people when you know, when you know where you are, you see, all you have to remember is this, Frederick Douglass ran away from Maryland.

[10] A concept by Amiri Baraka, referring to how Black cultural expression evolves while maintaining deep historical and political continuity, showing how past struggles shape present realities.

That's all you need to know. Okay, so if you want to know where you are, you know Frederick Douglass, ran away from Maryland. If you can't get to Canada, at least get to East Orange [NJ] or Newark [NJ]. Okay, but even that's probably because that's Woodrow Wilson state. So you might want to keep going until you get to some place where they would be planning the revolution. Up there in upstate New York was pretty delicate at the time.

You want to—you want to do that? You've got to know that history and understand the impacts on your family and how they thought about who you want to be, you see? So all this Black Lives [Matter] stuff is meaningless unless you take it into your system. It's like food or vitamins so that you grow, okay? And that's how it has to be. In every high school.

My motto is [indistinct]. And I have to mention Donna Lee. These are people that mentored me, you know.

I was blessed to have a lot of different mentors—Stephen Henderson, Darlene, Jim Mayfield. There's a list of people. And my commitment, as a literary activist, is to make sure their names are not forgotten.

For example, one name that often gets forgotten—we talk a lot about Sterling Brown, but we don't talk about Owen Dodson. If you take my name and link it to Vera [J.] Katz—I just interviewed Vera Katz, [indistinct]. She has taught almost every single Black actor or actress that you see, from *Empire* to *42* to *Black Panther*. She taught all those individuals, right?

The first question I asked her during the interview was, "What was it like to be on campus back in 1968, 1969?' And you know what she said? She said, 'Well, you were one of four people who talked to me.' And she said that—not in a laughing way. She caught hell. She was Jewish, she was different, and she was trying to teach people who didn't want to hear her, but I tell you, her students, they love her.

She's got her memoir coming out—with the introduction written by Phylicia Rashad. You know, with Debbie Allen—whenever they were coming to town, they'd come on campus to focus on [indistinct]. And that's a person who affected historics at schools.

Now, to show this connection—and this is important in terms of this movement—I do a lot of work with different Black communities and also with the Jewish community. There was a woman who was also my mentor. Gabrielle Edgcomb who wrote a book called *From Swastika to Jim Crow.* What she was documenting were the Jews who fled Nazi Germany, came to the United States, and found work in the South. They often found work in historically Black schools.

If you take somebody like the president of Howard University at that time, like James Nabrit, or other individuals at Tougaloo, whether they're at Spelman or Morehouse. They came in contact with people who were not just there but are also radical. Sometimes that's how they introduced

socialism or new ideas. These were important figures, like Howard Zinn, who had an impact on Spelman, and you see that influence on institutions like Howard as well.

When you look at our movement in the same way, going back to what I was saying about Amiri Baraka and Cuba. Just things in terms of—like Che Guevara who have an impact on it. That's when you look at our music and our art. The influence is coming from a lot of different places.

When you go back to this Larry Neal article and you define the Black Lives Matter, the key thing he says here very early is that liberation is impossible if we fail to see ourselves in more positive terms. Liberation is impossible if we fail to see ourselves in a positive light, forget about it. Liberation is impossible.

Liberation is a term that's very popular in the United States. You have that coming out of Vietnam, you have that coming out of Algeria—you have that idea of liberation. So that's another word that you circle and say wow, that's not what somebody was talking about years ago. This is new. The positive images are there, but it's liberation, you see.

Let me mention another thing that opens up another door. He says—here, "Now, along with the Black Power movement, they had been developing a movement among Black artists. This movement we call the Black Arts. This movement, in many ways, is older than the current Black Power movement. It is primarily concerned with the cultural and spiritual liberation of Black America."

Let's underline this sentence: "*primarily concerned with the cultural and spiritual liberation of Black America.*" As soon as you emphasize spiritual liberation, we have to begin looking at the influence of Islam on the Black Arts Movement.

For example, if you're a visual artist and you design some of the books or work with poets, you'll see a star and crescent. You might see Islamic design. Or look at all the people who began to take Muslim names—from sports figures, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Faculty Member: Howard is a Mecca.

E. Ethelbert Miller: Mecca. Now this is key. Howard is a Mecca. Where is that from?

Faculty Member: A lot of people talk about its relationship in terms of Malcolm's Hajj.

E. Ethelbert Miller: No, see. Now this is a game show. Howard is the Mecca? You know when I heard that, I said, ok. I'm a poet. Mecca, ok. Gwendolyn Brooks, it's the Mecca. It's a housing project in Chicago [Mecca Flats].

The Mecca thing is actually Kelly Miller, and it's in an essay in *The New Negro*. It's a small passage, but it talks about this whole idea that Howard should be a Mecca, okay? So it's not like Malcolm X [indistinct]. But what happened is, it's based there. It came all the way back, you see.

So it seems different now, but if you go back to Kelly Miller's essay in *The New Negro*, he mentions [indistinct]. That's why you see that within Howard University—it brings these two streams together, tied through a poem.

I edited this back in 1972, this is from a little journal from the Department of Afro-American Studies. You could buy it for 35 cents. In the back here, this is what I wrote—a little poem:

> "Between the vanishing Negro and the invisible Black man,
> I look for change every day.
> Between the vanishing Negro and the invisible Black man,
> I look for change."

There is what we find in terms of when we look at that Mecca—that straight line telling us, because he's in there. He's the best. But then the other stream, the Mordecai Johnson, Michael Winston stream and those have been two battles.[11]

If you go back, and pull when they were having these little conferences with the faculty, and they produce a poster of Greg Carr and Michael Winston, which was not like the Malcolm X, Martin Luther King picture, but it had its own dynamic and narrative.

Faculty Member: You know of course Winston is the current president's kind of advisor now. So that kind of tells you.

E. Ethelbert Miller: This is important. After the student protest they set up a committee to look into the demands in terms of the feasibility of having Afro-American Studies. And what happened, Mr. Bundy and others up a year talking about Black Studies. And what happened – Howard University will get a very large national Ford Foundation [grant]. The people who are key in terms of putting that proposal together are David, others. When it got down to who would head up the department, Michael Winston, the historian, and he's a Rayford Logan man, so this too will pass.[12]

He never saw it as a discipline. So this connected to Michael Winston to—is this thing recording? Because I can name names.

Faculty Member: Please. No, we need this.

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[11] The reference suggests an ongoing ideological battle between institutional progress and activist transformation within Black intellectual spaces.

[12] Michael Winston, a historian, was influenced by Rayford Logan, a prominent Howard University historian known for his work on the nadir of Black life in America (the post-Reconstruction period of intense racial oppression).

E. Ethelbert Miller: Because this is why this institution struggles. In fact, you could go and finally ask yourself, why was [indistinct] not made president of Howard University? Then you would understand sexism within these black institutions. You don't have to be working for five years. But you had a question.

Interviewer: [Indistinct] and what influence Marion Barry's time in office had on you?

E. Ethelbert Miller: Marion Barry is key and I said this in a session where Greg Carr invited—Christopher, who was running at that time for City Council. I sat in there, and they were showing *[The] Nine Lives [of Marion Barry]*. *Nine Lives* was about Marion Barry.

The focus was on Marion Barry. If you talk about Marion Barry, you have to talk about Effi Barry. Effi was the one really pushing the arts. She had a gallery down at the District Building, and she was really doing that.

If you ask Sterling Brown—[indistinct]—it's when these cities were having financial problems Marion Barry was the one not cutting the artwork. If you bring in and talk to Tony Gittens, who was head of the Arts Committee, you'll see that under Barry, he gave Tony Gittens cabinet status.

The hiring of Larry Neal was radical. One of the weaknesses Larry had was that he didn't have administrative skills. So, people never gave Larry Neal the respect. And since this is being documented, I'll say this..

One person I know I fought with was Peggy Cooper Cafritz, because at one time, somebody wanted to take the name Larry Neal off the Larry Neal Writers' away.[13] I fought against that because my argument was, 'We don't have enough awards named after Black writers. We have the PEN/Faulkner Prize and others, but we need prizes. It would be very important to have these prizes. Now we named the Larry Neal prize, which is key [indistinct]. The first person to win the Larry Neal prize was a white person. But it was a very important white person.

The person who won that prize was Aldon Nielsen. A.L. Nielsen is probably one of the best critics of African American literature. I've been working on a major project just interviewing him because he has a tremendous history—of not just what's happening in DC at Howard.

But there's another institution that we need to mention and that's Federal City College [FCC]. When people got thrown out or kicked out of Howard for being too radical, they went to FCC. At FCC, you had people like Gil Scott-Heron. You had a whole bunch of people down at FCC.

Faculty Member: Jimmy Garrett

[13] Peggy Cooper Cafritz was a prominent arts patron and education advocate in Washington, D.C., known for co-founding the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Larry Neal, a leading figure in the Black Arts Movement, significantly influenced Black literary and cultural expression. The reference suggests a conflict over preserving Neal's legacy. The Larry Neal Writers' Award recognizes key authors for Black literary excellence.

E. Ethelbert Miller: Jimmy Garrett. So, when you look at this period in DC, the institutions would be Howard, Federal City College, the Center for Black Education, and [indistinct]. And you have to add Drum and Spear Bookstore because it's not just a bookstore.

These are the things that, if you did back then, you would move around to these places. I mean, just Gil Scott-Heron down at FCC would have a direct impact on David Nicholson, who would found *The Black Film Review*, working with Tony Gittens. And then he would become the Book Editor of *The Washington Post*.

And then, when he decided to step down, he gave me a call. He said, "I don't want to give this position up. Who do you think could replace me at *The Washington Post*?"

That's the only person that could replace you: Jabari Asim. See, and this is when you look at certain areas, in certain places, there are still places where we work for you. And so, when you look back then, book review critics—you know, very few. If you look right now, preservation architects—okay, very few.

One thing that needs to be supported in this city is the Duke Ellington School. At the high school level—they have museum studies. And I remember telling Lonnie Bunch. I said, "Man, if you can follow through, if you went over to Duke Ellington once a year and said, 'Okay, these are high school kids. We need this, this and this in the museum.'" You create a pipeline and [indistinct].

When you look at the staff meeting, you'll see Black people with these skills—a lot. Now, when you put a job application over here, sometimes you can't do it. And that's why, in many places, you know, we reach a point where, if you're dealing with African American Studies, you're going to have to deal with the fact that [indistinct].

I saw the future of African American Studies and where it was going a couple of years ago when I was invited to this big conference of Black Studies in Alexandria [VA] or somewhere up there. You saw this conference, and about 36 people were enrolled. Every graduate student took, like, two or three languages. So you saw where the future was going.

If you look at it right here—okay, before you guys get out—you've got to be bilingual. Now, let's look at Howard. Howard several years ago, phased out Portuguese [indistinct]. Who would sit on a board and eliminate the Portuguese Department? Who would do that, even if it's just one person studying Portuguese? [Indistinct].

Remember I talked about Walter Rodney and the press and Nkrumah? One of the things [indistinct]. But last year, before they phased it out—if you look at the [indistinct]—can you imagine every year Howard University was sending back to South Africa people who had skills with one company? That's—that's amazing about the city.

Howard historically—both hadn't seen happen. I think under Marion Barry, a lot of things happened. [Indistinct]

Marion Barry is key, and this is why: if you look at all the transportation stuff going on, there's this erasure. You don't want a situation where you look up, and you can't find anything named after Marion Barry. If you look at the Reeves building, Marion Barry is responsible for that.

Because, as I go back to what I talked about earlier this year—the riots—when the riots happened in '68 and U Street was all burned down, Marion Barry said, "Okay, we're gonna put this [Frank] Reeves building here."

Now, to show the Black Arts connection: Reeves was the lawyer defending Langston Hughes during the McCarthy period.

So there is a connection between Busboys and Poetry. I don't think you noticed that, but—there is a connection between [indistinct] because Reeves was defending Langston in 1950. I mean, nobody probably makes that connection. I think it's interesting.

But what happens is, Marion Barry is key in terms of support. And I remember the last thing I had with Marion Barry was when we invited him to a National Poetry Month event. You know how these politicians come and just show up to read and leave for the show. But Marion Barry, he's gonna be whole—like an open mic. "Hey man, somebody else wants to read."

And what was so beautiful was, the guy I was sitting next to [indistinct]. He was head of this Navy unit and he and Marion Barry had this discussion. Because this is the one thing that Marion Barry had. He's a people person and that's something you can't take away. Marion Barry gave people jobs in the city and that's why people love Marion Barry. [Indistinct]

Marion Barry—because I feel that Marion Barry never stole, you know, like [indistinct]. Because if somebody wants some Chicago Bulls tickets—maybe because we got bad tickets and nobody wants to—you may go to jail because you bought somebody some Wizard tickets or 76ers tickets.

Marion Barry may have had addiction stuff like that and I even put that in a larger context.

When you look at the people from SNCC—the fear of losing people. The bond is there. To me, that's probably the same way if you went to Vietnam, and we know people, you know, went through that.

Well, how do I deal with it? I mean, we're here, and Frank Smith—and I remember listening to Frank Smith talking about when he left SNCC, he wound up coming up to [indistinct]. They just needed a place to cool out. I mean, you know, that's activism. Activism will burn you out.

And I think that Marion Barry— you need to hear those stories. I mentioned this—take my name again and Google it with Dana Flor. She did the film *The Nine Lives of Marion Barry,* and I interviewed her. She talked about making that film and also how Marion Barry responded to it. Very, very interesting [indistinct]. You know, it's just very, very important being tuned to that movie.

But I always mention Marion Barry. My wife is very close to Effi Barry because they worked at the hospital together. I also might have been at the second Black Family Day, [indistinct] was responsible and I was in charge of the tent bringing people in. My tent was Effi Barry's. At that time, I wanted her to address the issue of raising a child in the public view because all the stuff was going on about Marion Barry, and she was raising Christopher [Barry]. I wanted her to speak publicly about that.

That woman had a tremendous amount of grace. But you can't take away what he meant for the city, especially for art and culture. It wasn't something in terms of a place of passion, and that's why you have the Mayor's Arts Awards. You know, I'm proud. For example, I think it was '78 in terms of [indistinct]. But that's Marion Barry.

And I don't forget that, nor do I forget the Sterling Brown [indistinct]. But you have to mention these names, because right now, when you're looking around for topics to do a term paper on, there's a need to focus on Washington history. Okay, that's what's missing.

I've been working with people at the Washington Historical Society. There's just a need for how to systematically direct people to say, "Okay, I want to look at jazz in DC. I want to look at this." And there's so much to do. I mean, you just can't be doing nothing for 19 years. It's just—you know, there's a lot.

I mean, you go around with all these cultural troves inside the city. There's a clue, and I'm probably tied to those sites. You see, all the history—I'm tied to that too. What happens is that I'm one of the founders of the Humanities Council, and cultural troves come out of the Humanities Council.

And so, there are a lot of these ideas where I was thinking about what we documented. You know, this is what I was very much involved in. But there's a lot of work that needs to be done, and we're not doing the heavy lifting.

Faculty Member: Certainly want to get to the student questions, but I just have to ask about C.L.R James in DC, how influential he was in that 70s period in the development of the Pan-African movement out of DC.

E. Ethelbert Miller: C.L.R. James is very important. If you want to know everything about C.L.R. James, just go to the show that I did last week on WPFW. Go to wpfwfm.org, go to archived shows, and then scroll down to last Thursday.

I had a meeting with Paul Buhle, and Paul reminded me that I had a lot to do with that because of Sterling Brown—as I mentioned in the interview. I first encountered Sterling Brown when he was teaching a class on Pan-Africanism for the African Studies Department.

Okay, so that might have been around 1970. I remember my roommate, Reggie Hudgens, was in that class. That's how I got pulled in. Reggie Hudgens got up and asked a question, and Mr. James said, "Mr. Hudgens, please tell the class about the role of the police."

He said, "they're not here to protect people… they're here to protect property." The whole thing was very, very specific. But you know, what I've been documenting with Aldon Nielsen, the first Larry Neal Prize winner.

I've been interviewing Aldon Nielsen for over a year now. He was at Federal City College, okay? He became very much a C.L.R. James person. He's written a lot about C.L.R. James.

I knew C.L.R. James when he was living in Chastleton on 16th Street. What I would do is go and bring Mr. James his books. Everybody said [indistinct].

And I remember it was a big argument. It probably changed because it was [indistinct]. There was a big argument because, at that time, Ntozake [Shange's] *For Colored Girls* was very, very controversial.

You know, Donna Lee, for example, was organizing protests in Chicago against that play. A lot of it had to do with Beau Willie dropping the kids out the window. Everybody thought it was anti-male. All this stuff was going on.[14]

And, you know, C.L.R. James was here, reading that material, okay? And that was a thing where he had an impact prior, directly, on many people who helped with organizing the Sixth Pan-African Congress.

So you're talking about Sandra Hill, Sylvia Hill, Kathy Flewellen, Cecily [indistinct] —a lot of individuals were here. And that's just the thing. In terms of C.L.R. James, I mentioned that in the interview I remember being on the stage at Cramton Auditorium, where it's me, Leon Damas, and C.L.R. James, you know, and I never forgot that. Each one of those individuals—I had a direct relationship with too.

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[14] Ntozake Shange's 1976 play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, was groundbreaking but also controversial, especially for its depiction of Black male violence, symbolized by Beau Williedropping his children out of a window. Critics, including Donna Lee, organized protests against the play, arguing it was anti-Black male. The debate reflects broader tensions within the Black Arts Movement over representations of gender, masculinity, and intra-community struggles.

If you don't know, Leon Damas is the father of Négritude [literary movement]. And it's very important, if you are studying the Harlem Renaissance movement. If you go from the movement and realize it doesn't end there, the message spreads—it skips over a whole generation of young students from the Caribbean and Africa in the 1930s to get this Négritude movement.

Some of those individuals would go to Africa and lead their own independence movement. So you see someone like Léopold Senghor becoming the head of Senegal. So you have this connection. And I was very much aware of it in terms of—this is Damas, you know, what you represent.

Faculty Member: Like Damas who taught at Howard.

E. Ethelbert Miller: And Damas caught hell at Howard because Damas was head of African Studies and some of the folks said, "well he's not African." I mean, these are the things we got, you know.

But Damas would give his last speech at Watha T. Daniel Library. He would say, "It is very important that you listen to Ethelbert Miller." I've got the documentary. He says that.

You know, in preparation for this show I just did on C.L.R. James, I pulled—I have a bad habit of sticking papers and stuff in books. And when I pulled out my C.L.R. James book, there was a number of notes popped out of the book. And some of it was me helping him do his research and stuff when he was in London.

And then, you know, I remember taking my wife to see C.L.R. James. This tells you C.L.R. He always would be in bed with the TV going, like looking at the soap operas, right? And he'd talk to me. Then he turned and talked to my wife and said, "Where do you work? What do you do? Do you have a journal? How many pages in the journal?"

Very specific. The same way, for example, me and James Early would go over when he was at the Chastleton. And these are in the resources, and we interviewed him, okay? And you ask me a question—I remember James going to ask a question:

"Well, Mr. James, you did such and such in 1935—wait, no, it was October 5, 1934." C.L.R. would come in and say, "I'm going to speak for 31 minutes." You don't need to say that. You know he's gonna put his hat on.

And the only other person I've seen do that is Miles Davis. Miles Davis would have the band going until he picked up his hat. Boom. You know.

C.L.R. had that. But what he's saying—he's teaching you that you have to be exact. And this is what I learned. If there's one thing I learned about C.L.R. James that was very helpful to what I was doing traveling outside the United States.

If you asked C.L.R. James a question and you did not formulate it correctly, he did not answer the question until you corrected it. Okay? That is very important.

Now, I'll show you who I saw do this. Dusty Baker, the manager of the Nationals. At one of the games. Mikey Carter asked him a question about why he took a pitcher out, and Dusty said, "why'd you ask me that question? Do you know why you asked me that?"

"I know the answer, but do you know why you asked the question?" You know, it was this teaching moment.

Okay, let me show you what happened. I'm in Saudi Arabia—no, I'm in Iraq. I mean, I'm in Iraq. Someone's doing the interview right there, and the person said, "Mr. Miller, we want to know what you think about the Zionist regime." That's it. That's the question.

I'm overseas. This is what I call a Paul Robeson moment. I know not to criticize U.S. foreign policy overseas. Okay? I learned that from Paul Robeson. And so what happened? I corrected the reporter. I said, "What do you mean by Zionist regime?"

I'll answer if you've got some questions about Israel, but I'm not going to use your definition. I might agree with you, but I'm not going to say that publicly because I know that could be lifted out of context.

And when you go overseas—at least for me—the trips are high level, you know, high-level trips. And so I'm very much aware of what I'm saying, what I'm promoting, what I'm discussing. And that's my advice to you as young activists: when you give interviews, think about how you answer the question.

Interviewer: We're going to take some questions. This question is from Kenya Hall, who's a sophomore English major and philosophy minor from Houston, Texas.

"In your interview with Nibir K. Ghosh, you briefly mentioned W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness theory and the idea that there are more than two consciousnesses or identities. What are your identities, and how do you organize them? Are you Black first, a man, or a poet, etc.?"

E. Ethelbert Miller: I got the idea, you know, and this is where you learn from people that you come in contact with. One person I knew and interviewed was Audre Lorde, and Audre Lorde talks about her many selves. One book I would put on required reading would probably be *Sister Outsider*, which is a very important collection of essays.

And so I saw that. I saw what was happening in terms of—if you pull someone aside today, they may have a triple identity. They may be Muslim, American, Black—that's something we didn't see before. And so we have to be aware of that.

You know, in the same way, for example, it's not just Black and white. Identity is very, very complicated. And this is why, to some extent, we're at a point now where Obama is African American, and you see more people saying, "I'm African American." Or, for example, you come from the West Indies, and your key identity is effectively Jamaican.

What became problematic during the time of the Mexican Revolution [indistinct] everybody was embracing this whole Cuban identity. When the Black Movement was going on in the U.S., and people were hijacking planes and going to Havana, Cuba began to sort of downplay this Afro-Cuban thing because "we're all Cuban." It downplayed that because it seemed very divisive.

We're trying to build one and now people are growing Afros and want to be there. And it isn't until Cuba comes [indistinct] I think, into the invasion of South Africa, and begins to send troops as part of their foreign policy.

And Fidel [Castro], in one of his long speeches, as they're sending troops to the Horn of Africa, begins to say, "This is very important because we can trace the slaves that came over—and going back, now they're going back to defend the country."

So he was able to use that to emphasize something that, in the early days of the Revolution, they had downplayed. Okay? But you can see right here [indistinct].

You know, now, when you look at Black Lives Matter, it's almost the identity of Richard Gardner. The key is that they came out of the labor movement, domestic workers, and the gay movement, okay?

And so, when you talk about Black Lives Matter, you can't just overlook the fact that there are also gay leaders. If you talk to them about it, you'll see that being very much a part of the movement. They're not denying that.

Now, some people following them may have some problems, but they say themselves… if you go to those interviews, okay, don't just pick through it, but read it. This is what they say. They're gay activists too, and they were pretty much doing that before they were doing Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter comes after Ferguson and some of the other events. They were activists before that.

This is very important—when you see the leaders of this movement, you begin to realize that they were connected to other things. And what happens is, some people can't separate it—and they shouldn't.

And then I saw the future when I was [indistinct] an older Black woman, and she turned to me and said, "I'm Christian. You know." You know how you said what you said.

You're AKA, you know, for example, you go someplace, and in your sorority, you say, “I’m Omega.” You might be Black here, but you’re Omega ‘til you die.’ So, because that is a key part you play. That’s a key part, you see.

And the complexity of it—it isn’t that simple, you know. And then it fluctuates. You know, if you go back to the 1970s, what we’re talking about—on the cover of *New York Magazine* around 1970. A fair skinned Black woman with a big afro on the cover [indistinct]. And then, you know, you bring that all the way up to Tiger Woods or whatever you want to do.

But you know, these are the things that define identity, which is ongoing. And then you, as an individual, have to decide what’s going to be good for you. And the key thing—you’ll know when you become a mother or father, okay—what is going to be, how you’re going to raise your child.

Okay, if you’re a Muslim family right now, that can be a problem. Your girl, your daughter, may not want to wear a hijab, okay? You have some people—they don’t want to speak Spanish, you know—all these things, they downplay that part of their identity, especially if you’re in some small town in Idaho.

You know, you might be Mohammed, but it’s Frank today. You know Donald. But these are the things that you have to deal with. And it’s fluid, you see? If you look at identity, just look within our community at how names have changed.

We came as African then when we wanted to stay here, that shifted. It became 'colored,' then 'Negro,' then 'Afro-American,' then 'African American,' then 'Black.' All those terms, at any particular time, represent a different level of consciousness. And it’s not going to be static.

Do you see right now how many people are saying they’re Black Republicans? They want jobs. [Indistinct]. You will see, all of a sudden, that emerging of being Black Republican and being now. What is that thing with Ben Carson? [Indistinct].

But these are the things that have a lot to do with identity. Because when you go back to when I was coming up, identity was centered around these terms. We knew who the Negroes were, okay? We knew who the Negroes were. So, those terms were very political. They had a lot to do with identity—who we thought to identify with.

That’s why somebody— “oh, Clarence Thomas, he’s a Negro.” And *Emerge* magazine would put [indistinct]. But what happens is, that’s still there. And you have to make sure, as young people, you don’t lock people in, in negative ways.

And that’s the thing, in terms of any type of label. Your identity is very fluid, just like the music.

Interviewer: We have just enough time for maybe one or two questions from the floor, but you'll have to step up to ask your questions because of audio. And maybe you would oblige us with some poetry before you close us out after the questions?

Student: We wanted to have poems that you've written that embodied the feeling of being in DC during the time period that we're discussing.

E. Ethelbert Miller: You know what happened, to show you? When I'm at Howard University. When I'm a student at Howard University, my first poetry reading is at All Saints Church. The people I'm reading with are Callen Rogers, [indistinct]. That was my introduction in terms of my first year. I'd sit in the dorm, and I was reading poetry in the city.

But as I moved on—as I left the campus of Howard University and moved into the city—I wound up living in [indistinct]. Many people who knew me back then were from El Salvador and Nicaragua, and my work completely changed.

So if somebody says, "Okay, what's the work that you were writing in DC?" A lot of it was about Central America. It got so much that I remember having a reading at a Black church, and I had just got done reading my work. And, you know, I was looking at the audience, and they were like, "What's going on?" I said, "Well I've got to find [indistinct]."

But, you know, when I look at my work and how the city has affected me, it affected me because I was interacting with that part of DC. I interacted with El Salvadorias. A lot of my poems about El Salvador got translated into Spanish. Some young kids—some of the schools I go into—my work is there. That's my DC work.

You know, I've written pretty much my memoir, which describes DC a lot more. You know, because this is my home, I write about my children. I see my children as an opportunity. I wrote a piece for *The Hill Rag* called *Fathering Gentrification,* and I felt that my daughter has to be the type of person that this city keeps.

And I say that because my daughter went to Edmund Burke, a private school [indistinct].

I'm glad she's there because her consciousness is one—and this is what I did—I went and said to many people I know in the legal field, "I want my daughter to sit on these panels, [indistinct] you have to make this difference."

Now, of course, what happens is she's a little more conservative. But what's happening now is, because she has a son, she's really dealing with the school situation. And so I've been writing about that in terms of the city.

My son now is working in one of the DC high schools. He came back to DC to work in education. And so, you know, I'm seeing [indistinct] and those are interesting, and I'm trying to write about that.

And so, I think when I think about Washington, D.C., it appears more in my prose and my memoirs than in my poetry.

The other thing I'm probably most proud of in the city of Washington is that there are probably about 12 sites where my work or face is represented. I'm trying to think—it's sort of like a tour.

So, like, if you come out of the Dupont Circle Metro, you'll see my poem on a bench. If you're in front of the Petworth Metro, you'll see my poem on a leaf. The other day, at the Anacostia Arts Center, there's a poem I wrote about Freddie [indistinct]—it's sitting in the back.

You know, you go to Busboys and Poets—that's what we call the big thing. But there are other places, like the homeless shelter and the Casa homes, where they use where people come in. And I'm very proud of my work being that part of the city because I wasn't born here.

This is a home that made me. This is where my children were born. And I want to have that impact on the city. And I want to make sure that if I do that, wherever I'm going, I'm always talking about Sterling Brown, Owen Dodson. Because I don't want their work to be forgotten.

And it happened. I mean, right now, I'm 66 this month, and when I go down and look at some of the posters from the writers' conferences—say, starting with like '72, '73—most of the people on them are gone. I'm like one of the living because I was only 22 or 24.

But it's amazing how many people are deceased now. And as scholars, you have to make sure you begin to do the critical work. Don't do another article or paper on Nikki Giovanni or Mary Evans or somebody who's already extensively studied. There's a whole bunch of people that we need.

And I'm doing that. I just got finished doing a long article on June Jordan. Alicia Garza [co-founder of Black Lives Matter organization], for example. Alicia Garza has a June Jordan poem as a tattoo. So when she was here, I told her, "Alicia, you know I edited that poem."

[Indistinct] I thought the ending was very corny, you know. And he took the ending, you know. But all of this is in our letters that [indistinct]. So, anybody who's doing a thing on June will see those letters.

And we're one of the people—like, if I go to these poems, there are a number of poems that, when you pick up my book, [indistinct]. So, I would encourage that.

But in terms of DC poetry, I really don't have it, but I do have some work that I find very important. And maybe I'll read one that might be instructional. I think this is a better one because it's not lyrical—it's in five sections. And I think, if I can link anything together with all of us doing this poem, okay, I'll break it down by section, because I know this has happened to you.

It's called *Five Shards of Whiteness Cutting into Black.*

One. An empty seat next to a Black person on a crowded bus. White people standing, but not too close. Welcome to the fear of sitting. You know how you're on the bus—you sit there, and nobody sits next to you. And then, someone else sits down, and they don't say anything. But that's one.

Two. Coins dropped from white hands into Black hands. Thank God for gravity—it keeps one from touching. You know, one time, you were smaller, and an owner would not want to touch your hand. They'd drop the coins, or they'd throw change at you. You know. I might, you know—and that's one. I'd say, "Don't ever go back there." You know.

Three. Black bodies waiting patiently in line in front of a counter. Suddenly, a white person arrives and goes to the front of the line. No excuse, no acknowledgment. Black anger is a red-hot coal—just stand back and don't get burned.

Four. No matter how intelligent the Black words are, the white ears will only talk about the rhythm, the sound of it, that dancing sound, or that drum, that banjo in those plantation days. Creative writing class, right? So you leave Howard and you enrolled in a creative writing program for X amount of money, right? You're in your little class, and for three weeks, white kids and people are sharing their work, and you get into the structure analysis, and then you share your work, and there's a little silence. And then someone said, I like how you read that. It's filled with a lot of rhythm.

Now, this is the one I like the most.

Five. In a business room, a Black voice speaks and makes several excellent points. Seconds later, a white voice explains what the Black voice is trying to say. Everyone listens to the echo.

If you're successful and business people and corporate, this is going to happen to you. You could be chairing the meeting. It happens all the time. So that's, you know, I don't – you know, I'm not making this up. You might leave here. You gotta take a bus, and this will happen, you know? And it's like, when you go to the shop, you have to stand in a line, when you're in a meeting, you see. And this thing was different. One of the things which is so funny is Barack Obama's very first press conference. But what happened is his first press conference, he comes in and when everyone stands up, he goes "woah."

I mean, small things like that are funny. But when you get other things, you know—where somebody's going to yell while he's giving the State of the Union, "you lie." You don't respect the office, you see? But these are things that sometimes you go out, you're professional, and you're disrespected. And your whole day is messed up.

You go shopping for your family, you get your groceries, and an incident like that happens. And that's what you go home talking about—not the fact that your food is fresh or whatever, but the fact that this happened to you. Or you're heading up an organization, and this is how you're treated.

And that's the thing when we talk about why you should study Afro-American Studies, or things like that. It's so that you can survive your day-to-day. You know, it's not like you've got to quote Du Bois every minute, but it's about learning how to navigate these things every single day.

And you have to do it in terms of the people coming after you, and we're here [indistinct]. See me. I'm here today because in the midst of a student protest, [indistinct]. You go back to your room and you'll say, we didn't see you down there for that. That gave you that moral confidence, okay? And don't compromise it with any foolishness. You have to know.

And there's a time when you have to be like a [indistinct] to drop out of school and change America. You have to know when that comes. I knew I wasn't gonna shoot somebody.

You have to be tested around it. And one of the most beautiful things is, when you look up [indistinct]. It was at my desk. I knew, as [indistinct] they're going to disrupt Charter Day, but Bill Cosby's speaking, and I said to her, and me being older, I say, "don't mess with the negros pageantry."

[Indistinct] robes he's going to disrupt, because you have a problem, you know, with that.

No, and I had saw a year before, a student I was mentoring, brilliant brother. He decided [indistinct] him and one other guy decide they were going to disrupt Charter Day. Now nobody knew what was going on in Liberia.

But these two guys, do you know that that brother disrupted Charter Day, and he lived in the hall when he got back? And so I was trying to advise April on [indistinct]. They did it. They were successful, you know. And that's why, sometimes in your movement, you have to do what's right, but you have to have a moral compass, and you have to filter that out.

And your mentors may help you figure that out, but that's one of the things I've always felt about being at Howard—your first two weeks can be key, because you can fall in with the worst crowd.

I fell in—I fell in with the military system, okay? Then I also fell in with the people who wanted to run for student government. And the best thing that happened to me was losing the elections.

Yeah, you see how Hillary Clinton lost the election? That was me, you know [indistinct], I lost to Charlie Goodman.

And it was the best thing that happened to me, because if I had won that election, I probably would've ended up in the Black Caucus or something. I've seen government leaders, you know—Black Caucus.

But anyway, in the end, I had a nice time here. And if I can help anybody, let me know.