

Mr. WARREN: This is Tape #1 of the second interview with Ralph Ellison, June 17 - proceed. You say that many Southerners have been imprisoned by the feeling of a necessity of loyalty - of a necessity of being Southern, and that is clearly true. Now, there's a remark often made about Negroes, that they are frequently imprisoned, or the genius of the Negro is imprisoned in the race problem - in the focusing on the race problem. I am concerned with a kind of a parallelism here between these two things. Do you mind, if you have anything to say on that topic, exploring that a little bit?

Mr. ELLISON: Well, I think that the parallel is very much there - very much a reality - that on the one hand the - well, let's put it this way - just looking at it as a sort of legend, and this comes to mind because I am right in the process of reading Calvin Trilling's piece on the Mardi Gras in New Orleans, where he's done a piece really on the Zulu king, and you get this process going on, and now there's a - well, since 1961 there's been a great confusion in the Negro community over whether the Mardi Gras Zulu - King Zulu - should continue. Now, we know that there is an area in Southern experience where whites and Negroes achieve a sort of human communication, and even social intercourse, which is not always possible or always present in the North. I mean, that's the human side. But at certain moments a reality which is political and social and ideological and so on asserts itself, and so the human relationship

breaks up and people fall into these abstract roles. That's a great loss of human energy goes into maintaining our executive roles. In fact, much of the imaginative energy - much of the psychic energy of the South among both whites and blacks I think has gone into this particular negative art form, if I may speak of it that way.

RFW: Just the strain of maintaining this stance?

RE: I think so. I think that - because in the end, when the barriers are down, there are human assertions to be made, there are - in terms of one's own taste and one's own affirmations of one's own self, one's own way of life, and this is a big problem for Negroes. There is much about Negro life which Negroes like, just as we like certain kinds of Negro food. The dieticians might not care for it, but it satisfies our taste and it fulfills all of the other overtones, all of the references, all of the - well, let's put it this way, it expresses a ~~existence~~ culture and it expresses us, and that's good enough. And one of our problems now is going to be to affirm those things when there is no longer any pressure there saying, well, all right, you're no longer kept within a Jim Crow community, what are you going to do about this? Do you think that there is some form of life which is more enriching, do you think that there is going to be a way of enjoying yourself which is absolutely better than this, you see. It's a matter of finding a human core after the fighting has stopped. And I think that this holds for whites, it certainly shows up in the white Southerners, the mountain people who turn up in Chicago. They have a real problem there. They feel they are

alienated, their customs and mores are in conflict with those of the big city just as ours were and still are as we come to the North, and the problem is to affirm and finally to affirm without being contentious about it.

RPW: To affirm in a simply pluralistic society, without -

RE: Yes, without any value judgments being negative or positive being placed upon it. I watch other people enjoying themselves, I watch their customs and I think it one of my great privileges as an American, as a human being living in this particular time in the world's history to be able to project myself into various backgrounds, into various patterns, not because I want to cease being a Negro, not because I think that these are patently ways of conducting oneself or extending oneself, but because it is a privilege, it's one of the great glories of being an American. You can be somebody else while still being yourself. And one of the advantages of being a Negro if we'll ever recognize it, is that we can do this, and we have always done it. We have always had the freedom to choose or to select, to reject and to affirm that which we have taken from any and everybody.

RPW: In a paradoxical way it's a bit more fluid than anyone else - the situation of anyone else in the -

RE: That's right. It's been more fluid and we had no particular investments, once we left the Negro community and being snobbish behind. You know, we say, well - it's like Louis Armstrong when he

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talks about teaching somebody to play jazz. I think he's talking about teaching a few things when they were on the river boats, - these two young men. Well, he was speaking very much as jazz musicians spoke when I was a kid. They were delighted when anyone liked the way they played music. I mean, that was the point. You like this, this is a celebration of something we feel, you feel it, well, all right, we're all here together. And I think that this has been basic to the Negro situation, and it isn't recognized by sociologists and by journalists who consider that Negroes have no choice. If anything within the world beyond the restrictions of social movement and political movement and economic opportunity, we probably have more freedom than anybody.

RPW: This would relate - or would it? - to the - some concept of the Negro's position as primarily existential in a world where - where this applies to lessons we other Americans say.

RE: Yes. Well, I think that this is a basic -

RPW: A purer existence.

RE: Yes. And this is a basic American situation. It depends upon what you want to take, how you want to use your life, and what assertions you want to make. Well, with us, we had this blocked out area in which we could live on a social level and a political and an economic level -

RPW: Here is a matter of just a tactical concern. I know some people Ralph, white people or Negroes, who would say to what you are saying that this is the current apology for a segregated society. Of course

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it's not. I know that. I know it's not. Who would say that it is - it works that way. Just as you're saying - some Negroes say the challenge of segregation made me develop whatever force I have, and are called immediately apologists for segregation. How do you answer such a charge? How would you answer such a charge?

RE: Well, there's no answer to such a charge beyond this, is that if I am -

RPW: If a damned fool is a damned fool you can't change him.

RE: You can't change him. If one thinks that by asserting reality that is, - which is another way of saying, asserting my humanity - by recognizing what my life is like, by recognizing what my possibilities are like, and by the way I'm not for one minute pretending that the restrictions of Negro life do not exist, but I'm on the other hand trying to talk about how Negroes have achieved a very rich humanity under these conditions. Now, if I can't recognize this or if recognizing this makes me an Uncle Tom, then Heaven help all of us. I know, in the first place, that there has been the necessity for Negroes to find other ways of asserting their humanity than in terms of political or military force. I mean, this - we were outnumbered, we still are, and this did not cow us as a lot of people like to pretend. It imposed a discipline upon us and we see that discipline now bearing fruit in the Freedom Marches and so on, and the willingness of little children and old ladies to take chances, that is, to walk up against violence. This is an expression not of

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people who are suddenly freed of something, but people who have been free all along.

RFW: How do you relate this, Ralph, either positively or negatively to the notion that the Negro movement of our time - is a discovery of identity?

RE: I don't think it's a discovery of identity. I think it's an assertion of identity. And it's an assertion of a pluralistic identity. The assertion in political terms is that of the old American tradition. In terms of identity it's revealing the identity of people who have been here for a hell of a long time.

RFW: You know the line, of course, that you find the extreme expression in Black Muslimism - just, you know, along that line - about I'll teach you who you are and therefore you become - for the first time yourself and become real. And the same line is followed by many psychological curlicues and elsewhere. And I was just trying to get your statement about this continuity as related to that notion.

RE: Well, my notion of the American Negro life is that it has developed beyond any restrictions imposed upon it, historically, politically, socially, economically, because human life cannot be reduced to these factors, no matter how much these factors can be used to organize action, to prevent action. That's something else. But Negroes have been Americans since before there was a United States, and if we're going to talk at all about what we are, this has to be recognized,

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and if we're going to say this, then the identity of Negroes is bound up intricately, irrevocably, with the identities of white Americans, and this is especially true in the South.

RFW: It is, indeed.

RE: There's no Southerner who hasn't been touched by the presence of Negroes. There's no Negro who hasn't been touched by the presence of white Southerners. And of course this extends beyond. It gets - the moment you start touching culture you touch music, you touch popular culture, you touch movies, you touch the whole damned structure, and the Negro is right in there helping to shape it.

RFW: Now, what about another notion that's sometimes in this connection, that the tradition of slavery and the disorganized quality of much Negro life after Emancipation, meant the loss of role or the man. Patriarchy was the rule, or at least more than the ordinary man, you know, bossed family. How does your line of thought relate to that so-called fact anyway?

RE: Well, I'm willing to recognize or to agree with the findings of the sociologists, the historians, that the Negro woman has been a very very strong force in the Negro family. I'm also willing to say that the disorganizing effects of the - well, of slavery, and of the lack of opportunities for the Negro male has made for a modification of the Negro family structure - I mean, of the - yes, of the family structure. But I am not willing to go as far as the sociologists go, who would set up a rigid norm, you see, for the Negro family or

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for the - usually what they're talking about - white Protestant family - and say that this is the only type of family which is positive. I know that some of the most tyrannical heads of families are Negro men. I also know that some of the most patriarchal and benign heads of families are Negro men. This too is true, you know. I guess I'm one of the few - let's see, my father's father was a - but my father's father was a slave.

RFW: That close?

RE: That close, you see. Now, what are they talking about? My grandfather, Alfred Ellison, was known as a stern father. He was a man who was respected in South Carolina, and I guess if the oldtimers are still there, black or white, they will talk about Uncle Alfred because he was a man of character who had insisted upon certain things. In fact, he insisted so hard that my father ran off when he was a teenager to join the American army. On the other hand, now, my father died when I was three years old, and my mother stood in for us. Now, I was never made to feel neglected. I felt sometimes ashamed that we didn't have a father, but I knew my father, I knew him very well. But my mother sacrificed and worked to keep the unit to the family. That is, part of the strength which she had gotten and she did not come out of a broken family. She knew her father. She was part of a big family with a Negro man at the head of it. So so much of this seems to be abstracted from the continuity of life when you put it in a historical perspective.

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RPW: It's hard to know what the statistics would be - I have observed in a very limited way what it's worth - that time after time in talking with, well, Negroes I've interviewed in this series of things, that a very strong reference to a father or a father-presence is in these cases of people who have a strong personality, a strong driving personality.

RE: Yes. Well, that is true, I admit. The other things to be said - and this is the other side of the disorganization which did exist - but you always had this - all these guys who were around - not guys - these were men - these were respectable men in the community - who always went to - at least went through the ritual of being concerned for the orphans and the widow women. And these women had a special status. They did try to look out for them. Some of these were uneducated men, some of them were professionals, but that too was a part at least of Oklahoma City, the Negro community there. The first two boys who were signed up to go on the encampment, the first encampment that the Negro community got together for the boys, were Herbert and Ralph Ellison, my little brother and me, because they were doing this for the community, and they looked out for those people who -

RPW: Because you were orphans?

RE: We were orphaned. I mean, that was the idea. And they respected my father, they knew what he was like, and they knew what my mother was like. Now, I'm willing - make a little leap here - all of this talk about the dominance of the Negro woman - and the Negro woman can be awfully strong - there's no doubt about this. She had to be, given

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the circumstances. But when you look at the rise in importance of the white woman - I'm not going to talk about the Jewish family, which is very often matriarchal - the German immigrant family, which again is often matriarchal - the Italian family, which you know even in Rome, no matter how the father is there, how much his presence, that old lady is the one who is asserting a hell of a lot of power - now, in the United States, we talk about the rise of the importance of women in financial organizations, they own more stocks, they do more this, that and the other - they have been behind many of the important reform movements and so on - this just brings the circle around as far as I'm concerned. Maybe it's a male conceit that the man has a force within the family which dominates - in the white family, which dominates that of the woman. I doubt this very seriously.

RFW: I think you're right. Let me cut into some matters of American history, some American figures for a moment. Could you give a - sort of a character sketch, an estimate of, say, Thomas Jefferson?

RE: Well, Thomas Jefferson was a most sophisticated man of his times, an idealist given over to, I guess, a great concern with human possibility, drawing upon all the thought of European political philosophers who set out with his colleagues to build a better way of life in this country. He was limited by the realities of his time, by the system of government and the necessities of production, which included slaves, and a number of other things. He was a politician. We tend

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to forget this too about him.

RFW: If he hadn't been he would have been in another line of work.

RE: He would have been in another line of work, and it's part of the fate of the politician to be involved - very deeply involved in moral compromise. There's a lot being said about Jefferson's theories of Negro humanity and so on -

RFW: That's one of the things I'm getting at - how that - what weight you give to that or what perspective do you put it in?

RE: Well, I put it in the perspective of history, of human history, and exactly that. I don't care whether he liked Negroes or not - I mean, that isn't important. What is important, it seems to me, is that he helped set up the Constitution. Now, as long as I have the Constitution I have the possibility of asserting myself and not depending upon any paternalistic ideas which Jefferson might have held or might not have held. You cannot demand too much of any human being. He moves out of his own historical circumstances, he moves in terms of his own personal life, he moves out of a complex of motives and ideals and frustrations and cowardices and heroisms which is faced by anyone who is lucky enough to get in a position of making important policy. But one thing is certain. This man stood for the right things on the human level. His concept of human possibility was broad - in fact, it was noble. If he couldn't quite see some of my own people mixed in this, included in this, that's too bad. But the fact of it is that his efforts - and I think I'll probably live to

see the day when the University of Virginia will be an instrument - an institution which help extend the possibility of Negroes within Virginia. All you can ask is that a man do what he sees to be done as well as he can. I think that Jefferson did this.

RFW: Let's switch to another kind of character - John Brown. How do you read him, Ralph, as - psychologically and ethically and historically?

RE: Well, I think that John Brown was demonic - I prefer to use that term than to call him a lunatic - you know, he was popular and still is among certain people. I rather like the idea of Brown which turns up in Faulkner's *The Bear*, a man who was utterly impractical and perhaps was a little off his beam. But he was dedicated to a certain ideal and tried to put it into operation, and thereupon showed himself up to be a most unpolitical man. He had absolutely no idea of how to make a revolution and completely misread the nature of slavery as far as the slave sense of timing and the slave's sense of what was possible at the time. I think that there is a certain grandeur about him in terms of his willingness to pay the price for what he believed in, and I think there's a certain nobility about his last speech.

RFW: His whole demeanor in the last phase is extraordinary. How it becomes that is a story that nobody knows, but it is extraordinary.

RE: I wonder about this. Was he always that eloquent?

RFW: No - no. What about Lee? How do you read him?

RE: I read him, again, as a man who was caught within the contradic-

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tions of a system in which he was born and loyal to people among whom he grew up and who somehow - and this is difficult for me, although I tend to understand it - but - well, let's put it this way - regionalism - I'll use that term - always puzzles me when it goes beyond - at least when it asserts values which it considers as primary to those of the country at large. And I'm phrasing that very badly -
RPW: I don't think so. I mean, it's perfectly clear. And it's a question of how much history you put into this, I suppose. I mean, what Virginia could mean now and Virginia could mean then appear to be very different things.

RE: From what it would mean now. I can understand, nevertheless, that the - the contradiction.

RPW: End of Tape #1 on June 17 with Ralph Ellison. Proceed.

(end of tape)