A Conversation *with* Ossie Davis

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On November 3, 1999, the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University hosted a public conversation with Ossie Davis. Davis's lifelong work as an actor, writer, director, producer, and activist helped shape and transform the artistic, social, and political landscape throughout the late twentieth century. Davis discussed his history of commitment, his history of struggle, and his history of achievement.

Ossie Davis was born in 1917 in Cogdell, Georgia. He graduated from Center High School in 1934 and went on to attend Howard University the following year. He began his career as a writer and as an actor with the Rose McClendon Players in Harlem in 1939. He has most recently appeared in films such as Dr. Doolittle *with Eddie Murphy,* Get On the Bus *with Spike Lee,* I'm Not Rappaport *with Walter Matthau, and* 12 Angry Men *for Showtime and on the CBS television series* Promised Land. *In 1946, Ossie Davis made his Broadway debut in Jeb. Roles in* The Wisteria Trees, Green Pastures, Jamaica Ballad for Bimshire, *and* The Zulu and the Zayda Anna Lucasta *followed. After making his film debut in* No Way Out *in 1950 with Sidney Poitier, Davis appeared in such films as* The Cardinal, The Hill, *and* The Scalphunters. *In 1970, he directed his first feature film,* Cotton Comes to Harlem. *He went on to direct four other feature films, including* Black Girl *and* Countdown at Kusini.

Davis's first appearance on the small screen was in the title role of the 1965 television production of The Emperor Jones. *He received Emmy award nominations for his work in* Teacher, Teacher; King; *and, most recently,* Miss Evers' Boys. *He has been a regularly returning player in the series* With Ossie and Ruby, B. L. Stryker, Evening Shade, *and* The Client. *Together, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee have produced a number of television specials, including* Today Is Ours, Martin Luther King: The Dream and the Drum, *and two segments of* A Walk Through the Twentieth Century with Bill Moyers. *Davis has received innumerable honors, including the NAACP Image Award and the National Medal of Arts. He is also the author of several children's books, including* Escape to Freedom. *He and Ruby Dee recently marked their fiftieth wedding anniversary with the publication of* With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together.

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Davis Discusses Life with Ruby Dee.
Photo by Delphine Fawundu.

Dr. Manning Marable: *Two generations ago, the artist who best personified the integrity and courage of the black freedom movement was Paul Robeson. Mary McLeoud Bethune called Robeson "the tallest tree in our forest." For our generation, the artist who is the tallest tree in our forest is with us tonight. Please welcome Ossie Davis.*

Ossie Davis: Paul Robeson, indeed, was a magnificent tree. I'm still somewhat of a stump, but I'm working on it. I owe a great deal to Manning. I have for a long time. This time to share with you gives me an opportunity to say that. Manning is on the front lines with what's happening, with our needs, what's the play, and what we should be doing now. He's giving the talks, he writes, he lectures, he gives me the stuff I need in so many ways. So I came tonight, in part, to say, "Thank you so much for the help you continue to give me as an individual."

I could spend the whole evening talking to you meaningfully about a young poet and writer who sits on death row tonight, Mumia Abu Jamal. I could talk to you about why I think he is such a great "target," why they hate him, and why they think he must be permanently removed. I could also talk to you about the new honor bestowed upon me. I've just been elected the chairman of the board at the Apollo Theater Foundation. When I went to receive my honor, my wife, who is a good friend of mine as well as a critic, told me, "Ossie, I want you to do me one favor." I said, "What is that?" "When Charlie Rangel passes you the gavel, I want you to sit down and hit yourself on the head." Which is what I should do for taking on additional commitments.

The Apollo Theater: The Real Black Church

There is a reason why the Apollo is important to me. As a matter of fact, I'd like to explain why it means so much to me. After graduating from Howard University in April 1939, I came to New York in search of the old Rose McClendon Players. My time with the McClendon Players was one of my greatest experiences at the time. Another great memory that I have of this time period was of a little man who, in my eyes, was also God. His name was Father Divine, and he fed people for fifteen and twenty-five cents a meal, which was enough proof to convince me that he was God. I knew this man really was divine. Additionally, the other thing that was for me just as transforming was an institution called the Apollo.

I have attended many churches, to be sure, but our most important religious institution, in my opinion, wasn't the church. It was the Apollo Theater. The Apollo Theater was such a solid, irrefutable display of Negro expertise and authority and power. It was not like the real black church, where we were supplicants, throwing our miserable selves at the feet of the cross, on the mercy of Jesus Christ, begging His forgiveness with sorrow in our heart and tears in our eyes. No. At the Apollo, we weren't praying to anybody. Power doesn't pray. It doesn't need to. Power is sassy and impudent, it doesn't give a damn about white folks. In the Apollo, it was us, black folks, calling all the shots, not Jesus.

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The Apollo was our conjure, our mojo, our voodoo, our Negro empowerment zone . . . our black magic, in whose hallowed confines we could overcome all enemies, even white folks. Where every week we proved to ourselves and to the world that we had something the rest of the world didn't have and was not only hungry for but desperately in need of—our music! Jazz, blues, boogie-woogie, a new way of flaunting the secondhand culture we were wearing, and a brand-new dance for every change of mood we happened to feel. It was something God-given, which only we, Negroes, could produce—something that gave us power. And power was where we were headed, so help us God!

I still believe that the Apollo, symbolically, represents to us that one statement that may not be challenged. We produced black music, and nobody can take that from us. It's part of our definition as a people. We need something, without argument, in order to value ourselves. So much can be built on the reputation of the Apollo Theater. And it meant so much to me that now I would like to have a chance to give back—thus, I have proudly accepted that position.

Niggerization

I understand that in groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, those who come to participate rise when the occasion calls for it and announce their name and state, "I am an alcoholic." I rise before you now and say, "My name is Ossie Davis, and I am a Nigger." And I want you to understand what I mean by "nigger," and why I thought it was important to confess that fact to you. It's a painful situation, and it's easy to let the material trappings, which might indicate that you have achieved higher social status and position, make us believe that it's all over. I'm no longer crippled, I can fly. I'm equal with everybody else and I have great self-confidence in myself. But the truth of the matter is, I am not. It's simply not that easy.

One of the reasons I wrote the book was because I felt I would have a chance to say something important about blacks, and I've said it on more than one occasion. Of all the people I reference and speak of in the book, and who have given me a great deal of acclaim, in only one section has anybody, once, just raised the question of the process of "niggerization." I would think that would be the most important thing you would want to talk about. Even now we don't really talk too much about being "niggers," it's such a painful thing. The memory is so horrible and we don't want to deal with it. But until we face it, and explicate, and understand thoroughly what it was and what it was not, and get it truly out of our system, we are going to be plagued with it.

You see, today it works differently than it did when I was a young person. Today, we have the trappings of freedom and equality, and society gets us all on the starting line—blacks and whites together. Then, just before the pistol is fired, society whispers mixed messages in our ears. To the white child, it whispers, "He who hesitates is lost." To the black child, it whispers, "Look before you leap." In that slight difference, in that slight moment of hesitation, the game is won or lost. And as long as the counsel from our culture that comes to us is, "Don't dare, don't jump, don't try," we're going to come up with more of our young people in those prisons. So we need to look at this process of "niggerization." Let me describe a little bit how I became aware of the process of "niggerization," as it operated in my life, when I was a little boy.

One day, when I was no more than six or seven years old, I was on my way home from school when two policemen called out to me from their car. "Come here boy. Come over here." They told me to get in the car, I got in, and they carried me down to the precinct. There was no sense of threat or intimidation in them. I was not afraid; neither was I upset. They laughed at me, but the laughter didn't seem mean or vindictive. They kept me there for about an hour. No attempt was made to call my Mama, who might very well have been worried that I had not come home from school. We didn't even have a phone at that time. Anyway, I went along with the game of black emasculation; it seemed to come naturally. Later, in their joshing around, one of them reached for a jar of cane syrup and poured it over my head as if it was the funniest thing in the world. I laughed, too. Then the joke was over. The ritual was complete. They gave me several hunks of peanut brittle and let me go. I ate up the candy right away and went home. I never told Mama or Daddy. It didn't seem all that important. But for whatever reasons, I decided to keep the entire incident to myself. They were just having some innocent fun at the expense of a little "nigger boy." Yet, I knew I had been violated. Something very wrong had been done to me; something I would never forget. This was happening to me at the age of six or seven. The culture had already told me what this was and what my reaction to this should be: not to be surprised; to expect it; to accommodate it; to live with it. I didn't know how deeply I was scarred or affected by that, but it was still a part of who I was.

Now, the process of "niggerization" is always a two-sided one, shared by two consenting individuals, one black, one white. The price of consent exacted from the black person, however, can be his life, livelihood, and all that he holds dear. The ritual is never fixed or certain, but must be renegotiated at every turn. Is that what was happening to me?

After I came to Harlem and tried to be a playwright and then an actor, I wasn't very pleased with myself, because all the plays I promised to write I hadn't written, even after

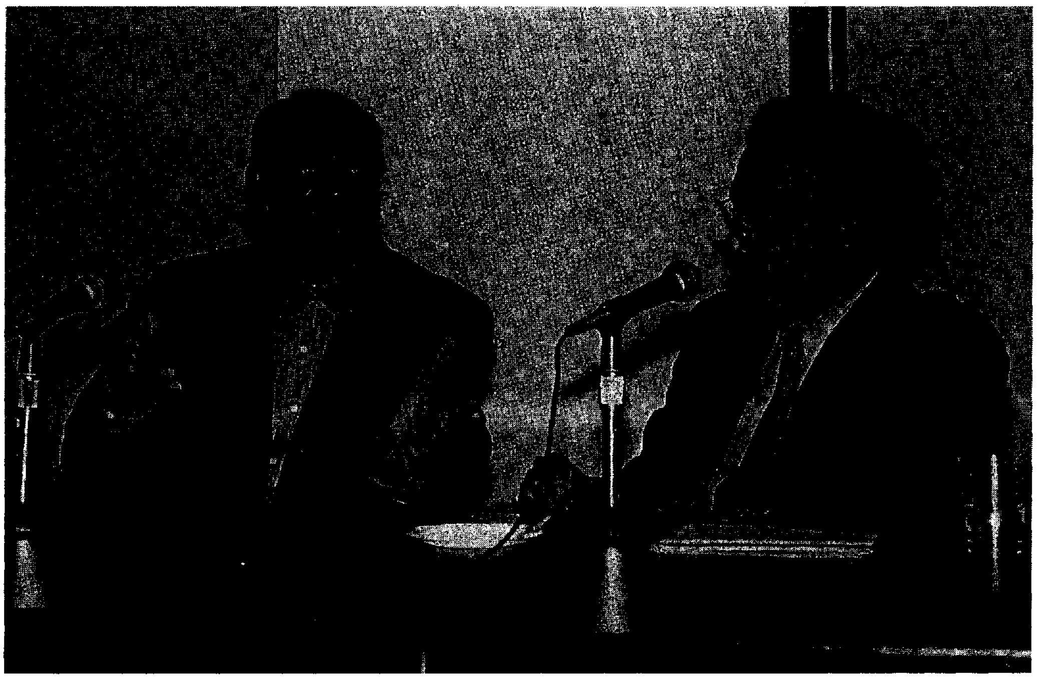
I had been there two years. I was beginning to become very despondent. And I wondered then if somehow the "niggerization" to which I had been exposed had something to do with the fact that I didn't produce. Nobody was stopping me. The libraries were open and I read the books and I wrote the plays, but it didn't work. I wasn't satisfied. Somehow, something whispered in my ear, "Look before you leap," and my caution was enough to kill all the creative possibilities that I had, as a young man, given expression to. Failure and frustration began to take their toll on me, and finally I hit rock bottom, down in the hell that lives in every black man—one base suspicion explaining all the rest. The question gnawing at the edges of his ego, put there by white America before he was born: "Am I, in spite of myself and my church and my teachers and Negro History Week, Karl Marx, and Dr. Du Bois, am I, in spite of them all, am I a nigger?

I went into the war and fought, came out and married, then got involved in the struggle, and one day I found myself and my family in a small hotel in Rome, waiting to be called to go on the set to shoot a film called *The Cardinal,* which was produced by Otto Preminger. I was offered the part of a Negro Catholic priest with a parish in Louisiana who was having trouble with the Klan. The film was to be shot in Rome around Easter time and that turned out to be good news for my family.

Much of the film actor's job is waiting to be called. One day, while I was waiting, already dressed in my priestly garb, Ruby and I decided to bring the family downstairs to have breakfast. The sight of a black Catholic priest openly parading a wife and children was too much. Everything came to a stop as the other patrons stopped and stared. On another occasion, we were sitting in the lobby of the hotel in Rome with our children after having had breakfast; just sitting there, waiting for the call to come. Suddenly, I heard a voice from my past. The voice was Southern, white, angry, superior, female, condescending, and full of complaint. I wanted to turn, to see who was speaking, but somehow I didn't dare. Suddenly, I was sitting there, short of breath and sweating. Ruby, alarmed, asked me what was the matter. I couldn't tell her. I didn't know myself. After a while, I walked over to the reception desk and the voice disappeared, and I was myself again. But Ruby kept pressuring me, wanting to know what was wrong. I was glad I had to go to work; it gave me enough time to try to figure out what had happened to me.

I know the game of nigger and how to play it, as I've played it many times. And I suppose I've played it in self-defense. It is a game in which, to make the white folks happy, you deplore yourself to something that is less than a man. It was a game that denies us power and uses our powerlessness as proof that we are inferior so that no one can consider us a threat. It is a role such as any competent actor might play while the curtain is up and the necessity to survive is the issue at hand. But when the play was over and the curtains were down, he puts the role aside, drops the accent, abandons the limp, removes the makeup, takes off the costume, and again becomes the man he always was.

The art of pretending to really be a nigger is much like that game. In the presence of the supremacist, you do what you have to do in order to survive: You grin, you shuffle, you lie. Most of all, you pretend in important ways to be helpless, absolutely incapable of standing on your own two feet and deferring always to the judgments of the supremacist. This behavior confirms his need to believe that Negroes haven't got sense enough to survive on their own without him. But then, the white man is gone, the way is clear, and the danger is passed, you're supposed to stop your obsequious behavior, take charge of



Ossie Davis and Dr. Manning Marable. Photo by Delphine Fawundu.

your own affairs, and resume your role as a man in your own community. But suppose, when the danger is over and the time comes to take the nigger off your face—like an actor removes his makeup—the face you then reveal is the face of a nigger. Suppose like an onion, the more nigger you peel away, the more you find hiding underneath, layer after layer, until finally suspicion becomes certainty: If ever you were a man, you're not one now, nor will you ever be again. Maybe it was impossible to play at being a nigger without in the end becoming the nigger you played. There I was, safe and sound in the bosom of my family, thousands of miles away from segregation and lynching and the Ku Klux Klan, yet the sound of a woman's accent—a woman who I didn't even know—was enough to make me panic. Paul Laurence Dunbar was right when he wrote "We Wear the Mask." What he didn't say was that, in turn, the mask wears us!

If I owe anything to the young generation, to my own children, to my own grandchildren, it is to explain to them what the "nigger" is; how it came to be; and, most of all, how to get rid of it. Because, as Carter G. Woodson said, "If you can control a man's thinking, you can control his actions." You don't have to tell him to go around to the back door. If he thinks that's where he should go, that's where he will go. And if there isn't a back door back there, he will make one. Because he has been conditioned so to do.

I am no longer a nigger. I grew up to be strong and very stubborn, and finally I was emancipated. I was free. But it was an important part of my journey though life. Although I, too, was a nigger and found these feelings here in America, part of my life has been my response to and my struggle against it. It defined my effort to reclaim whatever was still a "man" in me.

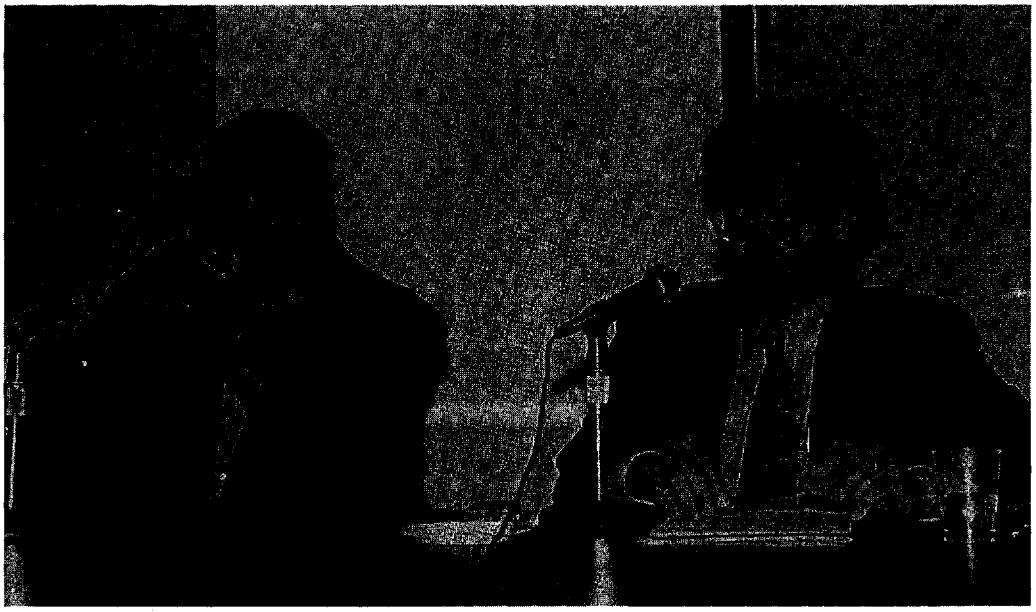
One day, back in 1968, right after Dr. King had been killed, I was with my son in Shreveport, Louisiana. We were making a film in Shreveport. It was a film about slaves, and there were a lot of people in Shreveport who didn't want the film to be made, including the Ku Klux Klan. The only thing was, the Ku Klux Klan needed the income that they generated by working on the film, so they eventually gave in. One morning, my son and I came down to breakfast at the Ramada Inn. And, of course, in the South, grits is a regular part of breakfast. I sat down, and I started eating my grits and bacon and eggs. My son got his grits, and lo and behold, his grits were cold. He rose up and he said, "Hey. My grits are cold! Who put these cold grits here?" It wasn't necessarily a great moment—cold grits. But, you see, all the little girls who had served his plate had that same voice I had heard in Rome, and I started to caution my son. But he wasn't doing anything. He was asking why his grits were cold. He asked with all the masculine authority he could muster. "My grits are cold, god damn it." And I wanted so much to teach my son the "appropriate way" to respond to cold grits. But I caught myself. I said, I will not transmit this poison to my son, and I bit my tongue. And the little girls came, "Yes, these grits are cold," and they took the grits back and heated them up the right way. But for the rest of the time we were there, every morning, when my son came out, all the little girls gave him good business and watched to see that his grits were hot. But to me, the real triumph was that I did not teach my son how be a nigger.

The Howard Years

MM: You attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., at a time when there was an extraordinary collection of black intellectuals as ever existed at any single institution. This whole thing about black public intellectuals is not new. It goes all the way back to black institutions. A short list of Howard faculty in the 1930s included E. Franklin Frazier, Kelly Miller, Sterling A. Brown, Alain Locke, Ernest Just, Ralph Bunche, and Thurgood Marshall. Which of these intellectuals had the greatest impact on both your education and subsequent career. What of the Howard experience has stayed with you over the years?

OD: Two people who had a tremendous influence on me were Sterling A. Brown and Alain LeRoy Locke. Locke was the one who formally introduced me to the theater, to the world of black drama, and hence, ultimately, to myself. I also had a good relationship with Mordecai Johnson, who was president of Howard University at that time. When I came to Howard in 1936, one of the first things I noticed was that Howard University Law School was a night school. It was inadequate at all levels and Johnson felt that we needed access to the best Negro thinkers we could get. He was determined to build a law school from the ground up. He went to the Supreme Court and spoke to the some of the Justices in his efforts to develop the law school. One of the first things that he tried to do was to get rid of the night school. He also named Charles Hamilton Houston, who held a Ph.D. from Harvard, as head of the law school, and it was Hamilton who began to reach out to thinkers such as Thurgood Marshall. It was Howard Law School that developed much of the legal theory that led to civil rights victories in the courts.

What I would like to see Howard University do now is to establish a school of economics, which would do the same thing with economics that the law school did with civil rights. Now, what would the objective be? At the law school, freedom was deemed one of the central American values, and thus civil rights laws were constructed in pursuit of that



Davis Revisits the Activist Era. Photo by Delphine Fawundu.

freedom. What we need now is to push the country to recognize the right to a job with a meaningful income. We've got to change the nature of our society. Howard University did a wonderful thing with civil rights, and I'm still waiting for the same thing to happen with relation to economic rights.

The Activist and the Artist

MM: You arrived in Harlem in the late 1930s, during a time of great social protest with leaders like Adam Clayton Powell Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and Benjamin Davis. You participated in the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" demonstrations right down here on 125th Street. How did your political commitments influence your thinking as a young playwright and actor? How did your work as a young, black artist inform your ideas about political and social change?

OD: The question can only be answered by saying that one thing led to another. I never was able to thoroughly separate my life as an actor, or a director, or anything, from what my life means as an activist. I really had no chance to separate the two—struggle and art were mutually reinforcing forces in my life. The superintendents of the struggle and the applicants for leadership were all living in Harlem when I got there: A. Philip Randolph, James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, Father Divine, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and W.E.B. Du Bois. I, too, felt the call to leadership, but only as an artist. Like Paul Robeson and Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes and Alain Locke and Richard Wright—I wanted to sing my service to my people. But only as a playwright.

Paul Robeson and Political Repression

MM: Throughout the 1950s, there was a fierce level of political repression, and severe restrictions on civil liberties in this country. The battle against this repression was fought, in large part, by individuals such as Paul

Malcolm had invited us to the Audobon that day, but we had a previous commitment downtown and had left the three children in Harlem with Mother. When we returned to pick them up, the kids told us that something had happened to Malcolm. We turned on the television as a bulletin interrupted the ballet. Malcolm X was dead—shot down in front of Betty and the children. We were stunned and deeply, deeply saddened. That night, we drove back into Harlem and walked the streets, mingling and talking with the crowds about Malcolm's death and what it meant to black people.

Fear and sorrow were mixed with a desire to give Malcolm a decent funeral. Percy Sutton, Malcolm's friend and lawyer, went from church to church trying to secure a place for Malcolm's funeral, but most of them said no—it was too dangerous. There was a lot of politics involved and the big challenge was figuring out a way to bury Malcolm in the spirit that the community called for and the spirit he warranted. Finally, Bishop Church offered his small church on Amsterdam Avenue. Sylvester Leakes, speaking for Percy Sutton and Malcolm's family, asked me to give the eulogy and I asked him, "Why me?" The answer was that Ruby and I were widely known to have been among his earliest friends and supporters. Also, I was a man with whom nobody in this shooting argument could quarrel. Ruby and I were honored to accept.

Well, that Saturday, we went to the little Faith Memorial Chapel on Amsterdam Avenue. It wasn't much of a day and I remember there was no sunshine at all. The funeral was at ten o'clock. Ruby and I sat in the pulpit and our job was to read the messages that were pouring in. At the proper time, I arose to give the eulogy, trying to be simple, plain, honest, and sincere, saying by way of farewell what, in my heart, I believed Harlem wanted me to say. Afterward, we followed him to the cemetery where the professional grave diggers were waiting. We said no and took their shovels from them. Malcolm was ours, and if he had to be buried, we would do it. He loved us and we loved him.

Revolutionary Struggle and Activism

MM: You and Dick Gregory served as cochairs of the Committee to Defend the Panthers. In the 1970s, you were the national chairman for the Committee to Defend Angela Davis. After she was acquitted, there was a huge Madison Square Garden rally honoring the occasion but where you spoke behind a bullet-proof barrier. In the 1990s, you remain the most prominent cultural worker, actor, spokesperson to defend the life of Mumia Abu Jamal. This is not something that most actors do. Few prominent artists and actors would have taken and would continue to take controversial public positions as you do. How do you explain this commitment to the struggle?

OD: I do it because, number one, I have to. And number two, the struggle is a great teacher. Struggle contributes to the humanity of the individual. In the struggle, we are always trying to relate to the leadership, to the people who are the theoreticians. Struggle is the essence of the human condition. We're born into it, we choose a battle, pick a battle, get in the line, and march, keep moving.

MM: One of the first times we met, the thing I remember you saying is, "Every generation needs a moral assignment." We have yet to define the moral assignment for ourselves, and what I want to say is that Ossie helps us to define "that moral assignment." His life and his achievements demonstrate that without struggle there can be no progress.