RACISM AS BARBARISM
OR
THE HUMANITIES WITHOUT THE REST OF US

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It is a pleasure to speak at this Humanities Showcase, especially here in the Canaday Center. This place and the Humanities Institute represent our very best. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to share my views and to express my thanks to Professor Roger Ray, the staff of the Humanities Institute, and everyone else involved.

Two years ago I joined the faculty as Professor of Sociology and Director of Africana Studies. I wish I could say that my arrival was purely a function of campus wisdom or my professional academic accomplishments. These were factors, but first and foremost I have to give credit to the political courage and vision of the African American students. Their direct action was the decisive initiative
that got things moving. Though we hear less and less of it
everyday, this is not so unusual. Starting a Black Studies
program seems to require creative social protest. This has
been true at most institutions, including Harvard,
Columbia, and UCLA.

I have chosen as my title "Racism as barbarism, or the
humanities without the rest of us." I will explain this
sound bite of a title via three key concepts: perspective,
voice, and vision. The perspective is freedom, the voice
is Malcolm X, and the vision is of a civilized 21st century.

There is no more fundamental discussion than that
which seeks to distinguish between civilization and
barbarism. Whether we look at it culturally, morally, or
even biologically, most of us have had to consider this
question of civilization vs. barbarism. We have worried
about ourselves, our families, and our neighbors,
schoolmates and coworkers. We have evaluated the folks living down the street and on other continents. We have considered it when we reflect on the past and compare the past with the present. We are constantly called to assess the humanity of ourselves and others.

The cultural wealth that enables us to carry out such an evaluation is all around us. It is encoded in our art, religion, language, and law. It is encoded in our behavior at work, at play, in school, and with family. We use standards to guide us. Upholding standards, we qualify as civilized. And we determine that others are not.

In our institutions of higher education we have formalized this into a set body of texts and works of art that embody these standards. It is on this basis that we establish the humanities, and fashion a curriculum everyone is required to master as a formal standard for being
educated. Indeed, we feel so strong about this process that we see it as being foundational for our civilization.

Any claim to ultimate truth, however, must be tempered a bit. Recall the history of how these foundational texts have changed at critical junctures in history. At the beginning of higher education in the US, a Yale University don wrote "if Latin and Greek should ever cease to be taught in our universities, and the study of Cicero, Demosthenes, Homer, and Virgil thought unnecessary, we should regard mankind as fast sinking into absolute barbarism, and the gloom of mental darkness would likely increase until it became universal."

Then what happened? Industrialization and the power of the nation state replaced Demosthenes with vernacular culture. A 20th century descendent of that Yale professor called Shakespeare an "imperishable fixture whose meaning
was inherent in the text and set in place for all time by the writer's word craft."

Both of these efforts at forming a canon were based on the idea that certain texts were not merely better than most, but by far the very best of all. They were the content that gave legitimacy to the university as an institution with cultural authority. This seemed to work in the medieval and pre-industrial context, but has since been proven inadequate by the demand for constant innovation in industrial society.

We are confronted with a duality - the university is "a center of free inquiry and discourse while at the same time being a center of intellectual authority." This contradiction between freedom and authority is really at the heart of what being civilized is all about. Robert Maynard Hutchins argued that the liberal arts should free
each of us from the prison house of class, race, time, place, background, family, and even nation. What a noble project! And what limited results we have experienced so far.

My remarks today have special relevance for educational institutions. My premise is that the university is an institution rooted in a web of social and historical relationships. The intellectual content of these relationships set the limits of the curriculum as set by its faculty, administration and Board of Trustees. The university is ever changing, ever being challenged to be freer, more open to the fullness of humanity. At its best a university curriculum demonstrates the textures and particularities of each group of us as it seeks to clarify and proclaim universals about the human condition and the nature of all that is. In the end this premise requires
humility and self-criticism. Our curriculum and research are good but we can be better, and in the end we strive for the illusive goal of being the best, a goal that even if attained would be but for a moment. Freedom always challenges authority, only to achieve a new standard that in turn will be challenged once again by those forces yearning to be heard, to be counted, and to be free.

Each generation has its own perspective on history. Hence we write history today with the knowledge that it will be rewritten tomorrow, because tomorrow another generation will have its own perspective. Partly this is driven by new facts, tools and techniques, but even without these things a new analyses will be required. New experiences will lead the next generation to raise their own questions requiring different answers than the previous ones.
Every historical period, at any time of the past or present, is constructed by a unity of conflicting forces, classes, and nations - groups of all kinds. Each group has a voice, an articulation of what is being experienced and what the experience means. Each voice is countered by other voices. In all of this some are heard and others are silenced. There is no more profound human self-realization than the fact that our lives are given social meaning by our ability to speak as well as our ability to listen. The conflict we often experience between alternative voices is to be contrasted with the dynamic interplay and positive feedback of speaker and audience.

Our sense of historical perspective and our capacity to hear all the voices is connected to our vision of the future. At this moment, to see clearly into the 21st century forces one to confront more than ever before all
previous limitations. Vision today must embody nothing short of species consciousness, overcoming the limitations imposed by the past based on racism, gender, language, or any other aspect of human diversity. Moreover it requires consciousness of all space and all life. We know it now as being green but this may turn out to be just another color barrier to cross in accepting all life forms in space.

With this short introduction let me turn now to the first of my three concepts for this talk: For African Americans and their history Freedom is the fundamental concept. Freedom has been the main theme at every stage of African American history. This is as true today as it was on the slave ships, though of course the details have changed. A deep longing for freedom is lodged in our distinct version of the American Dream. Many understand the American Dream as having developed from escaping the
European nightmare. For Black people the situation was reversed: the nightmare was at the end of the journey. Africans in the Americas sometimes longed to go back to Africa. Mostly they plotted and schemed for something new that negated their American nightmare. The past in America has been bad, never golden, never a past to long for or to try and recreate. When President Reagan said he remembered when we didn't have a "race" problem most Black people smiled, using that old survival technique of laughing to keep from crying.

The current experience of the African American is a dangerous one indeed. The nightly news only reports the symptoms. The fundamental and objective process is that technological innovation is being used to attack the economic stability and undercut the cultural integrity of Black people. Black people were freed from the intensive
toil of the sharecropping south by the mechanization of cotton through the 1944 mechanical cotton picker. Blacks migrated into the northern urban industrial environment and got good jobs. But the factory doors began to slam shut just as Blacks finally arrived in the industrial city after WW II. One social analyst commented "It is as if racism, having put the Negro in his economic place, stepped aside to watch technology destroy that place."

Let me cite one example: The Ford River Rouge plant in Detroit was the largest auto plant in the world. In 1945 there were over 85,000 workers. Just fifteen years later this went down to 30,000, but upwards of 40% were Black workers. That 40% was at the bottom: Chrysler had 7500 skilled workers that included only 24 Blacks, and General Motors counted only 67 Blacks among more than 11,000 skilled workers. Today there are about 11,000 workers at
the River Rouge plant that continues to produce more cars than ever. A majority of these workers are Black. Detroit is 85% Black, with soaring rates of unemployment, homelessness, and drug addiction. Detroit was an American dream for some, but its short-lived benefits led most Blacks into another version of the American nightmare.

There is an economic curse on Black people who are facing an absolute decline in the demand for Black labor, especially unskilled labor for the first major time since the days of slavery. On searches for a frame of reference that can console and give assurance that things are really all right, will get better, but most are urged to just continue to believe, be loyal, and most of all be obedient.

Black people are often told to remember this is the best country in the world, after all we have the US Constitution, the supreme text for democracy for the entire
world to emulate. The US Constitution legalized the slave trade for 20 more years, mandated the return of runaway slaves, and contained an important provision that slaves were to be counted as $3/5$th of a human being. This strengthened rather than destroyed slavery. A majority of the first 9 Presidents were slave owners, giving slaves recourse to neither men nor laws.

When claiming the sanctity of the Constitution we often forget that many of the most memorable features were actually amendments forged under the threat of violence. This was true of the Bill of Rights just as it was true of the $13^{th}$ (1865), $14^{th}$ (1868), and $15^{th}$ (1870) amendments to over turn slavery.

The best case is the $14^{th}$ amendment. It was passed to establish citizenship rights for Blacks and extend to them due process under the law. It said: "No state shall make
or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or
immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any
state deprive any person of life, liberty or property,
without due process of law; nor deny to any person within
its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

By 1896 in the Plessy v Ferguson Case the court used
the 14th Amendment to sidetrack the move toward equality.
They stated "The object of the 14th Amendment was
undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two
races before the law, but in the nature of things it could
not have been intended to abolish distinctions based on
color, or to enforce social as distinguished from political
equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms
unsatisfactory to either."

By 1954 the Court used this same 14th Amendment to get
back on track: "We conclude that in the field of public
education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th Amendment." The Court swung back again in its decision of the famous Bakke case in 1978 causing Justice Thurgood Marshall to comment "I feel we have come full circle."

But our striving for freedom will not allow uncritical approval of the political legacy and economic experience of this country. Quite the contrary in Black America there is opposition to this history of hypocrisy and deception. How do Black people feel about this? We could turn to any number of rap artists for an answer from the Black youth,
but for an even more clear answer we can turn to Frederick Douglass in a talk he gave in 1852 on July the Fourth.

"What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brash-fronted imprudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation of the earth guilty of practices more shocking and
bloody than are the people of these United States at this very hour.

"Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the Old Word, travel through South America, search out every abuse and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy America reigns without a rival."

It is so wonderful to hear the powerful protest voices of those most oppressed. For our consideration of voice let us now turn to someone who challenged us to understand, whose sharp criticism was a call to denounce racism, a call to be human and as such able to embrace the humanity of Black people as well. Let us turn to the voice of Malcolm X.
There were four stages to Malcolm's life: one, small-town boy from a broken family trying to get ahead; two, a big-city hoodlum dealing in drugs and robbery; three, a proselytizing Black-nationalist minister in the Nation of Islam; and four, a leading spokesperson for the radical Black tradition.

Malcolm was born Malcolm Little, May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska. His parents were Reverend Earl Little and Louise Little. He was a Georgia-born Baptist preacher and an organizer for Marcus Garvey's UNIA, Universal Negro Improvement Association. Louise Little was a Grenadian-born outspoken activist in the UNIA as well. During the first six years of Malcolm's life he lived in a two-parent family with strong parents. His father was a Baptist preacher and, as such, played an important role in the community. It was on this basis that Malcolm was able to
visit many homes and to go to political meetings where both of his parents gave leadership.

When Malcolm was six years old his father was brutally murdered by white racists and six years later his mother succumbed to the pressures of the welfare system while trying to raise her children single handedly. She was committed to a mental hospital where she stayed from 1937 to 1963. Malcolm was a Black youth alienated from his family through racist violence and forced to turn to the street. After spending three years in the foster-home/detention-home process, and still not escaping institutional racism and individual prejudices, he moved to Boston with his eldest paternal halfsister, Ella.

In Boston he rejected what he perceived to be the hypocritical and imitative lifestyles of Black status seekers. Instead, Malcolm preferred the more common and
basic community life and took to the street. First in

Boston and then in New York, Malcolm explored the full

range of illegal alternatives, everything we know in our

community today: drugs, prostitution, robbery. He formed a

gang in Boston and ended up in prison in 1946. In his 21st

year he was a school dropout, a drug addict, a loser. It

was at this stage of his life that Malcolm had descended

into the very bottom, the very depth of the community. He

had spent five years in the street and was about to spend

six years in prison. It was while incarcerated that

Malcolm came to understand how he had been isolated and

rendered powerless.

At this point he experienced one of the great

reversals of the 20th century, the rehabilitation and

conversion of a hardened criminals. He met Bimbi, prison

intellectual, and was introduced to Elijah Muhammad, the
leader of the Nation. These two men guided Malcolm to self-emancipation, reading and writing his way to intellectual
growth and reversing old habits to reinforce a new
lifestyle and moral code. He went into prison a degenerate
criminal and after less than seven years as a model of
commitment, dedication and discipline. When he was
released in 1952, he was now a whole, cleansed man, moving
in the path of his father. He was becoming a Black-
nationalist organizer, attempting to save Black people from
the destruction of a white racist society.

His brother, subsequently reinforced by other members of
the family who had also joined the Nation of Islam had
introduced Malcolm to the Nation of Islam. Malcolm
discovered through his interaction with Bimbi that he was a
basically uneducated, ignorant person. Through Bimbi he
discovered the world of books. And through Elijah Muhammad
he discovered the need to learn how to write. Reading and writing, fundamental tools of an educated person, were the bases for his self-emancipation.

After being released from prison Malcolm moved to Detroit, got a job and became an activist in the local Muslim mosque. Malcolm began to discover that his skills as a street hustler could be transformed and utilized as an organizer. For the next 12 years Malcolm X became the main spark for the Nation of Islam to grow from 400 members to 40,000 members, with temples organized in virtually every major city in the United States. After studying with Elijah Muhammad he was then assigned to lead the temple in New York, and eventually became the national representative of the organization. Inside the Nation of Islam Elijah Muhammad and the older ministers ruled supreme, but outside, in the Black community at large and the emerging
Black movement in the 1950s and 160s, increasingly people began to know the Nation through Malcolm and the new recruits.

At first Malcolm X was a devout representative of Elijah Muhammad. When one heard Malcolm speak you heard the words of Elijah Muhammad. He articulated the doctrine of the Nation of Islam for the Black community at large through speeches and articles. Every important aspect of their beliefs was put forward by Malcolm not only as a minister inside the temple, but as a voice that increasingly spoke to larger and larger parts of the Black urban community. As Malcolm began to become a force in Harlem he began to confront the living ideas of the Black-liberation movement. This represented a conflict between his dogma and the dynamic discourse of the movement. Malcolm X was silenced by Elijah Muhammad on December 3, 1963, but for over a year
he had been moving away from the strict dogma of the Nation of Islam toward the more dynamic rhetoric of the Black-liberation movement. This, of course, becomes full blown after the three-month period when, on March 8, 1964, Malcolm declares his independence from the Nation of Islam and he then goes on a virtually unprecedented ideological transformation and journey for the next 11 months until his assassination in February the following year.

Malcolm had become the supreme voice of the Black community, specifically, the inner city economically marginalized youth. He became an icon of the Black power movement and as such is a major voice to be considered. Academic scholars in the Humanities have researched and reflected on the texts produced by Malcolm X, especially his autobiography. In this case literary criticism has mainly sought to his texts, and then to manufacture modes
of meaning based on how they relate to other texts, and surprisingly to the texts of the canon. While this literature has not begun to exhaust the possibilities it is here that we can find a glimpse the humanities with or without the rest of us. One of the main concerns is to read Malcolm X as the supreme icon of Black political culture.

Robert Coles (1966) takes up the manhood theme put forward by Ossie Davis in the funeral oration: "I suspect that for millions of Negroes - and not a few whites - the secret of his charisma was his manliness, his stubborn, daring, almost mutinous manliness; despite everything that happened to him and his ancestors, his manliness. In our culture, at this time in history, the accomplishment of that manliness was no small feat, perhaps even for a white man, let alone a Negro."
Robert Penn Warren (1966) is quite prophetic: "One feels it is an American story bound to be remembered, to lurk in the background of popular consciousness, to reappear some day in a novel, on the stage, or on the screen." Twenty years later Hentoff (1985) can state without hesitation what so many Black people know to be true, "When I think of Malcolm, most of the time I remember him smiling."

Ohmann (1970) compares the texts of Malcolm X to the seminal American autobiography by Benjamin Franklin. She states that they "resemble each other in the conception of the self they convey, in the categories by which they apprehend men and events, in the standards by which they judge them, and in the ways, looking backward as autobiographers do, they pattern or structure the raw materials of their own lives." Miller (1972) continues the
comparison by approving of their efforts to "turn history into a novel ... to express what cannot be understood by facts alone." Whitfield (1978), in comparing Franklin, Booker T Washington, and Malcolm X, points to the pragmatic utility of writing an autobiography to demonstrate that one was indeed as good as people thought. He states that "even if these autobiographers forgot or fudged or misrepresented parts of their lives, the significance of their stories has overshadowed their failure to attain the reality of candor.... Through the craft of autobiography and the art of impression management, dead men can and do tell tales."

Berthoff (1971) makes these same points in a comparison of autobiographies by Malcolm X and Norman Mailer. Holte (1982), in a comparison of Malcolm with other ethnic immigrant experiences, argues that his voice emerges within the transformative process of acculturation to embody the
essence of what it means to be an American. It is amazing that this scholarly literature, focusing exclusively on the text about his life and not the conflict ridden social relations of his life, can find a way of fitting Malcolm X into a version of the American Dream.

Rose (1987) identifies the theme of literacy as the path to individual freedom (autonomy) as a myth adopted by Malcolm X. By reading and writing one could understand, control, and create a new reality for oneself. Each process of transformation in Malcolm's life involved an act of reading and/or writing. In fact the last three pages of The Autobiography contains a virtual soliloquy to literacy, Malcolm X's special politicized form of multicultural literacy, that makes this point in a very powerful way.

Imagine Malcolm X saying in the last year of his life "You can believe me... I would not be one bit ashamed to go back
into any New York city public school and start where I left off at the ninth grade, and go on through a degree."

This profound humility of a man whose life embodies conversions of epic proportions has led to comparative analyses that place him within the context of world literature. Van Horne (1986) compares Malcolm X to the African known as Saint Augustine. His purpose is "to trace the journey of their souls from the agony of rebellion through the transfiguration of revelation to the sanctification of redemption and on to the joy of regeneration." Abbott (1979) and Mandel (1972), who also introduces similarities with 17th century Puritan autobiographies also discuss this comparative tale of conversion. In sum, these literary critics have been able to link the meaning of Malcolm X in the African American
experience to the American experience in general, and the world experience overall.

Hearing the voice of Malcolm X leads us to affirm a vision for the 21st century. This is a vision of hope. There has always been hope guiding the African American through movement, seeking freedom and at the same time embodying freedom in the very struggle to keep moving. This covers the Underground Railroad by which Black people fled slavery seeking freedom in the North, through the migrations North during the 20th century.

There has always been some form of collectivity and common cause with the majority of the American people often in spite of their racism. There is hope in this as well. Listen to the wise and wonderful words of Langston Hughes in this regard. This is a quote from his poem "Let American Be American Again."
I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,

I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.

I am the red man driven from the land,

I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--

And finding only the same old stupid plan

Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,

Tangled in that ancient endless chain o

Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land! Of grab the gold!

Of grab the ways of satisfying need!

Of work the men!

Of take the pay! Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.

I am the worker sold to the machine.

I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, worried, hungry, mean--

Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!

I am the man who never got ahead,

The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream

In that Old World while still a serf to kings,

Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,

That even yet its mighty daring sings

In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned

That's made America the land it has become.

O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas

In search of what I meant to be my home --

For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,

And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,

And torn from Black African's strand I came

To build a "homeland of the free."
O, yes,

I say it plain,

America never was America to me,

And yet I swear this oath--

American will be!

Its dream

Lies deep in the heart of me.

We, the people, must redeem

Our land, the mines, the plants, the rivers,

The mountains and the endless plain--

All, all the stretch of these great green states--

And make America again!

This freedom perspective requires us to demythologize

the American story. We have to lay bear the nightmarish

forced march Black people has had to endure. But when we
examine the icon of the Black outsider - Malcolm X - we
discover a paradigmatic figure that links the African
American experience to fundamental biographical tropes of
Western civilization.

Here is the basis for the vision I want to argue is
our hope. Racism negates the Black poor, the rebel,'
because on the surface this person fails to live up to the
prevailing cultural standards. In fact I want to argue
that it is precisely the Black poor who is the necessary
agent of change and our salvation. The transformation of
the Black poor will proclaim the humanity of us all. To
reject this necessary historical development is to embrace
racism and march into the hell of Barbarism.

In the end I am an optimist. Ghandi, when asked what
he thought of Western civilization said it sounds like a
great idea. Someone should try it. I agree.