TONI MORRISON

in conversation with

FRAN LEBOWITZ

November 12, 2008

Celeste Bartos Forum

LIVE from the New York Public Library

www.nypl.org/live

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. Tonight it is a pleasure to present to you Toni Morrison in conversation with Fran Lebowitz. A few announcements and many thank-yous as well, so bear with me. This is what makes all that jazz possible.

Immediately following the conversation Toni Morrison will be signing her new book and ninth novel *A Mercy*. 192 Books is with us, as always, the fabulous independent bookstore. We love

them. Thank you, 192 Books and, of course thank you to Toni Morrison as well as all those at Knopf, particularly Paul Bogaards and Michelle Somers for your help and enthusiasm in making this happen. Thank you also to *Metro*, they are our media sponsor. Wonderful to see our events announced boldly in their pages. A round of applause to our fabulous wine sponsor Oriel. **(applause)** Wine does it every time. You know I was mentioning 192 Books, why no applauses? 192 Books! **(applause)** *Metro*! No, no, please. They are a wonderful purveyor and distributor of fine wines. Aristophanes inspires them to sponsor us. He said, back then, "quickly bring me a beaker of wine so that I may whet my mind and say something clever." So join their e-mail list, please, so they may offer you some wonderful wines for you lovers of fine conversation. Thank you to Oriel. If you left your business card upon coming in with Oriel, you may be a winner of a bottle of red and a bottle of white wine from Oriel. And now the winner is Paul . . . no, no. So I'm going to take a card, let me see if I left mine. It must be somewhere. Okay. And the winner is Sharon Werner, so Sharon, **(applause)** afterwards you can go and get your wine.

So please stay on for the wine reception after, following the conversation, as well as of course for the book signing. More thank-yous. Sutherland is sponsoring this evening. They are a proud supporter of the New York Public Library and a member of the Lawyers for the Library group. They are a law firm with global reach founded in 1924. The firm has grown to approximately 500 lawyers and serves many Fortune 500 clients. So please a round of applause to Sutherland for their help. It couldn't be more welcome. **(applause)**

Please also consider joining the Library, become a Friend. In these times of economic crisis, the Library needs more than ever your support. Certainly LIVE does. For just forty dollars, you can

become a Friend of the New York Public Library. A cheap date, if you ask me. Please consider joining tonight. LIVE is also thrilled, and this is brand-new to announce, that the discussions do not end when this program ends in about an hour and thirty-nine minutes. We are now partnering with WNYC's Culture blog to continue the conversation online. So please visit WNYC.org tomorrow and leave any comments. You may receive a response from me, perhaps from Toni Morrison or Fran, so thank you very much.

As you know, our tagline, our motto, is no longer that we wish to make the lions roar but rather Expect Wasabi. And what does the season still offer you? Well, tomorrow I invite you to join us for fifteenth anniversary of Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries* with Sara Botsford, Meg Wolitzer, and others. This promises to be a very special evening. On Friday, a tribute to Rust Hills, who was an extraordinary fiction editor for *Esquire* magazine. Come hear James Salter, Richard Ford, and many others pay tribute. In December, three events. Our season ends with the conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim, whom I will have the pleasure of interviewing. Omer Bartov will debate Avraham Burg. Burg's new book is *The Holocaust is Over: We Must Rise from Its Ashes*.

And then just after that event on December 5, Zadie Smith will deliver the Robert Silvers Lecture this year. She has just transmitted to me the title this afternoon of her lecture, "Speaking in Tongues." I want to read the brief description she sent in simply because I love it: "What does it mean when we speak in different ways to different people? Is it a sign of duplicity or the mark of a complex sensibility? Zadie Smith takes a look at register and tone, from the academy to the streets, through black and white, with examples such as Queen Elizabeth I, Shakespeare, Humbert Humbert, Obama." Join our e-mail list so that you may hear of all of these events and

for those joining tonight a special offer—we will invite you tomorrow to come back free of charge to the Carol Shields tribute.

Fran Lebowitz is known to all of you. She's the author of *Metropolitan Life* and *Social Studies* as well as of a half-finished cult novel *Exterior Signs of Wealth* and the absolutely almost completed book-length essay "Progress."

Before Fran comes on stage, Toni Morrison will read from her new novel, *A Mercy*. Nobel Prize winner in literature, Library Lion, and Trustee of the New York Public Library, it is my pleasure, ladies and gentlemen, and a distinct honor to bring to this stage tonight Toni Morrison.

(applause)

TONI MORRISON: Thank you, thank you. I really do thank you. I'm sorry I'm late. It wasn't my fault. I've been sitting in a car for two hours. But now I'm ready. I'm going to read a scene from *A Mercy* in the voice of the leading character, the driver of the narrative, a young girl named Florens, who's on a journey sent by her mistress to locate a man who seems to have healing powers and those powers are needed. Incidentally, she's desperately, desperately in love with him.

I see a path and enter. It leads to a narrow bridge past a millwheel poised in a stream. The creaking wheel and rushing water are what shape the quiet. Hens sleep and dogs forbidden. I hurry down the bank and lap from the stream. The water tastes like candle-wax. I spit out the bits

of straw that come with each swallow and make my way back to the path. I need shelter. The sun is setting itself. I notice two cottages. Both have windows but no lamp shines through. There are more that resemble small barns that can accept the day's light only through open doors. None is open. There is no cooksmoke in the air. I am thinking everyone has gone off. Then I see a tiny steeple on a hill beyond the village and am certain that people are at evening prayer. I decide to knock on the door of the largest house, the one that will have a servant inside. Moving toward it I look over my shoulder and see a light farther on. It is in the single lit house in the village so I choose to go there. Stones interfere at each step rubbing the sealing wax hard into my sole. Rain starts. Soft. It should smell sweet, with the flavor of the sycamores it has crossed, but it has a burned smell, like pinfeathers singed before boiling a fowl.

Soon as I knock a woman opens the door. She is much taller than Mistress or Lina and has green eyes. The rest of her is a brown frock and white cap. Red hair edges it. She is suspicious and holds up her hand, palm out, as though I might force my way in. Who hath sent you she asks. I say please. I say I am alone. No one sends me. Shelter calls me here. She looks behind me, left and right, and asks if I have no protection, no companion? I say No Madam. She narrows her eyes and asks if I am of this earth or elsewhere? Her face is hard. I say this earth Madam I know no other. Christian or heathen, she asks. Never heathen I say. I say although I hear my father was. And where doth he abide, she asks. The rain is getting bigger. Hunger wobbles me. I say I do not know him and my mother is dead. Her face softens and she nods saying, orphan, step in.

She tells me her name, Widow Ealing, but does not ask mine. You must excuse me, she says, but there is some danger about. What danger I ask. Evil, she says, but you must never mind.

I try to eat slowly and fail. Sopping hard bread into lovely, warm barley porridge, I don't lift my head except to say thank you when she ladles more into my bowl. She places a handful of raisins next to it. We are in a good-sized room with a fireplace, table, stools, and two sleeping places: a box bed and a pallet. There are two closed doors to other parts and a closet-looking place, a niche at the rear where jugs and bowls are. When my hunger is quiet enough I notice a girl lying in the straw of the box bed. Under her head is a blanket roll. One of her eyes looks away, the other is as straight and unwavering as a she-wolf's. Both are black as coal, not at all like the Widow's. I don't think I should begin any words, so I keep eating and wait for the girl or the Widow to say something. At the foot of her bed is a basket. A kid lies there too sick to raise its head or make a sound. When I finish the food down to the last raisin the Widow asks what is my purpose traveling alone. I tell her my mistress is sending me on an errand. She turns her lips down, saying it must be vital to risk a female's life in these parts. My mistress is dying I say. My errand can save her. She frowns and looks toward the fireplace. Not from the first death, she says. Perhaps from the second.

I don't understand her meaning. I know there is only one death not two and many lives beyond it. Remember the owls in daylight? We know right away who they are. You know the pale one is your father. I think I know who the other ones may be.

The girl lying in the straw raises up on her elbow. This be the death we have come here to die, she says. Her voice is deep, like a man's, though she looks to have my age. Widow Ealing doesn't reply and I do not want to look at those eyes anymore. The girl speaks again. No

thrashing, she says, can change it, though my flesh is cut to ribbons. She stands then and limps to the table where the lamp burns. Holding it waist high she lifts her skirts. I see dark blood beetling down her legs. In the light pouring over her pale skin her wounds look like live jewels.

This is my daughter, Jane, the Widow says. Those lashes may save her life.

It is late, Widow Ealing is saying. They will not come until morning. She closes the shutters, blows out the lamp and kneels by the pallet. Daughter Jane returns to her straw. The Widow whispers in prayer. The dark in here is greater than the cowshed, thicker than the forest. No moonlight seeps through a single crack. I lie near the sick kid and the fireplace and my sleep breaks into pieces from their voices. Silence is long and then they talk. I can tell who it is not only by the direction of the sound but also because Widow Ealing says words in a way different from her daughter. A more singing way. So I know it is Daughter Jane who says how can I prove I am not a demon and it is the Widow who says sssst it is they who will decide. Silence. Silence. Then back and forth they talk. It is the pasture they crave, Mother. Then why not me? You may be next. At least two say they have seen the black man and that he…Widow Ealing stops and does not say more for a while and then she says we will know come the morning. They will allow that I am says Daughter Jane. They talk fast to each other. The knowing is theirs, the truth is mine, truth is God's, then what mortal can judge me, you talk like a Spaniard., listen, please listen, be still lest He hear you, He will not abandon m, nor will I, yet you bloodied my flesh, how many times do you have to hear it demons do not bleed. You never tell me that and it's a good thing to know. If my mother is not dead she can be teaching me these things.

I believe I am the only one who falls asleep and wake in shame because outside the animals are already lowing. Tiny baas come from the kid as the Widow picks it up in her arms and takes it outside to nurse the dam. When she returns, she unshutters both windows and leaves the door wide open. Two geese waddle in followed by a strutting hen. Another flies through a window joining the search for scraps. I ask permission to use the commode behind the hempen curtain. As I finish and step out I see Daughter Jane holding her face in her hands while the widow freshens the leg wounds. New strips of blood gleam among the dry ones. A goat steps in and moves toward the straw, nibbling nibbling while Daughter Jane whimpers. After the blood work is done to her satisfaction the widow pushes the goat out the door.

At table for a breakfast of clabber and bread, the Widow and Daughter Jane put their palms together, bow their heads and murmur. I do likewise, whispering the prayer Reverend Father taught me to say morning and night, my mother repeating with me. Pater Noster…At the end I raise my hand to touch my forehead and catch Daughter Jane's frown. She shakes her head meaning no. So I pretend I am adjusting my cap. The Widow spoons jam onto the clabber and we two eat. Daughter Jane refuses so we eat what she will not. Afterwards the widow goes to the fireplace and swings the kettle over the fire. I take the bowls and spoons from the table to the closet where a basin of water sits on a narrow bench. I rinse and wipe each piece carefully. The air is tight. Water rises to a boil in the kettle hanging in the fireplace. I turn and see its steam forming shapes as it curls against the stone. One shape looks like the head of a dog.

We all hear footsteps climbing the path. I am still busy in the closet and although I cannot see who enters, I hear the talk. The Widow offers the visitors seating. They refuse. A man's voice

says This is preliminary, yet witnesses are several. Widow interrupts him saying her daughter's eye is askew as God made it and it has no special powers. And look, she says, look at her wounds. God's son bleeds. We bleed. Demons never.

I step into the room. Standing there are a man, three women and a little girl who reminds me of myself when my mother sends me away. I am thinking how sweet she seems when she screams and hides behind the skirts of one of the women. Then each visitor turns to look at me. The women gasp. The man's walking stick clatters to the floor causing the remaining hen to squawk and flutter. He retrieves his stick, points it at me saying who be this? One of the women covers her eyes saying God help us. The little girl wails and rocks back and forth. The Widow waves both hands saying she's a guest seeking shelter from the night. We accept her how could we not and feed her. Which night the man asks. This one past she answers. One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric. Afric and much more, says another. Just look at this child says the first woman. She points to the little girl shaking and moaning by her side. Hear her. Hear her. It is true then says another. The Black Man is among us. This is his minion. The little girl is inconsolable. The woman whose skirts she clings to takes her outside where she is quickly quiet. I am not understanding anything except I am in danger. As the dog's head shows, a Mistress is my only defense. I shout, wait. I shout, please sir. I think they have shock that I can talk. Let me show you my letter I say quieter. It proves I am nobody's minion but my Mistress. As fast as I can I remove my boot and roll down my stocking. The women stretch their mouths, the man looks away and then slowly back. I pull out Mistress's letter and offer it but no one will touch it. The man orders me to place it on the table but he's afraid to break the seal. He tells the Widow to

do it. She picks at the wax with her fingernails. When it falls away she unfolds the paper. It is too thick to stay flat by itself. Everyone, including Daughter Jane who rises from her bed stares at the markings upside down and it is clear only the man is lettered. Holding the tip of his walking stick down on the paper he turns it right side up and holds it there as if the letter could fly away or turn to ashes without flame before his eyes. He leans low and examines it closely. Then he picks it up and reads aloud.

The signatory of this letter, Mistress Rebekkah Vaark of Milton, vouches for the female person into whose hands it has been placed. She is owned by me and can be known by a burn mark in the palm of her left hand. Allow her the courtesy of safe passage and witherall she may need to complete her errand. Our life, my life, on this earth depends on her speedy return.
Signed Rebekkah Vaark, Mistress, Milton, 18 May, 1690.

Other than a small sound from Daughter Jane all is quiet. The man looks at me, looks again at the letter, back at me back at the letter. Again at me, once more at the letter. You see, says the Widow. He ignores her and turns to two women whispering to them. They point me to a door that opens onto a storeroom and there, standing among carriage boxes and a spinning wheel, they tell me to take off my clothes. Without touching they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. They frown at the candle burn on my palm, the one you kissed to cool. They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust, but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition. Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough. The women look away from my eyes

they way you say I am to do with the bears so they will not come close to love and play. Finally they tell me to dress and leave the room shutting the door behind them. I put on my clothes I hear the quarrelling. The little girl is back, not sobbing now but saying it scares me. It scares me. A woman's voice asks would Satan write a letter. Lucifer is all deceit and trickery says another. But a woman's life is at stake says the Widow, who will the Lord punish then? The man's voice booms. We will relay this to the others he says. We will study on it, consult and pray and return with our answer. It is not clear it seems whether or no I am the Black Man's minion. I step into the room and the little girl screams and flails her arms. The women surround her and rush out. The man says not to leave the house. He takes the letter with him. The widow follows him down the path pleading, pleading.

She returns to say they are wanting time to discuss more among themselves. She has hope because of the letter. Daughter Jane laughs. Widow Ealing kneels to pray. She prays a long time then stands saying I have to see someone. I need his witness and his help.

Who, asks Daughter Jane.

The sheriff says the Widow.

Daughter Jane curls her mouth behind her mother's back as she leaves.

I am hung with fear watching Daughter Jane attend her leg wounds. The sun is high and still the Widow does not return. We wait. By and by the sun slows down. Daughter Jane boils duck eggs

and when cool wraps them in a square of cloth. She folds a blanket and hands it to me, motions with one finger to follow. We leave the house, scurry around to the back. All manner of fowl cluck and fly from our feet. We run through the pasture. The nanny goat turns to look. The billy does not. A bad sign. We squeeze between the fence slats and run into the wood. Now we walk softly, Daughter Jane leading the way. The sun empties itself, pouring what is left through tree shadow. Birds and small animals eat and call to one another.

We come to a stream, dry mostly, muddy elsewhere. Daughter Jane hands me the cloth of eggs. She explains how I am to go, where the trail will be that takes me to the post road that takes me to the hamlet where I hope you are. I say thank you and lift her hand to kiss it. She says no, I thank you. They look at you and forget about me. She kisses my forehead then watches as I step down into the stream's dry bed. I turn and look up at her. *Are* you a demon I ask her. Her wayward eye is steady. She smiles Yes, she says. Oh, yes. Go now.

I walk alone except for the eyes that join me on my journey. Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man's whip between my legs, wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the four legs of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake's or if my teeth are filing to points to chew them up. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite. Inside I am shrinking. I climb the streambed under watching trees and know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter, I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandoned by the herd, a turtle without its shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes,

but inside as well, and the inside dark is small, feathered, and toothy. Is that my mother knows? Why she chooses me to live without? Not the outside dark we share, a minha mãe and me, but the inside one we don't. Is this dying mine alone? Is the clawing feathery thing the only life in me? You will tell me. You have the outside dark as well. And when I see you and fall into you I know I am live. Sudden it is not like before when I am always in fright. I am not afraid of anything now. The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home.

Thank you.

(applause)

TONI MORRISON: Hi Fran.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Hi Toni. **(applause)** You're really coming along, Toni.

TONI MORRISON: Thank you.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Before I begin and just because I happen to have you all here I thought I would take this opportunity to say that when Toni Morrison said, "Write the book you want to read," she did not mean *everyone*. **(laughter)** Just a warning to the audience. Now, a few days ago Toni and I spoke on the phone with the idea and the intention that we would formulate some questions and some way to have the conversation. I apparently jotted down just a few words which disappeared under a pile of newspapers and when I looked at them this afternoon, I saw

that the thing I'd written I the largest letters said, "It took sixty million years for the human eye to evolve." This seemed to be the centerpiece of our conversation. Now the person who brought this up was Toni. She's a scientist. And she said that the reason she brought this up is because she said she felt that since it took so long for the human eye to evolve, she felt people were not taking the fullest advantage of the human eye. By which I took her to mean that she didn't think that such a carefully crafted sense should be used primarily to look at Internet porn. That's what what you meant, right? **(laughter)** So I thought I would begin by asking you in what other ways have your readers disappointed you, Toni?

(laughter)

TONI MORRISON: Readers disappoint me when they expect a quick and happy ending. That is, their definition of happy—not merely violins and roses and people walking off into the sunset, but a kind of style, a kind of resolution so that when you close the book it's done. I think happiness as a result of reading a novel consists of do the people in the book, the major ones, have they had an epiphany, do they know anything at the end, has anything happened that changed their mind for the better? Have they evolved along with the eye? And if that is the case that something happens like that at the end of the novel, then that's my version of joy and I am a little uneasy with a kind of disquiet, unease in readers because the book doesn't close like you turn off the television or at the end of a—when a movie is over, because I like not just ambiguity and ambivalence, but the life of the book in the mind and in the imagination of the reader beyond the last page.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: I personally feel that all endings are happy. Any ending I'll take. But I think that the reason that you feel that way is that first of all, as I've often said to you, you overestimate your fellow man, and also I think that people and/or readers—I make the distinction—**(laughter)** are totally unused to what used to be called the literary imagination, they don't know what to make of it and I think that's because people have been taught by certain figures in the popular culture to look for—because there's so much fiction in journalism, I think they look for journalism in fiction. Do you think that's probably the case?

In other words, when I—I mean all your books I think this is true of, but this book particularly maybe because I've read it most recently—you know, it really takes you, this book, which is what I want from reading a novel, the way that you read when you were a child, you know, and I think that because people have been taught to look for themselves in books, you always hear people saying this, "I loved this book, this character was just like me," like that would be a goal of a writer—to create a character just like them. Because people have been taught to think of a book as a mirror instead of a door—

TONI MORRISON: Exactly.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: You know, or a window, like a way out, and that's probably why there are people who misunderstand you in that way.

TONI MORRISON: I think you're exactly right. The willingness to surrender to the book or step through that door, be in that landscape, you know, sort of make it yours and not looking for

data, maybe sometimes knowledge, but certainly imaginative insight and the company of people that are interesting and compelling—

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Which would be people different from the reader.

(laughter)

TONI MORRISON: Not only different from the reader, but many times people think—I was in England a couple of weeks ago with a large crowd and many of them—twice I was asked, and I've been asked this before, something about what is the relationship between something in a book and my personal life. And I was saying, first I wanted to say—"You have no idea how dull my personal life is." **(laughter)** It doesn't—I was going to say my personal life doesn't interest me. **(laughter)** My *mind* interests me, you know, my *mind* interests me, and the imaginative doors that I can open with it. That is the free place, that is the place where I do what I want to do, where I'm not really beholden and obligated to do anything but pay close attention to the language, the work in progress, and what I anticipate to be a fastidious reader, but I also like to work well enough so that a nonfastidious reader gets something delicious from the book.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Because once I asked you—because you often express how much you like to write, not a thing writers frequently say, and I asked you why you liked to write so much and you said, "Because otherwise I'm stuck with life."

TONI MORRISON: Well, I have to say, that after I finished the first book I wrote, *The Bluest Eye*, there was a period of melancholy that was very profound. Nothing was different, nobody was beating me up or mad at me or whatever. I mean, it was rough, financially and so on, but nothing, but it was this sadness and then suddenly I had an idea for a book, which was *Sula* and before I put pen to paper I was buoyed and cheerful and confident and I was, you know, really here in this place and for however long it took to write, I was in this other place and now I know I can anticipate that feeling at the close of a novel and at the close of the last revision, that constant picking over and picking over and making sure it's this word and not that word. But it's true, "stuck with life" may be a little strong, Fran, but it's certainly—

FRAN LEBOWITZ: I'm just quoting you.

(laughter)

TONI MORRISON: I have to say the colors aren't as bright, you know, the world itself seems to be receding a little bit to me—

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Which is always to be hoped for. I mean, I agree, that's why people read, too. That's why people should read, too, to not be stuck with life. That's your perfect reader, right? I mean, that to me seems to be.

TONI MORRISON: Life. Books are not *not* life.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Well, they're not *my* life.

(laughter)

TONI MORRISON: It's a guided life. It's life in a book, organized or disorganized, seductive in a way life may not be. There are very few things outside a book that match it, but I can't say that people who are skiing madly down a slope or winning a relay or doing whatever they do on television that looks so exciting, maybe that also is life. I don't do it. I don't generally even like to watch it. But I don't want to say this is all there is, that life is only in the book and that there is no thick, rich, fulfilling life outside of it. It's just not *my* life—full, rich, and exciting outside of reading or writing.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: What is it you're saying, you were hoping to create a vogue for seventeenth-century Virginia?

TONI MORRISON: That's relevant, the seventeenth century.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: It is relevant, because at that point it could have gone either way. Did you think that at all when you were working on this book? I mean it seems to me that the world you evoke in this book, it was right before things that we have thought of always as kind of immutable were really set in stone. In other words, you know, you show that it didn't, you know, that slavery, or enslaving people didn't have to do with race. You know, and it didn't *have* to do with race. I'm guessing it was like a way to kind of give a bone to, you know, what used to be

called poor white trash, as a way to—you don't hear that phrase anymore, which is good, because I always thought it was an incredibly racist phrase because it implies that all the rest of the white people are Eleanor Roosevelt. Because in this book, these people, I mean, these indentured servants, they're slaves and it has nothing to do with race.

TONI MORRISON: It was a very interesting time before racism was institutionalized, because slavery itself was, you know, the way nations functioned, empires functioned, and they may be called all different things, peons or serfs or peasants or slaves or whatever or indentured, but they were bound, and they ended up in people's wills and they were passed on and their children could inherit that debt, so that separating indentured servants from slaves, legally, and giving indentured servants a kind of power that slaves did not have was *much*, much later, so I wanted to feel what it felt like in a world in which the common thing was enslavement, being traded, and the—but that the stratification, the hierarchy of race between black and white had not existed, entrenched. People had *attitudes* about people not in their group, but generally it was religious or language or country or empire and I wanted to see what that felt like. So the best time I thought—I could have chosen a couple of other years—but two years before the Salem witch trial was important because the strife at that time, the battles at that time, were so violent and so bloody among different religions.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: We've come a long way.

(laughter)

TONI MORRISON: Well, it was clear, clearer than it has ever been to me, why, you know, a hundred years later, or ninety years later, the Founders said no religious test for the president and said the church must be separate from the state because the violence—I mean, people being burned and slaughtered, literally drawn and quartered, and fierce fights and you could, of course, since it was, as you suggest, fluid, anything could have happened. The Portuguese were here, the Swedes were here, the French were here. The Spaniar—I mean, everybody in Europe was scrambling for the resources here, and of course the British, so they could have been practically anything, but I was interested in not what the clerics were doing or the merchants or even the armies but what the people who sort of seemed to me to never appear in the history, which is these ordinary people who are not connected in any way with any institution. They were the indentured servants, they were purchased wives, they were adventurers, and it was very important for me to find out not only what that world looked like, but what were they running from? So it was important to find out what was in England in the seventeenth century in these towns. What were the possibilities, what were the freedoms to settle, and why would they want so badly to get out?

And what they wanted, of course, was the same thing immigrants in those little boats who end up on the shore of Spain and Florida wanted, taking their lives in their hands in these frail little ships, floating on a sea in terrible circumstances for six months, sometimes, for three months, some of those ships sank, but they were desperate to get to this country and I wanted to know the nature of that desperation and then to put together a kind of cell of these individuals looking for this and give them, you know, a chance. I wanted to see of what they were made, finally, when they were dependent on one another and ultimately when that collapses.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: And the descriptions that you—even though you are older than I am. It's so rare I get to say that to anyone now. But the truth is as long as I've known you, I've always been able to really imagine you as a child, and that is because there is a part of you that also you get on the page, you know, this is not just from knowing you, where you have a total ability to convey the *best* kind of child, you know, the not-annoying child, the—and especially the little girl, you know, like a real little girl, you know, not some FAO Schwartz idea of a little girl, and that's clear in people that are really different from each other, I mean characters in your books that are really different from each other, you know, that you really convey the hunger of that little girl, the curiosity, the bravery, and you show that to be universal but not common.

TONI MORRISON: Their wonder, their sense of wonder. And what they *don't* know is as important as what they know. You know, the absence of a certain kind of information that would just paralyze them. And you know, books for me were—I keep saying this, although my sister keeps saying that couldn't be true. But I don't really remember not being able to read. I don't remember my life not being able—Now, it's true I read early, because my sister could read, and, you know, we learned, I learned really from her and we wrote on the sidewalk and so on, but it was two years before I went to elementary school I was really reading everything that was available. And I was fortunate because my mother liked books and liked to have them around and also there were those libraries, you know, where there were children's books like from here to there and there and then the rest of the world, because they didn't have Young Adult, you know, all these sort of categories, so I remember myself on that stool that's not much higher than those speakers, squatting down with a book, and then another one, and then another one until

they sighed and threw me out and said, “it’s over,” or bringing them home and really eating them.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: I mean, I assume that’s why you believe that your readers have that same level of imagination.

TONI MORRISON: That same hunger, yes, sure.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Yes, but you know that’s not the case, don’t you? There used to be some imaginary figure called “the common reader.”

TONI MORRISON: I don’t know what happened.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: It’s been replaced by the common writer. **(laughter)** I think people used to be more open to books. Do you think that’s true, I mean in a real way?

TONI MORRISON: Yeah, I think they didn’t *mind* and maybe they looked for a kind of alternate world or universe or set of imagination, but you have said this before and I guess it’s truer than I thought. Many readers really are looking for some replica of their lives.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Of themselves. So they can attain what they now call their “dreams,” right? I mean, that’s why people read, to learn how to attain their dreams, a word that replaced “ambition” as soon as women were supposed to be allowed to have ambition. That’s what

"dream" means now, right? When people talk about their dreams it means ambition but you can't say ambition once women were, you know, working, because then women would have to have ambition. So dream, don't you think that that's the case?

TONI MORRISON: We do use that word like that, dream.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Dreams, like passion. "My passion." **(laughter)** You know, they don't mean passion, right?

TONI MORRISON: You're suggesting—I guess you're right, though. It's the sharing, it's the sharing, you know, it's the back—You know, I think I am really talking to a reader and I think the reader is in a sense—I *am* the reader of the books I write.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Yes, you are, but your other readers aren't. This is what I try to impress upon you. **(laughter)** Your other readers aren't you.

TONI MORRISON: Yes, they are.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: You say we, you told me that once. When you write, you say, "You." I gave you something I wrote and you said, "I have one suggestion. You say, 'you,' here, but you shouldn't say 'you,' you should say, 'we,'" and I said "why?" and you said, "that's because that invites the reader in." I said, "I don't want to invite the reader in." I said, "I mean, 'you,'" I said,

“I’m not a hostess.” **(laughter)** I said, “I’m not a hostess, I’m a prosecutor.” And you are a hostess, you want to invite them in.

TONI MORRISON: Yes.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Because you think they are—

TONI MORRISON: Come on! Come on.

(applause)

FRAN LEBOWITZ: And that’s why you are *loved* by your readers.

(laughter)

TONI MORRISON: For this I say, “Don’t be afraid.” Somebody, a friend of mine who read the galleys, said—I sent them to her, not anybody in the literary world, not for that, but just a friend, a close friend, I wanted her to read it, get a readerly response from a sensible, curious, interesting, and interested person. So she read a little bit. She called me up about a month later and I’m waiting, saying, “What’s taking her so long? Maybe she doesn’t want to tell me that she doesn’t *really* like it,” because she is capable of saying that. You know, in better words, nicer words, but she’s capable.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Can you please tell us her name?

TONI MORRISON: No.

(laughter)

FRAN LEBOWITZ: That's what your readers want to know.

(laughter)

TONI MORRISON: She called me up and she said, "I read part of this book and I had to put it down." She said, "It made me *breathless* and I had to stay away from it for a while." And then she told me about some dream she had and the book was shaking her up and she said, "And I had this out-of-body experience." You know, she went on and on.

(laughter)

FRAN LEBOWITZ: This is what happens when you say "we."

TONI MORRISON: And I said, "Oh, go back and read the first few words." I said, "Don't be afraid. Go back and finish the book." But, anyway, I was very pleased with her, you know, candor. Something in there, you know, entered her in such a way that it rocked her. She explained what it was, but I don't want to go into here, but it was something—some scenes,

some lines, some words, some event, that had taken her—that she had taken from the book, internalized it, reimagined it, got frightened. You know, this is all about her.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Of course. That's why I say "you."

(laughter)

TONI MORRISON: So anyway, that me, I want to take the reader, no preparation, you don't have a ticket, and you haven't packed your bags, all you have is your mind, your willingness, trust, trust me. It may be a little, you know, disarming in the beginning, but trust me, you know, if I want to voice it. Trust me, it'll be all right. You'll get there. You'll do like the characters, you'll go through some difficult times, but you'll get there, don't be afraid.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: I have one last question, which I bet you can't answer, which is the point of the question. Now, I originally read this book in manuscript about a year ago and then I don't know a few weeks ago, when I found out I was going to do this. I said to you, "Should I reread the book? Should I call and get the book?" And you said, "Oh, absolutely, because I've totally rewritten it," so I said, "Okay," so I got the book, I read the book, it seemed really the same to me, **(laughter)** so I called you up and I said, "Toni, I reread the book and it really seems the same—what did you change?" And there was dead silence where I could feel you're disappointed in me and you said, "I changed seventeen words." **(laughter)** So my question is: which seventeen?

(laughter)

TONI MORRISON: I'll tell you in private because you read both versions.

FRAN LEBOWITZ: Okay. See, that's how much she trusts the reader. Thank you very much. Toni's going to read again and then you can leave.

(applause)

TONI MORRISON: This is the . . . thank you, thank you, the voice of the mother who has given away her daughter under pressing circumstances and this is the voice, the information that she would have imparted to her had she been able. Neither one will want your brother. I know their tastes. Breasts provide the pleasure more than simpler things. Yours are rising too soon and are becoming irritated by the cloth covering your little-girl chest. And they see and I see them see. No good follows even if I offered you to one of the boys in the quarter. Figo. You remember him. He was the gentle one with the horses and played with you in the yard. I saved the rinds for him and sweetbread to take to the others. Bess, his mother, knew my mind and did not disagree. She watched over her son like a hawk as I did over you. But it never does any lasting good, my love. There was no protection. None. Certainly not with your vice for shoes. It was as though you were hurrying up your breasts and hurrying also the lips of an old married couple.

Understand me. There was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no. I tried to tell Reverend Father I hoped if we could learn letters somehow someday you could make your

way. Reverend Father was full of kindness and bravery and said it was what God wanted no matter if they fined him, imprisoned him or hunted him down with gunfire for it, as they did other priests who taught we to read. He believed we would love God more if we knew the letters to read by. I don't know that. What I know is there is magic in learning.

When the tall man with the yellow hair came to dine, I saw he hated the food and I saw things in his eyes that said he did not trust Senhor, Senhora, or their sons. His way, I thought, is another way. His country far from here, there was no animal in his heart. He never looked at me the way Senhor does. He did not want.

I don't know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they were told to break we in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below.

Insults had been moving back and forth to and fro for many seasons between the king of we families and the king of others. I think men thrive on insults over cattle, women, water, crops. Everything heats up and finally the men or their families burn we houses and collect those they cannot kill or find for trade. Bound with vine one to another we are moved four times. Each time more trading, more culling, more dying. We increase in number or we decrease in number until maybe seven times ten or ten times ten of we are driven into a holding pen. There we see men we believe are ill or dead. We soon learn they are neither. Their skin was confusing. The men guarding we and selling we are black. Two have hats and strange pieces of cloth at their throats.

They assure we that the whitened men do not want to eat we. Still it is the continue of all misery. Sometimes we sang. Some of we fought. Mostly we slept or wept. Then the whitened men divided we and placed we in canoes. We came to a house made to float on the sea. Each water, river or sea, has sharks under. The whitened ones guarding we liked that as much as sharks are happy to have a plentiful feeding place.

I welcomed the circling sharks, but they avoided me as if knowing I preferred their teeth to the chains around my neck, my waist, my ankles. When the canoe heeled, some of we jumped, others were pulled under, and we did not see their blood swirl until we alive ones were retrieved and placed under guard. We are put into the house that floats on the sea and we saw for the first time rats and it was hard to figure out how to die. Some of we tried; some of we did. Refusing to eat the oiled yam. Strangling we throat. Offering we bodies to the sharks that follow all the way night and day. I know it was their pleasure to freshen us with the lash but I also saw it was their pleasure to lash their own. Unreason rules here. Who lives. who dies? Who could tell in that moaning and that bellowing in the dark, in the awfulness? It is one matter to live in your own waste; it is another to live in another's.

Barbados I heard them say. After times and times of puzzle about why I could not die as others did. After pretending to be so in order to get thrown overboard. Whatever the mind plans, the body has other interests. So to Barbados where I found relief in the clean air and standing up straight under a sky the color of home. Grateful for the familiar heat of the sun instead of the steam of packed flesh. Grateful too for the earth supporting my feet, never mind the pen that I shared with so many. The pen that was smaller than the cargo hold we sailed in. One by one we

were made to jump high, to bend over, to open our mouths. The children were best at this. Like grass trampled by elephants, they sprang up to try life again, they had stopped weeping long ago. Now, eyes wide, they tried to please, to show their ability and therefore their living worth. How unlikely their survival, how likely another herd will come to destroy them, a herd of men of heaped teeth fingering the hasps of whips. Men flushed red with cravings. Or, as I came to learn, destroyed by fatal ground life in the cane we were brought there to harves. Snakes, tarantulas, lizards they called gators. I was burning sweat in cane only a short time when they took me away to sit on the platform in the sun. It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was *negrita*. Everything—language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song- all of it, cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was as a black that I was purchased by Senhor, taken out of the cane, and shipped north to his tobacco plants. A hop, then. But first the mating, the taking of me and Bess and one other to the curing shed. Afterwards the men who were told to break we in apologized. Later, an overseer gave each of us an orange. And it would have been all right. It would have been good both times, because the results were you and your brother. But then there was Senhor and his wife. I began to tell Reverend Father but shame made my words nonsense. He did not understand or he did not believe. He told me not to despair or be faint of heart but to love God and Jesus Christ with all my soul; to pray for the deliverance that would be mine at Judgment; that no matter what others say, I was *not* a soulless animal, a curse; that Protestants were in error, in sin, and if I remained innocent in mind and deed I would be welcome beyond the valley of this woeful life into an everlasting one, amen.

But you wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor's eye. After the tall man dined and joined Senhor on a walk through the quarters, I

was singing at the pump a song about the green bird fighting then dying when the monkey steals her eggs. I heard their voices and gathered you and your brother to stand in their eyes.

One chance I thought. There is no protection, but there *is* difference. You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take *me* to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said *you*. Take you, my daughter, because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him, hoping for a miracle. He said yes.

It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is an evil thing,

Oh Florens. My love. Here a tua mãe.

Thank you.

(applause)