

Monique "Big Mo" Matthews Rhythm and Poetry

(In reality this interview was done on an afternoon in the spring of 1989, while I was in residence at the University of California, Los Angeles, as a fellow at the Center for Afro-American Studies. Mo was a student of mine. We were sitting in my office, which was a narrow office, with sunlight. I performed Mo in many shows, and in the course of performing her, I changed the setting to a performance setting, with microphone. I was inspired by a performance that I saw of Queen Latifah in San Francisco, and by Mo's behavior in my class, which was performance behavior, to change the setting to one that was more theatrical, since Mo's everyday speech was as theatrical as Latifah's performance speech. Speaking directly to the audience, pacing the stage.)

And she say, "This is for the fellas," and she took off all her clothes and she had on a leotard that had all cuts and stuff in it, and she started doin' it on the floor.

They were like

"Go, girl!"

People like, "That look really stink."

But that's what a lot of female rappers do-

like to try to get off,

they sell they body or pimp they body

to, um, get play.

And you have people like Latifah who doesn't, you know, she talks intelligent.

You have Lyte who's just hard and people are scared by her hardness,

Fires in the Mirror

her strength of her words.

She encompasses that whole, New York-street sound.

It's like, you know, she'll like...

what's a line?

What's a line

like "Paper Thin,"

"IN ONE EAR AND RIGHT OUT THE OTHUH."

It's like,

"I don't care what you have to say,

I'm gittin' done what's gotta be done.

Man can't come across me.

A female she can't stand against me.

I'm just the toughest, I'm just the hardest/You just can't come up

against me/if you do you get waxed!"

It's like a lot of my songs,

I don't know if I'm gonna get blacklisted for it.

The image that I want is a strong strong African strong Black woman

and I'm not down with what's going on, like Big Daddy
Kane had a song

out called "Pimpin Ain't Easy," and he sat there and he talk for the

whole song, and I sit there I wanna slap him, I wanna slap him so

hard, and he talks about, it's one point he goes, yeah u m,

"Puerto Rican girls Puerto Rican girls call me Papi and White girls say

even White girls say I'm a hunk!"

I'm like,

"What you mean 'even'?

Oh! Black girls ain't good enough for you huh?"

And one of my songs has a line that's like

"PIMPIN' AIN'T EASY BUT WHORIN' AIN'T PROPER. RESPECT AND

CHERISH THE ORIGINAL MOTHER."

And a couple of my friends were like,

"Aww, Mo, you good but I can't listen to you 'cause you be Men bashin'."

I say,

"It ain't men bashin', it's female assertin'."

Shit.

I'm tired of it.

I'm tired of my friends just acceptin'

that they just considered to be a ho.

You got a song,

"Everybody's a Hotty."

A "hotty" means you a freak, you a ho,

and it's like Too Short

gets up there and he goes,

"B I AYYYYYYYYYYYE."

Like he stretches "bitch" out for as long as possible,

like you just a ho and you can't be saved,

and 2 Live Crew. . . . "we want some pussy," and the girls! "La le la le la le la,"

it's like my friends say,

"Mo, if you so bad how come you don't never say nothin about Two

Live Crew?"

When I talk about rap, and I talk about people demeaning rap, I don't even mention them because they don't understand the fundamentals of rap. Rap, rap is basically broken down Rhythm and Poetry. And poetry is expression. It's just like poetry; you release so much through poetry you get angry, you get it? Poetry is like intelligence. You just release it all and if you don't have a complex rhyme it's like. "I'm goin to the store." What rhymes with store? More store for more bore "I'm going to the store I hope I don't get bored," it's like, "WHAT YOU SAYIN', MAN? WHO CARES?" You have to have something that flows. You have to be def, D-E-F. I guess I have to think of something for you that ain't slang. Def is dope, def is live

it means it is the epitome of the experience
and you have to be def by your very presence
because you have to make people happy.
And we are living in a society where people are not happy
with their everyday lives.

when you say somethin's dope

ven Verses

Leonard Jeffries Roots

(3:00 P.M. Wednesday, November 20, 1991. A very large conference room in the African American Studies Department at CUNY. Drawn venetian blinds, fluorescent lighting. Dr. Jeffries wears a light, multicolored African top, and a multicolored African hat. His shoes are black functional shoes, like the shoes to a uniform. He sits facing the table, and often sits back with the chair back from the table, often touches the table, and often sits back with the chair on its back legs only. Sometimes he scratches his head by throwing his hat forward on his head with great ease and authority. There is a bodyguard, a large heavy-set African American man, present.)

People are asking who is this guy Jeffries?

When they find out my background they're gonna be surprised.

They are gonna find out that I was even related to Alex Haley. In fact I was a major consultant for *Roots*.

In fact there might not have been a Roots without me.

Now when I say that,

that's my own personal in-group joke wit' Alex.

He was in Philadelphia

getting his ticket to go down to Jamaica

and

Roots was lost.

He had it in a duffle bag,

a big duffle bag like this,

the whole manuscript.

It was lost in the airport of Philadelphia.

I got on my horse and ran around the airport of Philadelphia

and found Roots.

So that's my joke.

He had this manuscript,

Alex didn't have anything else but this manuscript.

Now if he had lost that, that would have been it.

He didn't have any photocopies.

Alex did everything on a shoestring.

u h m

so for him to deny me now . . .

He never even acknowledged

Pat

Alexander

his girlfriend/secretary who he had paid with affection and not with

resources.

So I didn't expect him to acknowledge me.

He called me to come down.

I called my wife who was working on her Ph.D. at Yale.

I said, "Rosalind, Alex wants us to come down to

Brunswick, Georgia,

they're filming Roots."

She said yes she'd come down and we'd go, then she called me back.

She said, "I got too much work," so I went down to Brunswick, Georgia.

He introduced me to Margulies,

who was the, um, director

of Roots,

as the leading expert in America on Africa, and I said, "Wow," to

myself, "that's kind of high."

When Margulies said,

"That makes me number two," then I realized what Alex was doing to keep *Roots* honest.

So for two weeks I tried to change Roots.

Alex would say, "Wait a

minute, let's consult the experts."

After two weeks they got tired of me, sat me down

and said, "Dr. Jeffries," at lunch,

"we are very happy to have you here

but we just bought the rights to the book Roots

and we are under no obligation to maintain the integrity of the book

and we certainly don't have to deal with the truth of Black history."

Now,

this was a wipeout for me

T

I, there's been very few traumatic

moments

(Longest pause in his text)

uh, just to think.

Now I wasn't even prepared for this

but Pat had called me before and said,

"Len, I'm looking at this document and I don't know what to make of it."

I said, "What is it, Pat, what is it?"

and I knew she was nervous, she said,

"I'm reading a contract that says

"Roots has been sold to David Wolper and their heirs for ever and ever

(He is thumping his hand on table)

and their heirs for ever and ever."

Alex had signed the contract for fifty thousand dollars.

(He is thumping his hand on table)

Fifty thousand dollars for paperback Roots.

Something that made how much?

Three hundred million dollars?

He was suing them for years.

The millions he made on TV Roots he spent a lot of it to sue

Doubleday to get a better deal—I don't know if he ever got it.

Roots was a devastation.

The tens of millions and hundreds of millions made on Roots

went to produce,

not to make more Black series,

like Roots,

but they went to produce a series

 ${\bf may be\ a\ dozen\ mini-series\ on\ } {\it Jewish\ } {\bf history}$

as opposed to Black history.

You can document what was produced in terms of Black history

compared to what was produced of Jewish history.

It's a devastation.

But the one thing that came out of this for me,

was that when these people told me, you know,

"We bought your research

We bought your history

You really have no . . ."

I was thrown off

I had to get out of there.

I stayed for another couple of days.

I told Alex I had to make a pilgrimage to my grandfather's grave.

Never saw my grandfather.

Then I watched one more scene in the Alex Haley thing and that finished it for me.

A cutaway of a slave ship

that was so real that they had to bring in these high school kids,

and once these high school kids played the enslaved

Africans greased

down in simulated vomit

and feces

they couldn't come back,

so they had to continue to get,

go take these youngsters,

and some little White woman

who was there sleeping with one of those guys,

they told her, "You cannot take these kids without

authorization."

But she would drive a bus

up to the schoolyard,

put the kids in it, and bring them to the set.

And it almost produced a riot

there.

But anyway this slave scene

was so realistic

the trainer's up on a lower deck

and Kunta Kinte's on a bottom deck and they call down to each other, and the trainer says,

"Kunta Kinte,

Be strong! Be strong!

We may have to fight.

Kill the White man and return to Mother Africa."

This was high drama.

All of us grown men over hiding in the shadows in tears.

Then

Green rushes out and said, "Break! Break!"

He said he didn't want the scene.

We said, "What?"

Even Lou Gossett and them were ready to fight!

You know 'cause they had-

a movie script is just

a skeleton,

you have to put your soul in a movie script,

and they put their heart and soul into what would have

been . . .

And with the African-

because the "earth is mother" all over Africa.

So to say to go back to Mother Africa is a very meaningful phrase.

But this

Englishman refused

to accept it,

and they almost had a physical fight on the set.

They compromised and said,

"We—are—all—from—one—village,"

(Hitting his hand rhythmically on the desk) which is not the same thing. After that I said, "I have to go." I said I have to go, and I rented a-I flew out with Lorne Greene of all people. He saw me and we had known each other for a couple of weeks from the set, and he's sitting there drinking his little drinks talking about "Isn't Roots wonderful. It's everybody's history," and I'm dying. (Pause) Get to Atlanta. Rent a car. Cut across the Georgia countryside. came to a fork in the road. made the right turn, and there on a bluff was a clapboard church made by my grandfather and through which is a see the resultable of four other trustees. Then when I went across the cemetery to see, uh, the gravesite where he was the tallest tombstone in the graveyard was his.

Uhm. It was an obelisk. On it was a Masonic symbol. He was the master of the lodge. On it was his vital statistics: "Born August the tenth 1868." At the birth of the Fourteenth Amendment. I later learned that his brother Sam was born 1865 at the birth of the Thirteenth Amendment! And this is why people say, "Who is he? What is he? Why is he?" If they only know I've had one of the best educations on the planet. Yeah. So . . . When I went to Albany in July, I went knowing that you might not have much time. just like my wife said on the radio today: "When we speak we speak as though it is the last speech we're gonna make." But I knew what was at stake ever since they branded me a conspiracy theorist, February 12, 1990, two-column editorial in the New York Times. That was.

in the concept of Jewish thinking,

the kiss of death. I knew I had been targeted. Arthur Schlesinger went and wrote a book called The Disuniting of America. He has everybody in the margin except a half-page photo of myself which said to us. "This is the one they got to kill." We knew that Schlesinger and his people had sent out a thousand letters to CEOs around the country and foundation heads not to have anything to do with all of us involved in these studies for multicultural curriculum so, uh . . . Knowing that I had taken this beating for two and a half years it was my chance to strike out, but people don't understand that that was my way of saying, "You bastids! . . . for starting this process of destroying me." That was my striking out. But people don't know the context. They don't know that for two and a half years

I bore this burden

And now they've got a problem.
'Cause after they destroyed me,
here he is resurrected!!!!!
I spoke at Columbia, I spoke at Queens College. . . .

by myself

and I bore it well.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin Near Enough to Reach

(Evening. The day before Thanksgiving, 1991. On the phone. Direct, passionate, confident, lots of volume. She is in a study with a rolltop desk and a lot of books.)

I think it's about rank frustration and the old story
that you pick a scapegoat
that's much more, I mean Jews and Blacks,
that's manageable,
because we're near,
we're still near enough to each other to reach!
I mean, what can you do about the people who voted for
David Duke?

Are Blacks going to go there and deal with that?

No, it's much easier to deal with Jews who are also panicky.

We're the only ones that pay any attention

(Her voice makes an upward inflection)

Do you hear?

Well, Jeffries did speak about the Mafia being, um,

Mafia,

and the Jews in Hollywood.

I didn't see

reaction.
Only Jews listen,
only Jews take Blacks seriously,
only Jews view Blacks as full human beings that you

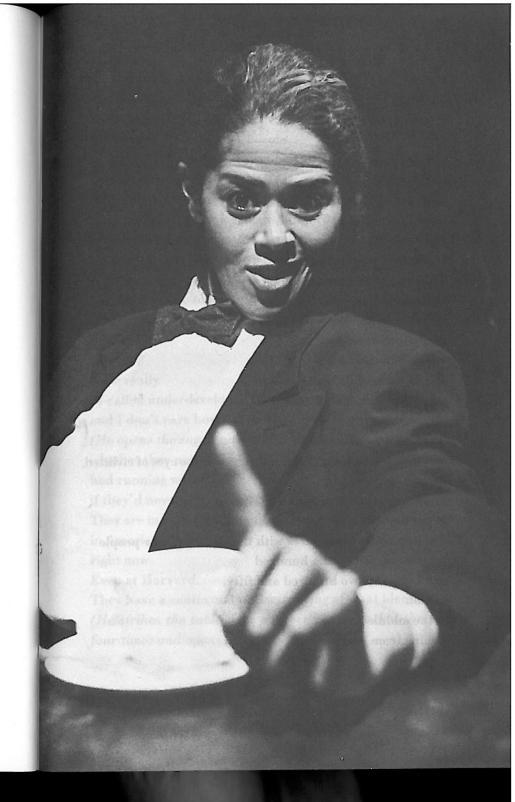
this tremendous outpouring of Italian

should address
in their rage
and, um,
people don't seem to notice that.
But Blacks, it's like a little child kicking up against Arnold
Schwarzenegger
when they,
when they have anything to say about the dominant culture
nobody listens! Nobody reacts!
To get a headline,
to get on the evening news,
you have to attack a Jew.
Otherwise you're ignored.
And it's a shame.
We all play into it.

Minister Conrad Wohammed Seven Verses

(April 1992, morning. A café/restaurant. Roosevelt Island, New York. We are sitting in the back, in an area that is surrounded by glass floor-to-ceiling windows. Mr. Mohammed is impeccably dressed in a suit of an elegant fabric. He wears a blue shirt and a bow tie. He has on fine shoes, designer socks, and a large fancy watch and wedding ring. His hair is closely cropped. He drinks black coffee, and uses a few packs of sugar. He is traveling with another man, also a Muslim, in the clothing of a Muslim, impeccable, who sits at another table and watches us.)

The condition of the Black man in America today is part and parcel, through the devlishment that permitted Caucasian people to rob us of our humanity, and put us in the throes of slavery . . . The fact that our—our Black parents were actually taken as cattle and as, as animals and packed into slave ships like sardines amid feces and urine-



and the suffering of our people, for months, in the middle passage-Our women, raped before our own eyes, so that today some look like you, some look like me, some look like brother . . . (Indicating his companion) This is a crime of tremendous proportion. In fact. no crime in the history of humanity has before or since equaled that crime. The Holocaust did not equal it Oh, absolutely not. First of all, that was a horrible crime and that is something that is a disgrace in the eyes of civilized people. That, uh, crime also stinks in the nostrils of God. But it in no way compares with the slavery of our people because we lost over a hundred and some say two hundred and fifty, million in the middle passage coming from Africa

We were so thoroughly robbed. We didn't just lose six million. We didn't just endure this for, for five or six years or from '38 to '45 or '39 to — We endured this for over three hundred years the total subjugation of the Black man. You can go into Bangladesh today, Calcutta. (He strikes the table with a sugar packet three or four times) New Delhi, Nigeria, some really so-called underdeveloped nation, and I don't care how low that person's humanity is (He opens the sugar packet) whether they never had running water, if they'd never seen a television or anything. They are in better condition than the Black man and woman in America today right now. Even at Harvard. They have a contextual understanding of what identity is. (He strikes the table with another sugar packet three or four times and opens it)

to America.

But the Black man has no knowledge of that; he's an amnesia victim (Starts stirring his coffee) He has lost knowledge of himself (Stirring his coffee) and he's living a beast life. (Stirring his coffee) So this proves that it was the greatest crime. Because we were cut off from our past. Not only were we killed and murdered, not only were our women raped in front of their own children. Not only did the slave master stick (The spoon drops onto saucer) at times, daggers into a pregnant woman's stomach, slice the stomach open push the baby out on the ground and crush the head of the baby to instill fear in the Massas of the plantation. (Stirring again) Not only were these things done, not only were our thumbs (Spoon drops) put in, in devices that would just slowly torture the slave and tear the thumb off from the root.

Not only were we sold on the auction block

like cattle. not permitted to marry. See these are the crimes of slavery that nobody wants to talk about. But the most significant crime because we could have recovered from all of thatbut the fact that they cut off all knowledge from us, told us that we were animals, told us that we were subhuman, took from us our names, gave us names like Smith and Jones and today we wear those names with dignity and pride, yet these were the names given to us in one of the greatest crimes ever committed on the face of the earth. So this kind of thing, Sister. is what qualifies slavery as the greatest crime ever committed. They have stolen our garment. Stolen our identity. The Honorable Louis Farrakhan teaches us

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that we are the chosen of God. We are those people that almighty God Allah has selected as his chosen, and they are masquerading in our garment the Jews. We don't have an identity today. Because we are the people . . . There are seven verses in the Bible, seven verses. I believe it is in Deuteronomy, that the Jews base their chosen people, uh, uh, claim the theology, the whole theological exegesis with respect decided as the state of the sta of being the chosen is based upon seven verses in the Scripture that talk about a covenant with Abraham.

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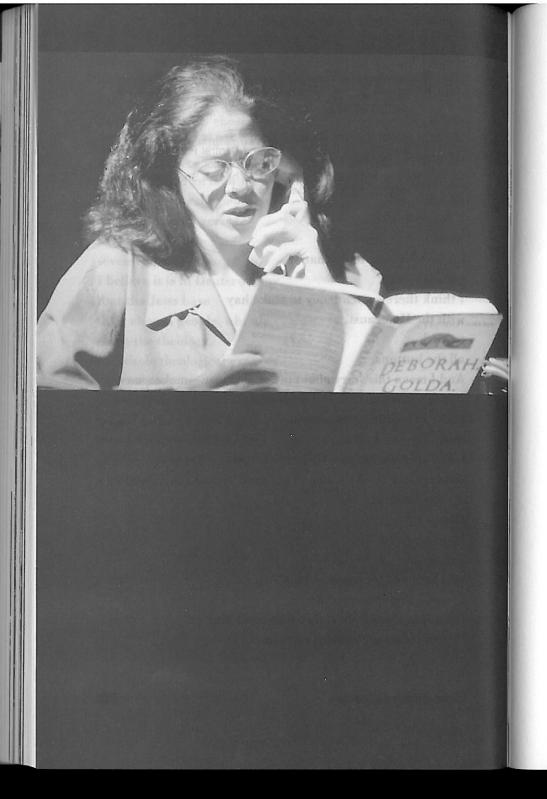
Letty Cottin Pogrebin Isaac

(Morning. Spring. On the phone. She is in her office in her home on West 67th Street and Central Park West in Manhattan. Her office has an old-fashioned wooden rolltop desk and bookcases filled with books. She says she was wearing leggings and a loose shirt.)

Well. it's hard for me to do that because I think there's a tendency to make hay with the Holocaust, to push all the buttons. And I mean this story about my uncle Isaac—makes me cry and it's going to make your audience cry and I'm beginning to worry that we're trotting out our Holocaust stories too regularly and that we're going to inure each other to the truth of them. But I think maybe if you let me read it, I would prefer to read it:

(Reading from Deborah, Golda, and Me)

"I remember my mother's cousin



Isaac who came to New York immediately after the war and lived with us for several months.

Isaac is my connection to dozens of other family members who were murdered in the concentration camps.

Because he was blond and blue-eyed he had been chosen as the designated survivor of his town.

That is the Jewish councils had instructed him to do anything

to stay alive and tell the story.

For Isaac

anything turned out to mean this.

The Germans suspected his forged Aryan papers and decided that he

would have to prove by his actions that he was not a Jew.

They put him on a transport train with the Jews of his town and then gave him the task of herding into the gas chambers

everyone in his train load.

After he had fulfilled that assignment with patriotic

German efficiency,

the Nazis accepted the authenticity of his identity papers and let him go.

Among those whom Isaac packed into the gas chambers that day

dispassionately as if shoving a few more items into an overstuffed

closet were his wife and

two children. The designated survivor arrived in America at about age forty (Breathes in) with prematurely white hair and a dead gaze within the sky blue eyes that'd helped save his life. As promised he told his story to dozens of Jewish agencies and community leaders and to groups of families and friends which is how I heard the account translated from his Yiddish by my mother. For months he talked, speaking the unspeakable. Describing a horror that American Jews had suspected but could not conceive. A monstrous tale that dwarfed the demonology of legend and gave me the nightmare I still dream to this day. And as he talked Isaac seemed to grow older and older until one night

Robert Sherman Lousy Language

(11:00 A.M. Wednesday, November 13, 1991. A very sunny and large, elegant living room in a large apartment near the Brooklyn Museum. Mr. Sherman is sitting in an arm-chair near an enormous bouquet of flowers for the birth of his first child. He wears sweats, and a bright orange long-sleeved tee shirt. Smiles frequently, upbeat, impassioned. Fingers his wedding ring. Each phrase builds on the next, pauses are all sustained intensity, never lets up. Full. Lots of volume, clear enunciation, teeth, and tongue very involved in his speech. Good-humored, seems to like the act of speech.)

Do you have demographic information on Crown Heights? The important thing to remember is that—
and I will check these numbers when I get back to the
office—

I think the
Hasidim
comprise only ten percent
of the population
of the neighborhood.

The Crown Heights conflict has been brewing on and off for twenty years since the Hasidic community developed some serious numbers and some strength in Crown Heights and as African

Americans and

Caribbean Americans came to make up the dominant culture in

Crown Heights.

a few months later

he died."

when he finished telling everything he knew

Very important to remember that those things that are expressed really as bias, those things that we at the Human Rights Commission would consider to be bias, have the same trappings of bias, which is complaints based on a characteristic, not on a knowledge of a specific person. There sort of is a soup of biasprejudice, racism, and discrimination. I think bias really does relate to feelings with a valence, feelings with a, uhm, (Breathing in)





feelings that can go in a direction positive or negative although we usually use bias to mean a negative. What it means usually is negative attitudes that can lead to negative behaviors: biased acts, biased incidents, or biased crimes. Racism is hatred based on race. Discrimination refers to acts against somebody . . . so that the words actually tangle up. I think in part because vocabulary follows general awareness. . . . I think you know the Eskimos have seventy words for snow? We probably have seventy different kinds of bias, prejudice, racism, and

discrimination,
but it's not in our mind-set to be clear about it,
so I think that we have
sort of lousy language
on the subject
and that
is a reflection
of our unwillingness
to deal with it honestly
and to sort it out.
I think we have very, very bad language.



Rabbi Joseph Spielman No Blood in His Feet

(9:30 A.M. Tuesday, November 12, 1991. A large home on President Street in Crown Heights. Only natural light, not very much light. Dark wood. A darkish dining room with an enormous table, could seat twenty. The rabbi sits at the head of the table. Lots of stuff on the table. He wears Hasidic clothing, a black fedora, black jacket, and reading glasses. As he talks, he slightly slides around the tape-recorder microphone, which is in front of him at the table. The furniture in the dining room including his chair is, for the most part, very old, solid wood. There are children playing quietly in another room, and people come in and out frequently, but always whispering and walking carefully not to make noise, unless they speak to him directly. The children at one point came over and stared at me.)

Many people were on the sidewalk,
talking, playing,
drinking
beer or whatever—
being that type of neighborhood.
A car
driven by an individual—
a Hasidic individual—
went through the intersection,
was hit by another car,
thereby causing it to go onto the sidewalk.
The driver on seeing
himself in such a position that he felt he was going to
definitely hit

someone. because of the amount of people on the sidewalk, he steered at the building, so as to get out of the way of the people. Obviously, for the most part, he was successful. But regrettably, one child was killed and another child was wounded. Um, seeing what happened, he jumped out of the car and, realizing there may be a child under the car, he tried to physically lift the car from the child. Well, as he was doing this the Afro-Americans were beating him already. He was beaten so much he needed stitches in the scalp and

fifteen or sixteen stitches
and also
there were three other passengers in the car
that were being beaten too.
One of the passengers was calling 911
on the cellular phone.
A Black person
pulled the phone out of his hand and ran.

Just stole the—stole the telephone.

The Jewish community
has a volunteer
ambulance corps
which is funded totally from the nations—
there is not one penny of government funds—
and manned by volunteers—
who many times at their expense—
supplied the equipment that they carry in order to save
lives.

As one of the EMS ambulances were coming, one of the Hasidic ambulances or the Jewish ambulances came

on the scene.

The EMS responded with three ambulances on the scene.

They were there before
the Jewish ambulance came.

Two or three police cars were already on the scene.

The police saw the potential for violence and saw that the occupants of the car were being beaten and were afraid for their safety.

At the same time the EMS asked



the face,

the Hasidic ambulances for certain pieces of equipment that they

were out of,

that they needed to take care of the Cato kid,

and,

um,

in fact, I was . . .

The Hasidic ambulance left, leaving behind one of the passengers.

That passenger had a walkie-talkie and he requested that I come down to pick him up.

And at that time there was a lot of screaming and shouting and it was a mixed crowd, Hasidic and Afro-American. The police said, "Rabbi get your people out of here."

I told them to leave and I left.

Now.

a few hours later,

two and a half hours later,

in a different part of Crown Heights,

a scholar

from Australia,

Yankel Rosenbaum,

who, urr,

I think he had a doctorate or he was working on his doctorate.

was walking on the street

on his own—

I mean he was totally oblivious and he was accosted by a group of young Blacks about twenty of them strong

which was being egged on by a Black male approximately forty years old and balding, telling them, "Kill all Jews look what they did to the kid, kill all Jews." and all the epithets that go along with it, "Heil Hitler" and all of it. They stabbed him, which later on the stab wounds were fatal and he passed away in the hospital. The Mayor, hearing about the Cato kid, came to the Kings County Hospital to give condolences to the family of the child who had regrettably been killed.

regrettably been killed.

At the meantime they had already wheeled in

Mr. Rosenbaum.

He was in the emergency room
and I was at the hospital at the same time,
and the Mayor, seeing me there,
expressed his concern
that a child,
uh, innocent child, had been killed.
Where I explained to him
the fact

that.

whereas the child was killed from an unfortunate accident where there was no malicious intent, here

there was an individual lying in the emergency room
who had been stabbed with malicious intent
and for the sole reason—
not that he did anything to anyone—
just from the fact that he happened to be Jewish.
And the mayor went with me to the emergency room
to visit Mr. Rosenbaum.

This was approximately one and a half hours before he passed away.

I noticed at the time that his feet were completely white.

And I complained to the doctor

"He's having a problem with blood circulation because there's no blood in his feet."

And she gave me some asinine answer.

And the mayor asked her what his condition is:

"Serious but stable."

In the meantime he was screaming and in pain and they weren't doing anything. Subsequently they, um,

they started giving him anaesthesia in a time that they weren't allowed to give him anaesthesia and while he was under anaesthesia, he passed away.

So there was totally mismanagement in his case.

So whereas the Mayor,

had been fed . . .

his people got
whatever information he got out of the Black community was
that
the driver had run a red light
and also,
and that the ambulance,
the Hasidic ambulance,
refused to take care of the Black child that was dying and
rather took care of their own.
Nenh?

And this is what was fed amongst the Black community.
And it was false,
it was totally false
and it was done maliciously
only with the intent to get the riots,
to start up the resulting riots.