In *A Biography of America*, we've tried to bring to life some of the defining moments of American history using the medium of storytelling. At the root of all history are memories that have been woven into stories. Today, we turn to four storytellers who've drawn on the past to create works of power and truthfulness.

**Esmeralda Santiago**, author of *When I Was a Puerto Rican*:

Here I am in this, you know, Katonah, New York and I started out in Macoun, Puerto Rico—how did that happen?


Things don't always narrow down to a sort of pencil point of truth; it's kind of messy.

**Charles Johnson**, author of *Middle Passage* and winner of the National Book Award for Fiction:

...ask my mother, "Well, what about your grandmother?" And my father, "What about, you know, your great-uncle?"

**Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.**, author of *Slaughterhouse Five* and a dozen other memorable novels:

It is the past, not the future, which scares the heck out of me.

On *A Biography of America*, it is the past, not the future, which scares the heck out of me. Memories, storytelling and history today.

[Captioning sponsored by ANNENBERG/CPB]
NOW, SHELBY'S A NOVELIST AND HE FEELS HE'S GOT TO EXPLAIN THAT A LITTLE BIT.

AND SO, IN AN AFTERWARD, HE WRITES THIS:

"THE POINT I WOULD LIKE TO MAKE IS THAT THE NOVELIST AND THE HISTORIAN ARE SEEKING THE SAME THING, TRUTH-- NOT A DIFFERENT TRUTH, THE SAME TRUTH. ONLY THEY REACH IT-- OR TRY TO REACH IT-- BY DIFFERENT ROUTES. WHETHER THE EVENT TOOK PLACE IN A WORLD NOW GONE TO DUST OR IN THE IMAGINATION THEY BOTH WANT TO TELL IT HOW IT WAS.

"TO RECREATE IT BY THEIR SEPARATE METHODS AND MAKE IT LIVE AGAIN IN THE WORLD AROUND US."

NOW, ARTHUR, YOU WROTE A NOVEL THAT IS AMAZINGLY DETAILED ABOUT A GEISHA GIRL. YOU REMIND ME SO MUCH OF AN HISTORIAN AT WORK:

YOU PUT THE DETAILS TOGETHER INTO THE HISTORICAL PATTERNS AND GENERALIZATIONS.

YOU'RE TRYING TO ENTER INTO THE CULTURE.

YOU ARE USING HISTORY BUT YOU'RE WRITING FICTION.

YOU'RE PERFORMING A KIND OF HIGH-WIRE ACT THERE, THOUGH AREN'T YOU? YOU'RE A WHITE, AMERICAN MALE WRITING ABOUT A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT CULTURE.

AND TRYING TO GET INSIDE THAT CULTURE.

WELL, THE WAY I FINALLY GAVE MYSELF PERMISSION WAS BY SAYING
YOU KNOW, I'M NOT TRYING TO WRITE ABOUT EVERY JAPANESE WOMAN.
I'M NOT TRYING TO WRITE ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO A PARTICULAR LIVING PERSON.
I'M TRYING TO WRITE ABOUT WHAT MIGHT HAVE HAPPENED.
AND PEOPLE DO DIFFERENT KINDS OF THINGS.
THERE ARE ALL SORTS OF POSSIBILITIES.
IT WAS A CHARACTER WITH A VERY, VERY DIFFERENT BACKGROUND AND SENSIBILITY FROM MINE, OF COURSE.
AND I CAME TO THINK OF WRITING AS BEING LIKE A WAR--
AND WHAT I MEAN IS THAT THERE WERE TIMES WHEN YOU'RE THE GENERAL LOOKING DOWN ON THE BATTLEFIELD MAKING BIG DECISIONS.
ABOUT LARGE ISSUES, LIKE WHO'S GOING TO BE IN THE BOOK.
WHERE'S IT GOING TO GO?
THEN THERE ARE THESE SORT OF TACTICAL MOMENTS.
WHERE YOU'RE THE TROOP COMMANDER TRYING TO TAKE A HILL.
BUT THEN THERE ARE THOSE MOMENTS.
WHERE YOU ARE THE GUY IN THE TRENCHES WITH THE RIFLE.
AND THOSE ARE THE MOMENTS.
WHEN SOMETHING AFFECTS YOUR CHARACTER.
AND YOU HAVE TO SAY HOW IT FEELS.
AND, YOU KNOW, IT REALLY IS A MATTER OF JUST SITTING THERE CLOSING YOUR EYES, I THINK, AND EXPERIENCING IT.
CLOSING YOUR EYES, I THINK, AND THAT'S THE THING THAT I THINK FICTION CAN DO SO POWERFULLY.
WELL, I THINK THAT THE KEY IS AS A WRITER YOU HAVE TO HAVE TREMENDOUS EMPATHY.
TO PROJECT YOURSELF INTO THE CIRCUMSTANCES AND THE WORLD OF YOUR CHARACTER.

BUT, YOU KNOW, AN ISSUE CAME UP EARLY IN OUR CONVERSATION THAT YOU RAISED, AND I THOUGHT IT WAS KIND OF INTERESTING. BECAUSE YOU'RE DOING THIS OUTSIDE OF YOUR CULTURE INTO ANOTHER-- PROJECTING YOURSELF INTO ANOTHER CULTURE. THE IDEA THAT COMES UP IS "CAN YOU WRITE OUTSIDE OF YOUR RACE?" FOR THE "AFRICANS IN AMERICA" STORIES I HAD A CHANCE... I COULD WRITE ABOUT FREDERICK DOUGLASS BUT I COULD ALSO WRITE ABOUT MARTHA WASHINGTON IT'S A PROBLEM. I THINK THAT WITH GREAT EMPATHY AND IMAGINATION AND TAKING... THIS IS WHAT ART DOES, ANYWAY-- IT TAKES US FROM OVER HERE AND PUTS US BEHIND HIS EYES OR BEHIND HER EYES SO WE GET TO SEE THE WORLD FROM A DIFFERENT ANGLE WITH A DIFFERENT MEANING, A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE AND, FINALLY, A DIFFERENT TRUTH. A TRUTH OF THE WORLD, NOT THE TRUTH. AND YET WE'RE ALL WEDDED TO OUR OWN PERSPECTIVES AND, AS CHARLES SAYS, THE ISSUE FOR ART IS CAN YOU BRING IN A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE. IT'S ALWAYS THE FACT THAT WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE IS PROVISIONAL AND TENTATIVE-- THERE'S NOT GOING TO BE ABSOLUTE. WHETHER IT'S HISTORY OR IT'S ART.
felt compelled
to write your own story.
Yeah, I did, because I felt like I was doing a lot of work in the United States:
I had to learn English.
I had to learn how to live in a city.
I had to learn how to... be in American culture.
And yet, I didn't exist in its literature.
And, um, I was a big reader and I read a lot of books but I wasn't there.
And there was this sense I had that if I didn't exist in the literature I didn't exist in the society.
And when I speak about "I" I'm talking about myself and my ten sisters and brothers and my mother and my children and my nieces and nephews.
Um, and this sense of this invisibility is really what drove me to begin to write because I thought it was really important for people to know that this happens in the United States-- people come from other countries people live the way we live they struggle with these kinds of issues and it isn't just a bunch of data and statistics.
It's real people.
And I wanted to become real to rest of the United States.
And that sense of not existing
WAS WHAT DROVE ME.

OR, IF YOU DO EXIST

YOU EXIST AS A CARICATURE

OR A STEREOTYPE

OR SOMETHING PRODUCED

BY THE PLANTATION SCHOOL

YOU KNOW, AT THE END OF

THE 19th CENTURY, EARLY 20th.

YOU DON'T SEE THE FULL

DIVERSITY AND RANGE

OF A PEOPLE

AND THEIR LIVES.

BECAUSE, AGAIN,

YOU KNOW

YOU TALK ABOUT

WRITING ABOUT A GROUP

THE GROUP HAS

MANY KINDS OF INDIVIDUALS

IN IT, YOU KNOW?

AND SO YOU WANT

THAT SAME RANGE

AS WELL AS DEPTH

OF PORTRAYALS.

AND THAT'S

ONE OF THE REASONS

I THINK NOVELISTS DO,

IN FACT, TURN TO HISTORY

BECAUSE IT'S ALL THERE.

IT JUST HASN'T BEEN BROUGHT

FORWARD TO CENTER STAGE YET.

YOU KNOW, I FIND MYSELF

REPEATEDLY...

TO KNOW YOURSELF?

TO KNOW MYSELF,

AND ALSO

IT ISN'T A PERSONAL TASK.

THIS IS LIKE A COVENANT

THAT I HAVE WITH MY ANCESTORS.

IT'S A COVENANT THAT I HAVE

WITH MY CHILDREN.

AND IT'S A TRANSMISSION OF

CULTURE AND UNDERSTANDING

THE LIVES OF PEOPLE WHO

SHAPED THIS NATION FROM 1619--

YOU SEE

WHAT I'M SAYING?

SO, IT'S A DUTY

IN MANY, MANY WAYS.

BUT IT ISN'T AN ONEROUS DUTY,

IT'S A DUTY THAT... I LOVE.

I FIND MYSELF...
I'd like to go back to something that you said earlier when you were...

What gave you permission to approach this or what gave you the courage to approach it?

Is this sense that this was one person’s story and that then within that person you could then go into that life and they make mistakes and whatever.

And one of the things that...

It really sparked something in me because that's what allowed me to write to write memoir.

I remember just being terrified at the prospect that I had to write about my life.

And that, in fact, because there weren't a lot of books about Puerto Ricans coming to the United States and all the kind of experiences that I knew on some level that it would be seen as representative of a whole group of people.

But I do remember sitting in front of my computer one day and just saying, you know, I just have to write my story.

And interesting thing is that when you do that...

Because you have to.
218 01:09:30:03 IN ORDER TO BE SPECIFIC
219 01:09:32:22 ABOUT YOUR CHARACTER
220 01:09:34:22 OR ABOUT YOURSELF
221 01:09:37:29 YOU HAVE TO GET INTO THE REAL,
222 01:09:40:01 NITTY-GRITTY SPECIFICITY
223 01:09:43:07 OF THAT MOMENT OR OF THAT LIFE.
224 01:09:45:12 AND THAT'S WHAT BRINGS IT
225 01:09:49:12 AND MAKES IT UNIVERSAL.
226 01:09:53:12 THEN IT DOESN'T SEEM
227 01:09:57:12 AS DAUNTING.
228 01:10:01:16 BUT, IN FACT, IT'S A LOT BIGGER
229 01:10:05:23 THAN YOU EVER IMAGINED.
230 01:10:03:03 BECAUSE I THOUGHT ABOUT IT
231 01:10:12:09 AS A NOVELIST.
232 01:10:05:25 IT'S TERRIFICALLY IMPORTANT
233 01:10:08:03 IN STORYTELLING
234 01:10:12:09 LIKE, FOR EXAMPLE,
235 01:10:14:13 YOU'RE AT A DINNER PARTY
236 01:10:16:01 THAN HE SHOULD
237 01:10:18:09 AND YOU'RE A MAN.
238 01:10:18:09 IT DOESN'T MEAN ANYTHING.
239 01:10:19:21 BUT IF YOU PUT
240 01:10:21:16 AN AFFAIR WITH HIS WIFE
241 01:10:23:11 NOW, SUDDENLY
242 01:10:25:04 WHEN HE LOOKS AT YOU
243 01:10:26:19 BUT IF YOU START A STORY
244 01:10:28:20 TO THE BEGINNING OF AFFAIR
245 01:10:29:25 AND WORK YOUR WAY
246 01:10:30:28 UP THROUGH
247 01:10:31:03 IT'S A VERY
248 01:10:34:07 FROM STARTING WITH
THE BEGINNING
OF THE AFFAIR

249 01:10:34:09 01:10:35:13 AND WORKING YOUR WAY THROUGH
250 01:10:35:15 01:10:36:29 IN ITS NATURAL, CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER.
251 01:10:37:01 01:10:38:06 BECAUSE, IN THE FIRST CASE
252 01:10:38:08 01:10:40:06 YOU POSE A QUESTION IN THE READER'S MIND--
253 01:10:40:08 01:10:41:19 WHAT WAS THAT LOOK ALL ABOUT?
254 01:10:41:21 01:10:42:29 WHY DID IT UPSET HIM SO MUCH?
255 01:10:43:01 01:10:44:18 I MEAN, NOW THE STORY IS REALLY PRINCIPALLY
256 01:10:44:20 01:10:47:02 THERE TO ANSWER A QUESTION.
257 01:10:47:04 01:10:49:04 IT'S A SORT OF INTELLECTUAL SATISFACTION.
258 01:10:49:06 01:10:51:00 BUT IF YOU DO IT IN ITS PROPER ORDER
259 01:10:51:02 01:10:52:10 WHEN YOU GET TO THAT SCENE
260 01:10:52:12 01:10:53:25 NOW IT HAS AN EMOTIONAL EFFECT
261 01:10:53:27 01:10:55:09 UPON THE READER.
262 01:10:55:11 01:10:56:03 AND I THINK CHRONOLOGY IS INTRINSICALLY
263 01:10:57:01 01:10:59:06 MORE EMOTIONAL OR EMOTION-LADEN.
264 01:10:59:08 01:11:01:04 Miller: I'D AGREE.
265 01:11:01:06 01:11:02:22 BUT A LOT OF HISTORY HAS GOTTEN AWAY
266 01:11:02:24 01:11:04:03 FROM THE ART OF STORYTELLING.
267 01:11:04:05 01:11:06:03 WE FORGOT HERODOTUS, WE FORGOT THUCYDIDES
268 01:11:06:05 01:11:08:12 WE FORGOT WHAT MADE HISTORY COMPPELLING
269 01:11:08:14 01:11:12:14 AND WE'RE BACK TO, YOU KNOW, ANALYSIS
270 01:11:12:16 01:11:13:28 YOU KNOW, WITHOUT STORIES.
271 01:11:14:00 01:11:16:02 BUT I THINK THE IDEA OF A STORYTELLER
272 01:11:16:04 01:11:18:19 HAS A MORE INTERESTING LEGACY AND HERITAGE.
274 01:11:23:00 01:11:25:11 YEAH... THAT SOUNDS LIKE AN EASY ONE.
275 01:11:25:13 01:11:26:18 YEAH, YEAH, IT IS.
276 01:11:26:20 01:11:28:18 BUT THE STORYTELLING TECHNIQUE
277 01:11:28:20 01:11:32:01 I DEAL WITH A SCENE IN A BOOK I'M WRITING NOW ON VICKSBURG
278 01:11:32:03 01:11:33:23 WHERE GRANT GOES
BEHIND THE LINES--

01:11:33:25 01:11:35:20 THE CONFEDERATE LINES IN MISSISSIPPI.

01:11:35:22 01:11:38:02 HE CUTS OFF COMMUNICATION WITH WASHINGTON AND HE WINS.

01:11:38:04 01:11:39:28 BUT, AGAIN, IN THE HISTORY BOOK THEY'D SAY

01:11:40:00 01:11:41:25 "WELL, GRANT, IT WAS A FANTASTIC CAMPAIGN--

01:11:41:27 01:11:43:14 HE CUT BEHIND THE LINES AND HE WON."

01:11:43:16 01:11:44:26 BUT WHAT YOU DON'T SEE


01:11:47:00 01:11:48:13 THAT COULD HAVE AMBUSHED HIM.

01:11:48:15 01:11:51:07 YOU DON'T SENSE THE DANGER OF GRANT GOING BEHIND THERE UNLESS YOU PUT THOSE OPTIONS OUT THERE.

01:11:51:09 01:11:53:05 THAT ALL THESE THINGS COULD HAVE HAPPENED TO HIM.

01:11:53:07 01:11:55:23 AND THAT'S STORYTELLING, YOU KNOW?

01:11:55:25 01:11:57:16 MILLER:

01:12:01:08 01:12:08:28 JOHNSON:

01:12:10:21 01:12:12:02 "WHEN YOU WRITE"

01:12:14:11 01:12:16:15 "NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION"

01:12:16:08 01:12:18:28 "IT IS JUST AN INDIVIDUAL" IT DOES OFTEN HAPPENED THAT READERS READ IT AND THINK OF SOME LARGER MEANING-- WHICH IS ALL RIGHT

01:12:19:00 01:12:22:07 "AND THINK OF SOME LARGER MEANING-- WHICH IS ALL RIGHT"

01:12:22:09 01:12:24:25 "BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE WHAT YOU MEANT."

01:12:24:27 01:12:26:15 "YOU KNOW, WHEN PEOPLE COME TO ME AND SAY"

01:12:26:17 01:12:28:03 "I DISCOVERED THIS" OR "I FOUND THAT"

01:12:28:05 01:12:29:16 "OR " DID YOU MEAN THIS?" YOU KNOW

01:12:29:18 01:12:32:03 "I HAVE TO REMIND THEM I'M REALLY NOT THAT SMART"

01:12:32:05 01:12:35:09 "TO PUT THAT KIND OF VERY ABSTRACT THEMATIC THING IN THERE."

01:12:35:11 01:12:37:29 "IT'S JUST NOT SOMETHING THAT I SIT DOWN AND SAY"

01:12:38:01 01:12:39:28 "I'M GOING TO PUT SOMETHING IN HERE"

01:12:40:00 01:12:42:26 "SO THAT YOU CAN WRITE A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION."

01:12:42:28 01:12:44:24 "VERY FEW WRITERS WILL DO THAT."
Johnson: I DO THAT.

Miller: HE DOES.

Johnson: I DO THAT, YES.

Miller: HOW DO YOU START?

Johnson: WELL, I MEAN, MY WORK IS PHILOSOPHICAL FICTION LARGELY SO THERE IS GOING TO BE USUALLY SOME KIND OF UNIVERSAL THEME.

Johnson: BUT THE WHOLE POINT IS TO PUT FLESH AND BLOOD ON IT.

Johnson: I MEAN, ABSTRACT IDEAS DON'T BEGIN FLOATING UP HERE IN ETHER OR IN PLATO'S REALM OF FORMS.

Johnson: THEY BEGIN DOWN IN THE GRIT AND THE MUD AND THE DUST OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND EXISTENCE.

Johnson: BUT DO YOU GO AND TRY...

Johnson: AND ARE YOU VERY SPECIFIC ABOUT PUTTING THESE THINGS IN THERE...

Johnson: WHAT IT IS THEY EMERGE.

Johnson: THEY EMERGE FROM TRACING THE DRAMA.

Johnson: BECAUSE THERE'S NO WAY, I THINK YOU KNOW, A VERY FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION SUCH AS "WHO AM I?"

Johnson: QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY.

Johnson: EVEN FURTHER QUESTION LIKE WE'RE TALKING ABOUT RIGHT HERE.

Johnson: "WHAT CAN I KNOW?"

Johnson: QUESTIONS OF EPISTEMOLOGY-- WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE?

Johnson: HOW DO WE DEFINE THAT, YOU KNOW WHAT I'M SAYING.

Johnson: THOSE ARE QUESTIONS THAT CAN BE DRAMATIZED.

Johnson: AND, INDEED, ARE IN FICTION ALL THE TIME.

Johnson: I MEAN, I PERSONALLY THINK THAT FICTION AND HISTORY ARE SISTER DISCIPLINES.

Johnson: IT'S NOT LIKE PUTTING THINGS IN ONE BOX AND THAT'S A NOVEL.

Johnson: PUTTING THINGS IN ONE BOX, THAT'S HISTORY.

Johnson: BUT TO SPEAK TO YOUR SORT OF APPROACH TO FICTION.

Johnson: IF IT'S TRUE THAT A NOVEL CAN BE ABOUT ONE OF FOUR THINGS
AN IDEA, A STORY, A CHARACTER OR A WORLD, A SETTING...

I THINK THAT AT A CERTAIN POINT THEY MERGE

AND IT ENDS UP BEING ABOUT ALL FOUR OF THEM...

TO SOME DEGREE A GOOD NOVEL HAS TO BE...

AND I THINK IT'S, OF COURSE, WHEN YOU START IN ONE...

YOU START WITH ONE.

IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU START WITH IDEA

A LOT OF PEOPLE START WITH CHARACTER

YOU GET TO THE SAME PLACE.

IT DEPENDS ON THE STORY.

WE DON'T WRITE EVERY NOVEL AND STORY THE SAME WAY.

WHATEVER THE CASE IS, I THINK THAT FOR THE NOVELIST FOR THE NOVELIST

AND I CERTAINLY HOPE THIS IS ALSO TRUE FOR THE HISTORIAN

WHAT DOMINATES THIS WHOLE PROCESS

IS THAT IT'S A PROCESS OF DISCOVERY.

YOU DON'T GO INTO, I BELIEVE, A HISTORICAL WORK WITH YOUR MIND MADE UP.

IF YOU ARE, YOU'RE A BAD HISTORIAN...

YOU SHOULD.

IT'S LIKE THE SCIENTIST WHO GOES IN WITH A HYPOTHESIS

AND THE END OF THE PROCESS IN THE LAB

MAY CONTRADICT YOUR HYPOTHESIS, RIGHT?

SAME THING WITH A NOVELIST...

IT SHOULD BE A PROCESS OF DISCOVERY, AS WE GO ALONG.

Golden: DON, IN WRITING YOUR HISTORY OF CHICAGO

I'M CURIOUS, WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO THE SUBJECT

AND IF YOU WERE SURPRISED BY WHAT YOU LEARNED ALONG THE WAY.
WELL, I WAS SURPRISED BY THE FACT THAT I PICKED THE BOOK.

I WAS GOING TO WRITE A NOVEL BASED IN FLORENCE ON THE LIPPI BROTHERS, THE PAINTERS.

I HAD THE NOVEL ALL MAPPED OUT AND I CAME BACK, WAS WALKING AROUND CHICAGO, AND I DIDN'T...

I DON'T WANT TO SAY I HAD AN URBAN EPIPHANY BUT I WAS STANDING ON THE MICHIGAN AVENUE BRIDGE AND JUST SENSING THE SUNNY DAY, THE RIVER'S FLOWING.

THE SKYSCRAPERS IN THE BACKGROUND.

THE LAKE BEHIND ME.

I JUST SENSED THE POWER OF THAT CITY.

THE INCREDIBLE POWER.

IT'S ONLY 180-SOME YEARS OLD AND IT JUST GREW UP LIKE A MUSHROOM OUT OF THAT PRAIRIE MUD.

AND WOULDN'T THAT BE A GREAT STORY TO TELL?

AND I... CAME AT IT, TOO, WITH A SENSE OF HUMILITY ABOUT MY OWN DISCIPLINE BECAUSE I HAD THESE REAL DOUBTS ABOUT HISTORY, I THINK.

AND I OFTEN CALL IT A CRIPPLED DISCIPLINE.

BECAUSE IT CAN'T GET AT THIS ELUSIVE THING WE CALL TRUTH IN ITS COMPLETENESS.

RECORDS ARE LOST, LIBRARIES BURN DOWN, PEOPLE FORGET.

PEOPLE LIE IN THEIR MEMOIRS.

HOW DO YOU GET AT THIS STUFF?

HOW DO YOU GET AT THE TRUTH?

Santiago: WHY IS TRUTH SO IMPORTANT?

THAT'S THE POINT, WHY IS IT?

I DON'T KNOW, I DON'T KNOW WHY WE HAVE THIS, THIS DESIRE.
LOOK FOR THE TRUTH.

I THINK, AS A HISTORIAN, I'M LOOKING FOR UNDERSTANDING AS MUCH AS TRUTH.

Golden: I THINK THAT'S WHERE TRUTH TIES IN, IS THAT

IT'S NOT SO MUCH THAT YOU WANT TRUTH

AS THAT TRUTH IS A STEPPINGSTONE TO REACH AN UNDERSTANDING.

I JUST HAVE TO INTERJECT THIS.

THERE'S ANOTHER REASON ABOUT THE TRUTH

THAT'S SO TERRIBLY IMPORTANT.

IF YOU'VE HAD NEGATIVE HISTORIES WRITTEN OF A PEOPLE OVER 100 YEARS--

I'M THINKING OF BLACK AMERICANS AGAIN-- THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS REPUBLIC ON EVERY POSSIBLE LEVEL-- POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL-- HAVING THE TRUTH THAT BRINGS FORTH THOSE CONTRIBUTIONS IS EXTRAORDINARILY IMPORTANT.

NOT JUST FOR THE SAKE OF BUILDING UP EGOS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

BUT FOR THE SAKE OF HAVING A MORE ACCURATE RECORD OF THIS COUNTRY'S EVOLUTIONARY HISTORY.

GETS ME ANGRY.

WHEN HISTORIANS TALK ABOUT TRUTH OFTENTIMES WHAT THEY'RE SAYING IS

WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS TRUE, OKAY, AND IT JUST SO HAPPENED

THAT WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT RIGHT NOW

TO HISTORIANS 50 YEARS AGO, WAS NOT SO-CALLED "IMPORTANT."

BUT IT'S DAMN IMPORTANT TO YOU RIGHT NOW.

WELL, IT'S NOT JUST DAMN IMPORTANT TO ME
IT’S DAMN IMPORTANT TO ANYBODY IN A MULTI-RACIAL...
MULTI-CULTURAL COUNTRY, SO THAT WE DON’T BASICALLY
JUST HAVE THE HISTORY OF THOSE WHO WON THE WARS
OKAY, WHETHER THEY WERE THE, YOU KNOW
THE WARS AGAINST THE INDIANS
IT TAKES A VERY, VERY LONG TIME WHETHER THEY WERE
THE WARS AGAINST THE SLAVES.
Miller:
IT TAKES A VERY, VERY LONG TIME
FOR A HUMAN BEING
TO START FROM NOTHING-- AT BIRTH
AND PUT TOGETHER A FRAMEWORK
ON WHICH TO HANG THINGS IN YOUR MIND
AND THE COMPLICATED ENOUGH UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD
AND OF HIMSELF AND HIS PLACE IN IT
THAT THINGS BEGIN TO MEAN SOMETHING.
YOU HAVE THE CAPACITY FOR MEMORY...
THIS ISSUE OF FRAMEWORK IS TERRIFICALLY IMPORTANT, I THINK
BECAUSE, UM, THERE’S SOMETHING THAT I CALL...
I NAMED IT AFTER MYSELF; NOBODY HAD EVER NAMED IT, SO I NAMED IT "GOLDEN’S PHENOMENON."
AND IT’S THAT THING THAT HAPPENS
WHEN YOU’VE NEVER HEARD OF SOMETHING
AND YOU HEAR OF IT ABOUT SIX TIMES
OVER THE COURSE OF THE NEXT TWO WEEKS.
WELL, ACTUALLY WHAT HAPPENS IS, IT’S BEEN OUT THERE ALL ALONG--
BUT YOU NEVER WERE AWARE OF IT.
YOU BECOME AWARE OF IT AND NOW IT GETS STUCK IN THE... IN THE SCREEN.
IT DOESN’T PASS THROUGH ANY LONGER.
I think that is such an important issue...

So we start to become these memory-haunted beings, but, a lot of times, as you once said to me, you want to forget, you almost have to forget.

I think for oppressed people, history's a burden.

You don't... there's a part of you that just doesn't want to know, because as you pointed out, it's been negative all along, or it's been ignored, or it gets in your way in one way or the other.

When I was writing my novel, I had the sense of America Gonzalez dragging her history behind her, and it is such a burden that it's hard for her to move at the speed which she would like to move, because it's there and the thing is that if you have the history but you don't know what to do with it, that's when it really weighs you down.

You have to understand how you got here.

That doesn't mean that you are entrapped by history.

You know what I'm saying? Because again, every history is an interpretation rather than entrapping.

So, I mean, really, history is liberating, rather than entrapping.

And also, every history I think, what history shows is that... we're all of us constantly in a process of invention and reinvention as the country.

I think we're very mutable.
I think we are about becoming rather than being. We are about... you know, we are verbs and not nouns. But I think that as you're changing, you're always lagging your sense of yourself lags behind the reality.

So, you know, your character in the book really tremendous scene where she looks in the mirror and she's in the process of moving from what she had been in the small sea coast town to being a geisha and she looks in the mirror and she can't even find and see her former self. That's how far she's gone. That morning she wakes up and she's not quite sure who she is. Because she's in transition.

COUNTRIES DO THIS, TOO, I THINK. MAYBE AT THE END OF THE 20th CENTURY WE DON'T QUITE KNOW WHERE WE ARE BECAUSE SO MANY HUGE CHANGES ARE TAKING PLACE AND WE KNOW WE'RE SUPPOSED TO KNOW ABOUT THEM BUT WE'RE NOT QUITE SURE.

IF YOU CHANGE CULTURES YOU CONSTANTLY FEEL LIKE THAT'S HAPPENING BECAUSE YOU'RE CONSTANTLY NEGOTIATING THOSE TWO ASPECTS OF YOURSELF.

The one that you are, and the one that you're becoming. But human beings do change because we're able to transmit culture and the culture accretes. You know.

It gets... it changes over time.
That keeps us from being what we would call animals.

Miller: Yeah, I'll raise that question with...

That question with my students, I mean.

What separates you from your dog?

Because your dog has a kind of memory, reflected memory.

You know... put him near the fire, he pulls away.

"Come, Spot," things like that, but... no transmitted memory.

And because we're hooked into our memory as you pointed out earlier, "we're haunted by it," you know.

Or liberated, we're burdened, liberated, or haunted, yeah.

It's been true from the beginning of time--

Man's need to tell stories.

From the cave paintings at Lascaux.

To the graffiti on the Berlin Wall.

The stories we write and tell have contained our fears.

Expressed our joys and given shape to our uncertainties.

Whether we are talking about the African griot, the medieval bard, the contemporary novelist.

Or the historian.

Their stories define who we are, as individuals and as a people.

In his masterpiece, Invisible Man.

The late great novelist Ralph Ellison.

Speaks of a character who "falls out of history."

At first, the reader doubts that this is possible.

Because doesn't history encompass everything?

What Ellison wants us to think about is something every historian and storyteller knows--

Namely that history is only the events.
THAT HAVE BEEN SEEN AND RECORDED

AND THAT MEANS MOST OF LIFE REMAINS INVISIBLE TO US

MOST OF THE TIME.

SO IF ONE FALLS OUT OF RECORDED HISTORY

ONE FALLS INTO NOT ONLY THE REALMS

OF IMAGINATION AND THE POSSIBLE

BUT ALSO INTO A UNIVERSE OF LIVES AND EVENTS LONG HIDDEN

BY OFFICIAL INTERPRETATIONS OF WHAT HAS BEEN.

ONE JOB OF THE STORYTELLER IN OUR TIME

IS TO MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE TO PUT MARGINALIZED LIVES AT CENTER STAGE

AND REMIND US AGAIN AND AGAIN THAT ALL OUR KNOWLEDGE IS PROVISIONAL, TENTATIVE

AND ALWAYS IN NEED OF REVISION. WHICH SCARES THE HECK OUT OF ME.

MILITARY AND POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL HISTORIES OF THIS CENTURY ALONE NEVER MIND ALL THE OTHER NUMBERED NIGHTMARES

CAN ONLY PERSUADE A SANE AND DECENT PERSON OF THE FOLLOWING--

HUMAN BEINGS ARE MUCH TOO VILE FOR A PLANET AS SALUBRIOUS AND ENCHANTING AS THIS ONE HAS BEEN FOR MILLIONS AND MILLIONS OF YEARS NOW.

WE DO NOT DESERVE TO LIVE HERE.

HISTORIES OF OUR HUMANE IMAGINATION, OF OUR FINE ARTS

AND ESPECIALLY OF OUR MUSIC, I WOULD HAVE TO SAY CAN MAKE US SEEM LIKE ANGELS.

TO BE SURE, WITH TEARS IN THEIR EYES.

OUR ARTISTS HAVE AGAIN AND AGAIN DONE WHAT SO MANY MOTHERS

HAVE ASKED THEIR GIFTED CHILDREN OR EVEN THEIR ORDINARY CHILDREN

TO DO IF THEY CAN--

MAKE THIS A BETTER WORLD THAN IT WAS BEFORE YOU GOT HERE.

MY SYNONYM FOR THE FINE ARTS AGAIN

WILL SURELY INCLUDE OUR WISEST HISTORIES OF EVERY SORT.
HUMANE IMAGINATION--
OUR DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE
AND THE BILL OF RIGHTS
OF OUR CONSTITUTION
AND ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S ADDRESS
ON THE BATTLEFIELD AT GETTYSBURG
ARE LITERATURE.
SO IS THE SPEECH
MADE IN 1963
IN MY TIME, IN OUR TIME
WHICH BEGINS THIS WAY,
"I HAVE A DREAM THAT ONE DAY..."
MUSIC, MAESTRO, PLEASE,
GOD BLESS US ALL.
(cello and piano play
melancholy piece)
[Captioned by
The Caption Center
WGBH Educational Foundation]