

JILL NELSON, Interviewed

Ishmael Reed: Why do you call it the “Trump Virus?”

Jill Nelson: “The Trump Plague.” He is a plague in every way since before he was elected and his presidency has been nothing but an awful, ravaging infection. This is the latest manifestation of it. (Inaudible) destruction of his evil.

Ishmael Reed: How did this incident begin?

Jill Nelson: I left home to go to the drugstore and the supermarket. I had some money and my debit card, no ID. I went to the drugstore. I passed this beautiful, green, plywood expanse covering an empty building. I went by it and I was just inspired to write “Trump=Plague” on that side of the boarded-up building.

Ishmael Reed: It was boarded up?

Jill Nelson: Oh, yeah, it was empty for some time. It had a “for rent” sign on it. Before I could step back to admire my handiwork two cop cars roared up. One cut me off with their car and the other on a side street like an “L.” You’d of thought I was selling crack in the ‘80s the way they acted. They jumped out of the car. “What are you doing? What are you doing? Is this your property? We’re arresting you for graffiti.” No, actually, I said, “Arrest me for what?” and they said, “Graffiti.” Then they frisked me. “Do you have any weapons? Do you have any weapons?” Then they cuffed me and shoved me into a police car.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, they frisked you. Right?

Jill Nelson: Yes, they frisked me.

Ishmael Reed: Was it a man or a woman?

Jill Nelson: A man frisked me.

Ishmael Reed: A man frisked you. I’m just going to back up a little bit. I wrote an article out here that was published in *The San Francisco Chronicle* about how Stop and Frisk affected women.

Jill Nelson: Uh huh. Oh, great.

Ishmael Reed: There were 16,000 women who were stopped and frisked. They always talk about the guys, right? And the women charged that these cops, these creeps at the NYPD use that as an excuse to approach them sexually. So a guy frisked you?

Jill Nelson: Yeah, there was only a guy. And when I got to the police station a woman came and thoroughly frisked me. This guy definitely patted me down.

Ishmael Reed: What do you mean thoroughly frisk you?

Jill Nelson: Like apart, up one leg, up the other leg.

Ishmael Reed: Oh, my goodness.

Jill Nelson: it was cold here. When I was stopped, I had on jeans and a coat, so I guess he gave me the pat down he said, “Do you have any weapons? Do you have any weapons? Take your hands out of your pockets.” I had gloves on because it was cold.

Ishmael Reed: Did you think that any of the pat down was inappropriate?

Jill Nelson: Not to me. I didn’t think it was at all inappropriate to me. Did they go too far in the patting down? No. The woman actually said, “Sorry. I have to do this.”

Ishmael Reed: I see.

Jill Nelson: This guy was macho, officious, you know, trying to be kind of threatening and I think I went into a state of disbelief because I thought it was so incredible that they arrested me for writing "Trump=Plague."

Ishmael Reed: Do you think it was political? You know these cops love Trump.

Jill Nelson: I think it's open season on Black and Latinx and other people of color and I think that they're overzealous and I think they are encouraged by this Cheeto Satan in the White House, so I think it was political that way. Let me put it this way. The day before it became mandatory for people to wear masks in New York City. I live in a neighborhood that has one of the highest rates of the COVID-19 infection in the city. I live in a neighborhood that houses New York Presbyterian Hospital. It treats many, many people. As I walked over to the drugstore, before this happened, I would see people going into schools, families and adults without children to get meals because the city is giving out three meals a day not only to school kids, but to families too, if needed. I mean we are really in a crisis.

Ishmael Reed: How long are these lines?

Jill Nelson: It kept moving, but as I walked past I would see five or six people go in and that was what, in ten seconds, fifteen seconds. I think the cops should have something better to do than roll up on me and arrest me for writing the truth in chalk, which was washed off by the time I got out of the police station and walked by at 6:45. It had already been smudged off, and when I went past a couple of days later it was totally gone. I mean why not educate people about masks and how to use them?

Ishmael Reed: You know there was a report in *The Village Voice* a few years ago about some cop who recorded the instructions given by a captain at a Brooklyn station and they were instructed to go out and harass Black people for a quota.

Jill Nelson: I'm sure.

Ishmael Reed: And then when here revealed this they went after him, you know.

Jill Nelson: Right. Of course they did. Here in Brooklyn the other day they took down a woman at the subway station with her child who was three at most.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, I saw that. You're in Brooklyn?

Jill Nelson: It was in Brooklyn. They took her down because apparently, she had a mask but she was on the phone, so she pulled it down. You're going to bum rush somebody to the ground because you don't like how their mask is on their face? And the mayor here, I'm afraid, is afraid of the police and he goes along with anything they do. This is a mayor, as far as I'm concerned, who has exploited his Black children, his Black son when he was running, talking about, "I, too talked to my son about what to do if he was stopped by the police." I believe he is afraid of the police. He knows they're out of control and instead of doing what he should do if he had any integrity and honor is to say, "I know how you people feel now. Here's what I'm going to do to change the situation." He just bows down before the NYPD.

Ishmael Reed: Well Trump told the police to rough people up.

Jill Nelson: Right. Rough people up. Well, I mean, come on, Ishmael, look at the people with long guns and other weaponry and Confederate flags, Nazis and white supremacists storming the state houses demanding that we reopen and then we find out this isn't spontaneous but funded...there are only a few hundred people really, and they are funded by Trump supporters.

Ishmael Reed: Devos has put some money in.

Jill Nelson: Right. I mean he has legitimized and brought to the surface some White supremacy and racism that we have always known has been there and as far as I'm concerned...I heard this old man a couple of years ago, I think right after Charlottesville, a brother in his 90s on the news who said, "The Civil War was never over. It just paused." I think Coronavirus and Cheeto Satan and now Black Lives Matter and the movements for justice and equity are the latest battles.

Ishmael Reed: Are they giving this as an excuse to harass Black people even worse than before? This virus thing? In New York?

Jill Nelson: Well, I think so. I mean, how can you tip toe through the tulips with scores of White people out in the park with no social distancing and then rush to the ground four Black people that you see on a corner who were allegedly not observing social distance? I wasn't in the park last weekend but the cops were giving out masks to White folks, politely telling them to space themselves out, and tackling, ticketing and arresting Black people.

Ishmael Reed: What are your friends saying about this situation?

Jill Nelson: Tons of feedback. Ninety-nine percent is positive. "What can we do?" "Right on." "Thanks for speaking out." I heard from a guy I went to high school with from Singapore. He heard about it. You know, and let me say this, too. The mayor and the police commissioner here have declared that they don't want any demonstrations during the pandemic. I mean, so we're supposed to surrender our First Amendment rights under the guise of being kept safe? Think about it. It's a great way to stop people from organizing. You can't touch people, you can't gather in groups, you're not supposed to go out and meanwhile the authoritarian fascist state arrives. You see with all of these states reopening with no criteria and infections...

Ishmael Reed: Well they feel it only affects Browns and Blacks.

Jill Nelson: Well I think that we're the vanguard of that and I think that COVID-19 has been racialized and weaponized and I think that they don't care. And the same for people that are old. Apparently, that is fifty-one and up. These are all "going out and die" "keeping us alive" and propping up the corrupt capitalist system. Truly sad. And more than ever we need to exercise our First Amendment rights. Now the great thing about it is that I have gotten great feedback from old, sick people and rise and resist people and Norman Siegel from the ACLU has offered to be my attorney. So we are working on getting the charges dismissed and my record expunged and an apology from the officers and a meeting with the commander to discuss what can be implemented so this can never be done again.

Ishmael Reed: What are the experiences that some of your friends have had with this new situation in New York? Similar to yours, or what's going on?

Jill Nelson: I don't know anyone who has a similar experience to mine, but I think people are just nervous, afraid and staying inside. You know, someone told me the other day that they went outside for the first time in fifty-seven day. I go out and get my groceries, medications, or whatever. I'm mindful, but I definitely don't see myself staying inside for months.

Ishmael Reed: Do you see people when you go to the grocery store or getting your medications wearing a mask?

Jill Nelson: Yes, and sometimes outside stores there is a limit on the number of people allowed in, and you have to wait on line. The Farmers Markets have lines down the street to keep you six feet apart. They have someone at the door of many stores you know, letting in a certain number of people at a time, and then as other people come out more people can come in. But I

think people are nervous, are scared and trying to go along with the program if they know what the program is. But to assume that everybody watches the nightly news or listens to news radio or reads the newspapers...here in my community all the newspaper stands are closed.

Ishmael Reed: Is that right?

Jill Nelson: Yeah. I got a newspaper the other day at the drugstore, but the stands, the kiosks are closed. I haven't seen one open anywhere. Maybe they're open downtown, but they're not open where I live on 158th down to 110th. It's just a mess.

Ishmael Reed: So what's the next step in your case?

Jill Nelson: You know, I wrote my elected officials. I heard from very few of them. I'm going to have a phone meeting with my lawyer on Monday.

Ishmael Reed: So it's going to cost you money?

Jill Nelson: No. He's going to volunteer and you know, if they don't meet my demands I'm going to go to court and my court date is August 14, 2020, which would have been my mother's birthday. I felt this is fortuitous.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah. They try to string you out. I had a case in New York where they tried to string me out for months and I had to pay for a lawyer. I ran into a psychotic cop. This guy was nuts. I could see he was clinically mad.

Jill Nelson: I'm glad you survived.

Ishmael Reed: I could have been shot, but I didn't know any better. I was in my 20s. What happened was the judge...it was like a disorderly conduct, he was the one being disorderly, right? The judge, when it came time for my sentencing, the judge left the courtroom.

Jill Nelson: Why?

Ishmael Reed: I don't know. I never found out. I went home. Florence Kennedy was in the audience and she said she had never seen anything like that.

Jill Nelson: They didn't want to take you?

Ishmael Reed: I was naïve enough to charge them with...I exaggerated. I said they beat me up and all this kind of stuff. I didn't know any better.

Jill Nelson: Well, you know, I think the one reason I pushed this and have spoken out is for all the people who can't speak out, who no one wants to hear. People who don't have a husband who works at home and has a job and can come down with my license. If I had to hire a lawyer I could, but I think stuff like this goes on so often, you know, the everyday abuse and violence...

Ishmael Reed: Every day. Every day.

Jill Nelson: I have a real question. The statute in New York that I read, writing graffiti is not a crime unless you intend to cause damage over \$250...

Ishmael Reed: That's the art trend in New York. It's in all the museums, the graffiti.

Jill Nelson: According to the statute it's something you do with spray paint or etching acid.

Ishmael Reed: It's all in the museums. It's how Jean-Michel Basquiat sold a painting for \$102,000,000.

Jill Nelson: Oh, my god. Don't try to motivate me to go back to that wall. But, you know, people have actually, by in large, been great. You know, I was talking to my husband, Flores, because I have had some woman I know say, "Oh, you know, I'm glad to hear your story, but I want to know more about the trauma and the fear and how hurt you were."

Ishmael Reed: They like that.

Jill Nelson: Let me tell you something. I was *mad*. Yesterday someone asked me if I was humiliated. I wasn't humiliated. I was *angry*. You know, MF these people, you know, they're not shaking *my* sense of self and right and wrong. They didn't make *me* feel embarrassed or humiliated or anything else. They made me *angry*. And then they start threatening me because I didn't have ID. They were going to take me down to the tombs and if they take you down there you probably won't be out until tomorrow morning.

Ishmael Reed; Yeah, well that's what they say. The cop that arrested me said to me that if I plead guilty, I could go to Rikers Island. I said, "I ain't going to Rikers Island. They murder people there." New York has been rough on Black people since the 1700s.

Jill Nelson: Absolutely. Well remember police brutality when cops would beat Black people in midtown nearly a century ago.

Ishmael Reed: They used to hang people in Washington Square Park and burn them up and lynch them.

Jill Nelson: You asked about friends earlier and one said, "Well why didn't you tell them who you are?" I was like, "Who I am should have nothing to do with this."

Ishmael Reed: That would have been worse.

Jill Nelson: I'm not going to turn a class coin to get myself out of something when most of our people don't have that option. I wasn't planning to go to the tombs. I was figuring I would get a medical fit or something.

Ishmael Reed: They can kill you in there.

Jill Nelson: And can I say this, too? It's Coronavirus. I'm in a filthy cell, I had a fabric mask I made, and I demanded a mask from them. Five and a half hours, I'm sixty-seven years old and I'm there in the middle of a pandemic. When I came in there was a guy in the cell next to me. I think he was there because he was a burglary suspect. No one else came in the whole day. In other words these members of the NYPD in the middle of a pandemic spent all day messing with me. It's just endless.

Ishmael Reed: Plus taking up your time. That's a big problem with racism. Time theft. They put you through hurdles.

Jill Nelson: Right. Right. They make you waste your energy on stuff that is not important to you because of them.

Ishmael Reed: If you go in the bank with a check over \$500, they take it to the manager and they check you out.

Jill Nelson: Yes. Yes. So you know, I feel like this is a real battle and we can fight it. I'm going to fight it to the best of my ability and here at 7:00pm they clap for the essential workers and I just posted something on the community news letter saying you know, "Maybe we should ratchet it up and make some demands."

Ishmael Reed: I like that quote you gave me for my book, *The Complete Muhammad Ali*, where you said that they like to keep Black people enclosed and confined. Emotionally too in terms of their range of emotions you're allowed to have.

Jill Nelson: Well, that's what's disturbing, you know about what the woman I knew said about being humiliated and the pain. One person I know said, "The article I read made the horror more powerful than Jill on the radio" and I'm like, "I define my own experience, and no this didn't shake the foundation of my being and no I wasn't humiliated and no I wasn't embarrassed. I was *mad*. I mean angry. Angry and mad.

Ishmael Reed: Well if a White woman had done it, it would have been dismissed as a prank.

Jill Nelson: Yeah, and it also speaks to how we're conditioned as Black people and as Black women to see ourselves. I'm like, F*** these people. They're wrong. I'm not." There's something wrong with *their* sense of self if during a pandemic they're all up on me.

Ishmael Reed: Well they're trying to blame Black people during the pandemic. Our lifestyle. You saw that Uncle Tom Surgeon General? That Black guy?

Jill Nelson: Oh, God. Call your Big Mamma? How dare you? It's like Tyler Perry's Madea. That's the worst thing. He's standing there...

Ishmael Reed: Well they don't use him anymore.

Jill Nelson: So he's gone now?

Ishmael Reed: He's gone now.

Jill Nelson: This whole thing is ridiculous, even how they talk about Cheeto Satan whose name I don't like to speak. You know what? I'm going to call him like he is, a moron, he's a grifter.

Ishmael Reed: Who is this again?

Jill Nelson: The guy in the White House. We need to call *him* as we see him. Our generation has lived through so much, you know?

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, but I never thought I would see this.

Jill Nelson: Me, neither, but I knew something awful was going to happen, you know. We all knew that, but I thought it was going to be nuking Iran, and you know what? To me I'd rather have what we have on us instead of him nuking some country. Remember when he was running, he said he was going to nuke Iran? Now you got to f*** everything up and it comes bouncing right back on him."

Ishmael Reed: And on his followers. They're getting hit. So what are you working on? Are you writing a book?

Jill Nelson: No, I'm writing a play. Before this started happening it was about a diverse group of people ending up in a holding cell together and the pandemic is nothing but fodder for that and then I've been making a lot of collages. Now I am working on one about the Harriet Tubman 20s.

Ishmael Reed: People are doing auditions and performances through Zoom. Much cheaper. Take care.

Jill Nelson: Bye.

Ishmael Reed: Bye.