

Eugene B. Redmond Oral History Interview November 23, 2011

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Library and Information Services

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0:00:00 [Meaning of the book title *Drumvoices*]

Ramsby:

Alright. My name is Howard Ramsby and today I'll be interviewing Eugene B. Redmond, it's November 23, 2011. Ah, Professor Redmond I wanted to start out by asking you about *Drumvoices: the Mission of Afro-American Poetry: Critical History*. Could you just start us out by talking about the origins of the book, how it moved, how it developed, where it come from.

Redmond:

Yes, well I've traced the main drumvoices back to Katherine Dunham and the sixties, variations on the movements, the historical movements, the sixties updates and variations on various social movements especially as they relate to African Americans and so-called multicultural people. So, so the term is one that I was very pleased to be able to use. I'm not quite sure, I'm not sure whether it originated with me or not. I know there was always the drums and the voices were always connected, the words were connected and the ideas and entities were connected, but I do know that I wouldn't have used a word like 'drumvoices' and I think I might have connected those two words. I mean I might have been the first person that I knew of to connect the two of them, actually, you know, juxtapose them. 'Cause I'd seen 'drums' and 'voices' and maybe 'drums' and 'voices' and 'drum voices' but broken up and I noticed that people will -- spell check will tell me to break up the word. So most people around me seem to be more familiar with 'drum voices' as two words.

But coming out of Washington University in the mid-sixties I wouldn't have naturally used 'drumvoices,' for example been thinking of *Drumvoices* as a title for something literary, because I'd been, you know, trained with classical and modern that was the, the matrix out of which I came. I remember using it before I actually wrote it down, you know, in speeches before people. Whether it was open air events, on stage in an enclosed area. If I was doing one of dozens of dozens of radio and TV interviews. I remember using that in the sixties. Before I wrote anything down, or if I wrote it down it was just something to trigger -- a note on a paper, on a pad, to trigger what, you know, a stream of thought and discussion. I used it in, with Katherine Dunham, when I was with Katherine Dunham I was working in theater and poetry and I supervised theater and poetry workshops, and I led the performing troupe on the road. I was the manager of Dunham's performing, her new troupe. The Performing Arts Training Center was her base, which was under the umbrella of the Experiment in Higher Education, which was

under the umbrella of Southern Illinois University East St. Louis, which was under the umbrella of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, which was under the umbrella of Southern Illinois Carbondale. We were Salukis [the Carbondale mascot] and we were just an extension of Carbondale we didn't have a separate identity, we weren't -- no cougars [the Edwardsville mascot] existed. So I was the road manager and musically the primary voice or the lead voice in stage productions when Miss Dunham put on shows, when she staged events which were inclusive. And every day she said to me, "Eugene, we have to develop a theater-going audience." Every day in some form she would say that: "We've gotta develop a theater-going audience." But anyway, so I would say 'drums' and 'voices' or 'voices' or 'voices of the drums' so I remember doing those kind of things. And much of this is on -- whatchacallit -- Betamax, you know the various forms of visual recording that we were using at the time, large, some of them almost big as satchels. Anyway, so we used that, we used the words 'drums' and 'voices' and the drums coming as voices like approaching almost like, like some kind of stampede or a like, like horses and cavalry. I mean it was always 'watch the drums a-coming' you know it'd be this mushrooming sound and then the feet. So we -- and some of my notes I have 'drumfeet.' In fact the first poem that I remember writing that appears in *Songs from an Afro/phone* has the word 'drumfeet' or the words 'drum' and 'feet' several times. ["Drumfeet on the Soil"] This is all, you're talking sixties early seventies. And so what I was doing, I was disengaging from that heavily academic to the streets, although I never really left it because Wash U is in an urban community so I never really left it, but I had to buckle down and sort of go underground and get through that work at Washington University.

0:07:46 [Reading African poetry; drums in music; the cover of *Drumvoices*; Charles Rowell]

Redmond:

So that's, that's how, how I remember *Drumvoices* coming about. At the same time I was reading African poetry and one of the things that was notable to me, that stood out about African poetry was the constant reference to drums. I was reading Okup Petek [spelling?], I was reading, you know people like Derek Walcott, I was reading Edward Kamau Brathwaite, I was reading Ezekiel Mphahlele, anthologies of African poetry that were put together by people like Langston Hughes, and Ulli Beier and people like that; reading the works of the German critic who did the book on Nomo [spelling?] and outline of the new African culture, there's constant references to drums. I was buying books, scholarly works and tabletop photo books featuring African drums and drum ceremonies. So I was beginning to immerse myself in the drum culture.

Not to mention that as kids in East St. Louis a lot of us were beating different tops, we made our own drums. Oatmeal boxes, we had tubs, we had washing boards, we had buckets, we turned them over. Anything that you could beat on. We would fill bottles and glasses with water, you know various levels, and if you hit those with sticks or forks or another piece of metal then you get a different sound, so we had these orchestras all over the community. You'd go past the house and on the porch, on the banister there, there'd be six, seven, eight, ten, twelve soda bottles and each one had water in it up to a different level, so when you hit it you got a different sound. So they were all over town, all over town like that. So, percussive, kind of thing. Anyway, and then I started to talk about the difference between what we call black music, African-derived music, and European-derived music. Around the same time I ran into the

writings of Senghor, who was the president of Senegal, and he said the African drum met the European violin, and that's with, what we heard in the popular music. I remember when the violin and other stringed instruments started to be used to back up Dinah Washington and Brook Benton, at first we didn't like it, we thought "They're messing with our music," we didn't know anything about it, we were teenagers and young adults, we had no idea what we were saying. I mean not against the backdrop of black studies, later on I would really put that all in perspective but we just really didn't like it at first when we heard these violins behind the singers. Basically it was, it was a horn and a set of drums, a couple of horns, maybe a guitar and a piano. But usually it was four or five pieces, a combo, that was what backed up rhythm and blues, and blues. So before we heard that, of course we were adjusted to it. So this percussive sound, and the word percussion words percussion and percussive were all were around too.

So those are, those are some of the ideas, events, activities, instruments, practices, thoughts, and writings that helped inform and form this idea of 'drumvoices.' And I didn't know initially until I got to -- I began writing in a more scholarly way about it, that I would actually use it as a title of something. But, and then Marie Brown my editor at Drumvoices, at Doubleday, got a person, in-house person to design the book, and I always thought it was an interesting irony that the title of the book is *Drumvoices Revue*, *Drumvoices* pardon me, and the drawing on the cover is of, (video cuts to the book cover) there're two faces, two profiles, like black youth, and there's a quill, you know, and an inkwell. (video returns to the interview) And I thought this interesting that *Drumvoices* but the pen is there, you know. So, so, we, we, I wanted something that looked more like drums but that was what Doubleday wanted to appear. Which was, was good, I mean it brought them both together. I'm not sure that the relationship or the analogies were, were recognizable instantly by people, you know *Drumvoices: the Mission of Afro-American Poetry* and then, you know hand with the quill and the feather and the inkwell, not sure about that.

So that's how it came about. The first time that I actually used it on my own -- I'd used it in connection with Katherine Dunham -- the first time I used it on my own was at Southern University. And it was the summer of '71. If I back up I might of used it first at Cal State Sacramento where I went in '70. But the first time I used it away from home in a play or a ballet or a ritual as I would sometimes call it, that I had put together was, if I remember correctly, was at Southern University. Woody King was there. I did two productions over two consecutive summers, and one was called, one was *The Night John Henry Was Born* and the other one was *The Face of the Deep*. They're both folk sagas, in fact they're, the subtitle was "A Black Folk Saga." [this was the subtitle for *The Night John Henry Was Born*; the subtitle of *The Face of the Deep* was "A Black Ritual"] And there was lots of drums and lots of feet (laughs) and lots of voices in those in those two plays, that used faculty and students at Southern University in Baton Rouge. In fact the editor that published, the founder-editor of *Callaloo*, Charles Rowell, was in both of them. The voice, he has quite a voice, have you ever heard Charles Rowell? He has quite a deep voice, so I had him as one of my lead voices, he was teaching at Southern and still finishing up his work in folklore at Ohio State University.

0:15:35 [Research for *Drumvoices*; disengaging from Eurocentric poetry]

Redmond:

So of course I'm, at the same time I'm doing my scholarly research on black poetry, poetry in general, black poetry, how black poetry fits into that. And I'm going to these libraries wherever I can find them, I go in and pull out folklore, the drum, poetry. And because of Katherine Dunham, anthropology and dance. So I'm doing this everywhere, whether it's Moorland-Spangarn at Howard or at Southern University's library; Oberlin, which has a great library on slave writings, slave literature, African literature. And the connection there for me to the drum and to various traditions was that Oberlin was one of the first schools to admit black people and women, 1834. And so that was my first job away from home. And so wherever I went, University of Wisconsin, Harvard, University of Massachusetts, it didn't matter, I went for these kinds of things and I went right to look at those and talk to whoever I could about the origins of the drum and the connection of the drum and the voice. And the longest connection of course, and oldest connection, and most circuitous connection, is that the drum was the first means of speaking over distances, drum voice. That's how I got to working, and I had drumvoices -- I always had it in the back of my mind or the front of my mind. I didn't know I was going to call a book that, you know, but I do have a piece. ... In fact if I had my book I would read it, another time I'll read the piece that came from one of the ballets I did at Southern University. ["Drumfeet on the Soil," from the ballet/ritual *River of Bones*, published in *Songs from an Afro/phone*] You know (starts gesturing with his fists in a rhythmic pounding motion, as if beating a drum) "Drum feet on the soil, on the sand roads of the mind, flesh pistons pounding, it is a coming forth, it is a coming forth, coming forth, the earth coming forth, drum voices drum feet pounding, pistons, flesh pistons on the sand roads of the mind." And that's kind of like a chorus entering.

(recording interrupted)

Rambsy:

Could you say more about that whole process when you were writing *Drumvoices*, about "disengaging" ...

Redmond:

Yeah.

Rambsy:

from a certain kind of Eurocentric. ...

Redmond:

One of the things that I vowed to do was to learn a black poet as, in as profound and as deep a way as I knew T. S. Eliot, the poet that I knew the most about. And one of my professors at Washington U had, had anticipated what I was going to do when he told me to stop reading T. S. Eliot. And I said -- a Jewish professor, Donald Finkel. And he may have had his finger on something that I hadn't quite arrived at yet because of his Jewish, thousands of years in the Jewish tradition, 'cause he said to me, "Stop reading T.

S. Eliot." And I said, "Why, and for how long?" And he said, "Why, because your work is coming out a little," -- this is 1964 -- "your work is coming out, everything is coming out as a little T. S. Eliot." And he said, "For how long," he said, "preferable forever." He said, "You know, you know as much about T. S. Eliot as any of the professors here now, you've really done," he said "preferably forever but for at least 10 years. Don't read Eliot. 'Cause you're going to destroy your own voice." Well I thought, "Well, how do you do that." I went back and I looked and I saw what he was talking about in my poetry. So I said I need, I want a poet on this level, with the, this level of rigor, Eliot's level of, of demand. And so I found out about Melvin B. Tolson, who was the first and only American poet to be named poet laureate of a foreign country. [Liberia] That was fascinating to me, I was getting into this. And I hoped that I would have been able to work with Tolson but he died, right the year that I finished grad school. He died after I think five stomach operations for cancer.

Anyway, I launched, I wanted to disengage myself, I knew what Finkel was telling me. It wasn't just T. S. Eliot. In a polite way he was saying get out of this Western world, you know find, you know, two people, [Ted] Hornback had said it to me earlier, he said to me read E. E. Cummings, Dunbar, Hughes, and then gave me an article in the early sixties that had appeared in Time magazine, and it was about the Négritude poets and it translated some stuff by Senghor and the other, Diop, and other poets from French-speaking European colonies, who had been founders of and in some cases continual purveyors of the Négritude movement. And the, the Black Power Movement was coming, I didn't know, I knew some things were happening -- I'm talking about early, mid-sixties -- the Black Arts/Black Power Movement was coming, and here was some people who had done something similar in the twenties. So he had said to me, Hornback had said to me, "Because of your, because of the way you want to manipulate and play with language I suggest Cummings, but I also suggest Dunbar and Hughes," and, and then he gave me this article from Newsweek magazine with these, about Négritude poets. It was in the sixties though, interesting. So I then began to disengage.

At the same time someone came up to me and was very it was humiliating and embarrassing. One of my childhood friends had been annoying me. He had come back -- he had been in Europe where I hadn't been at the time -- he had come back home through the East Coast, stopped on the East Coast, spent some time in New York. So he got the brunt, the very earliest stages of the Black Arts Movement. Because black arts occurred before the Black Arts Movement, I mean there were rumblings -- Umbra, you know? Just announced then, or pronounced then. But this guy, Lafayette Johnson, La was at a reading that I did at a jazz club, a matinee on a Sunday afternoon. And I was reading this love poetry and the women were going crazy, you know, and I was reading some sociological stuff too. You know, stuff with sociological indices what problems in the community without actually coloring them you know? Issues or characters, features. And this guy stood below the bandstand, I was working with a jazz band, he crossed his arms and looked up at me (demonstrates) and he said, "Brother we want to hear some *b-lack* poetry." Well first I'd never heard the word black said like that before. You know the emphasis on it. Unless somebody was cussing somebody out. So. But I mean he just disrobed me. And I'm talking, "What is he talking about?" Then I was angry. Which later I developed a lecture a series of lectures on the consciousness and how a consciousness comes about and often anger is the first emotion that the victim feels (laughs). You know once a woman with a wig on is hit a black power advocate you know and --

whew, when he gets to talking about it, straight hair, you know was really raw early on. So that's how it hit me. So I went home, like "Damn, what is he talking about?" I'd seen the Négritude and my teacher had said to me, a white teacher had said to me read Cummings but also read Dunbar and Hughes, a lot of Hughes and gave me the article, given me the article. And I remember tossing and turning in my sleep "What does he mean, what does he mean, 'black poetry'?"

So then I started looking it up and I started, found some definitions about it, Negro poetry. Blues, it listed blues and folklore and the Négritude movement, stuff like that. I found out that it wasn't that easy to write it. I thought, well okay I can write the same poetry and just put references to black people in there. No, that's not, that's not what he's talking about. He's talking about something about challenges and something about the culture, you know, and that's -- people ask me to summarize black literature, I'll say those two things, there're two things that black literature does. It, it exalts the culture, and it tells you how, how people in the culture got over. If you wanted to say two things, you know. "These are some things that are good about what we do," all black poets do that (laughs). And they also say "these are the troubles we've seen."

0:27:21 [Disengaging from Eurocentric culture and poetry; Sterling Brown; Tolson]

Redmond:

So. I realized that and I realized you had to go back and rethink and you had to read something else. So I started this process of disengaging myself from the European American aesthetic, that we called the white aesthetic, what Malcolm was calling white nationalism. I was disengaging myself in order to re-immers, and it seemed to me the whole black nation was doing it. (laughs) Because around the same time I told some white friends not to come to the jazz clubs anymore until I told them to. Remember I mentioned that at [Anthony] Cheeseboro's [Associate Professor of Historical Studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville] lecture? 'Cause they got, a couple of them got roughed up and had been called names and I said, something is going on, I'm a leader, civil rights leader, but I don't have a handle on this new thing so just don't come looking with me, and don't come around calling my name because I don't need a white dude or a white woman coming to a black club saying I'm a friend of Eugene Redmond's. (laughs) Now, not right now, I said there's something going on I'll take a look at it meantime we'll meet at the neutral jazz clubs in St. Louis, you know like Safari Club and like that you know. I'll meet you over at, in Gaslight Square, which is like our Greenwich Village. Don't come over here anymore and don't go too deep into north St. Louis to the clubs either (laughs) and don't call my name (laughs) 'cause it's just - - whew (gestures with a rolling circular motion with his hands) it's like that.

So, I was doing, engaged in this process, and ultimately became a spokesman. But it took quite a bit of winnowing and threshing, soul searching, meditation, reading. I have a book that's stamped 1966 I think that I bought from the Blacksmith Shop in St. Louis, the book by, the German who wrote African culture, African language, and the -- you know just started going back over the whole history as the race men and women had examined it. 'Cause it wasn't part of our training, you'd get it by hit and miss, it'd be accidental. So I went back and started to read everything, you know I knew who Dubois was, and a little

bit here and a little bit there. And I had to go *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*, and of course the great, his great epic (pauses)

Rambsy:
Ah, *Souls*

Redmond:

Souls of Black Folk, excuse me. And Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery*. But as a poet I was interested in the folklore, I was interested in the philosophy, so I read all the works of the great minister, and right now it's mind, I'm having these senior moments -- Howard Thurman. *The Luminous Darkness*. And he helped me a lot, analyzing the spiritual 'cause I didn't want to just write the spiritual. I read Sterling Brown, and I said in *Drumvoices* that some of Sterling Brown's (gestures prayerfully, looking upward) some of Sterling Brown's was almost paraphrase of folk, 'cause when I read the original work I saw it. And I read every original folk song, and folk tale I could get. And Sterling kind of, sort of rearranged and restated, so I decided didn't want to do that. And when I met him he asked me -- we were in his basement drinking Rock and Rye in the early, in the seventies, and he said, first thing he said to me was "Redmond, who is your daddy?" which was signifying (inaudible), he was going to play the dozens with "Who who was your daddy?" you know. (laughs) I caught it right away, this is interesting, anyway we went back and forth like that, and he'd say, "You have your doctorate?" I said, "No sir." He said "You did, you don't have your doctorate?" I said "No," 'cause this -- when he was asking me this was right after *Drumvoices* had come out. I thought he was going to jump on me for a statement that I made about a near plagiarism. (laughs) And he said, "You did good." He said, "It's a great work, important work," and I was shaking. Sitting in the basement, he's in a corner and "I want you all to do, I want what Bessie Smith wanted," he said, "put the light on me baby, put on the light on me!" And he sat in that corner under that light and told those stories, man. And [Jerry] Ward was there, [Charles] Rowell was there, whole bunch, there were conferences at Howard and we went to Sterling Brown's home afterward. Rock and Rye.

But, so it's all, all part of the disengagement, to continue to disengage, to get -- immerse myself in the culture of Africa and African people, African-derived, called the diaspora, I went to the islands I personally went to teach to a black college cause I hadn't gone to one. So I went for two consecutive summers to Southern and visited a lot of them. I wanted to know what it was like, I wanted to know the mind of a black student, you know, what, you know the mind of a black young person who comes into my room. What do I need to do with that mind. Now the mind of a white young person and what that person brings about black culture, about blackness. So that was part of the process it's quite, quite a lesson. I mean I turned myself into -- as I said on the road in lectures -- I turned myself into a human guinea pig, I just became a guinea pig. What is black studies? What is a course in blackness? You know, I really didn't know.

(recording interrupted)

Redmond:

And that's led me to a point where like today I decided that, not that I was going to obliterate that sixteen years of white studies, but that I was going to match it, at least match it, and double it if I could. So I got into Tolson, Tolson was the most, is, is -- Tolson is our most academic, is the black, is the most academic poet black people produced, possibly the most scholarly and academic poet that America has produced, possibly the most scholarly and academic poet the world has produced. And I figured ah, this man's going to take me through, back through all the stuff that I, all the references that I looked up when I was reading Eliot and Pound. You know, when I was reading Swinburne or Shakespeare, you know when I was reading Classical and Neoclassical and Victorian and Modern, he's going to take me through all that, but look at it through black eyes. And I thought where else would I get this? Where else in the world could I get this? Everything -- Alfred North Whitehead said all Western philosophy's a footnote to Plato. Okay, so then I knew I needed to read Plato to understand Western philosophy. If Tolson has digested all of that then, man I'm on top of the world. If I, if I spend hours and hours and hours with an atlas, with a globe, and Encyclopedia Britannica, (laughs) you know all the stuff you need to read Tolson. [alluding to Dudley Randall's "The Black Aesthetic in the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties" in *Modern Black Poets*] Then, then I said, okay, then I can pick the night John Henry was born or "The night John Henry was born/an ax of lightning splits the sky,/a hammer of thunder pounds the earth,/the eagles and the panthers cry!" [from "The Birth of John Henry"] That's Tolson talking. All the things are -- "Before he deserted the streets of Harlem and the fuel in his furnace died at curfew, my Afroirishjewish grandpa said: 'Between the dead sea Hitherto and the promised land Hence looms a wilderness Now. Although man is a board bailed up on a ridge Attic salt in him survives the blow of Attila, Croesus, and the Witches Sabbath in the Catacombs of Bosio.'" [from "Harlem Gallery"] So here's a black man summarizing African and European history. I mean that's one stanza. "My Afroirishjewish grandpa said." (laughs) So I said, I knew I had to know it all, I mean have a command of not all all things but you know. So. So, so Tolson was very important for me in that process.

And I decided I would get up every day -- like when I was in school I studied German so every day, every morning I got up and translated a German poem, you know, stay in touch with it. You know, Rilke, or Thomas Mann, or somebody. So what I decided I would do is get up every day and do something with blackness, scholarly. And I've done it every day until today. Every day, I'm going to go, I'm going to read a passage, I'm going to recite something and take a look and meditate on it. And that's what I've done because I wanted to be serious, I wanted to be a serious student and scholar of blackness of black culture, and I mean historic you know. I went and sat at the foot of John Henry Clarke. I sat at the foot of Dr. Ben Yosef Jochannan. I sat at the foot of the great African -- guy had a Ph.D. and he was a chief, I miss his name right now, he was at University of Pittsburgh for awhile, Nigerian. [Fela Sowande]

0:38:30 [Activism in the St. Louis area; creating black studies programs]

Redmond:

So, those are kinds of things that I did to disengage, and then I could go back -- just like the Black Power, which created a self-will withdrawal, engaged in a self-willed withdrawal from the system (inaudible). Well they -- at the height of integration they were practicing segregation. Pulled back, "Okay, what does

all this mean? Is this the way we want it?" You know, and across the country there were black houses and black dorms. (laughs) I came to Washington University almost every year when I was away and the students said -- there were nine black students there full time when I was a student. They had a couple of hundred students, their own meeting house and dorm, floor. And they said to me that they couldn't have survived during the time I was there, they couldn't have survived. And I said "Well yes you could have, because the generation before me said they wouldn't have survived slavery." And then the slaves, the people who were born into slavery, had said they wouldn't have survived the Middle Passage. But you would have. Those of you who made it.

So, this, this whole thing of taking it seriously, once I knew though, 'cause this is going to be my life work. Then after a few years I thought well I'll, I'm going to import or export revolution, 'cause I didn't really know why I was there, I was, we wanted to get our degrees and get out. And then when the sixties blew up in my face you know somebody said, "You got a degree, tell us about Black Power." (laughs) So I developed a lecture so as a progress that whole phenomenon swept the country. Each community had a Malcolm, had a LeRoi Jones, had an MLK, had a Stokely, had a Rap, you know every community had one. I was like the LeRoi Jones of St. Louis and East St. Louis. Every other evening on Channel 4, 5, or 6 you heard me saying "We're not trying to square with the system, we wanna square off against it," you know, it's kind of cliques. (laughs) Some of the stuff I read now, like "Oh God, did I say that?" But you got a twenty-something-year-old and they say, "You have degrees, stand up and tell us what we're supposed to do, how're we supposed to do it."

So I, that's, that was all part of the disengaging from that that Modernist Classical tradition. So that I could be informed and formed anew by traditions that were more kindred or as kindred. Without giving that up completely -- the Eurocentric -- picking up on the Afrocentric. So now when I walk into a room, a classroom or a lecture hall I said, "Where you're primarily informed or brought into this particular matrix, this fulcrum, the Greco-Roman-Hebraic-Christian continuum, now what I'm going to do is parallel it with the Afro-Asian-Indian-Latino-Hindu-Muslim-Island continuum." So we created a think tank. Some people are dying like Asa Harriet [spelling?]. In the mid-sixties, and we would think sometimes all night, hammering out black studies. Hammering out the new curriculum. And we're still in place. What was the black -- were you going to be a Black Studies Program, a Black Studies Department, Pan African Department, were you going to be African American, were you going to be Africana, the fights over that. So that was all part of the disengaging. Okay, so you're going to have this? Even up to where black women said "we want a Black Women Department." I remember when I first started at University of Wisconsin; you know the women had said "we want a Black Women Studies Department." Separated from the Afro-American Studies Department. The fact that I could witness a school that had, that gave a Ph.D. in five areas of black culture, I mean it was a thrill to be there at Wisconsin you know. African Learning and Lit, African Languages and Literature, African Studies, African History, African American Studies, and a cross-fertilized, you know. So, in fact that what we started, that what we started had reached one peak there, I'm actually sitting on a campus that gives a Ph.D. in five areas of black culture, something that people didn't, people scoffed at initially. So that disengagement and then re-engagement have been what I've been about, now since, it really. ...

And you know there're casualties, you know friends who knew you as a sharp person in that first, in that one continuum that everybody (inaudible). (laughs) And it caught me, one of my teachers, a man at Wash U -- a professor at Oberlin said to me, "I'm going to show you a letter. If you reveal either the contents or that I showed it to you I'll get fired. But, you don't want to ask this man to write a reference for you ever again." And what this professor said was, "He is brilliant, he has great potential as a poet, but he's morally corrupt because he's teaching the youth of East St. Louis. ... He's, he's advocating the destruction of America." (laughs) That's what he saw and what, you know, 'cause I'd be on TV sometimes every evening for ten days at a time. They'd come over and stuff was going on, so. He said, "He's corrupting the youth," I guess it was sorta like what Aristotle was charged with, corrupting the minds of the youth. And this man had some racial issues too he was dealing with, I could tell from the way he would attack a Jewish professor across the table at a writing workshop you know. So it was anti-Semitism and some anti-black racism. It was veiled but he, it was there, he was wrestling with it. But he couldn't say I had no talent because I won every award at Wash U Wash U offered, so he couldn't say that. You know, that was offered when I was there, in writing, so, he said that I had talent and great potential. And it was because of what he was hearing, so so you do -- you know and there were other kinds of things, suggestions in papers that I be fired because when I was in the Experiment of Higher Education program, some of the posters and some of the flyers and cartoons that were on the cubicles and the teacher-counselors area and on the student you know, the Panthers newspaper that showed you know a Panther stabbing a pig with a police, with a cop hat on. You know and those were (laughs) on the wall. And so they'd come over the newspapers'd come over and see, take pictures say you know "this is what they're teaching," you know. I mean that's what people wanted to put on their walls, you know. (laughs) That time, that period. So that was all part of the disengagement.

And, and it was that disengaging process was also multicultural because there was the Students for a Democratic Society, there was the Weathermen, the Weather Underground, you know the White Panthers in Detroit, the Gray Panthers, the old (laughs) the old, so it was the Brown Panthers, Brown Berets, the Brown Berets which was the Latino Panthers, right? So it was you know and those studies, they were advocating study and new curriculum so we were working with them. But that was all part of the disengagement that I think culminated in a multicultural way with the, the annual Third World Writers and Thinkers Symposium that we did in California.

(recording interrupted)

0:48:52 [Decision to write a history of black poetry; Stephen Henderson; Marie Brown]

Rambsy:

We were talking about some, in some ways the theoretical foundations of *Drumvoices*, but I was going to ask you about, and you also talk about your experience, but I wanted you to say a little bit about even the actual writing of a history. Because some people have similar, they talk kinda -- they don't use the term, they talk about disengaging? But where you go different is in you end up actually writing a history. And I know some people wrote some shorter critical books. But could you say something about just the idea of writing a history of black poetry.

Redmond:

The, writing a history of black poetry, is clearly is extremely demanding and it requires you to gain possession of encyclopedic understanding of poetries, if you can. And then of course the history of black poetry is what I was about. I had an understanding of, of the origins and the development of European American poetry, and I knew Whitman was the big gun in American poetry. We could almost say all poetry comes from Whitman, you know. And you go different cultures and say the same thing, if you go to Russia you're looking at interestingly enough, interestingly enough a black man, you're looking at Pushkin, Alexander Sergeyeovich Pushkin. And interestingly enough, you go to French you look at a black man too, in part; you're looking at Alexander Dumas. Or let's say a cross -- Pushkin was mixed, racially mixed, and so was Dumas, yeah. So that's fascinating. But I think that for me the role of Katherine Dunham is so central in the preparation for and the writing of a history of African American poetry. Especially conceptually and, and in terms of some of the things that I learned that poetry did and meant in various African and African diasporan cultures. It's a very, very very -- I mean it means the drum, it means the feet. First thing I found out was that there was no word for it. Hmmm, so, okay well, what it means and it implies is the most robust, connotative meaning of word, of 'word,' the word, now, okay? (laughs) Hmmm. Poetry. The broadest possible, most robust connotative meaning of the word 'word.' (laughs)

(recording interrupted)

Rambsy:

Yeah, so could you say just a little bit more about even just the decision to write, and then even the process of actually writing a history of poetry.

Redmond:

Okay. So, so yeah, that, that whole thing, Katherine Dunham's influence and the idea of poetry in various cultures around the world, specifically, you know African-derived cultures, made it a challenge to write a literary history of the poetry. There were times when I thought I might write another kind of history of the poetry. You know, more, a more illustrated or more ritualized. In fact I have a script that was performed. It's a script of *Drumvoices* -- this comes after, not the one before, you know the thing that -- this is adapted. (laughs) You know after *Drumvoices* was put together in order to perform it at a book party at Cal State Sacramento. And it's, eh, about that thick. (holds up thumb and fingers to measure approximately 1/2 inches) So, but the decision to write it (laughs) -- I guess we've talked about the steps already, so you just want to go right in to. ...

Rambsy:

Or, yeah, I would just be interested in how you like even decided, yeah, to, what made you decide now I'm going to write this history and then. ...

Redmond:

Okay, okay, well the, part of it was that I had -- I was wits' end as to what to do with it, and that's part of how, why I decided to write it. The other part was that Marie Brown, my editor at Doubleday had

pushed me. And people around me had suggested based on what they heard me, what they had heard and seen me do with the poetry. There's one anecdote that -- concerning, involving Stephen Henderson. Henderson called me over to a group of people -- I think I might have told you about this. Henderson -- I was telling Haki [Madhubuti] about it the other day -- Henderson called me, you know he had already done *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, and he said, he called me over and he said a name, you know, he just said a name, we were at some cocktail party during a break in a conference and he said "Albery Whitman." And I said, "Oh, Albery Whitman," I said, "oh, the longest poem written by a black poet," so many hundreds of lines, and an epic poem when it was written, the late nineteenth, eighteenth hundreds, and I was just talking, and he said, he called out "Melvin Tolson," just called out about five, six things. So I noticed that he, at two or three gatherings he did that. What I learned later was that he would say to like ten people standing in a circle, "Watch this." He would say, "Watch this machine." And he would say, "Eugene, come over here a minute, I want to talk." He never told me, see, I didn't, I didn't know any of this. He said, "Just watch this." And he would say (pauses) "a Cleveland poet who had his work performed at Caramou House," he said, "we're trying to think of his name." I said, "Oh, Russell Atkins, the friend of Langston Hughes." I would just, you know, so he did that over and over. And some other people. And so they were, "Man you gotta write -- do you realize? That you, you gotta write this." That kinda, it was really funny. (laughs) And then I think I told you I was at Quincy's [Troupe] house one night and I went in and he called me out from the bedroom, whatever I was staying in, and, and I came out and I recited some, so I recited some pages of prose by a Latin American writer. Anyway, part of it was I seemed to have had that memory, and you know I was boning up to teach, and so everybody was, you know aware of that but they thought, "Well you ought to take it beyond that. We need that in a book." So that was part of it.

So the two things, one is you know one was I was reading, I was researching to teach, I wanted to be a good teacher. And of course when I went on the road to lecture about it, and also Marie Brown said, "You need to get me a proposal." And after articles and lectures that she had heard; I told you there was a pamphlet and then, you know. So those are some, were some of the catalysts to the, some of the things that propelled me toward writing the book. I had been preparing to write the book but didn't know it. When I was going and studying with certain people and specifically looking at the history of the poetry: all dissertations, all theses, all the exit senior papers, all honors papers, and anything I could find on the, on African American poetry. So those are the things that put me in the mindset to write it.

And then, and so and I knew that the writing, that the book was not, it was not you know going to be like a popular book, like a biography or a piece of fiction or a, the history like from slavery to freedom or before the Mayflower, wouldn't be used that broadly. So I was kind of stuck, like do I really want to do this, I didn't have a doctorate so I wasn't, I hadn't gone that length, you know, to even the practice of doing scholarly work. I'd done it but did it unofficially, without a portfolio. Dorothea -- I mean Dorothea is another person -- Darlene Roy said to me when I got the honorary doctorate here she said, "Well you know that's late coming, *Drumvoices* was a dissertation." You know people have told me, Margaret Walker told me, a lot of people told me that. So, so I got into it and decided I was going to do it, do a book-length work.

1:00:09 [Specific comments about writing *Drumvoices*]

Redmond:

The thing, the exciting thing about writing *Drumvoices* interestingly enough was the titles of the sections. I had a lot of fun, 'cause there was -- some of it was drudgery you know, (laughs) and where there was drudgery I always tried to lift the language, I always tried to be creative and poetic. But I really enjoyed coming up with those titles and the titles of those chapters and subtitles, titles of subsections. They're all very, very carefully thought out and played with in the air. And a lot of the language of *Drumvoices* was played with in the air too. One way that I wrote it was to read it out loud. I'd read it to students or to a couple of assistants who were helping me, or I might call somebody and read it on the phone like Maya [Angelou] or Quincy [Troupe], like that, you know, just call and read sections on the phone.

So, so the decision came after several -- all the things I talked about earlier on during this interview, you know the drum and the feet, the question of poetry, the role of poetry in the community, as I had seen it and heard it over time. I knew no one who didn't, who hadn't memorized a poem. I knew no one in the black community who didn't memorize some poem. That was the way it was. And almost everybody had memorized "Lift Every Voice and Sing." And if you, if when you were, at fifteen my peers and I would have been considered illiterate if we hadn't memorized it. Just as we would have, males would have appeared illiterate if we didn't know the standing of football teams among the HBCUs. 'Cause this was before the NBA and NFL, you know all that stuff, 'cause they were white players, you know the one black player here, one -- you know, we were looking at the black player. And then we, we'd deal with, hope the team won because, you know. Every black person was a Dodgers fan, you know, 'cause of Jackie Robinson. (laughs) And so, those are kinds of things, but that was, that recitation, you know I was aware of that recitation I wanted to get that into *Drumvoices*, like. You, you knew, we knew which cheerleaders or majorettes had the prettiest legs because it would be like in *Jet* and *Ebony*, I mean the black colleges right? The marching at FAMU, the baddest in the world, you know, all that stuff you knew, because you were, because it was, we were almost hermetically sealed that way. You know we got the *Afro-American* in Baltimore, the Philadelphia paper, we got *Jet*, we got the *Chicago Defender*, we got the *World* from Atlanta, I mean, we got it in the local paper so we were into that.

There was just all kinds of soundings taking place. And that's what I wanted to with that in addition, so whatever I can't do -- you know today I would have recordings, in today's world I'd have, the back of *Drumvoices* would have CDs or what's the visual counterpart? DVDs. If I were to redo *Drumvoices* no way in the world I would have it without some recording. Well the equivalent to that in those days was, you know play with the titles, you know "A Long Way from Home," (laughs) the title of a chapter. "Festivals and funerals." You know the least I could do in a non-visual, non-verbal world (laughs) and so the book. ... So that was what I had in mind in writing and that was one of the motivating features, what can I do with the cover, what can I do with titles, what can I do with fonts to the extent that I can use them. Even down to the dedication, you know, the way I thought about dedicating it to people who had gone on, Tolson and others, and people who were still here like [Robert] Hayden and [Gwendolyn] Brooks and Sterling Brown. And the way I wanted that arranged. So to me it was a visual -- it was an

oral/aural event, it was a ritual event, even though there was no sound and we didn't have pictures. The plan had been to use photos. We had photos; in fact I have the photos with the captions. That got thrown out because of money concerns. But we had photos of all -- or not, you know the major poets, and some, and a few of the new, the younger new ones. That was...so yeah. That's interesting to know, because I still have those photos with the captions that Marie [Brown] said "Okay, not enough money." There were other kinds of concerns in the book that got cut out because of finances, because of size, in other words pages that were, that couldn't go in. So, it came on as a lot of winnowing and threshing.

I was preparing to be a good teacher and a better poet and a better what I call soul-doctor-in-training. How would I go out to the community, how would we continue to develop and advance our communities. And so I was preparing to do all that. And the scholarly part of it kind of fell on me, and one of the compromises was that there are no footnotes: they internalize, 'cause to me that was anathema, I mean I was not a scholar per se, it was kind of weird (laughs) really because. ... You know that was supposed to go to people like J. Saunders Redding and [Louis D.] Rubin and the man who collaborated on the *Black Writers of America*? He told me that he taught the first black literature course in the U.S. at Jackson State in the thirties. He died, he's, he died. The big book (gestures with his hands to describe a book approximately 24 inches tall and 18 inches wide). ...

(pause while Redmond and Rambsy think)

Rambsy:

[Richard] Barksdale.

Redmond:

Barksdale, yeah Barksdale. It was people like that, and the brother in Chicago, Nate, not Nate, can't think of his name. But it went to people like that. Even Sterling Brown, kind of, you know he was a pioneer and he backed away from that and started doing that other stuff, you know, the anthology, but he was a great teacher. But we didn't have that, that next step in our education, the Ph.D. which would require more exacting, a more exacting concentration or a, a proscribed course of study. So we just, there'd be people coming along to do that, you know. (points at Rambsy; laughs) So, so writing it there were lots of, of edges that I trimmed off, there were a number of approaches that I modified, you know given the scholar that I was. You know basically a poet who had fallen into the academy by accident because of black studies, because the sixties blew up America before [Amiri] Baraka did. (laughs) [alluding to Baraka's 2002 poem "Somebody Blew Up America"]

Rambsy:

What would you say, did...

Redmond:

So, so that's what, that's what I -- there're other shortcuts that I took that I'll talk about later, when I look at it, when I looked at the book and I think about it, that one was that internalization of footnotes.

No footnotes, here once in awhile at the bottom of the page there'll be something. But I just sort of parenthesized and kept moving. (laughs)

1:09:06 [Situation while writing *Drumvoices*; community of scholars and poets]

Rambsy:

What would you -- like now if you were trying to write a *Drumvoices* from scratch, you probably -- it'd be so hard because people are tugging on you everywhere.

Redmond:

Yeah.

Rambsy:

You know, like even probably to write the East St. Louis poem, ["A Tale of Two Captains & Two Avenues in the Life of East St. Louis" in *The Making of an All-America City*] I mean it was hard to fit in because you were going speaking and this and that. So what was different about your life that you had long periods to actually write, like yeah, like how was the writing process for you different than if you're trying to write now?

Redmond:

One was I was younger. (laughs) Two, that I was, I wrote it in California, okay. I lived eight minutes from the campus. I lived in the community where the university was. My students lived in the community where the university was. It was a residential campus, you know, a campus that drew on the residential community. My colleagues were my neighbors, my students were my neighbors, I locked down every summer, you know I just locked down every summer and wrote. I never taught summer, after the first couple of summers when I went to Southern from California? I never taught again unless I did a two-weeker early on. So I always did that. Just I'm talking about just the logistics and the kind of format that my life assumed. So, so and I had, I had people help, you know I had people type. And I had two levels of assistants, one was a person, I had a couple of fact finders, and that was -- you know today it would've just been going online -- you know people going in the libraries and museums, even church, basements and attics. So I had that. I had that kind of help. So my point is that I was living in a, a communityiversity family. It wasn't like I drove to the campus all this, like a third of the time it took me to get here I'd be on campus, right? And the students were right around me. And I was shaping the students, I was teaching the material as I was writing it, writing about it. I was getting feedback.

We had a complete community, we had theater, that's mentioned in there, we had music, that's mentioned *Drumvoices*, in fact I talk about that whole idea of that multiphonic, I mention Ike [i.e. Isaac] Paggett, who talks about how, talking about polyrhythm, polymeter, polynotes, you know, in fact I can just see one footnote where I actually paraphrased a statement he made to -- we were saying polyrhythms and he suggested polymeter in terms of some of what some of these musicians were doing, some of the avantist musicians, and just music in general.

So yeah, so, so that, those are some of the differences I was around people who were working -- in other words I was working around, I was associated with people who were pioneering their fields like I was pioneering mine. So they were all of the cutting edge -- Paul Carter Harrison in theater, Oliver Jackson in painting, he's mentioned in there, Pan-African theorists, there were poetry theorists and critics in the different fields, you know right down the road there was Clyde Taylor there was Ishmael Reed, you know at Berkeley. Clyde read the manuscript, the whole thing, sections of it and read the whole thing. So I think there was a family that stretched about maybe a hundred miles, over a hundred miles in northern California. And they, you know Paul Carter Harrison founded the Sons/Ancestors theater company. We were working on masks, you know masking, what that meant in theater, what it meant in social life, the double consciousness, we wear the mask, what it meant in poetry, what it meant for example in interviews that, that slaves and former slaves had given to white interviewers, you know what's missing from it. What you won't say, what you can't say, what you're afraid to say, what you're not going to say just because this is a person from another culture, this is a white person. We were working on all that, how did that come in, how'd that play into the poetry of Countée Cullen and Claude McKay.

So we had people working together in a way that we don't have it today, we wouldn't have it today. So that, that -- and we were moving at a slower pace because we didn't have the technology that sped us up. Like you were saying. We just knew everybody. When I went to Spingarn they said "oh yeah, come on in, stay, you can sleep in there if you want to." (laughs) The Moorland-Spingarn collection? So you had that kind of thing going on. We, we, the poets don't see each other today like they used to. (inaudible) come and people might see, they just don't see each other. I mean I saw, I saw all the poets, I mean I went to all those poets. I mean I saw Russell Atkins, I saw Norman Jordan, I saw Sterling Brown. I saw all those, I saw Sam Cornish, who wrote me recently, he's the poet laureate of, laureate of Boston now. He's wrote me out of the blue, "Eugene Redmond do you remember me? We met in Cleveland in Oberlin." And I wrote back (pantomimes typing on a computer keyboard) and said, "*Chickory*," a series of stapled booklets he did with children in them, "*Chickory*, issues of *Chickory* occupy a sacred place on my bookshelf." That's how I answered him, let him know there's somebody got stuff you did in the sixties, right? So 'do I remember you?' (laughs) -- and sent it.

So, it was that kind of thing. We just, Quincy [Troupe] and I, we got in got in the car, we got us some beer and some ribs, and drove all night in the rain to hear Robert Hayden read poetry. I can't even imagine poets going to hear Nikky Finney -- not that she has the same position -- you know, getting in a car. I couldn't imagine Treasure [Shields Redmond, Redmond's daughter] and her friends getting in a car and going and driving all night to hear Elizabeth Alexander read poetry. They might push a button and read. I'm just saying, (inaudible), that's what we did. Rode all night, almost, to hear Robert Hayden read poetry! I mean, just, "Man, woo!" it just, "Woo!" sent chills up your spine, the thought that you were going to do that, that you were going to be in his presence. And we drove all the way to Buffalo, New York, from Ohio for the American, Inter-American Writers Congress, that's something we need to talk about, where Hayden was. And that's where I first met Stanley Crouch, Ishmael Reed, Steve Cannon, the whole gang. Yeah, Sarah Webster Fabio, the whole gang. All that, 1969 in the fall the Inter-American Writers Congress. And Maurice Lubin, the Haitian writer, there. So, so that was part of -- part of the

problem today is I think there's a dislocation, I know that Maryemma Graham said in Chicago at the last Gwen Brooks Conference on Black Literature and Creative Writing? She called my daughter out, she said Treasure needs to write the sequel to *Drumvoices: the Mission of Afro-American Poetry: a Critical History*, and Third World Press needs to publish it. And that's interesting, 'cause is Bill [i.e. William J.] Harris still writing it?

Rambsy:

Yep, yep.

Redmond:

Okay. But so, so she, you know. So anyway, but I thought wow, how do you connect up with these people? Is it, at this point where we're closer together we're farther apart. Where then we were farther apart but closer together. That's, that's a -- so, it's not impossible, it could be done. Yes. It's, it's-- that would, it would be different. And I think too, it would also be different; I mean the character of the book. I think the thrust of the book would be different. The -- one critic said I did less criticism and more survey, you know. Which is part in true part, you know, I mean part true. But those are some of the things that would be different. The challenges for today.

Rambsy:

Okay. That's it.

Redmond:

I also was alone, I was much farther from my family, from my siblings, so I wouldn't, I didn't have to put out the fires that I put out now. Well I was, but I was doing it long distance, you know.

Rambsy:

So you had longer times to. ...

Redmond:

Yeah, yeah. Yes.

Rambsy:

And you, did you do most of it during the summer you think? The bulk of your writing?

Redmond:

Yeah, yeah.

1:20:08 [The chapter “Festivals and Funerals” in *Drumvoices*; Redmond’s photographs of Jayne Cortez, a group of women laughing, and Ralph Ellison]

Rambsy:

So, okay. Alright, we're going to switch a little bit, and it's kind of connected, and talk about some of the photographs?

Redmond:

Okay, okay.

Rambsy:

And actually it's nice that we mentioned the “Festivals and Funerals.” (takes his glasses from his shirt pocket) 'Cause I wanted to open up with, this is a photo from Box 53 packet (pauses) not sure, but it's Jayne Cortez. (puts on his glasses) And I was going to ask you one, about -- just moving from there, like we're going to slowly shift to talking about some of the photographs, but you -- Jayne Cortez was the poet (video cuts to the photo, no. 14 from Box 53, packet 5 (EBR53_05_014) of the Eugene B. Redmond Collection) whose title inspired that section.

Redmond:

For the last section. Yeah, yeah.

Rambsy:

Yeah. Did you, did you have a idea that that section was going to become so -- like that's the one that a lot of folks talk about when they talk about the book. Did you have an idea when you were writing it that, hey this is going to be the section that really gets. ...

Redmond:

(video returns to the interview) I did, I did think that. The, you know the universities where people use it? And they send me, they copy that and -- for classes. And they send me royalties, you know, that cluster of schools in southern California, I think Richard Nixon went to one of them. What are they called? Pomona?

Rambsy:

Claremont? Claremont system?

Redmond:

Claremont, yeah. Well there're schools in that cluster that use it. And English teachers, they use it, some of them every semester. And they, they copy it and put it in a book form, just that last chapter. And send me a royalty, a little royalty.

I thought that, I thought that I was onto something. And I knew that it would be the longest chapter too, you know because I knew all those poets and I wanted to talk about, you know what was happening,

during, during our time, in our time. Yeah, that was quite a -- you know, "Festival and Funerals," I mean that's what I came up with; I looked around tried to create something. I called Jayne and said, "I want to use it." And she said "of course." Yeah I thought it would be -- there're some people who said to me that that could have been a book by itself. You know, just tapped into that. And there're books that looked at the poetry, the sixties poetry, in a different way, and they're like, two to -- they're about the size of that chapter. And there're other books that look at the entire poetry but then focus on the more recent, like that co-authored book with Rubin, [*Black Poetry in America* by Louis D. Rubin and Blyden Jackson] yeah, that, fine, fine, it's like just a couple of essays, fine book, good book. Yes, I thought that, and that was, that chapter was the one that I stretched out on and in regarding what I spoke of earlier trying to use the broadest possible application of, of a discussion of black poetry. You know when I say that, near the end that I can recall how that the drum is, you know the, poetry in music. Music is the most universal experience, and the language that's used to discuss poetry and music are, is almost the same. You know, if you say 'feet' or if you say 'rhythm' or if you use, if you say things like 'vision,' various ideas, 'meter,' 'metronome,' there's, there's a parallel word or that word itself also fits in, into poetry, into a discussion of poetry. And I knew I was onto something there, you know when I did, near the end, 'cause you know all the force of the entire book was riding on, was riding me. So, like what're you going to do, what can you say? And then I say, I said the guitar, the whine of the guitars, the rattle of the, of the tambourines, and the drumvoices, drumvoices, the rivers, the drumvoices urging us to cross them. Yeah, yeah.

Rambsy:

What would you. ...

Redmond:

And that comes all the way back to the beginning with how many rivers to cross. Yeah, very last words in the book. [*Drumvoices* ends with: "Music is the most shared experience – the most vital commodity – among Afro-Americans. And poetry is music's twin. Both the metaphysical and the metaphorical word stem from and return to the drum: life, love, birth, and death labored out in measured rumble or anxious cacophony. Between the lines are the rattle of choruses, the whine (hum) of guitars, and the shriek of tambourines, framed by rivers that will not run away. And the drumvoices urging us to cross them, cross them."]

Rambsy:

Did that, do you think that *Drumvoices* where you cover over a hundred poets, do you think -- or how do you think that sort of shaped the interest in photographing? 'Cause you photographed just about, at this point just about everybody who is living at least.

Redmond:

That's in the book, yeah.

Rambsy:

Yeah, like, so. I guess I want you to talk about that, that shift, and then particularly starting with Jayne Cortez, like when did you start photographing her regularly. And it's notable that since she typically says

no photos during her shows, that you have -- she's probably going to be a poet who's photographed less frequently than some of the more, poets who don't mind people who shoot, so.

Redmond:

Yeah. Yeah that's right. The idea of poetry. ... By the way, some of the poets and artists and activists in general who early on were a little more reluctant to be photographed? Now they know about this, they want to be photographed. (laughs) Now that they know about the [Eugene B. Redmond] Collection. They go, "Oh what's going on here," you know. I notice that some of them get ready when I'm approaching, when I'm crossing the room? You know 'cause they, that, that thing, that sense of immortality. (laughs) It's with them. (laughs) That is interesting, very interesting. 'Cause I walk into a room now and I say, "Everybody in this room is going to be in the Collection, wait 'til I go to work, when I finish whatever else I'm doing, everybody in this room is going to be in the Collection." Or in some rooms I go in I say "Everybody in this room is in the Collection already," you know, because they're people that I've photographed already.

But, yeah, photographs, these photographs are -- I mean one man told me in the mid-nineties, that, he said, "You know you may actually become better known as a photographer than as a poet," I told you that. And he, and I said, "I hope not." I cringed, at the time, "I hope not," I got a little upset like, that he even thought that way, he would say it, but who knows.

And then, the poet, a writer friend of mine said to me -- a friend died and left me some cameras, but when this writer said, the man hadn't died, we were keeping the watch, I came home from California to assume the watch. This particular guy, who said, made a statement that I'm going to repeat, he acquainted me with everything in the house and everything that I should know and then he, he said to me, "I noticed you're taking a lot more photographs, Red," he said. He said, "They're going to change you as a writer." And he winked like that, (winks) got in his car and drove off to, to Philadelphia was where he was staying. The -- looked, winked (winks) -- and I, it puzzled me at first what he meant. Then I realized that I had been taking pictures of people without looking at them closely. Like poets. I didn't own a telephoto lens at first, I never owned one. So then when, when I was sitting at Maya's [Angelou], or near Alex Haley, or Toni [Morrison], and I studied somebody, studied one of them through that telephoto lens for say ten minutes without taking the picture, you see a different person. Kind of, yeah it's kind of strange. You know when you just sit there and you study, you're playing, going in and out, you're focusing, taking it out of focus, (gestures as if focusing a camera) you're waiting for, you see certain things that you hadn't noticed before about the person.

So, that's one of the things that I noticed, (begins talking about a poster displayed in the room of a group of women laughing; video cuts to the corresponding photo, no. 22 from Box 48, packet 3 (EBR48_03_022) of the Eugene B. Redmond Collection) it was like getting that photo, well, anyway, (laughs) that photo. Photo of Oprah Winfrey, Angela Davis, Eleanor Traylor who's sick by the way, very ill, Joan Sandler, Mari Evans, Maya Angelou, and the former editor of *Essence* magazine, Liz Taylor.

Rambsy:
Susan Taylor?

Redmond:

Susan Taylor. (video returns to the interview) I mean that, that one was some work. That's one I wouldn't have been able to get, before I started being more conscious. I would've missed that one. I would've missed that one, you know. But studying the, the various configurations that that group of women took over a period of time? You know, maybe, five minutes. They gathered and Toni Morrison is out front like a cheerleader doing a dirty dance. What some would call a dirty dance, I mean, normal for a lot of us. (laughs) But you know, maybe the Black Bottom or something like that. (laughs) I mean look at those women, they're catatonic almost. (laughs)

Anyway. I started to understand what he meant by it's going to change you as a writer. And I think I can see in my writing certain kind of things changed, I think it changed me like Dunham changed me. Like I tell my writers to be uninhibited, they should take a course in dance and acting and martial arts. 'Cause people ask me like, "How do you get that loose up there?" I say, "Forget grad school poetry, that's how you do it." And I say, I tell my writers to take, take a dance course, take Dunham technique, especially so they can loosen, loosen the pelvic. Take a martial arts course which further opens you up, makes you more daring, and controlled, and an acting course. And sing. 'Cause people's, people'll say -- you know everywhere I go someone will come up and say, "How -- I can't do that, I don't, I don't, I don't seem to be able to get that -- how do you get so loose?" I say, "Just get loose, like you do in the shower. When you're making love, do the same thing. Imagine, the next time you," I told one young lady in Boston, "the next time you read poetry, pretend you're making love." (laughs) She looked at me like I was crazy. (laughs) But I said "Hey you know, you gotta get completely loose." Now if you want to do it, you know what I do. If you want to, if you want that old stale, stiff graduate school poetry. You know, the poets I had to suffer through when my teachers would take me to hear, you know. Powerful poetry. But there was so many times I wanted to say, "Hey let's go back over this "Sword of Achilles," [i.e., "The Shield of Achilles"] W. H. Auden, and let me read it. (laughs) Let me read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," T. S. [Eliot]. You know. So, so those, those are some of the things that seem to me that, that helps me with poetry.

I, it's like this (begins talking about a poster displayed in the room; video cuts to the corresponding photo, supplied by Howard Rambsy II) particular stance by, of Ralph Ellison. I mean Ralph Ellison was among other things a cat daddy, and you see it in that photo. (laughs) You see he was a cat daddy, he was a bop man, (video returns to the interview) you know. He was a jazz expert. He was, he was hip. Yeah, so, so. In photographs it comes out.

And this picture interestingly enough (holds up the picture of Jayne Cortez introduced previously) of Jayne Cortez? The way I took this picture was just to (video cuts to the photo) drop the camera on the table raise it and get it. 'Cause I knew what, if I had put it in her face, I knew what would happen. So she's making a point, and that's, that's a favorite stance of Jayne's. (video returns to the interview) Meaning she's upset maybe with a waiter or whoever's standing up near. And so all I do was put the

camera down like this, put the camera on the table, flash on, and hit it. Not the best picture of mine of her. But we're in a restaurant in the Soho district of New York. Yeah.

1:34:55 [Redmond's photographs of Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez; Dick Gregory performance; technical difficulties of photographing black people]

Rambsy:

Here's another one of [Amiri] Baraka, this is, let's see, Box 46, I think it's picture 9. (video cuts to the photo, no. 51B from Box 46, packet 9 (EBR46_09_051B) of the Eugene B. Redmond Collection) But he's been one that you photographed, I mean...

Redmond:

Ninety-six. [i.e. the picture was taken in 1996]

Rambsy:

Yeah, he's been, you've photographed him quite often throughout. What have you learned about your writing and him, as a matter -- I mean you said you see different things when you photograph?

Redmond:

Yes, yes.

Rambsy:

What did you see different as you photographed him over the years?

Redmond:

One thing I know that, before I really got into photographing Baraka, I wasn't as aware of him as an actor. (video returns to the interview) Baraka is an actor, I mean literally and figuratively. You have to know that to understand Baraka. That's how he started out. Acting! Yeah! Black Arts Repertory and Theatre. Repertory and Theatre School. Or Black Arts Theatre and Repertory School. [Black Arts Repertory Theatre] I mean, he was an actor. He had to act, he had to put those plays on. So that's one thing, you know. And, and he comes out of a long tradition. Okay. He's also a frustrated musician. Let's not even say frustrated, say he's a musician. He's a musician like Trane. Like Bird. Like Shep. Like Dizzy. Like Duke. I mean he, he, he brings it. A lot of people don't even talk about that. The recent article in the *St. Louis American* about the [Eugene B. Redmond] Writers Club 25th birthday party? [event on October 26, 2011, at the Missouri History Museum in St. Louis featuring Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti] That's one of the first times that I've seen it in a news article. They just go to his politics. First time that I've heard it, one of the few times that I've heard, seen, read his manner being described, you know, how he, how he sings. So I think he's a polemicist, he's a propagandist, he's a publicist, he's, he's improv. You know, he can improv, like he can come back and rev the poem, reverb the poem, you know he can, he uses his entire body. It's like the difference between say a black comedian and say other comedians in America. The black comedian uses his body. European American comedians don't use their body as

much. You know, they're cerebral; the head is the punch line. Part of the punch line in a black comedian is what the comedian does with his body.

And I knew this before I knew it academically because I went to, with some of my white professors to hear Dick Gregory when I was a student. And, and the white professors and white students said, "Why is it that the Negroes were laughing at times" -- this is like early sixties -- "why is it that Negroes were laughing when whites weren't, and Negroes and whites were laughing at different times? Rarely at the same time." And then I just said -- now later I developed a series of complicated lectures around it -- but I said, "Well, some of the things, some of the, some of the, what you call punch lines were in body movement that followed the speech." For example I said, (stands up to demonstrate) he pulled his pants up to indicate high water, I said, "Now that's a southern person who just got up north, or up south. And they're wearing pants that belong to their little brother 'cause the family doesn't have enough money, and the pants come up here. (hitches up his pants) And so we call that high water." And I said, and so he does this (hitches up his pants and starts to walk with an exaggerated strut) and the black students just cracked up fell on the floor! I said, "There's several things happening there. One, he's, he's giving them a picture of somebody, a country person comes up wearing his pants too, they're too high. Two, he's gesturing, he's taking on the character of hipness, you know. That too, like or trying to be hip." (begins walking again with a swaying strut) And you know, other things. (sits back down) And so they thought, "Wow, we didn't know." And so, and I went through several while we were walking back to the class. I did several things, I animated it. And I said, "That's why the black students, they get off on that, I mean it's a picture of them, it's a picture of what they know about their grandfather or about their little brother or big sister." So that's what, you know. That's why it was funny.

So (holds up the picture of Amiri Baraka introduced previously) Baraka can do all of that in his sound and in his movement. I think that's one of the things I love to photograph. He's what Sherman Fowler -- the, who's a wonderful photographer, taught me a lot about taking pictures -- calls a moving target in photography, in a photographer's universe he's what is called, known as, he's what is known as a moving target.

Rambsy:

Well one more who in some ways that acting relates too -- and that's Baraka with her -- (video cuts to the photo, no. 15 from Box 17B, packet 7 (EBR17B_07_15) of the Eugene B. Redmond Collection) Sonia Sanchez. What has it been like, what have you learned, some of the things you picked up as you photographed her over the years?

Redmond:

(video returns to the interview) I've, my understanding of Sonia, my appreciation of her, they have deepened as I look into what Sherman [Fowler] says her soul, that's what he calls it. He has certain photographs that he takes and he said, "I captured her soul," or he'll tell me, "Dr. Red, you captured her soul that time." (video cuts back to the photo of Sonia Sanchez) Here, Sonia is pausing, for example, to create an original statement as she autographs a book. So she's in the ozone, she's -- you don't want to say the same thing. (video returns to the interview) And poets -- I was, I was doing an autograph party

with another writer, he had written a book on, what was it, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. Frank Kofsky. So, he was writing the same thing in every book, and so he said to me at some point during a little lull -- there were hundreds of people, we were at California State University bookstore, at a book signing, we were just, we were new faculty and you know, you know the Black Movement was peaking and everybody, you know. And so he said, I said, "Man, this is really demanding," I said, "to keep, keep coming up with something different." He said, "What do you mean 'something different'?" I said, "Well I write something different in every book." He said, "What?!?" I said, "Yeah." He said "You don't do that, you just write the same thing." I said "No." "No," I said. I didn't know people -- I thought you were supposed to write something different. I guess being a poet -- and I think that Sonia, what I learned is that Sonia sees the person and then mirrors what she sees or what she thinks the person needs to do in the autograph. It's what I do; you know I do that a lot myself. But I just, you know sometimes, I might not have gotten that before, you know before I really got into taking pictures diligently. I might not have gotten that. But that's one of the things that I've gotten.

But also I'm aware of what people have on. 'Cause when you, when you look at a, look through the lens you see the photograph. So you see what they have on. If you want a group, it's fine, you may not know it until afterwards. But if you see certain colors. One thing that I've learned that is that I can't take, I can't put a group of white people on the front row and a group of dark black people on the back row and get a good picture. Because my, the people who do my photographs, they told me, they said, "Well there's something we want to talk to you about, Professor Redmond, but we don't know how to bring up the subject." And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Well it has to do with race and color." And I said, "Well that's what I teach." And so these are young white people, and they said, "Well, photography," they said, "the photography business is designed to favor white people." They said, designed to favor light-skinned people. So I would take pictures and I would go back and say, "Lighten this picture! Lighten this picture!" But by the time they lighten it so I could see the black people, the white people will be bleached out. Like I took a picture of some nurses, they had white uniforms on; they asked me to come take their picture down at the hospital. And I took pictures of the nurses; well there were a few black nurses. When I got the pictures back the black nurses just looked like dots. The white nurses you could see. And I went back and said, "Hey I want to see these nurses." So whiten it whiten it, then the white nurses started to bleach. I said we got to get a compromise. And so, over a period of time, someone who knew something about it, and they just told me that, if you, that the business is skewed, the chemicals, the process. This is all created by lighter-skinned people, even the Japanese, so they're not they're not thinking, that's the first -- I said wow, wow! They're not thinking about dark-skinned people, this is not a dark-skinned person's business. You know, take good pictures of you, fine, but it is light-skinned people who do it and it's light-skinned people that they anticipate being photographed. One guy, people told me it may be unconscious. I said, "You don't have to, you know, that's my business. You don't have to deal with that one, that's, (taps himself on the chest) that's what I study. Once you tell me what it is then I will give you the background on that." You know from Freud to Jung to the brother in Harvard. What's his name?

Rambsy:
Poussaint.

Redmond:

Poussaint. I said, "I read all of the, all the material on color and what's happening mentally. You just tell me what I need to do." And so we had some great conversations after that over time. But the point is he said, "You put the black people in front. It's going -- I don't care where you put the white people they're going to get picked up anyway." Because that, the materials are, you know this whole, this whole process is set up for lighter-skinned people. So sometimes people, I have to explain when I reassemble 'cause people may gather based on rank and I say "do this" and maybe the president or somebody will say "well hey wait a minute," you know, "what are you putting all these white people behind, is this racist?" They don't say it, but. ... And I say, "No. this is the way it is. Black people won't come out in this photo, what it's going to do is make spots out of all those people." Sometimes you have no choice, because you're in a hurry, so I get at an angle or I go up above, stand on something, or I stoop. I do different things. This is all very interesting, that I learned, I'm learning. So I find out even with fair-skinned black people and dark-skinned black people you have to be careful. Or you won't, you won't get them you know. But yeah, that's. ...

You know it's part of my life, we're talking about the [Eugene B. Redmond] Collection and that's part of my life now, I mean I've taken these tens of thousands of photos so it's just different. It's something I've got, you have to talk about now. (laughs) There was once, there was a time when I didn't think, you know, this was -- I couldn't even have dreamed that I'd be discussing this. 'Cause the photos weren't that important. I wouldn't have dreamed that I, that I would be talking. If I put Walter Mosley who looks white in with a group of black writers, if I put him up front and him and say Nikky Finney and several other light-skinned writers and the dark it's going to be the same problem. The other night, Darlene [Roy] thought that the, that [Michael] McMillan, the license collector for St. Louis? She thought he was white. He's up there talking about Afro-centered at the Better Family Life Ball? He's fair; he's a fair-skinned black man. And she thought he -- so that, that happens.

1:48:57 [End]