Eugene B. Redmond Oral History Interview March 12, 2012
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Library and Information Services
Interviewed by: Howard Rambsy II & Mary Rose
Recorded by: Virginia Stricklin
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0:00:00 [Reading of "Miles Song" and "Milestone" (second reading begins at 0:03:38); discussion of "Miles Song" and *Songs from an Afro/phone*]

Rambsy:
Alright Professor Redmond, I was going to start with two of your Miles Davis poems. So "Miles Song" and then "Milestone." So I'm just wondering could I get you to read "Miles Song" first and then we'll -- or maybe we'll just read both of them and then we'll talk about them.

Redmond:
Okay. So I'm reading from *Songs from an Afro/phone*, my third book of poetry. And it came out in 1972.

[beginning of poem; poem appears here as it was read in the interview, not necessarily as it appears in print]

Miles Song, for Miles Davis

Goldlipped blunderbuss
Diamoned eyed derringer
Cool air carver and fashionfreak
Moonsong and moonson
Moonsongster and lunarlyricist for a nightfaced nation
Croonbearer shuttling a blue cord
Polyscreaming his hex-songs
Refingering a three-keyed note-fryer
Blowing soundbeams and phonic rainbows
Hissing sighing humming through the sun
Root-tooting and root-toting
A totem of tones and tidal walls
Miles from home (employs a singing tone)
M-i-i-i-les to roam
Clifford Brown reincarnated in the subconscious chorus
Of this goldlipped windfencer Clifford
Yardsong foot- and inch-song, Miles from home [in a singing tone]
Miles, multitudes, whole storms crushed to soundgraphs
Fed through an Afro-phone, darksong in coppermoon
Miles to roam (employs a singing tone)
Miles to moan (employs a singing tone)
Cotton-lipped flute, note sizzler, brassblare and brassbone
Riffin'
Riffin'
Riffin'!

Blood boiling upto air-stream, upto Afro-urn
Condensing to acoustigraphs
Steady, yet startling as fixed stares, echoes caught in stone pots.

[end of poem]

Redmond:
And the next one, written after Miles passed, appears in volume 11 of *Drumvoices Revue*. And this is actually the prologue to a very, well a long piece that I read at Miles' memorial. At his and my alma mater Lincoln High School in East St. Louis.

[beginning of poem; poem appears here as it was read in the interview, not necessarily as it appears in print]

Milestone: The Birth of an Ancestor, for Miles Dewey Davis the third, 1926-1991, in memoriam, in futuriam

Prologue

Dressed up in pain
    dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum (sings the melody of "All Blues," from the Miles Davis album *Kind of Blue*)
The flatted-fifth began its funereal climb
    dum-dum
Up the tribal stairwell
Grief-radiant as it
Bulged and gleamed with moans
Spread like laughter ha-ha-ha-ha or Ethiopia's wings
    (moves his arms in a wing-like motion)
Mourned its own percussive r-i-i-i-se
Became blues-borne
    dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum
In the hoarse East Saint Louis air
Bore witness to the roaring -- calm
The garrulous -- silence
The caskets of tears
    dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum
The gushing -- stillness
The death of the cool
    dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum
Became the birth of an ancestor.
Yeah, y'all, the death of the cool
    (leans forward, slumps his head to the side, and gestures abruptly downward with his right hand)
Became the birth of an ancestor
    dum-dum, dum-dum

[end of poem]

Rambsy:
Hmm, alright (inaudible). Can you say that, the circumstances under which the first one “Miles Song” was written? You said 1972, right?

Redmond:
Right, it was written between, in the early seventies. This, this was the second book of mine, the other being In a *In a Time of Rain & Desire,* to be written as a cohesive volume, you know in other words thematically the poems were, were designed for a book or for a, one reading, one sitting, one setting, one, one work. A ballet, an operetta, what Amiri Baraka might call a bop-opera. The book for a musical piece, for what might be composed. So that was the case for both of the books, for *Songs from an Afro/phone* and the, *In a Time of Rain & Desire: Love Poems*.

Rambsy:
Could you say something about your approach in them? 'Cause I always, I've heard you say -- and I've seen you write or something , then you'll say "lift the language," and it seems like that's what you were doing already at that moment. So would you say something about your approach to it. I love like these lines like ‘lunarlyricist’ and then ‘brassblare,’ so yeah, could you say a little bit about your approach to -- ?

Redmond:
Yes, it was, it's consistent and yet different with and from the, the other pieces, almost every piece in there had the word, something related to music in the title, and the title of the book itself *Songs from an Afro/phone*. My, that -- I borrowed 'afro/phone' although I've seen the word spelled in different ways. ‘Afro’ it's an African instrument **[???]**, but I've seen it spelled without ‘afro’ as in ‘Africa,’ more like ‘Aphrodite,’ you know. So I decided to use ‘afro’ as in the afro, as in Afro-American studies, and use the slash instead of the hyphen that was often used.

So, my approach was to make something fluid if I could, that is one poem segues fairly easily into the next poem, and many of them are for musicians and singers, like the next one here is for Sam & Dave and there’s poems for The Miracles and for Curtis Mayfield and people like that. Julius, there's even one for Julius Hemphill in this book. So the, the overarching concept and the arc (makes hand motions describing a vertical curve) that I was trying to draw or follow to turn music as the root experience, as the basic experience of African Americans, actually human beings.

There were people that I studied with like the great philosopher whose name escapes me but it will come back to me, an African philosopher who was chief in Nigeria [Fela Sowande] but he was also, he also had a Ph.D. Came to this country and he was one of the people I had the opportunity to study with, he was at Kent and he was at the University of Pittsburgh. As I said I will give you his name, he has a little book *From the Center to the Circumference and from the Circumference to the Center*. [i.e. *The Africanization of Black Studies: From the Circumference to the Center*] And he was a philosopher and a composer. At any rate he, one of his important assertions for me was that if you had to select one word that would summarize black people -- and you'd be crazy of course to pick one word and summarize any people -- it would be ‘belief.’ There'd be two words: ‘belief’ and ‘music.’ And I think it was ‘music and belief,’ in that order. You know if you, if you just wanted to say, okay what is blackness, what, how would you describe or summarize black people, you'd say music and belief, faith.

So, this book derives in part -- and this poem itself certainly specifically derives from that idea, it's the interaction of all elements, with music at the core. Yeah. And, and it, it's -- I was talking last night at

Duff's Restaurant during the award ceremony [the Heschel-King Award Celebration at which Redmond and Howard Schwartz were the 2012 awardees] about having to design the new curricula and, you know, black studies, ethnic studies, women studies, gay and lesbian studies, anti-war studies, free speech studies, urban studies, poverty studies, you know that was part of my generation, what my generation was about, and the idea of the studies created quite a, quite a series of exchanges and investigations and they continue. And one of the things we based what we were doing on was ancient thought, you know any ancient thought that we could use, in particular ancient that, as it was handed down from the African civilizations, you know whether it was the question of the star Sirius and the Dogon people, or the seven principles on which the knowledge that came to us from Egyptology was built, and so on. And we kept coming back to this idea of the interrelationships, -ship of elements and heavens and that 'moonsongster' here, 'lunarlyricist'? I heard Elijah Muhammed speak and one of the things he said early on in my career, I was a young man, he said, "If you're having some difficulty with your, with your woman, take her near the river 'cause the water calms women," because of women's make-up and the flow. And then we, we looked into things like the gravitational pull of the moon on the earth affects the tides of the ocean and the cycles of women, and we actually were able to go into that. So this whole -- and our, our moods. So this 'moonsongster' and 'lunarlyricist,' I was really trying to get some of the depth of black studies, of African, of Afrocentricity, of the great thinkers in various cultures across the world, trying to collapse some of that into my poems. So that anybody who was really studying the culture, he'd go in and say "Oh yeah, he's talking about, he's talking about the Dogon," without even saying it, you know, "he's talking about the creators of the pyramids," and those are some things that Miles looked into, and I knew that, I knew that Leon Thomas, another homeboy of mine, he had lectures on, he had the yodel, the pigmy yodel, right? In a lot of his recordings you know with Pharoah Sanders and others, right. And he knew, he had lectures about the historic relationship between the Nile and the Mississippi, in fact Ntozake Shange, who used to be Paulette Williams when she was here living in St. Louis, has it in her, in *Colored Girls*, in her play *Colored Girls*, [*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*] that, that you know, that phenomenon.

So that's, that's kind of where this comes from, looking at him, Miles, who was a dresser, who was a boxer, a dancer, you know, all kinds of things, and then his, his pioneering nature as a musician. That's what sort of backdrops all this, the idea of him moving about, 'Miles' playing on Miles the name and distance, and that sort of thing.

0:16:47 [Influence of music in black art]

Rambsy:
That's something that --

Redmond:
That's what I -- is that? Did that make sense?

Rambsy:
Yeah yeah yeah. That really helps. I was wondering too, when you were mentioning these, the poems, though because we could say that it's as much if not more music today than twenty years ago, right? But I see less poets write, about, like -- I mean it's not as prominent. Like you could do this whole book on music and everybody had a Coltrane poem, you know black artists folks. I mean they had Malcolm but they had the Coltrane. What do you think drew that too, like made the music -- I guess you kind of explained it, but that's very interesting, now you might seem to have less prominent music, I mean poetry about music. (inaudible) It might have been a different time, I'm not sure.

Redmond:
Yeah. And the role of the musician and music was different. You know, why we looked at Jackie Wilson and the way he dressed, James Brown and his silk. We looked at Billy Eckstine and the Mr. B shirt, everybody wanted the Mr. B shirt. The women liked the flower in Billie Holiday's hair, you know. People wanted to look like some of the folks that they -- but it wasn't the same, there was a deeper connection to the music and survival, or as a survival tool, which I think, I'm feeling, I'm talking to young people about it. We were, we had a program Saturday where a bunch of us, me and who have modicums of success set at tables with black boys, they were nine to sixteen, so each one of us or two of us sat with these boys. And I was asking them 'cause I'm interested in it, I asked them and everybody, said, "Well what are you listening to?" and they said "rap," everybody said "rap," right? And big program the Deltas do every year. So I'm trying to find out, you know, the root, basic connection that they're making with the music, and if it has anything to do -- and I know some of it does, 'cause the words are more direct and they chop (makes a sharp horizontal hand motion), you know you can't miss that.

But I think that we connected it with the evolution of the fight for freedom even when it was like the, the Moonglows or the, one of the groups that just blended harmony without any real statement, sang from the Great American Songbook, you know, that preceded R&B, the crooners you know. We still connected it with the evolution of our struggle. Not -- 'cause I think that that historical discontinuity which is what, how Henry Clark [spelling?] described it -- it's for what we see now, the discontinuity. I think that's why in the minds of the young people listening to music today it's not directly associated with the black struggle, or black beauty, or black aesthetics at all, black, black art. You know it's what we saw in Joe Louis what we saw in Ali, and what they see or saw in say the dancer rapper, my daughter was with him, you know. …

Rambsy:
Oh, MC Hammer.

Redmond:
MC Hammer. I don't think it's the same stream.

Rambsy:
Mmm-hmmm, mmm-hmmm.

Redmond:
That's a cause for investigation.

0:21:17 [Discussion of “Milestone”]

Rambsy:
So almost, yeah, yeah maybe twenty years later is when you wrote “Milestone.”

Redmond:
Yeah, yeah.

Rambsy:
What were the circumstances under which. …

Redmond:
Here I was responding to a very, (holds up *Songs from an Afro/phone*) a very much alive Miles, you know. (laughs) Who you know, Miles was born in 1926, so when I wrote this poem he would have been you know fortyish, fifty, I'm sorry, fiftyish. …

Rambsy:
Yeah forties, 46 or something?

Redmond:
Yeah something like that. And then of course the second poem was written on the occasion of his passing. And to be read at his memorial at Lincoln High School. So I was thinking about that, there's a long portion that has quite a bit of his own history. The prologue here fronts a biographical section that's about four or five times the length of this piece, and so, it was like, you know a call to the ancestors, actually, this poem actually describes what I felt as I heard, I was hearing accounts of his death. So that's the circumstances. Placing him back in East St. Louis, he was, he belonged to the world here, except that I -- in the first poem -- except that I talked about home, home, Miles to roam, he's out. Then by the time I get to this poem (gestures indicating the second poem "Milestone") I interacted with his family over a number of decades, you know going to the house, his daughter at the time was teaching math at Miles Davis Elementary School, so it was, it was I guess I instinctively placed him in the city, 'hoarse East St. Louis air,' it's a way of saying the blues, this is where the blues comes from. 'Cause on the road I say growing up in East St. Louis whenever you inhale or exhale you took in and let out the blues, you had no choice, that's the way I describe it, you had no choice. So that's why I say 'the hoarse East St. Louis air,' even the air, you know – and I did that unconsciously although I'd been saying over time that if you breathe in East St. Louis you take in and let out the blues. And then there was a saying that I used as an epigraph to another poem called "Double Clutch Lover" that we used to use as kids not really knowing what we were saying, "Let me blues ya 'fore I lose ya baby, let me blues ya 'fore I lose ya." (smiles and sways his head side to side) And it was a kind of mannish way of talking to girls and women you know, yeah.

Rambsy:
Did you, did you know you were going to be reading this at a memorial when you wrote it?

Redmond:
I didn't know it. I wrote it and it's, this is the only part that's been published. I wrote it and then I went to the memorial and I said to them I have this poem. 'Cause I'm not listed on the program, but Dr. Lillian Parks the first black woman, woman superintendent of East St. Louis public schools said she and the undertaker Officer, Bernadette Officer, who was the brother, she's the brother [i.e. sister] of the man who was the mayor, [Carl Officer] said "yeah oh yeah we definitely want," you know. And I read the whole piece there. And I had about 25 or 30 requests for it and told people I'd get it out. I never got back to the work of editing and revising the body of the poem so this ended up first in another issue of *Drumvoices* [volumes 1 and 7] and reprinted here in the anthology. [volume 11]

(Rambsy & Redmond begin laughing and talking simultaneously)

Rambsy:
So, you, so I'm just clarifying. You showed up with your poem --

Redmond:
I sort of went there and bogarted myself onto the program. In fact some people, people saw the program and they were saying "How did you get on the program?" 'cause it was like an official Miles Davis Enterprises product, had one of his art pieces on it, and it had him, a photo of him, receiving, being knighted in Spain, Sir Miles, right? (laughs) So (laughs) so, I mean this was a classy program, I have a copy of it. Very classy, right. And --

Rambsy:
And it was in East St. Louis, right?

Redmond:
Yeah.

Rambsy:
Where was it in East St. Louis?

Redmond:
At Lincoln High School.

Rambsy:
Okay.

Redmond:
And Oliver Lake came and he was working with the young, with a student Russell Gunn, and you know all the kids. They're well known professional musicians nowadays. They were students under Ron Carter, not the bassist but our Ron Carter. [music teacher at Lincoln High School in East St. Louis]

Rambsy:
Yeah.

Redmond:
So, it was all done, this was all done out of New York, you know. And you know, put together fancy. And people, representatives from New York, from the law office and Sony and different, the recording companies, they were here. (laughs) So I bogarted my way onto the program.

Rambsy:
And that was ‘91 when they -- ?

Redmond:
Yeah. He died the 28th of, of August, and the program was the 9th of, of September. I'm sorry, he died the 28th of September and the program was October the 9th. Yeah. So, yeah. But people were just saying “how'd you get on the program?” (laughs)

Rambsy:
Now when you read it, like I heard it, folks, musicians when they perform with you, you have them play parts of “All Blues.”

Redmond:
Exactly, exactly.

Rambsy:
When did you start, when did you add "All Blues" to performances of it?

Redmond:
That was, that was some time later, I didn't do it then, that day. If I recall, now there's a tape of it, I recall I didn't do it that day. But not long after that I started it. I remember doing it in at Langston Hughes Centennial? [2002] And (clears his throat), excuse me, Baraka was in the audience, and he started tapping, (mimes tapping with both hands as if on a drum) tapping on his, on the desk, you know when I was reading it, yeah.

Rambsy:
What made you choose that song to add, of -- ?

Redmond:
Well because it, you know it seemed to be the pivotal piece for him. This one and "So What" I mean they remind me of East St. Louis. You know “So What” is like East St. Louis philosophy. I explained to these boys what it means. And we got up to get in line and I asked them did they know -- they knew, they knew it was Miles, which I was very pleased. These kids, right? They knew it was Miles Davis. Course one of them, grandfather one of them’s a friend of mine, he knows more about jazz than I know. And then -- but they all knew it was Miles Davis. Didn’t know the song, and then I told them, “Okay, well I'm gonna put some fat on your head,” as my uncle used to say ‘put some fat on your head.’ Boys, I said, “Those two titles and Miles' way in the world are connected to East St. Louis philosophy that comes out of East St. Louis.” It's like “So What,” I used to hear it, you know members of my team and I would say it to the opposing team on the football field, “so what” you know, so, and then “All Blues,” that, the foundation, the foundation of who we are, one way to call the blues people I told them. So we went on with that, they were fascinated! They wanted it man, when I, when I connected it to the word 'philosophy' I mean they were – 'cause they were sure, they're all part in mentoring programs anyway so they, they were very interested in that. So that's why I chose "All Blues," 'cause it just seemed to me the basis, at the basis of what he was about and what the people are about, is that blues and blues motif.

So, and I didn’t really think, it hit me, man, just the lines unfolding, when I did 'flatted' when I read that to audiences that know music, man they -- "wow!" -- they're like, “how’d that get in a poem,” you know, just. … And my nephew, who's a music teacher, said to me “You can't flat the fifth, Uncle.” I said, “Get your horn out and try it.” He told me that, this guy with a master’s in music; well he didn't have a master’s. He told me that! And I said, “You just made a gotcha statement.” And he said, “Wait a minute,” we were on the phone. He picked up his horn; he said “Yes you can.” 'Cause people think of a seventh or, you know. He said “But yeah Uncle a flat can't, a fifth can't be flatted.” “Try it,” I just told him to try it. He actually went and got his horn. And now I don't know music but I knew that! (laughs) Blew his mind, man, blew it just laying around. (laughs) For the next few times I saw him he was ducking, he was “what does he have for me now? I'm the music teacher, right?” (laughs) Anyway, I -- and then, so then I wanted music, I wanted the poem to be musical without, you know without music, but with music if, if you, if someone wanted it there, or if the occasion called for it. And that was. …

0:32:40 [Reading and discussion of "Funky-Grace"]

Rambsy:
I was going to next switch to this one, "Funky-Grace," is another one. Yeah I asked her [interviewer Mary Rose] to add this one because I said let's make sure you get one that he -- I've seen you when you do performances this is always one in your rotation. One of your I guess standards? Or signature pieces? So, yeah, so I'll have you read it then.

[beginning of poem; poem appears here as it was read in the interview, not necessarily as it appears in print]

Funky-Grace
From the Hero Series.

Redmond:
Which I never completed it, even though this poem was written way back, you know in the, in the eighties.

For Joseph B. Harrison.

He took the lion lunge
Hey, hey
He took the -- tiger step
Hey, hey
He took the -- tomb trail
(rocks in his chair as if riding a horse along a trail)
Hey, hey
He took the -- sacred plunge
Hey, hey
He made the ocean leap
Hey, hey
He made the gong-gong call
(cups his right hand around his mouth as if calling to someone)
Hey, hey
He made the -- death mouth
Hey, hey
He made the -- freedom creep
Hey, hey
He ate the -- juicy blues
Hey, hey
He ate the -- rat roach flat
Hey, hey
He ate the -- numb stare
(leans back in his chair, tucks his chin down and stares from under his eyebrows)
Hey, hey
He ate the airborn shoe
(makes his right hand move through the air like a fish)
Hey, hey

He caught the sassy space
Hey, hey
He caught the – totem call
Hey, hey
He caught the – kill flame
Hey, hey
He caught the – funky grace
(begins snapping the fingers of his right hand)
Hey, hey
He caught the funky grace
Hey, hey
He caught that -- funky grace
Hey, hey
Give me some funky grace!
Hey, hey
I want some funky grace
Yay, hey

[end of poem]

Redmond:
(laughs) You see I changed 'cause I'm working with kids? Yeah, 'cause it was written for kids.

Rambsy:
Okay, okay. What were the circumstances of that one?

Redmond:
I was teaching. When I came home, after sixteen years on the road 1985 I returned to East St. Louis, I was hired by my dear friend and the one with whom I helped found the East St. Louis Monitor in 1963. I was a student here at SIUE [Southern Illinois University Edwardsville] and he approached me. So we were dear friends and he was a lover of the arts and a promoter of the arts, supporter of the arts. He hired me as Special Assistant to the Superintendent for Cultural and Language Arts. And what I had was an open field, you know there were 37 schools at the time, there're now fewer than, there are twenty-some schools now. There were 37 schools, I had the principals and the teachers in my arms, you know, to do virtually what I wanted with the blessing of the superintendent and especially the deputy superintendent who was a woman, English teacher, Dr. [Lillian] Parks, who entered high school as a teacher the year I graduated, so we went way back. And this man Clyde Jordan got me hired, he was president of the school board, I think the most powerful black politician in the history of the community 'cause he was president of the school board, publisher and founder of the East St. Louis Monitor, president of the Democratic Precinct Committeemen's organization, which meant he controlled the political machine, and supervisor of the township. Which dispensed, you know, goodies and, you know, went in the gap between people who might get put out of the house or might not have food, and staying in the houses and having food. So he, the township did that, helped people.

Anyway, I came home and he, I went to see him and he said write what you would do, and bring it to me, tell me what you would do. In other words what kind of a part, what would you, how would you do it. So I became Special Assistant to the Superintendent for Cultural and Language Arts and poet-in-residence in the school district, well I was already poet-in-residence in the, for the city. And I went, I

went to work. With my crew, I hired Sherman Fowler, I hired Lorna Reed [spelling?] you met her I think. I started politicizing the teachers, you know. Three teachers took my course five years -- four years later, five years later -- three of the teachers took my course teaching African American Oral and Written and Literature. Alice Andria [spelling?], Regina Medley [spelling?], and Edna Forman [spelling?]. Came here and taught in a summer, you know. So what I did, was I circuit-rode the schools. I had special programs, I brought in Warrington Hudlin, I brought in Quincy [Troupe], you know we wrote a proposal, the Illinois Arts Council gave us like $7,000 to bring poets. And we brought in people like Quincy -- Quincy played basketball with the kids 'cause he was a basketball star at Grambling. (laughs) So he came, he played basketball and read poetry, that was great, really hip. We had Sterling Plumpp at the school, we had Shirley LeFlore, the [Eugene B. Redmond] Writers Club was going a year later in '86 so we got going with Alima [Sadiq Afsal, also known as Sandra Reynolds], Sandra Reynolds, she's the wife of the saxophone player, legendary saxophone player from here [Willie Akins]. So that's the kind of thing we were doing. We had summer arts festivals, we had, we showed movies in the schools, really revved it up in the summer. I circuit-rode, I did teacher training programs, I mean it was really, really rich. I think by the time I finished three years later we had about twelve of the principals and about 75 teachers out of several hundred that were in a very advanced stage of readiness, you know dealing with culture. Could give a black culture, allied cultures, and allied forms of poetry and allied forms of expression. And of course some retired you know when I left, and nobody stepped into the spot, 'cause I had been the first only. The first time and the only time, nobody's had that position since. That's when I came to SIU [Southern Illinois University Edwardsville], again.

One of the schools that I worked with was Lucas School in the South End, Martin Van Lucas, and he was a black man who early in the 20th century was like an administrator for like six schools, you know, before they had, before we got a black superintendent they had like administrators for clusters of schools, and this guy was administrator for like six schools, so they named this elementary school after him. And a friend of mine, Dr. Edna Allen, was the Director of Gifted for the district. So Dr. Allen and Miss Stark **[???]** who was principal out there and I got together and we did special programs to that elementary school. And one of the assignments I gave the students was -- it was a two-part assignment. Use rhythms from games, you know, number them, number the times that you repeat or you ump-ump or dumpty-dump, alright? Play with that, put that down, and I taught them the oxymoron. You know, we had several weeks of exercises where they would, they learned, and so they would do the oxymoron and use rhythms from some game or some situation that they encountered at school, playground, pajama party, in the kitchen, you know with their mother, with their fathers, out moving about. Whatever, whatever, but take it out of the culture, take it out of the culture. And this was my contribution, "Funky-Grace." And we even talked about how 'funky' was -- how for them 'funky' didn't mean nasty, you know. But in my generation of youth it was like using a bad word. So you couldn't use, you couldn't say 'funky,' you know, you meant somebody smelled bad, if you said it when I was a kid. If you said it about somebody you'd get a whipping for that, a reprimanding. And now you know there was P-Funk, bring on the funk, that kind of thing. So that's how, this was my contribution to that.

Rambsy:
What year was that?

Redmond:
That was 1985. I worked from '85 to '88, I had that position. So this is, this is what -- and then I coupled it with, for me -- and my friend, who had died in 1981, my best friend Joseph Harrison. Who had, had had my back in the sixties and the seventies.

Rambsy:
And you said the “Hero Series.” You were going to do a series of these?

Redmond:
Yeah, and I still plan to do it, I have some poems that are part -- that are for men and women who for me are heroes. But I was going to do a whole, I was going to do it consciously, now I'm doing it sort of the way poets generally work, it's like you just write a poem here and there and then you collect it into a volume. So I'm writing poems about certain people, and then I will put them in the Hero Series, instead of writing like, like I did for the book *Songs from an Afro/phone* and *In a Time of Rain & Desire*, where the poems are written in a sequence knowing they were going to be about music and song, black culture, and about love, you know. Various kinds of love.

Rambsy:
So this is one you certainly wrote knowing that you were going to be performing it.

Redmond:
Oh yes, of course, it was written to be performed. Yeah. And I have used drummers, I've used dancers, I've used voice choruses.

Rambsy:
Oh really? Oh okay. I've seen where you do a call and response with the audience, saying the “hey” part. Yeah yeah yeah. And so the young folks, I'm sure they liked this, what was their response like?

Redmond:
Oh it was fantastic, and then everywhere I go. I mean, you have to, sometimes you have to tell them to tone it. You know, "Heeyyy!" 'Cause you want to hear what I'm saying and you want to get into the rhythm, you know, like. … And, the, this is a follow-up to the poems and, and other experiments, practices that were part of the, my early life, my life as a kid, and then when I went to Southern University to teach and stage work down there. Yeah, you find, that that's where I used that ‘drumvoices,’ the word ‘drumvoices’? “Drumvoices on the sand, drumvoices on the soil, on the sands of time, footsteps pounding,” I've got to, I've got to remember it, but “it is a coming forth, the night within us coming forth, drumvoices coming forth,” you know a village, a village chanting, yeah, yeah. [“Drumfeet on the Soil,” in *Songs from an Afro/phone*]

0:45:53 [Performance poetry; influence of music on various poets]

Rambsy:
And so that's one that, yeah this thing has had a life of its own (inaudible)

Redmond:
Yeah. You know this, I was thinking, I think all of the time about Larry Neal and his comment about poems being scripts? [in Neal’s afterword to *Black Fire*] When you write them down, they're not supposed to be static? You know that's something that we all knew, from the way -- you saw what I did at the end of this poem, and I do that with a lot. … I said, Maya does it. You know I see Maya and I know her poetry, and to me that ain’t the poem. But then, you know, you know, yeah, it's a, he says a script, it's just an outline, when you get up there take it, whsstt. (makes a whistling noise and motions quickly with his right hand upward, suggesting a rocket taking off) Like me, the way I repeated the end of that Miles poem? Yeah, “death of the cool, y'all.” And then I break into my Miles stance. (leans forward,

slumps his head to the side, and gestures abruptly downward with his right hand) “Death of the cool y'all.” You know, after I, I say it twice and then I do that, “became the birth of the ancestor.” [from the poem “Milestone” read earlier in the interview]

Rambsy:
So it seems like over the years that too, the idea of audiences has sort of impacted how you even approach pieces, 'cause you can almost predict -- particularly when some music, it seems like, you know, around Miles Davis audiences they know all of those references.

Redmond:
They know -- of course, of course. And you know I think, I think that I'm going to do a book of performance pieces. I mean if Nikki Giovanni can get away with it. Well. (shakes his head and looks upward to the right, laughs) Poetry. And I love Nikki. (laughs) But if Nikki Giovanni can -- and I mean she's consistent. She ain’t gonna change. It’s, narratives. Yeah. Yeah. And I think that [Haki] Madhubuti stepped into the gap with his latest title, *Liberation Narratives*? I think things are kinda like, I think, he, he had some brilliant work, but I think he, he's seen, I think he's always seen that his poetry is different from mainstream and from black classical poetry, and I think he -- *Liberation Narratives* as a title, as a handle, demonstrates his recognition of that.

Rambsy:
Yeah.

Redmond:
Liberation Narratives. You, you're not going to see that on another book of poetry -- 'narratives.'

Rambsy:
Yeah, yeah, that's true.

Redmond:
You're not going to see that. I think he's come, come to grips with what he's doing and he can stretch out. He's done it anyway.

Rambsy:
You've mentioned that before too like -- and I mean it’s a break and I've been thinking a lot about it, all of those poets who were born in the thirties versus those born after. Like and 'cause I was looking -- thanks for the Quincy Troupe book -- I'm looking at him writing about the musicians as well. You know, which you've been doing for years, and then most recently still. But a lot of the musicians you all write about who were very kind of influential were born in the twenties. So I was like – I mean like older brothers, it’s almost like you see Miles as an older brother or young uncle. So I was just thinking about that, how that might help explain something about that age and who you looked to a little bit older.

Redmond:
Yeah. And I think that everybody says, you know, the -- everybody talks about jazz in a formal way. They say “okay this is your intellectual music.” And at Miles' funeral in the (inaudible) in East St. Louis, when I stood up, the first thing I said was, I remember it -- they got it taped, I didn’t get the tape -- the first thing I said was, first thing that came out of my mouth was, “The first time I saw and heard the word 'intellectual' and decided I wanted to be one,” -- and then you hear this roar out there Suggs [Donald

Suggs] and a bunch of people just laughing, you know the whole idea to open it up like that --- “was when I was reading liner notes with some older jazzheads and I saw it there.”

Rambsy:
Wow.

Redmond:
“I was thirteen,” I said. And I (inaudible) like the word, like what Johnson, James Weldon Johnson called the ear-filling, mouth filling “in-tell-lect-cho-wal” -- word, see? Then I went on to, you know. So I think that, that's very natural 'cause you look at stuff like Denmark Vesey, not Denmark Vesey, Paul Vesey. I'm sorry, Paul Vesey. [Samuel W.] Allen. I mean all these, all these poems that are out there about Bird and fingering Bird's skull, that's one poet. I think it’s the Jewish black poet, where he's like Yorick, in Hamlet, fingering the skull? [“Yardbird’s Skull” by Owen Dodson; Dodson does not appear to be Jewish] So he's fingering Yardbird's skull. You know, I mean that's some heavy stuff, man. Shakespeare and Charles Parker. I mean it's very very, very apt and very traditional. I said, but at the same time, I've talked at the University of Michigan at a Robert Hayden conference after he died? And (inaudible) one thing I said (inaudible), and Michael Harper came up and said, “why?” I said, “Hayden dealt with blues not jazz. “ And left it like that, and he said “Why? Why?” I said “Because jazz is a hybrid,” you know I mean it's brilliant, but it's a hybrid. And Hayden, who some people derided for being too citified and, you know, academic, was authentic. That's interesting “Homage to Queen of the Blues” [i.e. “Homage to the Empress of the Blues”] He didn’t deal with, he dealt with the blues. Really ironic, 'cause you think, like, well, in fact somebody was telling me that, that the philosopher of the [Harlem] Renaissance, you know, from Howard?

Rambsy:
Oh, Alain Locke?

Redmond:
Yeah somebody was saying that, somebody told me that he was listening to classical music on his, you know (inaudible) he’s kind of very kind of tee-dee-tee. So (laughs) but he was, you know, he was the exponent, the purveyor and conveyor of the, of the mind of the Harlem, black culture right? But anyway, the point is that when I make a statement, after I've finished I get off stage the poets came up to me and asked me why. They -- and then I took, I took black, 'black ivory, black gold, black silver' -- what, that line in “Middle Passage.” And I said, I said you know, (starts snapping his fingers to the beat) "one gin [i.e. scotch], one bourbon, and one beer." Now the song. Then I said, (snapping his fingers again) "black gold, black ivory, black ... black tear [i.e. seed]." Well, I can't think of it now. I did that on the stage. So they said, “man how did you get that?” I said, that's what he was doing, that's what Hayden was doing. And they all, we went to lunch, “Man,” they were saying, “where did you get the idea?” I said “It’s basic, Man, he” -- you know jazz is intellectual music of course, Hayden was our intellectual, right, but he went to the root of the culture, for all what people say about him, you know, “Homage to Queen of the Blues” [i.e. “Homage to the Empress of the Blues”]. (laughs) So I'm just saying that, that there're all kinds of ironies running through there. He knew jazz was a hybrid music. You know, he knew that everybody who wrote on the back of these liner notes said -- well, you know, they paid homage to the people who had done a little study in Europe. You know you had to write; they genuflected to Europe first before they started assessing the black jazz musician or the white jazz musician. That is until Baraka, A. B. Spellman, and people like that. I was talking about that in a lecture out East the other day, until these young guys came, until these young, until these young black critics came.

0:55:39 [Reading and discussion of "The Eye in the Ceiling"]

(interrupted to switch to second interviewer)

Rose:
Okay, so, thank you for talking with me about your poetry, Dr. Redmond. The first poem that I was hoping we could talk about is "The Eye in the Ceiling," which you won first prize at Washington University's Festival of the Arts in 1965 for this poem? While you were a student, a graduate student there, '64 to '66.

Redmond:
Yes, Yes.

Rose:
And then actually all of the poems we're going, that I'm going to talk with you about are from your book *The Eye in the Ceiling* which won the American Book Award in 1993.

Redmond:
Right.

Rose:
So. Without further ado would you mind reading "The Eye in the Ceiling" for us.

Redmond:
Yes. I wouldn't mind at all. I have one question. Did I tell you I won the award or did you find it?

Rose:
I think I found that in different sources, you know.

Redmond:
Wow. Well that's impressive. You're really a, quite a detective. I've been noticing this for quite, for some time, that you've found a lot of things that I, I either had forgotten or in some instances didn't know about, and -- of course I remember that, I found the newspaper the Wash U newspaper, and the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* paper, with a photo of me receiving the award. Yeah, and the *Globe-Democrat* doesn't exist. Had you ever heard of that paper?

Rose:
Yes, I have heard of that paper.

Redmond:
Yeah, doesn't exist anymore. (laughs)

Rose:
I'll have to look for that photo.

Redmond:
I have it. It's in the archive. We just sent by the way 42 boxes up last week. [transferred portions of the collection to Southern Illinois University] Did you know that?

Rose:
I had heard a rumor to that effect. That's great!

Redmond:
Yeah, Dr. [Stephen] Kerber and Steve Hansen and facilities manager worked out, I met them at 8:00, well closer to 9:00 when they got there, Thursday morning. So we're -- I told the crew, I said you know it looks like, sometimes it looks like we're never going to end but we will, if I live long enough. (laughs) You know. It's -- because it is shrinking, the room is shrinking except I have all this stuff at the house and some stuff in the storage, that I have to go through, you know a lot of stuff that I don't, you know, I'm not ready to let go yet 'cause I'm working on it, and, trying to do a, I'm trying to do, I'm doing a book with the Urban, Institute for Urban Research, and I'm also doing, trying to do some biographical, autobiographical stuff, you know, but. … I don't know. And of course you're doing something.

Rose:
And I'm working on a project as well, yes.

Redmond:
Wonderful.

[beginning of poem; poem appears here as it was read in the interview, not necessarily as it appears in print]

The Eye in the Ceiling
For Gerald E. Thomas and Donald L. Finkel

You sit snug in my ceiling (looks upward)
Staring at the room
While insects worship you

But I can hide you in the night
And your body like a corpse
Loses its heat in seconds

This time however
Resurrection is simple
Far simpler (pantomimes reaching up for a cord and yanking it downward) than the painful
Mathematics of your birth

Though in your final death
I'll go through the clumsy
Ritual (pantomimes twisting a light bulb loose from its socket) of unwinding you

Knowing I could not
Have touched you
In your citadel an hour ago

[end of poem]

Rose:
So obviously it's about a light bulb in a ceiling light. It's very clever. Did you have another metaphor going on that you were suggesting there, or is it. …

Redmond:
Of course.

Rose:
Is the poem what it seems, or is there more.

Redmond:
Of course, several. (laughs)

Rose:
Okay! Well would you tell us about them.

Redmond:
Sure. You know they, the saying, the aphorism, more, warning, "don't be like a, don't be like an ostrich walking with its head up, it'll get cut off," or a chicken running around, you know that? The high and the mighty, we all die, no matter how rich, how poor, how beautiful, how black, white, green, red. You know, the pompous, the humble, the shy. We all hit bottom, we come down, you know. And that's probably the broad metaphor, the analogy.

Was thinking about experiences. I was actually thinking about some of the experiences I had at Wash U. [Washington University] It was during my tenure there that I wrote it, and some of the difficulties, you know that was one of the peaks in Civil Fights, the early/mid sixties, and writing poems and having someone say around, you know having a teacher say -- not right after I read a poem. … Some of the poems are more, more attached to my own upbringing and the culture. Although this one is very very profoundly attached to my upbringing. Because if, if the insects got in to worship the bulb, then you might get a whipping, for leaving the screen door open, or leaving open a door that didn't have a screen, or a window. Leaving up a window that didn't have a screen. 'Cause that meant everybody was miserable that night, because the mosquitoes ate us all. (laughs) They made, they meals of us, right. So "who left that door open, who left that screen up, who didn't put the screen in when they let up the window, pulled the window up" you know. (inaudible) So that was, that was, this's very linked to my personal experience, watching the insects move around street lamps and, yeah. But yeah, I had experiences at Washington U that, some were not the best, you know, I would be followed to my car by security, and once a week or depending upon who was working they would want to know what a black man was doing on the campus. I even went to the, file a complaint you know. 'Cause there were only nine black students over there at the time. So, so it was part of that, and a teacher who would say after I read a poem to be critiqued and it was on the table, maybe two poems later, you know read by other students, he would say (tilts his nose in the air and uses a high, refined voice) "there are certain subjects that are inappropriate for poetry, they don't belong in the realm of poetry" and you know I would say, he's talking about my momma, 'cause of the poem I read earlier. So that kind of experience too, you know, somebody up there, he was one of the eyes in the ceiling for me, you know.

Rose:
Oh, I see.

Redmond:
Yeah, so those are some of them. Gerald E. Thomas, Gerald Eugene Thomas, was my roommate, and my dear friend we had gone to SIU [Southern Illinois University] together, and Donald Finkel was my revered mentor. [the men to whom the poem is dedicated] He was an open-minded, very patient man. Yeah.

Rose:
I love the rhythm of this poem and, like the, your use of multi-syllable words like resurrection and mathematics and ritual, I mean all as first words of lines, three syllable words, I don't know it seems to sort of create like a rhythm inside the poem for me when I hear it. I like that a lot. And I also like how you use the, you're having a conversation with the light bulb sort of, like you say 'I' and 'you' and 'I' and 'you' back and forth, you know, like sort of makes a symmetry, I don't know. I really enjoy the poem a lot, I think it's very artistic.

Redmond:
Well, this is, it's very interesting to hear you say that and thinking of, of the work you're doing, [i.e Rose's biographical/bibliographical project about Redmond and the books in his collection] you know, an occasional poem and comment might, might give it, spice it. You know.

Rose:
Oh--to include something like that in the. …

Rose:
And your comment. 'Cause I think this is, this is very, this poem was written around the time that a number of those books, like the woman, oh, *To Mix with Time*? [one of the books in Redmond's collection, a collection of poetry by May Swenson] You know, the woman. …

Rose:
Yes, May Swenson.

Redmond:
Yeah, it was there, it was at Wash U that I bought that book and you know. So that's --

Rose:
So maybe some influences there.

Redmond:
Yeah, yeah.

Just listening to you, I did read the judges' report and one thing said, one statement said -- now I've changed it slightly here, like "This time however," I put that in instead of "Resurrections is simple," that's how that stanza began, "Resurrection is simple." The judge said, one judge said, "No -- If one word were taken out or one word were added it would destroy the poem." It was his assessment of what he felt was, perfect, you know. That really moved me too.

Rose:
It's a wonderful compliment.

Redmond:
I know it. As a student to have a, a famous, well-known person, poet say that, you know. Wow. (laughs)

1:07:59 [Reading and discussion of "Highflown: Love" (reading begins at 1:10:42); additional comment about "The Eye in the Ceiling" (at 1:09:05)]

Rose:
Well shall we move on to "Highflown: Love"?

Redmond:
Sure.

Rose:
On page 158.

Redmond:
158? Fifty-eight or sixty-eight?

Rose:
Fifty-eight.

Redmond:
Fifty-eight, okay.

Rose:
So I think I mentioned to you that I saw a video on the computer of you discussing this poem. And I looked back before I came here and it was actually --

Redmond:
Was it Miami?

Rose:
It was! At Miami Dade College in 2007.

Redmond:
Yeah.

Rose:
Yeah, and you said something like, and I'm going to paraphrase here, that you said the poem was sort of about the difference between how people in disadvantaged or disenfranchised communities for one reason or another, maybe for gender, or, or race, or religion, how people inside those communities are seen by the people outside who maybe aren't so empathetic to them.

Redmond:
Sure, sure.

Rose:
And then also in the poem then I guess it switches the perspective and it's also about how the people inside the communities see themselves.

Redmond:
Yes, yes.

Rose:
So.

Redmond:
Let me just say as we're leaving "The Eye in the Ceiling"? That one of my students years later after this poem was written and won the award, one of my students in the Experiment in Higher Education in East St. Louis, SIU East St. Louis, brought me a photo one day of a, of a, a light in the ceiling, but it was, it had, it was shaded, it had a globe on it. And he happened to be a student who smoked reefer a lot, I could tell, you know, he was grown, he had been in the service like I had so he was a grown person, and younger than me but adult. He'd been in Vietnam. And he was a brilliant guy, dead now, but he brought me this photo and I asked him what, you know what was it, and he said "well the eye in the ceiling," 'cause I didn't connect it. And I wasn't sure he even knew about it, maybe he'd heard me read it or something. I thought that was quite a, quite a honor, you know, that he shot this photo, I guess he'd been lying on the floor, you know, but it was a globe and I wondered why it was a globe and not a bare bulb, you know. I still have the picture. (laughs)

[beginning of poem; poem appears here as it was read in the interview, not necessarily as it appears in print]

Highflown: Love, from *The Eye in the Ceiling*

In the highflown language
Of moon travelers
Social scientists sort our hurts
Add their smog-crippled vision
And rearrange our private pains
Along the Wall Street of current demands
And my people become the
Cocaine that makes America high
Become dreams
America sucks through maniacal straws of sleep
Discounting our lore
The scientists say we can*not* love
Say our needs are numbed

But sometimes
When you construct knots in my throat
And your lips recreate my heartclock
I am hypnotized by the aggregate passion
Of my past, by the sum of my historical ecstasy
A power we know

Cannot be stilled by airborne theories of scholars
Nestled in Freudian citadels
A power that cannot be seen
Heard
Or flattened to fit the pages of a book

[end of poem]

Redmond:
(laughs) Wow, yeah, I. That takes me, takes me places when I read that, you know, the, the hurt, the joy, you know, the, the -- what I put into thinking about the poem before I wrote it, you know? And as I was writing it? Wow, yeah, it really, yeah. You know, what I was reading, what I was teaching, you know what my colleagues who were closer to this, the social scientists, were teaching and how they were trying to work with it in the classroom, some colleagues, and now other colleagues were aiding and abetting this, this negative feeling.

Yeah, I remember, I remember a colleague saying to me, she had a daughter who got pregnant once and then got pregnant again, and she was telling me about it. I had known the daughter when the daughter was a girl. And this woman had worked hard, European American, she had worked very hard to get to where she was. And I had taught her, she had had the ethnic courses, you know, Black Lit, and you know, the degrees in English. She was now a colleague, not at my school but at a community college, but a colleague. And so she and her daughter weren't speaking. And I went to visit her one day and she said that she's had another child. And I told her well I'm sorry -- I'm glad you have another granddaughter but I'm sorry, you know, she didn't. ... And she said "you know that that's something you normally associate with black" and then she caught herself. (slaps his open hand to his mouth) This is a student who studied with me, studied this kind of problem, (points to the poem he just read) but it's just that, you know she'd come out of that, and she just threw up, (brings his hand to his mouth again) you know she said I need some mouthwash, I need some-- you know. Yeah, but it was. And I just said, "Well you need to take another look at the statistics, and you know, you'll see, you'll see, just read the statistics." Anyway, it was just. … And you know we struggle, as I always said to my class and I say now, you just have to practice mental hygiene every day. Well everyone does, you got to practice mental hygiene, cultural hygiene, sexual attitude hygiene, artistic hygiene, you know we just we have to get up and practice it every day, just work on ourselves, you know just -- we'll slip, all of us, we all, you know.

So that -- and this poem provoked questions. I don't think, I don't know if it's there, [on the Miami Dade College video] it might have been during the Q&A, it might have been later.

Rose:
It's not.

Redmond:
There were a lot of questions. 'Cause the audience -- do you see the audience at all? (Rose shakes her head no.) See the audience -- I was in Miami Florida so the audience was Haitian, Cuban, other West-, I mean East-hemispheric Latinos or Hispanics, Black Americans, European and Anglo Americans, but it was heavy with Hispanics. And boy those students and those professors they really went into this (taps the poem). Especially after I made the statement and then read the poem. Yeah, “Highflown: Love.” Sorta like the same with “Eye in the Ceiling,” that's interesting 'cause it seems like this is a theme running through my work, the eye in the ceiling where there, that person up there looking down, you

know the the saying “Be kind to the people on your way up 'cause you might meet them on the way down.” (laughs) That is the same, yeah.

Rose:
Right. That “moon-travelers,” “smog-crippled vision,” yeah definitely a little out of touch in the stratosphere there.

I was wondering that at the beginning of the second half, the part where it says “when you construct knots in my throat/and your lips recreate my heartclock.” Are you talking about romantic love there to contrast with this statement right before that, “the scientists say we cannot love”?

Redmond:
Yeah. That and, romantic love and statements that make that constrict, you know because it's, it's a bigger picture. It's not just that. Miles Davis used to talk about this and a number of black icons used to say “Why aren't there more real romantic scenes in among blacks in movies? Why don't black people make love.” You either get somebody fornicating, you know, in a negative portrayal, or they don't get to that part. So there's more to it than simply loving, but loving, being intimate, you know, as lovers, there's the whole intimacy of conversation, of pride, respect, you know? And that's what I was trying to get to also

Just hearing -- I was talking to Howard earlier about this, the pedagogy of, that we used or that undergirded the development of the new curriculum, and that's something I'm most proud of. It's cause this, stuff like this, this just collapses you know hundreds of books and articles that I read to go in and make an intelligent statement or give an intelligent lecture or lead an intelligent discussion. Where do you start to talk about people. How do you talk -- I mean, when the students said “Black Studies” then the mouths of a lot of us did this. (leans forward and drops his lower jaw, raises his eyebrows, and widens his eyes) You know. “What do I teach? I've been mastering White Studies or White Anglo, Euro-Anglo Studies. The, so what -- though some people might not think of it that way -- so then you got to overnight -- I talk about how I, on occasion I would have come into a classroom bloodshot because I just finished the novel we were going to discuss. When was I going to read the black canon, when was I going to read all of Baldwin, all of Zora Neale Hurston, you know, all of Ralph Ellison. (coughs) Excuse me, all of John Oliver Killems. All of Chester Himes, even Toni Morrison, what she had done at the time (inaudible). Paule Marshall the West Indian woman writer. [Marshall is American with West Indian parents] When was I going to find the time to read all of that. So it was right up on us you know. (laughs)

So speaking intelligently about the world, trying to put something together in an art form so that, you know the two halves here, you know (points to the poem) can make sense to people, anybody who reads it, without even mentioning a color here. And I think that's one of the things that got the students in Miami that day that it has no -- "my people," (shrugs) you get, that same kind of attitude is held about quote ‘rednecks.’ Country people. You know, ‘they don't really have it like we have it,’ you know some people. … In fact I remember doing some studies of the skewing of culture in this, this Middle Atlantic, the Columbia School of Broadcasting, you know about that? Yeah, for decades that, that occurred before TV and radio would have a major respectable announcer or an anchor with a Southern accent. It was that ‘no language’ or ‘meta language’ that comes somewhere between U.S. and England in the ocean that nobody actually talks like that, the Columbia School of Broadcasting, right. So that filters down to behavior, you know, what you eat, and you know, so on and so forth people look down, so. We're constantly trying to, trying to work that. (laughs)

Rose:
I just like -- I loved this poem the first time I read it, it's probably one of my favorites even though I didn't, I didn't understand everything you were you were trying to say, there was just something so powerful about that second half. I, I just really enjoyed that, I like the part, you know the ending "a power that cannot be seen, heard, or flattened to fit the pages of a book."

Redmond:
And then -- (taps the book)

Rose:
Sort of, you know transcendent kind of thing.

Redmond:
And so here, even here, (laughs and lifts up the book opened to the poem) you can't do it, fit the page of a book.

Rose:
Well and it makes me think about the work that I'm working on about your library and, and you know your biography, and I take that as sort of a warning to myself you know, that there's only so much I can do.

Redmond:
(laughs) Yeah. Working in writers workshops I always say, and then when I'm just introducing -- in fact in each of the assemblies that I'll be conducting on Wednesday, the teacher, the master teacher that's arranging it, she said "I'd like for them to know something about you as a writer, when did you start writing, and so on, in between as you read, and what it takes to be a writer," you know. 'Cause they want to focus on writing, which I'm very happy 'cause most of the time it's on culture and the word as entertainment and I'm very happy that they literally want to focus on, on me as a writer, they really want me, from the lowest grade up to the top they want to make sure that I, that the students understand what a writer does, what it means to be a writer. I told them wow that's – 'cause you rarely get a public school teacher, this is like the first through eighth grade. Oh now, wait, I'm sorry, no it's four through eight I think, five through eight. You rarely get people saying, saying that I mean she pinpointed that, that that's what she wanted, she would like for me to be sure to include. So and I say to audiences that that the job of the writer is to take the casket, the heart attack, the, the gunshot, the kiss, the wedding, the auto race and put it here (taps the book) so that you really see, that you see the Indy 500 even though you know it's not here. And that is master work you know, you never stop working to get to, get to that point. And I have a funnel; I draw a funnel that has the blunderbuss mouth on each end. Okay you take the farmer and his life and his wife and children and their, them sending the kids off to college, you enter this one open end of the funnel with all of that -- that's the writer now, and the writer travels through that narrow neck and then at the other end -- it's just a two-headed funnel, a two-mouthed funnel. At the other end it has to be what you actually saw, but it's in the book. So then it explodes on the page, so that farmer who enters this -- you know physically enters this -- comes out on the page. Or whatever the experience. (laughs)

Rose:
Another thing I really liked about this poem is just again the way it's crafted with the sounds, the way you play with the sounds of the words, like just on almost any line there's the consonance and the assonance I think it is? You know where you're echoing the sounds of the consonants and vowels.

Redmond:
Yes, yes.

Rose:
Like I guess especially the "historical ecstasy" that sort of whispery sound that is repeated “nestled,” “citadels”, you know it's just, really ties -- it's tight in a way, you know. It's a really -- it's again like “The Eye in the Ceiling” you can't really take any words away from it it's all, it's all constructed as this, you know, work of art.

1:28:20 [Reading and discussion of “Sonnet Serenade/Soulo Beauty”; Gwendolyn Brooks]

(recording interrupted)

Well it's a number of writers said, Hemingway, a whole bunch of writers said “Easy reading’s damn hard writing.”

Rose:
I like that quote. Well shall we move on to “Sonnet Serenade/Soulo Beauty”? On page 94.

[beginning of poem; poem appears here as it was read in the interview, not necessarily as it appears in print]

Sonnet Serenade/Soulo Beauty

Redmond:
That's one of my inventions ‘soulo’? s-o-u-- yeah.

For Gwendolyn Brooks

Behold! the forms and rhythms of my face
Choral trees and soulos limbly bowing
Greenhiss grasslow and moanful in sparkspace
Caught crying, caroling and know-howing
Sometimes in gusty soulsoliloquys
Within vastvalleys and mountainous songs
Or much iterated with ah’s and me’s
Short-circuited or shattered against gongs

A lord-length voice invades these jungle sparks
Neoning drumscripting a passion-rain
Which seeds tear-tunes and in the drumpath marks
A cool mellow maid of song and a main
Squeeze close-held in sound-arms, in hip song-rap
Whose love, buttoned in gold, is your lyre-lap.

[end of poem]

Redmond:
Yeah I saw a couple of typos in this one. Oooo, “cyring,” [instead of “crying”] what we got, and “these jungles sparks,” should be “jungle.” Anyway, Haki -- wow, hmmm. Haki, the Third World Press, is going to, well that's the plan, bring out a fifty-year retrospective of my poetry? 1962 to 2012, for my 75th birthday in December. We're supposed to get that, gotta have it in to them, the manuscript, by early June, early July at the latest he said.

Rose:
That's fantastic.

Redmond:
Yeah, so. We'll catch some of these things. “Cyring” instead of “crying.” Anyway. Hmm.

Rose:
So this one was for Gwendolyn Brooks. And I wondered if you chose the sonnet form and sort of the, the style of the, of the hyphenated words and things to, sort of as a tribute to some of the devices she uses sometimes in her poems, not always.

Redmond:
Not always, yes.

Rose:
But she uses the sonnet form sometimes.

Redmond:
She does, yes.

Rose:
So that was intentional.

Redmond:
Yes, yes.

Rose:
As a tribute?

Redmond:
Yes, and her, her work is extremely compressed, we say ‘economic’ in our classes and workshops. Economy, she practices economy. And the use of words and, I wanted to capture that, as well as her, well philosophically. How she sees her thrust in the world. You know, concise, inventive within that conciseness, musical within that inventive conciseness. (laughs) And philosophical within that inventive, concise, musicality.

Rose:
Very complex.

Redmond:
Cultural within that inventive, concise, philosophical musicality. (laughs)

Rose:
I was reading --

Redmond:
Wow, I didn't even know that I could remember that stream. My memory is not like, you know it's nowhere near what it was. But I do practice like what I just did; I practice because I notice that. I told Howard [Rambsy, during the first half of the interview] that I was going to give him some names of people that I couldn't come up with, you know. One is Fela Sowande, the philosopher, African philosopher, that I quoted a couple of times. I owe so much to him. So it's coming to me now. I'll have to tell him. Yeah.

Rose:
Well I read a little bit about what you wrote about Gwendolyn Brooks in *Drumvoices: the Mission of Afro-American Poetry: Critical History*, and you said that "sculpture, precision, explicitness, and terseness are key words to remember when approaching" Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry, so I think that is also -- kind of describes this poem, the style of this poem. You do say that -- again in your discussion of her in *Drumvoices* -- that she's not an "easy read" poet.

Redmond:
Yeah, yeah. And this may not be the easiest read although I think it's accessible.

Rose:
I think it's a little challenging to the amateur like myself but it's enjoyable.

Redmond:
(laughs) It's fascinating too, the sonnet, the nature of the sonnet. You know there's various kinds of sonnets and the one I was modeling this piece after is a problem-solving sonnet.

Rose:
Can you explain that?

Redmond:
Well you introduce a problem or an issue in the first eight lines, and then in the second, they call it a sextet. I mean octet, excuse me. And then in the sextet, the second section, six lines, you answer it or reaffirm it. So you got all this stuff going on caught "crying, caroling, and know-howing." And then a "lord-length voice invades these jungle sparks." Yeah. You end up, and she's the "mellow maid." "A cool, mellow maid of song," in other words she comes into the forest, my forest -- and I'm indebted to another poet for some of the thinking. E. E. Cummings? 'Cause he has a line, great love poetry. "lady, through whose profound and fragile lips/the sweet, small, clumsy feet of April came/into the ragged meadow of my soul." [from "If I have made, my lady, intricate"] I used to quote that when I was a freshman here. Oh my, well in East St. Louis. [i.e. the East St. Louis campus of what would later become Southern Illinois University Edwardsville] This building didn't exist initially. But such a, so the "ragged meadow," (points to the poem he just read) you see? Tip-toeing into, yeah. The lips, the door, yeah. (gestures by repeatedly extending his hand outward from his chest and opening his fingers at the end of the gesture) That come out to, the words that come out, her mouth, you know. Yeah, whatever else comes out of her mouth. (laughs)

Rose:
I like how the third to last line “main/squeeze” wraps the line so that the rhythm is kind of changed a little bit. Every other line ends, you know pauses at the end of the line, and then right before the end you do that wrap that shakes it up a little bit, you know, and makes, makes you sit up to attention or something. I think that was really good.

Redmond:
And it's interesting you use the word “wrap” 'cause sometimes I use the word “wrap” in my poems and I have “w-slash-r-a-p” like in movie lingo: “it's a wrap, we're finished.” And I wanted that because I wanted the, I wanted the w/rap, see this is rap, I'm getting “a main squeeze,” I mean, that's not in formal poetry!

Rose:
Right.

Redmond:
So I wanted to bring it to earth.

Rose:
And then you just explicitly say “hip song-rap,” to bring the point home. Yeah there's a lot going on.

Redmond:
The “lyre-lap,” and. … Wow. You have notes on some of these.

Rose:
Well I think with my pen, you know.

Redmond:
Yeah there're certain things that I like, like “soulsoliloquys,” you know, that word.

Rose:
Yeah I like that too. It's sort of, it's musical.

Redmond:
Yeah I wanted. … And I combine a few words here. “Vastvalleys” and “greenhiss” and “grasslow.” I wanted to, you know, I wanted that, yeah. “Neoning” and “drumscripting.” I wanted to get those. (laughs)

1:39:46 [Reading and discussion of “River of Bones and Flesh and Blood”]

Rose:
Well shall we go ahead and move to “River of Bones and Flesh and Blood”?

Redmond:
Yeah.

Rose:
Page 37.

Redmond:
That's right, yeah. That's-- okay. Is this the one that I changed? Oh yeah, yeah.

Rose:
This is one that you did on your *Blood Links and Sacred Places* too, the sound recording.

Redmond:
Yeah, this is it's been changed some here a little bit I add, where Louis Armstrong is I add Miles Davis and Clark Terry I think, yeah.

[beginning of poem; poem appears here as it was read in the interview, not necessarily as it appears in print]

River of Bones and Flesh and Blood
(Mississippi)
For Doris Cason

River of time
Vibrant vein
Bent, crooked
Older than the red men
Who named you
Ancient as the winds
That break on your
Serene and shining face
One time western boundary of America
From whose center
Your broad shoulders (motions with his arms to each side to mimic water lapping on a shore) now reach
To touch sisters
On the flanks

River of truth. Mornings
You leap, yawn 2000 miles (stretches as if waking and yawning)
And shed a giant joyous tear
Over sprouting, straggling
Hives of humanity
Nights you weep
As the moon, tiptoeing
Across your silent silky
Face, hears you praying
Over the broken backs
Of black slaves who rode
Crouched and huddled
At your heart in the bellies
Of steamships

River of memory-y-y
Laboratory for Civil War

Boat builders
Who left huge eyes of steel
Staring from your sullen depths
Reluctant partner to crimes
Of Ku Klux Klansmen
River moved to waves
Of ecstasy-y-y-y
By the venerable trumpet
Of Louis Armstrong
Miles Davis
And Clark Terry

River of bones
River of bones and flesh (beats six drumbeats on his thigh)
Bones and flesh and blood
The nation's largest
Intestine
And longest conveyor belt

River Mississippi
River of little rivers
River of r-i-i-i-ses
Sometimes subdued
By a roof of ice, descending finally
On your (begins moving his forearms, while holding the book, in a motion to mimic a flowing and twisting river) southward course
To spit
Into the Gulf
And join the wrath (moves his upper body along with his arms in the twisting motion)
Of other bodies

[end of poem]

Redmond:
(laughs)

Rose:
Nicely done.

Redmond:
I want to say that Katherine Dunham, under her supervision the poem was choreographed. That's why you see me moving, all the movements. A French dancer named Christiane de Rougement choreographed it and -- using some of her own knowledge and Dunham's -- and it was performed for actually a couple of years, it was part of Dunham's traveling, you know, company offerings.

Rose:
That's great.

Redmond:
Yeah. (smiles and nods) Miss Dunham really loved it.

Rose:
Well the Mississippi is such a huge, dominating part of the landscape here locally, you know. East St. Louis, Edwardsville, Alton, you know, that's, you know it's just begging for poetry to be written about it. I'll tell you what I was thinking when I read it, I mean you know it's one person's. … I thought the first, in the first one the river is sort of like a body part, it's sort of organic, it's part of the landscape, and then in the second stanza it's becoming more active, it's leaping and weeping and praying, it's sort of personified. And then in the third stanza it's almost passive, it's a 'laboratory,' a 'reluctant partner.' And then, and then of course, the next part with the "River of bones/River of bones and flesh/Bones and flesh and blood" -- sort of is creating a climax of feeling, and then, and then it, it finishes with the river as a metaphor: an 'intestine,' a 'conveyor belt,' something that's dominating but also subdued. I don't really have a clear thought about it but this is the impressions I had when I was reading it.

Redmond:
That's basically what I was doing, sort of a story of the river from both the river's point of view and a social point of view, historical point of view. From the naming of it, (inaudible) by native people. The poem was commissioned by this woman who was a teacher, she was a teacher in the district. Later become, became director of art for the district

Rose:
Doris Cason?

Redmond:
She's still alive, and she's a very dear friend, and our families are quite close. And she said, "Why don't you write a poem about the Mississippi? I've read a lot of poems," she said, "but write one that humanizes it, gives it a more humanistic quality maybe, and locks it to the culture, places it culturally contextualizes it." So I went to work. This was like, I think like fifteen drafts, fourteen, fifteen drafts of it. Yeah. (laughs)

Rose:
So have you performed that poem several times over the years?

Redmond:
Oh hundreds, hundreds of times. Possibly thousands.

Rose:
Wow.

Redmond:
Yeah. I read a letter that a man wrote, a scholar wrote endorsing my bid for a, some kind of, you know, grant and he said, he had some nice things to say about this poem. He mentioned some other poets of note and said it reminded him of their work, so I was very pleased with that.

Rose:
I liked in the second stanza the scene moves, it's, the scene moves which gives you the feeling of the river moving, where it starts "Nights you weep /As the moon, tiptoeing/Across your silent silky/Face,

hears you praying/Over the broken backs/Of black slaves who rode/Crouched and huddled" -- so you know you have this scene of the moon and then all of a sudden you have the scene of the slaves, you know what I'm saying? The scene is continuous but all of sudden you're in this different place. You know, which is sort of like a river does, moves people from one place to another. It reminded me actually of -- and I'm not sure which book it was, a Toni Morrison book that did the same thing, in her novel, she was writing about a scene and then it turned into another scene.

Redmond:
I know it, *Beloved* is like that. That's one that a lot of people had trouble with. I was telling my sister that, I said get past page 35 or 40 and it'll, you'll be able. … 'Cause she said "I don't know what's going on in this book." But yeah, Toni does that. That's something to do with magical realism and something to do with a dramatic, a perception of writing as a dramatic event or as drama, you know? It comes together but it's problematic sometimes. (laughs)

Rose:
I think it works in your poem.

Redmond:
What?

Rose:
I think it works in your poem.

Redmond:
Yeah. I hope so! Yeah.

1:49:39 [End]