Eugene B. Redmond and Quincy Troupe on Henry Dumas, Interviewed by Treasure Shields Redmond

Treasure Shields Redmond: What's good, Troupe family? How you doing?

Quincy Troupe: How you been?

Treasure Shields Redmond: I have been quite well, indeed, here in "the mighty, mighty Midwest" as my dad says, "the heart of the heart of the country."

Quincy Troupe: Okay! Okay!

Treasure Shields Redmond: What about you?

Quincy Troupe: I've been great. Everything's really well. They've been for a long time trying to get together this movie on Miles Davis and on my book, *Miles and Me*. I wrote the screenplay for it and now they're going to do it. It was supposed to start earlier, but then because of the COVID thing, you know, and you know, actors and all those people got to get together and all that. Now it's going to be done sometime later on this year, and I'm happy about that.

Treasure Shields Redmond: Well, that is fantastic! I'm going to swing you all around to the beginning of the conversation about Dumas.

Quincy Troupe: Let me make a suggestion. I think you should let your father lead this because I didn't know Dumas. I never met him. I didn't know him personally, that's what I'm saying. But I always loved his work. When Eugene introduced me to his work, I just loved his work and I knew Toni Morrison, because she was my editor in New York. I turned it over to her, and told her she should get in touch with Eugene.

Treasure Shields Redmond: Mm-Hmm . . . Well, I think it's fine that you didn't know him. Not many people did. It seems like he was known by a lot of people, but not known by a lot of people.

Quincy Troupe: Right.

Treasure Shields Redmond: So we'll be talking about his work and other things. Do you remember the events that occurred where you introduced her (*Toni Morrison*) to Dumas's work?

Quincy Troupe: Toni and I lived in New York and she was my editor on *Giant Talk*. I brought Dumas's work in to publish in *Giant Talk*, and in the little journals I was doing. I was always doing journals, as your father knows, like *Confrontation*. I studied journalism at Los Angeles City College and at UCLA. That was a good thing for me since I was also interested in bringing forth African American men and women writers and publishing them in different things I was doing.

When I came across Dumas's work through Eugene, I brought that in to Toni and then I hooked them up. I introduced his work to Toni Morrison, who flipped out about it, freaked out, you know? She just loved it!

Treasure Shields Redmond: Is it true that you were babysitting her sons and she came to your house and you mentioned Dumas's work was on your bookshelf?

Quincy Troupe: Yeah. Well, what happened was I was living on Western Avenue and she sublet my apartment from me. And I used to always remind her that, you know, I used to be your landlord, you know. Don't get on the high horse with me. (*Laughing*). Cause you know, I had your son there. He was messing up my stuff, going through all my stuff, you know? (*Laughing*). Toni and I were real close.She'd just laugh. That's how that happened.

Treasure Shields Redmond: Fantastic. And Dad, do you remember your first contact with Morrison regarding Dumas's work? Was it a phone call or was it mail correspondence?

Eugene B. Redmond: Actually I saw her at various functions around New York when I would go there and visit Quincy. We talked on the phone initially. I think that Quincy gave her my number or me her number. But there were several places where writers hung out.

It was Toni Morrison. It was Toni Cade (*Bambara*). It was just a whole bunch of people, women and men. And then the clubs not far from Quincy's apartment. Different places where there was jazz and there were readings. Mikkels and Amir Baraka, earlier known as Leroy Jones, his sister, owned a bookstore.

Is that right, Quincy? Did Baraka's sister own a bookstore?

Quincy Troupe: Yeah. I think it was a bookstore or something like that. One of those Black shops.

Eugene B. Redmond: Yeah and so I saw her around, around the time that Quincy introduced her to Dumas. We knew about *The Bluest Eye* and that she was at Random House. A lot of the

women writers were teaching at Douglas College over at Rutgers and she hung out with them and so it was quite a mix!

You could just walk down the street and you might see James Baldwin. You might see Toni Morrison, you might see Toni (Cade) Bambara, and, in fact, Tony Cade and I went out a few times, you know, and she took me to some of the clubs. So we were in the mix, but didn't at first have that common interest in Henry.

Southern Illinois University published the book first, in 1970. And those two copies of his prose and poetry were at Quincy's house. And what Quincy told me was that she was talking about what's new and what are you hearing, you know, about what's going on.

And he took the books out and gave them to her. And she sat there and just read them until it got dark. I don't know if you remember telling me that story, Quincy. And then she requested does he have more work, or do you know the guy (*who published Dumas*)? And he (*Quincy*) said, of course, yeah, he's my friend, you know, I can put you in touch with him.

I wasn't as astute as she was in terms of the value of the work that was still in type, you know, in manuscript. She republished the two pieces that came out of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale Press and then she asked me, "Is there more?" I said, yeah, there's some more here, but, you know, some of it's unworked. And she said, "Send it to me." And so I sent it to her. And that happened about three times. Wow. Three or four times. She said, "This is brilliant."

And I said, "It is? Really?" You know, I was growing in the new consciousness and in the kind of, new pace that had been set by Henry Dumas and other people. We were getting into the newer writers. We knew about Baldwin and Ellison and you know, historically, "The Back Writer," but we're reading all these new Black writers, so it took me a minute to aclimatize.

I did the *Black American Literature Forum* (*special issue on Henry Dumas*), and Quincy had a piece in there, and we had a big reading at one of the U.N. houses. Quincy read there, and Toni read, and Amiri Baraka read, and Jayne Cortez read, and Leon Thomas performed. Remember that Quincy? Everybody who was anybody came to the reading. Wow. While all that was going on, you know, everybody's teaching, everybody's writing, everybody's making babies, getting married, whatever.

And at the same time, we're promoting Dumas. We're putting Dumas out there on the face of the earth, you know. That was a major job. If you look at *Black American Literature Forum*, you see 50 writers cutting their teeth on Henry Dumas.

Black American Literature Forum is now *The African American Review*. During that time, Morrison and I are still, with the support of Henry Dumas and Melvin Van Peebles and so on, we're still putting out Henry Dumas's work.

We get to *Jonoah and the Green Stone*, and the novel wasn't finished, and I told Morrison it wasn't finished. She wrote me; she said, "This is genius work. We gotta publish it." I said, yeah, but there's no ending. She said, "Well, you end it." And I literally got sick, you know, working on that because I just didn't know what would happen to me trying to finish a dead man's work.

I put a conclusion on it.

So, that's how I started. We did readings everywhere and there would be times when we'd be reading our own work and we'd read some from Henry's too. Quincy was very, very helpful in getting the word out there. Quincy edited journals, as he said, lit mags, and he would include Henry in those publications. All the way up until the last one, or the latest one, which he published out of NYU. What was the name of that Quincy?

Quincy Troupe: *Black Renaissance Noir*.
But before that, I was doing this journal called *Confrontation* coming out of Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, where I was teaching. And she (*Morrison*) said, Why don't you do an anthology of all these people. So I got this contract to do this book, *Giant Talk* from Random House, bringing all these writers in from Latin America, Africa, the United States, Native American, Indians, Eskimo, Asians, Haitians, you know, all of that. All these Africans and everybody was like, what is this?

It's a big book. It's about 600, 700 pages. And Toni Morrison was the editor of that, you know. It made a lot of impact on not only American, but African and everybody else, you know, and Eugene was in that book and, and Derek Walcott, and I just brought all these people into this anthology.[1]

We had a big book party in New York. All those writers were there. Nobel laureates and everything. And that was really something.

Treasure Shields Redmond: So you make me want to ask you all about notions of the Global South. I'm sure you've heard this term that came into vogue a couple of decades ago now in order to talk about the diaspora throughout the world. And not just the African diaspora, but also like those writers that you had in *Giant Talk*, people in Central and South America who might consider themselves more indigenous than African.

[1] Henry Dumas was also published in *Giant Talk*.(1975)

Those themes in Dumas's work, where do you see the diaspora and the global South figuring in Dumas's work.

Eugene Redmond: All the elements that you find in the various works of Southern writers, whether they're of whatever ethnic strain, but in particular Black writers are found in Dumas, but he was able to imply them without, for instance, actually using.the language of Vodou. It was just matter-of-fact. It was a natural product or by-product or ingredient. And if he made sounds you knew what he was doing, Certain constructions let you know what he was doing. The first time I went to Sweet Home, Arkansas, Dumas's hometown, I saw a man walking down the street with a partial bushel of pecans on his head. And the way they draped his head, it appeared, it looked like a turban. And I said to myself, okay, that's Henry Dumas.

This man is eating pecans, and walking with this sack on his head. Not on his shoulder, on his head. And I saw a turban. Because it, it was a partially empty sack. So it just sort of sank all. around his head, the four corners just sank and slung, slung over his head. So that's Dumas's language.

If he's eating yams, you know he's eating yams and you know that there's an entire environment. Dumas moved a step farther in the way that he embraced voodoo, and juju, and sanctified church mesmerization. He didn't have to state it as much as he was it. He became it. And I think that happens, you know, even with The Black Arts Movement work, where you see it in The Dark Collective and Cave Canem, where the blackness doesn't shout. And that's in every movement. Dumas did that with the Global South. But I think that Dumas had picked up something else when he was in the Arabian Peninsula and the Air Force I think he had picked it up in the north. At 10 years old Dumas migrated to Harlem. He picked up Juju in Harlem. He picked up Vodou in Harlem. I really could see the difference between what he did and what Martin Walker did, especially, you know, in the poems, with the Southern mode.

But part of it, too, was a kind of skying out. We used to say as young boys, "skied out." He saw it in Harlem. He saw, he saw Arkansas in Harlem, you know, in a way that, a writer who might be coming exclusively out of the South might not have had the opportunity, might not even have been there.

And, you know, what will the next generation and the generation after the next do with Juju and Vodou? How will they use hip hop? And how will they use Henry?

I also wanted to say about Henry, about the era. There were a lot of changes. And the war was at the back of Henry. You can see that in the stories, you can see that in you know, "Strike and Fade," "we like the vc" you know? it's gonna be interesting to see what the newest of this

generation will do with black Afro biblical work and how it will be shown, how it will be demonstrated.

Treasure Shields Redmond: it's fascinating that you bring up those, those mystical elements, African spiritualities, or even the occult elements, because I was re-listening to his conversation with Sun Ra. He asked Sun Ra about his name choice. And Sun Ra said, that's who I am on another plane. Here in the U.S., I'm not anything. On another plane, I'm Sun Ra. And so it made me think about Henry Dumas's move and several pieces of his writing– in "Ark of Bones" – we have someone ascending, [even] in *Jonoah and the Green Stone* we have kind of a mystical dirigible in a way. And in "Will the Circle be Unbroken" we have an "Afro horn" that makes things disappear and makes people instantly expire, instantly die. That idea that there's something that you must be initiated into that will remove, separate the wheat from the tare, remove people. What do you think about that choice he kept making in his writing?

Eugene Redmond: You know, I want to just bring in something here that will help a little bit. The publisher in England (*Heinneman*) [that] published all those great African writers contacted me. I sent them *Jonoah and the Green Stone*. And they want to create a Renaissance using Henry and some other Black writers. And you find all of that magic in the work of those African writers, you know? I thought that was a genius stroke of the editor who called me from Britain, saying, we want to use Henry Dumas to spearhead a renaissance in literature.That whole connection between African writers who Dumas had not read thoroughly, but came from a similar place. *Palm Wine Drinkers*, and so on. I've been just meditating on that for quite some time now. and certainly Giant Talk had something to do with it because *Giant Talk* published poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction from all over the world, all over the third world, "the third whirl."

Quincy Troupe: Well, I brought this to show you, see, it is *Giant Talk*. [*Quincy holds up the book on camera*] Even a younger me on the back without dreads. It's got Achebe, Miguel Asturias, James Baldwin, Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Cezaire, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Ellison, Marquez, Neruda, Paz, Ishmael Reed, Senghor, Wong, and a whole bunch. All these writers had the same philosophy. What I started to find out and realize is that African Americans aren't the only people like this. They like this all over the world.

When I first met Achebe, I loved his novels, you know what I mean? Achebe just was unbelievable, you know, and helpful to me as a writer, being able to stay with him in Africa. I got over there and I was thinking that all Africans, all Nigerians,[were like Achebe] and then Wole Soyinka saying, "we Yorubas got another philosophy."

He was saying, Achebe, his stuff is based in Christianity. Ours is based in Yoruba. It was an amazing thing for me to go to Africa and stay there and move in and out of all of these different people.

And Senghor told me one day when I met him, well, you know, I come from the French part. This is French Africa. That just blows up that whole thing that Africa is one thing.

Treasure Shields Redmond: As the Africans say, "Africa is not a country." I love the way you all are situating Dumas within the context of diasporan writings and within the context of a global African mind. I think it's also fascinating that he took the time to put little black boys in so much of his writing. What do you think was his thinking as he put the action and the choices in the hands of little black boys?

Eugene Redmond: We've talked a lot and learned a lot from Henry Dumas about black maleness. He gave us a lot of models, and he gave us boys, and then he gave us grown up boys, and very, very cleverly done, the grown up boys. And what boys see and what boys do. Leading and teaching. Scouts in a historical Native American, Native African way. I mean, those are some astounding boys that you find in his stories. They are. They're astounding boys. The leaders, the boys who would be men, boys who would be adults, boys who would be gods.

And the conversation between the two boys in "Ark of Bones," one is left to tell us why one took off. "You is my witness." He doesn't say it like that. But you is my witness. And it made me think about boys who came to me and they were going either to prison, to the military, to another city to find work. I took off with 16 other boys to pick fruit in Michigan for four consecutive summers. We were early/ mid teens. The responsibility that I had to put money aside to help buy my sister some back- to-school clothes and help my grandmother and I thought about all of that when I first read Dumas and those little boys.

You know, really remarkable little boys in those stories. They're prophets. They're seers. They're on their way somewhere. And, like Dumas, we don't last long. I'm 86, and I have to pinch myself every day. What happened? Ever since I read Dumas, I thought about the boys. What an enormous role to put into boys like that. Margaret Walker wrote that, "The first time I read "Ark of Bones," the hair stood up on the back of my head."

Treasure Shields Redmond: Yes. And you know, when you were talking about his use of boys in his work, it made me think about it as a response to Mark Twain's infantilizing of Jim, Dumas's humanizing of black boyhood. But it also made me understand a little bit of what Morrison was so attracted to because as I was going through my mental rolodex, [Dumas] does not position this in a world of "I'm fighting against white people. I'm responding to white people. I'm trying to prove my manhood to white men." He just accepts that black boyhood is beautiful

and capable and it's the center and that's what's telling the story. And you know, that was Morrison's big mission: Yeah, I'm writing about black people. I'm not writing for white people. So I could see why that also would attract Morrison to Dumas.

Eugene Redmond: Johnny Williams in his article we published in *Black American Literature Forum* said Dumas could teach Mark Twain a thing or two.

Treasure Redmond: As we bring this conversation to a close, I wanted to ask each of you, as we project into the future, the future of Black arts, the future of the black creative response to the world. How do you see Dumas as giving us any tools or strategies, anything in his work, anything in his life to show burgeoning and emerging and younger artists how to move through the world and think about their work?

Well, I got this poem that I want to read that I think is important just for this conversation. [*Quincy Troupe Reads "Son of Msippi" by Henry Dumas*]

Up
from Msippi I grew.
(Bare walk and cane stalk
make a hungry belly talk.)
Up
from the river of death.
(Walk bare and stalk cane
make a hungry belly talk.)

Up
from Msippi I grew.
Up
from the river of pain.

Out of the long red earth dipping, rising,
spreading out in deltas and plains,

out of the strong black earth turning
over by the iron plough,

out of the swamp green earth dripping
with moss and snakes,

out of the loins of the leveed lands

muscling its American vein:
the great Father of Waters,
I grew
up,
beside the prickly boll of white,
beside the bone-filled Mississippi
rolling on and on,
breaking over,
cutting off,
ignoring my bleeding fingers.

Bare stalk and sun walk
I hear a boll-weevil talk
cause I grew
up
beside the ox and the bow,
beside the rock church and the shack row,
beside the fox and the crow,
beside the melons and maize,
beside the hound dog,
beside the pink hog,
flea-hunting,
mud-grunting,
cat-fishing,
dog pissing
in the Mississippi
rolling on and on,
ignoring the colored coat I spun
of cotton fibers.

Cane-sweat river-boat
nigger-bone floating.

Up from Msippi
I grew,
wailing a song with every strain.

Woman gone woe man too

baby cry rent-pause daddy flew.[2]

Quincy Troupe: That poem influenced me a lot, you know. Just the rhythm of it and the minimal kind of expression and let the images speak to you. That's the essence of the blues in a way. It's the essence of the blues, the essence of jazz. And that poem for me is out there!

Treasure Shields Redmond: Powerful. And Dumas, you know, has some sort of philosophy about rhythm and sound. He included it in everything.

Eugene Redmond: And that's what drew him to Sun Ra and drew Sun Ra to him. Because the sound will carry. The sound does it.

[2] Henry Dumas, "Son of Msippi" from The Selected Poetry of Henry Dumas, published by Flood Editions.
Source: The Selected Poetry of Henry Dumas (Flood Editions, 2020)