

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Margaret Wilkerson
A LIFE IN THEATER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Interviews conducted by
Nadine Wilmot
in 2003-2004

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Margaret Wilkerson

Table of Contents—Margaret Wilkerson

Interview History by Nadine Wilmot xii

Interview 1: October 28, 2003

[Audio File 1] 1

Family background and history—Early childhood and education—Richmond production of *The Funeral*.

[Audio File 2] 15

Support for education in narrator’s family—Memories of World War II—Church affiliations.

Interview 2: March 15, 2004

[Audio File 3] 23

Family: culture, values, gender, training, sewing, importance of voting—What she learned from her mother about being a woman: love, working outside the home, poetry—Family trips through the desert to Oklahoma—High school at Thomas Jefferson in Los Angeles: social life, sports, afterschool program, teachers: John and Rubeline Long, the principal Mc Farnham, choosing to stay at Jefferson, a decisive moment—Father’s affinity with science/physics—Being knights and knightettes—Educational/occupational horizon for girls v. boys in high school—Encountering racial discrimination in college—College at Redlands, working at the library, challenging her reassignment—Being black on campus, one of five—Redlands culture of “no one falls through the cracks”—Wesley Methodist Church group—Oration, *Solitude*, and Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s *Gifts From The Sea*, professor’s expectations opening a door to reflecting on race, *Brown v. Board of Education*—Oral interpretation, Langston Hughes and W.H. Auden.

[Audio File 4] 38

Theatre in college, directing J.B.—Social life and dating.

[Audio File 5] 52

Working for the YWCA in Youngstown Ohio—Trip to new York to go to the theatre and seeing *Raisin In The Sun*, *Sweet Bird Of Youth*, *Touch Of The Sun*—Directing J.B. the story of Job, a theme of dramas that raise fundamental moral issues—Bible as history and literature, class from Redlands—Bible stories—Choices as director of J.B—More on social life and dynamics in Youngstown—Getting engaged, returning to Los Angeles, teaching theatre at Jordan High School—Watts.

Interview 3: March 17, 2004

[Audio File 6]

68

Watts—Social movements, political awareness, sensibility *vis a vis* the times, Civil Rights era—starting a family—Stanley’s experience at Cal State, Los Angeles—Dreams of starting an interracial theater, applying to UC Berkeley’s PhD program—Living on Sonoma Mountain, having a family and being in graduate school—Partnership with her husband, Stanley sues Solano Community College over discrimination—“No on Proposition 14” in Los Angeles—Reflections on their engagement in politics of the times—Visiting Stanley’s family in Shreveport, Louisiana—Malcolm X in the 1960s.

[Audio File 7]

82

Reflections on Malcolm X, violence, and self-defense, and Martin Luther King’s nonviolence—Missing the Third World Strike at UC Berkeley, job interview for Ethnic Studies program—Seeing *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway—Production of *A Raisin in the Sun* at Jordan High School in Los Angeles—Los Angeles meets Négritude and Pan-Africanism—Ford dissertation fellowship—Naming her children.

Interview 4: March 18, 2004

[Audio File 8]

91

Graduate school, observing political turmoil on campus from a vantage point of Petaluma—academic work, fulfilling early requirements, “Who walked with God?”—Why drama resonated for her—Working as a researcher for the rhetoric department—Turning down the role of Cleopatra while Director of the Women’s Center—Participating in a production of the *Oresteia*, liaisons between students and professors—Key faculty and lay of land in the department while she was a graduate student—“Experimental” teaching in the theatre department—Instances of subtle racial discrimination/cultural divides while in graduate school—Social networks, colleagues and advisors in graduate school, connections with other graduate students while in graduate school, initial involvement in American Theatre Association and Black Theatre Association—External networks, internal support, internal networks—“Learning” UC Berkeley, scheduling of oral exam, Women’s Center, serving on Committee on Committees, importance of being known and involved outside of your department.

[Audio File 9]

105

Serving on committees, importance of representation and communication—Faculty attitudes around diversity and affirmative action—Exploring formation of racial attitudes in Lilly Endowment workshops, participating in role play in psychodrama workshops—Teaching *Dutchman*, directing *Dutchman*—Suzan-Lori

Parks, Don Cheadle, Mos Def, Jeffrey Wright—What graduate students should know about graduate school—Building relationships to others outside of one’s department, drama department disarray—Expectations from faculty placed on her work—Dissertation.

[Audio File 10]

121

Working on the dissertation while raising children, losing dissertation on the freeway—sharing dissertation with the theatre groups that were profiled—Sorting and archiving original source materials—How black theater reflects changing race ideology, changing times, changing language—Interviewing Alice Childress.

Interview 5: March 19, 2004

[Audio File 11]

128

As doctoral student, department’s expectations, faculty lack of awareness of the field of black theatre—Connections and interactions with department faculty—Director/scholar program in drama department—Performance facilities on campus—Meeting Henrietta Harris—1995, Director of Center for Theatre Arts—Chair of the Drama Department—“Saving” the drama department, its decline and resurrection, rebuilding it—Racism at the box office on campus—trends in drama practice while Margaret was a doctoral student at Berkeley, avant-garde theatre, experimental/confrontational “happenings”—Connections to civil rights era, African American traditions of theatre—Connections between audience and performance—UC Berkeley Lonnie Elder production of *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, reactions from the black audience unanticipated by white Berkeley faculty—Theatre as revolutionary tool—One of the guiding principles in the dissertation: “Black theatre means different things to different people...no one way to explore black experience”—LeRoi Jones versus Aldridge Players West production of *Trojan Women*—LeRoi Jones’ condemnation and recantation around *Raisin in the Sun*, an evolution—North Richmond Community Theatre, Neighborhood House, working with Jim Linnell and Phil Larson, funding, caution from University administration about personal safety in post-Watts era.

[Audio File 12]

142

North Richmond Community theatre—Working to build a community theatre, encountering resistance, community encounters that illuminate the political environment—Jimmy Scott—ideology and philosophy of North Richmond Community Theatre, potential for theatre more generally as a tool for transformation—Challenges in mounting successful community based theatre—Communicating the form to community—Campus production of *El-Hajj Malik*—Working without resources and access—Kumoja Players production of *The Funeral*, Juneteenth in Richmond—Writing *The Funeral*, exploring how black people respond to death absent white people, funeral of Aunt Matt in Tulare—Influence of Bernard Jackson’s vision of community theatre, colorblind casting,

race as a plot device, disrupting the narrative of race, how audience adapts—Liberating theatre from narrow conception of audience palate, re-imagining and challenging the audience.

[Audio File 13]

154

How was Jack Jackson's vision of nontraditional, multi-traditional casting problematic, concerns raised by black artists, political questions, etc.—Issues with drama department, lack of access to theatre space—Professional trajectory and tenure at Berkeley, half-tenure slot, becoming a Lecturer with Security of Employment—Career horizons and family as priority in career decisions in early seventies—African American Studies Program under the leadership of Ron Lewis, political climate—Some of the highlights, balances to career at Berkeley, Gwendolyn Brooks—Being a working mother, coming from a tradition of working mothers, encountering campus (white male academic) culture around being a mother, having children and building an academic career—Pregnancy and childbirth.

Interview 6: March 20, 2004

[Audio File 14]

168

Being among the first generation of black women at research universities—How the trajectory of one's career was therefore different from her white male colleagues at Berkeley—Improvisation and working within the culture and framework of the institution, learning about institutions generally, and Berkeley in particular—Reflections on the trajectories of Barbara Christian and June Jordan: Christian rewriting and disrupting scholarly norms and June Jordan, coming to UC Berkeley as a star, how departments sought to utilize her—How scholarship focused on black women was not valued, e.g. *Nine Plays by Black Women*—Tenure for Barbara Christian—June Jordan and Barbara Christian—Barbara Christian's committee work, service to the university, service to the field, service to students—Margaret Wilkerson's committee work, on behalf of diversity and access, special scholarships committee, sexual harassment policy committee—Complexity of defining a policy at the level of graduate student/professor interactions—Learning the institution while being director of the Women's Center on campus—Workshops for staff, untenured women professors—Developing the center into an academic center—Supporting the work of scholars like Trinh Minh Ha.

[Audio File 15]

183

How national networks and connections established at the Womens' Center furthered her career in terms of scholarship and university activism and positioned her in national context of emerging women's issues such as "untraditional" re-entry students and women in higher education—Being one of the founding members of National Council for Research on Women (NCROW)—Miriam

Chamberlain and the role of the Ford Foundation in developing/funding womens' centers and women's studies department—being connected to other heads of campus based womens' centers nationally—Being involved with Office of Women in Higher Education (American Council on Education)—Serving as California state coordinator for Office of Women initiative to increase numbers of women presidents of colleges and universities—Alliances, advisors, and friends in navigating and flourishing at Berkeley—Participation in and importance of Black Faculty Caucus, younger black faculty who shunned the meetings, importance of collective action and visibility of the group—Career trajectory, importance of being known and being connected outside of campus—Accession to tenure in 1981 in the African American Studies Department, beginning research on Lorraine Hansberry, importance of composition of ad hoc committee and faculty associate for affirmative action intervention, interpreting and presenting one's career path and the value of your research, especially work that's not text based—Focusing on her own area of research—Serving on the Committee on Committees—The “silencing effect” created by gender dynamics, race dynamics, and surprisingly, disciplinary biases—how the admissions committee experienced SB1, SB2, proposition 209—Some themes: carrying the responsibility of often being the sole person interested in moving a progressive agenda on important committees, grappling with issues in evaluating people and their work in the academic community—Shift from initial career goal of opening a theatre company to being a scholar and professor: the sixties, interest in supporting students—Emergence of black feminist critical theory and literature.

[Audio File 16]

198

How academic research is linked to emergence of the field of African American studies and subsequently feminism and black critical literary theory, new lenses for her work in black theatre as each area evolved—Emergence of African American Studies Department at UC Berkeley, impetus with student insurgency and increased presence of students of color—Ethnic studies, third world college—Structural set up, academic requirements—African American Studies Department moves into College of Letters and Sciences and betrays promise of Third World College—Not being around to witness the transition of Afro-American Studies program from the leadership of Ron Lewis to Bil Banks—Returning to the African American Studies Department and participating in its development and growth—Gender representation in the department—Serving as chair of the department 1988-1994, waiting until she was a full professor, creating the graduate doctoral program, making the African American studies major attractive to undergraduates, removing barriers to student enrollment in the major, department retreat to create doctoral program, moving the doctoral program through administrative approval by appearing in front of the doctoral committee when it was slowed—National context for doctoral programs in the country at that time, very few, none west of the Mississippi—Margaret's continued work with graduate students, Libby Lewis, Maude DaKobe, Haldane Chase—How the department fared under the different administrative regimes of Chancellors Bowker, Heyman, Tien—Bowker's quiet and astute manner—Digression: politics

in New York City, culture and politics in the Ford Foundation—Return to survey of Chancellors, Heyman, Tien, Berdahl’s commitment to retaining FTE in African American Studies Department in wake of Christian’s death, Jordan’s illness, Margaret’s departure—Administrative level at which decisions about transfer of FTE are made.

[Audio File 17]

213

African American Studies Department’s understanding and performance of its mandate with regard to “community,” bringing people like Ayi Kwei Armah to campus, difficulties in trying to deliver on a community connection, reconciling that with role on campus, database of community resources, social services—the department as a resource for students—Production of El-Hajj Malik observed by members of the Nation of Islam—Theatre as politics of community in the academy—Reflections on third world strike, emergence of black studies and transformation of the institution, “a costly time.”

Interview 7: June 1, 2004

[Audio File 18]

220

Discussion of Kenny Leon and True Colors, financial challenges in running a theatre, Broadway revival of *A Raisin in The Sun*—foundation funding for black theatre in the seventies—Ford Foundation career trajectory and priorities, Media Arts and Culture program—Kenny Leon’s approach, how it is “Hansberrian”—teaching Lorraine Hansberry, researching Lorraine Hansberry.

[Audio File 19]

236

Memoir/oral history with Louise Patterson—co-editing 1979 issue of *The Black Scholar on Theater—Kaiso!*—1977 Panel at the Theater Convention and Theodore Ward—trying to create a sense of history for Black theater—Postdoctoral Ford Fellowship at the Schomburg—*Nine Plays by Black Women*, reflections on the evolution of Black women playwrights from the seventies to the present, canon formation/reformation, how it was received in the academy and in the theater world, challenges and revisions in the course of publishing—“Recovering a Lost Past” and “Excavating our history.”

Interview 8: June 2, 2004

[Audio File 20]

254

Working with the Lilly Endowment on the Liberal Arts and the Harvard Programs in Management and Executive Leadership—higher education workshop, curriculum reformation/revision, diversity—cultural pluralism seminar, dynamics and evaluations at Harvard management programs—helping people understand systemic racism versus personal prejudice,

challenging notions of what racism is in the classroom—training and support for her work in the area of cultural pluralism—intersection of cultural pluralism work with her academic work in the fields of equity in education, different understandings of the university’s mandate: “ethical” versus “value-neutral” institutions—with regards to anti-apartheid movement at Berkeley in the 1980’s, SB1 and SB2 in 1995—serving on the Committee on Committees in 1995 and 1996 when SB1 and SB2 were approved by the Regents—how the Committee on Committees works, dynamics on the committee according to discipline around issues of discrimination and affirmative action, ensuring representation of a diversity of views on a committee—allies, enemies, and the necessity of combating collective amnesia on a committee, “making our voice heard”—Proposition 209 and the dismantling of affirmative action—follow up question about cultural pluralism workshops: effectiveness of the workshops and the method employed.

[Audio File 21]

271

Discussion of the paper “Minority—Professional—Woman: a creative tension” —co-editing the Nation issue on the Black family and welfare—choosing to come to the Ford Foundation—Ford’s current operating environment in terms of changing demographics and shrinking funding for arts—Ford’s current media priorities, how the 9/11 attacks impacted Ford’s Media Arts and Culture program—lessons learned about institutions—risks.

[End of Interview]

Interview History—Margaret Wilkerson

Professor Margaret B. Wilkerson was interviewed as part of the *African American Faculty and Senior Staff Oral History Project* series. This series of interviews explores the experiences of African American faculty and senior staff at UC Berkeley as part of the broader history of the University of California and its commitment to access and diversity.

Margaret Wilkerson came to UC Berkeley in 1968 as a PhD student in the drama department. Upon completing her dissertation on the topic of black theater groups on the West Coast, she began teaching at UC Berkeley. Over the course of thirty years at Berkeley, Wilkerson taught in and chaired both the Dramatic Arts and African American Studies departments and served as the Director of the Center for the Study, Education and Advancement of Women, before retiring and taking up her current post as the Director of the Ford Foundation's Media, Arts, and Culture Program. This interview contains her reflections on the times in which she came of age, her research—black theater and the life of Lorraine Hansberry, and UC Berkeley, which she had the opportunity to experience from a few different vantage points, as a professor with multiple affiliations and as a student.

This interview consisted of eight interview sessions stretching over a nine-month period from October of 2003 through June of 2004. The first took place here on Berkeley's campus in the Strouse Press Room of The Bancroft Library. The subsequent seven interviews took place over the course of two visits to New York City. These took place in Ford Foundation meeting rooms, my hotel room, and in Wilkerson's home. Wilkerson's husband, Stanley Wilkerson, sat in on the interviews that took place at her home. All interviews were recorded on minidisc and digital video. The recordings were transcribed, audit-edited for clarity and accuracy, and sent to Wilkerson for her review.

This series is grounded in the premise that higher education is one of the primary strategies for gaining social equality—access to employment and income—for historically disadvantaged communities. Moreover, the University, comprised of its students and faculty and administration, with all of its intellectual and financial resources operates as a critical touchstone in processes of systemic social change. Therefore the university functions not simply as an educational institution, but also as a significant site of past, present, and future potential for imagining and crafting opportunity for ethnic and racial groups formerly excluded from higher education. This project recognizes that the University of California, as California's premier public educational institution, plays a significant role in the socio-economic mobility of all of California's residents. The story that we hope will emerge from this project is a story of California – its people and one of its most important public institutions.

This interview was conducted under the auspices of the Regional Oral History Office. The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through recorded oral memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in the Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Nadine Wilmot, Editor/Interviewer
Regional Oral History Office
Berkeley, California
August, 2005

Interview with Margaret Wilkerson

Interview #1: October, 28, 2003

[Begin Audio File 1]

01-00:00:43

Wilmot:

Today is October 28. I'm here with Margaret Wilkerson. This is interview one for the Regional Oral History Office, and I'm Nadine Wilmot. So, just to begin, we usually start off with the question of where and when were you born?

01-00:01:03

Wilkerson:

I was born in Los Angeles, California, at 648 East Forty First Street. My mother always hated me saying that because it indicated that I was born in the house, and not in the hospital. It was April 3, 1938.

01-00:01:26

Wilmot:

What are your parent's names?

01-00:01:27

Wilkerson:

My parents' names were George Buford and Gladys Edgenton Buford. My mother is still alive, actually. She's ninety-four.

01-00:01:48

Wilmot:

So you said you were born in the house. Can you tell me kind of the story? Has the story been told to you about how you were born?

01-00:01:55

Wilkerson:

Not a lot, actually. I'm the youngest of three girls, no brothers. The oldest girl in the family was born in the hospital, but the other two of us were not and I don't quite know why. She always was a little ashamed of that, that we weren't in a hospital, but I mean, she had a private physician, and in those years, they used birthing chairs. It was not unusual for children to be born at home, rather than at a hospital, so I just took it for granted.

When I entered school and they asked you to fill out forms that say where you were born, I always put the house address down. When she found that out, she said, "Oh, no, don't do that. You put the city there." [laughs] So I always think of that. The house is still there. My husband and I were in L.A. a month or two ago and we drove past it. No-one in the family lives there anymore, but it's a stucco house, and it's still in the same place.

01-00:03:02

Wilmot:

What was that community like when you were growing up?

01-00:03:05

Wilkerson:

When I was growing up, it was a very integrated community in Los Angeles on the Eastside-it was called then. It's now part of what's called South Central. It was an integrated community with a mixture of whites, blacks, and Mexican Americans-that was the term then, Mexican Americans. One of my best friends growing up as a little kid was a fellow named Tony Gundi Golindo, and he was Italian, apparently. I didn't know what that was. I have since figured that out. He was probably three or four years older than I was, but we played together. It was during World War II, so we played war games, and tried to spot airplanes flying over and things of that kind. Then, as I grew up-this is just an example of diversity-as I got into junior high and high school, my best friend Tony moved away, and my best friend was a Mexican girl named Martha Moreno, who lived across the street. We were best friends. She went to another school-maybe she went to a Catholic school, I'm not sure, but we didn't go to the same schools, but we were very good friends.

01-00:04:32

Wilmot:

When you drove by recently, can you talk about how-is the neighborhood different?

01-00:04:39

Wilkerson:

Yes, it is. The Eastside, that area is very interesting because it was largely a white neighborhood in earlier years. My father actually went to and graduated from the same high school that I graduated from. When I looked at his high school pictures, there were only a handful of African American young people there. They were mostly white. The whites in L.A. slowly moved westward as more immigrants came in-I guess I should say migrants from other states. When I was growing up, there were blacks that were moving in-it was very integrated-and then as whites moved westward, the blacks and Mexicans moved in and kind of filled in. Now, it's largely a Latino neighborhood. The high school I went to moved from being predominantly white when my father went there in probably the late twenties, to being a largely black school when I went there-it was like eighty-five, ninety percent black with Mexicans-to now being a largely Latino school. It's a gauge of the migration and the immigration that's been happening in L.A., and this area was one of the entry points for a lot of Mexican Americans and Latinos, and then blacks moving out of the South.

01-00:06:22

Wilmot:

You said your father went to this high school as well. How far back does your family go back as an L.A. family?

01-00:06:32

Wilkerson:

My father and mother-they didn't know each other. They moved as high school kids, around junior high, high school kids, I think. My father was born in St. Louis, Missouri. I'm always trying to remember if that's right, but he was an only child, and they moved slowly across the country westward because he had asthma. They lived in Colorado for a while, and then they finally moved to the West Coast. We go back to somewhere in the 1920s, something like that. My mother moved out while she was in maybe junior high school, something like that, or high

school, and she moved to San Diego and lived with her older sister there. We have relatives that actually go back before my parents do, because her sister there in San Diego was kind of like a mother to her, actually.

01-00:07:41

Wilmot:

Wow. I'm wondering about how far back do you know your father's family, from Missouri, before they came to L.A.

01-00:07:52

Wilkerson:

A little ways. My father's mother lived with us for many years-my grandmother. She had married and divorced three men. I always thought that was ordinary, and I look back and think, "You know, that must have been not so ordinary given the years." She lived with us for many years until she died.

01-00:08:16

Wilmot:

What's her name?

01-00:08:18

Wilkerson:

Her name was Mary Wellingham. I'm going to have to fan, I hope you don't mind.

01-00:08:26

Wilmot:

No, it's hot.

01-00:08:32

Wilkerson:

Her mother also lived in the same house where I was born. Grandma Emory was what we called her. I am not sure what her first name is, but Emory was her married name. She died the year before I was born, in 1937, so I never knew her, but I've seen pictures and so on. The tiny story about her is that she was born in slavery, and that Emancipation happened when she was about twelve years old. She was the daughter of a Native American woman-there were some Native slaves-and a white Irishman. Her father wanted very much to educate her, and so on, and she just hated her father and decided that she didn't want to take his offer of going to school or anything like that. When she got married, said she was going to marry the blackest man she could find. And she did, from what I understand! But that's about as far back as I go on my father's side. We don't have names beyond Grandma Emory.

My mother was born in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. She was the second youngest of sixteen children. You can imagine, my father being an only child and my mother growing up in a family of sixteen children. They have a very interesting story. I never knew my maternal grandmother. When she was around five years old, the mother decided that she wanted, and I think convinced the father, that she wanted to move to Africa, to Liberia. They had some issues with one of the sons in Oklahoma-you know racial tensions. Oklahoma was a real hotbed in those years, the turn of the century, so they took-about half of the children were to go with them to Liberia. There was

a Chief Sam who was a man who came along in Oklahoma and promised to take a number of blacks to Liberia if the parents would pay full fare and the children could go free.

So, my mother's parents were living in Okmulgee, and they had a fairly sizable amount of land as I understand it, and even had some sharecroppers. My mother remembers a house with a library with books, and a piano, and so on. They decided to go to Liberia. They moved to Galveston, Texas, to take the boat over, and when they got there, Chief Sam changed the rules on them, and they couldn't go with him. So, they lived in Galveston for two years and earned the money to cross. So they crossed on a, I don't know, some kind of a ship. I don't know exactly where it was registered or anything, but they paid their fare, and they crossed in 1914, I believe that's right, just at the beginning of World War I. My mother does remember a British man-of-war ship firing across the bow of the ship that they were on and boarding the ship to look for whatever.

They managed to get to Liberia, and they lived there for five years as a child. She was a child. A couple of the children died there. She remembers stories about that. It's really quite a story and we need to write it. We have recorded her. It's really quite a story. There was a great hardship. It was a very hard life, and I think losing a couple children made it more difficult. They decided that they would come back. They needed to come back. She didn't want to return to this country.

01-00:13:15

Wilmot:

Your grandmother? Or your mother?

01-00:13:17

Wilkerson:

My maternal grandmother did not want to return to this country, but she said she would go. She was ill and she said she didn't know that she would make the trip. They boarded ship coming back and she died, and was buried at sea. The father brought those children that were young enough, who weren't old enough to be married or whatever-brought them back. She left—or he did, I guess—one son who married a native woman. We don't know anything about that. Of course, Liberia has been in such upheaval over the last couple of decades that we have not been able to do any kind of research there on it.

01-00:14:05

Wilmot:

Is this an uncle of yours?

01-00:14:06

Wilkerson:

This is an uncle of mine, somewhere, and he had children there and lived there and so on, but we never saw him again. We never met him or anything. So they came back, and the father remarried at some point. And then he died, and my mother was on her own at about the age of twelve or thirteen. She lived with an older brother, but they didn't get along well at all, so she left at about age fifteen, took her sister with her. She left and lived in Chicago—at the YWCA—then eventually came out to California to live with her older sister. It's really kind of amazing and a kind of insight into what young people did in those years. Thank God for the YWCA, where young single girls and women could live in relative safety. It was a very dangerous world,

as it is now. So, that's my mother. Her mother's name was Sarah Gross and her father's name was John Edgenton. Our family on that side, on my mother's side—.

My mother always loved history and always wanted to build the family history, so she and two of her sisters who lived in California—a number of them lived in California actually, Tulare, Fresno, Northern California—there's a whole set of her family that lived out here. So they started family reunions, now probably thirty-five, forty years ago, and each year, we have a family reunion. On the twenty-fifth one—that's ten or fifteen years ago now, maybe—we had a very special one with T-shirts and all kinds of things, and a number of her siblings were still alive then. Now she's the only one left out of the sixteen. She has survived everyone. So it's really quite an incredible history.

We go back a little farther than that. I'm not sure I can call the names right now, but one of our cousins a while back, focused on the family history, and had hoped to make a film out of it. That never quite occurred, but she went back and did a lot of earlier research. Now my daughter—who is named for my mother; her name is Gladys Mari—and I and several others in the family are trying to organize ourselves to pick up that history and kind of fill in as much as we can. We are increasingly also interested in the native side of it, because my mother's mother, my maternal grandmother, was Native American and white, and she married a man who was Native American and black. I guess she could have been registered as a native person. Never did that. There are all kinds of interesting family stories around her father and his devotion to his children—the white father and his devotion—I guess he would be my great great-grandfather, who gave his children acreage, who purchased his wife out of slavery, and so on. Just a real sense of devotion to his family.

We have a lot of native background in terms of the family. We don't know much about what tribes or anything. We're kind of curious about that now. There was a time when it wasn't kosher in a sense to research that, because people sometimes thought that you were trying to deny your African side. We were not, but we always knew that there was native blood there. We're kind of curious now about what tribes, possibly, and trying to piece together things here and there, and trying just to rediscover family.

We always had a strong sense of family. One of my uncles, for example, the one that my mother didn't get along with, they later became good friends. I think he stayed in Africa longer, because he was older. I remember as a kid, he used to travel back and forth from Liberia and other parts of Africa to the U.S. He would always tell my mother that—because we always had unruly hair, and she'd press it and all that, and he'd say, “You know Gladys, you oughta go to Africa and open a beauty salon. Those women over there, they could use your pressing iron.” [laughs] He always had an eye towards business. He was a very entrepreneurial guy. I grew up in a context where Tarzan was a very popular story, but at the same time, I had an uncle who traveled back and forth from Africa and would come and tell us all these stories about it. I saw Africa as a great land of opportunity. I wasn't a prisoner of the popular stories around Tarzan and all of the implications of that and all the stereotypes about Africans. I was certainly exposed to them, but I had this other narrative that came in from my life as a child in the family. I've probably strayed way off your point. [laughs]

We were very much a part of the community on Forty-first Street. We attended church in Los Angeles—The First AME Zion Church, and my father was a fireman. Los Angeles had black firemen dating back, I believe, to the late nineteenth century, but they were segregated and they were only allowed to work in the two fire stations in the black community. My father would work three days and he would be off three days. That's the way they worked. The men bonded. There was never any talk about women being firefighters or anything, but the men would bond because they'd cook for each other and they'd back each other up in terms of fighting fires. My father was injured a couple of times. He fell off the back of a fire truck. The spring broke or something and he was popped off and injured his back. Another time I think he fell through a roof, so it was a dangerous job, but he had benefits. That was really great.

My mother worked in service first, meaning that she worked in homes in West L.A. As a matter of fact, she put herself through high school doing that. She lived in a white family's house and went to Fairfax High School, a school on the west side that was not known for having black people there. She went because she was living in that neighborhood—living in a home and working. The people seemed to be good to her and so on. It wasn't like it was a terrible, terrible kind of situation, but she worked all her life. She worked in service a lot, and as I got older, she became a cafeteria worker in the schools, and then a teacher's aide later on. I only remember her as working, but she says that she was home with us for the first few years. I don't remember that very well, but my paternal grandmother, that is my father's mother, lived with us. As I was growing up in elementary school, she was at home.

01-00:23:25

Wilmot:

This is your father's mother.

Wilkerson:

This is my father's mother, Mary Wellingham.

01-00:23:32

Wilmot:

Mary Wellingham, yes.

01-00:23:34

Wilkerson:

So that's probably more than you ever wanted to hear about the family.

01-00:23:38

Wilmot:

No, it's just the beginning.

01-00:23:43

Wilkerson:

But it's a very interesting—you know, sets of narratives that have come from particularly, my mother's side, but also the father's side as well. The relatives would visit from Oklahoma on my father's side. He had an aunt who had lived in California, actually. When he was growing up with his mother and his aunt, she was—his aunt was a circuit rider. She was like an itinerant minister. She was a minister in the Methodist Church, I believe in the AME Zion Church, and

she used to travel between Los Angeles and San Diego to preach at different churches. He used to drive her back and forth in his little hot rod, he said. My father was very mechanically oriented and he loved working on cars and all of that, so he drove her back and forth. It was on one of those drives and going to one of those churches that he met my mother. That's how they actually met.

01-00:24:58

Wilmot:

That was my next question: how did they meet?

01-00:25:00

Wilkerson:

That's exactly how they met—in the church. My father was always very devoted to my mother. He always remembered birthdays, and Christmases and everything—mother's day. He always got these big, big greeting cards. Beautiful big greeting cards. It always cost more money—now, they're five and eight dollars or whatever, but he always—

01-00:25:33

Wilmot:

The ones with the floral cut-out prints?

01-00:25:34

Wilkerson:

Yes.

01-00:25:35

Wilmot:

The beautiful big ones?

Wilkerson:

Yes, yes, the really oversized ones. He always would buy those. He was a very devoted husband to her. He was really crazy about her, as she was with him. They were married until he died. They were married about fifty-five years. We had anniversaries for them, to celebrate, I think, thirty-some odd years, and then the fifty years. The family had its issues and problems, no question about that. It's not as if it were all idyllic. I don't think any family really is, but it was a very intact family. As far as we could tell, there was never any indication that there would be a separation or a divorcing, or anything of that kind. They didn't always agree about things, but there was a great commitment. In fact, for the fiftieth wedding anniversary, someone asked my father, "What is the secret for longevity in a marriage?" and he said, "Well, we couldn't afford to get a divorce." [laughs] I think there's some truth to that. It wasn't so easy, and it was much more of a stigma to be divorced. It wasn't really an option unless it was just untenable.

We came from a family that had very strong values. Both of my sisters and I have been married for a long time. My oldest sister, just in relation to longevity of marriages—she was married to the same man for over thirty years, and then they divorced. The sister next to me in age was married for probably forty years or something like that, and her husband died. I've been married for forty-two years.

01-00:27:43

Wilmot:

What are your sisters' names?

01-00:27:46

Wilkerson:

My oldest sister and daughter in the family—the first child—was named Carmen. Carmen Bebe Buford. Bebe—she was named after somebody—some actor, actress, or something. She never liked that name. When she married, she married a Percy Towler, so she was Carmen Towler. They divorced after thirty-some odd years, and in the last five years somewhere, she married a man named Lee Paige. He died after about three years of marriage, so she's a single woman, or widow, twice over. She was six years older than I am. The second daughter is Mary Ann Buford, and she married a man named Isaac Greene and he was just a great guy. He was a lot of fun and all. He died of a brain tumor in '91 or something like that. She is four years older than I am. Then I'm the baby of the family. You know, once a baby, you're always a baby in the family. My mother still refers to me as, you know, "This is the baby of the family."

01-00:29:25

Wilmot:

Where is your mother now?

01-00:29:28

Wilkerson:

My mother lives in Los Angeles. She has Alzheimer's. She still recognizes us. She's not totally gone. She's creeping there.

01-00:29:39

Wilmot:

They just invented some new medication that's really—

01-00:29:41

Wilkerson:

Yeah, they're trying to hold that back, but she has a hard time remembering the children's names and all of that. You kind of remind her and she'll remember for a little bit. She repeats herself a lot. She lived with my sister Mary Ann, the one next to me in age, for about five years, and it just got to be just terribly difficult for my sister, so we found a very very nice place in L.A. so that she lives there where a lot of the immediate family—the grandchildren are there, and so on. The oldest daughter currently lives in New Hampshire and has lived there for a while, so she doesn't get to see her as much, but there's a lot of family in the area around her.

01-00:30:41

Wilmot:

You put forward such a rich history just now, that I'm just trying to speed up to keep up with you to ask relevant questions, so that's where I'm at right now.

Wilkerson:

That's all right. That's fine.

Wilmot:

Now that I have some bare outlines of your family history and your parents' occupations and your siblings, I wanted to return to the stories of your matrilineal ancestors and patrilineal ancestors. When you tell me these stories, it sounds like two rivers that have converged. I mean they're just amazing stories. I wanted to return to your Oklahoma family in particular, and that's your mother's side. I wanted to know a little more about the push factors that had them setting their sights on Liberia.

01-00:31:46

Wilkerson:

About why they set their sights on Liberia?

Wilmot:

Yes.

Wilkerson:

It's a very rich history. I read a book called *The Longest Way Home*, I think it's called, that is actually about the Chief Sam movement and Oklahoma at the turn of the century. Oklahoma was one of the homesteading states where there were opportunities for people to claim land and so on, and it didn't cost a lot at all. There were numbers of blacks who moved out of places in the South to claim land and to be free. At one point, actually, Oklahoma was envisaged by African Americans as a black state—that they would have a black state because there would be so many there. Of course, they met a lot of white resistance, and as the history moves along, they kind of narrowed their sights and said, "Well, we'll have a black county." The next you know, we had a black city, and that sort of thing. There were clusters of blacks throughout Oklahoma. There was a place and there still is a—I'm not sure of the name, I have to think about that [Boley]—where they claimed that a white man should not let the sun set on him in that city. I don't know if it's true or whatever, but it gives you a sense of the kind of tensions, and so on.

01-00:33:22

Wilmot:

What a reversal.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, that's right. Of course there were native people there as well, so there's a lot of native mixture there. What happened was that—some of this we've discovered since the stories. When you have a set of sixteen children, you can imagine the age spread within just the cohort of children. One of the older boys—well, I have to back up a minute. They lived in proximity to white families, apparently. There were a couple of white boys who used to ride their horses down the pathway as the kids were walking to school. They'd run them off the road, and things like that. There were all kinds of conflicts that happened, particularly around the children. For whatever reason, and I'm never sure exactly what happened, one of the sons, one of my mother's brothers shot a white boy, man—you know, his age—teenager, whatever. They thought that he had killed him, but apparently he didn't, because one of the brothers-in-law saw the man in San Diego many years later. But at any rate, they spirited him out of the area. I think that was Arthur,

but I'm not sure. He disappeared into wherever because my mother's family runs the gamut in terms of complexion. He was light enough to pass, actually. I think my mother said that she saw him once after that, but never saw him again. For a family that stayed in touch with each other, he was just "somewhere." We don't know where he went. He blended in somewhere, or something. He must have, because if he didn't, he would have probably come back and checked with the family. Our guess is that was what happened. My mother seeing that, and also—

Well, there's one other story. I guess I could tell you about that. They came, that is, you know, a group of white, sort of small mob, I guess, came to get him one evening. I guess the father wasn't there for whatever reason, but my mother remembers her mother walking out on the porch with a rifle in her hand—because, you know, on a farm, people were armed—and standing her ground. The men in the mob always referred to her as Mrs. Edgenton. They didn't call her by her first name or anything. My mother seems to remember that she was a teacher. We as kids, we hear these things and try to figure out, "That doesn't make sense from the things that we have heard." Then, when my mother's brother, Uncle Spudge Spurgeon, was his name. He was a hundred. He lived to be a hundred years old. We took her to see him in Kansas City. We interviewed him about his mother and about the family, and he kept referring to my mother's and his mother's mother—his mother, our maternal grandmother—as a white woman, that she looked like a white woman. We began to put those thoughts together and figured out that she probably did look like a white woman, which might explain the educational possibilities. We don't know about her education at all. The fact that she had a piano, that she had library books and all of that, and the fact that she was a teacher and could claim some kind of respect from people.

It also connects with the founding of Liberia, which was actually founded by United States African Americans, but others as well. The stories they told about Liberia recently, when the U.S. was trying to decide whether to go in, was not quite accurate, that it was founded by African Americans. That's not quite true, but it was founded as a place where white women could send their mulatto children. That's quite well known. So it made some sense to us that she might have heard about Liberia somehow through her various networks or what have you. It then made sense that she wanted to go to Liberia. Her children were—I guess they were mulatto in a way. She was white and Indian, and her husband was black and Indian, so, yes, there's a racial mixture. But the sense that we had was that she—and she really was the one who pushed going to Liberia—wanted to raise her children in a place where she wouldn't have to worry about the racism and so on. I think that's why she left, and that's why she didn't want to come back. We didn't know that part of it. These are things we pieced together from various members of the family before they passed on. We tried to understand the circumstances, and why they gave up land that my mother now believes had oil on it.

It's very possible that there was also some talk—I don't know if this has been verified—that Chief Sam was really an agent of others who wanted to get the folks off the land because of the oil that was there. Oklahoma is very, very rich in that. In fact, it reminds me of another faculty member who you probably should have interviewed, if you haven't. And I'm blocking his name. He was in urban planning.

01-00:40:11

Wilmot:
Blakely?

01-00:40:14

Wilkerson:

Not Blakely. There was another person.

01-00:40:18

Wilmot:

Ken Russell? No, that's wrong. Ken Simmons.

Wilkerson:

Simmons, that's right. He has an incredible story too. His father made a lot of money off of oil. He was a very wealthy man. He was known. Our family members who lived in Oklahoma knew of him. He was very wealthy, and my mother believes now that that was a big mistake in some ways, to go to Africa. But, I'll just say this and stop with that. One of the interesting things about her family is that there is a very diverse or split kind of perspective on Africa. There are those like my Uncle Will who believe that Africa was a place of great opportunity and so on, and felt the identification and all that. One of my aunts, Grace Edgenton Spencer, who lived in San Diego and who raised my mother essentially as she grew older—she was a member of the Church of God in Christ, and was one of the big matrons of that church in the San Diego area. Helped to found churches there. She was not a preacher herself, but she was very supportive. I think she was a missionary for some time when she was in Africa. She viewed the people in Africa as heathens because they were not Christian. You have part of the family who wanted to go back and see what Africa was like and felt identified, and another part of the family who felt, "Why would you want to do that? They're not civilized. They're heathens. They're not Christians." I remember one incredible family session in San Diego around one of the reunions when my Uncle Will and my Aunt Grace argued with each other about Africa, about what it was, and what was this meaning. It was just amazing. We just sat and listened and wished we had a tape recorder.

It's been an interesting kind of phenomenon. My mother has always wanted to go back to Africa just to see it because she remembers a lot of stories about it, about the driver ants that would cover the land and would eat everything. She remembers seeing one of her sisters who lived down river or up river or whatever, and their mother was worried that there was some kind of disease—the flu or something like that—that was going around causing high fevers. They hadn't heard from her in a long time, and some of the family thought she was dead, and the mother kept saying, "No, I know she's alive," and she remembers hearing the drums beating and the boat come up with the sister in the boat. She was alive. She remembered a lot of stories about that. The point of view on Africa was quite split in the family. My mother never actually got—well, she got to Egypt. My sister took her to Egypt on a trip, but other than that, she never got back to Liberia. She can't travel now. So, that's on my mother's side.

01-00:44:19

Wilmot:

I'm going to turn to your father's side next. I'm just so blown away by that story largely because Africa occupies a place for many of us that we have a kind of conflicted relationship to, but in your family, it's actually an experience that your family members visited, which is different than having it be an abstract place far away. That's kind of amazing to me.

01-00:44:50

Wilkerson:
Absolutely.

Wilmot:
So—sorry?

Wilkerson:

I was just going to say that you're absolutely right and you remind me that the starkest part of that whole story for me is the fact that my maternal grandmother, whom I never knew, died and was buried at sea. I've thought of that as a reverse middle passage in a funny kind of way. She didn't want to come back, and somewhere, like so many slaves who leapt to their deaths in suicide rather than come to these shores, she's out there somewhere with all those remains. It's a dramatic story in a lot of ways. I'm sure it's shaped my life in certain ways, I guess, but it took a while before—it is a remarkable story.

Wilmot:

I'm mindful of the fact that you grew up kind of in the bosom of your father's family—mother and grandmother. Well, she passed before you were born by one year. I just wanted to ask you a little bit about your grandmother, Mary Wellingham, and I'm wondering what you remember about her? What do you remember that she conveyed to you about who you should be?

01-00:46:28

Wilkerson:

My maternal grandmother had the job of raising us, in some ways, because she was there when we came home from school, and things like that. We remember her as a pretty strict disciplinarian. She loved us, obviously, but she was the one that always had to tell us not to do this and do that. I guess to talk about her—she was a church member, a churchgoing woman, all of that. She was also a little on the feisty side. As we grew older, you could see that. It wasn't like she wore red or something like that, but you knew that there was a very active kind of life when she was younger. Just the mere fact that she was married to and divorced three different men. She was proud of that. She would say, "Yes, and I outlived them all." [laughs] I remember her mostly in that way. I do remember that my sister next to me in age, Mary Ann, was very very feisty and always got into trouble for talking back, as people said, to the adults.

She defended me once when I was in high school. My husband and I went to the same high school. We had come back from a game or something or other and we were sitting outside in the car. We weren't doing anything. We were just sitting and talking. We had a good friend of ours, a male and a good girlfriend of mine who lived next door, Alicia Broadous. The four of us were sitting in the car just talking, and my grandmother came out of the house, and opened the door and ordered me into the house. I was just devastated. It was so embarrassing. My sister Mary Ann told my grandmother that she should not do that. That's the way that she was, and that's one of the reasons she always got into trouble. So I remember those things, but I'm an adult now, an old adult, and I have to really jog my memory not to think of only those kinds of things, because she really did take care of us. She taught us a lot. She taught us how to cook and all those kinds of things. She was just a disciplinarian. Maybe we were wild kids, I don't know. [laughs] Not too wild, I mean, you couldn't be very wild as a girl in those years. They watched over us.

01-00:49:37

Wilmot:

I have a question about your mother, as well. This came to me from when you were talking about her working in service. This really is a question that gets at your family's material means which is, did she ever have the option not to work? Was that ever an option for her to not work and stay home and be in the home?

01-00:49:52

Wilkerson:

Maybe for a very short time. I remember them saying that they actually built the house that we lived in, but it took all of them working to pay for the mortgage and so on. I think as the family increased and as we grew, that was not a real option for her. There were three adults working for a lot of time when we were little. My grandmother, that is my maternal grandmother, my father, and my mother worked at various times. There was a time, I think, when they first started living together, when all three were working. I guess I should say just to complete that picture was that my mother and father after they got married, which I think was in 1929, around that time, lived together as a couple, apart from family for maybe a year or less. Then they moved in with his mother and his grandmother as a couple. My mother's memory of Mary Wellingham, my father's mother, is one of great, great love because she said she really supported her and so on. There was a very close relationship there. But you know, as a kid, it's one thing to have a grandmother who visits, it's another one to live with your grandmother. I'm sure we're not giving her her full due, but she did teach us a lot because she was the one that was there a lot.

I'm sorry I'm not doing this in very good order. My mother, also, during World War II, worked in what they called the defense industry in Los Angeles. She was one of the early Rosie the Riveter types. She remembers that there were not many, if any, black women who were working in the defense industry, at least where she was. It was Canon Electric, where she worked during the war. That income was very important. My father was too—he always said he was too young to go to the First World War, and too old for the Second World War. Plus, he was in a necessary area as a firefighter. Of course the L.A. area was—I remember searchlights and the worries about the Japanese attacking and all of that sort of thing. Long Beach, where you could go and see the big war ships and the cannons that were embedded in the hillside to guard the West Coast, and all of that sort of thing. We had blackouts. We did have blackouts in those years. This is World War II. You were not allowed to turn on any lights that could be seen external to the house. We had a hallway that ran through the house on Forty-first Street. We could close the inside doors and could have light in there. Actually, all the windows that faced out had to be covered with black and no lights could be turned on. When blackouts happened and the sirens would sound and all, because my father was a fireman, he had to walk through the streets probably eight to ten blocks to go to the fire station because he had to be on duty. He would go, and all the women were left there because it was my mother, his mother, and the three daughters. He left. He would have to go, and we would be left there with my mother and grandmother.

To say a little bit more about my father—you were asking about my father's family and their relationship—his mother is about the only one that I ever knew. I've heard stories about others. There's actually some question in later years as to whether Mary Wellingham was actually his mother.

01-00:55:04

Wilmot:

Wow.

01-00:55:05

Wilkerson:

[laughs] Drop that little bomb! The story we always heard was that when he was born, she was paralyzed temporarily and couldn't raise him. Her sister, the circuit rider who was married to a man, Papa George, we called him—his name was actually George Buford—adopted him or took care of him. He took his name, Buford. Then later, after my grandmother was better, he was able to come back and be with her. Then they all lived together for a while as well, so it was kind of back and forth. That happens in a lot of families. Well, my mother told my father that she wouldn't marry him until it was clear who he was. Apparently, he didn't have a birth certificate or something, and so I have a copy of a letter that someone wrote to state who is his mother, who is his father, all of that to clarify that. Now we are hearing—and my mother for some reason raises that issue; never raised it when we were kids—she says that she thinks it's possible—now, let me see if I get this straight—she thinks it's possible that Mary Wellingham was not his mother. Is that right? Yeah. And that the—we always called her—I'm sorry, I'm blocking the name of the aunt, the circuit rider [Gussie Buford]. My mother now thinks that he was her son, but that—I don't know. It has to do with—I think I'm getting that right; but I may not be getting that right. But anyway that either she wasn't his mother—that is, Mary Wellingham was not his mother—and that he was actually the sister's son, but was perhaps conceived out of wedlock or something. I don't know. We honestly haven't been able to straighten that out. And I'm not even able to tell you straight. But there is some question about that.

Wilmot:

And she did operate as your grandmother, which is interesting.

Wilkerson:

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. They were sisters and so on. We don't know the family tree of the mother. We honestly don't know about that. It's interesting that my mother now will talk about that and thinks that there was something there.

To say something about my father also, you know what his occupation and all was. He also moonlighted as a projectionist at a movie house. That was his second job. It was literally moonlighting because he wasn't supposed to do it. He worked in one of the Spanish language movie houses in L.A. Every now and then, he would take us up to the booth and we could climb out of the booth and sit at the top. I saw Cantiflas as a kid, the great Mexican comedian. There were films that came up from Mexico. It was all in Spanish and we didn't understand Spanish, but we got to see a lot of movies like that. My father also played the violin. He had been taught that as a kid. He played it very well and played it in the church choir. He played the violin and they'd have the choir, the violin and the organ. So we were all taught to play the piano. All of us were. My two older sisters played very, very well. They were four and six years older than I was. They played classical music. I used to listen to them practice. So there are many, many classical pieces whose names I may not know so well, but I can name every note and hum every single note because I have heard it over and over as they practiced and practiced.

The oldest sister, Carmen was her name, went to Oberlin College. My parents' hope was that she would be a concert pianist, but she didn't do that. She left college after the first year and got married. She had six children. Much, much, much later—after they moved out here to California, to Los Angeles—she went back to school and got her doctorate in education. She moved into higher education and started working there, many years after the kids had grown up and all. My father always, always stressed education for us. My mother stressed education but she was always very practical in her feelings, and would tell us, "It's fine for you to take math and physics but you had also better take typing so that you can get a job." My father's friends, who were the firemen, encouraged all of us, all these daughters, as much as my father did. I remember a conversation with one good friend of his named Uncle Jake—Jacob Addison. He used to come over and talk and argue and discuss foreign affairs and public affairs and democracy and all of these things. I remember him asking me one day, what did I want to be when I grew up? I said, "I think I'd like to be a nurse," and he said, "Why be a nurse? Be a doctor." So then I shifted to something else and I said, "Maybe I want to be a teacher." He said, "Why a teacher? Be a principal." In other words, the idea was go as far as you can go. I later understood that part of that motivation on their part certainly was love for us and hope that we would fare even better than they did, but it was also that these were men who were very, very intelligent and very smart and they'd hit this glass ceiling that they couldn't really go beyond. My father actually passed the test for engineer in the fire department in L.A., and even though he was like third on the list, he never got the position. It was real discrimination that was going on.

They took a lot of that intellectual energy and just pushed it into us. There were times when we thought, "Maybe I don't want to have to push and go this far." I think that's what I was thinking when I said I wanted to be a nurse rather than a doctor. But they really instilled in us the belief that we should go as far as our talents would take us and get as much education as we possibly could. That stuck with all of us as girls. My father was tough enough to be a fireman and gentle enough for those big hands to play that violin. That all seemed very natural to me in those years. It wasn't until much, much later that I realized that it was kind of unusual to have a man [father] like that.

[End Audio File 1]

[Begin Audio File 2]

02-00:00:10

Wilmot:

We're recording now. I was just saying that I was really struck by the opportunities that were available to your parents' generation, in contrast to the opportunities that became available to your generation in your lifetime.

02-00:00:29

Wilkerson:

And I was thinking about the fact that the men, my father and his male friends—who were firefighters, for the most part—always encouraged us to go just as far as possible. They emphasized education a great deal. Many years later when I was directing the Women's Center here on the Berkeley campus, I began to realize that my experience with men like my father and his friends was different from the experience that many of the white women that I came to know

here had had. They felt that they had had no support or direction from fathers. Our experience was just really, really different. Maybe it was because we were all girls, I don't know, but my father emphasized—he wanted all of his daughters to be engineers. He pushed us to do that. My sister Mary Ann went to UCLA, tried to do that. She was very smart, but there was absolutely no support there and it was really, really hard. Even my sister Mary Ann, who is extremely courageous and feisty person and strong woman just had to give that up, and she went into social work. She became a probation officer and headed the probation units in South Central and things like that. I realize that my experience was just very different from the women that I met on the campus. I hadn't realized that until the women's movement came and people were talking about their mothers as the only and the primary role model.

My mother was a role model for us, but it was my father who really pushed us into education, into physics. He loved physics. He'd talk to us about it. We'd ask him a question about something and he'd say, "Go look it up in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*." He had purchased a set of *Encyclopedia Britannica* when we were younger. I'm sure that it was a sacrifice to do this. We just didn't know what the family finances were. We were not wealthy people, but he believed so much in education. That's before—I don't know if it's before—if there were easier encyclopedias that we now have—you know, Colliers and some others—he was not going to have it. He wanted us to have the best, what he felt was the best, which was the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which had teeny teeny print and gobs of pages on everything. We'd just say, "Would you just tell us the answer?" "No, go and look it up." We were urged and encouraged to read to learn, to discover, in the home. That happened in the home.

He insisted that we major in math and science, and that's what all of us did. We all did well in it. So, when the women's movement came along, and I met women who said they were afraid of doing math and all this—I was never afraid of doing math. Those were his aspirations for us. He modeled it himself by being involved as a self-taught, I would say, electrical engineer for the church. He would take care of the wiring and any kinds of things like that that needed to be fixed. He had friends who were firefighters who had the same kinds of skills. Again, this is a generation of men not talked about and written about enough, and who were really quite incredible, and could have gone who knows how far, had they had the opportunity. I'm pleased to say that Los Angeles, the Black Firefighters Association has a museum in L.A. where my father's picture and his friends are all there. The Fourteens and Thirties were the names of the two fire stations. He's there, and those men are remembered for what they did.

02-00:05:19

Wilmot:

I was going to ask you a question about postwar L.A, but I'm going to shift away from that for now. I'm really interested in politics and how your parents were involved in politics and how they communicated to you about politics. This can take the level at the very local level, or it can be national, or international.

02-00:05:51

Wilkerson:

Well, I'm glad you asked that because when I mentioned my Uncle Jake, it just brought back a lot of memories about the things that happened in the home. We really did talk about U.S. affairs, world affairs to some extent. During "the" war—it was always the war for us; World War

II—I remember us having lots of discussions, particularly with Uncle Jake because he really talked a lot and he would encourage us to talk. I can remember having debates at home about democracy. Whether democracy was relevant. Could it be relevant during wartime? Because you need to make—well, we're experiencing it now—you need to make certain kinds of decisions, and you can't always allow the mass population to vote on this and that and the other. We actually had arguments about that. We were talking as young teenagers, pre-teens, or teenagers, and Uncle Jake would come over and he would introduce some topic and he'd walk around and wave his arms and everything. We'd argue with him. We really had a rich intellectual environment. We didn't think of it as so much intellectual, but we had discussions about a lot of things.

As I said, my family was very much a part of the church, and my godfather, who asked to be my godfather, was a presiding elder in the AME Zion Church, Reverend [Theodore] Headen, and he was a very devout man and all. We would ask him questions. There was this weird thing in the AME Zion Church. It was not an evangelical church, so to speak, but it also was not staid. So, somewhere in the middle. Sometimes my grandmother would say we couldn't play cards in the house, sort of thing. Sometimes when we were younger, she would say, I don't know, dancing is a sin, whatever. Some people in our church felt that way and some didn't. We were able to ask, and it was okay to ask the ministers that passed through our home, who my parents were friends with, why was dancing a sin, when you're just moving to the music, or why is card playing a sin? I remember the minister saying, "You know, it's the environment. You're there, the people are drinking, they're betting." We said, "Well, we're not betting. We just want to play cards". So we were in an environment where we could really interrogate some of those values that people had. The same was true of politics as well. We could debate issues, and we really did argue about democracy. I can remember that extremely well.

02-00:09:11

Wilmot:

What was the alternative that was put forward?

02-00:09:14

Wilkerson:

The alternative?

Wilmot:

To democracy.

Wilkerson:

Well, the alternative was that you had to restrict it. You had to restrict democratic principles during a time of war. That authoritarian—it was very much, "Well, Hitler is efficient." It wasn't that people were arguing that we should be Hitler, but that sometimes democracy prevents you from moving in a timely way, and speaking with one voice. It is a problematic of democracy. There is no question about it. It's part of what we're struggling with now, with Iraq and all of that. I can remember us really talking about that. We, as kids—as I was saying; I certainly put myself in that camp—my sister Mary Ann in particular and I, always argued on side of democratic principles. We really believed in them and that you give up too much when you give

up democratic principles in order to win a war, or in order to, whatever—be decisive and so on. I can't remember the very specific incidents that we might have been talking about.

I do remember Pearl Harbor. I was only three years old when it happened, but I really remember that for some reason. I can see myself sitting in the living room, and one of my parents' friends, who was in the Navy, an African American man in the Navy [Thomas Killingsworth], came and told us about it and said that the loss of life was much greater than is being said. The war was very much a part of our life. We did Victory gardens. We had blackouts. We had all kinds of things that reminded you as a kid that you were in the midst of war. My oldest sister Carmen, she was very good at telling tales, even had us—the kids—I don't know if our parents believed it—believing that there were spies outside of our house and that they were peeking in the windows. She would write her own notes and say, "Look they left this note," and we would just flip. So you know, crazy stuff, but that was the war. We felt very much that we were in a war. There was no television. There was only radio. We didn't see a lot of images. I don't remember lots of newspapers in the house. There could have been newspapers but I don't remember reading a lot of newspapers. We heard a lot from family and friends who were involved in the service in one way or another. I don't know if that—.

02-00:12:13

Wilmot:

I'm going to explore that further, but did you have any proximity to Japanese Americans or Japanese who were interned during that time? I mean, just in terms of in your community.

02-00:12:25

Wilkerson:

I do not recall any Japanese in the community. I honestly—and I don't recall any at my high school or junior high school, for that matter. I don't think so. My sisters, when they went to high school they went to Polytechnic High School which was sort of in the middle of Los Angeles and was a very consciously integrated school. Teachers, students. All the students—I won't say every student did well but you didn't have the phenomenon that you have now where the black students are doing poorly and the white students are doing better and all of that. Among the students who were doing well, it was very, very diverse. It was quite an incredible school, and I hope someone has written about it because they closed the school at some point. I remember that they had good friends who were Japanese. That I do remember. I don't recall—.

02-00:13:28

Wilmot:

That was kind of far away from you.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, I think so.

02-00:13:32

Wilmot:

Just to kind of deepen the question about political affiliations in your family, how did your parents—what was their proximity or relationship to organizations that dealt with issues of organized labor or organizations like the NAACP that dealt with issues of African American identity?

02-00:14:05

Wilkerson:

I may not be remembering—I don't remember particular affiliations. I think they were members. And certainly in the fifties, we knew about the big court cases and things of that kind. Organized labor—I'm trying to remember whether the firefighters had a union or not. That's what I'm trying to remember. I'm not sure that they were, if they were organized or not. I'm not sure about that. They may not have been because they were such a necessary kind of occupation. But I always had the sense that they were quite pro-labor in terms of that, partly because of the work that my mother did in the defense industry, and both of my maternal grandmother and my mother having worked in service without any kind of real protection or guarantee or anything of that kind.

They were Republican for a while. I'm pretty sure they voted for Roosevelt, for FDR, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. But after that, if I remember correctly, they were Republican, tended to be Republican. My mother worked on the polls regularly, I remember that. Voting was high quality in our family. They were Republican because those were the years of the Dixiecrats, of the Southern racists and what have you, who were Democrats. Because of them, there were a lot of black families that were Republican because of that. I think after FDR, I'm not sure that my mother or father voted Democrat until maybe John F. Kennedy came along. I'm not really sure about that, but I think so. We used to debate politics as well in the family, as to whose side you were on. I remember McGovern running and being very disappointed when he lost, and all of these kinds of things. We, as kids, tended to be very much on the progressive side. I think they were too, but they were also of a generation that remembered the histories of the two parties, so the Democrats were not the favored ones.

02-00:16:42

Wilmot:

You also were talking a bit about your family's involvement in the church, and I would just like to ask you, what was that like for you? Was this church every Sunday?

Wilkerson:

Oh, yes! This was Sunday school, and then church, and then there was Christian Endeavor in the evening on Sunday. It was a big thing in my family when you were old enough to take the streetcar from our house, Forty-first and Avalon—we were about three doors from that—down to Twelfth Street in L.A., and then get on the other streetcar and go up Twelfth Street to where the church was. It was a big moment in my life and each of us as kids when we were allowed to do that by ourselves. We would call home and let the folks know that we got there safely and all of that kind of thing. The church was very big in our lives. As I said, my father played the violin in the choir. My mother sang in the choir. My mother, for some time headed the Young Women's Christian Society, I think it was called. As teenagers, we convinced her to make it the Young People's Christian Society, so we could have male members. [laughs] So we did have some. That was like a youth activities group, and they'd meet at our house or we'd meet somewhere else, we'd meet at the church, or whatever and we'd go on little trips and do things like that. We'd learn things together.

I don't know if we ever had a dance or not, but we did dance. My family didn't forbid that at all, but there were people in the church that felt that you shouldn't do that. There were a few that felt

that way, but most of the kids were doing it anyway. It was a very, very strong part of our lives. We read the Bible. A lot of our social life centered on the church with the various events. They used to have what they would call “Teas” on Sunday, and because my sisters and I—I actually played the piano too. I gave it up to play something else because I saw my sisters suffer having to play for the Teas, and also playing for the church. We sang in the choir, we sang in the junior choir and all of that sort of thing, so we were musically involved with the church as well. We actually would go to the various Teas, and there would be various people traveling through or whatever who were singers, and we would always laugh about it because we felt that no real singer would travel without their own accompanist. One of my sisters would usually be asked to accompany them without any rehearsal. They’d just put the music up there and they’d play and they’d sing and so forth and so on. So there were Teas in the afternoons on some Sundays, kind of money raising things. There were women’s days, and all kinds of—chicken dinners, you name it! We were very much involved with the church. It was very important to our lives in a lot of ways. There weren’t very many young men in the church at all. I think maybe you could count them on one hand, if that many. The boys that we met, we met usually through school or some other place.

02-00:20:40

Wilmot:

As an adult, did you still maintain a connection to a church, or an institution like a church?

Wilkerson:

I did. As an adult, you kind of in and out of it. Once we had children, we decided we should affiliate. We lived on Shane Drive, here in Richmond at one point when the kids were little and growing up. There was a church down the street from us called Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church, and because it was close, and also the minister was a young man who recruited me to come and start a drama program there, which I did. We affiliated ourselves with that church, which is part of United Presbyterian Church. As the kids grew up, we were there. I think my husband was an elder at one point for a while. We were active. I ran the drama group there for a number of years. We did various kinds of plays. I said I didn’t want to do sort of biblical plays. I would help the young kids act out some kind of biblical story, but I really wanted to try to marry the Christian values and principles with contemporary kinds of issues, so we tried to pick plays that were not necessarily bible stories, but that raised ethical moral kinds of issues that people had to come to grips with. It was pretty popular for a while.

02-00:22:16

Wilmot:

If you were to give me an example, what would that be like?

Wilkerson:

Well, let me think. Gosh. The one I have to give you is the one that I remember the best, so this is not necessarily the best one, but I wrote a play about—I wanted to explore how black people deal with death apart from who causes the death. So often, at least in those years, so much of the concern around death had to do with you got lynched by white people or you died in poverty and so on. And I said, could we just try to mute those issues and just talk about and explore how black people and black families feel about death itself and just deal with it, without talking about who caused it. So I wrote a play about death, and what happened in a family when a particular

person died—he was an older person. They died, that’s all, nobody killed them, or whatever. It had different characters in it and explored how they reacted. Some reacted very superstitiously. They reached back in their heritage and covered the windows with newspaper and things like that that people sometimes do. Some wanted to just treat it very cavalierly. It turned out to be as much a drama within the cast as it was for the audience, because we actually had a funeral on stage.

We borrowed a casket from one of the funeral homes and we brought it in to rehearsal for people to kind of work with as a prop, one of the young people, a teenager, who was with us in the group, jumped into the casket and laid down. We had everything from that kind of reaction to an older person, who was probably in her sixties at that point, who was playing the role of one of the matrons who would help to prepare the body at home, and take care of it. She didn’t want to touch the casket. She didn’t even want to come close to it. We had a whole gamut of emotions that even the cast had to deal with. It was a very interesting kind of experience to help people to think about that. It wasn’t like this is about death and we’re going to go to heaven or we’re not going to go to heaven, we’re going to hell—none of that. There were people who felt that way, characters who dealt with it that way, but it wasn’t to push one point of view or the other, but to try to unpack the layers of feelings that people have and perceptions that they have about death. That’s an example, and we did other kinds of plays as well.

02-00:25:37

Wilmot:

That would have been in the seventies?

Wilkerson:

That would have been in the mid to late seventies, that we did that. The other thing that was interesting about this moment was that the church, at that time, worshiped in a big multi-purpose room. On Sundays, or Saturday nights, we had to set up the pews—the chairs, actually—for the church, and set up the podium and all of that. During the week, at one point, there was a daycare center in there, and we’d clear that out. So when we did plays, we would set up for the play on Thursday night or something like that, run it on Friday and Saturday night. Then on Saturday night, we would break down the whole set and reconstruct the inside of a church. I was obviously impressed that we were performing drama in the same space where people worshiped the next day. In a sense, trying to philosophically going back to a time when drama and religion were closely intertwined. Many of the people in the audience would help us to break the set down and reset the church and so on. It was really interesting. We had a lot of fun doing stuff. We had some weird things happen too, and if you want, we can talk about them later. [laughs] The minister actually became a part of the troupe at times and performed with us. It was a very interesting experience.

02-00:27:23

Wilmot:

It’s interesting that he brought his drama to the theatre.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, he asked me to come. I remember when he came to my house and introduced himself. We had a student in common—a student of mine here at Berkeley. He had married him and his wife.

We knew him in common, Lamarr Ferguson [UC Berkeley alum], and he had suggested that he would come and talk to me about it. We did the first Juneteenth parade and celebration in Richmond. That was the date that the last set of slaves in Texas heard about emancipation. Lamarr was the one who brought the idea, and we actually had a little fair at the church, and we did a little parade up and down Shane Drive and around the neighborhood and picked up the kids and brought them down, and taught them about Juneteenth, and did makeup on their faces and things like that, and then took them back home. We had sent fliers out, delivered fliers in the neighborhood to let people know what was going to happen on that day and that we'd like to take the kids. We came down and they let us do it because we all lived in the neighborhood and they all knew us. I felt very proud that we did that for a couple of years and then after we stopped doing it, the City of Richmond picked that up and began to have a city-wide Juneteenth celebration.

Wilmot:

And then it expanded into Oakland—

Wilkerson:

Yeah, it was exciting.

Wilmot:

Well, Margaret, I think we should maybe close for today. We've covered a lot of ground.

Wilkerson:

I hope it makes sense. I'm not sure it does. I seem to be going back and forth.

Wilmot:

I think it makes a lot of sense. So we're going to sign off. Was there anything else you wanted to say before we sign off?

Wilkerson:

I don't think so. I'll think a lot more.

Wilmot:

Okay.

[End Audio File 2]

Interview #2: March 15, 2004

[Begin Audio File 3]

Wilmot:

Margaret Wilkerson, interview two, March 15, 2004. When we last left off, we talked a bit about your family background—the history of your family on both your mother’s side and your father’s side. Was there anything you wanted to add to that?

3-00:00:29

Wilkerson:

I wanted to try to sort of summarize a little bit in terms of what I learned and benefited from in my family. I wanted to say that my family taught me a great deal about culture in terms of literature, music, African American culture and music. It was a very stable family in a way, in the typical ways of the father and the mother and three children—daughters. We also lived with my paternal grandmother who lived with us. We were given pretty clear parameters. We weren’t allowed to spend the night at anybody’s house usually, especially if there were any men in the house. It didn’t matter if they were good friends or whatever. It was very strict along those lines.

My parents and grandmother saw to it that we went to church regularly. On Sundays we would go and spend most of the day in church. We would go to Sunday school. It was a big thing in my family when you could go to Sunday school on the streetcar in Los Angeles, by yourself. Usually that happened when we were around eleven or twelve years old, and you’d have to call back home after you got to the church. I think when we were probably in high school as well, we were taken to parties, driven by our father to parties, and then he’d pick us up. Then gradually we’d get a chance to come home with friends, but they had to be very carefully selected friends. It wasn’t overly strict but there were clear parameters and the kind of guidance and structure that we thought was awfully bothersome, but as I look back and I look at what some young people deal with today, it was very good and we were very fortunate to have that kind of relationship.

3-00:02:51

Wilmot:

Where do you think your parents got that sense of real strict propriety from? I’m not sure that propriety is the right word.

Wilkerson:

I think that, just reflecting over what I’ve read and learned about African Americans in our history, all being daughters there was great concern that we were more vulnerable than boys would have been. There were no sons, no brothers in the family. My father was the only man in the house, so there was a naturally protective kind of situation. Protective from all men. They didn’t protect me from Stanley, but protection from men, from premature engagement with men of whatever age. When I look back and we think about issues of incest and things like that, apparently there must have been concerns like that in African American communities because I don’t know where else that comes from, that there was a sense of wanting to protect.

I was going to add this to a couple of things that all of us were introduced to music largely through piano. My father played violin, played it very well, and all of us took piano lessons. I later went on to play drums because I didn’t want to have to deal with playing for the various

church affairs. I watched my sisters struggle through that. I still remember. I can still read music. I can still play the piano with a score. I remember also that in relationship with the church, we often entertained the Bishop of the church, the Presiding Elder who was like the next person down in the hierarchy. He, Reverend Headen, asked to be my godfather, which was really quite wonderful, and also the local minister. At least one or two of those people allowed us as young women to question and raise issues around dancing and things of that kind.

I learned a lot from my older sisters. I had two older sisters, four and six years older. I'm closest to the one that's closest to me in age, and I also learned a lot by observing. Being the youngest, I learned a lot about relationships with parents and how you get around the rules and how you follow the rules, and what you do to get along. I think my placement in the family made a difference in terms of how I grew up and what kinds of attitudes are formed. I benefited from watching and learning. [phone rings] I think by the time I came along, my parents had settled into parenting a little bit more. My sisters hadn't made any really big mistakes, so they were a little more relaxed with me because I was the youngest. They were probably a little tired out by that time.

I lived in the same house from birth until I got married—lived in the same house. We didn't move around a lot or anything like that, although we did travel. We did sometimes travel, driving to Oklahoma to see family and that kind of thing. And wanted to say that I learned a lot from my mother about practicalities. I think I mentioned before that she was the one that was very practical and my father wanted us to take academic courses and we did. My mother always said, don't forget, you need some skills to have a job, so take typing, and so on. She also taught us how to sew. In my youth, we got introduced to sewing formally in school and junior high school, but you might end up making a gym bag, was the first thing, or an apron, but after that it was up to somebody else. We all learned how to sew well enough to make coats and dresses and suits and things like that for ourselves, which was really a great thing. We always ended up sewing like the night before Easter, to finish our Easter dress or whatever. I actually made my trousseau, what little there was of it, for my wedding. I made a long three quarter length coat. It was bright yellow, as I remember, and some kind of dress underneath for my trousseau. We didn't have a lot of money to spend on things like that, so sewing was an inexpensive way to make something that you really liked. We did a lot of that kind of thing.

3-00:08:06

Wilmot:

Did you help your sisters with their trousseau?

Wilkerson:

I think my sister next to me in age. We would sew together a lot. Well, trousseau is kind of fancy for a dress to change into after the wedding ceremony. There are all those aspects to it that we don't always think about when we're living our academic lives, but all of that was very important to me, growing up.

3-00:08:40

Wilmot:

And yours was bright yellow?

3-00:08:40

Wilkerson:

My coat was bright yellow. I can remember that. the dress was some sort of print. I think they were called princess dresses in those days. They were all sort of one piece and sort of form fitting, and sleeveless, as I recall. I learned a lot about sewing. After we had our first child, I actually made my son a jacket which was some sort of weird plaid. To this day, he thinks, “Why in the world did you put me in this?” [laughs] It was what we were doing then. Eventually we got to the place where we could actually afford to buy more things. I miss sewing. I miss crocheting. I learned how to crochet. My mother crocheted. I miss working with my hands a lot. I look forward to it, when I really, really, really retire, to be able to do more of that kind of thing. It’s very satisfying. It also makes you feel like you can really create something out of nothing, which is really nice.

3-00:09:50

Wilmot:

We all have those pictures from when we were little of when you just wonder what your parents were thinking when they dressed you before you got to choose what you could wear.

3-00:10:00

Wilkerson:

Yes, absolutely.

Wilmot:

Especially in the seventies.

Wilkerson:

Oh yeah.

Wilmot:

And the sixties.

Wilkerson:

Yeah yeah, it’s really something. We didn’t have a lot to say about it when we were kids. Nowadays, kids have more to say about it, but you just kind of had to live with it. More than anything, I want to mention that I thought about it as I was thinking about my family. My mother, for many, many years, worked as a, I guess you call it—worked in the polls. The voting took place down the street from us on Forty-First Street, on east Forty-First Street, and she always worked in the polls. I think that had a lot to do with my feeling that you have to vote. It’s really really, really important to vote because she was always there, and to this day, I rarely miss an election. Once in a while, I’ve missed it, particularly here in New York when the state doesn’t send out ballots like they do in California, so it’s easy to miss who’s running, and even that a vote’s going to take place. But in California, you got all the literature and everything. To this day, I work hard to make all of the elections and to encourage our children to do that as well. I think it comes from, a large part, from the fact that my mother was always involved in the neighborhood polling place. I wanted to give it a little more context because I thought I was a little scattered the first time around.

3-00:11:50

Wilmot:

I think it makes sense. I think it was wonderful. I had a couple of questions pursuant to what you just said. One of them is just the kind of question that might require some thought over time, but I wanted to ask what did you learn about being a woman from the women in your family?

3-00:12:09

Wilkerson:

That's a good question. Well, I think from my mother—my mother was and still is a very feminine woman, and emphasized even more so by my father's love for her. He would give her gifts on all the birthdays, Christmases, anniversaries, and often would buy a big card. A really big card, that was more expensive then. I guess I watched how she received that and how she reciprocated in the relationship. I guess it made me grow to expect that as well. [laughs] My father set a high standard. It was special to see the relationship that they had—both of them. My mother worked outside the home. I was born in 1938, so that's sort of in the middle of the second World War. She worked in service, meaning she was a maid in a household for many years of her life because she was independent very early on as a teenager. She also worked, as I recall, with Canon Electric. She worked in defense, like Rosie the Riveter. I saw that model, of working outside of the home, and it was compensated for because my grandmother, who had stopped working after a while, and so she was in the home most of the time when I was growing up. I had the model of woman who could work outside of the home and still manage the home and still be a mother and all of that. I didn't feel a lot like I missed my mother during the days. Only because my grandmother was stricter than my mother, so we were anxious for her to get back home. I had that model very very, very early on.

My grandmother was a very strong woman. I guess I learned something from her, inadvertently, and that is that she had been married and divorced three times, which is pretty independent for a woman in those years. When I was growing up, she was in her fifties, sixties, probably. She was a very independent minded woman. She spoke her mind, and I think I was a little shy growing up, but somehow that model was always there—a strong person who could speak her mind. I think my sister who is next to me in age picked up that trait. She used to get in trouble a lot because she would speak her mind. I watched that also. I learned from her, how important it was to have an opinion and to be able to speak it, even though as a child, we can only go so far. We can debate issues, but you didn't talk back. If you talk backed, you were in big trouble. Those are some of the things I learned from the women in my family. I guess the other thing is that—that's the immediate family. My mother had a very strong sense of family history. She was one of the three of her sisters who started the family reunions that we have in California. We've had them for three or four decades now. She was always looking for family members, and finding them, and including them in the family reunions, so she was her own historian, in a sense—informal historian. I think I gained a sense of history from her. Also, a love of literature. My father was the musician.

My mother sang, and my father was the musician, but my mother used to recite Paul Lawrence Dunbar poetry to us, particularly to me when she would do our hair. Doing our hair in those days meant straightening it, and that was a long and sometimes difficult process because the hair was very, very curly, and combing it could be a real trial. I learned my first poetry sitting at my mother's knee when she was doing my hair. I can still recite some of the poetry that I heard from

her. Dunbar, the great African American poet was one that she recited a lot, so my love for literature and appreciation for it, and my interest in performing it really started with my mother's reciting poetry to me, and sometimes in the church context and so on.

3-00:17:40

Wilmot:

Do you remember still, individual poems?

Wilkerson:

I do. [laughs] I'm not sure I even know the title of this. It's kind of a misogynist kind of poem because it's about a man and a woman, a henpecked man and a woman who go to the gates of heaven, and she talks about she's been so wonderful and good, even though he hasn't been so good, so can't he come in on her credit, and that sort of thing. So she used to recite that. I know that poem somewhat, pretty much, and some of the dialect poetry that Dunbar wrote. I still know a few.

3-00:18:32

Wilmot:

Do you know one named "When Malindy Sings"?

3-00:18:36

Wilkerson:

Yes. I don't know it by heart, but that was actually one of her favorites. She used to recite that one a lot, and it was a very popular one in the church circles for the teas that were given in the afternoons to raise money by the different church clubs and all. It was a favorite one because you could also sing it. There were parts that you could sing in it. I didn't recite that one so much, but it was one that she liked a lot. It was a very nice poem.

3-00:19:10

Wilmot:

I had another follow up question. You mentioned that your family traveled to Oklahoma quite a bit to see your father's, no, mother's family in Oklahoma?

Wilkerson:

It would have been actually both, because my mother was born in Ockmulgee, Oklahoma, so we did go and visit her brother and family there at one point. We also had a great aunt, I guess, on my father's side, lived in Oklahoma City, so we would drive there and visit them, almost every summer, we would go in this old '38 Dodge for years. We had no air conditioning, we'd go across the desert, and there would be six people in that car. There'd be three children, my grandmother, mother, and father. I don't know how we ever made it. It was very hot going across the desert. We had those water containers that were kind of like canvas bags, as I recall. You'd fill it with water and they would hang it on the front bumper of the car. I guess the wind would cool the water, or keep the water cool, and that's what you would use to drink across the desert.

Of course, these were during the days of segregation, so we never spent a night in the hotel. We had to leave at a particular time in order to try to hit the desert in its coolest hours if possible. Drive all night—my mother and father would trade off driving. My grandmother didn't drive at that point, and we were too young to drive. They would trade off driving, and in I don't know, a

couple of nights, we'd be in Oklahoma. We would also pack lunches, but we didn't have—I don't recall having refrigerated containers then. I guess we could put ice in there. Of course ice would melt eventually. We would pack a lunch and so on, and we'd go into—. When you go into Oklahoma, you're not going through too many areas in those years where you had a lot of black people, so it's not like the South, where you could go into a black community and find a place to eat. You had to kind of ferret your way around and figure out is there a place to eat.

I remember, I'll never forget, once my father went to a restaurant along the road—I think it was in Arizona, or some place—and he went in to just get food to bring out, and they told him that he'd have to go around to the back door, and he refused to do that. He was very angry. My father was a very gentle man. You didn't see him get overly angry a lot unless he was really mad. He came back and drove off, and wouldn't talk about it. So it was always, you had to figure out how you could get across the country if you're going to drive to Oklahoma, or any place across the country in those years. So, with my family, we never drove into the South. My father was from Missouri, my mother was from Oklahoma, and we never went into the Deep South as a family.

I didn't go into the Deep South until I got married and drove with my husband to Shreveport, and that was the deepest I got. We went through Texas, but we going to Oklahoma, but we never went through the really Deep South. My parents really didn't want to have to go there. I guess we had some relatives, but a lot of our relatives were in Oklahoma and had moved westward—meaning my mother's relatives, because she has the bigger family. She's from a family of sixteen children. My father was an only child. They had moved westward. That's interesting and kind of unusual for black families for both parents to have come not from the Deep South, but slightly—I don't know what you call Oklahoma, but midwestern whatever areas and then moved west, but we did. My sisters and I were born in Los Angeles, in California.

3-00:23:54

Wilmot:

What do you remember of Oklahoma?

Wilkerson:

I remember the red dirt in Oklahoma. I had never seen dirt that was red like that. I remember the house that my great aunt owned and lived in. I remember that we would visit in the summer, so there would sometimes be big thunderstorms, and I recall how during the thunderstorm, they would turn off the lights, they would unplug all the appliances, you couldn't iron during that time because it was dangerous, that the lightning would come through. We had a smattering of science, so we thought it was very kind of silly, not knowing the danger, and you really couldn't play during that time. You had to sit in the living room, be quiet and prayerful, when all of this stuff was going on outside—all the thunder and the lightning and all that kind of thing. We as younger people thought it was really kind of silly because we hadn't seen big thunderstorms like that in California, in Los Angeles. I remember that very, very clearly. I also remember, I think the first time that we went, that I can recall, when we got ready to leave the family, when the family got ready to leave for California, all the neighbors—this is not only a function of not only community, but the fact that it was a time of segregation and they knew how hard it was to get food going across the country—the neighbors brought just gobs of food over. Fried chicken, sandwiches, potato salad, drinks, all kinds of things that they brought for our trip back. They

brought so much that we couldn't take it all. We couldn't eat all of that, so we took samplings, and left the rest of that with the family in Oklahoma. The people were just very thoughtful and giving in that way. I remember that very very clearly, because I hadn't seen anything quite like that. I'd seen generosity in California through the church and neighbors, but we didn't have a lot of people that came over when we were driving back and forth across the country. That was a special memory. I hadn't really thought about that in a long time. Those people were very thoughtful and they found various ways to help families, and black families in particular, to be able to travel in a time where it was very difficult to do that. Oklahoma was an interesting place. I haven't been back there in many many years. I'd like to go back and see what it's like now.

One other memory—we visited my mother's family. I've forgotten the little town that it was, but it was way back off of the main road. Brooksville—that's what it was, Brooksville. As we were on our way there, you had to cross a little bridge with planks and so on, on it. The bridge looked so unstable that my father wouldn't let us ride in the car over the bridge. So we got out and walked across the bridge while he drove across. You could hear the planks moving. I remember things like that. We went back to this little town where my mother's brother was a post office manager or something like that. He was kind of important in the town. It was a little bitty village, but it was just very rural, like nothing we had ever seen. It was fun, as little kids, and just very different from what we were accustomed to. They were very good experiences. Having grown up, married, and having children of our own, and trying to drive them places across the desert, and finding how difficult it is to get kids to accept it these days. I constantly am amazed that we were able to do that, that my parents could make us be still so that we could have that kind of a trip. We didn't have air conditioning or anything like that. I guess you just learn to adjust sometimes. So do you want me to talk about my school years?

3-00:29:05

Wilmot:

At this time, I don't have any follow up questions, but let's turn to high school. Where did you go to school?

3-00:29:17

Wilkerson:

I went to high school at Thomas Jefferson High School in Los Angeles. It was five or so blocks from my house. It was the school that my father actually graduated from sometime probably in the thirties. It was a largely African American high school with maybe ten, fifteen percent, we called, and they called themselves Mexicans then. It was not Latino. It was Mexicans [from Mexico]. Our neighborhood was somewhat integrated. One of my best friends was Martha Moreno, who was a Mexican girl who lived across the street from where I lived. She went to a different school. I went to Jefferson High School.

3-00:30:15

Wilmot:

What did your social life look like in high school?

3-00:30:19

Wilkerson:

[Chuckles] Well, you know, my social life—. If you think about social life, dating boys, okay, I didn't have a whole lot of dates. I started going steady with a young man in junior high school—

wasn't Stanley. [laughs] In the ninth grade, I think, and went on my first date in the ninth grade. He was a very nice young man—Wes Harris. He was very smart and made good grades and all. He wasn't necessarily an athlete, although I think he played tennis if I remember correctly, but he was nice manly person, and that kind of thing. We sort of went steady through high school. I was, I guess, known as a bookworm, and I was usually kind of at the head of the class. You know, you don't always—. I was known, but I wasn't popular as some of the girls were who had lots and lots of dates and all. I had a lot of good friends in high school. I participated in the GAA, the Girls Athletic Association, so we traveled around a little bit and played intramural sports and things of that kind. We played tennis a lot. There was a man who was African American custodian at the school. Very tall fellow; he had to be over six feet. I don't know why he was such a good tennis player. I never figured that out, but he was a very good tennis player, so he would coach the girls after school that wanted to play tennis. He coached us so well that we were competitive with the boys tennis team, actually. We didn't have our own intramural tennis. He went on to coach one of the young women who actually did very very well in the kind of semi-pro arena. He taught us how to do things after school. In fact, there was a lot of enrichment in the after school arena in my high school. I was introduced to Shakespearean plays and Shakespearean literature after school by my English teacher. The academic track in my high school was very limited because of resources and also limited because there weren't a lot of kids who were in the academic tracks. There were just a handful of us in any given grade. It was also a smaller school. For some reason, the population in the area had diminished, so for a time, we had part of the local junior high school with the high school. It had gotten small. It's a bigger school now, but it had gotten small in those years, so the resources were quite limited. We had some dedicated teachers—not all of them, but some of them, who would take their time after school to do something like Shakespeare.

I have a clear memory of my first classes in that after school with a handful of students that he taught us about Shakespeare. That's where I developed my really great love for it. His wife also taught at the school. John Long was his name, and Rubeline Long was her name, and she was the speech coach. She taught us oratory and how to speak well, with gestures and all of this kind of thing. They were very very important in my life there. I think my first year definitive experience was with the principal, Mr. Farnham. He was a white man. I was planning to transfer from Jefferson to Polytechnic High School, Poly High, which was more centrally located in Los Angeles. Both of my older sisters had gone there. It was a model, I would say, a school that was integrated teachers, staff, and students. Apparently, there was no racial achievement gap that you see now. Many of the students that were at the top of class were of every color. There was a real commitment to integration in that school. I don't know if anyone ever did a study on that, but they should have. My sisters had gone there, so I figured I would go there too, because it was a better school and so forth. In my first week, or couple of weeks or whatever, I went in to get my transfer. The principal called me in, Mr. Farnham called me in, and said—and he had a marvelous booming deep voice. He could speak from the stage of the auditorium without a microphone, which really impressed all the kids that in a big auditorium, he could speak without a microphone. So, he sat me down, and said, now I will give you your transfer if you want it, but I want to talk to you before you do this. Then he talked to me, and essentially what he said is that schools are made in part—the quality of a school is made in part by the students who are there. If all of the students who are high achievers leave the school, then there is a deficit that is created. He wanted me to think about that. I did think about it, and I decided not to take the transfer. There were two things going on. It's not just being civic minded, although that was an

introduction to that. Maybe in choosing where you go to school or what you do, that you shouldn't always look only at the way it benefits you. You also ought to look at what can you give in the context where you find yourself. I have to admit that it was attractive to me not to follow in the footsteps of my sisters. As a third child, third daughter, I was always kind of seen as their younger sister. This would be a chance for me to sort of strike out on my own, so that was also important to me. I asked my parents about it, you know, would it be okay. They said, fine, it was okay. My father was pleased partly because it was the school he had gone to, although they wanted us to make sure that we had the best experience possible. I stayed at Jefferson, and Mr. Farnham—I always had tremendous respect for him. Whenever there were problems—Jefferson was at the top as the school with athletics and football and track and so on, and on occasion there would be a fight that would break out or something like that, that would always get all over the city, that Jefferson had the black kids over there were fighting and getting into all of that kind of thing.

When things like that happened, he would call the whole student body together about our responsibility as young people in the name of the school, and try to instill this sense of values in us. He was quite a remarkable man, and he stayed there for many years. I've always remembered my conversation with him as a definitive moment in my life. Starting with my family's teaching of culture, particularly African American culture and literature and so on, I think I began to build on that. After one or two more experiences, it became almost natural for me to focus my scholarly work on African Americans. In a sense he was validating being in a largely black school and making a commitment to that community and making the best of the opportunity that I would have there. Staying there was a definitive moment in my life. My parents still insisted that we be in the academic track, and my father especially insisted that we major in math and science, which we did, and did well. All the time when we were kids—I think I've told this story before—but he was always telling us to look things up in the Encyclopedia Britannica. He always stressed the wonders of science in the world. Even though he was a religious man, when he talked about the miracles that were written about in the Bible, he often had a natural explanation for it. For example, who walked around? It was Joshua. Yeah, I think so. Joshua walked around the walls of Jericho and they made a lot of noise going around the walls and so on, and the walls came tumbling down. There was a song about it. My father would say, yes, it's a miracle, but it's also in a way, it was also probably because of the vibrations from the sounds that they were making—the music and the pounding of drums or whatever, that helped to have those clay walls and so on fall. He always said physics was a part of his life. He talked about it so much that I was just really dying to get into a physics class, because I had heard all of these stories and explanations from the time I was a kid. Math and science we majored in. We took typing, definitely. We had no TV in the house until I was in high school because my father didn't feel that any of the TVs that had been developed were good enough yet—that they weren't electronically sound yet. He waited for a particular one—I think it was RCA—to come along. I never had the struggle with TV until I was I think a senior in high school. Between parents, supportive teachers, principal, I had a very good high school experience. We had our problems. We didn't have a lot of resources. For example, I took solid geometry in a classroom with a textbook and had a teacher who would oversee it every now and then. I would take my papers to him, and that sort of thing. I think that some other friends of mine—Stanley, and other friends there took, I don't know, maybe it was physics, in the summer with three or four of the students, and one of the students teaching it. All of those kinds of things. It also gave us more responsibility. We had a little cabal of friends who were in the academic track, who kind of ran

the school. I was president twice, of the class. I can't even remember—maybe tenth, and somewhere in the twelfth grade, and Stanley, who I eventually date and married was class president and also student body president or vice president. I can't remember now, but we all kind of ran the school. In twelfth grade, we could get out of class to do things that we wanted to do with the student government and other things. We also were [Knights] and [Knightettes]. It was kind of the honorary groups [Knightettes] of students. We were selected to be that, and we wore green and gold sweaters, the colors of the school, and you actually were expected to be at the entrance during the lunch hours and make sure that students that came on and off the campus had passes. We were kind of like the informal, not exactly like security guards, but sort of like that. In those years, you didn't have actual security guards on the campus. You had teachers who took on that kind of responsibility, but always with students. We were among those students who did some of those kinds of things around the campus.

We had a lot of good opportunities. A nice thing about a school like that was that you really did get opportunities to take responsibility. You got opportunities to go to summer camps, like Anytown U.S.A. that was run by the National Council of Christians and Jews, which sponsored a citywide- countywide camp. You met people from not only all over California, but also international students who came to the camp for a week or so, and you'd learn together. You learned a lot about other cultures and people. It was really wonderful. I went to Girls' State, where they select students from each high school to go for a week in Sacramento, and replicate the state government. I got to do that as a tenth grader because I was an alternate and the person who was supposed to go couldn't go. You got opportunities like that that you might not get in other places. In the summer schools that you could go to in those years, you could go and take academic courses which would free up your time during the regular year to take electives like drama and music and so on. Unfortunately, today, kids can only go for remediation, or if they failed a class, or something like that. In those years, summer school allowed you to open up the regular curriculum, so you could do those other kinds of electives during the year. You did drama productions and all of those kinds of things.

3-00:46:11

Wilmot:

It sounds like also that you were, as a young woman and your intelligence, people really said that it's great that you're a woman and that you're smart.

3-00:46:21

Wilkerson:

Well, I don't know that we paid so much attention to it being a woman. I guess that was important, but it was kind of expected in a funny kind of way. It's hard to say to think back to what it really was like in those years, because young men were also encouraged. It was particularly important for young women. Let me try to link it up with this. I think this is maybe one of the reasons. It goes back to something I said about girls and African American families. In those years, at least when you lived in an area where there was industry, boys had a chance to—they could, in some areas, they could leave high school, or even graduate from high school and go into a job of some kind, get benefits and so on. This is particularly true in industrial areas. With girls, the choices were very circumscribed. There was always the fear with girls that they would have to go and work in service, as they say. They would have to live in or work in a family's home. Girls are much more vulnerable in that circumstance. In those years, I think if

there was a choice in a family, where you had to choose to send the girl on to school, to college or whatever, or send the boy, more than likely, the choice would have been the girl. This is in, I would say to some extent, in middle class families, but I think in most families, because the choices for girls was so much more limited. If a girl went to school, she could become a teacher or social worker. If she didn't go to school, there wasn't much else. In those years, African American women were not in the clerical work force. They were not in the clerical work force. When the women's movement came along in the sixties and many white women were pushing rightfully so, to get into the professional level, black women were working to get into the clerical level, because that was not acceptable necessarily. The expectation and the hope was that a girl would be interested in things enough, intellectually inclined or have enough aspirations to want to continue in school rather than either to work in service or to get married and have children, and be dependent in a sense. It was very important in many families for women to take advantage of whatever intellectual resources they had. I think it is tied in part to being female as opposed to being male.

3-00:49:28

Wilmot:

If it's a fair question, what did your career horizon look like in high school?

Wilkerson:

In high school? My career horizon?

Wilmot:

Yeah, what did you think was going to happen?

Wilkerson:

Well, I said I wanted to be a teacher. I may have said this on the earlier tape. I remember very clearly, a conversation I had with one of my father's friends who was a firefighter, and they kept pushing us to do something more—a teacher, a possibly a nurse. My father really wanted his daughters to be engineers and he tried very hard to make us do that and to help us do that. None of us did it, although my sister next to me tried very hard at UCLA to do that. I'm not sure that—he knew about the kinds of limitations that were there, but he had not gone to college or to a university, and I don't think that he knew all the impediments that were there. My parents believed, at least as we started out in college or university, that if you had the intelligence to go, the people who were there were educated and enlightened, and so the likelihood of you running up against racism and so on was not great. Knowledge is power, and people who are educated are enlightened. It's really the ignorant people who are very racist and all. We kind of grew up with that notion. I don't know if it came from my parents and all, so when I went to college and encountered racism, it was stunning to me. It was very very stunning to me. I really thought that people who had a broader exposure who knew more and so on would not be that way. I think that's what we kind of had to struggle with in terms of understanding what met people in college. His desire for us to be engineers—he really felt that if we had the ability to do it, we should be able to do it, not realizing there are all other kinds of contextual issues that make it hard for people wanted to pursue particular careers. As a young woman, I think in high school, the typical career for those who have a career would be teaching, and possibly social service. That's not to say that there weren't those who went on to become doctors and all of that kind of thing, but that would not have been the typical place to go.

3-00:52:23

Wilmot:

You raise this issue of going to college and encountering racial discrimination. What met you in college?

Wilkerson:

What met me in college? [laughs]

Wilmot:

What was it like?

3-00:52:37

Wilkerson:

Redlands was very interesting, a very interesting situation. First off, just in terms of placement, I wasn't the first African American to go to Redlands at all. In fact, it was an experience of another young black woman from my high school many years before, who the chemistry teacher knew that she had gone and had a good experience, and so he had recommended Redlands to me. I hadn't heard of Redlands before that. I was the only African American woman in my class. There was one other who was a male—Ron Billingsley. There weren't many of us there. There were five African Americans on the entire campus of probably twelve hundred or a thousand, something like that. I got a job in the library. During the summers, I had worked with L.A. Unified Schools and their library division which was kind of centralized. You produced the card catalog. I had done that for a long time as well. With that experience, I applied to Redlands and got accepted. I needed financial support. They gave me a job on site in the library. They had me working at the reserve desk, a very public area. When you walk in, you see the person at the reserve desk. So I went and I worked there.

I guess maybe the second week or so, maybe the third week, I came in, and I was told I had been reassigned. My assignment was to go down into the stacks downstairs. It was sort of cage-like area, maybe the size of this room or smaller, where you had to work and do card catalog kinds of things. It was tucked back. You couldn't be seen. There were no windows or anything. I balked at that. I wanted to know why am I being reassigned. There was this woman who was really a very mean woman. Everybody thought she was mean, whatever color, and she told me that I worked too slow. Well, I had worked enough at L.A. Unified to know that workers had some kind of rights. I asked her, "Why didn't you tell me if I was working too slow. I could improve. You could give me a chance to improve." She just kind of blew me off, so I asked to see the head of the library. They kind of said, no, you can't. If you're going to work, you have to work down there. So, I quit on the spot. It took a lot of courage for me to do that because I really needed the job. I had to earn the equivalent of a semester's tuition, minus the grant that I received. I really had to make some money because my parents could only pay for a portion of each semester's fees. I just knew it wasn't right, and then I went back to the dormitory and I cried. [laughs]

I guess that could have really reinforced an anger and a real frustration with white people. I could have become really racist myself then, but as luck would have it, there was a maid in the dorm who was a white woman, who sounded like she came from Appalachia. She had a country accent. She was cleaning and she heard me crying and she came and asked me what was wrong. Well, she didn't ask me what was wrong. She just came and comforted me and told me it would

be okay. That meant a lot to me because I was away from home. I wasn't that far away, but I was a couple of hours away from home. I didn't have a car so it wasn't easy for me to get back and forth, and she was a white woman. She was a woman whose children probably wouldn't go to the University of Redlands, if they went anywhere to college. I just remember that was very special. I couldn't easily categorize. Because I'd been hurt by a couple of white people in the library, but I had also been comforted by someone in the dorms. That folded into my experience. It was my first real racist situation that I ran into there.

The rest of it wasn't—racial things I ran into there were more out of habit and ignorance. I remember one young woman who was a good friend. I lived in Beacon's Hall. The cheapest rooms were in the basement, so there were about three rooms in the basement, and there were about nine girls there. We were obviously the poorest kids that were there, and we used to go and do things together all the time. We'd go to the games together, stuff like that. We were all walking across the quad to a game when one of the girls did, did the "eeny, meeny, miney, moe" thing. She made the mistake and slipped and said, "Catch a nigger by the toe." She was so embarrassed when she did that because she had come from a context where there weren't black people so it was a natural thing. The minute it came out of her mouth, she looked at me and she realized what she had done. That's what I mean about it coming out of unintentionally, in a way, out of ignorance. There was that sort of thing that happened. Something similar that happened in a gym class actually, which I didn't actually hear, but the teacher realized what she had done. So she was forever apologizing to me. It was those kinds of things that were happening.

I felt like I was expected to be a kind of representative of the race. I decided I didn't want to do that. I wasn't going to do that. I was going to try to be myself as much as possible, that I wasn't going to carry the race on my back. I didn't feel it was right to do that.

3-00:59:16

Wilmot:

How does one do that? How does one distance oneself from—

Wilkerson:

That is censoring yourself. You don't do this and you don't say that. You don't go here and you don't go there. You don't eat this, you don't eat that. If you like watermelon, you don't eat it because you are stereotyped if you eat watermelon—. Stuff like that. I decided I wasn't going to follow in that. I was certainly conscious of being a black female, but I decided I wasn't going to be—there are only five others on the campus, so are you ever going to allow yourself to be seen with another black person on campus? You suddenly stand out. It looks like you can't get along with other people, or maybe you're conspiring in some way. All that sort of stuff that you carry. I decided that I was going to try not to play into that. If I saw another black person on campus and I wanted to talk with her, I was going to do it and not worry about, "Well, let's go meet behind the wherever in the park where people won't see us" kind of thing. But it's not easy when there's so few of you on the campus.

But on the other hand, Redlands, first because you didn't have what I would call a critical mass of African Americans on campus, we weren't big enough to be a problem, where certain patterns might be so obvious that then the group would need to say something. In later years, when Redlands got about a hundred and twenty students of color on the campus, there were issues that

really surfaced. When there were five of us, it was a little hard for those issues to surface except in very individual ways. We didn't have a critical mass, so therefore any issues that happened were seen as more individual as anything else.

But there's another piece of Redlands that made it a reasonable place to be. That was that it was a liberal arts college that was formerly affiliated with the Baptist Church. It wasn't affiliated when I was going there but it used to be. There was a kind of ethos there that it should be a nurturing place, and nobody should fall through the cracks, so that if a person didn't show up—let's say in the dormitory—if you didn't show up at one of the dorm gatherings or something, then, the resident, the R.A. would come and find you, want to know, 'What's going on? How are you?' That happened regardless of what your color was, because there was this ethos that we want to make sure nobody falls through the cracks. Since we [African American students] weren't a critical mass, we kind of folded into that, and that was the nice part of it. That was the very supportive part of it.

On top of that, I had a wonderful experience with the Wesley Methodist Church, which was closest to the college. This young minister, Reverend Ron Cameron who was just a terrific guy. He'd come to the campus, we'd go to the church, we'd have all kinds of sessions to talk about religion and other kinds of issues. He was just really, really terrific, like a counselor almost. The Wesley Methodist group [which was part of the African American Methodist Church] was just a wonderful place for friendship and this man who was a little bit older than we were was such a great friend and counselor. I think he kind of endangered his own ministry by being so receptive to young people. He let us take over the whole church one time and do a drama there, and one of the guys rewired the church to the point where when the elders came in, they couldn't get the lights turned on. You know, stuff like that. [laughs] He was really, really terrific. There weren't racial boundaries there, somehow, you know. He was a very open and generous kind of person.

My other racial experience that I was thinking about that I think was very important to me was—well there were two, two professors in particular. One was the debate coach. Because I had participated in and won a few speech contests in high school, I signed on for the debate squad, but I didn't like debate as much because I found it difficult to take a position that opposed my belief. I tried but I wasn't really good at that, but I settled into oratory. For my first oration, I was very impressed by Anne Morrow Lindbergh's book, "Gifts from the Sea." It was all very beautiful about serenity and walking on the beaches and so forth. So, I wrote my first oration on something like—I think "Solitude" was what it was called. I borrowed liberally from the book and talked about how wonderful it was to contemplate various things and walk on the beach and all of that kind of thing. I delivered this thing for him and Dr. Moulton listened very patiently and at the end he said, "Well Margaret, that's all fine and good. That's very nice, but why don't you write about something you know about?" So I thought, "Well, what do you mean?" This is 1955. It's Brown v. Board of Education has just happened in '54. Emmett Till is murdered in Mississippi in '55. The South was heating up. Lots of stuff was going on. What he was telling me was why don't you write about the racial situation and what's happening. I didn't know how to take that because at first I felt, well he just thinks that's all I know about. I can write about other things.

3-00:05:57

Wilmot:

“I know about solitude. I know about gifts from the sea.”

Wilkerson:

[laughs] I know about solitude. Yeah, I spent a lot of my time walking on the beach. [laughs] But I did it. In a way, that question, for whatever purposes he had—now he was smart enough to know that if I was a good speaker and I could write a compelling speech, that I could be pretty powerful in a competition. I’m sure he must have figured that out, but his question opened a space for me to talk about race, and what was happening in the country at that time. It really took me further into this whole area, what later became known as African American Studies, Ethnic Studies. This is long before this had really surfaced in that way, in a formal way. I learned a lot of things.

For one thing, I was going to do some research on interracial marriage. I needed some kind of statistics. I went to the library to find this, and I looked up interracial marriage, and there was no category for that. There was no category. I said, ‘I don’t understand why there is no such a thing as interracial marriage’ in the card catalog. One of the cards referenced “miscegenation.” But marriage was not. It was just the cohabitation. It wasn’t even a library category. This search exposed me to all kinds of things that I learned by having to do some research on this, and also to dig into my own history, as well as read really what was happening in the world. Kids at University of Redlands, many of the white kids there, had never heard of the NAACP, even though the NAACP had been one of the major factors in the *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation decision which had happened just the year before. It really opened up something new for me. It connected more with my own roots and my earlier experiences. I really feel indebted to him for asking the question for whatever reason.

I did go on to compete in oratory and win on a national level and travel, and do stuff like that. It was great. I also did oral interpretation. I used a mixture of work. I liked W. H. Auden and some others, and Langston Hughes. I’d get a theme and put pieces together and read them and all of that. I won some national competitions in that as well. Of course he was very happy with me. [laughs] As I say, for whatever reasons he asked that question, it worked for me in a sense, because it legitimized my reading and studying and talking about these kinds of things.

Redlands was a great place in many, many ways and I’ve said some of these things when I’ve gone back twice for commencement speeches in the eighties, and I said these things there, that this was a mixed experience for me, but all in all, it was really a great experience, and Redlands has been very good to me over the years. I’m just going off of the board of trustees. I’ve gotten various post-graduate kinds of awards from them. They’ve been very, very good to me in lots of ways. My last story about Redlands is about—

3-01:09:42

Wilmot:

Can we break for one second?

[End Audio File 3]

[Begin Audio File 4]

Wilmot:

Margaret, who was the second professor at Redlands that you remember being very remarkable?

4-00:00:12

Wilkerson:

His name was Dr. Ralph Hone. I have to make a comment about one other as contrast. I mean, there were professors—not many—but I remember one who was a Southerner, who was a historian, Dr. Applewhite, who was really entertaining, you know, as a professor. I really liked him until he started talking about happy slaves. [laughs] It was that sort of jolting sort of thing. It was difficult when you really liked a professor and many other students liked him but there was something that they had said or done that really made it difficult for you to relate to them. But Dr. Hone was an English literature professor.

4-00:00:58

Wilmot:

Kind of like Gertude Stein.

Wilkerson:

Yeah. That's right. So Dr. Hone was an English literature professor. He was a very stately man, and he had this very kind of wry sense of humor. I believe that he was a Presbyterian minister. I think he had been ordained as a minister. I think it was Presbyterian. He had this marvelous sense of humor and we had some real characters in our class who, they just made lots of fun out of it. One fellow whose name I'm forgetting was very, very smart and he did a report on Arthur J. Schnitzler, who was, I think, a German playwright. No one had, of course, heard of him. He wasn't very famous. This fellow made this marvelously humorous presentation and then later in the course of the semester, he would remind us that this was Schnitzler's birthday, so we all had to honor—. He would just carry this stuff on, so we had a lot of fun with it, and the professor was fine with it. Well, Dr. Hone—let's skip to the drama department.

We had opportunities in the drama department even if you weren't focusing on drama, that you could sign on to do a senior thesis. I signed on to do Archibald MacLeish's "JB" as a reading, which had been on Broadway one of those seasons when I was at Redlands. It was kind of poetic treatment of the biblical story of Job. My friends urged me to ask Dr. Hone to play the role of God in this. The character was named Zeus in this. So I asked him, and he accepted. We thought he might be interested because he loved to read English literature in class and loved to perform. He agreed to do it. In my first rehearsals, we had people reading and so forth from the stage, and I had suggestions for everybody except Dr. Hone, because he was a professor. He sat and listened very patiently and he said, "Well, Margaret, don't you have any suggestions for me?" I kind of gulped and made a few tentative suggestions, but he was very good about that. I think about it now, about a professor submitting himself to an undergraduate student. I'm not even a graduate student, and willing, being a part of that ensemble and that team and so on, he was just marvelous. He passed on maybe a couple or so years ago, and before that happened, he knew that he was failing in health, he selected a few of his students, and I was one of them, to give portions of his library to. I still have a couple of books. He sent it all to me, and I told him that what I wanted to do was—I was heading the drama department at Berkeley then, and I said I'd like to

donate most of them to the dramatic art library, but there are two or three that I kept for myself, and he said that that was fine.

4-00:04:28

Wilmot:

Which ones did you keep for yourself?

Wilkerson:

I can't remember, but one was a first edition. I can't remember because I'm not even sure I brought it with me here. I might have left it in California. I might have it. I'm just blocking it. I'll try to find it. There were just a couple of books like that that I decided to keep. I was so touched by the fact that he was willing to do that. He was a very special man. Many of us that took his class were really just crazy about him. Really just terrific. He was the other professor. I remember now, one of the off-campus jobs that I had was to be the drama teacher at the First Baptist Church in Redlands. His children were in the drama group. I directed plays with them on the side. It was my job to do that. It was great to do that. I met his children at his funeral. Of course none of them remembered me because they were all so young, but he was a terrific guy, and his wife was wonderful. We visited with him sometimes when we were in Redlands, many years after graduating.

4-00:05:56

Wilmot:

Where did you live while in college?

Wilkerson:

Where did I?

Wilmot:

Live, while in college. Where was your residence?

Wilkerson:

I lived on campus all the time. Actually when I was going to Redlands, it was very difficult if you were a woman to live off campus. That was one of the requirements. You had to live on campus. I started out in Bekins Hall as a freshman and then went to Billings Hall, which was a small house slightly off the campus, but it still belonged to the campus. I forgot the other building. There was another one that I went to as a junior and a senior. I made lifelong friends there. We were all independents, meaning that we did not join sororities there, although as an African American woman, I would have been welcomed into a sorority. It was true of other women who were there and men. There wasn't any discrimination along those lines. I just decided that sororities were not my thing. My sister next to me in age was very prominent in AKA's black sorority, but it wasn't my thing. On campus, it wasn't the group that I wanted to run with. We were all independents. We called ourselves the "I-Eta-Pi's." [laughs] We were in the Methodist groups. We did drama together. We did all kinds of things. Phyllis Ford was a great friend. Jean Bazemore, Dutchee Edwards, people like that that I'm still close to. We still talk to each other and get to see each other whenever we can. That was really great.

4-00:07:44

Wilmot:

You mentioned that you said that wasn't "the crowd that I wanted to run with." So, that brings the discussion to me of if you were to draw a map of the social scenes that were unfolding at Redlands, what would it look like, and where were you located in that?

4-00:08:03

Wilkerson:

Well, if you did a social map, the sororities and fraternities were very, very important on campus.

4-00:08:10

Wilmot:

These are white fraternities and sororities?

Wilkerson:

They were all white Greek organizations but as I say, they admitted people of color if they wanted to be a part. That was not an issue. What can I say? In fact, they are still very important. It's very interesting having been on the Redlands Board. Redlands has these class reunions and things like that and people come back. There's always a place for the Greek members—people who were members of the Greek organizations, but nothing else is really recognized, the other kinds of clubs and affiliations that people had. They were all good organizations. They did a lot of useful things and what have you, but you just kind of felt like it was clan-ish. They had these various traditions of their own Greek activities. There was this thing of pinning the girls, you know. It was like engagement. Most of the dorms, the major dorms, are on either side of this big quad area. When I was going there, the men were on one side and the women were on the other side. Now they have mixed sex dorms and all of that. When there were men on one side and women on the other, the Gamma Nus or whoever would come over and they would cluster under the window and they would sing to the young woman who was being engaged and the young man would come and pin her and all. It just wasn't our cup of tea. [laughs]

We bonded around other kinds of values somehow, and there were men and women in our group. Many of them were part of the Wesley Methodist group, but not all of them. We were just all very independent. There were other religious organizations, clubs, and so on. We were pretty progressive, so we didn't even fit with those organizations. You either belonged to a Greek organization or you were outside of that. Now, I had a lot of friends who were in Greek organizations because as a sophomore—I had forgotten what this honorary organization that we belonged to the Spurs—and you were selected to be there. I was also selected to be in Mortarboard, which is a national organization, and that was a great honor because at the end of your junior year or something like that, during one of the chapel worship services, or one of the convenings where you had the whole college together, they would call off the names of those who had been selected. Someone would walk down the aisle before they called your name and bring you a rose. You were honored in front of the whole college campus, so that was a big, big thing. That was very nice. A lot of sorority girls were a part of Mortarboard and the Spurs. I had very good friends, like Sandy Bender, who was very much involved in sorority, but Mortarboard crisscrossed those lines. That was the nice thing about some of the honorary organizations. It wasn't as if if you weren't in a sorority, you were persona non grata. You didn't have to be, but unless you were in something that crisscrossed those lines, you really did find yourself outside of the so-called mainstream circle.

4-00:12:22

Wilmot:

What kind of clothes were you wearing? What was your style?

Wilkerson:

What kind of clothes did I wear? [makes a hooting noise]

Wilmot:

What was your aesthetic?

Wilkerson:

I'm remembering a terrible picture.

Wilmot:

What was your style?

Wilkerson:

In those years, our skirts were longer, kind of between the knee and the ankle. You always had a waist, you know. You wore slim skirts, but you also wore wider skirts. I can see in my mind, a picture of myself in a skirt that kind of goes out like that—a kind of flared skirt. Peter Pan Collars, and things like that.

4-00:13:07

Wilmot:

Would you wear your hair straight, or would you wear it natural?

Wilkerson:

My hair was straightened. Absolutely. That was well before the natural. It was long or longer than it was now. No, that's not right. I had my hair cut in a poodle cut in high school, caused quite a stir, and I kept wearing it short when I got to Redlands. But the problem that happened in my freshman year was that in our gym class, every four or five weeks, we did something different—like you were learning social graces at one point, and then you had swimming—so, not long after I got there, suddenly I had to be in the water, which really messed my hair-do up. [laughs] I had to find ways to compensate for that. This was well before the natural. I didn't start wearing it natural actually until I was at Berkeley. Probably, '75, '76, '77, '78—something like that. No, they wouldn't have known what to do with a natural. [laughs]

4-00:14:35

Wilmot:

What does a poodle cut mean?

Wilkerson:

A poodle cut was—hair was short and kind of curled all around. No part. I don't know why it was called poodle cut, but it was very popular in—I graduated from high school in '55, I think it was, so around that time, it was very popular. It was very short in the back. It was a nice cut.

4-00:15:07

Wilmot:

So this group of friends that you were running with, were you all getting into theatre together?

Wilkerson:

Yeah, actually we did. Not all of us, but a number of us. Jean and Phyllis and I—Dutchee helped out. We were doing senior theses, which meant that we got a chance to direct something of our own, but before that, the drama program at Redlands allowed students who were majoring in other areas like crew, even to act sometimes. I didn't act much because they weren't doing things where a black woman made sense, to them anyway, to be in, so I did some crew work. I did sound for—I can't remember which show it was for—but I did sound in some cases. We'd do costumes. We also did costumes for each other at different times. I remember sewing a dress for a show that Jean did. Because it was a small drama program without professional crews around, the students got a chance to do a lot. So we learned a lot in the process. [pause]

I should say that, since you mentioned drama—this really began, I would say, a serious shift from majoring in history, just straight history, to drama. As I moved on to UCLA, I took a secondary credential in language arts which combined theatre and literature, and then eventually went for the PhD in drama. I think it had a lot to do with the experiences at Redlands, although I had been involved in drama in high school, and I directed my first play actually, at the age of fifteen when I was in the church. I directed a play in the church. The interest had been there for a while. My father had moonlighted as a firefighter. He moonlighted as a projectionist, often in the Spanish speaking theatre. He liked movies, I liked movies. That interest in drama was just kind of building along the way, although when I said that I wanted to get a PhD in dramatic art, one of my father's friends said, "Why don't you get it in something important, you know, like economics?"

I realize now that it was something of a radical decision to do that because to be a black woman doing a PhD in dramatic art, the question is, "Why are you doing that? And what are you possibly going to be able to do with it?" But it made a career, somehow. It worked out in some odd sort of way. [laughs]

4-00:18:40

Wilmot:

Margaret, while you were at Redlands, was there a dynamic—what was the surrounding community? What was the community right outside the university?

Wilkerson:

Well, that's kind of interesting. We didn't have much of a relationship with the community. The college didn't, to my knowledge. There were obviously some connections. I had a connection with the Baptist Church because I worked there, so I had some affiliation there. There were some affiliations with the churches—with the Methodist church, the campus one, but other than that, unless you had some reason to interact with the community outside of Redlands, there wasn't a lot of connection there. The campus was fairly insular.

4-00:19:31

Wilmot:

What was the community outside of Redlands like?

Wilkerson:

There wasn't a lot of diversity there although there was some. There was some that was there, in the high school, for example. I don't recall specific neighborhoods that were—. There were certainly neighborhoods that were somewhat poorer than the middle class and upper middle class people who were around, but I don't remember whole sections that were like that. Redlands was pretty much grown up around the university. People who would have been there, who would have been lower income, possibly minority, would have been service personnel. We were not that far from San Bernadino and Riverside, within driving distance. That's where you would have had your larger minority communities because they were bigger cities.

Wilmot:

As far as politics, while you were in college—this was 1950—

Wilkerson:

This was '55 to '59.

Wilmot:

Did you kind of have a sense of the national scene in terms of politics? Did you have a sense of things getting ready for change? I'm thinking this as just prior to the Civil Rights Movement.

Wilkerson:

Definitely around the Civil Rights Movement. I don't think that there was a heavy consciousness of it on the campus. I'm trying to think if there were particular incidents. The number of African American students were not increased particularly. There was a feeling of it being its own sort of bubble in way. Not that it was completely insular, but the currents that were beginning to drift across the campus were not as evident.

One thing that was evident though, that was very interesting as I look back on it, and this happened when I was a freshman. These were the days of panty raids. Like in Berkeley and other places, they had these panty raids, and on the news they would show the stuff that kids were doing and all. The fellows at Redlands, when I was a freshman, staged a panty raid, in the typical fashion. The freshmen women in my class planned a reverse panty raid, and stole their shorts out of their dorm rooms and all that kind of stuff. Unfortunately, I had to work that evening. I was working, I think still in the library or some place, so I didn't get a chance to participate but it was interesting that the dean of women—. They didn't say anything to the men about their panty raid, but the dean of women gathered all the women in their freshmen dorms and so on together to talk to them about unladylike behavior. As I look back on this, I think it was the beginning rumblings that erupted in the women's movement. This is just before the birth control pill actually comes out. This was this sort of sense about—the women were playful about it, but it was also that “Why do they think they can do that to us? We will do that back to them.” There was a sense of equality that was really emerging among the women there. I thought that was pretty interesting.

Of course, the college took a very traditional point of view on it. There was also an interracial couple—one very well known interracial couple. The young man, Jackie Crowder, was his name. He is now known as Thalmus Rasulala, who was an actor, actually, in film. He had a beautiful baritone voice. He really had a lovely, lovely singing voice. He was dating a young woman. I

think her name was Bunny something—a young white woman. There were rumblings and issues around that.

4-00:24:35

Wilmot:

At Redlands?

Wilkerson:

At Redlands, at Redlands. I guess he was exceptional, so it was okay in some way. Other than that, there really wasn't any known interracial dating. I had a date about once a year there, and usually had to import my own. [laughs] Because it was a predominantly white campus, I think, it didn't have the motivation to deal with the issues as much. Issues would be dealt with in enclaves, small groups in different places where people would talk about it, but it didn't really sweep that campus until the sixties.

4-00:25:25

Wilmot:

While you were on campus, while you were an undergraduate, did you ever think about interracial dating as an option for you?

4-00:25:35

Wilkerson:

As an opportunity for me?

Wilmot:

Option.

Wilkerson:

Oh, an option?

Wilmot:

Was that even something you thought about?

4-00:25:42

Wilkerson:

Oh sure. Sure, because you wanted to go and do things every now and then. I would have one, I would call it, courtesy date, with one of my white friends who was in the "club." We might go on a date some place, but it was a courtesy friend date, that sort of thing. Yes, I thought about it, but no, there weren't any options to speak of. There were two Africans who were students during that period, and they also dated the white women. That's really what happened. The one African American male in my class dated white women and married a white woman. I guess there were one or two other males. There was one, really gorgeous, about the time I was getting ready to leave. I think I was a senior—Gallisneed Weaver—a gorgeous Native American man who obviously had African American parents also, somewhere. He was just a gorgeous man. He didn't seem to do too well academically, but I knew white women students there who were just crazy about him. One, who just came and talked to me and asked what could she do to get his attention. She would do his homework for him, she would do anything for him. What could I say? A black woman's currency wasn't very high [laughs] on that campus as a date, but certainly

respected as a colleague. I had lots of other forums that I was involved in, like in debate and like, I sang in the university choir, the various other kinds of groups—the Mortarboard that threw you into contact with other circles of men, and so on. I had good friends and that sort of thing, but no real dates to speak of. [laughs]

4-00:27:55

Wilmot:

Okay. What kind of music were you listening to at that time? Do you recall?

Wilkerson:

Music. Stanley, you need to help me out if you're going to sit over there. You need to tell me what kind of music we—we liked West Coast jazz, like Stan Kenton. I guess we liked danceable music like—[sigh] who were some of those we listened to? We used to go dancing at the—. I can't remember that now. [Stanley says something.] What? The Palladium, that's right. We used to go dancing at the Palladium in L.A. That was in high school also. I want to say Benny Goodman, but it wasn't so much Benny Goodman. There were other musicians. Les Brown, that was one. These were bands that used to come through town—L.A., that is—and you could get to hear them and dance to them.

I say West Coast Jazz because it wasn't until much later that I began to understand some of the differences. I don't know whether Billy Eckstine was later or earlier. And Nat King Cole. Gosh, what else did we listen to? Was there anything new on the horizon? I'm trying to think what else was out there. When we were in Redlands, that's kind of before—we graduated in '59 and that's kind of before the other more sixties oriented music kind of came out. Those were some of the folks that we listened to.

4-00:29:59

Wilmot:

How about as far as texts that you remember really kind of coming alive for you?

Wilkerson:

Texts?

Wilmot:

Yes. I'm having trouble saying it, but yes.

Wilkerson:

Gosh, I'll have to think about that.

Wilmot:

You mentioned that you were enjoying this "Gift from the Sea" by Ann Marie Ginsberg?

Wilkerson:

Anne Morrow Lindbergh.

Wilmot:

Oh sorry.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, no, that's alright. Yeah, that was a very impressive book for me them. Let me just think. I'm remembering the racy ones. In one class we read Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, I think it was.

4-00:30:46

Wilmot:

I remember that.

Wilkerson:

That was really kind of a shocker for all of us. Dr. William Main was the instructor there. He was always challenging us with really incredible work.

4-00:31:08

Wilmot:

Was there any early theatre pieces that moved you? Or plays at that time?

Wilkerson:

Well, yeah. I certainly liked the MacLeish's work, "JB." I liked Eugene O'Neill's work. We read a lot of O'Neill. I have to really think about that—what texts were really exciting? What was speaking to me then? Yeah. Certainly some of the African American literature I kept up with even though we didn't really read it as part of the curriculum. It was not part of the curriculum necessarily. I remember going much deeper into Shakespeare there. William Main was really an extraordinary teacher and his way of looking at Hamlet and Macbeth—the major tragedies, "King Lear," in particular—that he loved, he just knew how to go in and ask the most challenging kind of questions. In fact, when we graduated, for all of his students that had come through his class, he had a question for each of us. His question for me was "Does suffering purify?" That's the kind of thing that he did. He also wrote—he did an inter-textual commentary on the tragedies of Shakespeare. I remember that particular Shakespearean course as the equivalent to my introduction to it after school in high school, that really, really spoke to me.

4-00:33:04

Wilmot:

I'm kind of marveling at that question still. "Does suffering purify?" Was that a question for you? Was it a question for Shakespeare's text?

4-00:33:10

Wilkerson:

No, no. That was a question for me that he gave to me to answer. I can't remember what I said. It still boggles your mind a bit to try to figure that one out. Those were the kinds of very evocative questions that he would ask students all the time. He was really quite an extraordinary teacher and certainly memorable. I was trying to think what else. Oh, yes. One that was absolutely kind of like a bible, and that was Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*. A lot of us read that and lived by that. Read him all the time. I think I bought his other books that were available at that time, although none touched me as deeply as *The Prophet*, I think. I still go back to it. It was a beautiful book.

I'm trying to think, isn't there something else that we've read. I can't think of anything else right now.

4-00:34:21

Wilmot:

You can always say more later. I asked you this question in high school and I'm asking it again, which is at that time, what did your horizon look like? What did you think was going to become of you professionally?

Wilkerson:

You mean from Redlands?

4-00:34:38

Wilmot:

Yeah, and upon graduation. What did you think was next? What were the next steps for you?

Wilkerson:

I was going to be a teacher, and I was. That's what I wanted to do. I'm not sure that at that moment I thought I would be a drama teacher necessarily. But I do know that I moved away from history. There was a really particular reason why I moved away from history—I thought I was, anyway, I became a theatre historian, but you know. In terms of history, I took a course at Redlands. I'm forgetting the name of the professor. He was a good professor, but for our final paper, I don't know what they call it exactly, but we had to take a document that he had created and try to verify it. Meaning that you would read it—let's say it's a document that was supposedly was written at whatever time, by so and so. So, we had to read it very carefully. It wasn't a huge document. It was probably a page. We had to footnote each of the statements that was made, so that if there was a particular phrase used, you would research when that phrase was written, within a historical context, and you'd write a footnote for it. So, you ended up with a document of several pages with a few lines of text and then a big footnote, like that. It was fascinating work to do, I enjoyed it, but I had this other side to me that was about social change, commitment to community, trying to improve the quality of life for people, and this just didn't seem to fit—at all. It was something I might enjoy doing, but I wanted to know, what is its social value? What difference does it make if I do this? That moved me away from history, even though I liked doing the work. It was precise and I liked doing that, but it moved me away from, I thought, away from history.

The irony of it was that explorations into African history were just starting, at least on that campus. I remember the boyfriend of one of the women that I knew—he was white—he was interested in African history. I was already a senior, but I didn't realize what other currents were out there. There was no way for me to know it at Redlands, from the professors that I had, particularly the history professors that I had. So I moved away from history and then of course, in about another five or six years, it caught up with me at Berkeley as the whole ethnic studies and African American studies movement got going. Ironically, if I had known about that, I probably would have gone into history as a straight field. I was a history major at Redlands.

By the time I got to UCLA, I was there precisely for a secondary teaching credential so that I could teach, and I was majoring in language arts, which was like a theatre credential in a way, but language arts combined theatre and English. I got my credential in that and then went into Jordan High School to teach English and theatre and be their drama teacher. I made the shift

within I guess three years or so, from graduating. From '59 to about '61, '62—something like that.

4-00:38:51

Wilmot:

Yeah, it is 1962. I wanted to ask you a question. This is a question that actually goes back to high school. I was wondering, in terms of geography, how did you relate with the rest of Los Angeles? Were you someone who was kind of neighborhood based? Did you go out? What did the world of Los Angeles feel like to you?

4-00:39:28

Wilkerson:

Well, let's see. I was there for a quite a while.

Wilmot:

When you were a young person growing up?

Wilkerson:

When I was younger growing up, L.A. was pretty segregated. We called it the eastside, then, where I lived. Not east L.A., but the eastside of town, was where blacks and Mexicans for the most part lived. I can remember, as a kid, that essentially, blacks did not live past Main Street. I had a girlfriend who went to my church, and her family was in the church, who lived on Main Street. So that was kind of like the dividing line. Gradually, blacks pushed westward. As I was growing up, L.A. was expanding for African Americans in terms of where you went, where you could go. Of course, because we had access to transportation, especially as we got a little bit older, we would get out to Hollywood Boulevard, because the Palladium was out there. It's either on Hollywood or Sunset, one or the other. We could get out there and go dancing. As you met people through the Anytown U.S.A camp., or athletics or other kinds of scholastic activities, you got a chance to see other schools and other areas. It was an expanding universe for us. It could always be a little chancy to go outside the boundaries where black communities actually were, but you still could do that. If you had the money, you could go to the Palladium, you could go to various places in the city.

For me, actually, my family never really respected any of the racial boundaries. We lived in a black neighborhood, but we would go *driving*, is what we would call it. We would take a Sunday drive out to Malibu, out to the ocean. My mother loved going to the ocean, as did all of us. We'd go to the beach, or we would just take a ride out around the perimeters of L.A. I remember that as a kid. Socially, it was segregated in certain ways, that continued to expand, but just in terms of geography, and appreciating and enjoying the beauty of the area, my family always did that. My father was usually off every other Sunday, and we would always pile into the car and we'd go driving as far as we could get reasonably and get back home. We saw a lot of the L.A. area by the time I had grown up, we had seen a lot of the neighborhoods. We'd driven up where UCLA was. All of those kinds of things, we went to see.

4-00:42:46

Wilmot:

In growing up, you kind of became a young adult in the fifties. But I realize that your family had been there predating the World War II migration of African Americans from the South. I wanted to ask you—was there kind of a social tension that unfolded there?

Wilkerson:

You mean in terms of migration?

Wilmot:

In terms of people that migrated from the South and people who were already there, specifically African Americans from the South versus African Americans who were already there?

Wilkerson:

There was this sort of funny class thing that went on, especially—. I guess it was class. I'm not sure if it was actually—well, some of it was class. It was also just the notion that we and our family were the ones who had moved out of the segregated South and we wouldn't stand it any more. There was always something of a division between those who had moved out and those who didn't move out for whatever reasons. There were good reasons not to move out as well because in many cases those were very cohesive black communities. There was that sort of difference—a more pioneering spirit. The others were kind of left behind and they kind of stayed and what have you. Sometimes it caused small ruptures in families and little differences, people in the South feeling that the folks who had moved west had abandoned the family homes and the family roots and all of that to go out to the strange place called the West Coast. There was that kind of thing.

There was also this other thing, funny kind of thing, with people that were migrating, who had migrated out—and maybe this coincides with World War II, I'm not sure—some people who would pretend that they were natives of California. There was a particular time in my life as a person in California, that if you were asked where you were born and you said you were a native, you might not be believed because the notion was that you really want to deny your southern roots. You don't want to say you're from Mississippi. You don't want to say you're from this place or that. So that was a funny phenomenon.

I remember a kid, a young person in Jefferson. I know you remember this too, Stanley. A young man whose name I am blocking now—he had come, I think probably from Mississippi, but I kind of think he may have come from the Gullah Islands, because we could not understand him when he spoke. We really just couldn't get it. He had a hard time there for a while, but he was also an athlete. If I remember correctly, he was a football player, I think. [Stanley speaks] J.T. Holloway, right. He was short and squat, a very kind of built kind of fellow. He kind of earned his way because of his athletic ability. He was a tough fellow, you didn't want to go up against him, but you really literally could not understand what he was saying. That was very difficult for him. People initially would put him down and so on, but he eventually became a part of the campus community in high school. There was this sort of notion that, especially if you had a Southern accent, a kind of difference that was there that people would play on and tease you about and things of that kind. But you could really just not be believed if you said you were a

native of California. “Oh yeah, sure. You just want to deny your Southern roots.” I think all that has changed.

4-00:46:59

Wilmot:

It’s different now, what you’re saying, that phenomenon. California is still such a destination that it is one in twenty, if you ask them where they’re from, they say they’re from California. It’s a different dynamic, but it’s still kind of enduring in some ways. Slightly different than what you are talking about. One of the things that we skipped over was this one question of when you first started applying to college, which ones did you apply to besides Redlands?

Wilkerson:

I applied to UCLA. I really think those two are the only two I applied to. I don’t recall waiting to hear from anybody else. UCLA, I knew very, very well. I knew UCLA and I knew USC. USC was too expensive, and it wasn’t the most popular among the folks in the neighborhood because USC was very close, on the very edge if not in, actually, black communities, and simply had no relationship with them at all. Our high school for example, we didn’t have any student teachers from USC until we were about to graduate. They never sent them to Jefferson High School. There were certain racist things that were going on in the athletic program that we knew about. Mainly it was too expensive to go to because it was a private school. UCLA was the one place—my sister had gone there also and so—it was a public institution and so on. Redlands was a private institution and it was only through a grant-in-aid that I would have gone there. If my chemistry teacher hadn’t recommended it, I would never have known it had existed. When it came along and I got a grant-in-aid, we figured out that I could manage to do it and I could go away from home, which would be nice to do.

4-00:49:14

Wilmot:

Did you think about applying to a historically black college or university?

4-00:49:19

Wilkerson:

I really didn’t. We didn’t have any tradition in the family of HBCU’s. Well, nobody in the family had gone to college. My parents had not gone to college. Going to an HBCU meant you had to go to the South. That would have been a big decision. Plus, except for Oklahoma, we didn’t have any relatives in the South that we knew about or we were close to. We just didn’t have any. They had all moved out, pretty much. A lot of times, people who went to HBCU’s had family close by to watch out for you and that sort of thing. I really didn’t think about it. I think I figured it would have been too expensive, anyway. Many of them are private.

4-00:50:20

Wilmot:

Do you have the sense of what the trajectories of your classmates were? Did they have a similar trajectory as yours? Did they go to college?

4-00:50:30

Wilkerson:

Let's see. I think a number of the guys went into the armed services. The G.I. Bill was supposed to be ending right around the time we were graduating. A lot of young men were recruited in on that basis. I think some went on to college, but I don't think a lot. I think it was a few. I'm not even sure that very many went on to—. A few may have gone on to community college. Our class was very small in high school. I'm sorry, we were talking about high school?

Wilmot:

Mm-hm.

4-00:51:17

Wilkerson:

I think we had ninety students in our class. We still graduated by semester then. I think between the army and the few going on to college—a handful, literally going on to college. Most of the girls, many of them got married and had children. My guess is that some went back to school. There were a few out of our class who went on to school, but not many.

4-00:51:52

Wilmot:

I was also wondering because in your early life, there was both World War II and the Korean War, and I wanted to ask you whether anyone in your family, in your immediate circle of friends, was anyone impacted by that war? Did anyone serve in the war?

Wilkerson:

In World War II, my father had a friend, Thomas Killingsworth, younger than he was, who was in the Navy. It was through him that we heard more about Pearl Harbor. I remember that conversation. I remember that Pearl Harbor was 1941 and I was only three years old, it's hard to believe, but I have a very clear picture of hearing him talk about it, sitting and overhearing the adults. So, he was impacted by World War II. My father and my father's friends, he said they were too young for World War I and too old for World War II. Plus, for firefighters, they served in a central [essential] occupation, so they typically weren't taken.

Our connection to the Korean War, my sister's husband, actually—well before he became her husband, my sister nearest to me in age was very popular, had lots of boyfriends. I remember she had two boyfriends—well, she had more than two, but two of them were sailors. So they were in the Korean War. In fact, the man that she married was actually at Eniwetok and saw the atom bomb exploded. They were involved in the Korean War or in the service around that time. Other than that, we have not had a lot of close family or friends that were actually in the war. I had a cousin, and he's still alive, who is a bit older than I am. He was in World War II, probably, but we only saw pictures of him and things like that. Nobody really close in our circle. It's a part of life that we've missed in a sense, except for students of mine when I had students in the service, in Vietnam, for example.

4-00:54:47

Wilmot:

Which we will get to, unless you want to talk about it now. I'm going to stop and change all of

our tapes again. Let's take a break.

[End Audio File 4]

[Begin Audio File 5]

Wilmot:

So, after graduation, you move back to Los Angeles?

Wilkerson:

For a short time, actually. I decided that I wanted a break from school and wanted to go into the work world for a bit. Because I had gone straight through so far. So, I applied for work with the YWCA and was offered—they kind of screen people nationally in their national office and then I was given several options of places to go. One was Youngstown, Ohio, and one was Upstate here—Kodak, where Kodak is—Syracuse. I took the one that had the highest salary, which was all of—I can't believe that's what the salary was—it was forty two hundred a year. That's right. I can't believe that's how much. And I actually saved money. I don't know how that happened. But at any rate, I got that job and moved to Youngstown and it turned out to be the year of the big steel strike. I went there as an assistant adult program director. I worked with one other woman. The woman who headed that Y there was well known—she was a white woman—she was well known for her—she was a real pioneer in terms of integration in the Y. She was really wonderful. So, I went there, and I thought this was my chance to get away and discover myself. I'd always been the nice upstanding, “do all the right things” person. I thought, ‘Maybe this is the chance for me to get out and see what am I really like.’ Well, you know how it is. You find that you're the same person that you were, wherever you are. [laughs] The woman who headed, Dorothy was her name. Sabiston, that was the name. Dorothy Sabiston.

Wilmot:

That's a very interesting name.

5-00:02:46

Wilkerson:

It is. So because I was only about twenty years old or something like that, she kind of took me under her wing, and she literally would not let me take an apartment. [chuckles] I'd never lived in an apartment by myself and I wanted to try being independent. The reason she wouldn't let me take the apartment was that I was only about twenty or so years old, and the last person who had the job that I had taken, who was older than I was, had had an aneurysm and had died in the apartment and people hadn't found her for at least a couple of days or something like that. She said, you have to live here in the Y. [laughing] So there I was, in Youngstown, living in the YWCA, in a room there, living where I worked!

But it was really good work. It was fascinating. I worked with African American women with children. Some were single, but many of them were married to men who worked in the steel mills. Of course, when the strike happened, the men were hanging around the house a lot, and a lot of them got pregnant in that year. Everybody was having babies around the same time. It was interesting because I worked with women who were low income. I also worked with the Jazz Society, which I'll talk about in a minute. So you had a chance to meet the women whose

husbands worked in the steel mills, but the women on the board of the YWCA were the wives of the presidents of the steel mills. So it was really quite a range. I remember that they used to have a kind of flea market although they had another name for it. The women, the board members would give their fur coats away and all this fancy stuff that they didn't need anymore because they were making lots of money, but then the steel strike happened and it was really different. I had never lived or worked in an industrial town, so I had no idea what that meant until I got there. So that was a really remarkable experience.

Then, one day, a group came to me, Father Boller of the local Episcopal church. He was a black man who eventually moved out to L.A. He had a meeting in his church, a group called the Jazz Society of Greater Youngstown. For some reason, they couldn't meet in the church anymore. I'm not sure what it was, for whatever reason—it wasn't that he was throwing them out because he was still their advisor and worked with them—but he was looking for a place, maybe it was a larger place, for them to meet. I got approval for them to meet in the YWCA. What that meant was that of all the groups that met in the Y, only this group started their meeting at, like, ten o'clock at night. Because if the men, the musicians had any gigs to play, they would come late. They didn't want to start at eight o'clock. This was not the kind of group that started at eight. So, we got special permission for them to play music in the YWCA. It was a residential Y, so that was a big issue. The group would meet until one o'clock in the morning.

These were all black musicians, mostly, for the most part. From them, I learned about the racism of the musician's union, at that time, which was segregated. Often very talented musicians could not get work and so the Jazz Society was a way for them to keep current. They played wonderfully! There was a flautist who was just amazing and a pianist. It was really, really something. It was very exciting. I worked with them for a long time.

I also learned in working with these men that I had to be careful about relationships. When I would call the houses of any of the men who were, like the officers—if I had to call them during the day—I would call, and if a woman answered, I would state my name and say that I'm from the YWCA, and I'm calling your husband about blah blah blah, before I talked to him. Because you never knew how the men would use your calling. I learned to be careful about that. There was one guy there that I really was attracted to immediately. Stanley knows about this. Then I found out he was married, and I just cut it off. He was not happy. He was very upset with that, but I decided I did not want to be beaten up or shot by a woman or a wife who was angry. And it was really against my values to do that.

It was really a wonderful experience. I learned a lot about music and their work. I decided to leave that job after a year. Stan was one of the reasons, because we were carrying on a long distance relationship by that time. He was playing football at Cal State LA. Of course, that meant that young women were very interested in him and what have you and so, I decided that I needed to come home and take care of business there. [laughs] I'm going to look at him! I decided to leave after a year and I took the train home. When I went down the platform to get on the train, some of the guys from the Jazz Society came down and played for me as the train took off. They played "There Will Never Be Another You." [laughs] So I left in tears, you know! It was just very, very special. These were all guys that were older than I was. I was twenty, twenty-one years old. I was very very young. They were all probably early thirties, maybe. Some might have been older than that.

5-00:09:10

Wilmot:

That's so interesting that you raised this idea of being a young single woman. Actually you were a young single woman for a very brief amount of time.

5-00:09:22

Wilkerson:

[laughs] I guess that's true.

5-00:09:26

Wilmot:

It's such an interesting time you know, when your person means so much to different people. It's interesting to think—. Did these men kind of regard you as a family member? Did they kind of treat you like little sister or—?

5-00:09:46

Wilkerson:

It's a little hard to say.

Wilmot:

Well, they really liked you.

Wilkerson:

One or two were kind of interested, but many of them were married, so I kind of made it clear that I wasn't going to do that. I wasn't going to fool around with a married man. And the guys that I thought were single weren't. So, they treated me with respect, actually. It was really kind of interesting. They treated me with respect. It's not like they were all pursuing me or anything, even though they were married. I guess that's part of what I mean by however you've learned to conduct yourself, unless something really radical happens, you tend to do the same thing whatever context you're in.

There was a man who was a little bit older. He's probably about ten years older than I am. He worked in the steel mill. He was a nice looking fellow. I think he had some property. He certainly had a car. He was very interested in me, wanted to get married, and I really wasn't ready to do that, and I wasn't sure that he was the person, actually. But I remember that he took me to a house party—he was going to take me to a house party. So, he drove up to this apartment unit and he said, "Wait a minute, I'm going to go in and check something out before you come in." He went in, he came back out, and said, "We're not going to go. We're going to go some place else." I finally got him to explain to me. Apparently they were playing what they called blue records, or showing blue films—sort of semi-porno, soft porn, whatever. He said, "You're a nice person. You're good. I don't want to take you to..." It was that sort of thing where obviously, if he had these friends, he probably would have gone if he'd been with somebody else. I say that not to say that I was Miss Goodie Two Shoes, but simply that you get used to handling yourself in a particular way. It didn't turn out to be the wild year that I thought it might be. [laughs] Not wild. I mean, not really wild. I just wanted to see what would happen if I wasn't in my usual context where people didn't know me.

5-00:12:22

Wilmot:

But it's interesting that you didn't think New York.

Wilkerson:

I didn't think like what?

Wilmot:

You didn't think "This is the year I'll go to New York" or "This is the year I'll go to Chicago."

5-00:12:34

Wilkerson:

I probably would have gone to New York if I had found a job with a Y that I could do.

Wilmot:

Or "This is the year I'll go to Europe."

Wilkerson:

Oh, I wouldn't have even thought of going to Europe. That's the weird thing about it. I really would not have thought about going to Europe. Don't ask me why, I'm not sure. But I did go to New York, actually, right after I graduated. I had forgotten that. It was a very important time. A girlfriend and I went. She passed away not three or four years after we all graduated, very suddenly. Nancy. We went to New York to go to the theatre. That year was the year that "A Raisin in the Sun" was on Broadway. So I saw "A Raisin in the Sun." It was an absolutely amazing year. I saw *A Raisin in the Sun* with Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee and Lou Gossett, Jr., and all those people. I saw "Touch of the Poet" which was last of Eugene O'Neill's plays. We saw Tennessee William's *Sweet Bird of Youth* and there was one other that I can't remember. There were, like, four incredible dramas on Broadway which hasn't happened in many, many, many years. Outside of the Tennessee William's play, I think, we saw Marlon Brando standing on the street because he had gone to see it. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. I don't think we were here more than a week. It was just one of those little trips and we must have saved our money or something like that to go. That was a great moment. I had no way of knowing. I did not meet Lorraine Hansberry. I had no way of knowing that I would come around to working on that play in the way that I have. So, that was exciting. But anyway, back to Youngstown—so I left there and came back to California.

5-00:14:27

Wilmot:

I have a question about this New York trip. Would you say that was one of the major markers for you?

5-00:14:36

Wilkerson:

Did I—?

Wilmot:

Sorry, would you say that was one of the major markers for you, in terms of deepening your interest in theatre?

Wilkerson:

I think, as they say, “entered into your consciousness.” The fact that I wanted to go, first of all. I know, the other play was “JB.” MacLeish’s “JB” that I had directed as a senior thesis. I got a chance to see that as well. I saw a play that I had directed a reading of; I saw a new play that I had heard about, “A Raisin in the Sun,” and then some classic works by two very classical American writers. It entered into my consciousness. It was percolating, I think, at that point.

Wilmot:

When you—just to return to JB, the play you directed as a senior thesis at Redlands—I’m not familiar with the narrative of that piece. What did you bring to it? As a director, one who interprets texts or people, actors, what did you bring to it at that time?

5-00:15:43

Wilkerson:

Well, JB was based on the biblical story of Job.

Wilmot:

Oh yes.

Wilkerson:

Which I imagine you would know.

Wilmot:

I do.

Wilkerson:

Although it’s a more modern interpretation of it. So, there are two sort of singular figures that are kind of seated above everybody else. That’s essentially God and Satan, although the name is Zeus and Mr. Something—I can’t remember what they called him, but they didn’t use the classical names. They are constantly commenting on what’s happening there. Because it was a biblical work and it was a reinterpretation of it, when I had done drama at Redlands in the First Baptist Church, and done it in my church in high school, it was all about reinterpreting biblical texts, or commenting on it, that sort of thing. Later, when I did the Kumoja Players at Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church, I took it a step further in terms of doing, not biblical dramas, but dramas that raised important spiritual issues for people, fundamental moral and spiritual issues. That’s always been a theme in the things that I’ve done, particularly in school and in churches, and eventually at Berkeley, actually.

5-00:17:12

Wilmot:

Well, biblical texts, that’s such an amazing place to start as a director and an actor because whether you take them at face value and read them as someone with a faith, or relationship to faith, or if you just read them as literature, they are just so powerful.

5-00:17:32

Wilkerson:

They are very powerful.

Wilmot:

The story of Job in particular is just—really wrenching.

Wilkerson:

Oh, it's really filled with all kinds of issues and contradictions. Of course MacLeish was a great poet, so it's a lyrical poetic drama. It's very powerful. It's very, very powerful. I had had a teacher actually, just as a sidenote, who was the chaplain of the campus. I took his class called "The Bible as History and Literature" or something like that. One thing that I took from that course was that he emphasized that the Bible was treated as a sacred text, but it was actually written by people. It was people's versions of history. He didn't talk about what had been left out necessarily, but now I know that the gnostic gospels were discovered in the forties, and my guess is that he must have known about that. I don't recall him talking--he might have, and it just went over my head. The Gnostic Gospels are sets of writings during the same time or around the same time as the gospels that we know of in the New Testament, but were designated as not sacred, so they were not put in. They are now being written about—the gospel according to Mary, the gospel according to Thomas—now, I'm reading about those and going full circle back to that. I remember that was the one thing that I took from that course. I had not thought about that. I had encountered the gospels and the Bible in church and it was a sacred text and that was it. We always interpreted it and questioned it in lots of ways when we saw contradictions in it, but we had never realized that it was a human document. That hadn't hit me until I took that undergraduate course. I think that had something to do with my choosing to do these kinds of works which I thought were about great stories in the Bible and trying to come to grips with it as a contemporary human being.

5-00:19:59

Wilmot:

Do you remember any other stories from the Bible that stayed with you, not necessarily that you went on to direct, that just even now stay with you?

5-00:20:11

Wilkerson:

Certainly Adam and Eve. It's always the problematic one because I was raised—I don't know how folks reconciled it, but I was always raised on the idea that knowledge was important, and something that you should seek. To have knowledge in the way in which the Creation story as being a bad thing, and because you sought knowledge, you got thrown out of the Garden of Eden, and how terrible that was, and we lost innocence and purity, and all those things. You think, "I don't get it." [laughs] Also, blaming essentially the woman for that, that's always been a problem for me. I've never been able to take it in the traditional way. I have to say that's got to be a very human piece [laughs] of the Biblical text. The story of Adam and Eve has always been an issue for me. The story of Cain and Abel, of fratricide and competition—.

5-00:21:25

Wilmot:

All these amazing themes emerge.

Wilkerson:

Really, really, really amazing. And of course the story of Christ and the revolutionary nature of what he talks about in the Biblical text. He wipes away all of the ten commandments, essentially,

and says, “You don’t need to go by all those ten things. The two things you should remember is to love God as you love yourself, and to love your neighbor.” He doesn’t say that you shouldn’t covet your neighbor’s wife. He doesn’t codify it. He says, “These are the two principles,” and if you take those principles, they are quite revolutionary. If people—and people have tried to live by those—you get into a lot of trouble in this world doing that.

5-00:22:19

Wilmot:

That, and the idea that the simple act of someone else can be revolutionary, if one was actually to do the work that it takes to really do that.

Wilkerson:

Absolutely. So what does that say about gay marriage that we’re all having a fit over? What does it say about interracial marriages? What does it say—just a whole bunch of things, you really have to think about them again. I’ve always found stories in the Bible to be very interesting and very challenging. Without treating them as Biblical stories, they can be used as a basis for some of the most fundamental struggles that humans have. It’s a great text to work from.

5-00:23:21

Wilmot:

I’m asking you to reach back quite a bit, but I wonder what kind of choices did you make as a director? Do you remember any of the choices?

Wilkerson:

As a director?

Wilmot:

Of the short piece J.B. Do you remember any of the choices that you made around it? I’m asking you to reach far back to your senior year of college and tell me if there were any choices that you made there as a director for how you wanted that piece performed?

Wilkerson:

First off, I decided to do it as a reading. Not only because it meant a big investment in sets and stuff, but I thought that the sense of the work could come through better if you didn’t have to worry about movement on stage, so people could really listen, almost like you listen to a radio drama. We did situate people on the stage. We didn’t just have people sitting in a row. I chose to put Zeus and whoever played the Satanic character side by side and elevated over everyone else, so that they could be commentators. Then, whatever else happened, happened down on the flat stage. So, that was a choice.

I did choose to put my English professor [Dr. Ralph Hone] in it, and give him that weight of God, in a sense, but a God that was being challenged and protested all the time, because the other characters have great lines. It’s not all just God in there. There are some wonderful lines in there. I can’t remember a lot about what else I did, actually. I can’t even remember who else was in it, but I remember those characters in particular.

Let’s see, the Satanic guy—now that I think about it—Randy was his name—a great guy. He was—I wouldn’t say effeminate in a strong way—but he was softer kind of character, a softer

male. I just wanted him for it because he also had a wry, sardonic aspect to him, so I thought he would be really good, and he was. I didn't think of the sexuality aspect of it consciously, that was not in my mind, but now that I look back on it, that made it also very interesting and different. Those were some of the choices that I made.

5-00:25:55

Wilmot:

Thank you for taking the—

Wilkerson:

I guess I could call them choices. I was pretty young as a director. [laughs]

Wilmot:

I know you were a young director, but I just think it's interesting to get behind the craft there. As we go on, we'll look at other things you directed and still think about choices. I think that's great. Okay. I don't mean to jump around but I had one other question which was to refocus back at your time in Ohio and when you were working with the young mothers with children, not necessarily single, what was their ethnicity and racial background?

5-00:26:38

Wilkerson:

They were practically all African American that I can remember.

Wilmot:

And what did your day to day work consist of there? If you can just remember the texture of a day in Youngstown?

Wilkerson:

Let's see. I don't remember having to do too much, too early in the day. I mean, I didn't have to start at eight o'clock, partly because the Jazz Society had met until one o'clock in the morning at least once a week. Those were the two organizations. I'm sure I had others. We were expected to write descriptive reports of what happened at each meeting. One of the things I would do is to make sure I wrote that out. I wrote some fairly lyrical things [laughing] about the Jazz Society because it was really wild. It transported you sometimes. I would do that. Sometimes there were logistical things that had to be dealt with, particularly if the groups were taking a trip, or moving somewhere else and meeting, or something of that order. I had those kinds of things to do. We had staff meetings. Those were the things I remember. Then in the afternoon usually, our groups would meet anywhere from noon to some time in the afternoon. Then, of course, the Jazz Society met at night.

I knew I had begun to win over folks in the Y—the place where we worked, the Jazz Society met in a room that was like a gym and it had a balcony. There were two elderly white women who lived there who had been long term residents there. They had set in their mind what should be and shouldn't be. One evening, I glanced up and they were sitting in the rafters listening to the music. So I knew then that we had won our battle with the Y. [laughs] Because there was some question as to, “Why do you have this group coming in here, and these kinds of characters who

were usually in bars playing, and keeping us up at night with their music,” but they were enjoying it. It was a very special moment.

5-00:29:01

Wilmot:

So when you came back to L.A., how did you come to teach at Jordan High School?

5-00:29:12

Wilkerson:

Let’s see. I came back in 1960. I needed to figure out what I would do. I was back from my great sojourn out into the world of one year, so I decided to go to UCLA and get my teaching credential. So, I enrolled and was majoring in Language Arts and I took my first graduate seminars, actually, in the theatre department there. Stanley and I were going steady at that time, and I guess we got engaged somewhere during that year, probably, because we got married on July 2nd, 1961. That was only about a year or so later. Before that, I was taking graduate courses [starts laughing]—and Stanley is going to kill me for telling this. I was doing a paper for this particularly rigorous professor, William Melnitz. I was doing it at the last minute as usual, pushing the deadline. I was typing; this is before computers. I’m typing busily, and Stanley was punching the holes in the pages, and we got mixed up and he punched some of the holes on the wrong side of the page. [laughing]We didn’t have time to retype. We had to cut the pages off really short on one side and put the holes on the other side. It really looked bad when I turned it in! But you know, it was alright. It got in and all of that.

It was all those kinds of crazy things that were going on during that time when he was in school also, in graduate school. Were you in graduate school then? [Stanley says yes] I think you were in graduate school. He was in graduate school in Health and Physical Education. Then we both did student teaching—. I guess we got married in ’61. We lived in Pasadena. That was a trip, as we had to drive a long way to get not only into Los Angeles, but then to go out to student teach. He was at Cal State LA, which is closer to Pasadena than downtown LA. I was at UCLA. He was working on campus. I was working part time at the YWCA of the Woodlawn Y, which was not far from where I used to live before I was married. Our day started at six o’clock in the morning or something, as we would drive to Cal Sate LA, I would drop him off, and then I would go to UCLA to classes, and then often would go out to Venice where I was student teaching, and then drive back into town at the Woodlawn Y and work there, leave there, and go to my parent’s house which was close by, usually have dinner or something there, until Stanley was ready to go home, which was, like, at ten o’clock at night.

So we covered LA in this little Lloyd car that had been built in East Germany, that cost about a thousand dollars, that I owned. It had two cylinders, and got about fifty four miles to the gallon. It was such a little thing that when we started to have trouble with it, you could literally sit in the driver’s seat and put your foot outside on the ground just like you were on a scooter, and kind of help push it. Many a morning, we started it that way. Because as it began to need repairs and parts—the Berlin Wall was built, separating East and West Germany, and so you couldn’t get parts to repair this car. It was just crazy. We were young and we were able to deal with it. We lived in Pasadena, only for about a year or less, and moved into L.A. on the West Aide in an apartment. Then Stan injured his knee. Oh, before that happened, we had planned to go to the Peace Corps. We had planned to go the Peace Corps. We were accepted and everything.

5-00:33:51

Wilmot:

What changed?

Wilkerson:

Stan was demonstrating high jumping at L.A. State. He was much fitter than I was, but he injured his knee and had to have an operation. Fortunately, I had taken the L.A. City Schoolteacher's exam. When we were planning on going to the Peace Corps, I went ahead and took the exam because I said, "Well, let me see what it's like, so when I come back, I'll be prepared to take the exam," because some people didn't pass it. Fortunately, I had passed the exam, and then when he was injured and we couldn't go, I was able to go ahead and get a job as a teacher. When his knee healed, he was teaching also. He finished his masters and was teaching at Franklin High School in L.A. So, I got a job at Jordan High School at the last minute. It was not the school of choice of many people. [laughs] Stan had a friend then, Don Wilson, a Berkeley alum, who was teaching there at the time, and he called and let us know that the drama teacher had left, and they were trying to find someone to fill the role of the English teacher and the drama teacher. I think I must have gotten the job the day or the weekend before school started.

So, when I started teaching at Jordan, which was a predominantly black school, on 103rd Street, where the Watts riots started and all of that—when I went there, I did not have a classroom of my own. I was teaching five different subjects in five different rooms as a new teacher. I learned quickly how to negotiate all of that. It was quite an experience. It was really quite an experience. I had all of the—you know, the hierarchy and pecking order in English departments in high schools. You don't get to teach the students on the academic track. You teach the average, below average, whatever the other people don't want to teach. [laughs] I did get a chance to teach the advanced composition class at one point, had some extraordinary students there. I taught the average and below average students and had a good time doing it and really working with it.

I also taught the drama class and directed the shows there. I had said to the principal when I first came in that I wanted to do things that were challenging for the students and that I hoped that he would be supportive of that. I wanted to do plays so that they could really learn from them about the literature and social issues and what have you. He said, sure, that's fine. Well, every single play that I selected, the girls' vice principal said I shouldn't do. She was the one that was supposed to approve the plays. You had to approve the plays. So, when I said I wanted to do "Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court," she said, "The students will never be able to sustain this. They can't possibly do this." So I had to go to the principal and get his approval over her head. So we did that. When I decided to do "Everyman," this medieval play that I rewrote for them, because different characters personify death and lust and all these different kinds of things. It wasn't the subject matter so much that she felt they would never understand this. It wasn't that love and lust were in there. It was that they would never understand this. So I had to get approval over her head again.

When I did "A Raisin in the Sun," which I did there in 1965 in the fall, it was coming right after the Watts riot, the first really big one. She felt that the play was too revolutionary, that it might cause a riot. So I had to get permission to do that. We even did [Anton] Chekhov. We did some short dramas by Chekhov that were wonderful. I had some really talented kids. I had kids who were designated as non-readers who learned to read because they wanted to be in the play. I had

a young man who was a stutterer who I told, “If you want to take a role in the play, I’ll support you and we’ll get you through this role.” He said, “I don’t think I’m ready to do that yet, but I want to run sound.” So he ran sound, and he was the best soundman you ever want to see. It taught me—some of it I’ve just been dealing with on the weekend at this conference on higher education in the performing arts—it taught me a real power that drama can have in a school situation teaching young people. Kids that you think can’t learn can learn from drama.

I took students to L.A. City College, even my English classes, to see plays. They would see things that were very challenging, like “Firebird” or something like that where it’s all about various conceptions of time. I took average to below average kids to see it from English class. And they got it. [snaps] Like that. Because it was played out on stage. I was just telling Stanley the other day that Paul Winfield just died, the great, marvelous black actor. I remember seeing him as a student at L.A. City College, taking my students there to see the play. And he was a student. Because he was such a gifted actor, he was playing a lead role in Pirandello’s “Six Characters in Search of an Author.” Which was revolutionary in those days for a black actor to play that role. Things like that. They saw Beah Richards play in James Baldwin’s “Amen Corner.” We just made sure they had rich experiences. [Stanley says “Twelve Angry—”] We did “Twelve Angry”—well it was based on “Twelve Angry Men,” the play about the jurors, but we did the version that was “Twelve Angry People.” We had all kinds of issues. In that play, they had to examine a switchblade knife. We had to rent a pistol that shot blanks. So, there was all that worry in school, about can we have this it around these kids, and is this going to be safe. We had elaborate methods to make sure that the knife was passed to the right person backstage and they were responsible. Lots and lots of issues that I was talking about in terms of this DVD that I was telling you about earlier that documents the work of two teachers in Compton, California, that just took place just a year or so ago.

5-00:41:25

Wilmot:

One of your students?

Wilkerson:

One of my former students at Berkeley. All of the kinds of issues of kids first looking at the plays and saying, “What is this?” and “It doesn’t relate to me.” One story I always love telling is that I had only one drama class for a long time. I tried to build a drama program there but I wanted to get better books for them. We had these old terrible state texts that were just awful. L.A. City sent out this notice to teachers and said, “We have new sets of drama books, and if you’d like to test them for us, you can do that.” I applied to do it, but I couldn’t get them to send them to Jordan. We didn’t get to do that. Despite all those kinds of barriers, I was finally able to get a second drama class. Okay, because I had also taken students from the one drama class to compete in the citywide festivals and one or two of them had won something. But most of all, they had gotten a chance to see what other kids did, and they had some basis for comparing what they did. They competed in the Shakespeare Festival that was citywide. They competed in the drama festival and everything. And so, I was able to get a second drama class finally on the schedule and approved.

Of course, what happened was that it got scheduled against the English Literature class for the academic track kids. So, none of those kids were in it. Then the admissions office dumped into

this class all the students that nobody else wanted. So it was a small class, but they were real troublemakers in other classes. So, here I had this group of kids that were, you know. So we worked through reading plays. These are kids who would think nothing of cursing on the street or in the classroom or any place else, but when you put them in a scene and asked them to stand in front of the class and read something that said something about “the bastard son of the king,” they were embarrassed. We worked through all of that—.

5-00:43:53

Wilmot:

Right, “Who are you calling a bastard?”

Wilkerson:

That’s right. [laughing] They could do it in the informal setting, but in the formal setting, they were really troubled by doing this. I had one young man, Sherman, I remember was his first name, tall, gangly kid, and he spent a lot of his time on the street corner. He was not in class very much, but when he did come, I decided that this class—it was maybe ten, twelve students—that we would do a little program with them. And we would do it for each of the English classes, and use it as a basis for talking to them about appropriate behavior in a live performance. I was not trying to dampen their enthusiasm, but a lot of the kids had grown up on television, and so they didn’t necessarily understand the impact of them continuing to talk in the audience, or reacting forever to something that happened on the stage. They’d miss the next line. You know, all of those kinds of things, so we talked about that kind of thing. We used this little set of scenes in order to illustrate that.

I gave Sherman the “Alas, poor Yorick” speech from *Hamlet*. It’s a very short speech, but it’s the gravedigger’s speech, is how they usually refer to it. This gravedigger, he’s digging a grave—it’s Ophelia’s grave, actually—but there’s this little moment where he comes upon this skull and he says, “Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well” and he goes on to talk about how, towards the end, “paint your lips as you may,” speaking to women, “to this end, you must come.” In other words, we’re all going to be skulls at some point. So, I sat down with Sherman—and this is a kid, unless somebody else intervened, he is either in prison or dead or whatever. This is clearly where he was headed. We read this speech together, and he said, “Is this guy crazy? What’s wrong with him?” I said, “What do you mean, is he crazy?” He says, “He’s talking to a skull.” [chuckles] All my literary training about theatre conventions and whatever. I had to really just break it down to him and say, “Well, he’s speaking to—in theatre, you can do anything you want. Anything can happen on the stage. He wants to make the point by talking to a skull.” He said, “Okay, okay.” So we went through it and we studied it. He got to the point where he actually performed it on the stage in front of all these classes. This is a guy that was very concerned about his image, all those kinds of things. Sometime later after the show, I knew he had really made it his own when one of the other students in the class came up and told me that Sherman was going around the campus reciting the gravedigger’s speech to the women students who had makeup on. He was telling them, “Paint your lips as you may, to this end you must come.” He had taken the skull and everything! [laughs] So I said, “Well, okay, he understands it.”

Those kinds of experiences really taught me that kids, regardless of the low expectations we may have, and regardless of background or whatever, there is something about theatre, if you do it right, that opens them up—opens a space of creativity for them, opens a way for them to learn

and really engage. So now, to complete the loop, I'm working at—Cyrus, who you met at the Ford Foundation, he's pressing me to get these proposals read, he and I are partnering on an arts education initiative, where I am able to apply some of that that I learned when I was teaching at Jordan, and later teaching at Cal. Using the arts, and particularly, the theatrical arts to open a space for students to be creative and to be engaged in a way that they don't often get engaged through other subjects.

I never wanted to work in the professional arena of theatre. I love it, I love to see it. I always saw theatre as a way of changing the world or transforming people. That's what I've tried to do for most of my life. Some of the most wonderful and terrifying moments [laughing] of my life have come doing that and trusting non-professional students—students who are just kind of coming in and learning as they are doing—to carry on a very public act. It's been really exciting. Understanding that really emanates from my time at Jordan High School. It really made a difference, I think, in my life, in terms of what I did after that.

5-00:49:17

Wilmot:

Can we take one minute? Take a break for one second?

[interview interruption]

It sounds like while you were at Jordan, theatre for you was also shifting and changing. Is that right?

5-00:49:27

Wilkerson:

Yeah, in terms of what I learned what it could do for students' learning, but I guess in a way, my knowledge of theatre kind of ran on a couple of parallel tracks, oddly enough. It actually goes back to my first work in AME Zion Church, at the age of fifteen. Most of the drama that I read formally in school, even in high school—we did a little bit of it in the drama class—was not the kind of work that I was directing, like in the church, for example. I remember going to the downtown library in L.A., Central Library, and going through all kinds of searches I could, just reading lots and lots of plays. Going through the Samuel French catalog to try to find the kind of play that I thought would work. On one level, I was looking at plays that were written like religious dramas—plays that had been acted—but then on another formal level, always in school, I was reading Shakespeare and Chekov and expanding that part of my knowledge.

So, when I got to Jordan, I could dip into some classical works. I hadn't necessarily read Chekhov's—I had read his major plays like the *Three Sisters* and *Cherry Orchard* and things like that. I didn't know about his one-act plays, particularly. But I knew he was a good writer, so I found his one act plays, which are fabulous! They are absolutely incredible, like his short stories are. So I found one, something about "The Marriage." I had a terrific young actor. The audience loved it. We had them in period costume, the whole bit! But it was such a human piece. I used, I guess, some of what I learned in formal training to go further with some writers that you normally—. I mean, normally in a college class, you wouldn't read Chekhov's one-act plays. But they turned out to be a fabulous source for this. Certainly, you wouldn't read "Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court." But I would look for particular kinds of opportunities, themes.

For example, I wanted kids at Jordan, especially, to do something in real costume, not always wearing your street clothes. I wanted them to dress like King Arthur's court and have the fun of wearing those costumes and figuring out how people moved in those and what did that mean for their lives, stuff like that. Rather than always being, it's twentieth century—. Or what we do now is it's all ghetto. It's the stereotypical ghetto dress. There's nothing wrong with that. Let them partake of the imagination that theatre offers you. You can be in the twenty-fifth century and you can dress for that. I constantly worked to find those plays that I thought were produceable and directable in my particular context, whatever it was. Whether it was the church, it was the school, college, whatever it is. I ended up reading a lot of all kinds of plays that weren't necessarily in my formal training.

5-00:53:33

Wilmot:

While you were doing this work at Jordan, in your social life, were you moving with a group of people that were professionals, actors, directors, in L.A.?

5-00:53:43

Wilkerson:

Not really. Not that I remember doing. I mean, teaching was pretty full time for me. I don't recall being involved with professionals very much in Los Angeles. I don't remember that. I remember going to see a lot of shows. But I'm trying to think, did I bring any guests to Jordan? I don't really recall that I might have found somebody. I did more of that when I moved to the Bay Area. That's where I met people like Danny Glover, and what's the other guy that—Buriel Clay and some others, because I was involved in community theatre there. So I met a lot of people there, but not so much in L.A.

5-00:54:45

Wilmot:

My other question is, how did you experience that first Watts riot.

5-00:54:54

Wilkerson:

The first Watts riot? [sighs] That was a very hard time. Stan and I had moved to—gosh, I'm not sure where we were living then. I guess we were living near Slauson. Is that where we were living, Stanley? [Yes from Stanley] Yeah, I think we were living near Slauson in an apartment. We read about it starting and all, and it was in the summer of August. There was a part of me that really wanted to go and see what was happening. I wanted to go into the area because I was more worried about students more than anything else. But I was pregnant at that time, with the first baby. We made the conscious choice not to put ourselves in any kind of danger. The baby was born in February, so we were getting close. Maybe about three or four months or so, three months. So we didn't go. It was really just horrendous and devastating because we hadn't seen anything like that before. We knew that—.

[interview interruption for conversation with family]

We really hadn't seen anything like this ever in our lives, but we knew that the anger and frustration in black communities was growing. There had been an incident maybe a year or so before, of a black man in Watts who was rushing to the hospital with his pregnant wife. And he

got pulled over by the police. The police drew their pistols on them, and one of them stuck the pistol inside the window which was partially open. The car lurched, and he killed the husband. And the woman was pregnant. There was a big trial that was held on television. A lot of people watched it. I remember watching it. It was probably during the summer or something. And the man [the police officer] was acquitted. The frustration and anger in black communities was growing, and one simple incident sparked the whole thing, and the thing just spread all over the place.

My mother reminded me that I had had a dream some weeks before this happened. I remembered the dream, but I had forgotten—I mean, I remembered when she reminded me. In my dream, Central Avenue, which was not far from where we lived, was on fire. The entire thing was just aglow, which actually happened eventually. I asked my father, “What would cause something like that? How could that happen?” My mother remembered me asking that, and when she reminded me, she told me I had dreamt it. It was devastating. It happened in August, so that whole corridor, 103rd Avenue, which Jordan High School was on, burned.

5-00:58:37

Wilmot:

This involved your students, their families.

Wilkerson:

It was where they lived, exactly. Thirty-three or some people were killed in that. I did not know any of the people who were killed. None of my students were, but I’m sure they were involved. I’m sure they were out there. Some might have been looting. You don’t know. It was so devastating to the community. One of the things that was striking to me was that after the Watts riot was over, the media referred to all of the East Side as Watts, number one, which upset a lot of people because Watts was a particularly defined area. The students in the school took particular umbrage at the fact that they referred to Watts as a ghetto. I remember students saying, “I do not live in a ghetto. This is my neighborhood.” I began to see the differences in terms of outsiders, particularly media people, kind of labeling an area when the people themselves did not see themselves that way. They didn’t see themselves as being in a ghetto in that sense.

We learned a lot from that. I don’t know what to say about it except that it was just devastating to see all—one of the major things was to see people acting that way, but also the frustration that they were taking out on their own community. They were burning their own community, their own shops and their own areas. It was a real lesson for a lot of us in terms of how deep the anger was. Most of us had not seen anything like that. There had been riots in other parts of the country, but nothing like that in the west. Because everybody figured the west was—things were better, the living was not as dense. You weren’t in big projects. There were projects there, right next to the school, but it wasn’t like the East Coast and all of that. It was a real eye-opener just because the neighborhoods looked open and that there are lawns and things like that, that there was still a tremendous frustration with the poverty and the racism that existed there.

3-01:01:08

Wilmot:

I’m going to actually pick that up again the next time we talk.

Wilkerson:

I'm going to think a little bit more about it too.

Wilmot:

Let's just close for today. Is that okay?

Wilkerson:

Sure, that's fine.

[End Audio File 5]

Interview #3: March 17, 2004

[Begin Audio File 6]

6-00:00:29

Wilmot:

Margaret Wilkerson, interview three, March 17, 2004. Well, today, Margaret, I wanted to just go back to the story you were telling about Watts in L.A. This was in—I think it was 1965?

6-00:00:51

Wilkerson:

It was 1965, that's right.

Wilmot:

I just wanted to ask you, mostly because there was a lot going on when we completed our interview last time, I wanted to ask you to tell me the story again.

Wilkerson:

Sure.

Wilmot:

How you experienced that Watts uprising.

6-00:01:08

Wilkerson:

It was just a really devastating thing. No one could quite believe it because no one had—. And I'm talking about watching black people, for the most part, because I was teaching at Jordan High School, which was located on 103rd, where the fires started. That was kind of the central corridor where all of this began. It came to be called by folks a revolt, actually. We were just glued to our television sets. I did not live in what became known as the Greater Watts area. My parents lived on Forty-first Street, which is—if you subtract forty-one plus some streets from a 103rd, you figure out far that is. It was a fairly good distance, but it was still in the black area of Los Angeles. My sister, who was living in Ohio, had just moved out to California with her six children. She and her husband and their six children. We were very worried about the spreading of it. Stan and I lived on the west side near Slauson Avenue. We were quite worried about exactly what was going to happen to folks on the east side. Actually, we weren't living on Slauson. I think we were living on Ridgeley, near Pico. I think we had bought an apartment building by then. At any rate, we were a ways away from it, but we were very worried about the family members who lived in the area, because it seemed to be spreading. There didn't seem to be any particular control. Black businesses, some, were targets like others. When a riot happens and that kind of social contract in a sense is broken in terms of the way people are treating each other, everybody is in danger. It kind of flared out of control. It was really, really frightening.

Since I was a teacher at Jordan—this was during the summer, in August, so we weren't in school—I worried about my students more than anything else. I wanted to go in and see if I could help. I don't know what I thought I could do, at least to try to contact some of the students or something and try to help in some way, because you felt like you wanted to go and do something, not really being really clear about what you could do in that kind of laboratory

situation. Actually, I was pregnant. I was about three months pregnant with our first child. I'd actually had a miscarriage before—very, very early on, so early on that nobody was quite sure it was a miscarriage, but we figured that's what it was. That's what the doctor thought it was. We were nervous about my going out and getting caught up in that, so we didn't go.

My husband and I had both gone to high school in the general area. Jefferson High School is actually on Forty-First Street, so we weren't on 103rd, but we identified with the Greater Watts area. We were all very worried about it. This had been coming for a time in Los Angeles. There was an incident that happened maybe a year or so before the Watts riot actually got inflamed, where a black man in Watts was rushing his wife to the hospital to have their baby, and was speeding. The police pulled him over and drew their guns. One of them stuck his gun inside the window on the driver's side. The window was down slightly. The car, as they stopped it, or whatever, it lurched forward, and his gun went off and killed the husband. It just inflamed the community just tremendously. As a result of that incident, for that next year or two, community people started following the police and kind of watching them whenever they pulled anybody over. All of this had started boiling in the community, and when this one particular incident happened, where I think the police officer, again, had pulled somebody over. I guess the police office was somehow talking with, or dealing with, somehow, the young man, and the mother came out to speak to the officer, and they all got embroiled in something. That's actually how it happened. It started around a police incident.

Interestingly enough, one of the lawyers who were most involved with police brutality cases was Johnny Cochran, who had grown up in the black area of Los Angeles. Many of us knew him. We weren't of his generation, but we knew him as, for us, a major figure because he was in there dealing with charges of police brutality at a time when it wasn't taken that seriously, really. It was very interesting to watch the evolution of his career and how things have happened with him.

At any rate, the actual riot or revolt was quite incredible. The school that I taught in was next door to the major projects on 103rd, the projects being public housing, a few stories high, very densely populated. In fact, I taught in a bungalow, like a World War II bungalow—we had a lot of those on my under-resourced high school campus. My bungalow was right next to the chain link fence that separated the campus from public housing. Very often kids would climb the fence one way or the other, whether they were trying to get into the campus or get out. We always had this connection with what was happening in the projects or the public housing. I say that to say that I was very closely identified with 103rd street and Watts and all of that.

We all lamented the fact that so much of the anger was being visited on our own communities. It's hard to explain because so much has happened since then, but as I go back to those days, it was really just stunning to black people as well as white people. Also, you had heard of riots in New York, and sometimes in the South and places, but the West was considered to be beyond that, even though those of us who lived there knew that there were racial issues and discrimination. But there was sense that, in the West, many black people who had come from the South were building a new society. Many, many black people in the Los Angeles area had roots in the South. You had the sense that somehow we were doing better than others. For this to bubble up and happen in this way was shocking. I think it shocked the whole country. For one thing, when you look at Los Angeles, at least in those years, when you looked at Los Angeles,

yes, you had public housing in particular areas and so on, but you also had single family dwellings, you had lawns. They may not be huge houses, but you had space and freeways and things like that. Visually, you had the sense that people were doing better. They didn't live in these huge public housing units that they have on the East Coast, or that they had in Chicago, for example. I think it shocked everybody. I think some of us in the black community—we knew how bad it was, but we never thought that would happen.

6-00:10:40

Wilmot:

Margaret, it strikes me that you were beginning to start a family and think about raising a family at the same time that this incredible social turmoil was happening around you. I wanted to ask you what did you think at that time? How did you approach the idea of making a family given that there was so much kind of wildness happening at that time?

6-00:11:13

Wilkerson:

Well, I don't know. It's funny. There was a lot that was beginning to happen, certainly on the national scene, and somewhat on the local scene, certainly with the Watts riot. My husband and I both came from—I would say—strong families. That doesn't mean that the families didn't have any problems. All families have problems. His parents had been married for many years and did not divorce. They both died in the marriage. My parents had been married for a very long time. We had connections with our relatives and so on. We had a sense of history of our families. And so, in a way, I think that gave us a sort of—it wasn't exactly a cocoon, but it was kind of like a nurturing circle of people. And then we had extended friends and family and all of that. Despite the fact that all of this was going on, in a way it didn't disrupt our lives, but it did make us focus our lives a bit more. After all, we had lived with the stories of our elders who had suffered from a lot of discrimination and lack of opportunity. To see progress being made, or efforts at progress being made—in a way—it was affirming that this kind of thing happened. Not so much that the Watts riot happened, but that at least folks were beginning to bring to the surface the deep inequities that existed in the society. On the one hand, there was turmoil, but on another hand, it was welcome in a sense, to kind of break this mold in the United States that everything was fine and the American dream, and you come, you work hard, and that's all you have to do. If you don't make it, it's your fault. It helped us to begin to look at, why is that so? Why would people think that? What is it in the system that prevents people from “making it?”

We were fortunate in certain ways. We were fortunate to have the kinds of families we have, but there's also a certain amount of luck in that. For every person that we knew who was “making it,” whatever that meant, there were others who fell by the wayside who were as smart, often as committed, but the barriers were just insurmountable for them. Those of us for example in the academic track in high school—it was just a handful of us, but we weren't the only smart kids in that school. There were plenty of other kids that were smart in many, many ways. Given the right circumstances, the right encouragement, maybe teachers who expected more of them, more supports at home, and particular ways of the neighborhood, they would have been able to achieve in some of the ways that some of the rest of us did. We saw that early on in growing up, so as the Civil Rights Movement began to build, it was really kind of exciting to see these things happen.

One of the kinds of stories that had always gone around in the black community in those years, and I think it's probably true of everybody, that we act like crabs in a barrel. If one tries to climb up out of the barrel, the other crab will pull them back down. That kind of metaphor played into the notion that black people will never be able to cooperate to work together to achieve anything because it was the "crabs in the barrel" syndrome. We always tear it apart. We hold things back, and so on. As the Civil Rights Movement began to build in the South, we saw black people—now, there were many whites and others who were involved as well, which was marvelous, and made it a really multi-racial movement—but the fact that black people, particularly in the South, pulled together, around demonstrations, protests, and voting and all of that was breaking the mold for us. The common wisdom was that we would never work together to do anything like this. To see that happen, it was all a kind of a new sense of pride and possibility. There was a lot of excitement around what was building. A lot of tragedy, also, because that was also the period when so many people died. Shootings and assassinations and all kinds of things that were happening. Jailings, beatings—all of that sort of thing. But still, underlying all that, we knew that for one thing, we cared enough about freedom to put ourselves in harm's way. For people in the South to do this, in particular, who had the reputation in some ways, unfairly so, of being uneducated, what have you (that wasn't true, but the notion was that they would not be able to pull together and take this kind of action) was kind of revolutionary in civic action. When you're living in the midst of that, you still live. We never thought about not having children because of the challenges that were around us. After all, our parents had had even greater challenges and they had children and raised them, took care of them and all that. We never considered not doing this. In fact, we wanted very much to have children.

Here's one side story on having children. Stan and I, when we got married, it was 1961 and we were—I'm trying to remember how old I was—I think I was about twenty-three years old, and he was about twenty-five. We had waited a while to get married. That was a little on the late side in my generation, but folks in the church and our families and all said, don't rush into marriage. Wait until you finish school. All of that was a common wisdom, so we did that. They said, don't have children too quickly now, because you need to get a good economic base and so forth and so on, so we waited about four years. Then of course, as the second and the third year came along and we didn't have children, people said, "Well, don't you think you ought to have children?" [laughs] We could never satisfy anyone.

Then, when we started having children, we had three in all. The first two were about two and a half to three years apart, birth to birth. The third one was two years out from there. We had all three of them in a period of about five or six years, something like that. As the second one came in, people began to say, "Well, now, don't have too many children." If you listen to all the people around you, you can never meet their expectations. Our first child was born in 1966. He was a boy—Darren Eugene Wilkerson. He's getting married next week.

I have to say, as a woman, I had girlfriends who just couldn't wait to have children. When they saw babies, they just melted. I was never like that. I wanted to have children—it's terrible to say this—but they were not exactly the center of my universe. It wasn't like my whole life wouldn't be fulfilled until I have children. I certainly wanted to have children, but I didn't feel like my life was incomplete without them. I was happy to have children. I devoted a lot of time to them, cared for them and all of that, but it was not my entire life. I don't know how better to say it. It doesn't sound right, and it's probably not quite accurate, but I remembered contrasting my own

sense of self with other young women that I knew—not all, but other young women that I knew who kind of felt that their life would not be complete if they didn't have their own children. We were happy to have the kids that we had. I don't know. There are a lot of things that happened in this, but I'm not sure where to go from there. We had Darren in 1966, we had married in '61. So, between '61 and '66, both Stan and I were teaching high school. He was teaching at Franklin High School and was assistant coach there for football. I was teaching at Jordan High School, so we had all of those kinds of adventures that were going on at that time. A lot of good things happened.

6-00:21:16

Wilmot:

Is there anything that sticks out in your mind that you want to stick to, because I'm going to ask some questions but I'm not sure. Something that you think is important that we need to get at?

6-00:21:29

Wilkerson:

I don't think Stan would mind my saying this. It's about him—not about me and him, but something that happened to him. He was in graduate school at Cal State LA in health and physical education, and we both worked all the time during school. He worked in the gymnasium, handing out towels, doing that kind of thing that helps to keep the gym running. There had been some thefts of towels. Somehow towels were disappearing. And Stanley was one of the guys that worked there, and there was another guy who was also African American. Somebody decided that Stanley and this fellow had been stealing towels. You figure out how big towels are. You'd have to have a truck to take that many towels. But at any rate, they charged him with grand theft. Stanley had had a totally clean record. He came out of one of the roughest high schools, he had been an outstanding player, he had been a very, very good student, and had never had any interactions with the police. They came out and charged him with grand theft and took him to jail.

I was teaching at Jordan. We only had one car, so he was supposed to pick me up. He called, I think the school or some place. No, I know, he didn't show up. That was what happened. So I called somebody in my family to pick me up. I said, "Well, maybe he's practicing late, something's come up." I found out later that he was in jail. I thought he was joking. I couldn't believe that he was in jail. We found out what it was about. I called a friend of my father's who had been a firefighter, but had been studying law while he was a firefighter, and he was now a lawyer, so I called him about getting him out. His name is Arnett Hartsfield. He's still alive. He said to me on the phone, "Margaret, are you sure you know this young man? Are you sure that he wasn't really involved in this?" I told him, and I hadn't even seen Stanley. I said, "Look, I know that my husband would not do that. He is more honest than I am. I know that without even talking to him, I know his history, I know his record." Stan's mother happened to be in the room at that time, and she told me later, "I've never heard you talk that strongly to someone." I was angry because he needed to be out of jail. He didn't belong in jail. Anyway, we got him out the next day. Eventually, he had to appear for the trial. I can't remember what stage it was in. Between the time that he had been jailed, when his case came up, we got a call from a friend of ours with whom we had gone to school, at high school, and she happened to work somewhere in the police justice system. His case came across her desk, and she knew him. In fact, she had liked him when she was in high school. She called us on her own, and told us that "I just want you to

know that I have seen the case, and they have absolutely no evidence.” I won’t give her name because I don’t really want to implicate her, although it’s many years later. Sure enough when the case came up, they dismissed it, but the judge in dismissing it said to him, “Well, you just be sure you don’t get into trouble again.” It was all I could do to keep myself from standing up and saying something. I thought, “I know better. If I say anything, I’m in real trouble. He’s in trouble, so I will just eat it.” It was very, very infuriating.

I tell that story because it was our first absolute personal encounter with unjust charges against you. It complicated and put into question the relationships that he had with faculty in the school because no one came to his defense. No one would step up. Someone sent him a little cartoon that indicated he believed in his innocence, but nobody would step forward to say that. None of the professors that he knew. None of that. And then to see how you could get caught up in the justice system and end up with a record when in fact, you really had not done anything. Now, when they came to pick him up, he had a towel, maybe two, in our bin. He was an athlete. This was very common. You used the towel, you take it home, you wash it and you take it back. It was a normal thing. He didn’t have gobs of towels. He didn’t even have more than one or two. There was no evidence around him. There was nothing he was doing.

We were both working. I was teaching high school and he was in graduate school and working as a graduate assistant. That was a real moment for us, in terms of understanding how the system could go against you in an instant, no matter how clean your record was, no matter what your achievements had been. It was very sobering for us. It was very, very sobering for us so that it made us look at the world differently. It really did.

It wasn’t that we didn’t know that these kinds of things happened, but until it happens to you, with absolutely no justification, you don’t know how it really unsettles your whole world. Then, when you hear sort of fantastic stories when people say they did this and that, you know that it’s possible that that can actually happen. I tell it because it was a really definitive moment for us in living in this society. People say, “Well, just keep your nose clean. Be good. Don’t do this. Don’t do that.” You couldn’t have had a person who had been more careful in his life than Stanley was. It was a moment. We learned a lot from that. We learned a lot from that. We guess it’s still on his record. I don’t think we ever tried to expunge the record. We talked about it at one point and we never did. At least in the states, you can be asked whether you have ever been arrested and convicted. He can say no to that because he wasn’t convicted, but to have the arrest record—

It’s a story we have not kept from our children at all. We tell them that story because we think it’s important that they know that, and that regardless, you should always fight for your rights. If you can’t afford a lawyer, you have to afford a lawyer. You have to do something. You cannot just accept that, because peoples’ lives get totally turned around that way. That was one of the big incidents that happened.

6-00:29:38

Wilmot:

When you were young marrieds.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, I don't think we had been married more than—couldn't have been more than two years, probably a little less than that. We had known each other for a very long time. Our families knew each other. His mother treated me like I was her daughter. She had two daughters and three sons, but she treated me as if I was absolutely one of the family. She was really wonderful, and so was his father. Our families really married, in a sense. We're still close like that. When we had a family reunion, we invited them. It was all that kind of thing. That was one of the big things that happened during that period.

Also, another thing—I had a friend, Jean Bazemore, with whom I had done theatre at Redlands. She came to visit with us once in L.A. Jean was always just a wonderful kind of person who thought really outside the box in lots of ways. We loved theatre and she got to talking to me and said, “You know, wouldn't it be great to start an interracial theatre?” which in 1963, '64, whatever, was very important. It was unusual, I guess I should say. We got to talking about it. “That would be a great idea.” She said, “Well, there's this new Ph. D. program at Berkeley”—and this is almost literally a quote—“and we could just kind of go through the program and get our degrees and we could start a theatre.” We said, “Yeah, that's a good idea. Why not?” Stanley liked the idea, and we had this whole dream of an interracial theatre.

I've said all these wonderful things about the family. But sometimes being around the family a lot can be a little smothering. We kind of wanted to strike out on our own. The possibility of doing this and going to graduate school, starting a theatre, combined with the feeling that we wanted to move out of L.A. We wanted also to move to a place that was less urban. I applied to Berkeley fully expecting to be accepted, and she applied and got accepted, and we started in the Ph.D. program. I had no idea what that meant. I really had no idea. Nobody in my family—I think my sister had probably gotten a Master's by then. She had gone to graduate school and gotten a Master's. Nobody in my immediate family had gotten a Ph.D. I'm not sure I even knew anybody besides a professor who had gotten a Ph.D. I had no idea what it meant to enter those kinds of social and intellectual networks. I didn't know what it took to get through graduate school. I just had no knowledge of that. But here we were saying, naively, “In a few years, we'll kind of rip through this program and [snaps] and we'll start a theatre.” [laughs] And then we came to Berkeley. That in itself is a story, which we'll get into when you think we're ready, but that's how I decided to go. There was one other factor that was in there. I hadn't really thought about being a college professor too much. A little bit on the side. I was getting a little fatigued with the heavy, heavy teaching demand. I had five classes, one free period, and I was the drama teacher. By that time, toward the third year or so, I had my own classroom finally. I wasn't teaching five subjects in different classrooms, which is terrible because if you're using a different person's classroom, it's kind of like using another person's house. You have to carry your little paperclips and things. You can't move things around. It was just all those logistical things. Oh, gosh I just lost my thought.

6-00:34:29

Wilmot:

You were fatigued by teaching.

Wilkerson:

That's right. I was getting a little tired of the grind. I loved the students. My greatest teaching experiences were there, but I had to teach five courses and so on, and I had the added responsibility of directing a show each semester, which meant that I had to use my free period pretty much, not so much for the preparation so much, but going and getting all the props and putting all that stuff together, so there was lots of work. You got about two hundred dollars a semester for directing. The athletic coaches were paid far more than that. At any rate, you got two hundred dollars, which was not bad in those years. Every little bit helped with the young couple, but you put in much, much, much more time. Much more time. The work there was very, very gratifying, but it was a lot. By the time I had taught about four years, I was ready to do something else. I liked the idea of my vision of a college professor that they had a lighter load. They could do research and so on. That was just a very vague idea that I had. My real purpose for going back to get a Ph.D. was to start this interracial theatre. Of course, what happened in the 1960s changed things, and we never did that. We never started the theatre together. We stayed friends and we went on to do other things.

6-00:36:18

Wilmot:

When you say, what happened was the 1960's and all of that changed things, can you tell me a little bit about what you mean?

Wilkerson:

I started Berkeley in 1966, in the fall. Our son was six months old. Stanley was teaching at Santa Rosa High School while I was going. We lived in Petaluma, chicken capital of the world at that time, and we lived on Sonoma Mountain, which is just outside of Petaluma on property that was owned by the Matsons of the Matson Cruise Line. We never met them. We just paid. It was an interesting kind of house. It had a couple of bedrooms. It was sort of like a kind of a cabin, but you know, a larger size.

6-00:37:16

Wilmot:

How did you find this?

Wilkerson:

I'm glad you asked that. Jean and her husband, Duncan Bazemore, lived in Petaluma, in the town of Petaluma. They found this place. They found it, and they actually went and cleaned it up for us because the doors were open, the cows that were there wandered in, and it was a mess. Nasty and all of that. Before we moved up there, they went in and cleaned it up. We had friends that helped us drive up in the truck to unload our stuff and all of that. My first boyfriend, Wes Harris—we all stayed friends—helped us move. [laughs] We were in this kind of cabin-like place and we had immediate access to about six acres with pear trees and stuff. It was bucolic. It was very nice. It meant that I traveled about an hour to get into Berkeley. We had good babysitting arrangements for our son and all of that, but he was six months old when I started graduate school. I had this notion that graduate school—. I think I can get this right. I felt that if you were going to school and had children, that the time to have them would be when they were babies. The time to go to graduate school and have children was when they were babies because babies certainly need parents around, but they can also be nurtured by different people, if they

are loving to them. If you feed them and you change them and you hug them and all of that, then that's good. Other people can do that. You can have babysitters and what have you do that. But I thought that when they got older and they were in school, then it was more important to be much, much more available to them if you could be, so that you could interact with the school, you could help with homework, and they are much more attached to you as the one person or the two people or whatever. I don't know much, but that's what we did.

So over the next five years, I guess, we had the three children, between '66 and '71, when our daughter, who is youngest, was born. Within those five years, we had the three children, and I got my Ph.D. in 1972. I always describe those years as some of the most productive of my life because I had a husband, I had three children, and I got a Ph.D. Folks used to look at that and say, "Wow, you're a superwoman. My God." But I could not have done it without the support of my family. Our folks lived in L.A. When I was doing research, for example, on my dissertation, four of the theatres that I looked at were in Los Angeles. So I would fly with the babies to L.A. Family would take care of them while I went and did interviews and research during the day. On occasion, my mother or even my mother-in-law would come up and help take care of the kids in Petaluma while I was doing exams.

Stanley helped a lot. When I actually received the degree, I felt like I should cut it in little pieces and kind of give piece to a bunch of people because I couldn't have done it without their help. That's not something you do alone. That's why I say that I've been very fortunate. I've been very lucky in many ways to have really good and supportive people around. Yeah, we did that.

6-00:41:40

Wilmot:

I have a lot of questions for you about this. Were there other young moms in your graduate program? Was anyone else doing this?

Wilkerson:

Not really. Not very many at all. I can't think of any in dramatic art. We were all kind of insular. I wasn't interacting with a lot of people outside of dramatic art because, for one thing, I didn't have time. I lived in Petaluma. I worked on campus, and my time was either taken up directing, studying, doing things on campus, or traveling back and forth. Out of the folks in dramatic art, I cannot think of anyone else who had young children. In fact, some years later, my advisor, Dunbar Ogden, who was a wonderful advisor and support for me, his wife told me that she didn't think I was a very good role model. She meant this in a nice way, because she said that I never asked for a special privilege. I'm putting it the wrong way. Because I did what I did—without asking for the system to change, without asking for concessions from professors—I had prevented the people in charge from understanding what it meant to do what I'd done, as a mother and graduate student and so on. I was pre-women's movement in a sense. I understand that perspective, but I felt that I had enough of a burden to deal with in terms of racial issues, not to bring up issues of "Well, I have to babysit, or I have my children, so therefore I can't do this." I never did that. My husband or my family tried to help with babysitting. We just took care of it outside of the realm of any kind of special pleading.

That probably comes out of my upbringing. We were always taught that you should not ask for special consideration. You have to show that you can do this yourself. I still believe that to some

extent, but I also now understand and believe how important it is that systems of education, other kinds of social systems, be more flexible and adaptable for people.

[Tape break]

I don't know what was the last thing I said, but I had been talking about having a family and what that has meant. I have to say that having a family while going through graduate school certainly carries its own burdens and challenges but I have to say that it also nurtured me very much. I haven't talked about what graduate school was really like, which I can do, but it helped me to keep my balance, in terms of what was important. Ironically.

6-00:45:38

Wilmot:

Having a family?

Wilkerson:

Having a family. Ironically going from the esoterica of graduate school to home in Petaluma was very helpful. To change a diaper for example—to change a diaper, do something that very basic, or to feed a baby—I nursed as long as I could, but I also bottle fed and so on—to serve something so very basic and fundamental, helped me to keep my head on straight. This is very important, but life is what really matters. Whatever you do, you need to keep that frame because graduate school and academe can get very, very intense. It can become the entire world for people. You perish or you survive on this paper, on this faculty member's support or not.

Graduate students are very, very vulnerable people. I'd say even more than undergraduates because they depend so much on the informal networks or support. All this is not written. None of this is codified. It's custom. A faculty member can destroy you with a word with all of his colleagues. They usually were *his* colleagues, not hers.

So, having a family helped me keep balance. I really came to appreciate that. It meant a lot to me. It really helped me to survive in a lot of ways.

6-00:47:33

Wilmot:

It really enriched you.

Wilkerson:

Absolutely. I think it helped me to keep perspective on what's important, what's really important in this life.

Stanley and I consequently made a kind of pact with each other. He was working in higher education as well. We decided we would choose our battles—the ones that we thought were very critical to fight. But if anything ever happened where we really had to risk our jobs, that we would do that. We felt it was so important to stand up for what you believe, that if it meant that we were putting at jeopardy our jobs, that we would be willing to do that, and we would support each other in doing that.

One of the things that happened—and I can talk about this at another point if you want—one of the things that happened during the time after we had gotten our degrees—I was working as a faculty member at Berkeley and he was working as a faculty member at Solano Community College—was that he was discriminated against in a hiring situation at the college, and he decided to sue the college. He exhausted the other informal grievance procedures. The college did not respond. I remember he came home one day and he said, “I just can’t take this. I’m going to have to carry it further and file suit against them.” I said, “Okay. That’s fine.” If it means you lose your job or whatever, so be it, but this is too important not to fight it. I think things like the earlier incident I was talking about, the arrest when he was at Cal State L.A., gave us a sense of perspective as we raised children and started careers and went to graduate schools and all that kind of thing. That experience really helped strengthen us to do that—to fight. That thing dragged on for about three years. It was a tough time in lots of ways because we didn’t know what would happen. We really didn’t know what would happen, but we won, essentially, in that it was settled out of court by the college. So, all that kind of tied together in terms of how we tried to live our lives, and how we tried to learn from what happened to us, as we were moving along.

6-00:50:37

Wilmot:

Did he ever have the opportunity to stand by you as well? Was there ever a time when you felt that you had to take a stand? Do you want to talk about this now, or at another time?

6-00:50:49

Wilkerson:

It’s maybe less dramatic and definitive, but throughout all of the challenges of graduate school of being the first and only African American person as a graduate student in dramatic arts—I think that was number one, all that entailed, and I’ll have to come up with something that kind of typifies that. All of those kinds of challenges, he was very much there for me, always. I filled his ear with much more than he ever expected to have to hear when I was a faculty member at Berkeley and going through the early years of the starting of African American studies, which is a whole other conversation. He was always there. There were times when he actually came with me to the campus to make sure that things were okay. I’ll talk about that. Remember to remind me. I will do that. So yeah, he always was there. It’s helped to strengthen our relationship and helped us to appreciate each other more.

6-00:52:06

Wilmot:

I want to go back to something. This goes back a little bit to Los Angeles. I wanted to ask you if you or your husband were involved with organizations like CORE, Congress of Racial Equality, SNCC, or NAACP? Were you involved in organizations like that were working around civil rights?

6-00:52:36

Wilkerson:

We belonged but we weren’t active particularly. I think that’s partly because we poured so much of ourselves into our jobs that every moment that we could spend and be the teacher after school, whatever, that kind of thing—we put a lot of energy into that.

The one political activity we really got involved in—we were also involved in church as well—I'm not remembering what year, it might have been 1964. There was a housing proposition that was an initiative that was on the ballot. It was Proposition 14. It was on fair housing. Very conservative forces had gotten very good at this—the way that it was written, it would seem that you were voting against discrimination in housing, when in fact, it was the opposite.

6-00:53:50

Wilmot:

Sounds familiar.

Wilkerson:

Yes, doesn't it though? We got involved, I can't remember—I think it was out of our schools or somehow we got involved. We went to meetings and so on and we actually helped in this campaign against this initiative. This campaign became to be known as "No on Fourteen." I remember it now in particular because there have been so many others like it afterwards. We decided that you couldn't just explain the initiative. You just had to message "No on Fourteen." We had these placards and stuff and we went and posted things. We talked to groups. You know, a bunch of things like that. There was a coalition of folks from all over L.A.—all colors, backgrounds, what have you. Somehow, we made a connection through our teaching colleagues and we were very much involved in that. We weren't in CORE, or we weren't active in that way. We did think about going South at one point. I'm not sure why we decided not to do it. I'd have to ask Stanley. But I don't think Stanley was that excited about going back into the South. He had grown up in Louisiana, so he knew how tough the South was. His family had chosen to move, to leave the South. I don't think he really wanted to go back into that situation. Stanley's father was not a huge man or anything, but he was very feisty and fought for what he believed in. Given that temperament in those times, if they hadn't made the decision to come out to California, I'm not sure that his father or any of them would have survived, to tell you the truth. I think moving out of the South was a smart thing for them to do. That's my impression. We didn't have close ties or connections that would lead us into it in any way. We tried to support in other ways. We did think about it. I guess I should say that. I had forgotten that had happened. We applied to go to the Peace Corps. We were accepted and then he got injured, so we didn't go. We were set to go to East Africa, actually.

6-00:56:26

Wilmot:

I want to ask you this question. You were going to go to Tanzania.

6-00:56:29

Wilkerson:

It was Nayasaland. It's right across from Madagascar. I'm not sure what the country is now. It's right along the eastern side. I've often wondered how our lives would have been different if we had gone. We were set to go for training at Syracuse University and everything. Then he got injured, and we just couldn't do it, and I went to teach at Jordan. He had an operation on his knee.

6-00:57:00

Wilmot:

Margaret, I think at one point you had mentioned that you had never been South except for one time when you went to go visit your husband's family home in—.

Wilkerson:

He was from Shreveport.

6-00:57:19

Wilmot:

Do you remember what that was like?

Wilkerson:

Oh yeah, very much so. Well, it was the first time that I had actually seen—. No, that's not true. I was going to say the first time I had actually seen segregated bathrooms, but I had seen some of that in Oklahoma when I was much younger.

Yeah, I remember very clearly going to Shreveport. His aunts lived there. Most of them were schoolteachers. They all lived in the same area. They were very nice people and all. We drove to Winfield, which was a place outside of Shreveport where he had grown up. It was raining, and the roads were not paved. So when we got out to visit this family member, you know, you step out in mud and that kind of thing. I had always heard him refer to this particular area of Winfield as the T and G quarter. I didn't know what that meant, but I thought, okay. I had never seen a rural area like this before. I cried, actually, because I thought about how his parents had moved out from there—the courage that it took for them to be able to leave—what they had left, for one thing. I'm not telling this very well. T and G was the name of the railroad that ran through that area, because they lived just on the other side of the railroad tracks, which was the big joke among black people—not just a joke, but a truth, because the black areas were across the tracks.

It all hit me that here this family had lived in a place that was named after a railroad track, with unpaved streets and all of that. It moved me in a very special way because I know that his family in moving to Los Angeles lived in a garage at first. His mother had been a schoolteacher in the South. They lived in a garage with five children, and they worked and built an economic base for themselves that allowed them, by the time I got to know them, to own a house on East Forty-Ninth Street. Then they moved west and lived in a very nice house on West Boulevard, and then bought an apartment building on Burnside, and so on, moving west and developing resources. I knew them at that point, but to go back to the roots—.

I had heard they lived in a garage at first, but to go back to Louisiana and see where they started—I was just overwhelmed by that, by the kind of courage it took, by the kind of foresight. By the struggle, the hard work. It just collapsed for me in that moment. They always told this story about me in his family.

01:01:00

Wilmot:

“Margaret came here and she cried?”

Wilkerson:

Yeah, right. [laughs] I remember it very, very well.

The other impression I had about the South was that it was very beautiful, particularly Louisiana. We went in the summer and saw the weeping willow trees and all of that. I looked at that. All the stories I knew of the South were of discrimination, of lynching, of terrible, terrible things that happened to people, so I was really stunned that it was so beautiful. You think that those things must happen in terrible circumstances—you know, the desert, or something ugly. The desert isn't ugly, but you know, something barren and all of that. To see the beauty of that place made you wonder how could people be so cruel in such a beautiful place? Those were two impressions that I had going to the South. None of my family had come from the deep South.

01:02:06

Wilmot:

Your parents had, but not in your lifetime.

Wilkerson:

No, not in my lifetime. Oklahoma was not the deep South.

Wilmot:

In the mid-sixties, how did you see the kind of disparate discourses of, say, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X? How were their approaches striking you?

Wilkerson:

Well, that's interesting because Malcolm X, we first came to hear about while we were living in L.A. I'm trying to remember, to place the time. I think I was probably in high school. No, that's a little bit early. It could have been around the time I was at Redlands. I don't know. We heard about him before he was famous, because he was a Muslim. I can remember going to a local church where he debated a Christian minister as a Muslim. It was very, very interesting.

We did stuff like that as kids, as teenagers and all, we went to these kinds of debates. We went to things in the community to learn and to figure out what was going on. My older sister, Mary An Greene, the one next to me in age, was at UCLA at that time, so that was probably was somewhere in the late fifties, because he really got started in those earlier years. *Muhammad Speaks*, the newspaper of the Black Muslims, used to be given away. It was thrown on your lawn every Wednesday and something like that. We'd read it and look into it—"What is this?" We thought it was kind of wild. "What is he talking about?" But it was not unlike Louis Farrakhan, actually, now. Many things he said rang true and resonated.

Of course, we had been raised in the Christian church, so we were not inclined to become Muslim, but we had questioned a lot of things in Christianity growing up, so we were open to hearing what he had to say. We thought it was a little edgy, in a sense, but a lot of things he said rang true in lots of ways. He was very articulate—extraordinarily articulate. As he grew and emerged as a leading figure, we certainly resonated to the messages that he brought.

01:05:04

Wilmot:

This is when you were in maybe your early twenties?

Wilkerson:

It was what?

Wilmot:

When you were in maybe your early twenties?

Wilkerson:

Oh yeah. Definitely. Definitely. We didn't agree with the violent side, but we understood the militance. We weren't sure that he was really violent in that sense, but I guess I should qualify that.

[End Audio File 6]

[Begin Audio File 7]

7-00:00:27

Wilmot:

We were talking about Malcolm X's stand on violence versus and nonviolence and some qualifications.

Wilkerson:

I said, I think, that we didn't support his idea of violence, and I need to correct that, because I think we understood that he was not fomenting violence, but that he was coming from another tradition of self-defense that has been very strong in African American communities. It isn't talked about a lot, because it's dangerous to talk about it, and to act on it. There's a long history of black people defending themselves. After the World Wars the men came back to places in the South and questioned things. The notion that blacks were always helpless victims is not really an accurate one at all. In fact, there's a film out now. One group called the Deacons of Defense was very active during those years. My sister helped to raise money for them. There's a film on that. I think it's on HBO or something like that. It's about this effort, nationally, to support groups, black groups in particular, that armed themselves and were determined not to be helpless victims. It didn't mean they went looking for people to shoot, but when folks came into their neighborhood, they were prepared.

That also comes from also being a rural people. A lot of blacks lived originally in rural areas. Farmers and people like that often had guns, so it's not foreign to have guns. We had stories in our family about my maternal grandmother holding off a mob with a rifle—lots of those legendary stories are true. Malcolm X tapped into that sort of tradition and notion that you should defend yourself.

Martin Luther King, of course, he was a Christian minister. We belonged to Christian churches and so on. We certainly responded to his idea of taking a moral high ground—the nonviolent movement. We had read Gandhi, and were aware of the things that Gandhi had done. We also knew that was a strategy based on the notion that your oppressors were really human and humane. There was a real question about that.

I think one of the things that's been lost about that period is slowly being gathered by various historians and historical documentaries. There was actually lot of debate and concern in black

communities around the country about these two strategies. Martin Luther King's strategy of nonviolence was not just readily accepted by everybody. There were a lot of black people who said "Well, that might work if you weren't dealing with racist white people." There was real debate that went on around that. It wasn't so universally accepted. The way that it's portrayed now is that everybody thought that was wonderful and we were all loving black people and so we wanted to support nonviolence. Nonviolence was a very risky and courageous kind of stance to take. To stand and take beatings and all of that sort of thing in the belief that people would finally get tired of doing that and would be called to a higher moral code. It wasn't readily accepted. I think we debated it as much as anybody in our homes and in our families, asking, does this make sense, doesn't it, and so on. Of course, as we saw, certain gains were made in the South. But when he moved that strategy north, it was very difficult to get the kinds of gains that he got in the South, partly because I think the discrimination and racism in the north was much more subtle, in a way. You didn't have anything as dramatic as segregated restrooms and water fountains and so forth—it wasn't that clear cut. It was a more difficult kind of racism to fight.

There was a lot of debate about it. We did go and hear Malcolm X speak and watch him debate and all of that. It was an exciting time in lots of ways. We were just living it. We didn't realize how exciting it was. It was just life for us.

7-00:05:46

Wilmot:

That's often the case, and it's funny, because I'm asking these questions from a historian's perspective, but it's your life.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, that's true.

Wilmot:

When you moved up to Berkeley and there was this whole kind of emphasis or political culture around

Third World Marxism, did that enter your sphere, and what did you make of it?

7-00:06:27

Wilkerson:

That in particular didn't enter my sphere very much. I guess because I had children and lived a distance away from the campus and so on, about all I could do was to get there and go to my classes, do what I had to do, and leave. I was not particularly involved in activities on campus, because any time that I took was taken away from my family and my children and they were very young. I still felt a very strong obligation towards them. I wasn't very involved. I had just missed the Free Speech Movement. I came just after that. When the third world strike happened—'68, is that right?

7-00:07:36

Wilmot:

1968, '69.

Wilkerson:

Our second son, Cullen Anthony Wilkerson, was born in '68, in December, and I think we were on the quarter system. I stayed home that next quarter because he was born on December 31st, so he was a New Year's Eve baby. I think the Third World Strike happened in January or February of that year. I missed it totally. I watched it on television. When ethnic studies—and African American studies is a part of it—got established in another year, something like that, they were looking for people to teach in the program. I applied and I was on campus. I was interested in black theatre and so on, and I was going to do my dissertation on that. I applied and I was interviewed. I remember being interviewed in the student senate chambers in the ASUC building. There must have been thirty-five or forty people in the room, because it was very much a collective. The people who had been involved in the Third World Strike, to a large extent, and other politically active people were there, and they were interviewing whoever the instructors would be. I was a graduate student, so I remember one young man ask me, "And sister, where were you in the Third World Strike?" because he hadn't seen me anywhere. So I said, "Well, I was home, having a baby." He said, "Right on, sister, another baby for the revolution," or something like that. That got me over on that score. I was not on the line. I heard a lot about it. I was not on the picket line. I was not involved in that.

7-00:09:47

Wilmot:

Who were you hearing about it from?

Wilkerson:

I heard about it after—mostly after—because I did get hired into the first African American studies, the ethnic studies program, to teach the first black humanities courses on the campus. I heard about it after that. There were always stories and lore about what happened and who really got beat on the lines and all of that sort of stuff, as ethnic studies began to form itself, and I began my affiliation with, then, Afro American studies at that point, as a graduate student. I missed all of that. I have a way of missing things, somehow. I wasn't intimately involved in the Watts revolt or riot. I wasn't on the line in the Third World Strike. I was involved in—at least, we responded to it—the People's Park business, since I was teaching as a graduate student, so I honored the strike lines and we met off campus in various places. I guess it's typical of—and I can pick up this story later—my way of working from within the system—really trying to work from within the system and not always being the one was on the outside of the system confronting it, but trying to confront from within. You make those choices. I can talk about so many things that happened. They aren't necessarily as public and dramatic particularly when they are in academia, but I've tried to be effective in that way.

7-00:11:35

Wilmot:

I think we're going to spend a lot of time on that the next time we talk. I wanted to ask you about what I'm calling an emergent awareness of the intersections of art and politics. I'm reminded of this when you say, "We wanted to start an interracial theatre in 1964," and I wanted to ask you, when did you first encounter the work of Lorraine Hansberry?

7-00:12:13

Wilkerson:

I first encountered it in 1959 when I graduated from Redlands and this friend and I—the story I told—took a week and went to New York City, and we saw all these wonderful plays on Broadway. We didn't go to anything off-Broadway. I'm not sure we even knew about off-Broadway. *A Raisin in the Sun* was one of the plays that we saw. I was so struck by the incredible authenticity of this work—that fact that it really gave you a window into black people's lives in a way that had not been done publicly before—and of course, the extraordinary cast. You've got Sidney Poitier and Claudia McNeil, Ruby Dee. Lou Gossett was in it, and Ivan Dixon, who was later in the films. Glenn Turman was the child. He was about twelve years old at the time. I mean, it was just marvelous. I went with a woman named Nancy—I can't remember her last name now—and I think we were sitting in the balcony, looking at the play. She said to me, "I never knew that black people talked about white people so much, in their families." I said, "Yes." So, it was a great experience.

Later, I directed *A Raisin in the Sun* at Jordan, in '66, just a couple or so months after the Watts riots had happened. I think I mentioned in the earlier tape that the girls' vice principal thought that play was too revolutionary for me to do. Even though the film showed on television a week or two before our little high school play opened, we performed in an auditorium there that seated about six hundred people, and it was filled, every single night the three nights that we did it. People were just totally taken by that play. This is also one other little story around it to give you some idea of how groundbreaking that was, and what discoveries happened when I was teaching at Jordan. When we were going through our rehearsal period, there was a section of the play involving Beneatha, who was the college student—she was about twenty years old, something like that, in the play—she is in love with everything that is African. She has a young man who is an African who is kind of trying to date her. It's probably the first time on Broadway that you could see an African in this way on the stage. He fascinates Beneatha. He gives her some records from his trip home. She starts playing them, and he brought her some cloth from there, so she wraps her head up and starts dancing around in some fake African way because she doesn't know anything about it, but she had learned enough about it. We had this moment in this play that we had to prepare the students for to do this. I brought a recording by Miriam Makeba who was popular in some sets in those years, but was not popular with the masses, I would say, of black people yet. I played it, and the kids laughed. They couldn't relate to that at all. By the end of the rehearsal period, when they would have a break from our work on stage, they would play Miriam Makeba's work, just on their own. There was a lot of learning that went on. It was so clear that she [Hansberry] was so much ahead of her time in terms of predicting the attachments with Africa that culturally people would have.

There's one more story about that that gets to the heart of the political nature and educational value of theatre. I had a young man who was playing the role of the white character. There's a white character there who comes in to try to buy the house on behalf of the white neighborhood that they're moving into. I had tried to get one of the white faculty members to play this role. This was a guy in shop who was very popular and all that. I figured he wouldn't have anything to lose. He worked with the kids. Kids know him. He was afraid to do it. He didn't want to do it. So, I thought, well, what am I going to do? I got a fellow who was a little light-skinned, and just a tad darker than you are—just a tad. I said, I'm going to make him up to look like a white man, just thin his lips a bit with make up, not try to put a white face on him, but just enough to suggest

his whiteness. And we'd work a little with his diction, and we'd hope that the kids would suspend their disbelief, which they did, and they knew this kid. We had been rehearsing and so on, and about two weeks before the show, he disappeared. He stopped coming to school. He was a senior. He stopped coming to school. I asked the students, well, where is he? We need him. The play is coming up and all. They said, "Well, he's just hanging out." They said, "Well, we'll go get him." I have no idea where they went to get him. The students went out, a couple of the guys, and they brought him back—got him to come back to school, to do the play. Because he had to be there for rehearsals, he finished that year and graduated. He wouldn't have graduated otherwise. It was a sense of teamwork. It was sense of the importance that the kids felt the play then had for them, and he was a piece of that team that needed to be there, and so they got him back and he graduated.

7-00:18:28

Wilmot:

I wonder how he felt about playing a white person?

Wilkerson:

Well he kind of enjoyed it. A lot. He got kind of pretentious with it, and you know, and all of that. We couldn't make him talk really differently, but with just enough of a sort of proper sound to suggest that he was alien to this. Of course, people reacted to him and so on. The students accepted him as playing a white man. He rather enjoyed it.

7-00:18:57

Wilmot:

It's so interesting that the shop teacher, of course, he was a white person, but wasn't willing to play a white person.

7-00:19:07

Wilkerson:

Yeah. In that setting, when he clearly was a white person. I thought he'd be okay because he was pretty lively, a big guy. He worked with the guys in the shop and I figured he had the relationship where they would accept him. I think they would have, but he was really, really afraid and nervous about doing that. I couldn't convince him to do it. I just had to let it go.

7-00:19:29

Wilmot:

That's such an interesting story.

Wilkerson:

But, anyway, Lorraine Hansberry, that's when I first saw her work, here in New York on Broadway. I never met her. But I was introduced to her work at that time, and I started watching for the things that she was doing.

7-00:19:49

Wilmot:

Through Lorraine Hansberry and later, you do work with Katherine Dunham. Dunham's early affiliates were people who were very involved in the Negritude Movement. And Lorraine Hansberry also had something about pan-African political sensibility, which is reflected in her works like *Les Blancs* and *Toussaint L'Ouverture*.

7-00:20:23

Wilkerson:*Toussaint L'Ouverture*, yeah.**Wilmot:**

You being from Los Angeles and an American, how did you make sense of this palette?

7-00:20:40

Wilkerson:

Well, I guess I learned a lot from what I read and people that I met. I got involved with Katherine Dunham because of VèVè Clark. She was a graduate student at Berkeley and I think I was directing the Women's Center at that point, and maybe lecturing in English, and, later, in African American Studies. She was doing her work on Katherine Dunham and brought the project to me. I thought it was a great idea. We also got Katherine Dunham to Berkeley on a visiting scholars program. We did an exhibit around her work. I'm laughing about that because it was really something. We did an exhibit around her work, and then she and I put this book out. In fact, I think she's editing it for republication. Troy Duster was involved in this. All of these little pieces pull together. I smile about our doing the exhibit because we were in T-9 then—temporary buildings on campus. I was directing the Women's Center. We agreed to put the exhibit up in the Women's Center. I had no idea what it took to do an exhibit. VèVè knew more about this. The whole business of where you hang things, and the lighting, the whole bit. That was really something, because the room that we used was not a gallery, so we had to put all of that kind of stuff in. VèVè was the real force behind that.

Then, when we wanted to publish, Troy was at the Institute for the Study of Social Change. I think it's changed its name now. He had some publication money, so he published it. Since then, regularly, people have called and asked for that book. It could really be a much more popular kind of thing if we were able to do it. VèVè contacted me a few years back and there was an opportunity to do this. I was here at Ford by then. It was just too much for me to be involved in, and I told her, you go ahead and you do it. You can do it. I learned a lot from VèVè, and from reading in order to do the exhibit and to publish with VèVè. I read Katherine Dunham's work and all that. I mean, I really encountered the intellectual resources that were there around African Americans and pan-Africans. My sister, Mary Ann, when she was at UCLA—she'd read a lot of W.E.B. DuBois and talked about his work. I didn't read as much as she did, but I read some of his things. I've been introduced to pan-Africanism through her and her work in university. We had all, in our family, been nurtured and grown up in black culture. I knew Langston Hughes, I knew some of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, some of the others. Just knowing them, hearing them, as I said before, because my mother recited poetry while she was trying to deal with my unruly hair—all of that led me into a more formal kind of study, plus some of the other experiences that I talked about. I was reading about Katherine Dunham, meeting her, seeing her do a master's class, and beginning to understand the tremendous impact that she had. And I learned a lot through VèVè's witnessing of this and the work that she was doing. I was beginning to learn much more about Lorraine Hansberry, who I would learn later was very connected with W.E.B. DuBois. I didn't know that at the time. All of these connections had begun to grow clearer.

My desire then to focus on African American theatre and my dissertation. I really wanted to do a study, nationally, of black theatre. It was what I really wanted to do. I did not have the resources

to do that. Paying for graduate school with RAships—Research Assistantships, and TAs and stuff like that. I wanted to do that. I decided, if I can't do that, I will do black theatres in California. Just about the time that happened, I read, literally one to two days before the deadline, a notice on the bulletin board in the graduate division about the first dissertation fellowship sponsored by the Ford Foundation. I grabbed that announcement, I quickly put together a plan, sent it in, and was given one of the first fellowships in that first year, and one of four that was given at Berkeley, the only one that was given in a literary area. The other three were in history, and the other one was mine. That was kind of some validation around it. I thought about changing the study to a national one, because then I had the money to do it, but I had gone through the prospectus period and all that, and I decided that I wasn't going to change it. I would use this, hopefully, as a stepping stone.

7-00:26:23

Wilmot:

How much was the award?

Wilkerson:

You know, I honestly don't remember. I'm not so sure, but it probably was the equivalent of whatever a TA makes in a year, plus some money to travel to do research. The University got a little piece of money for supporting me. It was one of the few, if any, dissertation fellowships. Nobody supported dissertation fellowships then. They might support a graduate study, but nobody supported the year or two of dissertation work. So it was just a great gift in lots and lots of ways. I would have done a national study. That was a period that was very, very important in black theatre nationally. Unfortunately, it really hadn't been done.

Wilmot:

I'm thinking that today we should probably close. We'll pick up next time right away with your dissertation and graduate school, but I wanted to ask my last question today about how you chose to name your three children.

7-00:27:55

Wilkerson:

How did I choose to name the children? Haha. That's interesting. Well, first off, I wanted to give them names that could not be reduced to nicknames. I had a thing about that. I don't know why. My name was Margaret. They named me Margaret Louise, and my maiden name was Buford. I never liked "Margie." I didn't like any of the diminutives around that, although I did allow some of my friends in college at Redlands to call me Maggie. "Maggie Bu" was what some of my close friends call me, which was okay.

7-00:28:33

Wilmot:

That's cute.

Wilkerson:

But "Margie" I disliked because in the fifties, there was this television program called "My Little Margie," and it was so unlike anything that Margaret was like that I hated nicknames. That was number one on my list of criteria for choosing names for my children.

I wanted to give them interesting and unusual names—not a name like Robert or whatever. We had the two boys first. We decided not to name them after our fathers, although we really cared for our fathers. We couldn't get the names together. Stanley's father's name was Joseph, Joseph Marshall Wilkerson. My father's name was George. We just couldn't get George and Joseph together. Each child comes sequentially, so you didn't know if you named one George, would you have the opportunity to name the next one Joseph, and George Joseph didn't make sense, or Joseph George didn't sound good, so we decided we wouldn't name them after them. That freed us from that. I kind of got a baby book and we looked at different things. Darren means "little dear one," something like that. The middle name, Eugene, is for Eugene O'Neill. Don't ask me why. I was very much into drama at that time. I thought a lot of Eugene O'Neill, so Darren Eugene is his name.

The younger son, same basic thought. Now we'd lost the opportunity to name them after the fathers, and Stan didn't want a junior. There was also another member of the family who had a Stanley, Jr., so he didn't want to do that. Actually, Cullen was not named out of the baby book, although it does mean something like little cub or something like that, which is probably a right name for him, because he's becoming now a biologist. He's doing his Master's in biology, loves animals and all of that. But think of "Countee Cullen," and that gives you some sense of the shift you know, and moving more deeply into African American culture. Anthony is his middle name, and I honestly don't know where Anthony comes from. I can't remember why I called him that. Stanley might remember that. It's not anybody's name that I know of. I think maybe it just sounded good.

7-00:31:08

Wilmot:

Anthony is the patron saint of lost things, just so you know.

Wilkerson:

Oh really? Well, that's probably very right for him.

Rose came along, and we had actually decided that this was the last. At least, I had decided that this was the last child, since now we had a daughter. Well, both of us actually decided this. So, we gave her the names of her grandmothers and great grandmothers. Her name is Gladys-Mari Rosellyn Wilkerson. Poor child. She got all those names. Gladys is my mother's name. Mary is my grandmother's name on my father's side. [Mari is Mary in French.] Rosetta was Stanley's mother's name. Ellen was the name of her surrogate mother, the step-mother who actually raised her. The woman that you saw in the picture at the house was her birth mother, but she didn't live very long, so Ellen was the one who raised her. We gave her Gladys-Mari Rosellyn, and of course it always created all kinds of problems because people couldn't spell it. They'd call her Rosalyn, or whatever. When she became a graduate student at Indiana, she changed to Rose. It's not official, but she goes by Rose. We have changed and call her Rose. It was our way of saying, this is the end, and we're going to acknowledge the family history and all of that. That's how we named them.

7-00:32:55

Wilmot:

Thanks for that, and we're closing today.

Wilkerson:

Okay.

[End Audio File 7]

Interview #4: March 18, 2004

[Begin Audio File 8]

8-00:00:15

Wilmot:

Margaret Wilkerson, interview four, March 18, 2004. When you came to Berkeley—in 1967?

Wilkerson:

'66.

Wilmot:

1966. You said you came right after the Free Speech Movement.

Wilkerson:

I think it had just ended about the time I had got there. I was not there during that time.

Wilmot:

So what was the political environment like when you arrived on campus. Do you recall?

Wilkerson:

I lived in Petaluma. I had one six-month old baby when I got there. I didn't have a lot of time to test the political environment, being involved in dramatic art, but I did observe things. There were rallies that went on, there were a lot of activities and speeches and political people who came through. As I could, I would go to those, but I had a really full curriculum in dramatic art. Dramatic art was not particularly involved, although sometimes the students were. Sometimes some of us who were into socially conscious drama would slip over to another place to see something but it was pretty involving because you had classes during the day and you had productions in the evening that you were either in, or you were helping to crew, or you were directing it. And so there wasn't a lot of time for involvement in other activities on campus. Had I lived in Berkeley, that might have been different, but I lived about an hour and a half drive away in Petaluma, so that made it a little harder. I didn't come into campus to hang out much. When I came in, I was doing my work mostly. [laughs] You would hear about Berkeley in the news. Sometimes there was a big disjuncture between what I would see on television in Petaluma, and what I had actually seen on campus, because I was there throughout the People's Park protest. The whole period I was there, even before going on the faculty, was filled with all kinds of political activities. There was the Third World Strike, and I think I told on the earlier tape how I was having a baby during the quarter when that actually happened.

I was also there and working as a teaching assistant during People's Park. There were strike lines out, and issues about crossing the strike line, and people saying they should boycott classes, but students saying—especially undergraduates—I really want to make sure I pass this class. Sometimes the compromise was to teach the class off campus, in finding churches and other places, where we could rehearse and things like that, to keep the academic life going, but not violate the effort that students were making to show that they had power, that they could push the administration and so on. Those of us sort of working on the inside tried to support in that kind of way. Berkeley was always very, very lively—something going on all the time. Politics got

particularly heavy as I moved into African American Studies, but that may be jumping the gun a little bit in terms of what was actually happening on campus.

8-00:04:13

Wilmot:

Perhaps the better question then, as a first question, is what was going on for you academically?

Wilkerson:

Academically, I think I mentioned in an earlier tape that we—Jean Bazemore and I—thought we would sort of rip through this Ph.D. program. We went in with that intent. I took the classes I needed to take and so on. By '67 I had completed my master's degree, in the first year. I opted not to write a thesis, but you had an option—if you were on the Ph.D. track—you had an option to take an oral exam. I took what was probably my first oral exam and passed that. By '67, in a year, I had my master's degree with a few courses. I had passed my French requirement, my one language requirement. I had this wonderful teacher. I did talk about Mr. Long. He was also my high school teacher. He was my French teacher as well, and he was really incredible. He had been in the army and he had gone to the Sorbonne in Paris. I have no idea how he ever got there—it was very unusual for an African American man to have had that kind of training, but he trained us so well in French that I was able to be out of French for a couple of years as an undergraduate, go right into an advanced French class and do well, and then not touch French for all the period from say, '57 to about '66—nine years of no serious follow through on French and study, and be able to pass the French exam for the master's degree. I brushed up on it, and took it, and so in the first year I finished all of that. Our only child at that time was just a little over a year. It was a busy year for me.

What was it like? I found it expanded my horizons in just the dramatic canon—western canon, pretty much—I had always been a somewhat shy student in class, meaning that I always sort of doubted my ability in a way. I had been very successful at all that kind of stuff, but I would always question whatever answer I would come up with. I remember in that first year, I took a course from Dunbar Ogden, who later became my advisor. I think I took it in the first year, anyway. It was on medieval theatre. It was his specialty, it was a graduate seminar. Because it was medieval theatre and you had to be involved with the medieval church of the time, he would talk to us about some of the biblical texts on which the church dramas were based. He'd ask us questions and so on, and at one point, he asked us, “Now, does anyone know who it was who walked with God?”

Well, that's in the Old Testament, and I knew who that was. I really knew who that was, but I didn't volunteer to answer. To me, I learned that in church, so of course, when everybody knows that. When I noticed that nobody raised their hands, I thought, “Well, gosh, I don't really know that.” He said, “Well, Enoch walked with God.” I thought, [snaps] “I knew that.” I doubted it simply because it was something that was kind of obvious in my background, and I figured, if the other kids didn't know this—and I was the only black person, of course, but these are all graduate students—if they don't know this, then maybe what I know is wrong. I wasn't willing to risk it. I wasn't willing to just throw it out there. I tried as a graduate student to begin to overcome that kind of reticence although it stays with me all my life in some ways. I remember it really expanding my horizons.

I went into drama because I believed that drama was a very, very persuasive medium for social change. That's really what drove me into that. I wanted to make change in the world. I thought it was one of the really compelling ways to do that. There's another side to me as well, another part of me that really loves symbolism in drama. Not esoterica, but loves the mechanisms that are a part of drama, the way in which the play is crafted. I really love that. I enjoy that and I like it best when it's melded with a social consciousness. Not propaganda, not preachiness, but using all the effective tools available to really good dramatists to put forth the struggle that humans have to live in this world. I could spend time talking about symbolism in a work. It didn't interfere with my desire to do and to support socially conscious drama.

I enjoyed graduate school in a lot of ways. It was a challenge, because I had taken graduate courses in the theatre department at UCLA, so I wasn't a complete stranger to that kind of work, but it was nice to be in school and to try to do all this work. Now, it was challenging in a lot of ways because, for one thing, I needed to work. My husband was teaching high school in Santa Rosa, which was another hour north of Petaluma, or close to an hour, but I really enjoyed taking all the various courses, doing the research. I loved doing the research. I had a job. My first job as a graduate student out of dramatic art was not a teaching assistant job, although I had come in as obviously an experienced teacher, but as a research assistant in the then Rhetoric Department, which I guess is still the Rhetoric Department. I worked for Todd Willie, who is now here in New York. I haven't seen him in years. He probably wouldn't even remember me. And Robert Beloof, who was then the chair of the department. They were contemplating writing a book on "Wounded Knee." This is before the actual kind of "Wounded Knee" demonstrations and all happened a few years later, but they were thinking of writing this book. They hired me as a research assistant—I wasn't working in the drama department—and they asked me to go to the library and find out everything you can find out about "Wounded Knee." It was a fabulous introduction to the library for me. I got a carrel to work in. I probably wouldn't have gotten that as a first-year graduate student, a space there where I could work. I had to go through all of the various libraries that were a part of the main library, hunt through all kinds of stacks and stuff. It was an interesting project, with no boundaries except "Wounded Knee." I learned the library through that. I had all this material. They never wrote the book, as far as I know, but I gathered all kinds of material for them, and I got to meet someone—other faculty members. Later, and this is just a footnote to that, sometime later, after I got my degree, after I got my Ph.D., they asked me to come into the department as a faculty member.

I remember going to the dictionary to look up rhetoric, trying to figure out what it really meant. I said, "What is this? What is this department?" I knew it had something to do with speech, but of course, it was all over the place. It was communications. I was trying to understand what in the world is this thing? I didn't go in that direction. I probably should have since they seemed to want me. I didn't go in that direction. I wanted to stay with theatre.

8-00:13:48

Wilmot:

They saw a fit for you.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, it was strange. I don't know how it happened. It's not like I can connect all the dots. I honestly don't know how it happened. I was very surprised that I was invited to apply for this. It sounded like they might have hired me probably.

8-00:14:07

Wilmot:

Was it a tenure track job?

Wilkerson:

Yeah, it was a ladder rank as assistant professor. It was very odd. But anyway, so that first year went by pretty quickly.

8-00:14:25

Wilmot:

I have a question, Margaret. Did you ever think of making a production of what you learned? A theatre piece about what you learned about "Wounded Knee?"

8-00:14:35

Wilkerson:

No I didn't actually. It's an interesting thought. It would have been a very dramatic story, especially as things developed. It's odd that they were kind of anticipating that somehow. I'm not sure how. The first year went by pretty well. I did some production work. I think I was in a play during that time. I can't remember when my acting days happened there, but somewhere during the five or six years that I was at the Ph.D. program, I did some roles. Berkeley wasn't— [laughs] I just remembered one role I was offered to play a bit later.

Wilmot:

What was that?

8-00:15:25

Wilkerson:

[laughs] In 1973, I think or four, I became director of the Women's Center. I was acting director for a while. Somewhere, I think in the seventies. It was very early on. I had only been either actual full permanent director or acting director for maybe less than a year—and I forget his name now—one of the faculty in dramatic art was directing Cleopatra. It's the version that comes out of nineteenth century theatre. I'm forgetting the name of the fellow who wrote it, but it's a well known play, and he wanted to cast me as Cleopatra. I had heard things about this professor from Jean actually. He's long gone now, he passed. She would never tell me what he said, but she warned me, said, "Stay away from him. Don't ever be in a position where you are vulnerable towards him." When you're acting in a play, then you are very vulnerable to the third eye who is looking at you and telling you what to do.

8-00:16:50

Wilmot:

Is that because he was lecherous or racist? Or both?

Wilkerson:

I have no idea. Maybe both. She would never tell me actually. I never took a class from him, but he was always cordial to me. He kept telling me, “You have a Lauren Bacall look about you.” I thought, [Mumbling] “What’s that all about?”

He never really did anything overtly towards me, but I decided not to take the role, one, because of all of the warnings I had heard, but also because I was directing the women’s center, and I said, “What kind of statement does this make to a campus, if I’m playing the role of Cleopatra?” Cleopatra was an incredible queen, but I wasn’t sure how he would treat this character. I felt I had an obligation to my job and to the women on the campus not to put the director of the women’s center in a funny kind of compromising role. It could be compromising. I didn’t take the role, not that I had a lot of time to do it actually. It would have been a nice chance. It would have been interracially cast, or course, and there’s just no telling what that would have turned out to be. So I didn’t do it.

8-00:18:13

Wilmot:

I’m sure during that era, there must have been many productions or several productions, where you weren’t sure what people really had in mind, even if they meant well.

Wilkerson:

Exactly. I had seen some productions that he had done and others had done, and sometimes, dealing with women, they were really on the edge. I was in one production with the famous Jan Kott. I guess he’s still alive. I’m not sure. He was a Polish director and came to the states. The last I heard, he was still in the U.S., maybe at UC San Diego or some place. That was some years ago. He was seriously a lecher [according to other students]. No question about it. We were in “The Oresteia,” one of Aeschylus’s plays. I was the chorephus, who was the head of chorus. It was an integrated chorus and we did it in the Dwinelle studio theatre. The whole idea was to do it in the style of the sixties at Berkeley. We the chorus] were kind of an alternative group.

There’s a segment in there for Helen of Troy, so I read for it. He told me he thought I was just wonderful, but he didn’t cast me as Helen of Troy. He cast me as the head of the chorus, which was fine, so I did that. I was probably one of the older women in that group. I was in my early thirties, so I wasn’t old, but there were a lot of undergraduates in it. He systematically went through each of those young girls. They talked about it. They’d talk about it in the dressing room. You could tell, the way he acted towards them and everything. It’s funny I didn’t think of doing anything about it at the time, but I just wanted to stay away from him. He never came on to me, and I was glad of that. The sad thing about it was that the undergraduates didn’t seem to feel victimized by it. For them, at least when they talked about it, they were almost kind of proud of that connection that maybe he’d be able to do something for them in the field or whatever. It wasn’t like you had a set of women victims. I don’t recall that part at all. Maybe if that had happened, if I had felt that way, I might have said something or done something. There was no environment for doing that, particularly in a drama department, where things can be so vague and nuanced, so you don’t really know. You can’t really pin it down, sort of thing, but clearly, that happened. There’s no doubt in my mind that happened, hearing what the women students did and said—particularly undergraduates. That’s the seamier side. I don’t know how much of that happened in the drama department. Most of the professors that I worked with, like Travis

Bogard, who was really the big force in the department, were very supportive. Travis was supportive of me, Dunbar Ogden was supportive of me. Dunbar even defended me with another faculty member. I can't remember what it was that he was critical of me for something and Dunbar really just stood up for me as a faculty member. I wish I could remember what the incident was but I don't remember what it was.

8-00:22:18

Wilmot:

Who was the other person who—.

Wilkerson:

Travis Bogard.

Wilmot:

What was his area of work?

Wilkerson:

He was the famous Eugene O'Neill scholar. Well known on the campus. He passed away some years ago. And Dunbar Ogden.

Wilmot:

He did lots of medieval work?

Wilkerson:

Yeah, his area was medieval theatre and classical theatre.

Wilmot:

The person against whom Dunbar Ogden defended you?

Wilkerson:

Kerrigan Prescott, I remember. Kerrigan Prescott was an acting teacher among other things. I'm not sure I knew what all the faculty members did because I focused on the ones that I had to work with. Kerrigan was—what can I say—he really pushed the envelope when it came to teaching acting. I know students in his acting class, who he'd take him to his apartment, turn off all the lights, and—. You know. Actors do have to be able to do a lot of sensory work. They need to be very professional about it. They sometimes have to be in very intimate situations. Being able to handle that well—you really have to have a lot of integrity and know the lines and the boundaries and so on. Because actors have to go to all kinds of spaces and private, as well as public spaces—.

8-00:23:52

Wilmot:

Or private spaces publicly.

Wilkerson:

Absolutely. You're absolutely right about that. I'm not saying that you don't have to put actors through certain kinds of things. That's true. This was kind of edgy. He got in real trouble when he had an acting group perform, they invited him to have some students perform and talk about

drama at one of the professional development programs for teachers—that’s what I remember. It was held on campus. I think he had some nudity or something on the stage. That just really kind of blew them out of the water. He left. He was gone after that. How it happened, I have no idea, but he left. Kerrigan—I can’t remember what it was, but it was something—it wasn’t anything sexual or personal. It had more to do with either credit for a course or something on that order. Dunbar really just stood up for me and didn’t let that happen. Travis Bogard was very very helpful to me as well, and he was chair of the department, so I always felt like I had certain kind of protections, being African American, a woman, in that kind of setting. I had not anticipated any of that going into a drama program. I just didn’t know that that kind of thing happened.

8-00:25:23

Wilmot:

Do you mean anticipated a situation?

Wilkerson:

The whole sexual issue. Racial issues, I don’t think I—. Not really, you know—. One of the great, great disappointments in my life—and I may have said this before—was finding out that highly intelligent people in colleges and universities could be very racist, and I wasn’t really prepared for that. It was kind of devastating to realize that, because what it meant was that you could respect someone and really like them because they were so intelligent and they had ideas, wonderful things like that, but there was a divide between you and that person because of their racial views. That puts you in a kind of love-hate sort of relationship with people and with an institution. In general, I kind of feel that way about Berkeley. It’s a love-hate relationship. Hate may be too strong a term, but it’s a place that is really vibrant and marvelous, with incredible people with brilliant ideas, warm people in some instances, but the system itself tends to perpetuate discrimination and racism and exclusion and sexism—all that kind of stuff.

8-00:26:54

Wilmot:

In what ways? How does it perpetuate—.

Wilkerson:

Well, let me think if I can pull one example. Let me see if there was one in graduate school.

Well, I took an acting class. Let’s give that example. I don’t know if it’ll seem very blatant, but it felt like it to me. Cultural differences that people have—. I was in an acting class—it was a graduate acting class—and this professor had certain kinds of exercises that he wanted people to go through, so he wanted you to run around the room as if you were a cloud or whatever. I’ve always been a large woman, and I was never a tiny, thin, petite, anything like that, ever in my entire life. I was good sized when I was born. I had trouble seeing myself as a flower or tree or cloud or all of that. It wasn’t part of my cultural reference, if you will.

So, during the time that I was in that class, one of the other graduate students was directing *Jalousie de Barbière*, which is “The Jealous Barber” or something like that. He asked me to play the lead female role. It was a Molière play and a one act. He did it in the style of the period, so all the women wore these big gowns with a hoop and everything, and instead of crossing directly straight across the stage, you curved because that was the style of that particular period that he

wanted to do it in. So, instead of going straight to the lamp, I would curve around. You made all these circles and stuff. When this acting teacher saw the performance, he was really astounded. He said, “My goodness, I didn’t know you could move like that.” I don’t know if it was so racist or what, but, the point is, he wasn’t prepared to deal with the cultural difference, that I had particular perceptions, but I also had particular experiences as an African American woman that it made it not the most likely thing that I was going to move around like a cloud, or that it would speak to me. This student director was able to tell me, to work with me, and free me to do that, but he [the professor] assumed that I couldn’t do any of that simply because I couldn’t do his exercise.

Students run into that all the time. I had students at Cal who went through acting classes and just—. When you talk about racial issues, people expect it to be something that really slaps you in the face. It isn’t always that. Sometimes it’s just these kinds of very nuanced things. You are only cast in certain kinds of roles. You’re not allowed or not expected to bring any of your own cultural perspective to it. Lots of ways like that. It’s more difficult in a way, because it’s not as blatant. It’s not like shutting a door in your face. It’s like, well, come on in, but you need to walk this way or you need to talk this way, you need to look like this, or whatever. Those were some of the ways in which faculty are trained, or not trained, in a sense. The tendency is to teach as you were taught, and most faculty of those ages were taught in institutions that were predominantly white and were largely homogeneous and did not have much diversity. All those things are constructed without your particular group or your particular gender having any impact on that. That simply gets passed down and you end up as a younger student coming and having to adapt or leaving or whatever. Those were just some of the ways. There are many other kinds of systemic things that we got into much later as I got active on the faculty, but as a graduate student, you’re there to try to learn and benefit, and it’s not always the best kind of experience for you.

8-00:31:42

Wilmot:

What struck me in doing these interviews, and what’s kind of come to light in the course of doing these interviews, is just the way that this institution is a collective of individual network in some ways, and how you get involved in the networks often times has to do with people’s comfort with sameness or not, sameness or difference or not.

Wilkerson:

Very true.

Wilmot:

That’s one of those things I was really wondering about. As a graduate student, you were connected to Dunbar Ogden and Travis Bogart. Those were people who were your allies.

Wilkerson:

I had other graduate students who were allies and we were all sort of in it together in a lot of ways. Jim Linnell was one. He is now at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. He was a great ally. Jean, of course, was an ally. Jean finished her program very early though. When we were undergraduates at Redlands, she finished in three years. She took huge numbers of units to do this. She also finished her program early at Berkeley as well, and had probably as difficult a

time as I had, just in those terms. Networks—we had study groups. There was a woman named June—what is June’s last name? Oh God. She was a Texan—tall, blond, and she had this heavy Texas drawl. She was terrific. She reminded me a lot of Ann Richards, former governor of Texas—who is just very humorous and can kind of bury people in humor and all. She was very good. We studied together when we were doing our masters. We had study groups and things like that, so there were small networks within the department.

Outside, I guess one of the networks that I began to develop has been very, very important to me, and has been throughout my life—it was not in my first year, sometime in my third or fourth year, something like that. I went to the professional association for theatre educators. The American Theatre Association, which went out of business in its fiftieth year. It had been the American Educational Theatre Association, and it had just become the American Theatre Association. It was a combination of professionals—drama people—in colleges and universities, and children’s theatre and army theatre, and community theatre. I think secondary school theatre was the other one. There were five segments to it. The meeting was in Washington D.C. I went with Phyllis Ford—I don’t know if I’ve mentioned her—who was one of my undergraduate buddies. She and I went to Washington, DC to this conference because I read about it and I thought, well, this ought to be a great place to go and meet other people in theatre who weren’t going to college and universities and—you got the whole range there. So, I went and there I discovered the black theatre program which was—it might have been called the Black Theatre Association at that time. It was an interest group. They called it something else, but they had interest groups around women’s theatre, black theatre, whatever. Asian theatre, all of that. Directors. I went to it, and there I met Errol Hill and Tom Pawley, Winona Fletcher—who was the other person whose name I saw down here. Sam Hays,, Ted Shine. All these people I had never known.

These were people who were very prominent in black theatre. Errol Hill just died last year. He was really famous in terms of his work on Caribbean theatre and also on Shakespeare. Winona Fletcher was a costume designer but she had gotten her Ph.D. and she continued to work in costume design, but she was and still is the world’s most incredible mentor. She supported and helped students all over the country. Ted Shine is a wonderful playwright. I produced some of his plays. Tom Pawley, another black theatre person, who is a scholar and director. I would never have known these people. Before I left that conference, I had been elected to serve on the governing council of the black theatre program. They immediately pulled me in. They were so happy to see any young person coming on—an African American in particular—who was going into theatre. They just pulled me right in and that was it. I think the next year or a year or two after, I was head of that little group. It just went on from there. We kept touch for many, many, many, many years. In fact, I just talked to Winona not too long ago. They were a little bit older than I was. Probably about ten years. Maybe something like that. that was a network and absolutely helped me to sustain myself intellectually and in terms of scholarships and all of that, for all of my life.

I always thank my lucky stars that somehow I decided to go to that conference. It taught me a very important lesson that I used when I went to the women’s center and so on, and that is that these external networks, external to the university are very, very important in sustaining people, particularly when you are one of few whatever—African American, women—you name it, one of few excluded groups. You have a very small community within your university. It really

helped me to learn more about colleges and universities around the country, what was happening, resources—all of the kinds of things that I couldn't get from Berkeley.

Ogden was wonderful as an advisor and a mentor. When I was writing my dissertation—he had a background—his father was a minister in Little Rock during the very difficult times and a very progressive minister. He [Dunbar] had something in his background about knowing how to relate to people, to difference, and things of that kind. I could tell that. But he didn't know a lot about it. He didn't know about African American culture in the more scholarly ways that people like W.E.B. DuBois knew, and certainly this network of people that I tapped into. I could tell that because during the course of doing my research for the dissertation, as quickly as I would discover a book that was useful to me, particularly that was on African American theatre, it would appear on his library shelf. We were in a way like colleagues. I mean, we treated each other with respect and knew our place and all, but he was obviously learning from what I was finding out, and I was also learning from him. That was an important model for me as well, to see that a professor could actually learn, and you know, could expose himself in that way.

There are many things that I learned along the way in terms of that. Those external networks, internal support and some internal networks were really, really important. When I went into the women's center and was directing it and so on, I hooked up with a number of women across the country. It's one of the reasons why I'm here at Ford. It's because of someone I hooked up with during those years, and it took me into all kinds of experiences beyond the Berkeley experience so that I could also have perspective on what I was experiencing at Berkeley. This did not have to be the world for me.

Wilmot:

Which is important.

8-00:40:57

Wilkerson:

It was extremely important to me. The networks are really crucial and I always try to help graduate students understand that. As you participated in these networks, let's say the racial ones in particular, as black women for example, who were few and far between in research universities for many, many years, sometimes your best contact—the person to talk to about scholarly or personal and professional issues was not your neighbor next door or across the campus, but you'd pick up the phone and make a long distance call to Connecticut or to Kentucky, or to New York. We had those kinds of networks. Yes, we're three thousand miles away, but look, here's what we're dealing with and what do you think? It didn't matter where people were located. It was whether or not you could really learn from them and whether you could kind of have your spirit nurtured by them and return the favor when they needed it.

8-00:42:16

Wilmot:

Margaret, who was your network? Who were the people you could call in that way?

Wilkerson:

Gosh, I had a fair number of people I could call. Winona was obviously one. Erroll was very helpful to me, not in all kinds of ways, but in terms of intellectual resources. He's also a good

friend of Dunbar's, but I had met him through ATA. There were people like Pat Belle Scott, and Beverley Guy Sheftall at Spelman. I haven't seen Pat in a long time, but Beverly Guy Sheftall is still a connection, and Spelman.

That was the other piece of it I meant to mention. Some of the people in the ATA network—the American Theatre network—some of the African American people had the experience of HBCUs—of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, which I knew very little about because I had never attended one in the course of my education. There were very strong networks of drama students, festivals, competitions, exchanges—all of those things going on with HBCUs. Through some of these networks of professionals, you tapped into that broader base, at least in terms of African American theatre. That was very important. Who else could I call? Gee. There are only a handful of black women. If I expand the networks to think of other women to talk to, Donna Shavlik was always a good friend. She worked at the American Council on Education, for example, Office of Women in Higher Ed. There was Cynthia Secours who runs Hers Midatlantic, training workshops for women administrators. I won't say bunches of folk, but there were people that you met through conferences and that sort of thing. Both the women's networks and the networks of scholarly folk of color—that were really helpful. It made all the difference in the world in my career.

8-00:44:52

Wilmot:

I had this other question which was related to this idea of “fellowship” and how fellowship assisted one and navigating and negotiating graduate school. I wanted to ask you—the question is leaving my head. Oh, yes. Was there such a thing as learning the institution and was there anyone who showed you the ropes at Berkeley? Was there a necessity of learning the ropes?

8-00:45:27

Wilkerson:

I wish I had learned them. I hope I'm not leaving anyone out of this, but I feel that I learned it by trial and error. I'll give you a good example. In dramatic art, for the Ph.D., for your qualifying exam, we did two full days of written exam. You went into a room where they gave you exam questions. You wrote—no computers. We didn't have laptops and stuff like that then. So, you wrote by hand, and you wrote for like four hours. Morning, afternoon, you skipped a day, and morning, afternoon. Once that was over and that had been looked at and reviewed by your committee, then you had an oral exam. I was on very much of a timetable. My parents were not supporting me through graduate school because they didn't have the money to do that. They barely were able to help me through undergraduate school. We had to split the cost and things. My husband was working. We had, by then, two children, and at some point, a third on the way. I was working. He was working. I didn't have a lot of time to hang out.

What I'm trying to say is that every minute had to count for me. I scheduled my oral exam at a time when my advisor was away. I didn't know any different. You took a written exam, so I did that, and I figured go on to the oral exam. I didn't really have anybody to really help me prepare. We understood that your orals would be on your graduate work—no, I'm sorry. You chose two areas. I chose ancient Greek theatre, and I think the other was Molière. These were two areas that I really loved. I loved Ancient Greek theatre. We were required to take seminars in it and do a lot of reading and so forth. I thought that was what I had needed to do. I had done that, so I reviewed

all those notes and all that kind of stuff. So, I went in to take the exam, and I didn't pass it, but I was really—. There were certain people on the committee who were kind of dismissive of me, asking, "Didn't you read this?" and "Didn't you read that?" But no one had told me—I hadn't had anybody explain this to me. I don't blame Dunbar, particularly because I went ahead and scheduled it because I didn't know my advisor needed to be there, and that the advisor really needed to be in the room. Somebody let me sign up for that knowing that my advisor was going to be away. He was away on leave, on sabbatical. I didn't pass it. That was very difficult. That happened—I wouldn't say often—but it wasn't a rare occasion in dramatic art, where people didn't pass their exams.

8-00:48:59

Wilmot:

Master's exam?

Wilkerson:

No, this is a Ph.D.

I dealt with that disappointment, and when Ogden came back, we talked about it. He was able to help me understand, of course having gone through the first failure, I understood that I had to go beyond my seminars. I was the first in my family to go for a doctorate so I had no background on what was expected. If I had known that I was expected to read more broadly than my seminars, I would have done that, but I didn't know that. I learned from that. I learned about negotiating the institution, how critical the advisor was. I learned who I needed to be talking to and in touch with. Consequently as I taught at Berkeley and as I worked with graduate students in particular, I would always have this session where I said, "Now, here's the way you get through this. This is what you need to do. If you're choosing a graduate school, don't choose one where you don't know some faculty member who seems to be interested in your work. Don't pick it just on the name of the institution. You're going to get through a doctoral program because you have a guide, because you have someone who cares about what you are doing, and who is going to help you get through it—not do the work for you, but help you know how to negotiate this."

Too many students come into it blind and think, "Well, this is a great institution, and I want to do so and so." I've seen it happen, where students have gotten into graduate school and had to leave and go somewhere else, or not go at all, because they couldn't find anybody who cared about their work. I say, "You have to do your homework. You have to get in there and find that out." I didn't do any of that because I didn't know to do that. I didn't want to see any students make that mistake. It was one of the kinds of things I just learned by trial and error.

The second time, I blazed through them. This is a comment on the level of understanding—scholarly understanding—in dramatic art at that time. For the orals, you had to choose two areas to focus on. The first time I had done Ancient Greek theatre and Molière. The second time through, I think Dunbar suggested to move me along in my work, one of those areas could be focused in the area that I wanted to do my work in. So I thought, "Okay, maybe I can do something in African American theatre." I wanted to keep ancient Greek theatre because I loved that, and so I said—. I remember so well—Henry May—he's passed on since then—he was a good man but—.

8-00:52:16

Wilmot:

He was on your dissertation committee?

Wilkerson:

I don't know. Was he? There were only two people on it. He might have been, but he was a great scene designer. Wonderful, really incredible scene designer. He was on the faculty, and he might have been chair at the time. He said to me, "Well, why don't you just do African American playwrights?" and I said, "All of them?" He said, "Well, there's just Langston Hughes and LeRoi Jones." I knew a lot more in between there. I said, "I'm going to take contemporary, or something like that." It was just this whole level of ignorance about this whole field. African American theatre—you can't have anybody but Langston Hughes and LeRoi Jones. There were so many, just gobs of folk that had written, written well, and it was exciting and the themes—. So I did it and I had by that time, directed LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman* as a graduate student and filled one of the auditoriums on doing it. I've forgotten his name. He was in the journalism department, but he was on the committee, but he asked me if I would explicate the opening—the prologue in *Dutchman*, which is really a kind of incredible poetic statement that he lays out. I used to be able to quote it. I can quote it if I can get the first line now, but I can't. I, of course, had directed it, so I knew the play forwards and backwards. He wanted to hand me the script, and I said, "No, I know it by heart." [laughs] He was just blown away by the fact that I could go through it because I had taught it, I had directed it. I knew it backwards and forwards. I passed that very well.

I also drew connections between ancient Greek theatre and contemporary black theatre, and most of them could not—. "What do you mean connections?" I said, "Well, they both are trying to build mythologies. They're both trying to build a history." There are all these connections between what the ancient Greeks were doing, and building the Greek identity and what black theatre writers are trying to do. That was an illumination for them. By that time, I was getting to be a little more savvy about how this whole thing works, but it took some hard knocks to make that really happen for me. That's pretty much the way that I learned it.

I also learned how the university works through connections—. Sometimes doing service work is really important. I was writing my dissertation as I recall, and I was nearing the end. I was invited to serve on the search committee—to be the graduate student representative—a search committee for the women's center, the fledgling new women's center. I have no idea who suggested me. I don't know how my name came to anybody's attention, but I got this invitation to do this. I remember talking with my husband and saying, "I want to finish the dissertation." I needed to finish and not have to pay the money and all of that. We talked about it, and we both decided, "It might be good for you to do this. You'd meet other faculty." And all of that. So, I did this and helped to select the first director, who was May Diaz, who is also an incredible person.

I also served on the committee with Herma Hill Kay, who was in the law school, and was tenured, and eventually became the dean of the law school and so on. I forget his name—the mathematician—Leon Henkin. These were people I met as a graduate student. That connection became something very important for me as I moved on. We selected Maye Diaz. Maye started the center—Bea Bain was associate director—and [there was] another woman whose name I

have forgotten. This other woman left the associate directorship and Maye Diaz called me and asked me to come to be one of the associate directors of the center, which I agreed to do. I said I would do it but I wanted to make sure that the center was open to the needs of black women and women of color, and that would be part of my purpose there. I came and did that. Six months later, less than a year, Maye was invited to be provost at Kresge College in Santa Cruz, so she decided to do it. Suddenly, the women's center had no director. Maye was a tenured full professor, and she was an anthropologist. She had turned down a deanship at Berkeley in order to direct the women's center, which made a big statement on campus—that this woman, who is really up there and could be a dean in Letters and Science, has decided to do this. Six months later, she gets the provostship at Santa Cruz and so—.

8-00:58:23

Wilmot:

And didn't turn that down.

Wilkerson:

She didn't turn that down. So, the issue became, who moves into the directorship. Bea Bain heard about what was happening. She knew. She was close to me, and she knew what was happening before it was announced, and she took me aside and said, "Margaret, if they offer you this, you should take it." This was like 1973, '74. I had just gotten my Ph.D. in '72. I was in the English department and all of that, and so I was very reluctant to do it, but Bea convinced me by saying the center is in such a vulnerable position now. We don't know whether the administration would appoint someone who would not treat it well and not do well, and it could just die out. Women faculty on campus had fought really long and hard to get this center there. I said, okay, I would take it.

When a committee was set up to select the next director, Herma Hill Kay was on it, Leon Henkin, and some others, and they chose me. It went with the half time appointment, with a half FTE, a tenured spot to make sure that the women's center director had enough protection academically to be able to take some of the kinds of risks that needed to be taken. So, that's just to follow that network idea and the value of going outside of your own little bailiwick department. That taught me to try to make sure that I could get involved with faculty and other departments.

I ended up knowing a lot of people in a lot of departments, so that when—and I'm jumping around here—so that not long before I left Berkeley—maybe '96 or so—a few of the faculty asked me to run for membership on the Committee on Committees, which is the big committee that recommends all the other appointments to the other committees, including the budget committee. They said, "You know Margaret, we really need somebody in there who is more progressive and so on. I'll write it up for you. You just sign and we'll write—. Whatever you want to write about yourself, whatever needs to be included on the ballot, we'll take care of that." I won the election, and may have been the first African American woman to serve on the Committee on Committees. I connect all of that. It was my learning early on that if you're going to negotiate a big university like this that had so much at stake and so many stake holders, that was important for you to be known and involved outside of your department because it wasn't just promoting your own career, but it was the way in which you learned enough of what was happening to really be helpful to students, to young faculty coming through. You'd know how to

leverage the institution to be able to get the kinds of things you wanted and needed for yourself and for your students and for your department, eventually.

Those were early lessons for me on how to negotiate the institution. It served me well in working in other places like when I worked for the Lilly Endowment and worked with colleges and universities around the country. I had learned a lot that I could share with them. I learned what questions to ask about an institution in order to understand better how it really works. It all started with some of that early committee work and stretching myself a little be on the search committee to do all these various things. I think [Berkeley Chancellor] Al Bowker came to know me a little bit because of that, because he appointed the committee. He later at one point nominated me for the presidency of Medgar Evers College here in New York. That's what I mean about the way these networks work in odd and amazing and unknown ways. You come to the attention of someone, you work on a committee, and you never know where that's going to lead.

Wilmot:

Okay. Let's stop for a quick minute.

[End Audio File 8]

[Begin Audio File 9]

Wilmot:

Margaret, you were sharing with me off camera—we were talking about strategy around raising political issues in committee-type environments.

9-00:00:19

Wilkerson:

There really are a couple of things I want to say about that, and I hope I can remember. Well, certainly, I found often as a faculty member that I was the only person of color, sometimes the only woman, sometimes the only person that you could count on for representing student concerns and issues and all of that. It placed a lot of responsibility on me as a faculty member not to miss a single meeting. It suddenly hit me when I was directing the women's center, and I was on various committees, that if I didn't attend certain committees, and these were sometimes faculty senate meetings, and particular issues came up, that voice would not be heard. I couldn't count on that perspective being spoken by somebody else. If you have a committee of four or five people who kind of think alike and all of that kind of thing, certain kinds of issues come up—. They're all going to agree. Nobody's going to even see the other side.

This is probably the burden for people who are different, let's say—culturally different, gender-wise, or whatever—carries. Part of the responsibility and burden that they carry is that they can't afford to miss a meeting. Others can afford to miss a meeting because their perspectives will be heard, but if you are a person of color or a woman, or you have different kinds of views, or you care more about students, and you want to bring that perspective in, it means you can't miss a single meeting. You juggle your work. You do whatever you have to do in order to make sure that your presence is there. The other thing we were talking about off camera was that sometimes I used a strategy on committees where there were others who thought somewhat like me, or

thought like me, and might represent certain points of view. When certain issues came up, I learned I shouldn't necessarily be the first one to jump in with, "Well, remember people of color," or "Don't forget the students" or whatever. I'd wait and let someone else say that, let someone else open the door for, so I wasn't always perceived as the one voice—you could be stereotyped pretty quickly—

Wilmot:

Stigmatized.

Wilkerson:

Well, they might think, "we can always count on you for this or that perspective." But by holding back a bit you could show that others actually shared some of your values and some of your ideas. They may not be saying it exactly the way you would want to say it, but you can take what they say and elaborate on it, "And that means, blah blah blah." It's a tactic that you try to use to build your influence and your numbers, sheer numbers, to make sure that committees don't just go about their business without really taking into account all the people and the constituencies and the issues that they need to take into account, particularly if you're on admissions committee and those kinds of things. I was on admissions committees and scholarship committees, every kind of committee you can think about—all of which was helpful to me. It is a dynamic that goes on there that you really have to learn to deal with if it's not just going to be a token membership.

9-00:04:15

Wilmot:

Would one ever say something that is very reactionary because it would be completely unexpected from you, and kind of wait and set up a situation where other people get to fight the battles?

9-00:04:33

Wilkerson:

Yes, that's another way to do it. Absolutely another way to do it. Also, to take another position unexpected of you, but couch it in such radical, ridiculous terms that people can begin to see how ridiculous it actually is. You use all kinds of strategies to try to get people to open up their minds and understand what's going on. I also learned that faculty members can be brilliant in their fields, but they may not be so brilliant when it comes to ideas, and perspectives based on experiences that they haven't actually had. I can remember some of the debates around affirmative action in the faculty senate at Berkeley. People who are absolutely brilliant in their fields would not take that same scientific method that they used in their field and apply it to something like affirmative action. They make all kinds of crazy generalizations.

I remember one guy who was on a committee that he and I were co-chairing. He really was a good guy. But he was telling me, "You know, it's just terrible that it's a real problem because black students don't have families that really support them in education." I said, "What?" When I queried him a bit, he was basing this on one student that he had, whose parents did not support his going to school. I told him, "There is a long tradition in African American families of supporting young people in education. It's not true of every single family, but you can't generalize."

He would never generalize this carelessly in terms of his own work and his research. You see one little phenomenon and from that you generalize? You'd never do that. That's what I mean about not applying the knowledge and the methodologies that they depend upon in their disciplines and their fields to something like race and racial issues.

9-00:06:55

Wilmot:

I think many people have blind spots, but then there's this idea that I think that is increasingly being debunked, that people who have pursued higher learning and scholars are somehow have elevated themselves to the point where they are above racism but they are only people who have grown up in this country and couldn't possibly have avoided the attitudes of their parents and their environmental—.

Wilkerson:

Exactly. That's true.

9-00:07:28

Wilmot:

It's so amazing.

Wilkerson:

It's very amazing.

9-00:07:35

Wilmot:

Margaret, hold on one second. Let me try one other thing.

Wilkerson:

I was saying that one of the tactics that I used to help faculty to open up their understanding of their relationship to race and gender and so on—I used this in the Lilly Endowment workshop on the liberal arts. I taught as one of the thirteen or fourteen faculty members for about fourteen years. For two weeks, we would meet at Colorado College. We were all together in another place away from our homes, from twenty-five institutions from around the country. Each sent a team of four faculty and administrators usually, and they worked on an institutional problem that they had identified, and each person had some individual professional development, meaning that they went to a couple of seminars. I taught the one on cultural pluralism. So, one of the things I would get faculty and administrators to do was talk about the first time that race came into their consciousness and take them back in their own experience.

It was really remarkable. This was, of course, a predominantly white group, but there were sometimes people of color there. Usually there were a few, a handful. But almost to a person, the white faculty had had very little contact with people of color. They might have had a maid in the home, or they might have been on a high school sports team with someone of color. Or the men might have in the military and they might have traveled in the south with a black colleague, may have seen the racism and so on.

Over fourteen years, we came into contact with people from these twenty-five institutions. What struck me was that so many faculty had such limited contact with people somehow different

from them. That was very sobering because it helped me to begin to understand why so much of the racist or racial attitudes or ignorance of difference gets perpetuated because in our society, then, and even now, people have been extraordinarily segregated in terms of where people live and which schools they go to and therefore what contact they have with others. So people do end up dependent on media images and limited anecdotal experiences as they formulate their racial attitudes. It was really quite striking that over the years, I would say ninety percent had very, very limited contact. These are people they liked—"I liked the maid in my home"—but that was all they knew. The maid came in, then left, and went to some place else in the city or town or whatever, and they didn't know anything about the rest of their lives. It was a great way to begin to open those attitudes.

9-00:11:17

Wilmot:

How did this contrast with the experiences of the people of color who were in the workshops? Where did they locate their first awareness of race?

9-00:11:26

Wilkerson:

They located their first awareness of race—it was usually some sort of discriminatory situation, where they walked into a place and they weren't served. They were called some name. They had a teacher often, even if they were in largely Latino or black situations, they would have white teachers a lot, so that kind of encounter. It was always as a victim in a sense, of someone else's attitudes, and then trying to overcome that was part of the struggle that they would have.

Wilmot:

It's also amazing to me how racism is so pervasive, but still to this day, it's imagined as people of color's problem. There's this level at which I think white people don't understand how much they are compromised.

9-00:12:31

Wilkerson:

They don't understand white privilege, and really it's a dominant group that has defined the other. When the other decides, "Well, therefore, I must build my self esteem back by saying black is beautiful," and this or that or the other, then that person who is victimized is the one who is blamed for raising the issue when in fact it's more reaction than anything else. It's a very convoluted thing.

One of the things we need—and we have tried to do that, I've tried to do throughout my life—is to try to open up a safe space for people to talk about these things. Stan and I, in fact, used to go—when we lived in Petaluma—we actually used to go to various churches—we would be invited to do this—to talk about racial issues. These were always white churches. I remember going to one up in the Petaluma area where we introduced them to LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman*, a very confrontational play that people get very nervous about—and we'd talk about the play, read it, and then open it up and deconstruct it in a way. I don't know how we ever got into doing that, but we did some of that. Actually Jean lived up there, and she did psychodrama. She would ask us to go with her when she did her psychodrama sessions with various groups to be kind of the actors in the psychodrama. It was wild.

I remember doing one in Berkeley. I'll never forget this. It was on fraternity row, in one of these fraternity houses. It looked like that, anyway. It's on Gayley Road, I think it is. It was a white group and we were doing things around housing because that was an issue in housing. We're doing our integrated theatre, right? This is about all we did on that idea. We were doing the psychodrama, and this man was a minister. These were really liberal progressive people. Stan and I were playing the role of a black couple wanting to buy his house. He was selling the house. He was moving out of this neighborhood, but he wouldn't sell it to us. In psychodrama, you can shift the terms. You say, well, play it like so and so, and then they play somebody else. When he played himself, he still couldn't sell it to us. He personally couldn't sell it to us.

In the discussion, we asked, "So why couldn't you sell it to us? This is play-acting. Why can't you do that?" He said, "I have nothing personal against you, but I feel an obligation to my community."

We said, "But you're leaving!" I mean, the convoluted attitudes that people have about race are just really really, really amazing. Even when they are free to fantasize in space, it was hard to break out of certain kinds of attitudes. We did a lot of that during that time. When I worked with Lilly Endowment, I was the teacher in the room, but we did a lot of different kinds of role play, and mapping exercises—map the important things in your life and talk about it. We had tears from people and all kinds of reactions that people had to dealing with racial issues that they had not been able to—. It sounds like psychotherapy. It wasn't at all because we used the literature of writers of color, as well as white writers to introduce them to some of the views of people who really thought deeply and had lived richly. It wasn't always racial. It was sometimes just something beautiful that they wanted to talk about, and we used that literature as a way of introducing them to it, but also used certain kinds of exercises to help them understand their relationship to it, because it's very hard to teach this kind of literature or use it in any kind of class unless you're ready to deal with it in terms of students. It's very challenging unless people have come to terms in some ways and they are able to handle a potentially volatile situation. I don't mean people are going to get up and hit each other, but it's a potentially emotional situation for them as well.

9-00:17:54

Wilmot:

I would imagine you would have to do a certain amount of work just to be able to lead work like that.

Wilkerson:

Absolutely. I know I'm just rattling on, but it reminds me of the teaching that I did early on at Berkeley, particularly in the English department and in African American studies, but this is largely in the English department, where we would read a range of literature, and at some point in the class, the students would hit a kind of emotional moment where they kind of took off the blinders and really became exposed to the literature.

I'll give you an example of this. It was this class, a fairly large class, and we were reading, I think it was, *Dutchman* again and we were having this discussion and one of the students made a comment. It was a racially mixed class. One of the students made a comment about the play, and I forget what the comment was, but I think the student was black. Then, there was a white male

student who commented on her comment and said, “Well she just pulled the veil away that separated us, and now there’s a brick wall.”

The whole class—it was like an electric shock that went through the class. At the end of the class, I had lines of students outside my office in tears, coming in and talking about this. Because the students didn’t want that brick wall. One of the black students who came in—a young black woman—undergraduate—said, “I’m devastated. I have never known about this literature and I’m in college. Why is it that I don’t know about this? This speaks to me. I don’t understand this.” She felt this sense of loss. A white student comes in right after her and says, “I’ve never seen myself and my people or my family, people who look like me, portrayed this way. Why do people hate me?” It was all this wrenching stuff. Particularly around the seventies. I don’t know if it would happen now, but it happened so much. I came in the seventies to judge the maturity of a class by how quickly they reached that moment. Some classes it took the whole semester practically before they ever opened up to that and really began to dig deep in the literature. I’m not saying they had to cry when they think, but to really dig in and begin to discover. Others, it happened within a few weeks. It was really—. I had a lot of those kinds of experiences, at Berkeley, in a very formal setting. I drew upon a lot of that in teaching faculty and administrators and it’s very sobering in lots of ways. It makes you try to understand and respect people themselves and why they come from where they come from, rather than just being angry at them and wanting to bop them over the head or something like that. You can really, most times, help to create a space where people can really come to grips with some of that. We don’t have a lot of these spaces.

9-00:21:54

Wilmot:

I want to turn now to talk a little bit about *Dutchman* and why it was this lightning rod. As I remember the story—I think I read it once in college and I don’t remember it well, but it was two people sitting on a subway, a young white woman, a young black man, and there’s this weird—as I remember it, and I may be totally wrong—but there was this energy of attraction and hate. Those two things. Then it culminated, as I recall—did it culminate with him killing her?

Wilkerson:

No, they kill him. The people on the subway.

Wilmot:

Interesting.

Wilkerson:

And throw his body off the subway. No, let me get that right. She kills him. If I remember, she stabs him, I thought. I’m pretty sure she kills him. God, I should know that.

9-00:22:46

Wilmot:

Well, I’m sure that is what happened— Of course you think about what people’s bodies mean to America. That is the reason why LeRoi Jones constructed his play the way he did, chose those avatars for what they were.

Wilkerson:

It's interesting that you refer to it as "America" because in many ways you can talk about the play as a representation of America. At the same time, it's also a representation of two people and two races of people, and gender as well, who have this incredibly complicated history. He is a—Clay is his name—a middle class looking young man, and he's on the subway. She comes in, really—what can I say—very provocatively dressed and acting and so on. Immediately, there's this taboo of a white woman who is coming on to a black man. He's trying to keep it straight and cool and all of that sort of thing and she just plays with him and teases him and taunts him and so on, until she really draws him out. They begin to make out and so forth on the subway, meanwhile, people are slowly getting on and watching and looking at this and so on. The more people come on, the wilder she gets and so on. Then she begins to—. Then she gets up and starts dancing. She starts calling him "Uncle Thomas Woolyhead" and saying, here you are in this fake getup acting like a white man when you know you're really are just an escaped nigger or something like that. She really just taunts, taunts, taunts, taunts him, and finally he gets up. He tells her, "Now come on. Sit down"—Lula is her name—"Sit down, Lula." And she doesn't. She just gets wilder and wilder and wilder.

He reaches up and grabs her and pulls her down and I'm sorry I should remember this because I know this play backwards and forwards, but because—. Oh, I know. How can I forget that. He pulls her down and he gives this incredible kind of speech about her, and basically her as an American. He doesn't say American, but he talks about—. "You screw some black man and you think you know everything about him." It kind of goes down that road, where he just sort of takes his whole mask off. He lays out this thing. It's that that ends up him being killed. I'm pretty sure she kills him, because he falls on her. That's exactly right. She kills him and he falls and in some productions, he falls right on top of her, simulating the kind of sexual but impotent sort of move because he is dead. They take his body and throw it off the subway. It settles back down to—.

9-00:26:16

Wilmot:

So the passengers are in complicity with her.

Wilkerson:

Exactly.

They're all different kinds of people. Some guy's reading the *New York Times*. Clay walks up and down the aisle when he really gets riled up. He says, "Like this skinny man reading the *New York Times*. I could rip this right out of your hands and rip your throat," and he reveals this anger and this hatred and this frustration that he has.

They tacitly kind of come together in response. Nobody says "Well, come on, let's go get him," or anything. Everybody just seems to know what needs to be done with the body, so nobody claims this murder. She goes on, another younger black man gets on—like a student, it looks like. She begins to look at him. You get the sense of this being perpetuated. With lots of symbolic—I won't go into all of it, but when you think about the subway, it loops, it's always in motion. It never really, really stops. It might stop at a place but it goes back and back around. It's like this thing is continually perpetuated.

Dutchman, the title, refers to several things. One is that it can refer to the flying Dutchman and the myth of that, or it can also refer to—which is one of the pieces that I really liked about it—*Dutchman* is this small little piece that fits into a set piece, like a piece of scenery. The Dutchman is the one thing that holds the thing up. If you pull the Dutchman out, the whole thing collapses. So the title has all kinds of resonance. It's an absolutely brilliant play. It's an absolutely brilliant play, even though it was very, very—what's the word—very disturbing when people saw it. I don't remember if I had told on one of the tapes of seeing it in L.A. and seeing five white women who seemed to be from suburbia, I assumed, walk in and sit down in the front row—it was like girls' night out is what it looked like. They were laughing and they had packages and all of that, and I said to my husband, I don't think they know what they've come to see. I think Paul Winfield was in it, actually, and he just died just a week or two ago. I think they were there for the first ten or fifteen minutes and they got up and left. It's a very disturbing play. They were sitting down front, too. The whole taboo of black-white relations, sexual relationships. The whole taboo of a white woman who seems at least initially to prefer a black man over a white man, the way in which she was sensuously dressed and coming on to him, and he is avoiding her. He is trying to keep her calm. It reverses the whole image of the raping black man—all kinds of taboos that he just broke apart. It's a great play. It was one of the things that helped to put black theatre and black—sort of—nationalist theatre out there.

When I directed it at Berkeley as a graduate student, we did it at Anna Head, one of the auditoriums there, and it was off campus. It was just packed with people who wanted to see this play on campus. I liked it for the kind of truth that it told and its deep symbolism. I loved that it operated on so many different levels. I loved that. I thought it was one of the things that really made it very, very rich. It's also a courageous play.

Wilmot:

The one thing I was wondering also, what audience do you think Jones wrote that for?

9-00:31:21

Wilkerson:

Oh, I think he clearly wrote it for—. Well I shouldn't put it that way. He was writing it for a white audience, but also a black audience as well. I think he wrote it for both, quite frankly. I'm not remembering what he said about it, but he wanted to put it out there. I guess I should argue that he wrote it for a black audience because he really was writing for a black audience in those years. But I think he knew that there were enough sort of hip white people that might come and see it, and he wanted to shake them up as well.

9-00:32:02

Wilmot:

When you were directing the play—and I'm know I'm asking you to reach back to the 1970s or 1969 even—no, early 1970s—what kinds of choices did you make when you were casting the actors?

9-00:32:21

Wilkerson:

I have to think about that one, because I did make some very clear choices on it when I did it on campus. I have to think a minute about that.

Wilmot:

We can return to it too.

Wilkerson:

For one thing, I think that Clay has to look very much like a harmless black man. He has to look like what he describes himself to be, which is a student who likes to go to parties—I mean, he studies, but he also likes to go and hobnob and socialize. He's very comfortable in integrated settings. You really have to believe that about him, that he doesn't have an angry bone in his body. I think that's one of the points that Jones is trying to make. I cast this tall sort of lanky young man who was maybe a sophomore or something. He was very sweet looking and all that. If anything, I had to really work on him to get up and deliver this outrageous speech at the end. You really have to see something completely different in the person.

9-00:33:44

Wilmot:

Oh my goodness.

Wilkerson:

You have to believe both of those people. You really need to be a pretty good actor to be able to make that switch and not telegraph it ahead of time. At the same time, once you see the angry man, you have to be able to refer back and say, oh, yeah, it makes sense. There has to be a connection. It can't be like a Jekyll and Hyde. You're looking for somebody who has that kind of affect, but has capability to go to this really rough and difficult place.

For the woman, you have to find a woman who seems to be very obvious, but who is also enigmatic, because there are so many lines that have double meanings in them, that are suggestive in certain ways. She can't just be acting like a sort of slut. Yet for the audience, that's what they need to believe initially. That's the first image they need to have of her, but as she continues to taunt him and say all these funny kinds of things, you have to see that there's something else about this woman that's just a little off. It's not just that she's just crazy, but it's like there's something else. There's another kind of resonance that's there. That's where the whole American notion comes in because you know Baraka (LeRoi Jones) always said that America sucks you into thinking that you belong, that you're a part of it, and then it destroys you. That's part of what Clay talks about in that kind of speech.

9-00:35:38

Wilmot:

How did you construct just the subway seats? How did you make that space? Did you just use two simple seats?

9-00:35:45

Wilkerson:

We used—if I can remember my mental image here—you had to use more than two seats because you had the other people come in, so I think we had a little row or something like that. I was directing this not having ever ridden a subway so I had no idea what a subway looked like. I forget who my directing teacher was then. He was saying, the subway looks like this and that. I didn't know it was grimy. I just didn't know. We had tried sometimes when we had the equipment to make it look like it was travelling with light, so that you'd get a little more of the

feel, and the noise of the subway. That's the other part of it because a subway is very, very noisy. At least it was in those years. You know, you had to try to simulate it best you can, but a lot of people in California had never been on a subway.

9-00:36:46

Wilmot:

The BART train isn't the same.

Wilkerson:

No, and we didn't have BART then. No, how old is BART?

Wilmot:

No, the early seventies.

Wilkerson:

Early seventies. Right, right, right. That play was '64. It was produced in '64. It was one of those signal dramas, like *A Raisin in the Sun*, and now August Wilson's work and Suzan-Lori Park's work. Just kind of signal playwrights that kind of break the moment and move the field in another kind of direction while showing other possibilities on the stage.

9-00:37:21

Wilmot:

Did you have the opportunity to see Suzan-Lori Park's *Topdog Underdog*?

Wilkerson:

I did. I saw it twice, actually.

9-00:37:26

Wilmot:

What were your thoughts?

Wilkerson:

I liked it. I think it's my favorite of her plays, but I didn't see the Lincoln play. I didn't see that one. I think it's called *The Lincoln Play*. I saw, I think she did. *In the Blood*.

Wilmot:

I saw that.

Wilkerson:

That's the one with the women with all the children, kind of *Mother Courage* type. Then, I saw the latest one—the last one that I saw was at the Public, and it's about abortion somehow. I was impressed with parts of, but I didn't feel like it was as finished. I saw a Stanford production of her *Last Black Man on Earth*, I think it was. It was funny. I had tried to read the play and I couldn't make sense out of it, but somehow when I saw it, it made more sense and was more spoken. She works on multiple levels—one of the things I love. She's marvelous with the language. I felt that she was trying to find a way to maintain that complexity and be able to speak to an audience. I see *In the Blood* and some of the other plays, and *Topdog Underdog* as her effort to try to somehow use enough of a realistic base, like *Dutchman* does, in a way, so an

audience recognizes the reality and the life but she's loaded it with symbolism. I think she does that. I think she achieves it in *Topdog Underdog*. I saw it twice, once at the Public, and when I went to Broadway.

9-00:39:16

Wilmot:

So you got to see it with Don Cheadle and—

Wilkerson:

Yes, and Mos Def.

Wilmot:

Or was Jeff Bridges in it?

Wilkerson:

Jeffrey Wright. He was in both. He played the same character in both. He played Lincoln.

Wilmot:

So you got to see it with Don Cheadle. I read about that and so wanted to see because Don Cheadle is one of my favorites.

Wilkerson:

Oh, mine too. I'm crazy about him. He was wonderful in it. He's such a fine actor. It was just amazing with the two of them. Jeffrey Wright, I hadn't known that much before, but he is amazing. Since then, I've seen things that he's done on film and so on. One is *Angels in America*. He is just a consummate actor. I just love him. I'm just crazy about him.

Mos Def was good. He was better than I expected. In *Topdog Underdog*, the interesting thing about him is that he comes out of hip hop and rap, so his gestures, I noticed, were much smaller than what actors would do. He doesn't use his body like an actor—a trained actor, let me put it that way. Cheadle is a trained actor, and it was really clear. He's not bombastic, but he knows how to use his body. The kinds of gestures that Mos Def used spoke to a younger audience. The young people who were out there were with him. Not just him, but they were with what he was saying and doing and all that. I allowed for the fact that even though he wasn't my favorite actor, what he did spoke enough to me and to a younger generation to make it worthwhile.

But when I saw him in this last play on abortion—I don't know if you saw it—but I can't remember the name of it. Oh, I know, *Fucking A*. That's why I can't remember. Even the New York *Times* wouldn't write the whole name out. It would say "F A." [laughs] Go figure. Anyway. That's what it was. *Fucking A*. He has this moment at the end where this character that Mos Def plays, he just kind of breaks down, and he half sings and speaks his lines. It's very much a scene that is tantamount to, I believe, that incredible moment in *A Raisin in the Sun* when Walter Lee realizes his money has gone and he's lost his money, and Mama, he's begging at the end. It's that deep emotionally. Mos Def really pulled it off. I didn't think he could go there as an actor. I thought, well, okay. He's grown and learned a lot, as he's moved along, but it was a great moment. I don't know. How did we get to there from LeRoi Jones?

9-00:42:29

Wilmot:

I think I just took the opportunity to ask you about Suzan-Lori Parks.

I have another question for you. This is actually totally university related. You had mentioned that when you sit down with graduate students—I actually think it's appropriate that we interpolate the theatre with-

Wilkerson:

Sure.

9-00:42:58

Wilmot:

You said you would sit down with graduate students and you would tell them what they needed to know to negotiate and navigate this institution. Then, I think what I heard you say was, you would tell them they need to find somebody who can guide them and who is interested in their work so they don't fall through the cracks. So they would have a guide. What else would you tell them in those meetings? If there is anything else. I may be overmining this.

9-00:43:25

Wilkerson:

Let me just think a minute. I think having a network of people is one of the most important things they could have. In addition to a guide, they need to be able to build networks. They need to be able to, if possible, work on a non-competitive basis. So many of our graduate courses are set up as—you know, if you can be the first to get to the library and get the one copy of whatever, then you've got an edge on everyone else. They should try to build more collaborative learning situations so that, for example, maybe you're studying for your qualifying exam—let's say in drama—and you have to cover the history of western theatre. It's a good tactic to develop a study group where each of you takes responsibility for an area and prepares for the others, so that you can share that and you can share the resources, and share the work of all of this, because it's a lot to cover. Being by yourself and alone is not always the best way to make it through graduate school. You do sometimes have to work against the competitiveness that you might have in a graduate seminar in a class. But when you're doing orals, when you're doing your qualifying exams, they usually don't have in mind that only one is going to pass out of the ten people that are taking it. Three, or four, or ten—all of them—can pass. It's a situation where you can build collaborative strategies, and I think people need to do that. Students need to learn to do that because it helps you get through the mountain of work that you have to cover, and it teaches you a different way to learn and really be mutually supportive, and hopefully carry that into the classes that you might teach. I think those kinds of collaborative strategies are important.

I advise the assistant professors as well, and, within reason, I advise them to take advantage of an opportunity to work with people outside of your department—like, serve on a committee. Within reason, serve on a committee, be involved in, certainly in a student organization, but I'm also thinking about opportunities that would connect you with other faculty.

Let me tell you one little quick story about this. It is, again, jumping around. When I was asked to go to dramatic arts to head the faculty and to chair the department, I had to chuckle about that given my history with the department and all of that. Anyway, I was asked to do it, and I did.

The dramatic art department, since I had been a graduate student, had gone from something like nineteen faculty to two. Just by attrition, administrative neglect, whatever. All those lines had gone. We had one faculty in theatre and one faculty in dance.

Wilmot:

Who were they?

9-00:47:15

Wilkerson:

They were Mel Gordon, who is a full professor in drama. I think he is still there. Marni Wood, who I believe has just retired. She was in dance. She had been there many, many years. What was I going to say now. Let me think.

Wilmot:

This was a story about how serving on a committee outside of your department. When you were chair, the department had come to a severely reduced—

Wilkerson:

Oh, I remember. Thank you. They lost a lot of faculty but they still had Ph.D. students whose faculty [advisors] were gone. They were threatening to close the department, and decided not to do that. They would keep the department going. They would allow the students who were there to continue to matriculate—to finish their degrees—but they weren't adding new faculty. You had students who were essentially orphaned. In some cases they didn't have advisors. In other cases they didn't have committee members. Carol Christ, in the vice-chancellor's office, called together faculty whose fields touched in some way on drama, faculty who were outside of the drama department. She got them to agree to help mentor these students. That meant that a student could come to me in African American studies—and they fixed the committees so that they didn't have to have three from the department, since there were so few faculty members in drama—so the student could come to me, even if it wasn't in African American theatre. They could come to me because I was also trained in western theatre, so I could help them with that.

When I went over as chair, what I discovered was that the students had never been encouraged to make contacts outside of the department. The department's curriculum kind of focused them inward, so many of them were at total loss in terms of going out and connecting, even with people in the English department. There are people over there like Janet Adelman, who is a wonderful friend of the department, and was interested in theatre and was willing to work with people and all that, and people were really scared. Graduate students were afraid to go. We worked to really help them to do this. Yes, you can go to professor so-and-so. They will talk to you. I say that in connection to my advice to graduate students that they should always be able to, and always make contacts in other departments around scholarly issues and so on, so that you can benefit and learn from what other people are doing, so you're not so isolated. If something happens to your member of your committee or your advisor—you never know what's going to happen to a human being—then you might have some other options.

It was striking to me that the students were literally afraid to go outside of the department because they had no preparation for doing that. They did do that eventually. They had to. Otherwise they just wouldn't be able to finish. Again, it's the need to take advantage of all that

the institution has to offer you. Part of this advice that I would give to graduate students would also help to prepare them for their careers if they were going into academe, because some of the same things pertain to that as well.

9-00:51:40

Wilmot:

I want to turn now to talk about your dissertation. I have to go back and figure out who was on your dissertation committee.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, I can't remember myself.

Wilmot:

How did you come to frame your project, your dissertation project? Your inquiry.

9-00:52:01

Wilkerson:

Well, that's kind of an interesting question. I was starting this dissertation around '68, '69, somewhere in there. If there was a heyday in black theatre, it was around this period. There was a lot going on nationally. The Black Theatre Alliance existed. It was based here in New York and they put out a monthly newsletter about what was happening in theatres all around the country. You had black theatres in various parts of the country. A lot of stuff going on. Plays being written and arguments and black aesthetic and all this stuff. It was exciting. There were folks in the drama department who expected me, I do believe and I'm quite certain about this, since I was the only black person in the department—graduate student—in a typical research-university fashion, they wanted to produce the first black scholar who would define what is black theatre. They knew about LeRoi Jones and Langston Hughes, way back when. Well, he wasn't way back then because they were almost contemporaries. They really expected—.

9-00:53:53

Wilmot:

Wow. I hadn't realized that.

Wilkerson:

Well, they weren't the same age, but they were contemporaries. Definitely. They were on the same panels. Studying Lorraine Hansberry brought that home to me. All of these people were contemporaries of each other. It's very interesting.

But some folks in dramatic art expected to be able to say, we have produced the black scholar who has defined what black theatre is. Because, in the university, you're known by your research. Next to that, you're known by the students that you produce. This was the moment to define black theatre, no other scholar had done this yet, and they expected me to do it.

Having grown up in a black community, I knew that LeRoi Jones was very important, and as you know, I really cared about his work. That resonated with me, but I knew that he was not the only theatrical voice in the community and he did not necessarily reflect what were the aspirations and the values of the entire community. I wanted to define what black theatre was, but I wasn't willing to do it based only on LeRoi Jones, because I knew about a lot of other playwrights and I

knew about community theatre. I knew about all these various theatres that were working and happening. I really wanted to do a national study of black theatres, selected black theatres, and out of that, to construct what might be a definition, if you will, of what is black theatre? What are we talking about here?

Of course, I did not see that definition as one person embodying it, but a set of values, a set of approaches. Something on that order was what I had in mind. I resisted saying, "I'm going to write about LeRoi Jones" and whatever, and so therefore I will define black theatre based on what *he's* doing. He would certainly be a part of it, but he wouldn't be the definer of it in a sense.

I didn't have the money to do a national study, and I was working with Dunbar by now. We decided to focus it in California, and we would do black theatres in California. We picked eight theatres. Four in San Francisco area, and four in the Los Angeles area. I was going to do a kind of history and critical assessment of them. So I got into a kind of methodology that, you know, dramatic art really didn't know or understand. I didn't realize I was doing that. Because I was asking these kinds of questions, it took me implicitly into a kind of anthropological approach to theatre. To do interviews with founder directors, and also not simply to judge a theatre based on its repertory or the people who are in it, but also to look at their financial structure, to look at the physical facility. Look at their values and goals. Look at how were they received by, let's say, the press, and also by audiences. That's how I ended up with the whole scale of things that appears in the dissertation.

Dunbar was with me, with all of that. These were the kinds of questions I thought we needed to ask, because in black theatre—it's not just black theatre—but even the more mainstream theatres—they are in part defined by what their values and their intentions are, and their locations. A show, a theatrical production, is different if it's done in Lincoln Center, as opposed to being done in local community center. There are all kinds of ways in which the environment and the setting and all of that are affected. The way in which an audience receives possibly a drama may be different if you're doing it in the basement of your church, sitting in wood chairs, or if you're in a plush downtown theatre in Los Angeles. So, the setting and resources make a big difference. *A Dutchman* you can do it with a few chairs, or you can do it with an elaborate set. If you're doing the kind of theatre for an audience that kind of expects a flamboyant set, then that can dictate where you can do it and who does it and who comes and all of those kinds of things. I wanted to ask this whole range of questions. That meant that I ended up basing a lot of it on documents that were produced like press documents that the theatre produced, and a whole set of interviews. That's what I went about doing.

After I had my prospectus accepted and so on, I think I mentioned that I saw this notice on the bulletin board about the Ford dissertation fellowship and I was able to get that, which really was wonderful. It was, I thought, too late for me to change the whole prospectus, and I thought I would do California, and I could move on to do a national study. I never did the national study. I did do California. It was never published, but it's known to be one of the longest dissertations ever. I think it's eighteen hundred pages, five hundred of which is the part that I wrote, and the rest of it is documentation. Dunbar was very strong on documenting, and it was partly his influence that it became that set of huge appendices, but it was also a way of validating the fact that these were real theatres.

Somebody in English, at one point when I was teaching there, said, “I saw your dissertation. Why did you do so many theatres and so much documentation?” I said, “Well, would you have believed that these theatres existed and that they have such an importance for communities if I had only discussed one or two of them?” The fact that I was able to find eight, four in just two metropolitan areas, says something about their vibrancy and their importance at that time. If I had done only Inner City Cultural Center, it’s a blip or whatever. Or only Aldridge Players West, which was gone by the time that I did it, you wouldn’t get the sense of impact. These techniques were not the usual kind of things that dramatic art students did, students who might do more critical analyses of plays and what have you.

Wilmot:

Did that mean that people kind of weren’t totally receptive to the methodology in your department or you had to persuade them?

9-01:01:52

Wilkerson:

The dissertation didn’t have any trouble being accepted, but it was always—I don’t know why I feel this way—I always felt like it was kind of an outlier, in an odd kind of way. It didn’t quite fit the usual kinds of dissertations that people did. I was never able to publish it.

9-01:02:10

Wilmot:

Why didn’t you publish it? It’s four volumes, it has original source material that is located nowhere else on this earth.

Wilkerson:

It’s interesting. I couldn’t get any uptake on it. At one point I think I wrote to the NEA to get a fellowship to make it into a book and what have you, and you learn a lot about structures. I sent it for the general competition and they sent it back to me and said, we’ve put you in the special ethnic category. I did go ahead and send it in and apply anyway, but I thought it was American theatre. I thought it ought to be considered as a part of American theatre. Of course, I know now that the ethnic categories was a strategy to be able to give some grants in those areas because the review panels weren’t going to accept anything ethnic as a part of American theatre at that time. I heard once at the Ford Foundation—this is before I came here to work many years ago—and I never verified this—but I was told by one of the program officers that they had actually set aside a fund that publishers could tap into to publish the work of people who had had dissertation fellowships, and that they never got any takers on it. Now, I don’t know if that’s absolutely true, but that’s what I was told at that time. In other words, it was very difficult to get published. That’s the long way of saying that.

It was very, very hard to get any kind of definitive work published in those years. I went on to other things. I published sections of it. I published in the—what is it called—it used to be called the *Drama Review*. It used to be called the *Tulane Drama Review*. I published essays based on a couple of the chapters. I think the Watts riot is one, and something else. I did that and I went to other things and never looked back to it.

9-01:04:45

Wilmot:

Let's stop this tape for one minute.

[End Audio File 9]

[Begin Audio File 10]

Wilmot:

I think the thing that is so amazing to me about the dissertations and the five volumes of it—I think there are five volumes, there may be four—the weight of a small child, as I said to you before—is that you were doing all this work at the same time you were having children and raising a family and I'd love to hear a little bit more about how that worked for you. How did you travel and do your interviews while you were raising your children?

10-00:00:41

Wilkerson:

I have this one story to tell, in terms of doing interviewing. Unfortunately, it was not a national study, but I could get to L.A. easily to do research. Many a time I took whichever one was the latest baby with me, and had my mother or my mother-in-law or my sister, who lived in L. A., would help me. As I said before, this was a group effort, and family members helped, in-laws and all. So, there was a lot of juggling of things, and a lot of people giving me support.

We did have our moments. I told this story at one of the meetings of Ford Fellows, who are all minority fellows, quite a few years ago, actually. I had gotten a post-doc fellowship, and part of what the National Research Council does is to bring together three years' cohort of people who have had fellowships. Marvelous conference, people get together for two or three days. It's very high energy and very inspiring to see so many people of color who are doing research in all kinds of fields—every kind of field you can think of. I told this story, and it's become kind of a legend, so I'll tell it to you.

You know how big the dissertation is. By the time I was writing the dissertation it was 1970, '71, and I finished in '72. My last child was born in '71. She had been born. We were living in Richmond at the time. I had to go into Berkeley in the evening to Xerox a section, because I'd do a section and I'd give it to Dunbar, and I always kept a copy and all of that. This particular evening, my husband was working late with the team. He had a late game or something. So, I had to drive into Berkeley, in order to Xerox. They didn't have any copy shops in Richmond at that time. So, I brought this box and I set it on top of the car and I put the kids in and I put the belts on and everything. I put the baby in the front with the—they didn't have the big car seats then, just the little infant seat. I drove out of the garage, and I got on the freeway on 80 and I heard this big pop and I saw these papers flying. I said, "My goodness, somebody had—"

And I didn't finish that sentence. I realized it was that piece of my dissertation, that part of it. It was like five hundred pages. I had forgotten to put it inside the car, so I pulled over on the freeway and I cried. My oldest son remembers that. He probably was about six years old. He says he remembers it. Then I recovered, and I just went home.

I told my husband about it that night, and the next day, he got up very, very early, without my knowing anything about it, and went out on the freeway to try to pick up whatever pages he could find. He brought back pages that had tire tracks on them. It was very touching that he did that.

I always told the graduate students that story in terms of support and the kind of help that you get, but also that you can't let things like that keep you down. You have to keep going. Things happen to you. You have to keep going. I can't tell you how many Ford Fellows over the years have come back and said, "You're Margaret Wilkerson, you're the one that told that story." [laughs] That was a real moment. I was able to replicate just about everything. These were a lot of the documents that I had brought in for copying. Remember, we didn't have computers, so if you lost it before you Xeroxed it, then you didn't have it anymore.

That's my dissertation story, but I was able to continue because I had people who cared, who encouraged me. My husband just doing that made me know that I had to continue. I couldn't just give this thing up. Having kids and all was challenging because they have needs and you have to kind of wait until they go to bed. Then you work. My husband and I would devise some strategies to give me space so I could write. I think a couple of times, he took the kids down to L.A. to see their grandparents and all, and I would stay behind and I would write. It was always hard though, because you want to be with your family and have that quality time. We did various things like that so I could get the thing written. Actually, I did the research—I had the fellowship in '70 and '71 and I filed in '72. Somehow we got it done. Not sure.

10-00:06:51

Wilmot:

How was your dissertation received?

Wilkerson:

How was it received? I think it was received well. I mean, it didn't get published, but I think it was received well. People knew about it and they asked me to present papers on it. Everybody seemed to think it was a useful thing to have out there.

10-00:07:08

Wilmot:

I think it's extraordinary.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, but you know, we just didn't get a chance to publish it. That's all. One of the things I did do with it—. I didn't do this with Henrietta, because I think she was in Europe at the time when it was actually done. One of my Bay Area groups was The Group, the Berkeley Group, which is still there I hope.

Wilmot:

Black Repertory Theatre?

Wilkerson:

Black Repertory Theatre. Most of these theatres, like the Berkeley group, didn't have the time or the wherewithal to write up their own histories. If they were applying for a grant, they didn't

have big staffs or things like that. One of the things that I did, once the dissertation was done, was to make copies of the text about them, and give them to the theatres, so they could use them. I'm trying to remember if I gave them their documentation back. I had gotten it from them, and I probably did the appendix as well. I can't remember exactly I may not have given them the interviews. I guess if I had permission, I gave it to them, but I tried to give them documentation, give something back. I didn't want to be the kind of researcher who goes in, kind of rips off stuff from folk, and they never benefit from it, they never see it again or anything like that. When we worked in North Richmond developing that community theatre, that was one of the big criticisms from folks in the Neighborhood House that was sort of the broker for researchers coming into North Richmond and doing research. It was one of their requirements. They came to require scholars, particularly from Berkeley, to give something back to the community. There was a long history of Berkeley scholars going into these kinds of places in North Richmond and others and just writing it up, taking it, getting their tenure and promotions on it and giving absolutely nothing back to the communities that they had researched. It was my way of trying to do that.

10-00:09:26

Wilmot:

As an interviewer, what do you remember about the experience of being an interviewer.

10-00:09:32

Wilkerson:

I remember that even though I had questions laid out and I'd give them questions so that they'd get some idea what I wanted to ask, that it never flowed that way. You always had to be really flexible in trying to figure out what's the best way to ask a question, to try to ask questions that were open ended, so that people wouldn't just say yes or no, and know how to follow a line. I didn't know anything about interviewing. I didn't take any courses in it or anything like that. I think I might have read a few articles, but I just really had to learn how to work with people in an interview, how to take advantage of the unexpected, and also how to come back to important questions that I really wanted to ask. I found that my outlines weren't that useful. That may be because I didn't know what to put in them.

10-00:10:34

Wilmot:

One of the things—.

Wilkerson:

I can say one other thing about the research part of it. I alluded to it, but I want to say it explicitly. I really loved finding the documents and dating them. Now, you remember that I said, on an earlier tape that one of the reasons I left history as a major was that I didn't see how that kind of documentation could contribute to social change in any way. It just seemed so esoteric. Remember the paper that I said we had to document. We had to verify each line, or say whether that particular sentence or thought was inaccurate. You end up with a paper that's one line of text and then a whole page of footnote. That training in that class as a senior undergraduate was really helpful to me in working on the dissertation because you would have pictures. It's like a mystery. You'd have pictures and you didn't know what year they were, or you'd have documents that weren't dated. So, how do you date them? The whole process of historical method of internal dating, being able to read a document and pulling from the context when it was actually written, produced, or published and all of that kind of thing, I had all of that sort of

thing to do. Some things I couldn't figure out what the dates were, but most of them I was actually able to date, put in a chronological order and so on. I loved that work. Ironically when the opportunity came to me to work on Lorraine Hansberry, I was given exclusive access to her papers, those skills came in handy for me then, but I could never have predicted that I would need them.

10-00:12:43

Wilmot:

There was a question that I was really intrigued by when I reviewed—is it snowing already?—no. When I looked at your appendices of your dissertation and looked at your dissertation, you asked a question consistently, or you had a section for each theatre that said, “Ideology or values” of the theatre. It was so interesting to really see where these theatres were part of a front or a movement in terms of their race ideology or nationalism and the way that that interacted with previous generations of theatre—black theatre in particular. One example of this was just in people's language and how older people in the theatre would say “Negro,” whereas younger people were talking about “black.” Also, it was especially exemplified in LeRoi Jones's scorn for the play *The Trojan Women* which was performed by Aldridge Players West. That's a long way of asking you a question about transforming ideology and politics as expressed in the art.

10-00:14:07

Wilkerson:

Well, the whole Negro/black controversy was a really big one. It was generational, very much so. Part of what younger generations hadn't understood was that “Negro” itself was a progression, as “black” was a progression. The difference in terms of using the word “black” was that it was a reclamation. They were reclaiming a negative term. When I was growing up, for example, if someone called you black, referring to your color essentially, if another black person called you black, whatever, it was, as they say, fighting words, because the color black was seen as such a negative thing. If you were very dark skinned, you were stereotyped, stigmatized, what have you. The lighter that you were, the greater currency that you had, so therefore the darker that you were, well, you were not pretty, you were this, you were that, all of those kinds of things. The black arts movement, the Black Nationalist movement, all of that comes along somewhat on the heels of the civil rights movement, and people begin to assert that black is beautiful. It's a pretty heretical kind of thing for people to say, in American culture, that black is actually beautiful. There was an effort by younger people and actually, I was a part of that generation, as well, who wanted to take that negative term “black” and turn it into something positive. Therefore “black” was used in a very, very assertive manner.

It went through the sixties, probably the seventies, and then the language began to change to connect more explicitly with Africa. Then, you have Afro American or African American. The ideology, I don't know, I'm not a historian of race of anything like that, but I think that the use of the term “black” was perpetrated largely by what we call “the black nationalists.” They believed in race as a kind of major determinant in terms of not only who you are but what your goals should be. Some of the black nationalists, for example, at Berkeley, in some of the organizing groups and so on, led them into ideas—sometimes of black supremacy, sometimes of separatism, that we need our own state, we need our own nation, and so on—ideas always characterized, at least, by a militancy and assertiveness and aggressiveness that was “black.” Whereas Negroes were seen as being very accommodating and more or less middle class and so on. The irony is

that many of the people who were black nationalists also came from middle class families. Not a whole lot of folk came from low income community, because they weren't in the colleges and universities for the most part. [clears throat]

The use of the term "black" became somewhat generic, particularly on a college campus, as people began to see it as a way of reclaiming. But for older generations, it still carried something of a stigma. There was a lot of contention around that, a lot of disagreement as to what you should name yourself.

One of the things that I always thought was very important about that, particularly in terms of our history, is that black folks in this country, like other groups of color, have been named by someone else. In theatre, for example, the first black, Negro, however you want to say it, characters were portrayed by whites. From the very beginning, we did not own our image, and did not control our image on stage. There's a historical progression of black people trying to name themselves and to co-opt and control, if we can, our own image. If we can't control it, at least we can name it. You have the right to name it. So "Negro" was one iteration of that. Black, as I said before was a reclamation. It was a way of taking what had been a negative term and turning it into something that was very positive. [Pauses] What did I remind you of?

10-00:19:47

Wilmot:

I'm sorry, I was looking at Ntzoke Shange's *spell # 7*. In your introduction, you say that she's really working this idea of minstrelsy and the idea of taking back one's image.

10-00:20:05

Wilkerson:

Very much so.

Wilmot:

So.

Wilkerson:

You can argue that with a lot of plays by blacks. One of the things I have always felt that black playwrights have confronted historically is that, because we were introduced to the stage by others and defined by others, that black playwrights of the nineteen-fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, probably, were always working against a racial construction of what is black. I think to some extent it is still the case because of the limited kinds of depictions of blacks that you get on television. Everything is ghetto, whatever that means. It's a kind of stereotype of that. When Lorraine Hansberry, for example, puts Lena Younger, the mother, on stage, she has confronted in the psyche of the audience, the white but also the black audience, of a conception of a nanny. That's the stigma. That's the stereotype. How does she break through that? How does she allow that character to break through that stereotype and become a human being.

10-00:21:33

Wilmot:

And/or use the stereotype.

Wilkerson:

Exactly.

Wilmot:

It's amazing.

Wilkerson:

Unfortunately—not unfortunately—I shouldn't say that. The woman who was cast as Lena Younger in the first production of *Raisin in the Sun*, Claudia McNeel, fit the stereotype. She was a large, ample woman. She was dark skinned, so on. The woman who Lorraine wanted, one of the women who she really, really wanted to play that role was Alice Childress, who was a playwright and an actress. She was petite and very light skinned, and a fine actress. Alice Childress said "No, I want your play to have a chance to succeed, and no one will believe me as the mamma character." The whole notion of stereotypes and constructions of images and all—black playwrights and directors are always dealing with that because you want to connect with your audience, so you have to think about how do you keep your audiences, but how do you disrupt the constructions that they have in their heads?

10-00:22:44

Wilmot:

Margaret, that exchange between Childress and Hansberry, is that common knowledge?

10-00:22:49

Wilkerson:

No, I interviewed Alice Childress way back in the late eighties, obviously before she died, and she was telling me about her time with Lorraine. She and Lorraine knew each other. She was a little bit older than Lorraine, but they worked together on Paul Robeson's newspaper that he published out here, out of New York, back in the early fifties.

10-00:23:21

Wilmot:

What was that interview like?

Wilkerson:

I'm sorry?

Wilmot:

What was that interview like?

Wilkerson:

Oh, it was wonderful. She was very gracious. She lived on Roosevelt Island, and I didn't even know what Roosevelt Island was. I went across on the tram. Her husband was very, very gracious. We sat in her apartment, and I just interviewed her. She's a huge person in theatre and black theatre. I was just so pleased that she was willing to talk to me. She gave me a lot of time and all.

10-00:24:01

Wilmot:

I think you published her play in its entirety in your book.

Wilkerson:

Which one is that?

Wilmot:

Love/Hate Story in Black and White.

Wilkerson:

Was that Childress?

Wilmot:

Mm hmm.

Wilkerson:

Let me see.

Wilmot:

Oh, I was wrong.

Wilkerson:

Wedding Band is that name. It's a wonderful play. It's really about an interracial relationship. It's very interesting.

10-00:24:31

Wilmot:

Well, I'm thinking we should maybe close for today. Is that alright?

Wilkerson:

Alright, sure. That's fine. That's fine.

[End Audio File 10]

Interview #5: March 19, 2004

[Begin Audio File 11]]

11-00:00:07

Wilmot:

Margaret Wilkerson, interview five, March 19, 2004. I had a question to go back to. When we were talking about your dissertation and you were a grad student at Berkeley preparing your dissertation, you mentioned that in the drama department in Berkeley, there was this kind of wish for you to be the first black theatre scholar, to claim that honor. Did the people in your department, your professors, were they not aware of the wave of scholars that had come before?

11-00:00:57

Wilkerson:

Let me just revise that a little bit. Not the first black theatre scholar, but they wanted me to define black theatre. It was very current then, and had a lot of cachet and people talked about it a lot because Baraka—he was then LeRoi Jones—was so controversial and brilliant at the same time, and a poet and all of that. And here I was, the first black student coming through the doctoral program—and I think that some of the faculty saw this as an opportunity to produce the first major black scholar in theatre who would define this new contemporary phenomenon. It's true though that most of the faculty had very, very little knowledge of the long history of African American theatre. They might have heard of Paul Robeson as an actor and so on, but they really didn't know about those very early theatres. A lot of that work was just seeing the light, meaning, getting more into the mainstream. It was one of the reasons why it was very difficult to get published in those years because the theatre—in certain people's minds there was no history. There were books that had been written, but much of the research had come out of black colleges, and so they weren't necessarily from the major research universities because for one thing, the people weren't there.

I was working in a department that really didn't know much of anything about this kind of work and its history. As I say, the great, wonderful thing that Dunbar did was that he was willing to learn with me, and this was really true to how academics define graduate work: we're supposed to master a body of knowledge that is already there, and build on it. That implies that the professors who are advising you would not necessarily know everything about your research topic. In other words, you're adding to the knowledge base, through your research, and I truly was in that situation.

Doing my doctoral work in a place like Berkeley had greater prestige in certain circles, and more resources perhaps, but it meant that, except for my connections with people like Errol Hill and Winona Fletcher and Ted Shine and Tom Pawley, and all of those people I knew through the Black Theatre Association, and American Theatre Association, I had no real intellectual context, meaning access to scholarly history. I didn't have that except for them. They were the ones that could direct me, could ask, "Have you read such and such and such and such," or "Have you looked here, have you looked there?"

Berkeley faculty, certainly Dunbar, could say, using the traditional forms of research, "Well, you should look here and look in these kinds of places," but he didn't have the deeper knowledge of the culture. He was open to it, but I think it was beyond his experience at that time. To his great

credit, because he is still a great friend and colleague, I recall that once he learned about the Berkeley group—I keep forgetting the proper name actually—it started as The Group, actually.

11-00:04:54

Wilmot:

Black Repertory Group.

Wilkerson:

Black Repertory Group, right. As he came to learn about the theatres in the Bay Area that did this kind of work, he started taking his students to them. That's what I mean about being very open and continually a learner, which is in the best traditions of scholarship.

11-00:05:23

Wilmot:

Were there other faculty who were more resistant to the idea of changing the canon and expanding of canon of theatre?

11-00:05:29

Wilkerson:

Oh, yeah, I think so. I suspect most of the faculty was.

11-00:05:36

Wilmot:

So you weren't working closely with them.

Wilkerson:

Not particularly. For some reason it's hard for me to remember the other faculty. There was a young professor then named Barry Munitz, who is now head of the Getty. He did not get tenure at Berkeley, but went on to become an assistant to Clark Kerr, and then later headed the California State University system. There's life after you don't get tenure. I've seen him since then, since being here at the Ford Foundation, and since he started at the Getty down in L.A. He was a very young faculty member and he was open to new ideas and so on, but he wasn't there for very long while I was a graduate student.

I am having the hardest time remembering anyone else. That's why I can't remember who else was on my committee, because it was a fairly large department. Again, some of the faculty that some of my colleagues and my closest friends thought highly of were not there for me. That was always a hard thing to accept, like the acting professor that I mentioned and so on, where people say, "They're wonderful and they're really supportive and all that." I did not find that to be true. It was always that sort of disjuncture. The department was fairly large in those years. One of the very, very early professors, Fred something.

11-00:07:21

Wilmot:

Fred Harris?

Wilkerson:

Yeah.

Wilmot:

Was he a chair? His wife was Mary Harris?

Wilkerson:

Yeah, he was there very early on. There were people who were friendly and supportive in some ways, but they were not a part of the doctoral faculty. They didn't work closely with people who were working in the scholarly area and we were being trained as what Berkeley calls scholar directors so that we should be able to do scholarship and also be able to direct as well. We were required to direct so many productions in the course of our studies there.

11-00:08:02

Wilmot:

Was that a viable union for you?

Wilkerson:

Yeah, it was very interesting for me. I liked that idea.

Wilmot:

The idea of both studying and practicing.

Wilkerson:

Absolutely. One of the problems with it in a way was that we really didn't have faculty who combined those talents. Dunbar was a great scholar. He was not a director necessarily, though he had an eye for it. He wasn't an experienced director. Some years later, he directed a medieval piece, here in New York, actually. Not on Broadway or anything, but you know. They were trying to create a kind of creature that no one there actually embodied. You had people who were very strong on the practical side—acting teachers. You have people who understood the theory of acting and things like that, but you really didn't have the kind of model scholar-director, a person who was very strong in both of those areas. Those are two difficult areas to combine, especially to the satisfaction of a research university, because the arts always have kind of a practical aspect to them that it should inform the scholarship. It's like a combination of a scholarly and a professional program. The practice part is more like a law school and education and those kinds of areas where you practice. You apply the theory.

Yet, there's a historical, theoretical, literary dimension, that should be informed by the practice, and sometimes is, but in fact, in the traditions of academe, each field has its own kinds of methodologies and so on. You end up having a kind of bifurcated experience of the theoretical and literary-historical, but also the practical. Wedding those two has always have been a challenge for fields like theatre and the arts. At Berkeley for example, we have the art history department, and we have the practice of art department. The same kind of bifurcation. The dramatic art department tried to wed the two.

11-00:10:46

Wilmot:

Did the institution itself value the two endeavors equally?

Wilkerson:

I think it did when it had really strong leadership. When Travis Bogard was chair, he was a formidable kind of person and was very, very instrumental in the building of the Zellerbach complex, in developing those kinds of performing arts facilities on the campus. He had a lot of cachet. He came out of the English department. He was a tenured professor in the English department, but he cared a lot about dramatic literature, was as I say, one of the preeminent scholars in the world on Eugene O'Neill.

So, he came out of the English department, and started, essentially, the drama department. In order for a faculty member to do that, with whoever else helped him or worked with him, he has to have a lot of cachet with the institution. I would say that the arts were certainly valued at the core. To the extent that Berkeley allowed it to come into being, it was valued. Without really strong leadership continually articulating the importance of this combination, it was hard to sustain.

11-00:12:10

Wilmot:

Did you work with Henrietta Harris at all? I know you were not training to be an actor, but did you have the opportunity?

11-00:12:18

Wilkerson:

Right. I really didn't. I never took a class from Henrietta. I met with her a couple of times as I recall. We were in very separate areas, and since I wasn't taking an acting class—I took the one graduate acting class, which she did not teach, at that time, at least—but I just never really had any connection. Again, I have to say that even though I talked a lot about networking and so on, the other pressure on me was that I had a family and I lived a ways away, which was healthy for me actually. My time was really constrained. I had to make really critical choices about what I did. So I was happy when I did the dissertation and had the chance to interview her and to get to know her a bit better then.

11-00:13:12

Wilmot:

I want to fast-forward quite a bit to ask you this question, which is about the drama department. In 1995, you were offered the position of being director of the drama center—

Wilkerson:

Yeah, I was asked to be chair of the drama and dance department, and the director of this new center for theatre arts. I don't know if I can even articulate it now. We tried to develop a model for the drama center by looking at the other research centers on campus. The drama center would be a place where you could have residencies. It would focus on production as well as historical and theoretical knowledge about theatre. It could be a place of experimentation.

Why a center? Why can't a department do that? Well, departments are weighted down essentially by offering the curriculum. You have the undergraduate major and you have this doctoral program. You have all of those things you have to deliver and be involved in. Just like the sociologists on campus have what used to be called the Institute for the Study of Social Change that Troy Duster headed, through which they funneled a lot of their research grants and

so on, so we envisioned a kind of center for theatre arts. It could receive research funds and also production funds, and it would be an appropriate way to develop the drama department.

I don't know what's happened to it. I don't know if the concept held or not. There was a lot of confusion in those years because it was really an effort to save the drama department, and also to reconstruct it in such a way that it could respond to some of the needs of campus, the needs of the field and really strengthen it. We had an idea of a sort of research and performance center that would be attached to the drama department. I don't know what's happened to it. Under the auspices of the center, we were able to do a lecture series around major leadership in the arts. We brought Anna Deavere Smith, whom I had met through other contacts—ATA actually, the American Theatre Association—way back before she was known. People like Carl Franklin. I got the Chancellor Robert M. Berdahl to speak about the arts. I put him on the stage and had him talk about the importance of the arts, the role of the arts. It was so important to have students and even faculty hear that. Typically, your head of your institutions don't do that necessarily unless they are really caught up in the arts, like Lee Bollinger who is now here at Columbia, and Nancy Cantor at University of Illinois. We have leaders, a handful now, who understand the importance of the arts to a research university. Berdahl was one of those, so we did things like that, things that the department wouldn't necessarily do. It was easier for a center to do something like that than it was for a department to offer those kinds of things.

11-00:17:03

Wilmot:

When you say “save” the drama department, what had happened over the past—.

Wilkerson:

From the time that I was a graduate student there, when there were, I think, from sixteen to nineteen faculty—that's what I've heard—over the years, it declined. Part of my take on it—honestly, it wasn't like I was paying a lot of attention to it—but part of what happened, I think, with the drama department, was it became very insulated. It became very inward looking and isolated from other things on the campus. This has to do with leadership. Travis Bogard was a strong man, but he was the kind of person who was interwoven with and connected with the other parts of the university. Somehow, either because of the faculty or the lack of leadership, it began to focus more and more inwards.

For example, attendance at productions declined. At one point, it was mostly faculty prerogative to direct on the main stage. Occasionally a student would get a chance. Even a graduate student would have that opportunity. What drove the selection of plays that faculty chose for production? Well, perhaps their research, something they were interested in and so on. Attendance declined and it wasn't important because it was subsidized theatre, so you didn't worry too much about whether people came or not. There were some notorious mistakes made where the production costs were really high. A drama department that has productions is a very expensive enterprise, because you've got professional crews, you've got the maintenance of the theatre, the sets and the costumes and all that. But not many people were coming to performances. They weren't particularly connected to the lives of students except for the lives of students in the drama department. It just kind of continued to decline in that way.

What happened—and I'm not sure I can give the year, but it was somewhere in the early nineties—the administration essentially threatened to close the drama department, to just eliminate it. They made the mistake of planning to do the same thing with the practice of art department around the same time. It looked like Berkeley was abandoning the arts. It wasn't too long before or after Stanford was doing the same thing. It was budget-cutting time, so people were saying, "Well you know, we don't really need these things."

Well, various people on the campus rose up, the students rose up. I saw the most colorful and marvelous demonstrations by the art students. They came in all kinds of costumes and beautiful placards and what have you, and marched around the Chancellor's office. There was a lot of foment on campus around the question, Do we abandon the arts, and, if so, what does that mean for us as an institution?

Then there were the graduate students. What do you do with them? So the administration decided that they would keep the drama department, but they wanted to reconstitute it. At one point where there was consideration given to closing the drama department, possibly ending the undergraduate major, only having a graduate program or whatever. I remember walking across the campus with Carol Christ, who was then vice-chancellor. I told her, the impulse to do the arts exists on the campus. The student musical groups supported by the ASUC had performances, they had choirs, they had drama groups. I said, the impulse is there. You can't kill that, not that you'd want to. But wouldn't you rather have it somehow connected, if not shaped, monitored, for safety? Performance on stage is a very dangerous thing because people can get injured and so on. I appealed to her in terms of that, that it's better to have a connection with and a teaching program around the arts than it is to just let it happen on a campus where you really don't have much control over resources, you don't have much control over how stage facilities are used, how they're maintained. I don't know if that meant anything to her, but I thought it was really dangerous to do that. I had seen campuses where they had pulled out all the expertise. There were no faculty who were really teaching people. Students, if they wanted to do a show, they could go do a show. There's a space for that, but if that's the only art experience the students are getting on a campus, especially a major research university, I think it's a big mistake, and we're missing a real opportunity to learn and to teach.

So, the decision was made to keep the drama department. To my great surprise, Carol Christ asked me to come and chair it. Especially given my history with the drama department, I could never believe that. There's a piece of that history I haven't told you yet that would inform what I just said. I'd always been an in-house critic of the drama department and other things on campus, and I kind of felt like I had to put my money where my mouth was, and do it. Otherwise, I could never criticize anymore, because I hadn't taken the opportunity to try to make some change, so I decided to do it in '95, just after I had finished chairing the African American studies. I chaired the African American Studies Department from 1988 to 1994, minus one semester when I was on leave. I did it. It was a big challenge. It was a very, very big challenge.

11-00:23:40

Wilmot:

In what ways?

Wilkerson:

First of all, I had not run an arts program, so I had to learn about the dynamics of the professional staff, the people who work with the stage crew, who construct sets with students. I had to learn about maintenance of facilities and things that hadn't been my responsibility, and, at the same time, try to rebuild a program that had lost its undergraduate theatre major, had no minor in dance, and was no longer admitting students into the undergraduate theatre major. They had frozen admission to the Ph.D. program. And I was charged with the responsibility to rebuild both of those programs. They weren't going to add any faculty until we had shown that we could rebuild it, that we could get a Ph.D. program accepted. I thought, what are we supposed to do?

I had one full professor, Mel Gordon, who was there, whose history with the department was mixed in terms of his relationships with graduate students and other faculty, but he was the only faculty member left. I had two when I went in, and one of them did not get tenure, so we had one faculty member in theatre. We had one full professor in dance, and one lecturer with security of employment in dance. I was charged with trying to revitalizing the Ph.D. program. So, what I did was to find, with the help of graduate students, find other faculty on campus who were what I call my closet theatre people. If you look at their vitae, you would not know that they were involved. Through that kind of networking and a systematic scan of the faculty, we identified about seventeen faculty.

11-00:26:09

Wilmot:

Do you remember who they were?

Wilkerson:

Yeah, I remember some of them. I remembering Mark Griffith. He's in Classics. Wonderful, wonderful guy. In fact, when I left to come here, he agreed to take over the chairmanship at least for a year or two. He taught classical theatre, and he enjoyed the performance aspect of it, so he would bring groups in to perform in Dwinelle Studio Theatre for his classes. I knew he had an interest.

I got Vévé Clark in there. I had John McWhorter, when he came to the campus. He's a linguist—a little controversial now, but he performed in musical theatre when he first came. I went to see one of the performances that he gave. He was writing a musical. He's a linguist and a lot of linguists are interested in theatre. So I thought he would be a good addition to it. I had Janet Adelman, who was like a right hand. Wonderful, wonderful. She has been chairing the English department. I'm not sure if she still is, but she was doing that. Gosh, those are the ones that I remember. We had quite a list of people.

11-00:27:33

Wilmot:

Did you go after Russ Ellis at all for this work?

Wilkerson:

No. No, I had no realization that he had an interest in this at all. If I had known that, I would have gone after him because I was trying to find as many people as possible, who would form an

interdisciplinary Ph.D. group, which would receive its support and service from the drama department. That's the way that we would build a theatre department.

11-00:28:08

Wilmot:

Did this strategy succeed in terms of pulling together a cadre of people?

Wilkerson:

Yes it did.

Wilmot:

How did that work?

Wilkerson:

We got them together. We worked out where they could be affiliate faculty with their departments and so on. We did all of that. Then, we had to come up with a conceptualization of what this thing was going to look like and how we were going to build courses and that sort of thing. I have to say that Mark and Janet were just absolutely central in this process that went on, as I recall, over a summer period. They were coming in during the summer, and we had a couple of graduate students who were taking the notes, writing it up. I think Steve Tillis and Maya Roth were the graduate students who worked with us, took the notes, wrote it up. We would go back through it.

We had big discussions. If it's an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program, we have only so much room for people to take which courses. At one point, with Janet in the room, I asked the question, are we ready to have a Ph.D. program in drama where we don't require people to take Shakespeare? That's the kind of hard question you've got to answer when you're doing interdisciplinary work, because there are certain parts of the canon that are just undeniable. "What? You have a Ph.D. in drama and you didn't study Shakespeare?"

To Janet's credit, she said, "Yes. Yes, we can do that. We need to do that." There's room for them to take Shakespeare, certainly, but we would not require that of them. There were certain things that you had to take. There were certain kinds of courses you needed in order to prepare yourself to do your research work. That's the way that we looked at it.

One of the requirements, for example, was to have a strong theory course, have some connection with the historical moment that related to your work or a number of historical moments that related to your work.. But also, we wrote into it, you had to take a course that had a sort of practicum to it. One of the ideas what we were able to just start before I left was to have a class that centered around a practicing artist. Regardless of whether your work was only in theory and literature, only in the historical side or whatever, you would have to take this course. One of the things everybody had to do, we felt, was to have an exposure to the practice of the art. It didn't mean that we were going to train directors or choreographers or anything else, but you had to at least understand something about production and be articulate in terms of its relationship to literary theory and so on. That's how it was framed. I wasn't there long enough to see how well it has all worked out, but we got a wonderful new theoretician who came in, Shannon [Jackson],

and I understand there are one or two other faculty who have been added. The program seems to be moving along.

It was a wonderful opportunity. I had a lot of help doing it. I mean I didn't do it all by myself, obviously. We were able to build a credible set of faculty who were willing to teach courses, not every semester, but offer a range of courses. We set up a governance structure that would allow us to have a smaller group to monitor the program and make sure that it continued. I think I was the chair of the interdisciplinary group and I had an advisory group that worked with me, and we resolved a lot of the issues that might come up. That was the role. We had to have a governance group, and so we did.

11-00:32:35

Wilmot:

When you were offered this position, did you have the opportunity to negotiate with the administration and secure certain kinds of commitments in terms of additional full time employees and so on?

11-00:32:53

Wilkerson:

We did the best we could on that. We did the best we could. There was a promise to give FTE, once we were able to build some kind of critical mass and re-conceptualize what the program was going to be like.

You might ask why they would ask me to do it. It was kind of interesting because I'm trying to remember who told me that. First of all, there were only two drama professors—people trained in drama on campus: Mel Gordon and myself. Mel had been recruited as chair. I wasn't there then, but that had not worked out. But he was still on the faculty. Mel and I got along really well. He was really supportive of the things that we were trying to do and very helpful.

It was Carol Christ who told me that I was recruited for the position because I worked with the Black Theatre Workshop [BTW]. We haven't talked anything about this yet. I had directed BTW and produced shows out of black experiences, not confined to black performers, but out of black experience. The Black Theatre Workshop had done some of the most exciting and interesting work on the campus. I had no way of knowing that anyone in the administration was paying attention to that. But this was what I heard when I was offered the position. They thought, I guess because I had been an administrator on the campus, that I could do this.

I was surprised by being offered this, because I had come through at a time when the drama department was happy to have me be on committees but I really wasn't regarded as a kind of a colleague. I thought, well, this is a real challenge. Chairing African American Studies was a big challenge as well, for lots of reasons. Chairing the drama department, I think, was a bigger challenge, because you really did have the issue of race that was always just beneath the surface. Some people were really supportive, but it wasn't so much a personal level of support. It's a systemic—. We've talked a little bit about that. For example, there were graduate students who, let's say, handle box office. When you really begin to attract a more diverse audience, then there can be certain sensitivities that are not evident in the way a box office is not handled. People come, and there's a problem with tickets or some question of tickets. There were instances when

African American people raised that issue and they were dismissed, but when other people raised that issue—Well, there are always mistakes with tickets, oversights, errors. When other people raised those issues, they weren't dismissed necessarily. Issues of racism just embed themselves in all kinds of aspects of the way in which we do things—the accepted way of doing things.

For example, in the Black Box Theatre in the bowels of Zellerbach, you only had so many seats. Maybe it was fifty or seventy-five or something like that. The tickets were free, but they were given on a first-come, first-served basis. If you have a play that attracts students of color, when you haven't had that many offerings of that before and you have a huge turnout, what do you do with this? Particularly when students don't know, because they haven't been a part of the drama circles, they don't know that it's on the first-come, first-served basis, and they stand in line for a long time, and then they're not admitted. All kinds of issues come up and are a function of the sort of exclusivity that tends to build up in most drama departments because people work together very closely and they bond and so on. If your program has attracted, because of its content, largely one cultural group, when other cultural groups try to become a part of that, it's almost natural to exclude the newcomers. As I became chair of the department, I realized that this kind of exclusion wasn't always intentional. Sometimes it was intentional, but it was embedded in the accepted ways that we did things. We were always trying to figure out ways to have our practices and our policies be more inclusive as we tried to diversify not only the curriculum, but diversify the students who found their way into the drama department. It was a very interesting experience—one I would not trade for anything.

11-00:39:09

Wilmot:

I wanted to go back quite a bit and ask you a question about when you came to the drama department as a graduate student. What kinds of trends were holding sway, in terms of drama practice? You spoke to that a little bit when you talked about the experimental nature of the kind of actor training that took place, but I was wondering if there are any other overriding trends you remember.

11-00:39:40

Wilkerson:

Well, this was the sixties, certainly, so there was a lot of experimentation. Avant-garde theatre was out there a bit. Edward Albee, there was Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, a whole avant-garde wing of the theatre. It was thought of as being apolitical in a lot of ways, exploring what kinds of aesthetic achievements you could manage in the theatre that were not necessarily tied to naturalistic or realistic theatre, where you see on stage life as it is lived, more or less. Characters were played as actual people, and not merely symbols or figures. These are the years of *Waiting for Godot*. Really wonderful work.

But at the same time, you had this other kind of force that was coming out of society, with the civil rights movement and various cultural groups challenging what was seen as the western canon and its sense of remoteness from the lives and pressing concerns of many people.

There was also, for lack of a better term, a kind of confrontational theatre, where audiences, white traditional audiences in particular, were accosted in the theatre. These were the years of happenings, for example. You involved audiences. They walked into a room and you might lock

the door and they had whatever kind of experiences, beyond just the stage and performance and spectator, so that sort of things was also going on. It was a time of experimentation, challenging in different ways. All the various forces that were having an effect in the society found their way to the stage in some way.

11-00:42:17

Wilmot:

What did you find to be the most exciting in these kind of experimental approaches?

Wilkerson:

Well I enjoyed doing happenings. When I was in a directing course, we had to do a happening and I thought my happening was pretty good. I can't remember what it was, but the people who were in the class and the professor thought it was a good one. In the happening, you try to have the audience have an experience, an actual experience, almost as a performer. That was interesting to try to work with an environment and an audience. I was always interested in reaching audiences and connecting with them and starting where they are. It was very important to me particularly in terms of black theatre. Not to impose on an audience something we thought they ought to see, but rather to engage an audience. It partly comes out of the great participatory tradition in African American theatre and most non-European theatre, actually.

Of course, the movements of the sixties were changing all of that, or were trying to change all of that. Black audiences were notorious for being supposedly ill behaved in the theatre. I'll give you one example. When I was a graduate student, if I remember correctly, Cal Performances mounted a production of a play by Lonne Elder—he was a black playwright, who has since passed on—called *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*. There's a barber shop, I think, and there's a guy named Blue, who dresses all in blue and is sort of the criminal type. He is very cool and very sharp and he has this kind of Mafia-like business. The play has a very serious side to it. There are real terrible things that happen to people and things like that, but it also has a lot of moments where the audience responds with laughter. I remember the reaction. I think it was Travis Bogard, if I'm not mistaken, who said that several of the white drama professors in the department—actually, I think they were all men—kept saying that they couldn't understand the audience's reaction, because people laughed at the places where they thought they should cry. What they were learning, and what they hadn't recognized, was that largely non-white audiences connected with what they saw on stage and laughed for a whole set of reasons that observers didn't always understand. Sometimes it was laughter of recognition. It was just, "Oh, yeah, I see that. I know that." It could be a terrible thing that happened, but it was greeted with a kind of laughter of recognition. Or, could be a laugh of derision it can be a laugh of—. There are all kinds of ways and reasons why people laugh. I always found it fascinating to try to understand the role that an audience can play in a performance. [bell rings] Ooh.

What I was trying to say simply is that the connection between audience and performers has always been of interest to me. I always gravitated toward work that allowed us to experiment with that.

Wilmot:

Interesting. I was also wondering, during this time, was there a range of the ways that theatre was imagined to be, or could be implemented in a way that was revolutionary or liberatory. Were there a range of ways that theatre was imagined to be a revolutionary tool?

Wilkerson:

Mmmhmm. Yeah, I think so. I think, because black militant theatre—you could call it a black nationalist theatre—had come on the scene, sometimes people thought that was the only way you could shock the audience. That kind of thing, which is incorporated into *Dutchman*. We talked about that yesterday.

What some of us tried to do was to make sure that audiences had a wide interpretive vocabulary when it came to talking about and seeing revolutionary theatre. There are other ways to get across a revolutionary message. There are ways to take plays out of the canon and restore, perhaps, their revolutionary aspects. One example would be something like *Lysistrata*, by Euripides, for example, where the women are tired of the men promoting war, so they decide to withhold sexual favors from their boyfriends and husbands, to force them into peace. That's a pretty revolutionary thing to do. There are ways to engage an audience with that kind of revolutionary statement. It was particularly important to find a range of ways to do that with black audiences. It was one of the things I tried to expose and talk about in my dissertation. For example, Nick and Edna Stewart did the Ebony Showcase in Los Angeles, which I wrote about. Their idea of being revolutionary was to do plays, regardless of who wrote them, whether they were black or white or other, that helped black audiences to broaden their vision of what they could achieve and what they could do. If you showed this on stage with black actors, then you showed black people performing and achieving in a fictitious world, but at least you had an image of that. Now, they felt that was as revolutionary as doing a LeRoi Jones play for example. I think I agreed with that possibility because black audiences are not monolithic. They may share the experience of racism, but they come from different backgrounds, have various value systems and educational experiences, and so on. I always felt that there were multiple ways to show a revolutionary event. It was one of the main reasons why I chose to do the dissertation the way that I did it. I wanted to see how black theatre people and black people defined black theatre. To emphasize only the one very eloquent marvelous voice of LeRoi Jones seemed to me counterintuitive to me. That's an elitist approach, where you listen only to the voice of the person who the media has decided to pick up. I wanted to look at how an audience defines black theatre. After all, they are the ones who vote with money and their time and all of that. So, in my dissertation, I found a range of theatres—everything from Aldridge Players West, which did certainly some plays by black writers but also did *Trojan Women* and so on, to the Performing Arts Society of Los Angeles, that did more cutting edge kinds of work. What I found was that black theatre meant a lot of different things to different people. There were, I think, some shared values, but there was no one way to explore black experiences or to promote revolutionary attitudes.

11-00:52:16

Wilmot:

Within that context could you talk to me a little bit about I guess would be the small controversy that ensued around Aldridge Players West, the performance production of the *Trojan Women* and the way that LeRoi Jones kind of scorned—

11-00:52:41

Wilkerson:

Can you tell me a little more about him scorning it, because it's probably in my dissertation, which I haven't read in a thousand years, but it would be helpful to just remind me of the details.

11-00:52:54

Wilmot:

Absolutely. It seemed that they put on a production of *Trojan Women* and Jones then wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that he thought it was just very shameful and bad that they had done that, because it wasn't black theatre, it was Greek theatre. I think you and I were talking a bit about that off tape, and he may have recanted that at some point.

Wilkerson:

Oh, he didn't recant that. He recanted his criticism of *A Raisin in the Sun*. It was typical of his points of view in those years. He had a very strong and I would say narrow definition of what was revolutionary in theatre. It's understandable. He was young. He was angry. He's still angry, but he was young and he really wanted to break the mold. He was frustrated with all the excuses that people made. Theatre was a very, very strong force. Many of the writings about theatre reinforced a kind of hegemonic view. I can understand his feelings about it, but he felt that we needed to do plays by black writers and contemporary plays. I've always believed that drama is a very malleable sort of thing in that there are plays written in different centuries that can be brought alive for people in a contemporary setting.

The play that Jones reconsidered, which I'll put on record, is *A Raisin in the Sun*. He was very much a contemporary of Lorraine Hansberry. He thought that it was a very sort of integrationist play. A lot of the writing about the play by some blacks and some whites in the sixties and seventies criticized it as being a very acceptable, middle class sort of notion of what black families are like. In fact, Ed Bullins was another playwright who came out of San Francisco and also a contemporary of LeRoi, and he was very much of the same mind.

I remember Jones or Ed Bullins coming to one of my classes and lecturing. This is after the sixties, and he was saying that he had seen the play one way when he was younger, but he had changed his mind now that he was older. LeRoi Jones had criticized *A Raisin in the Sun* as a middle class sort of concoction of black family life. But in the 1980s—and I can't remember the exact year, it was early eighties, probably '83 or '84—he saw a production of *A Raisin in the Sun* starring Danny Glover and Esther Rolle at the Kennedy Center. He wrote a wonderful piece in the *Washington Post*, where he said, essentially, that he had been wrong about the play in those earlier years. He had criticized it as this middle class concoction, but it was more in touch with the deep aspirations of black people to prevail and to be a working part of the society. It was truer to their deep aspirations than his own plays were, which I thought was an incredible admission. I hope I can capture this because he said he was very critical in those earlier years of this family wanting to move into a white neighborhood. Now, he said he looked at it in a very different way. Why should we give up a neighborhood by saying that it's a white neighborhood? Why should we be willing to concede that, when, in fact, it's a place to live? It's not a matter of moving into someone else's neighborhood. It's our neighborhood. We should be able to move where we want.

I'm not saying it as well as he said it, but he had evolved in his thinking, which is something I've always respected about LeRoi Jones. He's gone from here to here to here, but his values have been the same. He doesn't recant what he has said. He simply continues to evolve and add to it. He did say that he was wrong about *A Raisin in the Sun*. But he doesn't go back and say, "I don't believe any of what I said before." It isn't that. He kind of validates who he was at that moment in time, and adds, "Now, at this moment in time, I'm of a certain age. I understand and this is where I am." I've always respected that in him and in the work that he does. You live long enough, I guess, you see change, maybe. [laughs]

11-00:58:33

Wilmot:

Interesting. Again, within the context of the discussion about the range of ways that theatre can be transformative, revolutionary, whichever words you want to choose, can you tell me a little bit about your work in Richmond?

Wilkerson:

I'd like to talk about the North Richmond Community Theatre that we did and I'd also like to talk a little about the Black Theatre Workshop that I did for many years and different iterations, and why I did that.

North Richmond is an unincorporated part of Richmond, unless they've incorporated recently, which is literally across the tracks. When we were there working with other graduate students, it was shortly after the Watts riots. It was probably my first year or two. No, I can remember exactly when it was. It was 1967 and 1968. The reason that I can remember is that towards the end of my involvement there, I was pregnant with my second child, so I can mark it. The area had sixty percent unemployment. It was a relatively small area. But sixty percent unemployment in those years, literally across the tracks, in a very, very depressed area, and there was one major institution there, which was called Neighborhood House. It was a community center and so forth. I was recruited by two graduate students, Jim Linnell—I've mentioned him before—and Phil Larson. They were both white males—I don't say that in a mean way, just to say that's what they were—who had come up with this idea of going into this depressed area to do something with theatre and really get involved with community. This was after the Watts riots. So, they invited me to join them in this. I said, sure, I'd like to do that. I'd taught at Jordan High School in Watts through the Watts revolt, so I said, yeah. It was a summer job. I don't know how we were paid. We were paid some kind of stipend. It could have been through the CETA program. Or work-study, something like that.

11-01:01:21

Wilmot:

I'm not sure if this was it, but there was some kind of War on Poverty funding that came through there.

Wilkerson:

It was probably something like War on Poverty funding, because that was during those years. I said, yeah, we'll do that. So the next thing I know, we had to go over to Sproul Hall and meet with someone in Student Affairs. I don't know exactly who the people were. I do remember, I think, that Travis was there as chair of the department. And the conversation was all about the

dangers of going into North Richmond and the worry that the university would be liable and responsible for our safety there, as we were students. I explained what my background was, and that I wasn't really worried about going into this area. I think part of the hope that Phil and Jim had was that we could help to prevent any riot—. We could try to enrich what was happening with young people there.

11-01:02:34

Wilmot:

Would you stop for one second?

[End Audio File 11]

[Begin Audio File 12]

12-00:00:19

Wilkerson:

So as I was saying, we thought that we could help to enrich the community, give young people something interesting to do. So, we went and there were other people there. You listed some of them in your outline and I had forgotten that people like Les Perry and Joe Polito were there. Gosh, there was one other guy who was very important to the project. It'll come to me though. I can see his face. I can't remember his name. Joe Polito and the other person whose name I'm blocking knew the North Richmond community. They were African American males and they knew the community. That was very helpful to us.

By that time, I was living in Richmond. We had moved from Petaluma because we found that, even though we wanted the bucolic existence of the countryside and the rural area, we found ourselves going to the city a lot, so we decided to move into Richmond. My friend, Phyllis Ford, from the University of Redlands, who I had been an undergraduate with, was living in the Bay Area, and she came and worked with us also. So there was a little team of people. We had a space, I think it was an old church—it had been used as a church—and we kind of fixed it so that we could do theatre. We did a lot of different kinds of plays. I'm so glad you listed some of these because I don't think I could have remembered—some things by Langston Hughes that were very popular, some by Jimmy Scott. Jimmy Scott was very important for this effort. He did *Amen Corner*. We just did a whole range of things. We had to recruit young people to come and do this. By young, they could have been as old as in their twenties, actually. Some teenagers, some who were older. We did some training workshops in theatre with them. I can remember literally going door to door to let people know that this was happening. One of the things I discovered—you learn a lot of things, you know—folks think they know what people want. One of the sentiments that we ran into, was people said, “So you're going to do a theatre here.” They said, “You know, when I want to go for entertainment and enjoyment, I want to leave this area. I don't want to stay in this area to be entertained.” That was sobering for us because we thought, we're bringing something right here in the neighborhood and all that. You can well understand living in an area like that, why you might want to go to San Francisco or Oakland or Berkeley or some place else to have that enjoyment, and not to walk around the corner to the building that used to be a church. We ran into that attitude, which was instructive to me, as I went from there to start my research, in the next year or two on my dissertation. We had a lot of really interesting experiences. We decided that we needed to charge for the theatre, rather than to make it free,

because people would value it more. We didn't make it expensive. It was like fifty cents or a dollar or something like that. It was very inexpensive.

12-00:04:13

Wilmot:

Which in those days would be like three or four dollars?

Wilkerson:

You mean now, or—?

Wilmot:

Yeah.

12-00:04:17

Wilkerson:

Probably more like five or something like that. We were trying to make it accessible, because a lot of times it was high school or junior high school kids that would come. Young adults would come. Families, of course, would come often to see their children and their family perform. It wasn't a children's theatre, but it was a youth theatre. I remember an incident where—. [laughs] There are two incidents I'll tell. We worked with some junior high and high school kids and sometimes race relations were very strained in the society as a whole. Of course, the white people in our team of folk were pretty much the only white people that were in the area at the time, working there. I remember, in one of our acting classes or something, Phyllis was working with me, and one of the girls called her a "white bitch" or something like that. I can't remember if I was present or not. Phyllis said, "I didn't know what to say back to her because I feel so guilty because of what a lot of white people have done." I said, "You know, Phyllis, you should not feel that way because you have not done anything to this young person. She has no right to call you a white bitch. You need to be able to stand up to her and say that. Fine if you feel guilty and so on, but you shouldn't feel guilty for your personal relationship, and you need to help her, and she needs to help you get over that." Those are the kind of really frank things that happened. This was 1967, '68.

The other thing—Well, first of all, the workshop was to go one summer and we got involved and decided we wanted to run it for another year, so we did. And that's when I got pregnant. I remember that pregnancy and that moment because for one of the performances that we were having, there were a little group of what we would call fast little girls who were at the door. They were African American, and they were refusing to pay. They were just up in the faces of Phil and Jim. Phil and Jim were tall guys, over six feet. They were white and very reluctant to push back. They asked if I would come to the door. I was very pregnant. The little girl was saying, "I shouldn't have to pay. I don't want to pay. I just want to come in." I said, "Well, you can't come in. I'm not going to let you come in." She said, "I will knock that baby right back into your stomach." I said back to her without blinking an eye, and I'll explain why I said it this way, but, without blinking an eye, immediately I said, "It'll be the last thing you'll ever do." She stopped and backed off. I think it surprised her, but I think it also surprised my colleagues, because they knew me only as a graduate student, and a somewhat mild mannered person. What they hadn't realized was that I grew up in a black neighborhood. I grew up in L.A. in what is now called South Central, at a time when most black people lived in the same area. You had the whole range

of people. We were taught early on that if you don't stand up for yourself, if you're not willing to go down when the moment comes, then you will never be able to walk the street again. You won't have any credibility. You have to be willing to put yourself in danger. I was ready to go down with her. If it came to physical, I was going to do it. I would do it, period. You learn that you can't back down in those kinds of situations. You can try to avoid them, if you possibly can, but this little girl needed to be put in her place, and something came out of me that I hadn't used in a very long time. They were shocked at that. They were very surprised that I would respond in that way. I think I said to them, "Well, I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth," or something like that. It was a very interesting moment and a lesson for everybody. I told them that if we're going to have rules, we have to have to have them. People respect that. Eventually they respect that. I don't care who they are and what color they are.

Wilmot:

It's interesting. It sounded like they brought some white liberal guilt to the work, which is very standard.

12-00:10:00

Wilkerson:

Yeah. They were really good guys and good-hearted and did some really important work there, and learned a lot, I think. For example, we did one show—I've forgotten which one it was and I'm not sure I would recognize it in here. I think it was *God's Trombone*, by James Weldon Johnson. The guy that we had in the show got arrested the night before and we weren't sure he was going to make it to the show. Should we cancel, or not cancel? I think we canceled it that night. Either we did cancel it, or I know I objected to canceling it, because I felt that it was important for the kids in the cast to learn that the show would go on. We might not have canceled it. We might have had Jim get up and read the lines. I think he directed it. I said, "The kids need to know that, even if this guy is not there, it's going to go on. It needs to go on. Your being absent or being irresponsible is not going to keep this from happening. There were lots of things to learn and to deal with there. I haven't seen Phil in a long time, but I know Jim and I have remained good friends and contacts for a very long time.

12-00:11:21

Wilmot:

You mentioned Jimmy Scott several times, saying that he was very important. Can you tell me a little bit about why he is important?

Wilkerson:

Well, he was local and he was a young man who was really serious about his writing and trying to do shows and things like that. He didn't have a lot of support. He connected with us, and as I recall, I think Phil and Jim, Phil, in particular may have made some opportunities for him. He was a young man who was an artist, actually—a theatre artist. We tried to film one of our shows and he was filming it with one camera. That's when I learned how difficult it is to do a film because you have all these angles and you have to re-shoot. It took us forever, all day, to do just a very small part of it. I don't think we ever finished the project. Jimmy was a really terrific person. I haven't seen him in a long, long time. And Joe Polito also, who was a very gifted actor. We tried to make some opportunities for both of them, and they did continue and move into some other areas of work. I don't know what they did in terms of the arts work, but anyway, they

were really talented. You find these gems of people throughout neighborhoods where they don't get an opportunity to develop and do the kind of work that they should be doing. It was useful for them.

12-00:13:14

Wilmot:

For the North Richmond Theatre project, in terms of ideology and goals, what was your take on the function of theatre—the purpose and function of community theatre, or theatre, period?

12-00:13:30

Wilkerson:

I guess I go back to some of the things I said earlier. In a community like North Richmond, or any community for that matter, particularly North Richmond, that is full of hopelessness that permeates the physical neighborhood—the arts can be really important.

North Richmond sits in the shadow of Standard Oil, so it gets all of the pollution and none of the benefit of the oil company. It was, at least then, an unincorporated area of Richmond, so it didn't benefit that much from being a part of a city or near a city. It got something, but it was just terrible. When you bring the arts into that kind of setting, I think it's really important for people—in all circumstances, but particularly in those—to be able to envision a better life of greater possibilities, be able to feel, or get the sense of what it means to empower oneself. I know it's a very discredited word, but to really have agency. There are things that I can do. It's not pulling yourself up by your own boot straps. It's having the vision. I don't believe people can move to meaningful action unless they can visualize it. If they can envision it, if they can see it somehow, if they can act it out on a stage. That's the wonderful thing about dramas. You can play a different character. You invent a different character where everything is possible, and where you can experiment with the barriers that you are going to face. It's a little microcosm of life in an odd kind of way. Then you have a better chance of figuring out how to survive and hopefully prevail in this world, with really humane values.

And so, I've always felt that that was one of the very precious gifts that dramatic performance in particular can bring to people in all communities. I'm not saying that visual art can't do that. Certainly, it can. But the thing about drama is that you are fully and totally involved. If you are acting, you are, but even if you aren't, if you are crewing, you are a part of a living and breathing thing that happens, that's live, and necessarily improvisational. I'm a great devotee of live performance, because it's unpredictable. Even if you rehearse your lines, you don't know what might happen. What if the set falls, like it did once on the Zellerbach stage? Or what if the other person forgets their lines, or the prop person forgets to put the gun in the drawer, and you've got to have it to shoot somebody or defend yourself in the course of the play? Theatre simulates life in an exciting kind of way. It allows you to embody a different person, a different set of values. I sound like I'm touting acting, and I do believe that it's very useful and important for young people in particular to embody something different, to act. Not that they should all be actors. I think these kinds of beliefs of mine have kept me devoted to educational theatre. I never aspired to go into the professional theatre. I love it. I enjoy seeing it. I love rehearsals, all of that kind of thing. To see the highest form of artistry that we can get at a performance, but I've always viewed drama as a way of teaching and empowering people. I've always stayed in educational theatre. I've never really aspired to do any other kind.

12-00:18:23

Wilmot:

When I look at the axioms you put forward —

Wilkerson:

Did I do that? In what? Oh, yes, the thing about theatre beginning where the community is. Yeah.

Wilmot:

—which evoke responses of audience and create the communal spirit. It was these axioms that were based on audience performance interchange. Perhaps an extension of that would be then—and tell me if this assumption is so—then the extension of that would be community-based theatre. I wanted to ask you about the challenges in mounting successful community based theatre, as you recall them.

12-00:19:16

Wilkerson:

It's very challenging from all sides because—I mean, I believe in it and I still believe all these axioms that I see here—that it should be a joyous gathering place, and it should use the most popular black art form, music, to attract a cross section of people. I think that's very important. I think that it's very challenging because, as a person in a teaching kind of role, you're trying to use and extract from performance tools, ways of teaching and styles and so on. You're trying to extract from that what's most important, relevant, and useful to your audience. We lift the Stanislavsky method because it's great and you just say, "Here, you need to do this. You need to be able to go back to the basis for that work, like the young man that I think I talked about, Sherman, when I was at Jordan. I was having him perform the gravedigger's speech. His first reaction was, "This man is crazy, because he's talking to a skull."

12-00:20:41

Wilmot:

Which is a legitimate response.

Wilkerson:

Absolutely. Now, if you've been taught in the theatrical and literary traditions, you know it's a stage convention, blah blah blah. That didn't mean anything to him, so I had to go back to basics and say, "Theatre is a place of fantasy. You can do whatever you want on the stage. So, yes, he's talking to a skull, yes. He really is. The reason he's talking to a skull is it allows him to blah blah blah blah."

You go back beyond the kind of constructions that you get in academe, to go back to basics. That's one of the things that's really challenging, is to be able to do that, after you've been highly trained. You've got to be able to unpack that for people who don't necessarily know or accept these kinds of conventions and traditions. That's one of the big challenges. Another has to do with just the discipline of what it means to perform—learning lines, if you have a script that you work from. If not, or even if you do, feeling responsibility to the team, meaning that you do what you need to do in order to participate. If you have to learn a script, you need to learn your lines because if you don't learn your lines, you can't rehearse it with other people. You're taking up other people's time. Coming to rehearsals on time. All of that whole set of disciplines, that's a

part of working with other people to produce something. You have that. The loyalty of that, and the willingness to sacrifice to do that.

Of course, these aren't all the challenges I think of. The third one I think of is the challenge of the space itself. Most often community theatre is done in spaces that are not set up for it. I don't mean just a stage—I mean, lighting, for example. What do you do when you are in a space that is not set up for good solid lighting? I'm not saying fancy lighting. I'm just saying illumination so the folks can see your face, see your body, see whatever. Basic stuff, that often, in community theatre, including the Berkeley campus [laughs] is a challenge. Lighting, sound, all the kinds of things that you might need for production. You can always do bare stage. You can always turn a chair into a chaise longue or whatever it is. You can help audiences kind of imagine, but it's hard for them to see if they don't have lights.

Since I'm talking about community theatre, I'm going to make this connection with Berkeley. In the early years when I did the Black Theatre Workshop, especially out of African American studies, we really did not have access to the theatres. We weren't able to use Dwinelle Studio Theatre. It took a while for us to get in there. After I finished and I was on the faculty, we had different rehearsal spaces. We even rehearsed in the hallways in Dwinelle, because we didn't have the space to do this. We existed in the earlier years in what I call the interstices of the university. It was like doing community theatre on a big university campus. When we did finally get into Dwinelle Studio Theatre, and eventually into the Playhouse, we paid for the use of it, just as if we were an off-campus organization. It was really funny. At one point, before I went to dramatic art to chair the department, I directed *El-Hajj Malik*, which was one of the extraordinarily successful things that we did—a play on Malcolm X that absolutely filled Zellerbach Playhouse, standing room only, for several nights. We not only had to pay for the use of the facility—full price—but also, when we had rehearsals in there, the drama department had a policy that a graduate student had to be present whenever the facility was being used. So, even though I had been trained by the drama department, and was a tenured faculty member, I had to have a graduate student sitting there. I was cool about it. Graduate students were terribly embarrassed because they knew who I was and they said, they said, “I'm just really sorry but—.” I said, “It's fine. It's fine with me.” Be here and whatever. It was little indignities like that that we went through for quite a while. Then eventually, when I was chairing the department in African American studies, I hired someone to pick up some of the production work [of Black Theatre Workshop], because I just couldn't do it all. It was just too much. That allowed me to step back a little bit and, between the two of us, we were able to negotiate being a part of the drama department in a sense, in terms of the production opportunities. We were able to do that and manage that.

12-00:26:35

Wilmot:

You were the founder of the Black Theatre Workshop?

Wilkerson:

Mmmhmm.

Wilmot:

When was that?

Wilkerson:

Gosh, that was really in the seventies. It started out as a Black Theatre Ensemble, as I recall. We used to rehearse—actually, we rehearsed in the community. We rehearsed in a church on—. The freeways are near there now, near the old Merritt College. Somewhere in that area, because we didn't have a place on campus. We held class there and we rehearsed there. That semester, we didn't even have a space on campus, all kinds of logistical challenges. This has to do with the structuring of universities. It's not totally racism. It's that you didn't have a place. Early on, I turned the Black Theatre Ensemble into a class, so that I, as a faculty member could get credit for doing this, number one. It wasn't something I just did in the evening, because it was viewed that way by some of my colleagues. "Well, what is that? That's just play. It doesn't really relate to real work." So I made it a class.

12-00:27:50

Wilmot:

Colleagues in which department?

Wilkerson:

In African American studies. Because it didn't fit the other disciplines. They didn't mount shows or plays. They didn't have to rehearse in the evening. They did whatever other things they did. But their work was mostly text-based. Mine was both text-based, but also it was production and performance and the creation of something.

I made the drama activity into a course—wrote it up, got it approved and everything, so that I could build it into my schedule, and also, so we that we could legitimately get a space to work in. Of course, what that meant was that we had to try to work with the facilities folk who assign, you know, willy-nilly, based on the numbers of students. I had to make sure I got programmed into spaces where you had movable chairs. There were many times when I got programmed such that the Black Theatre Ensemble or the Black Theatre Workshop would end up in a class with nailed-down desks. Well, you can't work very well in there. So I scouted the campus, I found places where we could do this kind of work in a class, and made sure that we got that choice of spaces. It was all kinds of things like that. In other words, the Black Theatre Ensemble, the Black Theatre Workshop, because we were not part of the drama department that had access to the performance spaces automatically, we had to kind of create our own. Sometimes we didn't have a space and we had to just perform in the hallways.

One time—I shouldn't tell this on tape—we were doing *El-Hajj Malik*, actually, the last time that we did it. Because I knew some faculty in the women's physical education department, I was able to get a space to rehearse in the women's gym.

12-00:30:05

Wilmot:

The Hearst gym?

Wilkerson:

The Hearst gym.

Wilmot:

It's a wonderful space.

Wilkerson:

Wonderful. Incredible. There were a few times when we weren't able to get into the space so I had a great student who is now a lawyer who said, "Professor Wilkerson, we're supposed to have rehearsal tonight and we don't have a space." I said, "I know. We're supposed to have that one but we didn't get it. They programmed somebody else." He said, "Well, why don't we use this one." I said, "Well, it's not the one we were assigned." He said, "But it's empty." I said, "Yeah, but it's got a nice floor, for gymnastics or whatever." I said, "We can't go in there in our shoes. We have to take our shoes off." They said, "We'll do that. I can get you in." He was very upstanding. He had been one of the ASUC senators. He was a very straight up fellow. I said, "How do you do that?" He said, "You just use a credit card and you can just open it." That's what we did.

For that night and a couple nights, we simply rehearsed in a space we weren't supposed to be in. But we took our shoes off and all of that. The space was totally empty, not being used, and we really needed to rehearse, so we did that. That was how it was. We were a legitimate course on campus. They were all students, and we had to make our own way. It was like doing community theatre in lots of ways because we didn't have the resources and the facilities that we needed. I suppose the work that I did in community theatre really helped to prepare me. I guess I should say one other thing about community-type theatre because there was another group that I started, called Kumoja Players, that we did through the same period, that we did at a local church. As I said, my family and I were living in Richmond, and just down the street, down Shane Drive about two blocks, was a new church that opened up, called Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church. It was a legitimate part of the Presbyterian Church, but the Presbyterian Church had allowed a certain number of ethnically oriented churches, and this was named Sojourner Truth. The liturgy and all of that came out of African American culture. The minister there, Reverend Eugene Farlow, had been a minister, in, I think, Oakland, and had there supported a kind of interracial theatre. So, he came to my house one day—I had never met him—and he knew one of my former students, Lamarr Ferguson, a great, great young man and colleague. He [Reverend Farlow] said he wanted to start a drama group at the church and he asked me, would I be willing to do it. Not being able to resist, I said, "Yeah, sure, I'd like to do that." I had done my first directing in a church, so I thought it would be nice to do. But I told him, "I don't want to do interpretations of biblical text. I want to do work that raises issues of spirituality, moral conflict, and so on, within a Christian framework, or value system. That's the kind of work that I want to do."

He said, "That's fine. That'll be great." I started Kumoja Players with some people from the church, and also Lamarr, who wasn't a member of the church, but came and became my co-director, essentially. He was then a high school teacher. He was formerly a student at Berkeley. The beautiful thing about this community space was that the church at that time operated out of what I can only call a big multipurpose room, so all of the chairs were movable, and the pulpit, the whole thing was movable. We used that space on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights, when we had a production. We would set the whole thing up with the little platform and everything for drama. On Saturday night, we, the performers, along with the audience would set the church up again—the pews and all of that for the Sunday morning service.

The thing that I loved about that was that it was so symbolic, because the Christian church in medieval times was the site of drama. I always thought it was wonderful to have these works done which extended the range of what the church really engaged—the kinds of issues that it

engaged and have it all happen in the same space. We operated for several years, and in fact, introduced, at Lamarr's suggestion, the first Juneteenth celebration in Richmond, Juneteenth being the time when the last slaves who were in Texas learned of the Emancipation Proclamation. It was many months after. We did a little parade up and down Shane and picked up kids in the neighborhood whose parents would let them come down to the church and we'd talk to them about black history and we made their faces up and did all kinds of artsy stuff and just had a lot of fun. We did it for a couple of years, and then the city of Richmond picked it up and now does it, or at least did for many year, did celebrate Juneteenth as a citywide event.

12-00:36:10

Wilmot:

I had question about the play *The Funeral*.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, that's where we did it.

Wilmot:

You wrote the play. As I remember, you actually shared with me a little bit about this play in our first interview. The themes were death, dying, and how a black community experiences a death. I wanted to know where did you draw from? What material were you drawing from in order to create that piece?

Wilkerson:

We drew from all the experience that we had and knew and the experience of the people in the group as well. I came to write that play because we had done a lot of different kinds of plays. Plays that are already done. I wanted to explore how black people respond to death itself, and I guess I should go back, I'll go back a little bit farther than that, but let me finish that thought. So many of the plays that we had done or were doing had to do with black people who were killed by white people. There was always somebody that causes death. I said, you know, I'd like to look at—absent that—what are our thoughts about death? How are we, as black people, responding and dealing with this? That actually came out of an actual experience in Tulare, California, where my aunt, passed away. She had been a missionary in Africa—it's another story of my family—

12-00:37:59

Wilmot:

I remember.

Wilkerson:

Right, right. She was married to a minister. They lived in Tulare, in the Central Valley in California. When she died, we all went to the funeral. It was in this wooden church. It seated maybe a couple hundred people—not much more than that. Wooden chairs and everything. Because she lived such an exemplary life, within a Christian context, there really was no concern about whether she was going to heaven or hell. This was a real celebration of her life and her passing. And so, the minister gave this classic sort of “train sermon.” There are certain kinds of oratory that black ministers have used over time, and they call it a “train sermon.” It's a cadence that they get into, and the audience responds and all of this. I had been to many, many funerals of

people in the AME Zion church. I had never seen one quite like this. It may have been a Baptist church, I'm not sure, but it was very, very participatory. People were responding. I was accustomed to that, but I wasn't so accustomed to it in a funeral setting. They were responding to his preaching and so on, and then when it was time to view the body—which had been classic in the churches that I grew up in—they opened the casket, which I was accustomed to, and the people would come walk past the casket and so on, and view the body for the last time, view the person for the last time. Up until that point of opening the casket, the music was quite somber—“Amazing Grace” and so on. That kind of music. When they opened the casket and people started walking by it, the choir kind of burst into all these wonderful gospel hymns and so on—spiritual, loud, wonderful singing. Very joyous. As people passed by and they would break down and cry and so on, especially the family, it was sort of subsumed in this great paean of joy and grace and all. I found myself sitting there thinking, “God, I wish I had a tape recorder,” because it was such a classic moment and experience. It was like nothing I had ever seen. I wanted to preserve it. I wanted to keep it. I wanted somehow to share that with other people.

This was a woman, as I said, who lived an exemplary life. She was a black woman. Sure, she suffered under racism, in various kinds of ways, but that was not a factor in this. This was just black people dealing with death. This kind of haunted me. I thought, “Gosh, I want so badly to share this. I didn't have a recorder, I didn't have a camera, not that I could have used one if I had it there. I felt really guilty even having those thoughts at that moment but I thought maybe the way to preserve this is to write a play, because then it could always be renewed with new traditions. It would be live. The idea at least, the understanding of it, would stay alive in people's minds. That's really why I wrote the play. I wasn't dying to write plays at all. It was this one particular thing that drove me to do it.

Then I directed it. The scary thing about it is that before when I directed, I was always directing somebody else's play, so I had some cover. If the play wasn't too good, I could always blame the playwright, but I couldn't blame the playwright in this instance. While we're on it, I'll just add this little bit. That is that producing and directing the play was as much of an experience as writing or seeing it, because the cast had to end up dealing with their views of death at the same time. I had a cast that ranged from teenagers, fourteen or fifteen years old, all the way to probably sixty, fifty or sixty. We borrowed a casket from a local mortuary, and when I brought it in, people's reactions varied widely. Everything from the sixty year old not wanting to go near it, to the kids, fifteen, sixteen year olds, jumping in and saying, “Look, see, I'm dead.” It was really amazing. People had to come to terms with what they thought about death. Then, you talked about sources that I drew from. I certainly drew from the experience in Tulare. Lamarr was very much a part of that production. He did a lot of reading around black customs, in terms of death. Wonderful actor. He added some things of his own, like covering the windows with newspaper to keep the bad spirits out. Different customs that were a part of it, he just kind of built in as an actor. It was collaborative in that sense and drew not only from my own experiences, but also from the experiences that the cast had. That's what it was.

Folks have asked me to publish it and all of that, and I think I found it again, but I haven't done anything with it. I don't know if the play is really any good, but it evoked experiences and important thoughts, insights, on the part of the actors as well as the folks in the audience. I had a minister who actually gave a sermon. He was an actual minister. He gave a sermon in it and all of that. It was really pretty interesting piece of theatre.

12-00:44:44

Wilmot:

I had this question and this goes back to this idea of community theatre. Really, not even community theatre, but what the function and purpose and role of theatre is, vis a vis community. I think Bernard Jackson of the Inner City Cultural Center put forward his idea of seizing theatre back from the zones of elite culture, and I wanted to ask you—of course you were familiar with this vision—did it shape your work? Did it influence you?

12-00:45:51

Wilkerson:

The Inner City Cultural Center and Bernard Jackson?

Wilmot:

Yes.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, very much so. Very much so. Jack—we called him Jack, actually—was really a visionary. He started that theatre out of the Watts riot, actually. I think Gregory Peck helped him out in the beginning and a lot of film people and actors and what have you from Hollywood who were moved by what had happened in Watts saw the arts as a way of helping people—not just to get kids off the street, but a way of helping young people to see a better life and envision something different. His theatre was quite unique because he was a very strong proponent of color-blind casting. At that time, casting in plays pretty much was very much along whatever racial lines we thought existed. Once in a while, there was some odd something, but he just carried the concept way out there. For example, I never will forget seeing one play there, where he had an Asian actress actually playing a black person. What I'm saying is, he could adapt a character—let's say, a white character—have a black person play the white character. They could play it either as a black person in that, or you make an all-black production of whatever it is. That way, you simply kind of transplant the experience and place it on another cultural group. But the really revolutionary thing that he did was to believe that an actor could transcend, in a way, their physical presence.

Let me give an example. He had Paul Winfield, who was a wonderful actor, play the gentleman caller in the Tennessee Williams play in *The Glass Menagerie*. The play is about a white family, and the gentleman caller is a white man, not a black man, but he had Paul Winfield play it with the idea that he could evoke the image of this other character. In other words, it didn't become an interracial relationship because he was black and he was in it. He was just a gentleman caller. He didn't make any changes in the play in the dialogue or anything to make it seem that this character was kind of racializing the play. I saw the production and it was fascinating. It was really fascinating how an audience was able to adapt to that. Even in the discussion afterwards, the audience did not necessarily see him as a black man, but saw him as a gentleman caller.

Well, it raises all kinds of issues and questions, but he really pushed the envelope in terms of the significance, a lack of significance, one way or the other, of the actual body on stage. What does it mean to be that body on stage, and how imprisoned is the actor and the audience in the sociological terms of that body. It was fascinating to see the way in which he and the productions that were done in that theatre toyed with that concept of what the physical presence means. His

was a truly multiracial theatre. He had Asian actors, he had Native actors, he had African, he had Latino Mexican actors, he had the whole range. The folks at Inner City worked very hard to bring diverse audiences in. I forget exactly where they were located but they were kind of located at the edge of many of these communities. He had folks go out and actually knock on doors and bring diverse audiences in—age-wise, race-wise, gender-wise. It was really, really fascinating. It was a very, very unusual concept—absolutely revolutionary concept for traditional theatre. I think that’s part of what he meant by rescuing theatre from the elitism of theatrical culture. Theatre could be alive and breathing. You could take classical works without changing dialogue and bring new life into them, help them to connect more viably with various audiences.

His work did influence me a lot, to see that kind of experimentation. I was already leaning in that direction anyway; that is, kind of liberating theatre from its sociological boundaries. I don’t mean by that, not being socially conscious—always being socially responsible, but liberating it from forms and casting notions and so on that just imprisoned it, and therefore imprisoned the audience. It did not allow the audience to use its imagination, which is one of the great things about theatre. I will always love Coleridge’s statement that you expect the audience to suspend their disbelief, that we should do that. We pander an awful lot to a very narrow conception of what people can handle, what they can do. Will they pay to go see this? Last night, I was watching Skip Gates on television. He was talking to some very well known producer. He’s done lots of shows and films. He was asking him how can African Americans—why can’t they be a part of some of these blockbusters and whatever. Skip was suggesting that you couldn’t you do a remake of *Love Story* with, say, Denzel Washington and Halle Berry. The producer said, “Oh yes, that would be wonderful. Yes, we could do that. That would be wonderful and all.” Gates said, “How much money would you make from that?” He was connecting the money with the filming choices. The producer said, “I would make about half of what I would have made.” “What about a remake with Halle Berry and Russell Crowe?” “Oh! *That* would be a blockbuster.” It’s that kind of thinking. It pans out because of the way things are marketed and so on. It’s that kind of thinking that essentially says that audiences are bound very much by racial constructs and that they can’t break out of them at all. I think that’s because we rarely ask them to do that. We don’t challenge them to do that. Sometimes money is so important that we can’t even get to that.

That was what Jack Jackson did. He broke that open. Non-traditional casting, as it came to be known, was really pioneered to a large extent—I’m not saying he was the first to do it—but in a very consistently conceptualized and theorized way, was really promoted by the Inner City Cultural Center under Jack Jackson’s leadership. He trained many people there who went out and carried that message for him.

12-00:54:44

Wilmot:

I think we should take a break.

12-00:54:44

Wilkerson:

Yes.

[End Audio File 12]

[Begin Audio File 13]

13-00:00:28

Wilkerson:

Okay. How was Jack Jackson's vision of multiracial theatre, nontraditional casting, problematic? This didn't emerge immediately, but it has emerged in the last ten, fifteen, or so years. I should preface this by saying that Jack was always held in the highest respect by other professional people in the field and so on. The concern that was raised for black artists has to do with essentially being able to work. If you follow a concept of non-traditional casting, it does not necessarily provide the kind of support for black playwrights who might be writing work that requires black actors.

It also opens you to the possibility that classic work of your own, that you feel is very important to your own communities—could be *Dutchman*, could be *Raisin in the Sun*, could be *Take a Giant Step*, all kinds of plays could then be opened to other people playing them on a regular basis. Now, having said that, it's a political question in a lot of ways. It's not only sociological, it's a political question. It's a theatrical question because those kinds of attitudes and concerns grew out of a commercialized sector, question of who gets work and who doesn't get work. The whole host of contextual things that have implications for those kinds of choices—non-traditional casting. There was real resistance kind of raised, particularly by black playwrights, August Wilson being one. Inevitably, in a society like the United States—I suppose there is nothing else like it—if you say, okay, we should be able to do *Trojan Women* or whatever, other plays by Tennessee Williams or whatever, and cast them willy-nilly, the very first question that comes back, and I've seen it happen in forums, is, “Well, then, we should be able to do an all white cast of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Now, I don't know that it is that people object so much to that kind of racializing of *A Raisin in the Sun*, but if you do *A Raisin in the Sun*, let's say on Broadway, and you decide to do a multiracial cast or an all white cast or whatever, then, there are black actors who don't get work. They don't get a lot of work in the first place, as much work as their talent should allow them to get. So it becomes an economic issue. That is often what drives controversies in theatre in a country where you don't really have equal access in a sense as performers in theater and film and so on. We have some incredible examples of very famous and marvelous actors like Denzel Washington. You can name them and there are more now than before, but if you look across the board at the people who are prepared to do this kind of work and the numbers of people who actually get to do this work, the numbers would still be proportionately the same as ever, or pretty close to what they've been historically.

13-00:04:48

Wilmot:

Margaret, thank you for answering the question that I posed to you off camera, which was this question about what were the problematics of the kind of vision that we had discussed earlier—Bernard Jackson's vision. I wanted to pose to you this question: you've mentioned several times that there was some friction between yourself and the drama department. I wanted to ask you, what was the beef?

13-00:05:17

Wilkerson:

[laughs] I shouldn't malign the entire department. That's number one. There were several problems, but one of the problems was lack of access to theatre space. Having been chair of the

department, now I understand some of the problematics of that, because of the demand that is in the program itself, generated by people who are majors and what have you. I still feel that, even having chaired and dealt with a lot of that, when your particular program itself is not very diverse in terms of involvement of students of color and what have you, when you have an opportunity to bring into the fold in a sense, and expand the scope of your curriculum by involving someone from another department having some kind of access to performance space—eventually, as I said, the drama department did that.

What I refer to really has something to do with the early days of drama. I think at one point, I talked about being on the search committee for the first director of the Women's Center. I told the story about the first director leaving about six months after I got there as an associate director. Maye Diaz went to Santa Cruz as provost of Kresge College. Through a search process, I was selected to be the director to follow. The appointment carried forty-nine percent academic administrator, fifty-one percent faculty member. It came with a tenured spot, it was negotiated to have a tenured slot, so that the Women's Center, which was a new and revolutionary idea for the campus, so that the director of the Women's Center could have some kinds of academic protections.

13-00:07:40

Wilmot:

Who negotiated that?

Wilkerson:

That was negotiated by someone—the faculty, probably. See, the Women's Center came into being after several women faculty members pushed for this to be developed. I think it was around that time that the Faculty Senate Committee on the Status of Women, now the Status of Women and Ethnic Minorities, did a study and found that there was a very, very low percentage—and I don't remember the number now—of women on the faculty, at a time when the availability pools for academic women were much larger.

13-00:08:19

Wilmot:

And then there was also, in the early seventies, the HEW audit.

13-00:08:29

Wilkerson:

That's right. This report came out and hit the academy really, really hard. Some of the women who had been involved in that were very strong women on campus who were tenured pushed for the founding of a women's center. Someone in the mix of people—I wasn't privy to that—had negotiated so that there would be this fifty-one percent, forty-nine, and the fifty-one would be a tenured slot. These faculty who were on the search committee knew what my record was. I had gotten my Ph.D. in '72. This was all happening around '75. Something like that. I had done some articles and so on. I didn't have the heavy-duty record I suppose that some folk thought I should have. So they selected me knowing full well what my record was, and these would be my colleagues. They first went to the drama department, because my degree was in drama. The drama department would not accept me as a member of the faculty. I was told by the then chair at one point that, well, you know, you just don't have the record. You haven't directed in New York and so forth. Just way off-the-wall sorts of things. I was very new at these kinds of things,

so I didn't have much to come back with. I said , you know, I've done this and I've done that, and there's this potential and stuff, and we know that there were others who became associate professors and tenured with that much or less. It could have happened, had they wanted it to happen. They also said that the department was afraid that if they took this half slot, that the next time they came around and they wanted someone in German literature or something, they wouldn't be able to get them because the administration would say, well, you've already had that, and blah blah blah.

The administration had claimed that this would not be treated in that way. This would be an add-on in that sense. So there I was competing with the fantasy of a German literature professor or whatever it was. That was a fairly bitter experience for me because I had been good enough to get through the department and so on, and when there was an opportunity to have an additional faculty slot—half of one, anyway, and to have a person of color in there, they did not want that at that time, in the mid-'70s. Having been at Berkeley now for many years, I can recite all the reasons why one would not accept that, but I really felt that it was an exceptional opportunity, and for me, at that stage in my life, it was an embittering experience.

13-00:11:39

Wilmot:

Ogden was there.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, he was there. He was a faculty member, though. I'm not sure whether Dunbar was even tenured at that time. One of the things—I was a novice in higher ed at that time. I didn't understand academics. I didn't even know, and I don't know to this day, whether Dunbar, when he was my advisor, whether he was tenured or not. He may have been an assistant professor. I honestly don't know. I know now what it means to be in one pecking order or another. Dunbar was never chair of the department, for whatever reasons. I don't know why, but he was never a chair of that department. Maybe he never wanted to be chair. I could sure understand that. But he wasn't. I didn't know where he was in the pecking order in those early days, simply because I wasn't aware of what it meant to be an assistant professor or an associate professor or any of that when I started graduate school. Regardless of what his opinion might have been, I don't know that he would have had a lot of influence.

13-00:12:54

Wilmot:

Where did that decision originate from then, as far as you know?

13-00:12:57

Wilkerson:

Well, as far as I know, from the faculty itself. The person who told me about it was Bob Goldsby, who was chair, I think at the time of that. I believe he was chair at that time, but I'm not sure about that.

13-00:13:09

Wilmot:

Bob Goldsby—he said, “This is what we've decided,” or he said, “This is what they've decided and—“

Wilkerson:

It was more like “we.”

Wilmot:

Mmm.

Wilkerson:

[laughs]

Wilmot:

Okay.

Wilkerson:

That always gave me something of a bitter taste. So then, this gets me to African American Studies. So then, the search committee which had people on it like Herma Hill Kay and other people who were very strong academics and all of that—they said, well, let’s try African American studies.

I had actually left African American Studies. That’s a piece of the story I haven’t told yet, but the leadership that was there at that time, there was no reason why they wouldn’t have wanted me back, because they were trying to build the department. At any rate, went to African American Studies. The appointment as an associate professor didn’t go through. I have reason to believe—and I really can’t talk about that—that someone within the African American Studies department didn’t particularly want that to go through. Now, I’m not sure about that. I had a source who told me that.

13-00:14:49

Wilmot:

What year was this?

Wilkerson:

When did I start at the women’s center? Was it ’77? I was acting director for several years so it would have had to be in the mid to late seventies, maybe ’75. Something like that, somewhere in that period. So, what was negotiated was for me to be a Lecturer with Security of Employment. That’s how I started. I was never an assistant professor. I agreed to accept that with the caveat, that at an appropriate time, essentially of my choosing, that I would be able to be considered for associate professor. Lecturer with Security of Employment is a tenured slot, not tenured track. It’s like tenuring you as a teacher.

13-00:15:56

Wilmot:

I understand.

Wilkerson:

That’s what Henrietta was. All of your evaluations are based on your teaching record, not on your research.

Well, I was doing research and I was going to do research and so on, and I felt that I should be in the tenure track. I reserved the right to be able to do that and make that move into associate professorship when it was time. Knowing also, I wanted it on my time schedule, because I knew I was having to build a new organization on campus that was going to have certain implications. I knew I wouldn't have the normal time frame for doing research and so on, because I was building this organization. So, I decided to accept it.

Now, being a Lecturer with Security of Employment on campus was very interesting during that time, because that meant that in memos to you, regardless of what kinds of committee you sat on, and I sat on a lot of them, everybody else was called Professor. You were called Doctor. Little things like that. I had the right as a SOE, as they call it, to head up research grants and so on. You can be a principal investigator, in other words. They were very clear about that. That's what the policy says. I had Ford grants. Not only the dissertation, but I brought Ford grants into the women's center as well. I'd brought a fair amount of grants from different places into the center. Each time, I always had to deal with the Contracts and Grants Office about the fact that I could be principal investigator. I had to constantly remind them, send them the documents that said, "Yes, it's in the policy and so forth," because most lecturers, SOE, weren't doing that, I guess, on the campus. I had to do that.

It was all this exceptionalism, always. I was the exception to whatever, even though I was serving the campus in many, many normal ways. I was on the committee that dealt with Title IX legislation as it came in, and dealt with the issue of whether we would have a men's and a women's athletic directors. You know, I was on a host of committees that I can't even remember now. I have to go with my vita. Each time, the fact that I was not on the tenured track was always very evident to me. Maybe nobody else noticed it, but it made that first experience around getting a faculty appointment a very problematic one for me. So, I went into African American Studies as a half-time person and the other half in the women's center. Then, of course, when I left the Women's Center, and folks were really kind of surprised that I would leave it after nine years of doing this—I did it much longer than I expected to do it—that meant that the department had to give another piece of FTE. Somehow we had to get that, which we were able to get. I don't remember exactly the negotiations around it, but by that time, I knew a lot more about the university, having directed the Women's Center. However it was, we were able to get it done. I became full-time in African American Studies, as a lecturer. It was sometime later that I was successful being appointed to the tenure track. I went from lecturer SOE to Associate Professor, and then to Full Professor.

13-00:20:14

Wilmot:

I need to back up and ask you a question so I have a better understanding.

Wilkerson:

Sure.

Wilmot:

One is, when you obtained your Ph.D. in 1972, what did your career horizon look like? Did you think—you know the term, were you "shopping" yourself?

13-00:20:32

Wilkerson:

I had some—were they offers? I had certainly strong invitations to places outside of California. As I recall, University of Illinois, Champagne-Urbana was one, and a few more other places that looked promising, but my husband and I really didn't want to move out of California at that time. We just decided that we wanted to stay there. Our kids were very young. I suppose we could have moved at that time, but we weren't interested in leaving.

I'm not sure about this, but I believe Stan was teaching at Solano by that time. When we were in Petaluma, he had been teaching at Santa Rosa High School, but he really wanted to coach in college, and particularly community college. If I'm not mistaken he had gotten a job at Solano Community College, on the faculty there. I'm almost certain by that time he would have, because it was partly the disturbances of the sixties that motivated them to look for faculty of color.

This was his opportunity to realize something that he had wanted to do. He had been so supportive of me in terms of my going through school at this time, which children and everything else that we agreed to do that. This was his moment. It was very hard, first of all, as a black man, to break into coaching in California, and to break into coaching, particularly at the college level. It was even difficult at the high school level, but it was even harder at the college level. This opportunity opened up and we wanted to take it. I'm pretty sure that was one of the big, big reasons why we decided not to leave. He's not a native Californian, but he's lived there most of his life and we liked California, and the kids were little. We just decided we would stay there. We had the opportunity at the Women's Center and all of that, so we decided that we would just stay with that.

00:24:33

Wilmot:

So in 1972, what were you doing immediately after you obtained your Ph.D.?

13-00:24:44

Wilkerson:

Well, I'm confused just a little bit. '72—Gosh, let me see. What in the world was I doing?

13-00:24:57

Wilmot:

You were associate director in 1973.

Wilkerson:

Actually, I was in African American studies until when?

Wilmot:

You were lecturer in the department of English from 1970 to 1975, and you were lecturer in drama from 1970 to 1971, and you were an associate in Afro American Studies in the Division of Ethnic Studies 1969 through June 1978.

Wilkerson:

When I was a graduate student.

Wilmot:

So you were very busy all through those years. It looks like the work that carried you right after—

Wilkerson:

I was in the English department.

Wilmot:

Was in the English department.

13-00:25:36

Wilkerson:

Here's that that piece that I hadn't mentioned. When I was a graduate student from about '69 to seventy-something or other, early seventies, I was in African American studies as a graduate teaching assistant, because I didn't have my Ph.D. when I first went in. Those were the real formative days, shall we say. It was in Afro American Studies. We were part of Ethnic Studies, we were a program in Ethnic Studies, and the unit called ethnic studies, I guess, was sort of a department. It reported directly to the chancellor, but the budgets for the four programs were all negotiated separately with the chancellor, with the coordinators from those programs. There were a lot of structural issues and problems that plagued the program.

Ron Lewis was coordinator. I was there while he was coordinator. It hadn't become a department but it was still a program, and that was after, I believe, Carl Mack was head of the program. Carl was a wonderful visionary guy, terrific guy. Ron Lewis came in and I don't know how to say this—it was really problematic. He surrounded himself with men, black men, who were almost like bodyguards in a funny kind of way. The program—we taught different courses and those things got done, but we had a very contentious relationship with the university. There are all these questions about what would the program become? What would happen with ethnic studies? There were internal rivalries about should we become a department in the College of Letters and Science, or should we remain outside of that? The whole Third World Strike, one of the things it had been predicated on, was that folks wanted a third world college that was autonomous. I always wondered how you can be autonomous in a university. I just couldn't figure out how that would be, because, given the lines of authority and lines of influence, you could never be fully autonomous.

There were all of these things that were going on. Internally, it was a very repressive kind of regime—very repressive. I think I have one example, if I can remember to tell it correctly. We had—I've forgotten who it was, but we had some sort of guest artist or something coming from off the campus, that had to do with literature or theatre or something like that. My students wanted to host this person. My students who were in humanities and theatre, and I think it was the Black Theatre Ensemble actually, wanted to host this person. They had put together ideas of what to do and everything. Ron had said, I thought, that it would be good for us to do this. But when I took him the proposal and we asked for some money—it wasn't a lot of money, but he just turned it down flat, which put a very bad taste in my mouth because I really had promised that the students could do it. It was more an issue of control and power, it seemed to me. A series of things like this led me to the point where I decided that I was going to leave Afro American studies.

Other things that happened like, I'll give you two examples. We often didn't get paid on time—often. We had a good AA, but I don't know what happened. Either the institution itself was resisting, which is very, very possible, and/or Ron as a coordinator was not able to build any kind of bridges with the university, and I'm not sure that he ever wanted to. So that was always a problem. You could never bank on your check to get to you on time.

The other thing was that we would have these marathon faculty meetings on weekends. Stan and I were still living in Petaluma. Marathon. They would be called for at eight o'clock in the morning. Stan would come with me—I'll tell you why in a moment—Stan would come with me, and we'd get there at eight from Petaluma, or nine o'clock, if it was supposed to be nine o'clock. The leadership wouldn't show up until ten or eleven o'clock. We had taken a weekend. We had asked somebody to take care of our children, because we had children, at least two, probably three by that time. We did have three by that time. You'd spend all day in a faculty meeting wrangling over just issues. Anyone who wanted to come, anyone who was black who wanted to come could attend the meeting, the assumption being that anyone that wasn't black who wanted to come was some kind of an agent provocateur. I'm sure we had agent provocateurs who were black who were in there. It was that sort of very narrow kind of thinking and stuff. A lot of those kinds of things—I got tired of that.

I remember thinking and saying at that time that I was better prepared to take racist incidents and so on, or to deal with white people and all of that. It hurt me and cut me too deeply when I had the same kinds of difficult issues with people who were black. I really didn't want to go through that pain, so I decided to leave. I wrote a letter to Ron. I don't seem to have a copy of this letter but Reggie Jones told me that he had seen it sometime later. I can't remember what I said, but I gave all these reasons why I was going to leave the program.

I remember having a conversation with Ron in one of those little offices. I was in one of these really narrow small offices right next to the department office in Dwinelle, and I can remember I was sitting near—there's only one door, and I was sitting near the window. He was sitting between me and the door. I had the feeling, I really had the feeling, that he really wished that he could have just [laughs] slapped me or something. He didn't do anything, but you could feel the anger because I was deciding to leave. I mean, I'm not giving myself special credit, but because he had certain people in the program, it helped to legitimize the program, because we were Ph.D. students. I felt very physically threatened, just by atmosphere. He didn't do anything, but I felt very physically threatened.

I told you that my husband always came with me to these big faculty meetings on the weekend when he could because there were women who were intimidated in that program by Ron and the folk that surrounded him. One of the women, Bernisteen Lincoln Holmes, who was a great friend of mine who died some years ago was my AA—administrative assistant—at the Women's Center. She told me—and she also worked in Afro American studies—right around the time or just after I left. She told me absolute stories about intimidation. Her, as a woman and having to be in a room with Ron and two or three or four of the men who were with him, and them actually threatening her. She had brothers, and she told him that she had her brothers and her brothers would deal with it if they messed with her. There was all that kind of stuff that went on.

Also, at one point, during the time I was in Afro American studies, at that time, there were just big political debates over the future of black people. How should we situate ourselves in university, but also, what should be our stance? There were those who wanted to have their own state somewhere. There were all kinds of political ideologies that were in conflict. I can't remember exactly why this meeting was held, but it rose to such a level that they decided to have kind of big community meeting of all the folks on campus. I remember that Andy Billingsley, who was the outside and black person on my dissertation committee (he's the only one I can remember) was assistant vice-chancellor then. Basically, his job was to work with the minority students. That's pretty much what it was. We went to a local church. Reverend Belcher, who used to teach in the program, was a minister of—I'm not sure if it was a Methodist church. I can't remember, for some reason. I think it was a CME church, if I'm not mistaken. It was relatively near the campus, and he let us use his sanctuary to have these debates. Because it was so filled with people, students, mostly from the campus, and everybody couldn't get in, they had public address system—PA system set up—with the speakers outside. Now, this church is located in a neighborhood surrounded by houses, so people in the neighborhood could hear whatever happened inside. These men—they were men—got up in the pulpit, in their debates, and used all kinds of profane language and so on, which, if you really respect and know black communities, you know you don't do that, certainly not from a pulpit of a church.

I was sitting in the first or second row with a couple of colleagues, and I know for a fact that there were people who were carrying guns, because I saw them. This happened not too long after or before—it was around the same time that the shooting occurred down at UCLA. I think one or two students were killed if I'm not mistaken. Ron Karenga was there at whatever that meeting was. It was a very kind of unsettling moment.

13-00:37:46

Wilmot:

Ron Karenga was at this meeting?

Wilkerson:

No, no, he wasn't at this meeting but at the one in LA when that happened. I think he was there. I believe so. I don't know if he was teaching at UCLA then or what, but any rate, I kind of associate his name with it for some reason. Maybe he was a speaker or something.

13-00:38:05

Wilmot:

As I understand it was the US-versus-the-Black-Panthers shootout type situation, right in the middle of campus.

Wilkerson:

That's right. That happened either just before or just after—I think it was just before. You had a kind of context that it could get out of hand. I went because we had to be a part of these discussions and so on.

That meeting almost cost Reverend Belcher his parish, because of the kind of language that people used. People were, in the neighborhood, more conservative in certain ways, and certainly people not connected with the campus were really outraged that that kind of thing could happen

in the church. Stan had seen all of these things happening and had come to meetings with me and so on, and he always said, very basic in his role, he always said that he felt that, “I want them to know that you have a husband who is going to stand with you.”

That takes me back to my conversation with Ron. I had the feeling that he knew that. Also, his wife Shirley Lewis, who was president of Paine College, I think, in Georgia. Shirley and Stan had been students together —undergraduates at Berkeley years before and hadn’t seen each other again until she had married Ron and they came back to Berkeley. So, she knew him from those early years, those couple of years that he was at Berkeley, and he had made his presence known. “I want them to know that you have a husband.” I’m sure that that was one of the things that kept me from being personally intimidated in the way they intimidated Bernisteen, or tried to intimidate Bernisteen. Bernisteen’s protection was that she had brothers who would deal if they had to. This was all stuff that was going on. This is just small potatoes. I’m sure there were much bigger, similar kinds of issues that were going on.

For a lot of these reasons, I left Afro American studies and got a job in the English department, which was another trip, but anyway got a job in the English department as a lecturer, not SOE, but as an adjunct, and taught there for a while in the English department, and this will wrap up my past experiences that shaped a lot of my attitudes.

In the English department, at that time, they had no folks of color. They had one or two, one man, maybe an Asian American faculty member. They had no blacks and no Latinos or anything like that. I was teaching advanced composition and I think I was teaching an American literature course or something like that. My training was in theatre. It wasn’t in literature, but I read up and learned and whatever, and I had read other things. They asked me—I can’t believe these things happen, but anyway, they did—they asked me to do a little seminar for the faculty, for the Americanists on the faculty on black literature. So I did that. I gave them a bibliography and whatever. There were Americanists there who studied American literature who did not know Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. I mean, it was the seventies, but really, *Invisible Man* has been a major work of American literature for many, many years. I mean, there were people who had never heard of him. “Ralph Ellison. Who? Who is that?” So, I did that thing.

At one point, I thought maybe I could go into the faculty in English. Of course, the argument there was, well you did your work in theatre and what can you do here? But they wanted me to instruct the American literature faculty in black literature. So, if I can instruct the faculty, why couldn’t I be on the faculty? So, anyway, I stayed and just worked there. Very shortly thereafter, I think I went to the Women’s Center in ’73. Very soon thereafter, I went to the Women’s Center as director and began moving along with that while I taught.

13-00:43:18

Wilmot:

What kept you at Berkeley in those early years?

Wilkerson:

God knows. [laughs] I don’t know what kept me. Just about the time any person with sense would have left, some new opportunity came along. The Women’s Center was an interesting new opportunity. As associate director—I wasn’t associate director for very long—but as associate

director, Maye Diaz was really quite an incredible person. I haven't talked to her in decades, but she was a very supportive and interesting woman, very accomplished. I remember as director, the women's center had a little bit of money. A little discretionary money. I think she had a thousand dollars or something like that, which seemed like a lot then. She said, "I want you to bring a speaker to the campus—a poet or someone—and I want someone who is a minority." We used the term minority, or "of color." She said, "Now, I want you to think really big. Who would be really important because we're trying to build an image, reach for the sky." She wanted me to bring someone of color.

I brought Gwendolyn Brooks, who was about one of the biggest names I could think of, and she was absolutely fabulous. So you get an opportunity to start doing something like that. It begins to compensate somewhat for the other things that are going on.

Again, Stan was beginning to build his career at Solano Community College. He was an assistant football coach and hoped to be head coach, which he did become some years later. That was working. We had the family and all and I said earlier that I thought it was important for me to be available and around.

I have to tell you this story and then I'm going to stop, because I know that it's getting late. I remember I was in the English department, and Charles Muscatine—bless his heart, he was a good guy in a lot of ways—I remember running into him in the English Department office and he said to me, "I just heard that you have children." I said, "Yes." I guess he asked me how many, and I said, "I have three." He said, "You have three children. I can't get over it. I have one son," I think he said, "and I barely saw him until he was twelve." He said something like that. "I didn't interact with him until he was twelve."

He said to me, "What in the world do you do with your children while you're here on the campus?" Without blinking an eye, I said, "I put them in the refrigerator." It was one of those satirical comments that I made, but it was such a crazy question. I mean, "What do you do with your kids?" So I said, "I put them in the refrigerator."

Wilmot:

Did he laugh?

Wilkerson:

I guess he did. Yeah, I think he did.

It was this notion that if you have children, you can't possibly be working this way in a profession and all of that. It was just these crazy kinds of notions. I came out of a tradition where women did that, where they worked outside of the home as well as inside the home, so that wasn't a new phenomenon for me. You heard what our daughter Rose said about women who were involved in professions and other things. I mean, my mother was never a professional, but she worked in defense at a time when women were brought in during World War II because the men were off at war and women had to take on masculine jobs—things that were considered to be for men, and so on. Those were just some of the disjunctures that you got because you were a mother.

13-00:47:41

Wilmot:

Well, you were on campus when you were pregnant and even with child. I was wondering, how did people respond to your body? Were they comfortable with you? Were they uncomfortable with you?

Wilkerson:

I don't remember anything that would suggest that people were uncomfortable. I mean, I don't know.

I do remember—this is not directly exactly answering that question—but I do remember that I was in a production that Jean Bazemore did. It was about the French Revolution. I played a prostitute who was very close to the male character, who was kind of a revolutionary. It's a historically based play, and I just can't remember the name of it. So, we had a sort of love scene on the stage, and it was after that that I got pregnant, or somewhere around that time, and I think this was Rose. It could have been Rose or it could have been Cullen. It was either the second or the third child.

One of the young women—she might have been in the cast—one of the young women who liked the fellow that I was playing opposite on the stage made some rather snide remarks about my having gotten pregnant after doing a set of shows with this love scene. [laughs] “No, I haven't been sleeping around.” Just stuff.

It was unusual to be pregnant and be on campus. There weren't many others. I think I mentioned that Barbara Christian, when she first came to Afro American Studies, when I was still in the English department, said, “I remember seeing you across the campus, being very pregnant.” It was unusual. I would say certainly in my department, across the campus, there were a number of women faculty who were not married, or who had been divorced, or whatever. They might have one child or something of that order, but they'd already had the child.

Having children and building an academic career is a very problematic thing for women, and it's particularly problematic for people in the sciences, more so than the humanities.

I'm sure I was weird looking. I had my hands full just taking care of the kids. Sometimes I had to bring them to the campus with me. Once I drove up to the Dwinelle annex to turn in a paper. Then you could pull up right up there where that circle is and park, and I accidentally locked him [Darren] inside the car, and so I had to call AAA to come, and he was just in infancy. He was just small enough where I couldn't explain to him how to unlock the door. Stuff like that. I was busy logistically dealing with things like that. I didn't always notice how people were noticing me. I'm sure it was unusual for the campus because I don't remember seeing very many other pregnant women around.

13-00:51:26

Wilmot:

Regardless of the campus, outside of the framework of the campus, did you like being pregnant? Did you enjoy?

13-00:51:32

Wilkerson:

Yeah, I really did. After the first three months. I was always nauseous during the first three months. I never threw up, I was just nauseous. The only time I wasn't was for about for twenty minutes after I ate—while I ate, and twenty minutes after, which means that I ate a lot. Now we know that you should eat six small meals. That kind of helps you. But after the first three months, I felt great. I really felt terrific. I didn't have to wear jackets so much. Your body felt warm.

Then you get close to the end and then it gets awkward. Pregnancy was good. I'm not so sure I'd say the same thing about labor. As I said before, there's a reason why they call it labor. I never did Lamaze technique or anything like that, although my obstetrician thought that I had gone to Lamaze classes when I had Rose, the last child. He was holding off on the spinal. They gave you spinal—I don't know if they still do that.

13-00:52:41

Wilmot:

Mmmhmm, they sure do.

Wilkerson:

He kept saying, "Well didn't you do Lamaze?" I said, "No, I didn't do Lamaze." [laughs]

Getting the spinal was like heaven. It was really like heaven. It was wonderful. It's hard on the body. It's a big moment. Of course after you've had one or two, you realize that it's a real advantage to be able to carry the kid around inside you because once they're out, they're running around and you're chasing after them and all that sort of stuff. You don't know where in hell they are and all of that.

I enjoyed pregnancy. I didn't enjoy labor, but I enjoyed pregnancy.

13-00:53:33

Wilmot:

Did you get to have your husband with you during your labors?

13-00:53:33

Wilkerson:

Well, it's interesting that you ask that, because I was going to say that, the span of time when I had the children—with the first child, we were in Los Angeles. My water broke, so we had to decide whether we would go early, or risk being a little late to the hospital. We had to go on the freeway, and the water broke around one or two o'clock or something. It was a question, do we leave at three o'clock and beat the traffic, or do we wait and risk getting in traffic? We went early.

When I had the first child, I was in a ward with lots of other women, having labor. There had to be twelve or so, fourteen or so. We were all groaning and moaning. The nurses would come and say, "Oh, be quiet. You're just having a baby." It was really not the greatest. That was the tail end of that kind of treatment in a hospital. It was the Queen of Angels Hospital in Los Angeles.

By the time we had the second child, Cullen, we were in Northern California and we were in a hospital in Santa Rosa, I think it was. We had gotten permission for Stan to be there at the birth, but then the paperwork got mixed and he never got into the room. By that time, they were actually giving the husbands permission.

By Rose's time, he not only had the permission but actually got a chance to come in for the birth. It was interesting that in those five or six years, the hospitals went from just terrible treating of women to really admitting husbands.

13-00:55:31

Wilmot:

That must have been amazing.

Wilkerson:

I guess it was. [laughs]

Wilmot:

Okay, let's close on that today.

[End Audio File 13]

Interview #6: March 20, 2004

[Begin Audio File 14]

Wilmot:

Margaret Wilkerson, interview six, March 20, 2004. Margaret, you were just reflecting on how gender operated in this era when women were just entering the work force. I just wanted to ask you to speak to that.

14-00:00:52

Wilkerson:

Well, doing this oral history has helped me to reflect on my own life. When I look through my vita, it looks to me like I've been all over the place. There are many various and disparate aspects of my life. It's led me to think about the kinds of challenges that my generation of women met moving into professional careers. Now, we weren't the very first, particularly women of color, we weren't the first, necessarily—the very first Ph.D.s of this and that and the other, but we were certainly close to the first in research universities and moving into the professorate in research universities. I found that, for women, and particularly women of color, women who were married, women with children, and so on, the trajectory of our careers was different often than men's. You could pursue a career like a man only if you were operating in the same context that men can often operate in.

For example, my male colleagues at Berkeley—many were married. Their wives in many cases had a profession, but clearly their work was subordinate to their husband's, it seemed. It's a generalization, but I think it's true, meaning that the men had kinds of supports in terms of taking care of house, taking care of children, and so on. I never got the impression that very many of my male colleagues, certainly not those my age, close to my age, had a lot of responsibility for raising the children or taking care of children and so on. Women often find that it's difficult to do that.

Not only is it difficult to get the kind of supports that you need, but it's also difficult on a personal level, because of the obligation that women feel to being the one who helps to hold the family together, takes care of home and hearth, and all of those things. It means that our lives, as we talk about them and try to make sense of them, are not necessarily linear. They don't seem to follow a kind of linear path because there weren't many clear paths for women who were moving into the professorate and moving into academe and that sort of thing. We kind of looked at how people were doing it. We tried to look at our own needs and try to figure out, well how do I do this? Like, as I've described before, having three children during the time I was doing my doctoral work. When I started, our first-born was six months old, and when we finished, we had three children, all of whom were six years old or younger. We didn't have any examples of people who were doing that. How do you do that? How do you do that, and also be true to the social responsibilities, not only in the home? How do you fulfill your obligation to be a good teacher, a mentor to students, to pursue scholarship, to be a good citizen on the campus? How do you put all that together?

We improvised a lot. I think it's partly that improvisation that comes up when you sit down and try to make sense of the life that you led over several decades. I just think there are differences in

the paths that men and women are able to take. It's changing, I think some, now, as more men share the responsibilities at home and as, hopefully, more men who are still in power in major institutions are more cognizant of the special challenges that women face, and also that faculty of color face.

14-00:05:55

Wilmot:

You mentioned off tape this idea of entering an institution or an arena like the academy and how you might, at some point, seek to transform it, but first you bump up against fitting into it.

14-00:06:14

Wilkerson:

Yes. Absolutely.

Wilmot:

As a woman and a woman of color, in particular.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, you come into an institution and at first you have to learn and understand it. So first you try to fit in. You come in, you're a graduate student, so this is how graduate students function, so we do it that way. You quickly find out that those ways don't always serve you. They don't accommodate you. They don't take into account what your life and your experiences and what your interests are, so therefore you have to then start inventing ways to be able to work in an institution and to be able to negotiate it.

I knew practically nothing about graduate school. I had been in graduate school at UCLA, but I was in a credential program. I ran up against things—various kinds of issues there, but I had never been in a doctoral program. Nobody in my immediate family had been in a doctoral program, so there was a lot of stuff I didn't know.

So, as I moved into it, I had to figure out, first of all what those barriers were, and was it my fault, or was it something else. Then, once you work through that, you try to find creative ways to accomplish what you want to accomplish in the institution. It takes you down some odd paths sometimes. [laughs] I think that's one of the reasons why, certainly at Berkeley, I really became very interested in institutions themselves and how they work. I was not one who studied organizations, except informally. I did read some about it, but it's not my area of scholarship. I learned a lot just observing how institutions actually work, how individuals come to have influence in an institution, and what an institutional sort of ethos is about.

14-00:08:26

Wilmot:

I would like to ask you more about that in just a minute, but I wanted to first ask you without assuming that you were friends or confidants, I wanted to ask you if you had any perspectives in the ways that your colleagues Barbara Christian and June Jordan encountered this institution and navigated it.

14-00:08:57

Wilkerson:

Hmm, there lies a tale. Many tales.

Let me start with Barbara, because Barbara came to Berkeley as a faculty member some time after I did. I believe I'm correct in saying that she was brought out to be hired in the English department, but they wouldn't give her anything more than a lectureship. Barbara was a true pioneer in the scholarship area and began her work very early on when she was at Berkeley, looking at black women writers. She wrote about Toni Morrison before Toni was really known, and certainly before she won the Nobel Prize for literature. She did some of the very early writing about that and that was a really, really pioneering move. So, she was breaking ground as a scholar, running up against the problems of getting published, of having peers—lets say, in terms of her own promotion—of having peers who understood her work and thought it was important, because it's a peer review process at Berkeley and at most research universities. Your scholarship is validated and evaluated by peers in the field. There weren't a lot of peers in the field early on, or they were peers that were not necessarily acceptable in terms of Berkeley's standards. Barbara was a great example of really going up against the scholarly norms that were part of the Berkeley scene. It was difficult. It was difficult.

I know she had networks of people who were writers, but also other young academics of her age around the country. She had to. That was the only way that she could really operate. So she ran up against the sort of scholarly framework. She really dealt with that. She also was a very strong supporter of students, so ran up against the ways in which a research university doesn't always listen to its students and doesn't empower them in certain ways. The scholarly arena was what she really ran up against.

When June came to Berkeley, I was chairing African American studies. I was part of the negotiations to bring June. She had already worked in various colleges and universities. June had been in a position to be her own person. When she came to Berkeley, she was already nationally, internationally known. She was incredibly effective as a poet and as a speaker and as a teacher and all of that. She was a prize, in a sense. She was a prize that the university could have.

She [phone rings] was positioned more to dictate her own terms because she was more senior when she came in. I think the problem that she had with the institution was that Berkeley had certain expectations of its faculty. I shouldn't say just Berkeley, but I'll just start with the Women's Studies Department that was recruiting her, and she was going to be shared with Women's Studies and African American studies.

I want to give an example of a person like June, who is her own, very large personality, and how she rubs up against the institution. Women's Studies was a new department at that time, and one of the things that you need faculty to do is to teach—you have a curriculum you have to offer, right? The department was relatively small. It only had a few of its own FTE. They wanted June to teach certain basic courses and June was willing to teach some of the basic courses, but she also was brought to establish a poetry center, which was similar to something that she had done in the institution she was in previously. In order to establish that, June had her own curriculum that she wanted to offer, and her own way of doing it. So, part of the struggle became do you absolutely insist that this star—and she was a star—come in and teach some of the basic

introductory courses for Women's Studies? Or do you allow the star to come in and do what she does best, what she wants to do, something that brings visibility to the department and to the campus? That's part of the struggle that took place in terms of her involvement in women's studies.

I was kind of in the middle of that with June. I was trying to encourage her to continue to have the joint appointment between the two, but June decided that she didn't want to do that. She wanted to be full time in African American Studies, so she left Women's Studies, and she came to African American Studies. I had been hopeful that she would keep that joint appointment because I thought it was important to have that formal connection through her with Women's Studies, but again, here is a person—and in her case, an academic and literary star who was brought to the campus—so how do you use them in this setting?

In some other departments, maybe, that had more faculty, they might have felt that they could afford to have the person kind of do the thing that they are best known for. In this instance, it didn't work out. It's one example of the way in which a person, a woman, has to negotiate her situation. In this case, it didn't work out. At least it didn't work out with Women's Studies, unfortunately. I spent a lot of time with June trying to convince her to keep the connection, but she decided that she didn't want to do that.

So, again, these are two very different examples, because Barbara, when she came, was at the very beginning at her career. June, when she came, was at the height of her career in a sense. Each of them ran up against institutional kinds of norms and expectations that they had to find ways around somehow.

14-00:17:57

Wilmot:

Was Barbara Christian's tenure path assured, or was it kind of a struggle?

Wilkerson:

Was it a—I'm sorry?

Wilmot:

Was her tenure path assured? Did it happen in an easy way or was that a struggle for her? Do you recall?

Wilkerson:

I don't think it was easy at all. I can't remember the details. I should remember them, but I know that it was problematic. It wasn't that the scholarship wasn't good. It was that it wasn't valued. It was not yet valued, particularly because it was about black women writers.

This is an example I have to give from my own experience, but it really informs what I'm trying to say about Barbara and her work. Some years later, when I did this anthology, *Nine Plays by Black Women*, it was the first anthology of its kind. There had never been an anthology of black women playwrights before—surprise! When I told someone, a white woman scholar, who is not in literature, but knew about literature and so on, that I was doing an anthology of black women playwrights, she asked me, are there that many that you can do an anthology on? This is in the

eighties. So, that's the kind of question that Barbara Christian would get, the kind of doubting that—well, maybe there are a couple or so, but really, is there anybody of significance? Of course, there were. Paule Marshall. There was, of course, June Jordan, Toni Morrison. There was a whole set of women who had been writing for many years, but whose work had not entered the canon, if you will. Barbara's scholarship on them helped to give them more visibility. They could be invited as guests to the campus and scholars in residence and all of those kinds of things, that certainly the research universities didn't know very much about.

Barbara's tenuring was difficult. When you go up for tenure, first you have to get the support of your department. There weren't many of us in the department at that time. I can't remember when Barbara actually got tenure. I may have been able to be a part of the personnel decisions because I was still lecturer SOE, but I was not on the tenure track.

Barbara was actually the first black woman to get tenure at Berkeley. That meant that in the department, I would not have been a party to the personnel discussions that the department had. There was nobody else on tenure track, or tenured, who was in literature in African American Studies. That meant that she didn't have any people that I can think of in the department who could validate or evaluate her work. They were all social scientists, if I remember correctly. There was certainly nobody else on campus who knew anything much about the work, so there had to be some white allies who were willing to read the work and update themselves, and then be supportive of it, be in a position to critique. And of course, then you had to identify outside references who could evaluate the work as well. It wasn't easy at all because she was coming along at the time when there weren't a lot of people—not even black women—but people who knew about black women writers, knew how to evaluate them. There weren't that many in the academy across the country. You're finding people who can write letters, who can even be literate about what this work is about.

14-00:22:38

Wilmot:

I've heard it said—and this is regarding June Jordan—that, at Berkeley, if you are a star, you can kind of write your own ticket, do what you want, come to committee meetings, not come to committee meetings, come to department meetings or not, do whatever you like. There are certain exemptions that are offered to you because you were bringing glory to the institution by virtue of your work. I'm wondering if there was a differential in terms of how white male stars were received and what was extended to them, and what happened for black women who were stars in their own right.

14-00:23:23

Wilkerson:

I think there was definitely a difference. The difference, I think, and this is me talking, not June talking, but having observed and talked with her a lot, the difference I think that June saw was that she couldn't get the resources that she needed to do, for example, the Poetry Center. She had to raise the money. It's not like she came into an endowed chair. If the provost or the vice-chancellor agreed and thought it was important, they'd find some discretionary funds or something like that, or you'd have to apply for a research grant from the Faculty Senate. You could do that. But June was constantly having to raise money to support the work that she did in the Poetry Center, bringing young poets to read, to teach. She developed a very innovative way

of extending the work by training students and young poets who could then become teachers and help teach the course. She developed this wonderful network that worked. Some of them have gone on to win prizes and what have you.

That took a lot of work. She didn't have a lot handed to her. We did all we could to support her financially and so on, at the department level, but departments don't have a lot of discretionary funds. There aren't lots of extra money sitting around. You have to raise it through the various pots on campus or through grants—external grants and that kind of thing. I think that's different from the kind of resource base that's available to white male stars, particularly those in sciences. You're talking about the humanities, literature.

Wilmot:

And arts.

14-00:25:26

Wilkerson:

And arts, and that kind of thing. But she made such an incredible impression on the campus, particularly with the students. I went to the Poetry for the People events that were done and listened to these first-time poets—they had never written poetry before, they had never delivered poetry before, and here they were, just doing it. Doing it around subjects that were very personal and very intimate to them. It was really incredible what she was able to do with students in a very, very short time. She's really a genius, not only as a writer, but as a teacher. You would think that that kind of presence on campus would really have its own kind of pot of money and support and that kind of thing, but she had to work hard for it.

14-00:26:25

Wilmot:

Was that in some way attributed to the way that humanities and arts are somewhat marginalized?

Wilkerson:

Yeah, it's all a part of that. It's all a part of that. They're marginalized, there are centers for humanities and so on, but often the work is defined in such a way that a June Jordan wouldn't necessarily be included. It's kind of double, triple marginalization that people have to deal with.

14-00:27:00

Wilmot:

Did you, June Jordan, and Barbara Christian ever discuss these things together?

14-00:27:05

Wilkerson:

Yeah, we did. We did on occasion. It's true. All of us who were like-minded within the department could get together informally and kind of agree about some of the things that we wanted to have happen in the department. Young faculty members were coming up and we knew they were going to have a tough time and we wanted to provide support for them and be there for them, and make sure we were there for the vote, and all of those kinds of things. Yeah, we talked. We were all working in our separate ways in our separate areas, so it's not like this was every Friday night we got together kind of thing, but when critical matters would come through, issues that we knew were very important for us to be there, we would be there.

14-00:27:57

Wilmot:

I think I remember off tape one time, you used the term, “We were all divas in our own right.”

14-00:28:05

Wilkerson:

Yeah, and I guess in our own ways. I tried not to think of myself as a diva, but someone told me I was, so I guess I’ll have to accept that. We were all our own presence, and we were working in different arenas. I was going to say we were all different stages in our careers, but I guess towards the end we were all sort of in the same boat. We did connect and work together to try to help certain things happen on the campus as well as in the department.

14-00:28:37

Wilmot:

When you say “We were all in the same boat,” do you mean fully tenured?

Wilkerson:

Yeah. At the end, we were all full professors. That gives you a certain kind of foundation to be able to work from.

14-00:28:56

Wilmot:

Okay. One of the things I wanted to ask you about was Barbara Christian, who was just renowned for being on so many committees and being involved as a citizen of the university. Of course, your CV also demonstrates an incredible kind of commitment and presence at the committee level and, you know, as a “citizen.” I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what that was about. You both were so involved at that level.

14-00:29:39

Wilkerson:

A little comment on Barbara’s committee work. At least, one of the kinds of committees that she spent a lot of time on. I think the last time I looked at her CV, she was serving on forty or fifty masters and Ph.D. committees.

14-00:29:58

Wilmot:

Okay, students.

Wilkerson:

Why was she doing that? I’m sure this was one of the factors that led to her illness—the stress of all of that.

Well, over time, maybe it’s not true now, but over time, the black women writers became very, very important in America. Barbara was a part of that, but there still was not a lot of faculty expertise on the campus to serve on those kinds of committees, even out of the English department. So, there would be any number of students, many of them from the English department, but not all, who were working on black women writers, including Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall. And they would all come to Barbara, and ask her to be on their committees. And she wanted to perpetuate the work. She wanted to be supportive of students and so on, so

she would end up being on all these committees. She would agree to be on all these committees. You can always say, well she should have said no to some of them. Well, it's hard to say no when you know that there aren't many alternatives for the students themselves. So, by virtue of being the first and, for some time, the only person who had deep knowledge in this area, you end up doing lot more service than you would have to do if you worked on, say Shakespeare, or something else where there would be more than one faculty member. She gave service across departments. This is before we even had a graduate program in African American Studies. All of these students, practically all of these were from other departments, and Barbara provided that kind of service. So she did this incredible amount of work in that arena.

She also did serve on other kinds of committees, but I think the service for the masters and the Ph.D.s was really where she spent a lot of her time. It was service, but it was also service to the field in a sense, to build the field and also to support students. That's what it gets to be about.

In terms of my service, I was on Ph.D. committees and so forth in dramatic art and wherever, actually, but I think more of mine was along the lines of equity and access issues. I served on the Special Admissions Committee. In fact, I chaired it for a while, as I recall. The Special Admissions Committee. I also served for a long time on the special scholarships committee that oversaw the Professional Development Program, one of the really model programs to support the advancement of students of color, particularly black students, in math and science. The faculty oversaw this program that has actually become a national model, largely because of the work that was supervised by Leon Henkin and Uri Treisman. He's down at University of Texas now. It really is a huge and wonderful model for students—black students.

For example, it grew out of the fact that black students taking beginning calculus were failing at an incredible rate. Leon Henkin suggested that Uri Treisman, who was a graduate student at that time, take a look and try to understand what was going on. Out of his observation and the work that he did came a program and a system that really turned that around, where black students who were failing, suddenly, over a year's time or so, were earning A's and B's. It had to do with that program, so it became a model program. I served on that committee for a long time and was co-chair, several times, and ended up working with Leon Henkin, who had been on the committee for the women's center. We were colleagues then. It was a wonderful committee to be on because there you had faculty who cared about the achievements of students of color in particular. There were many white faculty—mostly white faculty were on it—and it was just a great committee. There you could build alliances with people from all over the campus—many scientists that were there were a part of the committee and so on. So, I did a lot of that kind of work that brought me into contact with faculty from other parts of the campus and were dealing with equity issues. I served on the Title IX committee and all those kinds of things.

One of the reasons I got into that also that when I was at the Women's Center and director of the women's center, I got called on a lot to serve on those kinds of efforts. I think I also served on a committee that dealt with sexual harassment issues and what kinds of systems should we put in place to deal with those issues for undergraduate and graduate students. I did a lot. I'm scared to look at the CV because there are too many for me to talk about. Special Scholarships was one that I was on for a long time.

14-00:36:16

Wilmot:

While we're on the topic of the sexual harassment committee: I've heard it said that at Berkeley as an institution didn't know how to handle issues of sexual harassment, just wasn't equipped to deal with that part of human behavior. How do you feel that, at the committee level, you were able to create policy?

14-00:36:57

Wilkerson:

It was pretty hard, actually. I thought it was a little easier around undergraduates than it was around graduate students because the kinds of contacts that undergraduate students have with faculty were more proscribed and codified. You were in a professor's class. You might go for advice on something, these kinds of things. There were lines crossed, certainly, but somehow the expected relationship between a faculty member and an undergraduate woman, for example, was more clearly delineated. Whereas, things are much more informal between graduate students and professors. Much more informal. As a graduate student, you work as a kind of apprentice, depending on your subject area. The faculty member has a great deal of input in terms of the resources that you get, how you're judged. Some departments have what we used to call "Golden haired people," certain stars that they were developing, whereas other students wouldn't get the time, for example, in terms of advising on their work, wouldn't necessarily get the recommendations to write. The chance to hear about publication opportunities in your field (this is something Dunbar did for me). Say someone at the *Drama Review*, a major refereed journal at that time, called you to say, "Well, do you have a student who might contribute to this special issue?" You as the faculty member have the power then to recommend someone to a refereed journal, and the graduate student gets to write an article before they've even finished their work. It's all of those kinds of networks that are operable at the graduate level. Therefore, the opportunity for abuse is much greater: "I will do this for you if you do this for me," and so on. It's much more informal at the graduate level than it is, I think, at the undergraduate level.

We found, at least, that it was a little easier to put into place these policies that addressed the undergraduate situation, but the graduate situation had so many opportunities for harassment and abuse that it was hard to codify it in policy: "You mustn't do this and you mustn't do that."

UC, as I recall, tried to have a policy around—was it dating or marrying? Perhaps it was dating between faculty and graduate students. I don't know if it ever passed, maybe it did, but not at first, because there are any number of faculty members who married graduate students. How do you deal with that? It can be almost a natural relationship, or seem to be a natural relationship. I guess what I'm saying is that there were people who had been in those relationships. They were not a product of sexual harassment and so on, but they felt that this was more of a norm. How do you get people to agree to intervene in a kind of relationship that they have really benefited from? "After all, I married my graduate student, and we had a wonderful life together, and so I don't think we should stop that. I don't think we should intervene in that." But clearly, that's an arena where sexual harassment can take place. How do you legislate around that? How do you make policy around that? I always felt that graduate students were much more vulnerable in this way than were undergraduates.

14-00:41:46

Wilmot:

It's interesting because it really illuminates again, the campus as an institution that has historically been primarily white male. Issues of vulnerability around gender and race were just kind of not factored in.

14-00:42:08

Wilkerson:

That's true. That's very true. It took federal legislation to kind of push institutions to have to come to grips with these issues. They were real on the campus. Absolutely real. We worked very hard to legislate somehow.

14-00:42:31

Wilmot:

I wanted to return to something that we were discussing at the very beginning of this interview when you were mentioning how you became interested in how institutions work and how someone comes to influence an institution. It reminded me of something you had said last time we talked about how working at the Women's Center really kind of exposed you to a real steep learning curve, and I wanted to ask you about that.

14-00:43:12

Wilkerson:

Let me start by talking briefly about what I tried to do with the Women's Center. It had been brought into being through the efforts of tenured white women to address issues that plagued academic women. What I tried to build was a kind of umbrella concept of a Women's Center. Even though we were funded by student money, ASUC money, that administration had control over, I tried to build a center where faculty women could be served through workshops and what have you, where students could be served, but also where staff women could be served. I wanted to build a place where that kind of networking across those various groups could occur, where those networks could reinforce each other. Sometimes to have a faculty member know about the situation with staff women, so that she might be in a position to kind of weigh in on that because faculty had a bit more cachet perhaps than the staff member, and that sort of thing. The same with students. I tried to build that kind of organization. What that meant was that, at least for faculty women, we did various workshops for assistant professors coming along. I had an advisory board of men and women, actually, and they would help to reinforce and suggest the kinds of things that we ought to be dealing with. When you talk about understanding and learning about institutions and about Berkeley in particular, I learned a great deal, as I believe other women who were not tenured learned, from these various meetings. We were able to get white women who had served, for example, on the budget committee, which is the committee that does appointments and promotions on the campus, all appointments, hires, promotions, come through that committee. People get—I think they get a course release, if I'm not mistaken, to serve on that committee, because they cover all of those appointments. I don't think it's changed, but that's the way it was when I left the campus. It was a secret committee. People knew who was on it, but the deliberations were secret and were confidential, let's say. We'll put it that way. There wasn't a lot of knowledge out there among younger women on the faculty, among assistant professors, about how does this operate? What kinds of standards do they use? What really goes on in the committee.

Because white women had been on the faculty for a longer period of time than faculty of color, certainly black faculty or Latino faculty, we had women who had served on that committee who would come to the workshop and explain what the committee did. They didn't divulge individual records, but they could talk about some of the kinds of issues that they ran into with newer fields, with scholarship that focused on women. All of these kinds of things. You got a real picture of how one of the most powerful committees on the campus worked. If I had not been directing the women's center and been a part of those programs, I would know much less about it because I couldn't use the black network for that. At that point in the seventies and the early eighties there had never been a black person on the budget committee. That kind of information was not really available.

14-00:47:42

Wilmot:

Was it Louise—?

Wilkerson:

I think it was Louise Clubb. I believe so. Certainly, she had been there long enough to have served on the committee.

Then, something else came out many years later before I left Berkeley, probably in the nineties. Someone did a kind of study, a survey of who had served on that committee over time. What they found out—of course, it was overwhelmingly male. There was no question about that. There were more men on the campus than women in the first place. But they also found that the tendency was to appoint people who had had administrative experience on the campus, for example, someone who had been a dean, or who had been a department chair. There were certain kinds of invisible criteria that the committee on committees used to recommend appointments for all the committees including the budget committee that people really didn't know. So in other words, there was only a certain sort of elite in a sense among the faculty that got to serve on that committee.

Now, you can understand why you'd want people who had some experience as scholars and so forth and so on, but there was real question as to whether is it really important to have administrative experience, and at what level are you talking about? So, clearly, the committee that was so powerful was—you know, there were certain people that would never get to serve on it. I am amazed that I was at Berkeley at the time when the first black person served on it. I think it was Ed Blakely who was the first black that I know of to serve on the committee.

The work that we did at the Women's Center opened up whole networks and pockets of knowledge about the campus and the institution that I wouldn't have been privy to. The same goes for staff issues. We did, for example, a meeting of staff of color on the campus. I can't remember what it was, but we were just kind of getting them together so that people would know each other and they could share information and what have you. Often, let's say an African American or Latino staff member would be the only one in their department. They'd be very isolated. That's changed now, but I'm talking about the seventies and eighties. In having the women introduce themselves, we asked them to tell us how long they had been on the campus. All but maybe one had come after the sixties. I think there might have been one woman who had been there before the sixties, which tells you something about the demographic change within

the university. You could never do that kind of study of the staff, racially. It was very, very interesting that one of the impacts of the sixties was that there were more staff of color hired into the campus. To know that that was a very short history. That's a very, very short history for an institution that's over a hundred years old.

14-00:51:14

Wilmot:

As an aside, we were really interested in doing an oral history on African American staff at UC Berkeley because most African American staff did come in the early seventies around or after the HW audit, and we know that good jobs really afforded people serious life advancement opportunities in terms of home ownership, access to education, etc.

14-00:51:52

Wilkerson:

No, no. Working in the Women's Center opened me up to all kinds of knowledge about the campus, and got me very interested in how institutions operate both in terms of negotiating my own personal career and also trying to help others negotiate their presence there. I observed a lot and learned a lot and tried to use that and share that with people or have people share it with each other. The kinds of advice and ideas that the workshop leaders gave untenured women was really, really just absolutely valuable, and to be prized.

14-00:52:42

Wilmot:

Do you recall what kinds of advice?

14-00:52:44

Wilkerson:

Well, one of the big issues always for women as well as for women of color is service. Everybody tells you coming in, don't spend too much time in service. You need to do some, but you can say no to it, blah blah blah. Then, of course, you come in as an assistant professor or whatever and one of the first things that can happen is that the dean calls you up and says, "We really want you to serve on this committee."

The question is, well, do you say no to the dean? It's the same dean who's been saying, don't do a lot of service initially, but that dean may not be aware of all the other kinds of service you're being asked to do, so you get mixed messages. So they were able to advise people about how you negotiate that. If that happens, who do you go to? How do you decide about which committees are most important to you? They never tell people not to serve, because obviously service in committees is useful when you are evaluated. Committee service also puts you in contact with people on the campus, and you never know who is going to end up on your ad hoc budget committee, the special committee that's appointed around your area of expertise when you're going up for a promotion. This is a super secret committee. You never know who on that campus is going to end up weighing in on your evaluation. It behooves you to be known, but also to know people outside of your department. It's also a source of information for you. It's that kind of advice and so on that people will give—what kinds of references do you want to suggest when you're going up for a promotion. A lot of it was built around promotion issues, but there was also some sharing in terms of being women, particularly if you had children. There were some who

had younger children, or who had had younger children and they could talk about what kinds of strategies they used and that sort of thing.

14-00:54:53

Wilmot:

Do you recall who was kind of, generally speaking, who was taking advantage of these workshops?

14-00:54:59

Wilkerson:

Who was taking advantage?

Wilmot:

Yeah, who was attending?

14-00:55:05

Wilkerson:

They were pretty well attended. We sometimes had trouble getting women out of the sciences. We would work hard to bring them in. Sometimes, we could get a list of new people on the campus and we could select folks to come, but it was hard sometimes to get women in the sciences out, because unless there was a speaker who was from the sciences, they would feel that their situation was so different that they couldn't be helped.

I think the workshops gained a kind of reputation. Through our networks and all, we were able to get very good attendance at them, because obviously promotion issues are very important. In some instances, it was late. We gave workshops, but we also had this network across departments and divisions. If you were a woman in political science, you'd learn about the faculty search and another woman coming into the sociology department. There were so few, believe me, that you kind of knew who was coming in. Through the networks, you would get people into the workshops, but also there was one-on-one counseling. I remember one case—I don't remember the person particularly, and believe the person was in the sciences—but by the time the problems came to the attention of the senior people who were interesting in mentoring in this way, it was just about too late to really help this woman, because she needed to come earlier. I can't remember what happened exactly, but there was an attempt made to salvage her tenure there, and I can't remember whether it actually worked or not. I don't remember the specific problems either. I'm sorry to say. We reinforced our belief that we needed to catch women early on when they got to the campus and help them to understand where they were.

14-00:57:26

Wilmot:

You also worked with students as well?

Wilkerson:

Mmhmm. You mean in the Women's Center?

14-00:57:29

Wilmot:

Mmhmm.

Wilkerson:

Oh, yes. We worked with students. When I started at the women's center, it was during the time in the mid-seventies when the term "re-entry women" was invented. It was time when women who had been out of school for a while came back to school, either to get bachelor's or whatever. This was happening all across the country. And so, the Women's Center actually started out as the Women's Reentry Center to counsel women who were more senior, in their thirties, sometimes forties. We tried to help them understand and adjust to the campus, particularly a campus like Berkeley where eighteen to twenty-four years was the typical student. It's no longer that across the country now, but it was the beginning of that wave. Our earliest work with students was with reentry students.

14-00:58:41

Wilmot:

What makes you proudest of your work at the Women's Center?

14-00:58:46

Wilkerson:

Oh, gosh. I don't know. It's hard to say. I don't know. It would be hard for me to isolate one particular thing, except that one of the things that I'm very proud of is bringing in external support, bringing in grants to the women's center. We got several grants. We did get a large grant from the Ford Foundation. I think it was two hundred fifty thousand over three years. We were able to give fellowships to women to come and do particular studies. Trinh Minh-ha was one of those. She wrote her book *Woman, Native, Other*. She did the work for that there. In fact, in it, she thanks me, which is very sweet of her. I got the money for the Women's Center, and she applied, and we had a committee that accepted her as one of the fellows. We were able to do postdoctoral fellowships, which was great.

I tried to have the center have an academic profile. It was interesting. The center had existed for a number of years before we got the Ford grant, but when we got the Ford grant and it was announced, all kinds of faculty, male faculty, what have you sent letters of congratulations. It's wonderful, da da da da da. It was very interesting, because it lifted our profile, in a way. Because the academic work on campus has the most cachet, I thought it was very important to have an academic component to it.

I'm sorry to say that after I left, it lost that. It lasted for a little bit, but it became a student women's center and that's what it is now. I'm not saying that they don't do useful work. I know that they do, but I still think that it was very, very important to have a place where the women who had the most power on campus, as well as the women who had the least power on campus, had a space where they could interact and learn from each other and build mutual support. I thought that was critical. There were things that faculty women could do for students, to help students to do what they can't do by themselves.

14-01:01:24

Wilmot:

It's also amazing to have a space to dedicated in that way given what the gender make-up of the university was, in the very recent past, both in the terms of faculty and perhaps students as well.

14-01:01:41

Wilkerson:

Yeah, that's true.

Wilmot:

Is there anyone there who worked with you at the center that you want to remark upon at this time as people who are really incredible, either in terms of shaping the vision of the directions that the way the center went or people that you wanted to kind of shout out?

14-01:02:02

Wilkerson:

I'm afraid to name because I'll forget somebody, but Herma Hill Kay was certainly very important in terms of the shaping of the women's center and just endorsing it and helping it to come into being. People like Sue Irvin Tripp, gosh I'm going to forget the woman who was in the math department in statistics. Elizabeth— She was the only woman in statistics.

Wilmot:

Elizabeth Scott?

Wilkerson:

Scott. Yeah, in math. And then there was Elizabeth Colson, I think, who was in anthropology. There was a whole senior generation of women. Then, I want to really highlight people like Bud Cheit, who had an extraordinarily distinguished career in business, had been dean of the School of Business, had been Vice-Chancellor at one point. He was on our advisory committee and was very, very supportive. He came to our meetings. This was a man who had served at the highest levels, inside the university and in the field. He took time to come to this. He also is on the board of trustees—the honorary trustees at Mills College, and recruited me to the board of Mills College, but to have a person of that stature take an interest and be supportive of this kind of work was absolutely—you couldn't buy that. It meant a lot, a lot, to the center and to share his knowledge of the campus and his expertise was just really incredible.

14-01:04:09

Wilmot:

Did you ever work with Michelle Woods-Jones?

Wilkerson:

Oh yeah, absolutely. See, you just have to call the name. Michelle is just a treasure on the campus. Yeah. Absolutely. She could call to our attention students who were having difficulty and problems and so on. She knew all the students and they loved her, rightfully so. She may have been on the advisory committee also. I'd have to go back and look. We tried to get the best people we could and the most supportive people we could get on that advisory committee to show that the concerns for all women on the campus had broad support. We tried to make sure that the advisory committee reflected that.

Wilmot:

Let's take a break for a minute, okay?

[End Audio File 14]

[Begin Audio File 15]

Wilmot:

Margaret, you were going to tell me about external networks connected to the Women's Center that manifested themselves at different points in your life.

15-00:00:36

Wilkerson:

Yeah, one aspect of my work at the Women's Center was very, very important, and that had to do with its impact on my career as a scholar, but also as a university activist, I guess I would say.

I mentioned that in the seventies, there was this wave of women coming back to school, undergraduate, graduate degrees, what have you, meaning that there were populations of older women coming in. Not old women, but women who were beyond the traditional eighteen to twenty-four years of age. That was happening all across the country, so as Berkeley started its Women's Center, there were other women's centers that were developing in universities all across the country. And so, my being a director at a women's center at University of California Berkeley meant that I was thrust into national networks that were working on women's issues. For example, with the Women's Center as my base, I became one of the founding members of the National Council of Research on Women, NCROW, which still exists, and which is a membership organization comprised of various women's research programs now. Initially, women's research centers, most of who were campus-based. There were a few free standing ones, but mostly campus based. That brought me into direct contact with Miriam Chamberlain who was a program officer at the Ford Foundation. She almost single-handedly invented and supported women's centers and women's studies. The Ford Foundation put a lot of money into the support for women's studies programs and also women's centers. She was kind of the founding mother and the inspiration behind NCROW, the National Council for Research on Women, and is still very much involved with that organization. So that brought me into the company of other directors of women's centers across the country. We had a chance to learn, understand what was happening, plan together, plot together, to try to figure out how to create and sustain a national presence. All these kinds of things that went on in that particular kind of group.

It also meant that I got involved, through that group, with the Office of Women in Higher Education out of the American Council on Education. American Council on Education being, I would say, the major sort of professional association for colleges and universities around the country. It's located in Washington D.C. and the kinds of universities that belong to it are the major research universities, the state universities, private schools, a whole range. This is where the leadership of that organization has some of the top administrators—chancellors, presidents, across the country—as a part of it. The Office of Women undertook a project that had to do with trying to increase the number of women presidents of colleges and universities around the country. It was a state-based plan, where you would have a coordinator in each state. I was appointed as one of the first coordinators. There were two coordinators who were appointed. I was appointed in California and another woman was appointed in New York. We were the first two coordinators.

It was a big challenge to work across four sectors in California, which had little contact with each other. You had the universities, you had the state universities, you had community colleges and independent private institutions. We devised a strategy, based on the national strategy to find ways to connect aspiring women who were ready for presidencies, to find ways to interact with leaders in higher education so that when positions opened up, folks (mostly men, then) who were recognized leaders in higher education could nominate these women. It was a very successful strategy.

I dare say that that program nationwide, state-based, can take some credit for the growth in the number of women college presidents in the eighties and into the nineties. Well, just by describing that, you can see the kinds of people that I was able to interact with, the knowledge that I was able to gain from others about higher education, not only in California but across the country.

So, that all came out of the Women's Center, out of the people that I met nationally that I moved in those sectors. I became a part of the International Women's Year delegation that the UN was sponsoring, to spend ten years focusing on advancement of women across the world. I was part of the delegation that went to Houston and came up with the agenda that we then took to the international meeting in Mexico. Then, at the end of the decade, Stanley and I actually went to that meeting in Nairobi. I didn't go to Beijing and Beijing Plus Ten and all of that. I was out of it then, but there were people that I met, people from historically black colleges, people who were activists attached to higher education and activists in other areas. It was just a very, very, very rich experience. A lot was going on at that time, and I was able to be connected to it at least.

It also led to my going to China in 1981 under the auspices of the Committee on U.S.-China Relations. I was one of nine women in the group. China had sent a delegation of ping pong players. We were the first return delegation, that is, the delegation of U.S. people going to China, and we were hosted by the All-China Women's Federation. We spent a month in China, looking at issues of women and work. That was very exciting. It also led to some of my writing on equity access, women's issues and so on. So, the women's center turned out to be just a boon for me in many, many ways, in terms of my understanding more about women's situations around the world and the kind of networks that I got to work with.

15-00:08:25

Wilmot:

I wanted to return to talking about your career path at Berkeley. I had this question, which is informed by your discussion of how while at the women's center and giving those workshops. You said that you learned a lot about both obstacles and ways to get around obstacles when it came to navigating the university environment in terms of career. What kinds of allies and strategy did you employ when it came to your career path at Berkeley?

Wilkerson:

You asked me about the strategies, right?

15-00:09:29

Wilmot:

Strategies, yes, and I'm guess I'm asking you two questions at once. Who did you talk to? Who gave good advice?

15-00:09:39

Wilkerson:

At Berkeley?

Wilmot:

At Berkeley and outside if that's applicable.

Wilkerson:

To name names, certainly Herma Hill Kay was one of the people that I could go to to get advice about my academic career and what were my opportunities at Berkeley, who could I talk to and that sort of thing. She was always very good about that, and was very helpful and very, very knowledgeable. Because of our early association on that first search committee for the first director of the Women's Center, we just had a connection and that was always there. I didn't see her really often but she was one of those people that I could talk to. That whole group of women that I mentioned earlier, like Sue Irvin Tripp and Elizabeth Colson and Elizabeth Scott—all of those people were part of that network that were very, very helpful to me in those earlier years. There were no senior women of color for me to go to. Barbara was the first, and we were pretty much of the same generation. It was mostly white women and some white men like Bud.

Wilmot:

Were there any senior men of color to consult?

15-00:11:11

Wilkerson:

Well, I'm trying to think about that. Yeah, yeah, in different ways. One of the great colleagues that I had who was never on the tenure track was Roy Thomas. I don't mean to speak in the past tense. He's left Berkeley now and I haven't seen him in a long time. He and I shared an office. He was like a spiritual counselor because he was so grounded and so in touch with what was really important. He was always a great colleague. He might not have advice on the strategy to do this or that or the other, because of what his career trajectory was, but when you talk about values, and when you talk about cultural knowledge and history, there was nobody who was better than Roy Thomas. After all, that should inform what your strategies are.

15-00:12:20

Wilmot:

When you say cultural knowledge and history, do you mean academic? What do you mean when you say that?

Wilkerson:

Well, both academic and non-academic. He was a great scholar, even though he wasn't always recognized in that way. He had a heavy teaching load because he was a lecturer. He knew about sources, he knew where to go to find whatever. His values were so strong and so embedded in African American culture that he was just a great colleague and a great source of information,

not just technical information, but of trying to understand who you are and what you want to be and keeping clarity about your direction in the midst of a lot of competing forces.

You can make it in an institution like Berkeley, and maybe make it faster, if you don't have certain kinds of values. If you just go wherever the opportunity is, you can sort of sell out your values and you can get opportunities to do whatever. Roy was a person who could pull your coattail, say, "Hey, you have to think about this," rather than simply being very Machiavellian about what you do, saying, "Screw everybody else. I'll do whatever advances me personally." Roy was always that voice that helped you to remain grounded and remember what your values were.

Harry Morrison was a great contact. He was in physics. Harry was just terrific in lots of ways. He was in the sciences, so in terms of advice and strategies and promotions and stuff, his advice may not have pertained to the humanities and literature, but Harry loved the arts. He went to art exhibits, he went to theatre and music and all of that. I think his daughter, last I heard, went into a film program. So it was great to talk to him. It was from him that I got the idea of my dream conference, which would be putting together theoretical physicists with artists because, in a very interesting way, they both look at aesthetics and beauty and things of this kind. That idea that I haven't really ever done—I've done something very close to that, but never really done that—came from a conversation with Harry. He was kind of like Roy Thomas with the tenured track and science background. He had come from very humble beginnings in the South as I remember. He was just a great guy. So Harry was one of those.

What I'm describing are people who were supportive or part of my network who had different things to offer for the relationship. Bill Lester was another. He came on a little bit later, but he was always a great colleague. We worked together on committees. It was great.

I was trying to think of some of the women, but you know there were only four or five black women on the campus. Most of them were in African American Studies already, so certainly Barbara would have been in that group. And Jewelle Gibbs—we had contact around various committees around that time. They were terrific people who were very important. I can't forget Olly Wilson. Olly was always a great guy. As a composer, as a full professor in the music department, he certainly had the cachet as a scholar to be very, very helpful in terms of the various intellectual issues that came up. He also was a very smart administrator, because he was dean of the Graduate School at one point—I think he was dean. He was dean of the graduate school, wasn't he? He was really very astute in many ways and a very strategic thinker. My husband reminded me—I had totally forgotten—that when I was a graduate student, I did a production of another LeRoi Jones play, *Black Mass*. It's based on the black Muslim story of the creation of the white race—a very controversial kind of thing, and I was doing it in Zellerbach playhouse, if I'm not mistaken. Olly composed the music for it. It was again one of those plays where—we talked yesterday of plays that had messages in them but also used the tools of theatre—non-realistic tools of theatre. That's what this play does. It kind of takes place before time and all that. And so he composed a score of electronic music for that show. He was a professor when he did it. I was a graduate student, and he did that. We had a connection all along in many, many ways. He was a great resource, not only in terms of us working together on committees and what have you, but just to the black faculty on the campus and to the kinds of issues that black faculty tried to address. Olly was certainly very, very critical.

15-00:19:07

Wilmot:

I'm wondering if there were other men who were in your cohort, such as—you mentioned Bill Lester, Russ Ellis, Troy Duster. And other people who were very involved with navigating their own professional trajectories as well.

15-00:19:28

Wilkerson:

Were there other people who were involved?

Wilmot:

Were there other people that kind of advised or collaborated with you in thinking about your professional path at Berkeley, such as Troy Duster, Russ Ellis?

15-00:19:42

Wilkerson:

Well, certainly, Troy. How can I forget Troy? Troy, absolutely. No question about it. I'm talking about earlier years, probably before—I'm trying to remember when Russ came.

15-00:19:55

Wilmot:

In 1970.

Wilkerson:

Troy was also essential. I put him in the class with Olly as an outstanding scholar, a very strategic thinker, a solid administrator. He combined all of those things. He was very grounded and very wedded to issues of equity, access and so on. An extraordinarily important presence on the campus. I would definitely say Troy was one of those. Russ, not so particularly, and I'm not sure why. We knew each other. We had conversations, that sort of thing, but when I think about the people that I actually worked with and strategized with, it would have been the people that I mentioned like Olly and Troy, especially.

Wilmot:

Were you one of the members of the black faculty caucus?

15-00:21:07

Wilkerson:

Yes. Mmhmm. Actually, all black faculty were invited to be a part of that, but I went pretty regularly, and it was great. It was good. Well, I should add Reggie—

Wilmot:

Jones?

Wilkerson:

Jones. Reggie Jones, also. I would say many of the senior black men were very much a part of the black faculty caucus or group. We would try to meet—I don't know if we met as frequently as once a month, but we met once every month or two and shared information, and talked about how do you support younger faculty, and dealt with various issues on the campus. For me, it was a very important group. I tried not to miss those meetings.

15-00:22:05

Wilmot:

Which says a lot.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, it was really an important part of who we were. Sadly, as we moved along, and we got a few more black faculty on campus, I began to hear from at least a couple of younger people, assistant professors, for example, who were afraid to come to the meeting because they were worried about what their colleagues would say in their departments.

15-00:22:36

Wilmot:

Their white colleagues?

Wilkerson:

Their white colleagues. We had moved further and further away from the sixties. I say “sadly” because obviously you can experience a backlash if people think that you’re separating yourselves away or whatever and all that, but what we actually found, coming out of the sixties, was that collective action was really important. Being in touch with each other, having a meeting in the Faculty Club, so anybody can know that, yes, the black faculty members are meeting. If they wanted to engineer a backlash they could try to do that, but the fact that senior black faculty had proven themselves in so many ways to be assets to the campus would make them think twice about being critical of us. We didn’t hide the fact that we met. We met in the Faculty Club. Folks could see us if they happened to walk in the room or whatever. They could see that we were there. We thought that it was important and that it was an asset for younger faculty for their colleagues to know that they had these people behind them in a sense. Somehow, that didn’t translate always with some of—not a lot, but some of the younger faculty. I thought it was sad because I thought it was going back to a time when we allowed ourselves to be kind of divided.

15-00:24:13

Wilmot:

Did you interact with David Blackwell at these meetings?

Wilkerson:

Yeah, David would come to some of them, yeah. He would come and be a part of them. Absolutely. I really got to know all of those—I call them senior because David was, I think, the first black faculty member to get tenure on the campus if I’m not mistaken. It was great to have that history and have the wisdom that goes with that history, that knowledge of the campus and all. Of course, he’s an outstanding scientist. It was wonderful to have that kind of connection. There were some of the best kinds of conversations that we had.

15-00:25:01

Wilmot:

Okay, now, as far as the strategy for you, in pursuing your career path— how did you approach that?

Wilkerson:

Well, I wish I could say that I was very organized about it. I'm not sure I was. I don't know if I had any particular kind of strategy. I tried to survive and tried to get my work properly reviewed and appreciated. I think one of—if you can call it a strategy, I think one of the things I learned early on was the importance of being known and having connections outside of the campus. Internal ones are very important in terms of knowledge how the institution works—encouragement and what have you—working together to get accomplished certain things. I also found and believe that having some important friends outside of the campus was also very important. To be able, for example, to use the Ford connection when I needed to use it, to get a conversation with the Vice-Chancellor, for example, about the state of the Women's Center or its future and so on. To use the knowledgeable outsider who can come and say internally the same things that you've been saying, but they would be heard because it was coming from a significant person from outside. That was, I think, an important strategy. It also, if you used your external contacts well, put you in touch with a range of other people, scholars, other important folk who could help you in a variety of ways. You get to know other scholars who might even be able to review your work for example, or publishing opportunities or things of that kind. All of those external voices, like the people in the American Theatre Association—the whole range of groups that I knew about and was a part of, I think, were very helpful in pushing my career along, but also in continuing to encourage you, and to let you know that you're not really alone in all of this. That the things you are experiencing are things that a lot of people are experiencing, so there is some collective knowledge out there. I mean if I had to isolate one particular strategy, I think that was one that was really important.

15-00:27:48

Wilmot:

I think you became an associate professor in African American studies.

Wilkerson:

Mhmm.

Wilmot:

And that was in the early eighties? I think it's right there in the front page of your vitae.

Wilkerson:

That was [flips pages—I don't have a date there. It should be right here. Yeah, let's see. What was this? It was such a crazy career. I was a lecturer SOE from '75 to '83. Then, I became an associate professor in December of '83 to June of '87, when I became a full professor.

Wilmot:

How did that transition happen?

Wilkerson:

Lecturer SOE to associate professor. I don't remember. Well, I already told the story about becoming a lecturer SOE—security of employment. I had reserved the right, and I had written this into my negotiations, to be able to be reviewed for the tenure track, because I felt I was qualified to be on the tenure track and that's where I ought to be. By the time '83 came, I was still at the Women's Center, but I put together my case and put it before the department. There

were negotiations that had to take place—I'm looking at the dates here. I ended my tenure at the women's center in August of '83, so I wanted to move into a full time associate professor. I wish I could remember those negotiations. I'm sure that they had to take place, certainly at the department level, because they had to come up with another half FTE for me.

15-00:30:12

Wilmot:

What was the impetus for that move on your part? Why were you ready now to do this?

Wilkerson:

Well, I had been at the Women's Center for ten years. I had been director for about six years. I had been acting director for three of those years. I had been in the director's slot in the Women's Center for, like, nine years, and I felt it was time for me to move on and to focus more in my field, in terms of the scholarship.

It's also around this time that I begin my work on Lorraine Hansberry and was offered exclusive access to her on published papers. That had happened, and I'll briefly tell that story. That came out of my teaching. I was teaching a seminar on her work and my students were so taken with her as a writer and so upset that they didn't know her work that I decided that somebody needed to write a book on her work. That's how I moved into that whole arena of doing this biography and so on. I can detail that later. That got me into it. I wanted to focus more as a scholar and not be so bifurcated, because I had been that for a while, and I was involved in all this activity and so on. I decided that I wanted to do that and fortunately I was able to make the transition to associate professor and get successfully reviewed. Part of that also, was that, and this was part of the learning that I had as director of the Women's Center—I had not published a book, per se, but I had published a lot of articles. I had also built an academic Women's Center because we reported on the academic side. We didn't report on the student affairs side at that time. I made a case, I think, successfully, for the creative thinking that it took to conceptualize this center and to put it together as part of not just service, but an academic achievement. In fact, you look in this older CV there's a whole list of publications that I supervised because I was the principal investigator on those Ford post-docs. There are a bunch of reports and so on that were written maybe by a collection of people but that I had to supervise and review and so on. I put an academic lens on much of what I did at the Women's Center and I think was able to at least have some of that work count as academic work and not only service, because it involved research. It involved writing. It involved a lot of things that are part of research work, scholarly work. I tried to make a case for that. I guess I got somewhere. They accepted some of that anyway, although I had also been writing other essays on black theatre and so on.

15-00:34:02

Wilmot:

Do you recall who was chair of African American Studies at that time? I wonder if it was Reginald Jones?

Wilkerson:

I'm guessing it was probably Reginald Jones. I'm guess that it was.

Wilmot:

Would you have known who was on your tenure committee?

15-00:34:14

Wilkerson:

Well, in the department you'd know, because we were so small. The whole faculty had to vote, so you would know that. What you wouldn't know is who would the budget committee appoint as an ad hoc committee to look at your work. That, you weren't supposed to know, and you usually didn't know. I'm trying to remember though, I think at that time, I'm pretty sure of this, I know that they had the faculty associate, I think it was called, for equity or something like that. A lot of us worked to have this. But one thing that happened with that position was that at some point, that person could review the ad hoc committee appointments to make sure that there was no one there who would discriminate against the field. That's a real accomplishment, because people who were pioneering, like Barbara Christian, might get people who didn't know anything about black women writers, didn't value it, didn't think it was important, anything like that. And so, that individual was able to look down that list and say, okay, I don't think this person needs to be on this committee because we know from the work that they do or what they've said, whatever—. It's kind of like a lawyer being able to challenge certain jurors because they know they'd be biased. They built that in. That was very, very important.

15-00:36:04

Wilmot:

It is really important, especially in light of what you shared with me about the way that people didn't quite understand the breadth and depth of the work that you were doing..

Wilkerson:

That was a very important—a very small little known thing that happened, but it was something that we knew about simply because we had been involved with the black faculty, the women faculty and all of that kind of thing. That was very, very critical. I'm pretty sure that it would have been Reggie. I don't think Barbara was chair of the department at that point, but Reggie was. The chairmanship, because there were so few tenured people in the department just kind of bounced around between or among two or three people.

15-00:36:52

Wilmot:

Generally, as you recall, was that a smooth kind of negotiation? Did it happen in a smooth way?

Wilkerson:

Probably not. I probably have repressed all the different things you had to do with that. I don't remember this with Reggie particularly, but you had to help your department chair understand what you were doing and why things looked the way they did. It was one of the things I had to negotiate along the way. As my work on Hansberry proceeded—I have been working on the biography now for probably fifteen years, thirteen to twenty years—I was writing essays and articles and sharing what I was learning and all of that. I remember negotiating with one of the department chairs, and it wasn't Reggie, nor Barbara as I recall, about why isn't the book finished. I had to help the chair understand that this is a biography. Biographies take a very long time to do. I went back and did a little research on biographies of DuBois and of Langston Hughes and so on. The average time it takes to do it is about eighteen to twenty some odd years.

That's because it's not just text-based. Folks in English and literature, traditionally, even Barbara for example, work with text. The text is produced, you read it, you analyze it, you write about it, but biography is very, very different. You're going through papers and organizing them, you're reading them, you're evaluating them. You're interviewing people. It can take many years to research and write a biography, especially if you're not a full time writer. It was that sort of thing. You have to explain and help people to understand what is the norm for the genre that you are working in.

Remember, African American Studies was an interdisciplinary department. Reggie came out of education. Others came out of sociology, out of political science, and literature and humanities, theatre. No two people were in the same specific discipline. You might have two or three social scientists, but they were not out of the same specific discipline. Some disciplines produced more books and other disciplines do their work around articles. We need to understand that. I had to help people understand that there aren't a lot of theatre books published in any given year out of academe, because publishers became more and more concerned with the bottom line—how many can we sell? Sometimes decisions about what to publish have very little, if anything, to do with the quality of the work. So, you had to negotiate and try to help people understand, even in your own department, what the norms really were and what were the real factors to be understood about the work that you were doing. I remember some of those kinds of conversations. I'm sure they must have taken place when I was going up for tenure, because mine was not a normal case. There was nothing about mine that was normal, I would say, because of the variety of things that I had done and the kind of split focus in a way between women's issues—what was received as split focus—women's issues in equity and access, and work on black theatre.

15-00:41:03

Wilmot:

You were certainly doing different types of work and doing research and teaching and being a scholar and running and building a center. They almost require two different parts of your brain.

15-00:41:22

Wilkerson:

I kind of wanted to bring all of myself into one general sort of area because I had been working. As much as I had learned about women's issues and so on, I still felt like I was working at the edge of my own personal knowledge and I really wanted to really pursue the other more full time.

Wilmot:

Interesting. That's such an interesting statement. I have to pursue it further. When you think about women's issues and say that you were examining them at the edge of your own personal knowledge, are you speaking of your experiences as a woman, or your relationship to feminism as it's evolved—

Wilkerson:

I'm thinking more of the academic side of it. You know, you have people who have spent their careers focusing on this and they know the literature and all of that. I knew some of the literature,

but it was not my field. I couldn't go in depth in the way that others could. I could write knowledgeably about it and could be useful, but I wasn't going to shift fields, essentially.

15-00:42:44

Wilmot:

Thank you for clarifying that for me.

Wilkerson:

Yeah.

15-00:42:51

Wilmot:

Alright. I need to backtrack. When we were discussing your service work for the campus, you mentioned your appointment to one of the major committees, the Committee on Committees, and I wanted to ask you how that occurred and what that experience was like.

15-00:43:15

Wilkerson:

Well, the Committee on Committees of the faculty senate is I guess one of the most powerful committees and most important committees of the faculty senate because that faculty recommends the membership of all of the committees, including the budget committee. Now, those recommendations have to be endorsed by others, by folks in the senate, but also by the administration. In fact, it's a very, very important committee, and meets every week, actually.

I was approached by someone on campus who asked me to run—you are elected to this committee—asked me to run for this committee. I was then chair of the drama department. It was in the last three years of my being at Berkeley. He said, we'll write up your bio. I'll take it around and get signatures. All you have to do is agree and sign. I said, well, okay, it would be interesting to serve on the committee on committees. This was something people talked about. It was legendary. I said, I don't know that I have any real chance of winning this election. One of the things they do is that they get—when you're listed in the ballot—you have three or four people who list their names as sponsors. Don't ask me who they were. I can't remember exactly who they were, but it was a diverse group of men and women, what have you.

And I won. I was elected. I was one of the people elected. So, I went onto that committee. That was a very, very interesting committee. Some things I can't talk about, but one of the things that became very apparent initially was that sometimes when you serve on committees and you're a woman and you're a black person, or one or the other or both, your voice isn't always heard. Whatever you say, nobody seems to hear it until somebody else says it. That's a phenomenon. All the time. I noticed that. I was a new person on the committee, so I kind of expected that, but what I didn't expect was that it happened with one of the white men as well, who was I think new to the committee also. The silencing effect was happening because of a disciplinary bias.

The folks who had been on the committee for a long time were mostly scientists in the science arena. When those of us in humanities—literature, whatever—spoke up, the white men in those disciplines were as dismissed as the women were. I thought that was absolutely fascinating. I had never seen that before.

We had informal connections and alliances, in terms of the kinds of people that we thought ought to be on particular committees. I'll just talk about this very generally because these machinations are not for popular consumption. It was an important time. I was on the committee around the time that the whole issue of admissions was just blowing up. It was around '95, '96, something like that. If I remember correctly, the admissions policies had been changed. They became a bit more exclusive. I'm sure there was external pressure from the Regents and all. The admissions committee had no diversity or very little in its membership. When they came out with this change or whatever, however it was dictated or however that happened, when they made this announcement in terms of the changes in admissions policy, all of the voices that had not been in that room rose up. It became just a very contentious kind of situation.

One of the things that several of us felt was that one way that the committee needed to operate was that it needed to engage those issues in the committee. That's where that argument and discussion needed to take place so that hopefully their decision would be better informed and they would be able to articulate it to a larger community. We worked to make sure that there was a certain kind of diversity on the admissions committee. I think we achieved that.

Again, that was a committee whose meetings you didn't want to miss because if you missed them, something could happen that shouldn't happen—or something that should happen, wouldn't happen, if you weren't there. Things were voted on and that kind of thing. You only had a small committee and if you weren't there, you'd probably get out-voted and your voice wouldn't get heard, and all of these kinds of things. It was a very, very important committee and I learned a lot from it. It was one of the things that I regretted in leaving Berkeley because I really valued being present in those discussions and having some input in them. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I'd be on that committee. I'd always heard about it from outside those circles, but it was really fascinating to be on the committee and try to have some things happen. That was not a transition, it was a new experience for me. And gradually I gained more experience being on key committees. I was also put on the chancellor's committee that made the recommendations and central decisions about who would get the Berkeley citation and all of those kinds of things. I sometimes felt uncomfortable in the committees because I had always operated more as a kind of an inside critic. I'm inside the university but I'm not inside the power circles so I can be critical of things that were happening. When you are in the powerful committee, then, the responsibility falls very heavily on you to try to make change. It's a little easier to live with that when you have others on the committee that you feel are simpatico in some ways. That burden is harder to carry when you feel like you may be the only person in the room who really feels that way. You know, on the one hand, it's recognition that you reached a certain level in terms of your own career. On the other hand, you carry an even bigger responsibility when there are only five or six people on the committee, and you may be the only one who thinks the way you're thinking. It was always interesting, and always something to learn, and always testing you personally in terms of the degree to which you feel you can be really strong and influential in that situation when you may be the only voice.

15-00:52:04

Wilmot:

Are there particular instances or particular issues that come to mind when you are reflecting on this?

Wilkerson:

When you are what?

Wilmot:

When you're reflecting on this?

Wilkerson:

In both of those kinds of committees, you are always dealing with evaluating people and valuing or not valuing what they have done, and you run right up against the same kinds of issues that we've been talking about in terms of getting tenure and getting promotion. What is valued and what isn't valued in academe. You are there trying to explain and support people whose careers may have been different. They might have been a little controversial, whatever, or you find yourself trying to defend a faculty member who might be a person of color, who has a very distinguished record but because of their personal color, somehow there's this perception that they're radical, when they aren't necessarily. You know what I mean? It often came down to what are your judgments about the person and the work that they do and the value you place on their presence as a citizen in the academic community.

15-00:53:48

Wilmot:

I have another question for you, in 1983, when you came on the ladder, did things change for you in the way that you were regarded or the influence that you held on campus? Did you notice a marked change in the way you moved on campus, or were perceived?

15-00:54:33

Wilkerson:

I don't know. I mean, it sure made a difference to me. It really made a difference to me, personally. I think I told you the story about when you get a memo addressed to both tenured faculty and yourself as a lecturer SOE, everybody else was called professor this or that, and you were called doctor. That sort of thing. It was good to be able to say I was really and fully a part of the community. I didn't have to explain constantly that I could be a principal investigator because I was a lecturer SOE, although I wasn't on the ladder. Those kinds of things. That meant a lot to me. I'm not sure that it meant a great deal to people outside, on the campus. I don't know if they were aware of that at all. I think, because of the kind of work I had been doing on the campus, it was clear I was definitely a part of campus. It made a difference to me because I was on the ladder but also because then I could focus in one particular area. I could focus my scholarship in that area, which was what I went to school for. I mean, it was one of the reasons I went. [laughs]

Wilmot:

That's this whole other question, which I neglected to ask. I recall that you said you wanted to go to a graduate program so that you could open a theatre with a Ph.D. in theatre and drama. I wanted to ask you, when did your horizon shift? When did your focus shift? When did you realize that you were pursuing a career as an academic and scholar?

15-00:56:28

Wilkerson:

My way of capturing that is to say that the sixties happened. I came to Berkeley in '66, right on the heels of the Free Speech Movement. The next big movements had to do with ethnic studies and the development of that on campus. I was certainly interested already in doing scholarship in that area. As the whole concept of ethnic studies, African American studies, black studies and so on rose to the floor, I got interested in those things. There was so much that was happening on the campus. A lot was going on. I was still finishing my graduate work and all of that and was teaching in African American Studies in its formative years. I just got very interested in being there for students, particularly students of color on the campus.

In the early years, it was so difficult for undergraduate students in particular that I really got drawn into continuing to work at Berkeley in order to be some kind of force in that, and to help to conceptualize what African American Studies was about, that it belonged in a university. All of these kinds of issues—I just got caught up in that.

I talked about starting an integrated theatre and that was one of the major impulses that sent me back to graduate school and into doctoral work, but I'm not sure that I ever thought that I could make a full time living off of running a theatre. Certainly not for a while. And scholarship did interest me, so I probably had in mind some kind of college or university appointment. Remember, I said I was tired of the heavy teaching load that I had at the high school. I probably envisioned some kind of work as an academic, but also running a theatre. Of course that happened. Berkeley Rep Theatre was started by one of the graduate students out of dramatic art. I don't think he ever finished his degree, but he started Berkeley Rep. You know there was some kind of model for doing that. I got very caught up in what was going on in the development of ethnic studies and African American studies. I just moved in that direction.

Wilmot:

We'll turn to that in just a minute. I had two more questions for this tape. Would it be fair to say that the field of black theatre, black feminist critical theory and kind of black literary criticism all emerged apace of each other?

Wilkerson:

I don't think so. I think black theatre really kind of predated black feminism because black theatre came out of the black arts movement came out of black militant movement came out of civil rights movement. Black theatre movement—if we call it that—started in the really early sixties. I would really date it from *A Raisin in the Sun*, 1959, because that play inspired a whole generation of black artists who said, "If this can happen on Broadway, something of this kind of quality, this is something I want to do." I'd date it back into the late fifties for black theatre.

Black feminism as we defined it, actually emerged out of the women's movement, which comes along after the Civil Rights Movement. In the mid to late sixties, it begins to get it's currency. Black feminism comes out of the dissatisfaction with the limitations of feminism as it was defined coming out of the women's movement.

Wilmot:

I'm thinking of black feminist critical theory and books like *When and Where I Enter*. And then there was the book *Black Feminist Critical Thought*.

15-01:01:37

Wilkerson:

Well, Barbara did a book on black feminist—

Wilmot:

Theory.

Wilkerson:

Criticism.

Wilmot:

Literary criticism. I'm trying to get a sense of the ways in which you and other scholars were influenced by all these developments in these fields. Barbara Christian was doing her work around Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, and then people were really starting to theorize black feminist critical theory and create that area.

Wilkerson:

Well, all of these various movements fed on each other, even though they didn't emerge simultaneously necessarily. I think that there had always been a certain tradition of black feminist work, but it wasn't defined as such, necessarily. The women's movement and the emergence of black feminist theory and criticism that comes out of literature provided a different theoretical lens for looking at women, black women, women of color. It was a different lens at that point on, partly because of the exclusivity of the feminist movement, but also because of the growing importance and emergence of black women writers on the national scene. Black women writers go back many, many years, but the academy was just discovering them, I guess, is what I have to say. By that, I mean the academy writ large, the research universities and so on, were beginning to discover them, partly of course, because you had simultaneously the movement of a few more women of color into tenure track and tenure positions.

I'd have to sit down and really study it, but it's hard for me to think about which came first, how developments played into each other. You can talk about the big movements, but they were always kind of informing each other, and within the big movements that people knew about, like the women's movement and so on, and then the feminist movement, you still had all of these conversations that were going on internally.

01:05:39

Wilmot:

I think the question I want to ask is how you, as an individual scholar, experienced and drew

from developments in different areas. But I want to table that question for now.

[End Audio File 15]

[Begin Audio File 16]

Wilmot:

Well, Margaret we were just talking briefly off tape, further addressing that question about the intersections of feminism and your work.

16-00:00:25

Wilkerson:

Yes. Yeah, I think that certainly feminism, black feminism, black critical theory, black feminist theory, all of that, has influenced my work in black theatre. As I look back on it and try to understand the evolution of my work as a scholar, and my work in my career, they are actually linked together. So let me try to make a general statement about that. The involvement that I had as an administrator and a teacher on the campus (that is, outside of the scholarly area) really helped to feed and inform the scholarly work that I did. I went into doctoral work on black theatre around the time when there was a movement to bring Ethnic Studies African American Studies into the academy. The Third World Strike happened at Berkeley in the winter, January or February of 1969. That is about the moment when I was starting to do this research on black theatre so that my involvement in the development of African American Studies went hand in hand with the research that I was starting to do in black theatre and preparing that kind of work.

Then, shortly after that, in the early seventies—1973 or so—I move into the Women’s Center, just as the women’s movement is ramping up, with re-entry women coming back into school all over the country. So there’s a lot of movement around women’s centers, women’s research, women’s studies. All of that is happening around the same time. I am involved in it because I am directing the Women’s Center, but I’m also involved in the development of Women’s Studies on the campus as well. That is in the early 1970’s. I am still at that point working generally on black theatre, pulling out women’s work and so on, but the work is not informed by critical theory, yet.

Then, as we move into the late seventies and into the early eighties when black feminist criticism emerges; that is, literary theory emerges. At about that time I am beginning my work on Lorraine Hansberry, who just happens to be a woman. I saw my work through new lenses as each of the movements evolved, as each of them found expression in the scholarly world and in academe. So yes, all of those have informed my work at different points in time. Now, for example, I look back at some of the early writings I did on Lorraine Hansberry, work which was not necessarily informed by black feminists or black critical theory because it was just beginning to emerge at that time. So it is important for me, as I finish the biography, to take advantage of all that I have experienced, not only in terms of administrative work and that kind of thing, but also in terms of the various developments in scholarship that now help to inform work that I did before that was happening. It makes it really quite fascinating. It also means you constantly are trying to make sure that your work is informed by the best, newer theories that are coming out.

16-00:04:58

Wilmot:

Okay. Now I am going to ask us to change directions.

16-00:05:04

Wilkerson:

Okay.

16-00:05:06

Wilmot:

Not too much though. I am interested in exploring with you your perspectives and experience of the emergence of the Afro-American Studies Department. We have talked about it in some part before, but I wanted to ask you how that happened, from your perspective.

16-00:05:36

Wilkerson:

Well, African American studies, of course, was born out of the Third World Strike at Berkeley, and out of the movement that was emerging out of the fact that, I would say, that enrollments of black students in particular, but also other students of color- -Latinos to a lesser extent—were increasing on campuses. There was more of a presence on various campuses. And the academic institutions, college universities, [phone rings, talking in the background] didn't recognize the fact that with the inclusion of these students, there was going to be an implicit challenge to the curriculum. These were students that bring in experience, history, culture, and they don't see themselves in the curriculum. They don't see the scholarship that they learned about informally in their churches, in their homes or whatever. Or in our historically black institutions, for example. So I think the students really pushed for the change in the curriculum, the change, hopefully, in the structuring in the universities, at least in terms of including programs and departments and maybe even colleges that were devoted to the study of people of color. So that is one of the first important facts, I think, about the development and the birth of African American Studies on the Berkeley campus or on any campuses; it was student driven.

Immediately it starts with a disadvantage because it didn't come out of the disciplines and so on. It came because students were demanding that this happened. A strike happens on campus, there are all kinds of police on the campus. There is all this kind of disruption that goes on. So African American Studies and Ethnic Studies enter the academy, particularly at Berkeley, as a response to a political situation. So immediately it has very little credibility, in general, as a "valid" area of scholarship. The university did this, many faculty felt and thought, because they needed to pacify students and so on and so that is what this is. So it starts with a deficit and then it becomes a department of Ethnic Studies.

I think that I said before, that it was a department of ethnic studies with Native American, Latino, Asian American, and African American programs as part of it. But it reported outside of the typical colleges. In part, I think, because of part of the demand of the strike was to create a college of Ethnic Studies that was autonomous. I wasn't privy to all the internal stuff because, as I say, I was off-campus until our second child was born, so these are things that I heard about once I started teaching in the program. I am sure that people who were really involved in those negotiations can talk much more in detail about what all of this meant. This is, as I understand it. The Department of Ethnic Studies has these four programs in it. Partly because each of the programs had their own coordinator and each negotiated, as I understand it, they are budgeted separately with the Chancellor. There was all kind of space for there to be division and issues and problems, and so forth.

The programs got along, but differences began to emerge. This happened as I see it, and how I want to characterize it, as the years moved on. Not a lot of years, but let's say Ethnic Studies came into being in probably about 1969, something like that.

16-00:10:25

Wilmot:
1970.

16-00:10:28

Wilkerson:

And in the very early years it was [mostly] courses [taught] by students—mostly African American, and the students of color, but also some white students. Though the courses carried college credit, they didn't satisfy any of the breadth requirements, any of the breadth requirements that the students had to take. So if you wanted to take anything in ethnic studies, that was over and above whatever you did to satisfy you major and to satisfy the university requirements.

In those early years, we had students who cared enough about the development of these fields and this knowledge, to do that. As time wore on and we got well into the seventies, enrollments begin to drop because you begin to get more students, for whatever reasons, who were further removed from that whole movement and effort. So they needed and wanted to confine their college work to those things that counted. So there were fewer students who wanted to take those courses that only gave them college credit, but didn't give them credit towards their majors or satisfying what the university wanted.

One of the issues that arose was whether or not ethnic studies should move into one of the colleges, like the College of Letters and Science, because by moving into the college, your units would count for college credit for breadth requirements and so on. And at one point, I think the College of Letters and Science, even though Ethnic Studies was still outside of it, developed a list of courses in Ethnic Studies that would satisfy L&S requirements. So there was some bending of it. But it meant that a lot of your courses didn't count. So the question was put to ethnic studies programs, "Do you want to go into the College of Letters and Science or not?" And African American Studies, and I was on the faculty at that time, had discussed it, debated it, whatever, and decided that we wanted to go into the College of Letters and Science.

Well, it wasn't just an academic or administrative question, because to do that meant that we were "violating" quote unquote, in a sense, what was considered to be a promise coming out of the ethnic studies strike. That was that ethnic studies would be an autonomous college of its own, equal to L&S and all the other colleges that existed on the campus. And we made a strategic decision as a faculty that we didn't think that that was viable. We didn't think that even if we were made a college that we would be the equal because L&S has a lot of resources, and it contains much of the undergraduate work that is done on the campus. How would the College of Ethnic Studies actually gain any kind of power or leverage in that kind of uneven situation? So for a host of reasons, we voted to move into the college. That remained a bone of contention for over twenty years and the Ethnic Studies stayed outside of it and African American Studies went inside the college. That became a major point of difference not only for faculty, but for students as well.

It was partly, I would say, perpetuated by some faculty, not all, in ethnic studies who wanted to remain true to that dream on a separate and autonomous college. You know how transient students are. They come and they go, and they come and they go, but that idea stuck. So it had to be coming out of faculty, because the students graduated and went on into other things. But that idea that there was this fundamental difference between the two stayed very current. In the last years that I was at Berkeley there was some conversation with Ethnic Studies about whether they might want to change that, at this point. I don't know what happened exactly. I remember there were compensations, but I don't remember what happened and I don't know what the situation is now.

But the birth of African American Studies as a department was pretty contentious because of the nature of that decision and what it meant in terms of the promise of the Third World Strike. There were many people who probably still fault the department to this day for doing that, although I think a lot of that has died down.

The other interesting part of this is that you would think that means that the faculty never talked to each other. That didn't happen. There were real partnerships at the scholarly level, Carlos Muñoz and Charles Henry used to do work together, teamed up as scholars to do some work and so on. We had cross-dialogue, we spoke to each other, we were all working in the same general building and facility and when Ethnic Studies developed its Ph.D. program, which it developed long before we developed ours, our faculty became part of the support faculty. Many of us taught courses, some of the graduate courses and so on. So there was a lot of collaboration and cooperation that went on. But there were fundamental differences in terms of how we needed to work. I would say, to the credit of practically all of the faculty, that even though we had some philosophical differences, we did not allow that to divide us. Because it would have been to our detriment if we had allowed that to divide us. I don't know if Ethnic Studies could have staffed its Ph.D. program if African American Studies hadn't been a part of it. And there was some real leadership in Ethnic Studies who came along who still held to the Third World College ideal, but found real viable ways for the programs and the department of African American Studies to work together. So it worked out. But that was a difference that haunted us for a very long time.

16-00:17:43

Wilmot:

What would you like to say about the transition of the Afro-American Studies program from Ron Lewis to Bil Banks?

16-00:17:58

Wilkerson:

Well, I actually wasn't there when that happened, I mean I was on the campus. I think I told the story about my leaving the program—it was a program then—under Ron Lewis. He was still there, and I went from there to the English department. While I was there, Bil Banks came into Afro-American Studies. So I wasn't a part of the department when that was happening, I am pretty sure. No, I wasn't. So when I came back as a Lecturer with Security of Employment, Bil may have been chair then, I just don't think he was. I think Reggie was chair, but I am not sure about that. But at any rate, I wasn't actually there when that happened.

16-00:18:56

Wilmot:

Did you hear about it?

16-00:18:59

Wilkerson:

Yeah, I am sure that I heard about it. I heard about it. I am trying to think what did I hear about it. You know, my head wasn't there at that point. I heard about it and I heard since then about some of the negotiations with the Chancellor and all of that kind of thing, but I wasn't really involved in that at that point. I was in the English department, or I was teaching in the English department, and I had started working in the Women's Center. So my world didn't intersect so much with Afro-American Studies, and I really had left it. I had left it when Ron Lewis had had it. I wasn't thinking "Well, Ron's gone, so I want to run back to the department." That had been painful in a lot of ways. It had been great with the students and wonderful, but on an administrative level it had been painful, and so I wasn't anxious to go back until I could see how things were going to work out and what direction the department or the program was going to take.

16-00:20:10

Wilmot:

Were you part of kind of creating what direction the department would take in the years of 1975, 1976?

16-00:20:22

Wilkerson:

Well, eventually when I went back, I was very active in the department and you know, I mean, [sighs, frustrated]—when you say, "The direction that it would take—?"

16-00:20:39

Wilmot:

What comprises African American Studies?

16-00:20:43

Wilkerson:

Well, that is what I am trying to think about. I am trying to think back. As a lecturer SOE, I think I was included in some of those discussions. I was a tenured lecturer, so I believe I was. I mean, a lot of water has gone under the bridge [laughs] and a lot has happened, but I think I was a part of the discussions in terms of what FTE we should go for and what kinds of strategies and things like that. So I had some input into that. More and more as I stayed in the department, certainly. Do we want another social scientist, do we want another literature person? Those sorts of questions.

The department, for a while, enjoyed protected status, in terms of getting FTE. We did not have to compete with the major departments for a period of time. I've forgotten how long it was. Maybe ten years or something like that. We had to grow, so each of the FTE were not negotiated in relationship to what English might get, or sociology, political science or what have you, and that allowed the department to grow to a certain level.

We had the luxury of thinking, “How do we want this department to be structured?” Actually, as African American Studies developed at Berkeley, it was one of the few, I would say, in the country that pretty much balanced the social sciences and the humanities and literature areas. There were many, many African American studies departments around the country that were primarily social science. But we managed that tenuous balance among those fields. It also had, as it grew to its apex, at least, some years ago, ten ladder rank faculty. It had the best balance of men to women. It had 50% women, five and five. Most African American Studies departments and programs around the country at that time were primarily male. Even though you have a larger preponderance of women, and even women of color, in colleges and universities. Most of the faculty was male. So it was very unique and very special in that particular way. We had strong women’s voices. We had people like June Jordan and Barbara Christian. They were very strong voices in their field, and strong voices on campus, and popular with students. So it was a very special department as it evolved, and helped to build the scholarly reputation of African American Studies on the campus, but also in the field in general.

16-00:24:15

Wilmot:

You were chair of the department from 1988 through 1994. Can you talk about a bit about the directions in which you chose to take the department?

16-00:24:33

Wilkerson:

First off, I was asked to be chair earlier when I was associate professor, and I said to the department that I would not chair the department until I became a full time professor. Now, was I blackmailing folk? Not exactly. But I knew what I wanted to do, if the faculty wanted me to do it. My history had been building—building the Women’s Center, building in the early years of African American Studies. So I wasn’t going to go in as a chair just to maintain anything. African American Studies needed to have more faculty, it needed to have a broader presence. I thought it needed also to have a Ph.D. program. We had talked about it for years, and it had never happened. It had even been drawn up at some point. I think Bil Banks had drawn up, I heard, a plan for a graduate program at some point, and no one ever saw it. They couldn’t find it or they didn’t know. We kept talking about it, but we never did it. I thought it was important because the faculty had grown to a point where having graduate students around would be very important to their work. In fact, it was testimony to the loyalty, I guess I would say, of many of the tenured faculty that we had that that stayed even though they didn’t have a graduate program, because having a graduate program allows you to extend your work. You get to have research assistants, you get to have students who are interested in graduate level teaching and investigation and all that kind of thing. I believed in this, and the department seemed to want a graduate program. I said that I wouldn’t take the chairmanship, even though it was my turn—we only had a handful of people who could take turns with the chairmanship—until I became a full professor. I wanted to move the department forward in terms of a doctoral program, and I knew that I wouldn’t be able to do that as an associate professor. I mean, I might have been able to do it. But you weren’t at the top of your line until you were a full professor, and there were many things that needed to be done, negotiations, that kind of thing, and you needed to have that kind of credibility on the campus. So, I figured, “Not now. When I get to be a full professor then I’ll do it.” I don’t know how long it took, a year, two years, something like that. When I became a full professor, then I polled the faculty again in one of our faculty meetings, and I wanted to

know what did they want. Did they want to have a doctoral program? And the faculty, all of them agreed, though one or two were less enthusiastic. Maybe just one.

16-00:27:36

Wilmot:

Who was that?

16-00:27:37

Wilkerson:

Well, you know, Bil's fear, as he articulated it, was that it would overshadow the undergraduate program and it would make us less attentive to undergraduates. Faculty all said they didn't believe that that would happen, and I didn't believe that would happen. There were already two faculty members who cared more about graduate students from other departments than they did about the undergraduates in the department. So it was happening a bit anyway, but I thought that people were so committed to the undergraduate work that it wouldn't have to go that way. A graduate program wouldn't have to be built on the back of, and to the deficit of, the undergraduate program. So that was one of the big efforts that I made.

I also had a goal—how can I put it—of making African American Studies an attractive major to students who were coming to Berkeley. Trying to help students to understand that it was not an exclusive club, that it was an opening to an understanding of a variety of fields and cultures, and so on. That is wasn't narrow. And that was often what undergraduates would say: "Well, you know, I really want to major in this, but it is too narrow." And I would say, "Well, if you go to the history department, yes, you'll learn a lot about Western History. But there is a whole aspect of history you know nothing about. Whereas if you are working through African American History, it opens up to a broader knowledge of history and also helps you understand where the gaps are, why they are there, and so forth, and so on." So it was that kind of effort. At the time when I became chair [phone rings in the background] we had a counselor, a student advisor, who had created a kind of exclusive club, her own little clan, and was really actively discouraging certain students, if they seemed too middle class, too bourgeois, too whatever. There were incidents that happened that I can't go into that happened in the department. I decided that she needed to shape up or that she needed to ship out, one way or the other. Because she hadn't really been held to the kind of standard you need to uphold, in terms of that work. So a range of things happened and she eventually left, probably within a couple of years of my chairing the department. We were making an effort to let the department really be attractive to a range of students, not to fall into the trap of being a little exclusive club for certain students who wore their hair a certain way or dressed a particular way, or had a particular philosophy.

We already had some very, very fine students who had gotten their BA in African American Studies who were white and who had done some very good work. One student, for example was a white woman who did this wonderful work on John Brown, did a lovely video, really excellent work. Students like that, but not only white students, but students who didn't fit the particular mold that this advisor felt that they should, was actively discouraging them and making it very difficult to matriculate. Michelle and I cooperated on this front, because she would hear from other students across the campus about their perceptions of African American Studies. And this was another place where the network helped, so that I could understand and hear and know how the department was being perceived. As a department we were skating a very dangerous edge in

terms of our student relations, things that we might be liable for, given the way that people were acting and so on.

But the graduate program was the really big thing, because it took my whole tenure there to get that to happen. Everything from taking the faculty on its first retreat, around that time, up to Tahoe for three days. I was very enthusiastic. We had meetings prior to that, with the faculty, off campus, just to get us together and talk about how should a graduate program look and a doctoral program look. Then we decided to do a weekend and to do a retreat, and we were all very enthusiastic about it and everything. We were going to drive up, we rented some cars, had drivers and what have you. And we were in the Dwinelle parking lot and we had one sort of station wagon that had seats in the very back of it, but they were facing each other, they were like children's seats in some funny kind of way. So you would have two adults facing each other and their legs would be kind of cramped. One of my faculty members was sitting in the back and was very unhappy with the arrangements. In that moment it suddenly flashed in my mind that this could be total disaster. I had not even thought about that. I had just thought, "Oh, this is great, we are going to go to Tahoe, it is going to be great, la de da da!" And I thought, "Oh my god. This could just be hell! We are all up there for three days?" So [laughs] then I get really nervous, and we called, and got different cars, saying, "This is not going to work. We are adults, and we can't sit like this for this long time," and it turned out to be very good. It actually was very, very good. We brought our adjunct faculty, so Roy Thomas, even though he was not ladder rank, he came and was a part of the discussion. We had a few students. Out of that the ideas and the work to create a Ph.D. program was born.

16-00:35:29

Wilmot:

Was Robert Allen there as well?

16-00:35:31

Wilkerson:

No, Robert wasn't on the faculty then. I don't think he was.

16-00:35:37

Wilmot:

Okay.

16-00:35:37

Wilkerson:

I don't remember. I don't think so, but he might have been there. But I think he came later.

Then we had to go through all of the various committees, [sighs] to get it approved. The kinds of questions that we got asked, over and over and over again! You were asked a question from one level of committee, you would write and answer that; it would be appended to the file, and so on. The next committee would ask the same thing. It was all about, "Is the scholarship viable? Are there outstanding enough students across the country to come into the program?" All of those questions that haunted the program from the very beginning. The program was student generated, it was scholarship about people who are marginalized in society, who aren't considered important. All of those questions came up in an academic way, in a scholarly way, and we kept answering over and over and over again. Percy Hintzen was my vice-chair. I thought

it was important to not only have a male as a vice-chair, but also someone in social sciences, so he could help me as I tried to handle a multi-disciplinary department. At one point I said, “Percy, I cannot answer this question another time. You have to write this answer for me. I just can’t do it, I am so fed up with doing this.” So we kept on, kept on, kept on.

Finally it got to the university-wide committee that had to make the final judgement. It just was hanging there for some reason. It kept being postponed in terms of discussion and all that. I had left the chairmanship, and Percy was then chair. So he and Barbara and I sat down and talked about it and we decided that we needed to go and meet with the committee. We needed to appear, because they were asking the same questions that had been answered over and over and over again. I mean, not only had we answered the questions, we had data that could show our answers, and we had supplied all of it.

I was visiting LA, maybe I was on leave or something. Percy and Barbara and I let the committee know that we were coming in, and we came. It was very interesting, because they passed it after that. These were people, many of them, we knew because they had been running the institution for a while. University-wide, as well as Berkeley campus. It was as if they needed to actually see the human beings that were behind this, to be reminded that there were real people, respected scholars, behind this proposal. It was as if we had to remind them by being present. I really believe to this day that had we not done that, I don’t know if it would have finally gotten passed. It would have been hung up for a while. It was like we needed to be there. Because the discussion was very friendly. It wasn’t contentious. But we answered questions and so on. But I think that they had to see those faces and those bodies.

16-00:39:27

Wilmot:

Was that customary in these kinds of things—

16-00:39:30

Wilkerson:

No. No.

16-00:39:31

Wilmot:

For someone to really go and show up before the committee—

16-00:39:33

Wilkerson:

No, no, no, no, no, no.

16-00:39:32

Wilmot:

—in the flesh?

16-00:39:34

Wilkerson:

No, no. No, you didn’t have to do that. I am not saying that it never happened before, but, no. These committees work from the paper and so on, and they know the people and all of that sort

of thing. So it was really, it was again another lesson. But we did, they were meeting at UCLA and we went and we showed up.

16-00:39:50

Wilmot:

Wow. I have a question about this. Was this the time where people were just not familiar with programs like, say, the African American Studies program at Yale with Hazel Carby?

16-00:40:05

Wilkerson:

Oh no, Hazel had been on the campus. I mean, we brought in all of those kinds of people, and she probably had written some kind of support for our proposal. But Yale's was not a Ph.D. program. Yale didn't have a Ph.D. program.

16-00:40:16

Wilmot:

What about places like Duke or—?

16-00:40:21

Wilkerson:

Duke didn't have a Ph.D. program. Temple had a Ph.D. program.

16-00:40:25

Wilmot:

Okay.

16-00:40:25

Wilkerson:

Afrocentricity. And Temple was not considered a peer of Berkeley, for example. I am trying to remember who had—Harvard didn't have anything. We weren't the first. Temple was actually the first, but there was nothing west of the Mississippi, for one thing. There was Temple—I am not sure, there might have been one other institution, but I am not remembering. There were a lot of masters programs around. UCLA had a masters program.

16-00:41:02

Wilmot:

They still do.

16-00:41:04

Wilkerson:

But, there were very, very few, if any, other than Temple, Ph.D. programs. This was elevating it to a level that was on a par with other kinds of doctoral programs in fields that were much older than African American Studies was. So, it wasn't going to be an easy thing to do. It took us a few years to do it. But we did it. We managed to do it with all the faculty. We had to have the faculty in order to do it. It has struggled some since then, I know, since the loss of Barbara and June, which happened after I left. So I have continued, since I am emeritus, I have continued to work with graduate Ph.D. students. I have worked with them long-distance. Sometimes they come to New York, sometimes I would be in California. I have served on their qualifying exams as well as directed several dissertations since I have been here in New York, because I knew that the department needed the help.

16-00:42:14

Wilmot:

Are you working with anybody now?

16-00:42:16

Wilkerson:

Yes. I am working with Libby Lewis, who is doing hers on the black presence in media. Very interesting work. I was on her committee. I just signed off on Maude Dakobe, from Botswana, I believe. She has gone back home. I have one other outstanding student, Haldane Chase, and I am trying to get him to finish. And I think those are the major ones that I have done. It is hard to supervise dissertations with the kind of responsibilities that I have at the foundation, but I do like working with students and I like the opportunity to stay kind of current in aspects of the field. So that is very helpful to me.

16-00:43:24

Wilmot:

Okay. I have a question about administration. During your time at Berkeley, there have been some different administrations headed by Bowker, Heyman—

16-00:43:47

Wilkerson:

Yes [laughs].

16-00:43:47

Wilmot:

—I think Tien as well.

16-00:43:50

Wilkerson:

Yeah, Tien. Yes.

16-00:43:53

Wilmot:

Especially in the earlier years I am very interested in how, from your perspective, African American Studies as a department has fared at the hands of the administration.

16-00:44:06

Wilkerson:

[sighs] Wow, interesting.

16-00:44:08

Wilmot:

And different regimes.

16-00:44:10

Wilkerson:

Yeah. Wow, that is interesting. [long pause] I don't know how to characterize it. I think each of those chancellors was supportive in their own way, to one extent or another, let me put it that way. I thought Bowker certainly was supportive, given the fact that he allowed it to exist initially after the Third World Strike. He changed the leadership in it, and I thought that was important. I

can't comment on the deals and all of that sort of thing, but you know Bowker had come out of New York, and now, having lived in New York for a few years and watched the politics around here, I kind of understand him a bit better. He is a very astute man, and a very astute politician and administrator. When you were in a meeting with him, you would think that he was sleeping, but in fact he would come forth with just the right comment. I remember when I was directing the Women's Center and I was co-chair of the special scholarships committee. The San Francisco Foundation was going to give us a grant. But they wanted to tie some strings to that grant and insist that the campus mount a conscious effort to increase the number of women faculty.

This was around the time that that study came out and showed an abysmal 3.7% or some ridiculously low number of women faculty at Berkeley. So we were able to have a conversation with the head of the San Francisco Foundation at that time, and Leon Henkin and I, and maybe one other person, met with Bowker and Heyman. Okay. I was making the point that there was really no excuse to have only 3.7% or something like that, of the faculty be women when the availability pools showed that there should be more like about 15%. So we were arguing, talking about this back and forth, and Heyman (vice-chancellor then) was making his points and so on.

Finally, toward the end, and Bowker hadn't said much, Bowker said, "Well you know, I think that is right. We should have more women faculty if the availability pool is 15% or whatever." So he, in his own quiet and very astute way, was, I think, supportive of some of these kinds of issues. I never knew exactly what his position was on ethnic studies. But he did allow it to exist. I think, under him, that that arrangement for protecting Ethnic Studies was made.

16-00:47:43

Wilmot:

Ethnic studies or African American studies?

16-00:47:46

Wilkerson:

[pause]. I know definitely for African American Studies.

16-00:47:52

Wilmot:

Okay.

16-00:47:52

Wilkerson:

I am not sure about Ethnic Studies- that I am not sure about. But it wouldn't have happened if the chancellor didn't agree to it. So I think in his own way he was very, very supportive. He also is known in New York for being the architect of open admissions. So he has a history of support for these kinds of areas. Under Heyman—

16-00:48:17

Wilmot:

May I interrupt?

16-00:48:21

Wilkerson:
Sure.

16-00:48:21

Wilmot:

I want to probe something that you said, which is, “Having been out here a few years and kind of gotten a sense of how politics operate in New York,” as it reflects on deepening your understanding of Bowker’s actions. Can you tell me a little bit about politics in New York [laughs]?

16-00:48:34

Wilkerson:

Well, just that it is kind of bare-knuckled [laughs] at times, and very politically oriented. There are all kinds of various groups that weigh in. New York has a history of efforts to empower communities, to actually have input into public schools and public education, so it is a tough place. It can be a very tough place. So I have to have respect for almost any astute politician that comes out of New York and survives it. We just had the example the other day of the mayor firing at least two and engineering the firing of a third person on his education panel, and then appointing new people so he could get some piece of policy passed. So, I mean, that is a kind of raw-knuckle politics. Not that every mayor is like that, but some people, when they want to get into a power position, they want to move something, and they do it, with no apologies, and I don’t think that is that unusual in New York. So he is pretty astute. I have a lot of respect for Bowker.

16-00:49:57

Wilmot:

At a place like the Ford Foundation, is that a place where you are insulated from those kind of politics, or is it a place where you have really learned about them?

16-00:50:04

Wilkerson:

No, no. Ford is a bureaucracy like any other and has many constituencies and issues that they have to be very conscious of. It is a very, in a lot of ways, it is a very collegial place. But it is hierarchical. I wouldn’t say that it is exactly bare-knuckles.

16-00:50:29

Wilmot:

[laughs]

Wilkerson:

But you know.

16-00:50:31

Wilmot:

I love that term, by the way [laughs].

16-00:50:32

Wilkerson:

Well, it is New York, believe me [laughing]!

16-00:50:40

Wilmot:

So now you are returning to Heyman's administration.

16-00:50:43

Wilkerson:

Well yeah, I am blocking some Heyman part of it. A lot of my dealings with Heyman were around the Women's Center, because I was directing it. He was head at that time.

16-00:50:57

Wilmot:

Vice-chancellor?

16-00:51:00

Wilkerson:

I was just trying to think what those years were and what was going on in African American Studies. It is really hard for me to say, but it is my impression that he was a supportive chancellor. I can't hang it on anything specific. I may have to think about that a little bit more and try to refresh myself in terms of what was actually happening in the department at the time. But certainly I believe he honored the protection of our FTE. He still honored that. And I think he was pretty supportive in his own way around African American Studies.

Tien was probably the first chancellor I saw who actually publicly talked about Ethnic Studies. In speeches that he gave, he would talk about the importance of ethnic studies, so that, under Tien, you got the sense that African American Studies was very much a valued part of the academic community. I remember that very, very clearly because I had heard him speak at a couple of things, and he really put that front and center. Others might say, "Oh we have black faculty," or, "We have a diverse faculty." But he would actually single out Ethnic Studies, African American Studies, to talk about this department that was so valuable to the community and the university. And I thought that that was a very important move on his part. Just to give it that kind of publicity, that kind of public approbation and validation that you didn't always get.

Now, Berdahl, now I was not there for the whole time he was there. I was there for about his first four or five years or something like that. I believe that he was very supportive, and I will tell you why. It was under Berdahl that the department lost or was losing Barbara, we knew June was ill—she had been in remission and was ill. And I was on leave. Leave without pay, and I was on leave for like three years. And I remember that Berdahl came to a faculty meeting with his Vice Chancellor or maybe the Dean. Maybe it was the Dean of Social Sciences. There were two or three key academic people in the academic administration at Berkeley. And he came and listened to what we had to say about the loss of faculty and the need to refurbish the faculty. Then he promised that he would try to find a way to allow us to recruit for new faculty. So under him the department actually for the last couple of years, I believe, had two or three slots to replace people. Now, that is really putting your money where your mouth is. So I have tremendous respect for Berdahl.

I also found him to be very supportive when I was directing the Center for Theater Arts, and I asked him to come and speak in a series that we did to get leaders to talk about the arts and how important they were. I had artists that did that, and so on, and he came and he spoke quite

publicly all by himself sitting on stage, quite publicly about his appreciation for theatre, how important he thought it was. The faculty didn't get up and ask anything, they were all afraid to say anything. But one of the students said, "Well why can't we get more resources?" The student raised the question. And he tried to explain that, "Yes, I am the Chancellor, but I don't rule by fiat. There is a lot of negotiation that has to go on among the provost, the vice chancellors, the deans, and all of that." But he said that he remained supportive and blah, blah, blah. So he was very good, and he supported the department at a time when it was really threatened. We had lost, we were losing two members of the faculty and it was likely that I was going to be going. That could have been the death knell for the department, because I am sure there are lots of people looking at those FTEs and saying, "Boy, we could use those." But he stuck by the department.

16-00:56:40

Wilmot:

How does that work? Other departments can then say, "Well, we are going to take the African American Studies FTE? How does that work?"

16-00:56:47

Wilkerson:

No, no, those decisions are made at a higher level than the departments. The deans and the vice chancellor would be the ones who would negotiate. They could take the FTE back if they want to. By custom they have for many years allowed the departments to replace an FTE if a faculty member leaves or dies. But in more recent years—ten, fifteen or so years—administrations at Berkeley and across the country have found ways to pull those FTEs back and reallocate in a different way if they want to. That allows them to build certain fields, to be more responsive to what is happening in emerging and changing fields, and things like that. So it is not an automatic thing, that those FTE would go back. I think at the chancellor's level the supports were pretty good. What can get to be a little dicey is the next level down and how much support is actually there, because those administrators, the deans and so on are the ones that are the closest to the program, and the ones that kind of have to fight for them.

16-00:58:18

Wilmot:

So that would be dean, provost level.

16-00:58:19

Wilkerson:

Dean, provost level, yeah. Yeah. And that can make a very big difference.

16-00:58:26

Wilmot:

Oh okay. I want to go on for another ten or fifteen minutes, is that okay?

16-00:58:53

Wilkerson:

No, that is fine.

[End Audio File 16]

[Begin Audio File 17]

Wilmot:

I had a question for you about the way that African American studies as a department understood its mandate to be community based or not. This actually refers back to an earlier time in the department's history, to its earliest years. Could you reflect on the earlier times as well as the evolution of the relationship.

17-00:00:26

Wilkerson:

Yeah. In the early years certainly, African American Studies felt that it had a real obligation to the community, and I think that feeling of obligation certainly continued, and may have taken on different forms. Clearly, in the early years, the community had a stake in African American Studies. I kept saying that its emergence had been student generated, and that is true, but there were also people in the community who were not students who were very supportive of it as well. So we always did a lot of events to which we invited people in the community. I think I was chairing, when we invited Ayi Kwei Armah to come. He had written this novel called *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and some other works. What was amazing was that we had people from the community we didn't normally see, because they knew his book. And it wasn't necessarily through academic life. They knew his work. We had tapped into this person, an African man who had written a book that was important to black people at the community, non-academic level, all over the country. His presentations were so well attended, and you just had a full range of people who normally wouldn't bother coming to campus.

Now, you have to remember also that trying to deliver on a community connection as an academic department was not the easiest thing to do. First, there are physical barriers to getting on to the campus. You can't park anywhere close by, the transportation, public transportation, is not that amenable, necessarily, to people coming from Oakland or whatever. So there were real obstacles. If you were an older person, how were you going to get all the way across the hilly campus? All kinds of things like that. So it was difficult to deliver on that connection, just by virtue of the geography, limited parking, what have you. So we tried to find different ways to encourage people to make the effort to come.

But African American Studies has always maintained a strong community contact either through public events or service, with people in the department sometimes serving on committees in Oakland, for example, or in Berkeley.

17-00:04:02

Wilmot:

I understand that at some point that was one of the core kind of things that was disputed as the African American Studies Department moved forward, was what the nature of that connection should be.

17-00:04:17

Wilkerson:

It was one of the dividing points between ethnic studies and African American Studies. I am not sure I can articulate it very well. It had to do with validation and the relationship of community standards of research, for example. Whose standards do you honor? To what extent do you honor

what communities validate and what they feel is important in research? What is their role in all of that kind of thing? It was something of a dividing point between African American Studies and Ethnic Studies. I think that it is a problem for any kind of newer discipline like this that answers also to various constituencies that are not a part of the academy (I have seen it happen with Women Studies Department also). There are certain criteria for success as a department on the university campus, and they don't include community standards and involvement. The academy is a peer review system. It has to do with your peers, not just in higher education, because we could satisfy some of the community-concern issues, if we were allowed to use the validation from community colleges, for example, which have a much broader base of students and a broader mandate. But we can't even do that. It is a peer review system of "equivalent," quote unquote, institutions. So that it is more important that a scholar at Harvard have something important to say about your establishing a program than it is to have support from someone at Florida A & M. Almost by definition, to be successful is to fit in. Again, we go back to that issue, do you fit in to the institution or do you try to change it and transform it? Do you try to create a new space? So there were differences of opinion about how that community connection should be validated.

Some department chairs, more than others, tried to honor that community connection. For example, for many years, the department has maintained a kind of database of community services, of all kinds of information that people call the department to get. That may sound like a small thing, but it was important. I don't know if that is still happening, but I remember very clearly when I was chair that people would call African American Studies as a resource. They didn't call the history department for those things, for the most part. They called African American studies. So we had information, it was a little Rolodex file actually, so that our administrative assistant or receptionist could supply the community with information on social services, on other colleges and universities, on sororities, you name it. Everything that had anything to do with African American life and culture, we might get called to do. That in itself was a service to the community. It was not one that we were expected to do by the university and we couldn't get extra resources to do it, but it was something that we did because people saw us as a resource, so we acted on that.

17-00:09:10

Wilmot:

I have also heard that the African American Studies department has also served as a nucleus and a resource and a support center to African American students in a way that other departments may not.

17-00:09:34

Wilkerson:

Well, that is very true. It goes even further than that. As a resource and a support for African American students, and for other students of color, and even for students who are not our majors, for white students. Because once the word gets around that you have got faculty who care about student concerns and so on, everybody on the campus is going to come to you. So it was always a mistake, and I had always tried to correct administrators about this, that, "Oh yes, we understand it all, the African American students come." Well, yeah, it is African American students and all of the other students come to us as well. We mentor and support and help and advise, and all of that. So that creates an even greater kind of responsibility, and other

departments really don't have that. Some very popular faculty members in other departments might provide that kind of support, but not [phone rings] in the way that African American Studies, and Ethnic Studies, are expected to provide support.

17-00:10:36

Wilmot:

You mentioned that you weren't sure that if there was a specific incident that happened. I think the thing that has emerged, again and again, was just more around ideology, like what it meant to be a community, a department in the university that is connected to a community? What were the politics associated with that? What kinds of scholarship should take place as a result of that. It was all kind of things that unfolded from a political stance. That is the best way that I can articulate it.

17-00:11:12

Wilkerson:

Yes, yes, yes, yes. Yeah, that certainly is true. I am not thinking of any particular incidents around it, but that certainly was true. Who you would bring to the campus to speak, who did you chose to bring, what kind of forum did you give them. The one issue I do remember, which is somewhat political but it is of a different nature and I am just going to mention it, is that at one point I was directing the play, *El Hajj Malik*, which is the life of Malcolm X. I did it three times in my lifetime, and that was the second time that I did it. We were rehearsing in the church off campus, it was around the time of the People's Park protest and whatever. Again, this was also an effort to locate some of the courses in communities, and we were in this old church. It wasn't a UC church. Let's see, when was Malcolm X assassinated? Oh, right, it was 1965. But there was a lot of controversy in public discourse around the assassination of Malcolm X, and who had done it and all that. So here we were rehearsing his life, and into the rehearsal walked a whole set of men and women who were obviously of the Nation of Islam. They just came in, and they sat—I don't know how they knew what we were doing. They came in and they watched part of the rehearsal, and then they left. I was very nervous about it because I didn't know why they were there, I didn't know what might happen. I was responsible for students and stuff like that. Nothing happened, but again, honoring that obligation to community and feeling that we should place some of the classes in community and so on, also can make you vulnerable. Now, we continued to meet in the community, it didn't stop us from doing that, but it pointed up to me some of the liabilities that could happen because you were not in the protected space, shall we say, that the campus often offers.

17-00:13:57

Wilmot:

When you worked with the North Richmond Theatre Project, Jimmy Garrett, who is the former leader of the BSU of San Francisco State—

17-00:14:08

Wilkerson:

Yes.

Wilmot:

He did a piece called *We Own the Money*.

17-00:14:13

Wilkerson:

Yeah, I was looking at that. I was trying to remember the play, and I can't remember it very well, but yes, we did do that. I guess, going back to your earlier question about politics and relationship to community, I suppose the way that it would have been expressed and the things that I was actively involved in would be theatre itself and the kinds of plays that we did. I mentioned earlier *Black Mass* that Olly Wilson wrote the music for. This was a play about a very controversial aspect of Black Muslim ideology, and that was how the white race was created. Or doing *Dutchman* or doing *We Own the Night*, or all of those kinds of things that really brought politics, and the politics of community, into the academy. And who would go to see it, and would they be afraid. Not only were you afraid of seeing the show, but of who else is in the audience. Who is coming to see this? You are doing this on a campus and so therefore you are attracting maybe some of the rabble rousers, this and that. Are you putting people in danger? This was not only something that I thought about, but this is something that others thought about, and worried about. It is a largely black audience, possibly. So what does that mean? When you get all of these black people together, are they going to get angry and rise up and do something? Because, in those years, on the Berkeley campus, they weren't accustomed to seeing black audiences. They didn't do enough on the campus that black people wanted to come to see.

17-00:15:56

Wilmot:

And the fear was also a reflection of the times.

17-00:16:05

Wilkerson:

It could be very volatile. And again, bringing community means one thing to folks who are working in an academy maybe, another to people of color who are not. Community can mean something very different to people who have never lived in those communities and have had contact with them. So are you bringing drug dealers in? Are you bringing in poor people who are going to trash the place? Will they know how to behave? You confront all of those issues. In the early years, I am sure that there were those kinds of fears, and I know they were in the drama department, I mean I had some kinds of incidents like that, where people were really worried about these people who were coming.

17-00:16:55

Wilmot:

Raising these issues with you?

17-00:16:58

Wilkerson:

Yeah, well, just having the people up here on campus. When we first did *El Hajj Malik*, not only did black students from the campus come in, but people from the community also came. Of course then, you have your sister institution over there, San Francisco State. A lot of the true activism happened there as well. People forget that. So you had students from all over the Bay Area coming.

17-00:17:24

Wilmot:

Did you ever see the volume *Blacker Than Thou* by George Napper, a dissertation by a graduate student at Berkeley at that time. He was also somehow administratively linked to campus—

17-00:17:40

Wilkerson:

Yeah, I vaguely remember him. I can't remember exactly what his field was.

17-00:17:45

Wilmot:

He may have been in criminology before it was disbanded—

17-00:17:48

Wilkerson:

That is possible.

17-00:17:49

Wilmot:

I may be wrong, but I think that, in this book he put forward this hypothesis about the Third World Strike at Berkeley actually being something that was a response to the San Francisco State strike, and something that was mounted by a group of middle class black students who were attempting to authenticate themselves. He looked at the shift in ideology and the thrust of people's aspirations, within the context of the politics of the time.

17-00:18:36

Wilkerson:

Yes.

17-00:18:36

Wilmot:

It was very interesting.

17-00:18:38

Wilkerson:

That is very possible. And, if he is the person I am thinking of, he would have been in the position to know the people intimately who knew this. Part of my take on it grows out of that incident at Reverend Belcher's church. I did feel that there were middle class folks who were involved in the leadership of the various groups, us and all of the others, that were a part of the Third World Strike and a part of the controversy and discourse and all of that. But I also had very strong impression that they were people who really didn't know the community. And part of that comes from the way they acted. They always invoked the community, but they didn't know it and they didn't know its values, they didn't honor its values. I say that because of the kinds of things that they did.

17-00:19:54

Wilmot:

Well, I think we should—

17-00:19:55

Wilkerson:

—not all, but some of the things that they did.

17-00:20:18

Wilmot:

Yeah, I understand.

17-00:20:19

Wilkerson:

It was an extremely important time. I have some older colleagues, white colleagues on campus who always accompany any mention of the 1960s with a huge sigh: “Oh, my God, that was that terrible time.” I thought that it was one of the most vibrant and exciting times on the campus. It was so very important in terms of what it did. We all made a lot of mistakes, but we were creating this work and this effort and this movement out of what little we knew about institutions. It was an amazing time.

It was also a costly time for some students. I didn’t realize that fully. Well, I knew it in terms of some of the casualties in people’s lives that came out of that. But it really hit me when I was chairing the department and I had students wanting to come back to Berkeley to finish their B.A.s after twenty years away. Black students who had left because they could not take the disruption and the controversy and the arguments and all of the debate that accompanies that kind of a movement—they actually didn’t finish their work. They went to work maybe in social services or what have you, but they did not finish their degrees, because of all of the disruption. There was a lot of disruption on campus. It wasn’t all caused by the folks in the movement, but those were the years when the police came on campus, when they tear gassed folks. I remember being in Dwinelle and all the tear gas fumes coming through. It was a time when the physical disruptions, the threat to life, all of those kinds of things could happen almost at the drop of a hat. It was largely perpetrated as a reaction to the students. It wasn’t that the students were on a rampage tearing up everything. Reagan was governor, helicopters flew over, they tear gassed the campus. So it was a difficult time in lots and lots and lots of ways, but out of that difficulty, some important things were birthed.

17-00:23:02

Wilmot:

I want to say that you were not the first person to have mentioned the cost, that you are one of the few people who’ve talked on tape about these costs to human lives, to individuals from that time. It is so interesting because this was a really important time. There was a lot of negative things associated with it. It is remembered in different ways, but at the end of the day it was also this time of incredible curricular transformation. And quite simply, Berkeley wouldn’t be the institution it was.

17-00:23:43

Wilkerson:

That is true

17-00:23:43

Wilmot:

Without that time turmoil?

17-00:23:46

Wilkerson:

That is very true.

17-00:23:46

Wilmot:

It would be somewhere, I don't know, in the dark ages. I shouldn't quite say it that boldly, but it is so interesting because if you look at how Berkeley likes to remember its history as an institution, there is of course a big monument for the Free Speech Movement, and nothing about the Third World Strike.

17-00:24:05

Wilkerson:

That is true. That is very true.

17-00:24:07

Wilmot:

Okay, let's close for today.

17-00:24:08

Wilkerson:

[laughs]

17-00:24:09

Wilmot:

Okay? Is that alright? Did you have something to say?

17-00:24:11

Wilkerson:

No, no, I don't think so [laughs].

17-00:24:13

Wilmot:

Do you want to interview me [laughs]? Just joking!

17-00:24:15

Wilkerson:

[laughs] Yes!

17-00:24:17

Wilmot:

[laughs]

[End Audio File 17]

Interview #7: June 1, 2004

[Begin Audio File 18]

Wilmot:

Interview seven, Margaret Wilkerson. June 1, 2004. I wanted to start today with this article that I had found which was in the *New York Times* profiling a young director/producer, Kenny Leon, who established an organization called “True Colors.” It was really remarkable to me because one of the things that he seemed to be grappling with in this production, and one of the things that was highlighted consistently throughout this article was one of several primary themes in your dissertation, which had to do with management and fundraising to support black theatre. Have you also read this article? Are you familiar with his work?

18-00:01:03

Wilkerson:

Yes. Yes, I have read his article and I am familiar with his work. In fact he is directing, he has directed the Broadway revival of *Raisin in the Sun* and I was an informal consultant on the project and had the opportunity to hear the Walter Lee character, Sean “P. Diddy” Combs, read for him for the first time. I have known Kenny’s work a very long time, but this was the first time that I had actually met him. He is really a young star among black artists and among any artists, for that matter. He was the artistic director of the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta and has directed a number of shows around the country. So he is starting a new theatre, a very interesting concept, where he would prepare a set of shows [phone rings] and they would play in different cities, like Los Angeles and DC and Atlanta, and, eventually, move on to New York. He was very conscious, as the article states, very conscious of the financial challenges in running a theatre.

In my dissertation work I looked at black theatres from the artistic point of view, but also from the financial and the management perspectives, because all of this goes into making art. Kenny Leon knows what we have learned over the years. We have seen so many outstanding black theatres struggle and, in some cases, die. The Negro Ensemble Company, which is in New York, was run by Douglas Turner Ward and Bobby Hooks. They premiered *A Soldier’s Story*, and any number of really outstanding works. And Crossroads in New Jersey did wonderful shows, and moved into a beautiful new facility, and that proved to be the downfall of the theatre. They are now trying to revive it. On the West Coast we had the Oakland Ensemble Theatre, and the same kind of thing happened. The Philadelphia Freedom Theatre is struggling. It is a real challenge.

There are a few success stories like the Ensemble Theatre in Houston, but it is a real challenge first to get funding, number one, and another challenge to be able to manage the theatre. And the challenges are not exclusive to black theatres. It is a classic struggle, particularly if the head of the theatre, the artistic director, is truly an artist, him or herself. It is very hard to make tough financial decisions when you want to do a particular work.

Kenny says in the article, “Well, I would love to do this musical in this next season, but musicals are extremely expensive.” Most of them have large casts, the royalties are high, costuming—all of those things just run up the budget. He said that he decided not to do it because he felt that it would be too much of a financial risk. And those are some of the hard kinds of choices that

artistic directors or their partners, or their directors or whatever, have to help a theatre make. Often black theatres in particular, but not just black theatres, want to have their own space and their own theatre. It is very admirable, it is very important to be able to have a space that you can count on, but the costs of getting into a theatre and then the programming that are a part of that are really problematic. Now, I have learned a lot since I wrote my dissertation, but it was clear that even then these were major issues that were going to face black theatre artists.

18-00:05:30

Wilmot:

First, how was “P. Diddy” Sean Combs at his reading? What was it like?

18-00:05:39

Wilkerson:

He was very good. He’s very talented. He read the opening scene, and he had a real feel for it. It is his first, as far as I know, his first time on stage, in a play. Now, he has preformed before thousands of people, so he has overcome the performance aspect of it, but he is not a trained actor. And I thought that he was very talented, as I think that he showed in the production itself. Now, he is not Sidney Poiter, he is not Danny Glover, all those who have played Walter Lee brilliantly. And Walter Lee is a character who is a challenge for anybody, even the most seasoned actor. But I felt that he held his own, he learned a lot, and I thought that the production was really, really fabulous. It still moves people. The women in it were unbelievably fabulous. They were, of course, very experienced actors.

18-00:06:39

Wilmot:

Audra McDonald and Phylicia Rashad?

18-00:06:40

Wilkerson:

Yes, Audra McDonald. And Phylicia Rashad is the mother. I mean, they brought new dimensions to those characters. Sanaa Lathan, who is a former student of mine, a Berkeley graduate, was really wonderful as Beneatha. So, the thing about this production in 2004 is that it really did bring the play to a younger generation. That was what the producer and director really wanted to do, without sacrificing its values. And I frankly think that P. Diddy Combs brought an incredible nuance to the play because he is the Walter Lee who succeeded. He is an entrepreneur. He is also Walter Lee in a different form, who scares people.

The Walter Lee of 1959, as Sidney Poiter played him, was the precursor to all those angry black young man who would be striding the stage performing LeRoi Jones’s lines and all these kinds of things, and many other black playwrights. And eventually foreshadowed riots. They foreshadowed the Black Panthers. They foreshadowed the public figures of assertive black men of the ‘sixties, the ‘seventies, and so on. Sean is a threat in a different kind of a way, because he has money, he is smart, and he has power in terms of being a popular icon. He has young people of all colors, all over the world, who come to see him. And so, in a funny way, he embodies the same kind of presence and threat and fear, and maybe engenders some of the same kind of fear that the original Walter Lee did. So it was a very exciting production. There’s more if you ever want to hear about it, but it was really, really, fabulous. I was very proud of it.

18-00:08:53

Wilmot:

Did the Ford Foundation have a part in that?

18-00:08:54

Wilkerson:

No, no, not the foundation at all. It was a commercial show, the producers have to raise money from investors.

18-00:09:02

Wilmot:

Understood.

18-00:09:02

Wilkerson:

We don't usually support commercial efforts. We work with non-profits, and that certainly is not non-profit. [laughs]

18-00:09:10

Wilmot:

I told you earlier today that I the opportunity to see the film called *Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement* by Woodie King. And one of the things that was highlighted in that was the role of the Ford and the Rockefeller Foundation in making black theatre, in funding rather, black theatre in the seventies.

18-00:09:47

Wilkerson:

That is true. That is true.

18-00:09:47

Wilmot:

What did you know, what do you know, about the Ford Foundation's involvement and the importance of the big foundations in the development of black theatre?

18-00:10:01

Wilkerson:

I don't know all of the work that was done in the seventies, but the Ford Foundation was a major funder of non-profit black theatre in the seventies. They saw that there was a burgeoning artistic movement that was going on. I know that they put a fair amount of money and support under the Negro Ensemble Company, and the Lafayette Players, I think it was.

18-00:10:32

Wilmot:

New Lafayette?

18-00:10:33

Wilkerson:

The New Lafayette Theatre. That is right. And there were others as well. And I would say that over the years the foundation has had a commitment to African Americans that goes back to historically black colleges and universities, but also, in the terms of the arts, has continued to

strengthen minority organizations or organizations run by people of color. There was a program called the Working Capital Fund that worked with various so-called minority institutions across the disciplines from visual arts to theatre, performing arts, where they really, through a combination of grants and loans, tried to help these organizations to be stronger. We had two cohorts of them, and then the stock market dropped and that program was unable to continue because it was a very expensive program. But there has been a lot of support the foundation over the years in terms of blacks in the arts and also in terms of other minorities or groups of color, as well as women's theatre.

18-00:11:51

Wilmot:

Did you start at Ford working in the area of media arts?

18-00:11:56

Wilkerson:

No I didn't. No, no. I was invited there to be a program officer in higher education dealing with the diversity portfolio, we called it loosely, which included women's studies programs, African American and ethnic studies programs, and the minority fellows program as well.

18-00:12:17

Wilmot:

And when did you move over to work in the theatre?

18-00:12:20

Wilkerson:

About a year and a half after I got there. [laughs] The director of the media arts and culture program left and the vice president, Alison Bernstein, recruited me. I had actually known Alison for many, many years. She asked would I come and direct the program because of my dramatic art background. So I agreed to do that.

18-00:12:43

Wilmot:

When you first arrived at the program, what did the portfolio look like, and what does it look like now under your leadership? How has it changed?

18-00:12:54

Wilkerson:

You mean in Media Arts and Culture?

18-00:12:55

Wilmot:

In Media Arts and Culture.

18-00:12:57

Wilkerson:

Whew—that is hard, let me see [laughs], I didn't look. Well we had some very large initiatives in Arts and Culture. They had just started (and I say "they" because it was literally just started before I got in there) the "New Directions, New Donors" program where there had been twenty-eight institutions across the spectrum of the arts selected for endowment grants and the idea of this program was to help these institutions to diversify their funding base and to attract individual

donors. It was a matching program and they could determine what the match would be, and they chose anywhere from one to three, to three to one. In that matching program they could count only new money, so it was a real challenge and it was forcing the organizations to develop themselves and their management structures in such a way that they would be able to attract individual donors. That program lasted for about three years. Just after it was started, in the year 2000, the portfolio was already starting to slip. Then 2001 hit, and you know, all hell broke loose in terms of arts and cultural funding because lots of the funding just dropped out. Nevertheless, these organizations, about 2/3 of them, managed to make their matches, which was really quite incredible. It was called “Big Bet in the Arts.” About \$42,000,000 went out to these twenty-eight organizations.

When I moved in, we had two media officers. I argued for a media policy person and, in a couple or so years, the media production person’s contract ended and they moved on. So the upshot of it is that, in three to four years time I have hired four new people. Except for my deputy director and myself, the other four people are new to the program. So I have had some opportunity, with the help of others, of course, to shape the program so that we have a much stronger kind of media component at a time when we really need that, given all that is happening in the world. We also continued the Arts and Culture portfolio with a stronger eye towards diversity issues and the fact that we, as a country, are undergoing a tremendous demographic change that is affecting and that will affect the arts in terms of many more people of color across the country. What will the Arts and Culture scene look like when so-called minorities are majorities, as they are or will be in California and many other parts of the country? We also have a new position that replaced one that we lost, which focuses on Native American expressive culture. So it looks a lot different than it did. I won’t say a lot. It was moving in that direction, but it is different in some significant ways.

18-00:16:42

Wilmot:

Yes. When I initially asked you about Kenny Leon, you said that his approach and vision were very Hansberryian—

18-00:17:00

Wilkerson:

Yes. Absolutely.

18-00:17:02

Wilmot:

What did you mean when you said that?

18-00:17:05

Wilkerson:

He says in the article that he is creating a theatre that has more of a window on the world. I think one of his first productions had five white women in it. I have forgotten the name of it now, but it is mentioned in the article. And he said that it is a window on the world but it is rooted in black culture. In other words, he will be developing seasons that have some of the black theatre classics in them. I think that he is doing *Tambourines to Glory* by Langston Hughes, which is a play written in the forties, or the fifties I think. It is written in the forties or fifties or something like that. So he is doing that, but he is also doing plays that are contemporary. He will be doing

plays by various artists from around the world, but very much informed by, I guess, what you would call an African American sensibility.

Now, Lorraine Hansberry wrote a piece called *The Harlem Community Theatre*, I think that is what it is called. It has a couple of names. And what she talks about is the same concept, very much the same kind of concept. The theatre that she would create if she were creating a theatre would be one that was built on certain sets of values; on freedom, on democracy, very much rooted in African American sensibilities. And in fact, her other name for the theatre was the John Brown Theatre, and she said, “Yes, I would name it after a white man who fought for black liberation.” And then she went on to say (she says she was drunk when she wrote this, and she probably was [laughs]), “I can hear those Negroes in Harlem talking about, “This woman is naming a black theatre after a white man!” And she said, “Yes, that is what I believe.”

But she very much saw the connections of people across culture, across race, across ethnicity, across gender and all of that, without watering down anything, without saying “We have to blur this and we have to blunt some of this anger, and we have to do this and do all that,” and essentially compromise, in a way, the essence of cultures, in order to come together. She felt that they should be represented in their own right. But she claimed for this theatre an African American sensibility that was not narrow, but that was quite broad. And that is what Kenny Leon is doing. I don’t know if he has ever read that, but I am going to—I need to send it to him so he can read it. He may have. I don’t know. We actually published the article for the first time in the journal *The Black Scholar*. It was the first time that it was ever published.

18-00:20:15

Wilmot:
In 1979?

18-00:20:17

Wilkerson:
Yeah. Yeah. It had never been published before, so it was great to put that out.

18-00:20:26

Wilmot:
Well I wanted to turn now to your research on Lorraine Hansberry. So you are in the process of writing a biography?

18-00:20:37

Wilkerson:
Yes. [laughs]

18-00:20:38

Wilmot:
In past interviews, you said that you began being interested in researching her in the late seventies.

Wilkerson:

Yeah, it was in the seventies. It was definitely in the seventies. I had of course seen *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959, and had kept up somewhat with her, but not a lot. Then Bob Nemiroff, her former husband, who was then the executor of her papers, heard that I was doing this *Black*

Scholar issue. He called me up and said that he had this piece that I just mentioned, the *John Brown Theatre* of the Harlem Community Theatre, that had never been published, and would we like to include it? And of course we jumped at that. And so we published it.

That started up a relationship between the two of us. He was always looking for scholars—then, young scholars [laughs]—who might write about Hansberry’s work. So he would send me, after that, he would send me pieces from her papers and all that sort of thing. And then, because he sent me a lot of things that hadn’t been published yet, I decided to do a seminar on Hansberry, and I have forgotten which year it is, it was in the seventies, I think. I had about fifteen students, a very diverse group, I had white students, I had black, and I had Asian, and Latino, I remember that a number of the students were in the class, they were so taken with her and her writing. Some of them were angry. They said, “I have never heard of her before. Why haven’t I heard of her?” She died young, so she was always young to them, and the kinds of issues that she raised were the kinds of issues that really troubled them. I always had students keep a journal, because it allowed them to process some of the emotional reactions that they would have to some of the literature, and I found that several students in that class addressed their journals to Lorraine. They would say “dear Lorraine,” and write about whatever it was—

18-00:23:26

Wilmot:

How nice.

18-00:23:26

Wilkerson:

It was really amazing and it was that experience that made me decide to write on her.

Now, I had not planned to write a biography. I was a theatre scholar, so I figured, you analyze your plays and so forth. And I didn’t particularly want to write a biography because I had certain biases against biography [laughs] at that time. But then, at a conference, I announced after I did my paper that I was going to do a book on her, and Bob Nemiroff happened to be in the audience and afterwards he offered me exclusive access to her unpublished papers to write a biography.

18-00:24:13

Wilmot:

What do you think moved him to choose you for that privilege?

18-00:24:18

Wilkerson:

I don’t know. I don’t know. He would say that, he did say at times, that he felt that I had the same kind of spirit and could understand who Lorraine was. I am not sure exactly why he offered that to me.

18-00:24:37

Wilmot:

Were there other people working on Lorraine Hansberry at that time?

18-00:24:38

Wilkerson:

Yeah. Steven—oh lord!

18-00:24:44

Wilmot:

It's okay.

18-00:24:44

Wilkerson:

I am so bad with names [laughing], I am sorry. Carter. I'm sorry. Steven Carter was writing an analysis of her plays and he had access to certain things, but I don't know, maybe he was looking for a black female scholar, I am not really sure what moved him to do this. And I thought about it a bit and then decided to do it. I didn't realize what I was getting into, but then I backed into a lot of things before. I mean, I didn't realize the extent of what it meant to do a biography. I started that in the eighties, actually. The papers, of course, were in New York, and I lived in California, so that meant that I couldn't exactly run around the corner to see them. So that took some of the time, coming and reading them and going through them and taking notes and all of those kinds of things, until I got a laptop, where I could actually [laughs] record things and all. So it was something of a lengthy process, but I am close to the ending now. I am really hoping that this summer is going to be it.

I have about 700 pages of a manuscript, about nineteen chapters, and I am in the process of editing. But I am going to interview, just to circle back to the Broadway Revival, I am going to interview members of the cast about the meaning of the play for them in 2004. I think that it is a fitting way to conclude the book, even though it is about Lorraine and not about *A Raisin in the Sun*, I think it embodies a lot of who she was and what her work means for the future, that it is not dated at all.

18-00:26:23

Wilmot:

How big of a role did interview methodology play in your research for this?

Wilkerson:

I interviewed quite a number of people, and hunted down people and found people, Some people I didn't get to interview. For two or three years or so, I was interviewing as many people as I possibly could, especially people who were older. I did an interview, for example with Alice Childress, the playwright, before she died, and it was a wonderful interview. She told me a lot of things. She knew Lorraine as a young woman when she came to New York in 1950. My dissertation had been based on a lot of interviews and so I had learned a lot doing that.

18-00:27:34

Wilmot:

Was interviewing your primary methodology, or were you spending time with papers?

18-00:27:39

Wilkerson:

Oh, I spent a lot of time with the papers. In a funny way my dissertation prepared me for a lot of what I did. I really loved when I was researching eight black theatres for my dissertation. In some cases, like Aldridge Players West that Henrietta Harris was a part of, the boxes were stored, I think, in Adam Miller's garage. So he let me take those boxes. And they were just memorabilia stacks. So I had to go through things and date them. I had to try to figure out, put

them in some kind of chronology, put them in context, a bunch of things like that that I had learned from the short time that I was in history as an undergrad, the kinds of things that turned me off to it, but I really enjoyed doing it very, very much. Bob Nemiroff had categorized, and indexed the Hansberry papers in a filing system that worked for him. But it was a filing system that he had designed for his purposes, and they weren't mine necessarily. So I had to work between his indexing and mine. Where would things be? If there was a section call like LH, that is, Lorraine Hansberry's development, what did that mean? For him it meant one thing, for me it meant something else. So that took some time and some kind of adjusting. And I haven't fully adjusted, actually [laughs], with the various changes after he died and so on. But I have made complete listings of what is in those papers.

In the papers there were some things that needed to be dated. There were some things that weren't in the archive, like a very important letter that she wrote to the *Daily Cardinal* after she left the University of Wisconsin, a very seminal letter that is very insightful about the weaknesses of a big research university. She was all of like twenty or twenty-one years old. It is really quite insightful.

But one of the most useful and fascinating parts of the papers is her library. She read quite broadly, and it gave you a sense of the breadth of her vision and her ideas, but she also wrote copious notes in certain books. She might say, "Oh, this is brilliant," and in the next page, "How stupid, this is ridiculous!" [laughs] She had opinions, and the great thing about these books in her library is that it is an unmediated conversation between her and the writer. Even an interview doesn't give you that. There is nobody in-between. This is just me and the text. I literally did *find* her copy of one book, in some old boxes that were brought over from one of the apartments where she and Bob Nemoroff had lived. It was *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beavoir, the French feminist. Hansberry was reviewing the book and had read it and wasn't quite finished with her review. She was one of the few women, in this country anyway, that had appreciated that book. It took a while for that to catch on. I knew that she had read it, but the book that was in her library was a paperback dated after she had died, so I knew that was not the original copy. But when I found the original, I mean, it was just a big moment for me. The first fifteen pages were mashed together because they had been dampened and so on. But the rest of it you could read. This is a 700-page book. I immediately copied the entire book, because I didn't know how long the text itself would survive, and she had written on almost every page of that book. Now this was a woman who was mentored by W.E. B. DuBois and Paul Robeson and others, and they were wonderful mentors for her. Up until the time that she read the *The Second Sex*, DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* was the text that she had written the most in. But there was something about Simone de Beauvoir's work that spoke to her as a woman, and as a woman struggling with her sexuality at that time, as a black woman struggling in a world that didn't value black people very much, certainly not women, and this text really spoke to her in a lot of different ways. So she wrote many, many notes on that.

So I xeroxed the book—we are talking about methodology—I xeroxed the entire book and then I indexed all of her comments in relationship to what was in the book. So I have a very thick manuscript of not only the text itself with her writing in it, but also an analysis and a kind of coding of what she said in relation to what de Beauvoir was saying. And I am hoping that eventually that will be very useful to other scholars as well.

So there were things like that that I did to help fill out the papers. I mean, it is not totally all filled out, but they helped to be able to use the papers myself, but also to leave something in place for others. So the interviews- those, going through the interviews with a fine tooth comb, I had to do a lot of historical research. She was a woman who was very much involved intellectually and, in some cases, as an activist in what was happening in the world, and she studied and knew what was going on in the world. And I do mean the world, because she worked on Paul Robeson's newspaper for several years and reported news from all over the world that they thought would be of interest to the African American communities. So I had to try to be as up on that as I possibly could be so that I could understand what she was doing, what choices she was making at particular times. This was 1930-1965, some of the country's most incredible and tumultuous years.

It has been a real learning experience. It has been quite fascinating. I am sorry that it has taken so long, and I apologize to everyone who ever looks at this. It is taking me [laughs] so long to get this done, but I have not been a full-time writer. I have been doing a few other things along the way. But I think that I have matured and I think that the work has matured with me. So I would like to believe that there is reason for it taking this long.

18-00:35:29

Wilmot:

I want to ask, over the course of doing this work, what has she come to mean to you?

18-00:35:39

Wilkerson:

Okay. Got you. That is not an easy thing to answer [laughs] at all! When I first came to work on her, what I knew of her was that everything was not out there. I mean, the fact that she was lesbian was not out there. The fact that she had been a part of the Communist Party, like so many other artists had been, was not as much of a surprise to me, but that was not out there either. As I came to her initially, she was this marvelous young black woman, obviously a smart woman who had written an incredible couple of plays and they were very exciting and things of that kind, and I saw her as a kind of almost an icon, in a sense. As I have come to read her journals, her personal journals, which I read with great trepidation initially, I felt like I was just intruding where I shouldn't. Having studied her work and her life as much as I have, I have come to see her as a very brilliant and a very human being. I had to come to grips with the fact that she was a gay woman. And when I was told that by her former husband, I decided, like any good researcher, that I had to take it with a grain of salt. What did that mean? Does that mean that I write about that part of her, or is that just an absolutely intimate personal point that I don't touch.

As I came to understand it and read about it and so on, I talked to people, I decided that because she cared enough to write about it, often under pseudonyms and given the fact that it was part of who she was, that I had to write about it. And I had to find a way to write about it so that people would not dismiss it, so that they would try to understand. It is an opportunity to understand: why the choice? Why a lesbian choice? What did it mean for her? And to try to get beyond the very basic level at which we tend to deal with sexual issues, such as, "Well, who slept with whom and what do they do?" and that sort of thing. It was very important for me to try to unpack that as much as I could. And I had to unpack it in myself initially. [sound of thunder] I don't think that I was homophobic, but I didn't understand a lot, and I needed to unpack that for myself

as well. So that took me a little time, to try to figure that out and try to develop an approach that would allow people to be more understanding rather than condemning her. And I must say, I taught her many times at Berkeley over the years, sometimes in small freshman seminars, or in portions of classes, and the interaction with students has been very helpful to me. It helped me to understand how to approach it [lesbianism]. And also being reaffirmed, and the fact that the students, or at least the ones at Berkeley that I talked to, were not uptight about it. In fact, some said that it helped them to understand her better and understand her work better.

So it has been a big evolution for me, and I see her as a very, very human person and brilliant, really brilliant. But she is truly brilliant and I have constantly come across things that she had said, and things that I have even quoted that I have forgotten, that remind me of her amazing kind of insight. Particularly amazing in such a young woman. A very young woman.

18-00:39:53

Wilmot:

I am not so familiar with Lorraine Hansberry's work, so I'm not sure of the reference, but I remember you mentioning in an article, "The sighted eyes and feeling heart,"—

18-00:40:05

Wilkerson:

Yes.

18-00:40:05

Wilmot:

"of Lorraine Hansberry." Where was that from?

18-00:40:08

Wilkerson:

It is from her—I am trying to remember what it actually is from. I believe that it is from one of the speeches that she gave. The place where most people would find it is in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, which is a compilation of her work that her late husband, her former husband edited, after she died. But she talks about sighted eyes and a feeling heart, in terms of her own life experience growing up in Chicago and coming through this period- the periods of war and being born right after the Depression and so on. It is a paraphrasing of something that she said.

18-00:41:00

Wilmot:

I think, the other thing is, everyone in that film that I mentioned before by Woodie King, Jr.?

18-00:41:08

Wilkerson:

Yes.

18-00:41:08

Wilmot:

She was the second voice on film, basically. First it was Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, and then she was the second voice on the film. It is like an image. So in some way the film, at least, locates her as the mother of black theatre. And many of the people, as you said that he said, many of the

people who were in the film located her as their inspiration or as some influence. Who do you consider her influences? As her figurative parents?

18-00:41:49

Wilkerson:

Oh, yeah, yeah. Well first I should say that she is in a way the mother, but actually, the traditions of black theatre go back way before her, and there were many others who came, and she would be the first to say that, but what she did was become a very compelling voice at a moment in time when the country was ready for that, and when black people were ready for it, and when others were ready for it. When white people were looking at the Civil Rights Movement that was growing in the South and trying to understand, “What is going on? We thought people were happy. We thought that it was okay, that we had come so far and so on.” So she comes in at a moment in time, but in terms of the—now I have forgotten what you asked me.

18-00:42:39

Wilmot:

Her influences.

18-00:42:39

Wilkerson:

Her influences, right. Who were her literary parents? Well, there were several. She loved the work of Sean O’Casey and she talks about that in her memoirs that she started to write. She saw *Juno and the Paycock*, a story about a poor Irish family, when she was in college at Wisconsin, and she said that she heard in that a wail and a cry, and saw in that an experience that reflected, that echoed, the same condition of black people, and that she wanted to capture that at some point. And she says consciously, “It entered into my sensibility. I soaked it in, I absorbed it in some way, almost unconsciously, and then later this work would come up.” Because she really, when she came to New York, she wanted to be a journalist but then she shifted to drama. So, Sean O’Casey is one influence, and Shakespeare is another. She loved Shakespeare’s work and I think that shows in her the command of language that she has and the love for language. If you see *A Raisin in the Sun*, or if you read it (usually you should see it), you can see it there. And you see it’s particularly strong in *Les Blanc*, a story about an African sort of revolution, in which the language is heightened. It is almost Shakespearean in its syntax and, so she loved language and she loved the brilliance in Shakespeare and the way in which he shaped his work, and the tragedies and so on. She always aspired to that.

W.E.B. DuBois was another important political and artistic influence. He was both a sociologist as a scholar but also an artist. He wrote *The Souls of Black Folk*, which is a kind of history of black people. He starts each chapter with a refrain from a Negro spiritual. And she also worked on Paul Robeson’s newspaper. So she had these other figures who were artists writ-large who were artists and political activists, who were artists and scholars and so on, so that they were not narrowly defined artists- I am just a playwright or whatever. They were really citizens of the world, and people who had breadth and depth and cared about what was happening to their people, to people around the world, and who chose to express this often through art. So those were the kinds of people. And of course as I mentioned, Simone de Beauvoir, who spoke to the feminist self. And remember, all of these areas were different and separate. There was feminism, in France at least, there was African American, there were gay communities, and they were all separated. There was not a sense of wholeness there, and yet she was a woman who embodied all

of those areas, and I think that is part of her pain and struggle, was trying to reconcile all of that in her one, as DuBois says, “her one dark body.”

Wilmot:

Do you think that her being gay would be more or less controversial than her being married to a white man?

18-00:46:48

Wilkerson:

Oh—well, [laughs] it is hard to say these days. Probably being gay these days might be a little bit more controversial. With some people her marriage to Bob Nemiroff would still be somewhat controversial, but there is so much interracial marriage now that it is foregrounded and it is visible that I think that folks have begun to make some peace with it. But there were people, in the sixties in particular, who were really unhappy with the fact that she was married to a white man. One of those people was Malcolm X, who called her, at one point, a traitor to the race. And when she had a chance to meet him, she really got in his face. She met him I think after he had gone to Mecca, where he saw connections among the people and saw that many Muslims were white and blue eyed, so he began to rethink his position. And I think she was at a meeting where he said something to the effect that we need to be brothers and sisters and so on, and she said, “Well, I am certainly glad you finally figured that out, because you called me a traitor because I was married to a white man.” So, she was courageous, too! [laughs] And I think that it is a fact and that people had kind of made peace with that fact. There is a tendency to ignore Bob Nemiroff and to focus on Lorraine. It is proper to certainly focus on Lorraine, but Bob Nemiroff was a very important part of her life and whether anyone likes it or doesn’t like it or whatever, it is a fact.

18-00:48:45

Wilmot:

Yes. Yeah. I was thinking about in that era, just interracial relationships being so rare during that time, high profile, at least high profile marriages.

18-00:48:59

Wilkerson:

Yes, yes.

18-00:49:01

Wilmot:

Certainly, I mean I guess in some ways interracial relationships have never been rare, but just the idea that—and then also because she was a race woman- I don’t know whether or not she identified herself as such.

18-00:49:15

Wilkerson:

I think in a way, yeah.

18-00:49:16

Wilmot:

In the same era, Eartha Kitt was very high profile and was married to a white man and was a starlet of sorts.

18-00:49:31

Wilkerson:

Yes, yes.

18-00:49:32

Wilmot:

In any event. So that is really interesting. In order to access her papers do you have to go to her estate?

18-00:49:43

Wilkerson:

I did. They were kept in the home where Bob lived with his then wife, Jewel Gresham Nemiroff. And I had to go there to look at the papers, which can be a little awkward sometimes. But we worked through it. I think we worked through it. In fact, they were here in Croton, just nearby, not too far away, and I got a chance to go through all of the papers, actually. After Nemiroff died, I helped to index everything that was there so that his widow and now executor of the papers could know what was there and what she needed to do and what she wanted to do.

18-00:50:38

Wilmot:

Did you spend time in places where she had lived?

18-00:50:40

Wilkerson:

In places where she lived? Oh, I spent a lot of time in Croton, because the papers were there. That was the place where she lived before she died. I made a visit to Chicago and went to all—saw them from the outside—of the houses that her family had lived in. Her father was a real estate agent and he moved the family into these big houses that whites had vacated, and renovate them into several apartments. So that the kitchenette apartment that is the site of *A Raisin in the Sun* is the kind of apartment that he created out of these very large homes, turning them into smaller apartments for the burgeoning black migration that was coming up from the South into Chicago, into areas that were very segregated. So you have all of these people coming in and you have these parameters set in Chicago. So what do you do with all of these people coming into Chicago when there is no more housing for them? So he created more housing out of the few places that were there. I am sorry, [laughing] I get off the subject that I get going on! We were talking about what?

18-00:52:12

Wilmot:

Sorry. I was asking if you had been places where she had lived, and you said that you had been to Croton and Chicago—

18-00:52:16

Wilkerson:

Yeah. I went to all of the places and saw them from the outside. I got a chance to see an apartment, not one she had lived in, but it was like the other apartments. It happened by chance, because of someone I met. Strange things happen when you are doing research, and I will tell you about this one incident very quickly.

I was getting ready to go to Chicago and I was supposed to meet a colleague at one of the black faculty- I don't know. It was one of those receptions for somebody or something like that. So I went and this person didn't show up. So I ran into Bill Lester, who is a professor there in chemistry, and he struck up a conversation. "What are you doing?" I said, "I am getting ready to leave for Chicago tomorrow. I am working on Lorraine Hansberry, researching her biography. So he said, "You ought to look up this uncle of mine, because I think he said that he knew Hansberry when he was younger." Well, I can't tell you how many times people have said that to me. "Oh yes, so and so knew," and you follow it up and they say, "Well, I sort of knew her, but I really didn't." So I thought, oh, okay, okay sure. So I got there and I looked him up. And he was living in one of the apartments in a building that the Hansberrys owned and that they had lived in. I think they lived upstairs. And he had known her, and he had seen her with this man named Ray Hansborough, who was not related, but the name was very similar. He was a black communist who had been sent to Chicago by the party to try to bring in, to connect, to have the party and its activities with the other social activist groups like the NAACP and so on that were more traditional.

Now I had heard about this man from someone else in Chicago who said that Lorraine had learned everything that she knew about politics from him. But I had not been able to find anything on this man, or to trace anything. I had gone to libraries, I had looked, looked, I couldn't find anything. And here Bill Lester's relative had actually seen her with him when she was like ten years old, and talked about that. It was just an amazing coincidence.

In research of this kind, you are obligated to follow as many of the leads as possible, but after a while you become kind of jaded about whether these leads are going to pan out. But this one was absolutely on the money. And it was after that, then, that I did find Ray Hansborough's obituary, but not in the usual place. I found it in the Schomburg, New York Public Library's research library in Harlem, in what they call the vertical files. People in Harlem, for example, would keep memorabilia, and then after their deaths, somebody might give it to the library.

So there are all of these vertical files, kind of eccentrically put together, just around people's interests, and I went through those, and there was his obituary, which I never would have found any other way. That told me a lot about him, just from what was listed in the obituary. But it was Bill Lester's relative who really helped me make that personal connection. It was really amazing. So those things happen. That is part of the drama and excitement of doing this kind of work, but it is also very, very time consuming.

18-00:56:15

Wilmot:

What about her FBI file?

18-00:56:18

Wilkerson:

Well, the FBI file is very interesting. Bob Nemiroff took care of Hansberry's papers, and kind of produced her work after she died and made sure that people wrote about her, and he also wrote about her and compiled books.

In the course of all the research that he was doing, he had tried, with the help of the Freedom of Information Act, to collect as much of her stuff as possible. So around the time that I came into the picture he was getting the files. It is like two reams of paper on her. It is a healthy file, and I indexed that also. You see, you can't work with this material in separate sheets of paper, you need something that analyzes and gives you an overview and so on. So I went through all of those sheets and summarized what they were. I gave them a number code. I think they are sort of in chronological order, but it is a little hard because you have your quotes from different FBI offices.

A couple of things leapt out at me. First of all, she first appeared in the FBI files as the daughter of Carl Hansberry, Sr. The reason for that was that he and his wife—Carl and [laughs] Nannie, I think it was—had put together a foundation. Because he was, you know, well off. He was a very successful real estate broker. Had put together a foundation, the purpose of which was to inform black people of their rights. They put out a sort of Civil Rights publication agenda, a small paper, to say, here are the latest kinds of rights that you should claim for yourself. Updating people on civil rights. Just a very democratic thing to do. That is how he got picked up in the FBI files. It was recorded that this man was doing this, and the children's names are listed. And that is where she first shows up in the FBI files.

But then, she goes to New York. Well, actually in Wisconsin her name gets picked up in terms of her being a member of the Communist Party, okay. But the thing that leapt out at me was the amount of time and resources that went into following her around. And she was not a member of any central committee. She was just a writer and a student. Yes, she was very progressive, she spoke out and all of those kinds of things. When I think of the time and money that went into following her, if we could [laughs] count up how much the FBI spent on surveillance of people they thought were dangerous, it must be billions of dollars.

18-01:00:05

Wilmot:

Yep.

18-01:00:05

Wilkerson:

She actually—the other thing that leapt out at me was that she was actually placed on the Security Index for a number of years, and that was a list of those people who were suspected of being the most treasonous and the most traitorous people in this country. Now one of the reasons that she fell under the gaze of the FBI was because of her relationship to Bob. Bob had been very, very out there in many ways, very progressive, and particularly when he was a student at NYU, and so they were watching him. Then when she came into the picture that just fed it and made it even worse.

They sent two agents to see *A Raisin in the Sun* when it opened on Broadway, and their review is really funny, because they talked about the audience laughing at the usual places, and they didn't think that the play was very dangerous. It wasn't very "revolutionary" and all of that, you know. I have always thought that if Lorraine had ever seen that, she would have been disappointed. But they obviously missed the deeper revolutionary strain that actually is there in the play. But because nobody was out shaking their fists and so on, I guess they figured that it was pretty safe. But it was just amazing to me the lengths to which the FBI went to surveil people who were just going about their business and their rights. She never plotted to overthrow the country, that is for sure.

[End Audio File 18]

[Begin Audio File 19]

Wilmot:

Margaret, your memoir and your oral history that you did with Louise Patterson, when did that take place? Was that an early work or a later work?

19-00:00:18

Wilkerson:

No, it was in the eighties, as I recall. We started working on that in the late eighties.

19-00:00:26

Wilmot:

Okay. How did that come into being?

19-00:00:30

Wilkerson:

Let me just try to remember. Well, Louise Patterson had been living in New York and her daughter lived in, Mary Lou Patterson, lived in Oakland. I think Louise had turned eighty or ninety or eighty-five—she was really up there in age—and she decided to move west and live with her daughter. And they had an event, at Berkeley to feature her, and I met her there.

I knew that she had known Lorraine, and Louise Patterson's husband was William Patterson, who was a major figure in the Communist Party. He had even written a review of *A Raisin in the Sun*, which was not totally complementary. And so Lorraine knew them. They had sometimes gone to the beach together, they traveled in some of the same circles. So I wanted to interview her for the Hansberry book, which I did. I was chairing the department of African American Studies at the time, and in the course of that Louise asked me to come and to help her write her biography. I was in the midst of doing the Hansberry and it was difficult to [laugh] interrupt that, but I felt very humbled by the fact that she wanted me to help her capture her history. I felt like I couldn't refuse that. I thought that it was one of those sorts of things that you are asked to do that you should really do. And I like Louise a lot and I really enjoy her, so we started this process and I felt that the first thing to do would be to capture her on tape, to build the memoirs from that. She and I consulted about this approach. Knowing her age and so on, I felt that, if anything happened, we would at least have her story on tape. So we started down that path and did a lot of interviewing. Louise also wanted companionship as well.

19-00:03:10

Wilmot:

That happens sometimes.

19-00:03:12

Wilkerson:

You know, [laughs], a lot of time went into helping her out, being with her, interviewing her, the whole bit. Berkeley has this research money, very modest research money but that can go a long way if you are hiring students or doing things like that. I was able to get some small grants, like the Faculty Research Grant, to get students to help me. So you know, it took us quite a few years, actually. I wrote about 200 pages, which was, I won't say the manuscript was well written; it was tied together from the interviews and the transcriptions. The beginnings of her story, and so on. Then I entered into a process of trying to have her review those, critique and so on.

It was around that time, maybe a little before, that her daughter decided to move to Riverside with her husband. Louise wasn't exactly left alone, because she had many, many friends in the area, but her daughter was not there. So the call on my time increased a lot. I managed some of that with the help of graduate students. She loved talking to students and she was wonderful with them. And, how can I say it, at some point the daughter essentially said that she needed to have someone who could come and kind of sit with her on a daily basis and finish the story and so on. And I knew that I couldn't do that. I am sure that she knew that as well. So I left the project. I just left it all. I still have the taped interviews and transcriptions because they belong to me essentially, and I have the 200 pages typed [laughs], and it just didn't go anywhere. And it was a kind of a bittersweet sort of situation. I was very hurt by the way that I was treated and I am sure that they were unhappy that—I don't know if Louise was that unhappy—but, anyway, it seems as if the family was unhappy that it hadn't moved on further. But I felt that it was her story and I didn't feel that I could just take it and do it. I needed to get feedback from her. I needed to hear from her, as well as her daughter. What about this piece that we have done? It was very hard to get that feedback. I tried every way that I could. I had students that would go and read it to Louise and take down notes, I would go and so on, but I couldn't, as a chair of a department and full time worker, I couldn't give that kind of time. I got my wish that it got settled some form or another. I didn't expect it to get settled that way. So that is what happened, and she still needs to have her story told.

19-00:06:48

Wilmot:

Is she still alive?

19-00:06:50

Wilkerson:

No, no. She passed away a few years ago here in New York. She eventually moved back to New York, and Mary Lou, who was a physician, lives here in New York now as well.

19-00:06:59

Wilmot:

I am going to ask the ignorant question of what's historically significant about her.

19-00:07:07

Wilkerson:

Well, gosh. Louise, aside from being married to William Patterson, was very much an activist. She knew and was close friends with Langston Hughes. There is a film made by St. Clair Borne about Langston Hughes, and Louise was featured hugely in that film because she knew him. She traveled with, actually organized the trip that Langston Hughes and other black artists took to Russia in the 1930s. A very controversial trip. She just is wound all through the history there. Her early history as a young woman growing up in the west in Nevada is really quite fascinating. It is a wonderful story and it needs to be told, it should be told, but it has never been done.

In fact, the family brought in someone else, Robert Allen, to do it. I never knew what happened, exactly, but he left the project. So it was just difficult to get it done. Maybe some day the tapes will be picked up and someone will write it. But she really deserves to be written about. She is famous in some ways, but not as famous as people who were in big major positions. She was a labor activist, she worked in Chicago with all kinds of ethnic groups around labor. I mean, it was really just an amazing kind of story of a very amazing woman. And it deserves to be told. I hope that one day it will be.

19-00:09:00

Wilmot:

Do you recall any highlights from the interview or any important things that furthered your research or understanding with regards to black theatre and Lorraine Hansberry?

19-00:09:15

Wilkerson:

You mean from Louise?

19-00:09:16

Wilmot:

Yes.

19-00:09:18

Wilkerson:

Well, she worked with the Harlem Suitcase Theatre with Langston Hughes. She was really a very close friend of Langston Hughes. And so she had in her possession a copy of, I think it was, the rules that they laid down for the theatre, which reveal a lot about how people worked. I had never seen that document anywhere. So she gave me a copy of that. That is a great, momentous part of black theatre, a very important piece of it. She knew Robeson very well. She was particularly useful in terms of the history of the period from the inside. What was happening, who were some of the major actors and players in it and all that.

19-00:10:18

Wilmot:

Yes. The political context that—

19-00:10:21

Wilkerson:

The political context.

19-00:10:21

Wilmot:

—that surrounded and birthed Lorraine Hansberry’s consciousness?

19-00:10:24

Wilkerson:

Right, yeah.

19-00:10:26

Wilmot:

Interesting. You mentioned Robert Allen of *The Black Scholar*. I just wanted to move back now to 1979, the first issue of *The Black Scholar* dedicated to black theatre. That was something that you guest edited with VèVè Clark. It is an amazing document. You and VèVè made a decision to divide it into three parts. One was “Illuminations”—I’ve got the issue right here. And it is this first issue in which you publish that piece from Lorraine Hansberry, the original prospectus for the John Brown Memorial Theatre of Harlem. In your editorial preface, you say, “The idea for this issue originated with a panel. Black theatre sources recovering a lost past, organized by Margaret Wilkerson for the 1977 American Theater Association Convention, Chicago.”

There are three sections in here. The first is “Testaments,” which features the original source material. The second is “Illuminations,” which looks at the character of the theatrical event in black communities, and the value of it, an anthropological approach to understanding, preserving the essence of the process. And then the last one is “Regeneration,” which presents “the living repositories of black theater traditions—the people, the scripts, the vital record of the theatre hidden by neglect and sometimes by design.” I am directly quoting from your preface.

19-00:12:39

Wilkerson:

[laughs]

Wilmot:

So what was that process like, pulling together this issue? You brought in the leading scholars of the day, Errol Hill, William Branch, and artists and directors and playwrights. There is an interview in here, VèVè interviewing Amiri Baraka regarding *Scottsboro Limited*. So you have a real wide range of people here. I am going to give this to you—

19-00:13:18

Wilkerson:

Thank you.

19-00:13:19

Wilmot:

Yes.

19-00:13:20

Wilkerson:

[laughs] I use it often. I haven’t reread the entire issue, but I use it for some of the sources that are in here. Well, I am not sure if I remember exactly how this came to be. I can’t remember whether Bob Chrisman asked us to do this, but the idea of it came from the panel, and maybe we

approached the editors of the journal. I am not sure. But I was active in the American Theatre Association and we did a lot of scholarly work through the American Theatre Association. VèVè was, I think, still a graduate student at that point, and a very brilliant graduate student. She was more on the literary side, but not narrowly so. VèVè was never very narrow in the way that she looked at things. She was already writing her dissertation on Katherine Dunham, the great dancer anthropologist. So she was spanning those fields, and VèVè had a really marvelous sense of how significant that was. So it was her understandings of Dunham and the connections between the arts and anthropology that I think helped to inform what we were doing here.

She is a marvelous historian, as well. It was a really good partnership. We sat together and came up with the concept and we divided up the responsibilities for it. And we had a lot of fun doing it, because, as you have said, it is an unusual issue because it spans so many sorts of disciplinary approaches.

There are original source materials, which were very, very strong, and we thought that it was important in those days to note that there was such a thing as source material on black theater. It wasn't just being invented out of the air somewhere, but there was tradition, there were sources, there were materials that people could actually go to. And yet at the same time we wanted to show and deal with the performative aspect of black theatre—that it doesn't live simply in the text, that it also lives in three dimensions on the stage. That was very important. So we had people like Floyd Gaffney writing about black theatre in the university; Errol Hill's (the outstanding scholar and director who just passed away last year) and my article on redefining black theatre, and so on. It was a lot of fun to do, and I think that it is still used, a lot, by various scholars who are looking at some of these same kinds of questions and are also looking for some of this original source material. I believe this is the only place where it is available, unless it has been reprinted. It was the first place where Lorraine Hansberry's original prospectus for the John Brown Memorial Theatre in Harlem was ever printed. I think we got Katherine Dunham to write for the issue. So it was an exciting thing to put together. VèVè and I collaborated also, as you know, on *Kaiso!* I don't know what you would call it. It is not exactly a book. It is maybe a large monograph, or collected materials, on Katherine Dunham. There we compiled a number of writings by her and about her. It was published, interestingly enough, by the Center for the Study of Social Change, which Troy Duster ran.

19-00:17:55

Wilmot:

I recall that article, reading that.

19-00:17:58

Wilkerson:

And we still get requests for that. Shortly after we moved here, VèVè sent me some information that there was a publisher who wanted to actually publish it. I was just too involved with everything and I told her to go ahead and do whatever she felt she wanted to do.

19-00:18:21

Wilmot:

While you are doing that you can maybe send out your dissertation.

19-00:18:25

Wilkerson:
[laughs]

19-00:18:28

Wilmot:

There is a panel, the 1977 panel that you and VèVè mention, and then VèVè references it also in an interview that she does with Amiri Baraka, and there is a person mentioned, his name is Ward.

19-00:19:01

Wilkerson:

Oh, Theodore Ward probably.

19-00:19:03

Wilmot:

Yes, that you brought to that panel.

19-00:19:05

Wilkerson:

Oh gosh, I remember that. Geez, long time ago.

19-00:19:07

Wilmot:

Can you tell me a little bit about that—is he someone that everyone knows is important, or are there people who still do not know about him?

19-00:19:14

Wilkerson:

Theatre scholars do know him. I did have the chance to meet him and see him, a couple or so times. He was an amazing playwright out of Chicago. Let's look at *Black Theatre USA* [flipping pages]. This is the revised version of (where is it now?), he was in the 1930s, yeah. *Big White Fog*, that is it. 1938, the year I was born. [laughs] Yeah—his play is really just an incredible work and it was exciting to get to meet him. He was quite up in age at the time that we had him on the panel. So he was like one of the sort of literary fathers, if you will. I am just trying to read the introduction here just to—yeah.

The play opened in New York, and it had luminaries such as Canada Lee in it, and Frank Silvera, all of these are giants of black theater. Henry Watkins was the set designer, I mean it was just really a collection of terribly brilliant black professionals. But the critics, the reviewers praised the performers and the seriousness of the company, but they condemned the play. The play is about a family, and the father gets very much involved with the Garvey movement. I don't want to tell the whole story, but, in the play, there are arguments about Black Nationalism, and against capitalism, against communism. At the end of the play, it is communists who come forward and helps the family that gets evicted. So the play was condemned largely because of that ending. Because it was seen as a play that elevated communism and so on.

But the debates in that play that occurred between the two brothers—the head of the family, and his brother—are really quite incredible as they talk about what is the direction that blacks should

take. Should they embrace the kind of back to Africa movement of Garvey or the black nationalism of Garvey, or should they embrace capitalism? The brother has become a true capitalist, and he criticizes his Garvey-following brother because he is struggling economically, whereas the brother who is the capitalist is doing very well and so on. When the family is evicted, as I said, the communists come along and help the family. There's a lot of drama in it and it is a wonderfully written play. I remember how special it was to have Theodore Ward there with us, with the history that he represented and the experience in the theatre that he represented. He lived for a number of years after that, but it was really just exciting to have him present and to have that sense of history.

One of the things that we always struggled with in our *Black Scholar* sorts of activities and theatre scholarship was trying to create a sense of history. Folks saw the sixties come along and they started to define all of black theatre with the work of LeRoi Jones, the important playwright of that moment. Well, we knew that there was a much longer tradition and history that was there, and I must say that Errol Hill and Jim Hatch, who compiled this book, completed a book on black theater history, African American theater history, which just won a prize from the Theatre Library Association. It is going to be awarded this month. So that was part of the effort of this *Black Scholar* issue, to try to capture the range of what black theatre is about. There's source material in the issue, and it is truly a place for real scholarship to happen. That scholarship needs to be informed by the performative aspect of black theatre, as well as the text, and also to give some sense of what was its current state and what we saw for the future. We got a great group of people to represent that.

19-00:25:25

Wilmot:

And this 1977 panel, who else was there? Do you recall?

19-00:25:31

Wilkerson:

[laughs] I honestly don't recall. I'm sorry to say, I am not sure who else was on the panel.

19-00:25:39

Wilmot:

Okay. I wanted to ask you this other question which was about, and this is maybe jumping around a bit. There is this piece that you wrote "Schomburg Center's First Fellow, My Fellowship Year."

19-00:25:53

Wilkerson:

Oh, yeah.

19-00:25:55

Wilmot:

Were you a fellow at the Schomburg?

19-00:25:56

Wilkerson:

Yes, I was. Actually, it was a Ford fellowship. It was a post-doctoral fellowship from the Ford Fellows Program, and at that time you could take your fellowship (it was I forgot what they call

it, a traveling fellowship, whatever) and connect with any institution that you wanted to. I decided I wanted to connect with the Schomburg because it was a place where I could be in New York, This was in the the early years of my work on Hansberry, and I could be close to the papers and I could get a lot done. So I came and stayed for periods at a time. I had three children so I couldn't quite disappear, but I would come for a few weeks at a time and parent from afar.

19-00:26:45

Wilmot:

Were there people there who were particularly helpful at the Schomburg?

19-00:26:48

Wilkerson:

Yeah, Ernest Kaiser, who was the archivist, was one of the librarians there. He had done a bibliography with Bob Nemiroff on Hansberry. And he was very helpful. The curators there were really helpful in terms of source material. They didn't have anything much on Hansberry, because at that time most of the stuff, practically all of it except that which was published, was in the hands of Bob Nemiroff. No papers, none of the unpublished stuff had gone there yet. So I did a lot of contextual research there. As I say, that is where I found the obituary of Ray Hansborough. That was important to me.

19-00:27:33

Wilmot:

I would like to turn now to your book, *Nine Plays by Black Women*.

19-00:27:54

Wilkerson:

Well, I have it sitting here beside me here. [laughs]

19-00:27:57

Wilmot:

It came out in 1986, and included plays [phone rings] from 1950 through 1985, as I recall. I just wanted to ask you, why did you undertake this work?

19-00:28:12

Wilkerson:

I wish I could say that it was my own brilliant idea, but I can't say that. In the course of writing an introduction or something for one of the Hansberry books (per Bob's request), I met an editor named Carole Hall, who worked with New American Library. I had the occasion to talk to her, she asked me to come and visit with her at one point. It was her idea, actually. She said, as a senior editor at NAL, "You know, I think that it is time to have an anthology of plays by black women. There is none out there." And she said, "I think I can sell it to the editorial board." That is how it happened. I thought, "Yeah, I think that that is a good idea." So the idea was really handed to me, and I credit Carole Hall in the book, really, for her vision and for giving me the idea.

So if you are doing the first of anything, particularly if you are representing a whole set of people, how do you approach that? I felt, first of all, it needed to be representative. Actually, it was supposed to be twelve plays [laughing] by black women, but in my negotiations with the publisher, I had a couple of musicals and they came out of the book proposal. I had a musical by

Ruby Dee that I wanted to put in there, but they felt that musicals don't read well. (I don't happen to agree with them.) But I wanted to represent the breadth of what black women playwrights were capable of and what they had written. So I wanted some that went at least as far back as the fifties, and some things that hadn't been published quite in the major way that others had been.

19-00:30:16

Wilmot:

Well it is interesting in that, in itself, publishing things that were unpublished would be representative as well of this lost tradition—

19-00:30:26

Wilkerson:

Yeah, yeah. That's right, that is right.

19-00:30:28

Wilmot:

The ways in which the people didn't pay attention to the tradition.

19-00:30:29

Wilkerson:

Yeah. That is true. Typically, in the world of theatre, you don't publish a work unless it has been produced. It has to have gone through the production process because the text inevitably gets changed and developed through that process.

19-00:30:45

Wilmot:

Yes. Wow.

19-00:30:46

Wilkerson:

So first I was confined to those things that had actually been produced. Now, they didn't have to have been produced on Broadway [laughing]! So that was great, otherwise most of these wouldn't be in here! I was trying to find things that I thought were kind of representative of the range, and also brought us up to contemporary times as much as possible. So without going through all of them, first I would say that in my introduction I try to give a sense of the history, going back as far as I could, and the James Hatch book, *Black USA*, was a great, great help, because he did all of that work and he published these works, so that we had that history—the text anyway. And then I had interviewed Beah Richards for the Hansberry, because she cropped up in the papers. But I had known Beah from before that, and I am trying to remember when and how. When did we have her come out? Maybe when I was directing the Women's Center, I am not sure. But we had had Beah come and perform on the campus and in the Oakland community. It was a wonderful performance. I don't know if you saw her film? They did a film on her called *A Black Woman Speaks*. You really out to see it. It is really remarkable. It really shows her in all of her great glory. She passed away a few years ago too, and she was an amazing performer. I first saw her in *Amen Corner*, a play by James Baldwin that she had done in LA. She had this moment where she went from laughing to crying and back again, I mean where tears actually came down her face, and she was just wonderful. She was a part of Frank Silvera's Theatre of Being. It was a whole technique of acting with a philosophy wrapped around it and so on. I had

seen her do this piece, and I thought, “Gosh, I would love to do that,” but it was always kind of pitched as poetry. But I said, “I saw her perform it.” And I had read about it also when she had first done it, in Chicago in 1950, and had done it in front of a white women’s group, and talked about their complicity in slavery. I mean, it had to have just blown them [laughs] out of their socks. But many women there were deeply moved by this. I had read the accounts of it, and so I figured that I should put it in as an example of a one-woman show, which is very much a part of the genre that black women and other marginalized writers and performers had done, because you have complete control over the work and it is easy to perform in various kinds of places. So I was able to put it in that way. I tell the story because when I asked Beah if I could publish it, she just practically cried. She said, “I could show you a whole drawer full of rejection notices,” from her trying to get it published. It had never, ever been published. She had performed it all over the country and in various parts of the world. So I felt very proud that I was able to put that in as the first time that it was actually published, and actually to open the book with it.

And then Bob let me use an unpublished excerpt from *Toussaint*, the play by Hansberry that she never finished, that would have been, I am sure, her greatest work, and then I put things in like *Wedding Band* by Alice Childress, which had been published in other places, but I wanted to put Alice in the place where she should be seen, also, in the context of black women’s developing tradition.

Then I wanted to put in some more kinds of experimental kinds of plays, like *Unfinished Woman Cry in No Man’s Land*, *While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage*, which was by Aishah Rahman. This was actually an underground classic. It had been performed in many college campuses around the country, but had never actually been published. But these were plays that I had learned about and that people knew about but that not had been placed in the realm of publishing.

19-00:35:31

Wilmot:

It is a stunning play. I read it for the first time in your collection.

19-00:35:34

Wilkerson:

Yeah, it is a great play and it has some wonderful moments in it. And I wanted a play by Ntzoke Shange. That was another thing, to try to represent some of the women who had made it professionally as well. I think I first I wanted *For Colored Girls*, but she asked that I include something else. It is funny, playwrights are like that. They say, “I don’t want to just be known by just that one famous play. I want something else.” So we included *Spell Number Seven* into the book. It’s a marvelous play.

19-00:36:03

Wilmot:

I saw this footage of Ntzoke Shange in that same film I keep referencing, *Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*. I was just amazed by that footage. She was so fierce!

19-00:36:21

Wilkerson:

Yes. Yes. She was marvelous. Very defiant, and *Spell Number Seven* is a great play, and it is also like a choreopoem, a form that she really developed. She developed a style of theatre that was

different from anything that other people had done. Then things like *Brown Silk and Magenta Sunsets*, which is a more of a romantic piece. We just tried to represent the range as much as we could, and I must say, the cover itself was controversial. Can I show the cover [laughs]?

19-00:37:01

Wilmot:

Please.

19-00:37:03

Wilkerson:

When the publisher gave me the cover, it was not what I thought it would be. I was teaching at the time, and in class we had really good discussions about this cover. I explained, “This is the cover that the publisher has come up with. What do you think of it?” And it was interesting. Some people said, “Oh, it shows black women with their sexuality.” Others said, “No, it is just stereotyping us.” We went on and on and on around it and, “Does the cover represent what the book is trying to do?”

19-00:37:34

Wilmot:

What did you feel?

19-00:37:35

Wilkerson:

I don’t know. I felt like it was—I felt it was the publisher capitalizing on the sensuality of black women. At the same time, these playwrights, not all of them, but certainly the newer and younger ones, wanted to be able to project that part of life. Part of the problem with oppressed peoples, with people with histories of oppression, particularly if the women have been characterized in a particular way as being loose and what have you, this kind of a thing, then people try to behave in a different way and project themselves in a different way, and in doing that—

19-00:38:25

Wilmot:

Yes. Reacting.

19-00:38:29

Wilkerson:

And in doing that, they hide the sexuality, they hide these things. Well, younger women were coming on and saying, “No, we are sensual beings, let us do that, let us do that on stage.” So I felt kind of caught in the middle of it because, in a way, certainly younger women wanted to be able to be seen and dealt with in all their fullness, although I knew, I was sure that the publisher was using that sensuality. So you kind of get caught between: do you want to deal with the person’s intent, or do you want to deal with the effect you can expect from your audience, people who may or may not understand? We are always caught in those dilemmas. But obviously had to go with it. I didn’t have any choice actually. The cover design is not the choice of the author. I suppose if you are a very famous author that brings in lots of money, you could argue. But they printed about 24,000 or so. It was a big printing. All paperback. And it is out of print now. It sold out. It sold out very early on actually, and it has been very gratifying to run into people who, well, first of all, to run into students in various parts of the country. I checked into a hotel in the

University of Michigan and this young white woman was signing people in into the university hotel. She said, “You are Margaret Wilkerson!” [laughs] I thought, “What?!” She says, “I read *Nine Plays by Black Women!*” [laughing] So it is great to know that others found it useful, and I still get letters from college professors saying that they have used the book and that they love it and they found it very useful and all that. So I have asked my agent to look into reprinting it. I think Applause Books would reprint it. I have also thought about, as if I don’t have enough projects in the works, doing another edition. There are lots of very interesting young black playwrights out there now.

19-00:40:29

Wilmot:

Which brings me to this wonderful question. What do you see as the evolution of the black women playwrights from the late seventies to the present?

19-00:40:40

Wilkerson:

Gosh, I haven’t studied it at all. [sigh] Well, let me try to make a general statement first, and then comment with a couple of specifics. I think that black women playwrights feel more liberated. They feel less constrained by the politics of representation. I mean, they are certainly aware of it, it isn’t that, but it is no longer a situation where you can’t put this or that on the stage. “We have to have uplifting images. We have to show really good examples of people,” you know; that kind of pressure. We are a bit freer from that now. We can deal with more of the complexities, the contradictions, the bad as well as the good. Lorraine talked about this a lot. We have to be able to look at our own pathologies and so on, and see them in context. I think black women playwrights are freer to operate now, but I think the great ones really took that opportunity anyway.

I remember a panel that Anna Deavere Smith put together that had several of us on it. Suzan-Lori Parks was on it. Emma Amos, who is a visual artist. I was on it, and Aisha Rahman was. The subject was black women playwrights: “Whatever Happened to Lorraine Hansberry: Black Women Playwrights” (and something else, I can’t remember). Each of us spoke from our vantage point. I spoke about Hansberry and her work and so on. Aisha and Suzan-Lori spoke about theirs. Each of us in our own ways, without ever consulting each other, came to the conclusion and presented it individually, that black women playwrights, in terms of race and gender and class and sexuality, existed in the interstices between the various subjects or groups. That, in other words, none of them was really comfortably ensconced in one analysis of the world using one lens. Black women and home was a theme. Black women don’t have a home, is what all of us said, and they as artists were saying that. There is no home because black women exist on different contested terrains, they can never be comfortable when defined by race only, or gender, or sexuality, or class. And it was amazing that all of us came to that conclusion without ever consulting each other, just based on the work and the experience that they as artists have had and I had had vicariously through Lorraine Hansberry.

19-00:44:15

Wilmot:

This work, *Nine Plays by Black Women*, is called the first of its kind.

19-00:44:25

Wilkerson:

Yeah.

19-00:44:27

Wilmot:

Meaning there hadn't been an anthology of plays by black women.

19-00:44:30

Wilkerson:

That's right. That is right. There have been some since, which is great! And Asian women and Native American women, and Latinas. It is really wonderful that, I think in part because this book happened, because a publisher decided to do it, then others felt that this could be done.

19-00:44:51

Wilmot:

They also perhaps saw that there was a market for it, or perhaps it was the political times, or—

19-00:44:56

Wilkerson:

Yeah, yeah.

19-00:44:58

Wilmot:

In some ways, then, this book was one of the key pieces in canon formation. Would you say that? No? Okay, well.

19-00:45:10

Wilkerson:

Well, yeah, maybe. I guess you could say that, I suppose. In reforming the canon, maybe, yeah.

19-00:45:17

Wilmot:

Reforming the canon, creating a body of work recognizable work that is no longer lost or forgotten.

19-00:45:28

Wilkerson:

Right, because it is in print.

19-00:45:31

Wilmot:

Yeah.

19-00:45:32

Wilkerson:

There is another little piece to that, which is kind of interesting, and that is that it was done in paperback. Now in academe, paperback, at least when I was coming along, was not as good as hardback. You know, I had to kind of make my case with my own department and others that—

19-00:45:49

Wilmot:

You had the cover—

19-00:45:51

Wilkerson:

That it is very—right! Right. [laughs] Yeah, it is paperback, but it is very important. But also that it is an anthology, and that sometimes people think that that is not as important as writing a book where all the words are yours. But if this had not been in paperback, it probably would not have gotten this wide circulation, because it was inexpensive. That was important. So it was important to me, it was more important to me that it get out there, even if it meant that I might not get promoted, or whatever it was. I did, but, to take that risk—because I thought the material was important to be out there. So it was a paperback and I was delighted because it meant that it was cheap enough for people to buy. I am trying to see what the price was. I have forgotten what the price was [laughs], I had forgotten that it was that cheap! \$4.95!

Well, it was an inexpensive paperback. You see you made me think about that when you talked about canon reformation and so on. The price would allow a faculty member and a professor to use it as an additional text in class, where, if it were an expensive hardback book, then they would have to make the choice, “Is this going to be really central, because it is going to run up the price of the books in a class.” But you could add this to it and teach some of the plays, whereas you might not do it if it were a hard back and so on.

19-00:47:24

Wilmot:

Well, I have this question about canon formation, because I am wondering what gets lost along the way when we start to create our canons or move things from way outside the boundaries of the canon into the more formal structure. What do we cut off and leave behind

19-00:47:49

Wilkerson:

Yes, yes.

19-00:47:49

Wilmot:

And within that framework I want to ask about the other three plays that you didn't include in this important book. You said there was originally going to be twelve plays.

19-00:48:00

Wilkerson:

Oh yeah, yeah.

19-00:48:01

Wilmot:

There were other ones that you wanted to put in?

19-00:48:03

Wilkerson:

Yeah, I am trying to remember what we had. I remember Ruby's play and I am not sure I remember the other two, because they got dropped very early on. I think Ruby's play was called

Take It to the Top, as I remember. I don't know that it has ever published. I don't think that it has been. It has been produced, but not published, and one of the most important aspects of all is getting it in print. It is the way to do it. Now, with the Internet and so on, there may be other ways to distribute, for people to become aware of work. It does make a difference now. But it is harder, of course, on the Internet to have huge text. You might be able to put up a play, but to get people to sit still to download a whole text is, I don't know—I don't know that e-books are doing that great. But canon formation relies on print. It was really important to get this book out there. I didn't realize that when I was doing it. I just thought that it was a great idea. I wanted to redistribute it, and so on. But as I watched the history of this text unfold, I have realized how important it is to have it in print. It can't be ignored. I mean, it can be ignored, but it is less likely to be ignored, and particularly if it is accessible and if it is inexpensive.

19-00:49:45

Wilmot:

When you completed this book, how was it received in the academy?

19-00:49:52

Wilkerson:

Well, I had to argue for it, that it was not just an anthology [laughs], and so in my merit papers, for example, I wrote about the conceptualization behind it, that it was the first of its kind, how it was being received. The American Library Association, I think, rates books and so on. And it was a very small piece that they wrote, but they said that it was a must-read. Librarians felt that it was a must-read, and that it was the kind of book that was important. It really helps to have those kinds of endorsements for a text like this. I just felt kind of fortunate that the idea was given to me. [laughs]

19-00:50:54

Wilmot:

Margaret, how was this collection of plays received in the theatre world?

19-00:51:01

Wilkerson:

It was received very well. There were a lot of productions of these plays happened because of the book, because people then knew about these plays and had access to them. To go back to what you asked about reception in the academy: I think that eventually the academy appreciated it, and I think that I argued successfully that it was a worthy publication, a worthy expenditure of my time. That it is a scholarly work, and it is much more than putting a bunch of plays together. But there were a lot of negotiations in terms of the editing of the book. I had really wanted to include pictures of each playwright, an intro, and a brief interview. That was my plan. But they had a page limitation that they were going to deal with, so we couldn't do all of those kinds of things with it. Then I had a really interesting conversation [laughs], a difficult conversation, with the copy editor when it came to Ntzoke Shange's play, which is written in poetic form—

19-00:52:18

Wilmot:

And she has inspired generations with that form.

19-00:52:23

Wilkerson:

Oh yes, absolutely. Well, they wanted to, in the most poetic lines, they wanted to ignore the way that she had laid them out, because they were saying, “Well, this book is smaller.” And it was true, it was a smaller format. They said, “So therefore we can ignore those lines.” I said, “No you can’t ignore the lines.” In some cases, we did have to alter the play to somehow to fit the page, but in the altering you had to keep true to the places where her line ended. You couldn’t just run the whole thing together. The thought ends here, and this starts a thought, so you can’t tack this on to the end of that. We had this editorial long-distance conversation. He was in New York and I was in California, and I don’t know, we must have talked for an hour and a half [laughs] or so, and I wrangled and wrangled. I went through every single line and I said, “No, we can’t, we have got to do this,” I said, “You have got to respect the author’s intent. You can’t just throw this stuff together.” So we managed to get it the way that we wanted it, but I never expected to have that kind of a problem. But it is always interesting, all the kinds of things you have to go through. [laughs]

19-00:53:30

Wilmot:

Yes. [laughs] That is really interesting. Did you have a big party when you published it?

19-00:53:34

Wilkerson:

Actually, [laughs] I did! There were a couple of parties. I had forgotten that, I am glad that you asked. There was one in the alumni house, Aisha Rahman came out and read from her work, and a couple of other people. And then the playwrights themselves, many of whom were in New York, gave a party for me in New York.

19-00:54:04

Wilmot:

How delightful.

19-00:54:06

Wilkerson:

A bunch of them came, we had a lot of people. It was really weird, though, because there was a fire in the building before the program started and we all had to go out of the building and stand out on the sidewalk and it was freezing. It was so cold. It was freezing cold. Once the fire was under control we could go back in and have the party. People came. Alice Childress came, a lot of people who lived in New York came. They [the playwrights] autographed copies, and it was just a lot of fun. It was great.

19-00:54:41

Wilmot:

Do you have a copy that is signed by all of them?

19-00:54:43

Wilkerson:

I do. I don’t know if I have one that is signed by all of them, but I have one that is signed by most of them. It was very special. The playwrights really, really appreciated the recognition. It meant a lot to them. For years after, they would keep saying, “I am getting all these productions.

I am getting invited to speak on college campuses,” all of this kind of thing, simply because the work was out there. It was out there. And there wasn’t a lot of promotion that went on. Well there was a certain amount of promotion that went on. The NAL did do some promotions, but it wasn’t huge, you know, no New York *Times* ads or anything like that. But it was very useful, and for that reason, whether I would get promoted or not, I think working on the anthology was well worth it.

19-00:55:37

Wilmot:

I have one last question, I think, for today.

19-00:55:38

Wilkerson:

Yes, okay.

19-00:55:40

Wilmot:

You called the preface of that issue of *The Black Scholar* “Recovering a Lost Past.”

19-00:55:51

Wilkerson:

Yes. Yes.

19-00:55:51

Wilmot:

In some ways I see this work, *Nine Plays by Black Women*, as something that is part of that tradition, part of that effort, and in some ways I see much of your work within that continuum. I wanted to ask you to speak a little bit to what that means and what that has meant for your work.

19-00:56:14

Wilkerson:

Yes.

19-00:56:15

Wilmot:

What has been lost along the way?

19-00:56:21

Wilkerson:

Well, a lot [laughs] has been lost! Well, “lost” is an interesting term, because does it mean “lost” in that it doesn’t exist, or it is “lost” because we don’t know that it exists? There have been those things that have been lost, period. Absolutely erased, in a way, like the fire at Toni Morrison’s house.

19-00:56:51

Wilmot:

Oh! There was a fire at Toni Morrison’s house?

19-00:56:52

Wilkerson:

Yeah, up here in the Hudson Valley area. This was some years ago. She lost like her original manuscripts for her great novels and so on. Or, Maxine Hong Kingston, who lost her finished novel in the Oakland fire. Those kinds of things that disappear because sometimes people didn't know to keep them, sometimes they get caught up in a family wrangle, sometimes they just get destroyed. All kinds of things like that that have happened. I am sure that there is a lot that has been lost. It is more precious, in a way, for African American people, because there is so little that is retained and transmitted through the academy or cultural venues. But then there are the things that are lost simply because we don't know that they exist. That is the kind of work that I think that I was and am engaged in making available. That was the kind of work that VèVè has been engaged in. Those things that we don't know about, which do exist and need to be reclaimed, studied. To try to bring them forward, in some way that keeps their relevance, their importance, helps to inform the present and the future, all those kinds of things. So that is exciting work.

It is wonderful work. It is very, very exciting work, and it is historical excavation in a sense. It helps to inform us about who were are, and maybe even contain some keys as to where we ought to be going and what we ought to be thinking about. At the same time, we have to continually keep an eye out for what is constantly being created now, in our era. Because if we don't pay attention to that, we will lose that also. So, that kind of work takes you into the past, the chronological past, but at the same time makes you, hopefully, more attentive to the present. I think that is really important.

I had an article somewhere—well, I gave a speech first and then I wrote it up as an essay—about excavating our history and how important it is to do that. And I compared at that point, because I was actively involved in both, Louise Patterson and Lorraine Hansberry, and I talked about how important it is for these kinds of histories be excavated.

I also think that, if we think about history writ large, American history, US history, for example, I think that it is in these kinds of excavations around the lives of people, and women in particular, but men as well, those kinds of excavations help us to understand the history of this country much better than only studying the great well-known figures and works. That is important as well, because they have an impact on their centuries, their time here, but so do the lives of more obscure people and the ways in which people negotiate things. I have believed for a long time, that we won't really understand our racial and gendered histories without these stories of what people actually did. You go beneath the surface and you discover not only singular stories, but you discover stories that are of a category, that have similarities and so on. So I think that it is exciting and wonderful work, and I love doing it. I get very excited about doing that kind of recuperation. I never get tired of doing that kind of work, although it is very painstaking a lot of times.

[End Audio File 19]

Interview #8: June 2, 2004

[Begin Audio File 20]

Wilmot:

Margaret Wilkerson, interview eight. June 2, 2004. Good afternoon.

20-00:00:08

Wilkerson:

Good afternoon.

20-00:00:09

Wilmot:

I wanted to ask you if, overnight, there were any things that came to your mind that you wanted to discuss further following our interview yesterday?

20-00:00:23

Wilkerson:

Well, the only two would be my work with the Lilly Endowment Workshop on the Liberal Arts and a shorter period of time that I worked with the Harvard's two programs in management and executive leadership.

20-00:00:40

Wilmot:

Yes. Yes. Could you tell me a bit about those?

20-00:00:48

Wilkerson:

My involvement came about because of my work in the Women's Center and subsequently my work with professional women's networks across the country. I discussed that earlier. Also, some of the work that I had done around affirmative action. That earlier work, for example, when I was California State Coordinator for this Women Administrators' Program for the American Council on Education, I was working with the office of Women in Higher Education and so I met people like Donna Shavlik, who used to have an office there. The American Council on Education had a membership of higher educational institutions from around the country, it is kind of the premier professional organization for those groups, I came into contact with a whole range of leaders, men and women, in higher education. I guess my name got known a little bit in some of these circles. So I was invited out. Frank Newman probably had something to do with that. He used to be the president of the University of Rhode Island. He worked with the Lilly Endowment Workshop for a number of years and he had invited me out, I don't know, in the eighties somewhere or late seventies probably, to his campus for a discussion about Affirmative Action issues. I don't know how he got my name because I didn't know him, but the invitation came and I went. Those were the years when I was lower on the academic ladder, meaning the salary ladder. So when I had opportunities to do consultancies and to speak and all of that, I took them! Not only for money, but also for the chance to broaden my own horizons and to understand more about this field of higher education that I was in. So I suspect that from that contact and maybe some other things, I was invited to come and be a part of the faculty of Lilly Endowment Workshop on the Liberal Arts. And we called it LEWOTLA—

20-00:03:02

Wilmot:
[laughs]

20-00:03:02

Wilkerson:

That was the acronym for it. When I started with it, it was a two-week professional development program for colleges and universities around the country. There would be twenty-five institutions selected and each one would send a team of four people, usually a mixture of administrators and faculty, no students. They would identify an institutional problem that they wanted to work on. By and large most of them identified curriculum revision as an issue in need of attention.

20-00:03:53

Wilmot:

What did that mean, curricular reformation?

20-00:03:56

Wilkerson:

Sometimes it meant incorporating some of the newer literature and newer scholarship into the undergraduate curriculum. There were always undergraduate programs that we were working with, because a lot of newer scholarship was coming out. Faculty was beginning to diversify, to some extent. Sometimes curriculum revision meant building a stronger international component into the undergraduate work of students.

Sometimes it was as simple and complicated as trying to scale down the number of units that students had to take and kind of reexamine what should be required, what should be elective, all of that sort of thing. And, of course, curriculum reformation is probably one of the most difficult things you can do in a college or university. In fact, I have forgotten who said it, but they said that, "It is easier to move a graveyard than to revise a curriculum." [laughs] There are so many vested interests in the curriculum.

20-00:05:06

Wilmot:

That so reminds me of the conversation that we had about the Third World Strike and what that put in motion, regarding issues of contention with regards to faculties, faculty, student involvement, autonomy—

Wilkerson:

Absolutely! There are a lot of real issues behind that, in terms of what one has to teach, what the teaching load is, in particular for institutions that are not research universities. And FTE issues. It strikes at the heart of a lot of things in colleges and universities. So that was, by and large, the major topic that institutions would identify. But they also had other issues, like leadership issues. They had concerns about an influx of different kinds of students, student affairs, every problem you can think of. So there were about thirteen or fourteen of us who were on the faculty of this workshop, and we devised a curriculum that we implemented over a two week period to help institutions to address some of these kinds of issues that they brought with them, but also to broaden their horizons about what was happening in higher ed, and what were some of the forces

and so on. Each of us taught a seminar. We had everything from legal issues in higher education to leadership issues, and I, of course, taught the cultural pluralism seminar. [laughs]

The first time I went in 1981, I was the only African American [faculty member] and, if I remember correctly, maybe the only woman in the first few years of the program. It was rather interesting and a little daunting in some ways, because we had folks from the University of Chicago, from New York, from all over the country, who were on the faculty. Ralph Lundgren headed it for Lilly and he did just an incredible job of herding these cats—we, the faculty, being these cats, in a sense.

What did that mean for me? It meant that I spent two weeks with twenty-five colleges and universities, being a special liaison, to work with two of them, on their problems, I also taught the seminar on cultural pluralism that various people would take. The seminars were designed for professional development, actually, and they could elect what they wanted to do, and I started with a very small group of four or five the first year, and half way through, seven or eight years or so later, my seminar was just packed with people. And I credit Ralph Lundgren, who is a white Midwesterner, with keeping my seminar going, because he believed. He kept saying, “They don’t recognize this as an issue yet. They will.” And he was right, that after a few years we could tell by the numbers of people electing to take the seminar that this was becoming an issue in higher education that was being more broadly recognized. So it was kind of like having your finger on the pulse of institutions.

I worked with this program for fourteen years. At the end of that they, Lilly, decided that they would end the program, although the evaluations all showed that it was very successful, and I stopped doing it. But over the fourteen years, if you think about it, I met leaders, from twenty-five institutions. There were a huge number—over 300 or more institutions—that I became familiar with and that I had contacts with. So what that meant for me personally was that I learned a great deal about current issues in higher education, as well as the history of various institutions. We did some programming in that area. I learned a lot about institutions other than Berkeley. It was very helpful, because we had some research universities there—not very many, but we had a lot of liberal arts schools and state colleges and things like that. So I really got a sense for the breadth of higher ed, and of course, made a lot of contacts. As a result of that, I ended up doing a lot of consulting around issues of cultural pluralism at different colleges and universities around the country, and I was also invited to give speeches and I got two honorary degrees. All kinds of things like that that happened because I had the opportunity to meet these various people. As the workshop continued, a women’s studies seminar was added, so there was at least one other woman there. And I think one year we even had three women, out of the thirteen or fourteen people, which was really kind of hitting the apex [laughs] of it all. The dynamics among the faculty were always kind of interesting. and I made a lot of good friends.

20-00:10:42

Wilmot:

“Kind of interesting.” What does that mean?

Wilkerson:

[laughing] Well—faculty had to learn, also. We had to learn from each other. I remember, I had this conversation with Frank at one point. We always had a film seminar on the use of film and the kinds of issues that films raise, and one year they showed *Birth of a Nation*.

20-00:11:12

Wilmot:

Was that something that you organized or did someone else suggest it?

20-00:11:13

Wilkerson:

No, I didn't organize that at all, but I certainly critiqued it in my cultural pluralism seminar. And you know, we talked about it. It was fine to show it, but I wanted to make sure that we had at least a contemporary critique on it, because usually the film is shown as the first major feature film that kind of set the pace for the rest of that genre. And I said, "Yes, it set the pace for the genre, but it also set the pace for the way in which you depict people of color," because of the representation there. The blacks are played by white actors. They are not black actors. They are played by white actors.

20-00:11:51

Wilmot:

That is an infamous fact.

20-00:11:52

Wilkerson:

Yeah. Certain kinds of stereotyping that went on and so on. And I remember Frank saying, "Well, come on, Margaret, we have come a long way from that." I said, "Not far enough. Not far enough." Because in the eighties and nineties (this was like 1981 to 1985, something like that), we were still dealing with a lot of the issues that had been set in motion kind of cinematically in *Birth of a Nation*. So anyway, it was a great, great experience for me. And Stan, my husband, would go with me. You could bring your spouse, and we just had great conversations around all that was going around. I met wonderful people, it was just really, really great! I had a wonderful time and I learned so much from that, and I was really sorry when it ended. But we, for fourteen years, took two weeks a year (and then it was reduced to a week and a half I think somewhere along the line) to go to Colorado Springs at the foot of Pikes Peak and to do this program.

In the middle of that somewhere, I was invited to teach about cultural pluralism issues at Harvard's Management Development Program, which is for managers in higher ed, and then the Executive Leadership Program. That was a very different sort of experience, because the management seminars and the executive leadership seminars went on for, I don't know, maybe three or four weeks, a month or something like that. But the segments that you taught, like the one that I taught, I taught it over a period of three days or so. It is a lot to hit a group with. I always tried to get people to unpack issues of cultural pluralism and not to speak just as intellectuals, but to really get to something in the gut, to get to where people really live and act around these issues. I have known for a long time that, around these kinds of questions, even the most intelligent of us do not act from the intellect. Our responses come from some other place, from experience, from whatever. So to try to unpack that and do that in an hour-and-a-half

segment each day over a period of three days is not the easiest thing to do. In some instances I would have to leave before I could get things sort of resolved.

Over a two-week period you work with people, you eat with them, you talk with them in different kinds of settings, and you can unpack these issues better. I heard from a few people later, “Boy, things got really rough when you left. We got into a thing over at the bar.” Not fights or anything, but the discussions just raised issues. The process, in some ways, some people who felt marginalized, and that didn’t always break down by race. It empowered some women and others, and it made people a bit more willing to be candid. But once you have opened something like that up it is sometimes somewhat dangerous to leave it open that way. I did my best to try to contain it within a three-day period, but it is a delicate issue. It is a volatile issue.

20-00:15:30

Wilmot:

It is very volatile.

20-00:15:31

Wilkerson:

[laughs] They were always evaluating you. Before I tell you about my evaluations, I have to tell you about the setting, because it was a lecture room, like a lab, set up almost like a lab, and the presenters, the teachers, were kind of in the well, and everybody else was at a table. So they kind of looked down at you. So the whole setting was one of performance. It wasn’t really very conducive to dialogue, and I always worked around dialogue. I always wanted a large room to work in, I wanted people to get up and move. I used some of my theatrical training around that. I wanted people to be able to move and be in different groups and things of that kind. You couldn’t do it there. Everybody was frozen in their position. So you had to adapt to that. But [laughs] my evaluations were always mixed. They went from stellar to “I don’t like this or whatever.” It was very mixed.

20-00:16:40

Wilmot:

“It just doesn’t make me feel good!”

20-00:16:40

Wilkerson:

[laughs] Right! Exactly. Exactly. At one point, the woman who was organizing it said, “Well, you know, they thought that they wouldn’t continue it and so on.” Which was fine, because I was about ready to give it up anyway. I would spend two weeks at Colorado Springs, and then I would have to spend another almost week in Boston. It was just a lot to do. It was a lot to do. And it was taking up a lot of my summer. Actually, when they said that maybe I wouldn’t come back next year, I said, “I am more than happy not to come back, actually, at this point.” Because I didn’t think that it was as productive a use of my time as the Lilly Endowment Workshop was.

20-00:17:26

Wilmot:

This was, that was the Harvard Management Program?

20-00:17:29

Wilkerson:

The Harvard Management, and the Executive Leadership programs. Both of those. I think I did the management one for three years, and I think I did the executive leadership for two.

20-00:17:38

Wilmot:

Both at Harvard.

20-00:17:38

Wilkerson:

Both at Harvard, yeah.

20-00:17:40

Wilmot:

I have a couple of questions about this. The first one is, when you say “cultural pluralism,” in the educational environment, that is, with the Lilly Foundation, would that have meant discussing issues of curriculum or would it have meant discussing issues of white privilege and dynamics in the classroom, or dynamics at an institution?

20-00:18:06

Wilkerson:

All of the above.

20-00:18:06

Wilmot:

Oh, okay.

20-00:18:07

Wilkerson:

All of the above. Right.

20-00:18:04

Wilmot:

And then what would it have meant at Harvard Management and Executive Leaders Program? This is a slightly different audience. These are people who are going out into the world, into corporate settings—

20-00:18:21

Wilkerson:

Right, right, right. Well, we talked about leadership issues for the executive leadership, well, both of them actually. Much of the tone of an institution is set by the leaders, and we talked about some of the kinds of things that you need to consider when you are setting the tone. And we did this exercise. I didn't invent this but I found this in a text. I liked to have both groups, all three groups actually, in all three workshops, design a racist and sexist institution. What was always fascinating to people is that they often looked like the institutions that they were in. Because one of the things that I always tried to get across in all of these interactions was that racism, the terrible R word or the terrible S word, sexism or whatever, is systemic. It is a combination of prejudice and power. So it is not confined to any one race or any one gender. All of us who work in higher education to some extent participate in a racist institution. Because

there are certain system values that are there, there are certain structures that are there, that impact, disproportionately, a particular group of people. And I try to get people to look at it in a systemic way and not to personalize it, as, “Oh, you have called me a racist.” We don’t get very far with that, because it is not so much about changing our attitudes, it is about changing behavior.

20-00:20:12

Wilmot:

And institutional behavior as well.

20-00:20:16

Wilkerson:

Exactly. Exactly. Let’s see, what example can I give you? Sometimes, just the way in which a university is organized impacts disproportionately on particular groups. For example, this is a really obvious one, but take financial aid. All of the other services are in the bright new administration building. The financial aid you have to go to over to the temporary bungalow, over across the campus. It’s shabby, whatever—not very attractive, so forth. Separated from the other services on campus, and also clearly not as high of a priority. So stuff like that. You can look at that. You can see that this is a systemic issue. It is not just a matter of the head of the office being prejudiced against Latinos or whatever.

There are certain things that we take for granted in institutions that help to perpetrate racist attitudes. So it was that sort of thing that we tried to do. But some people could never get over just the use of the term “racism.” But I was trying to help people unpack it, really, so that they could really begin to understand the dynamics in an institution, because there are a lot of very well meaning people in higher education, who generally genuinely do not understand how their behavior, unintentionally sometimes, reinforces racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, all of these kinds of things.

I remember one teacher. He was a science teacher, as I recall. He was in my seminar at LEWOTLA early on. He said, you know, he really cared about black students, he was trying to help them in his class and so on, and he had one black female student, who, when he asked her a question, gave the wrong answer. He said, “You know, I never called on her again because she obviously didn’t know the answer and I didn’t want, you know.” And most of the class was juststunned, because he had no idea, really, what he had done to this child. That he never called on her again. He called on everybody else, he didn’t call on her again!

20-00:22:45

Wilmot:

Out of kindness.

20-00:22:48

Wilkerson:

Out of kindness! Not wanting to embarrass her and so on. A teacher’s responsibility goes beyond that, so if you don’t give the so-called right answer, and you have to kind of examine that notion also in teaching, but that if you don’t give “the right answer,” then what is your responsibility as a teacher? What should be your relationship to the student? So if the classroom is not someplace where you can fail, where you can miss the mark, then how do you learn? We always got into

discussions of teaching and learning, and what is the real role of a leader in higher education, and the role of a teacher and so on. So that was the kind of work that I was doing. I enjoyed doing it, I learned a lot from it. I didn't have all the answers [laughs], but we learned a lot. In my classes we learned to work together and try to solve very sticky issues, because these are issues that we all work on.

I would often tell the story of being in a classroom in Berkeley, I can see it now! I think we were meeting in Dwinelle, if I remember correctly. I was teaching a course in literature, maybe dramatic literature, and in the course of making a point, I used the analogy that it is like the lame leading the blind, which was a saying I'd heard so many times in my house, in my family, in my community and all. And the minute I said the last word of that phrase, I looked up into the eyes of a young woman who was sitting in my class in a wheelchair, who was disabled, and I immediately apologized. I just corrected myself and said, "That was inappropriate for me to say that." I had not had a disabled person in my class, not one that was visibly disabled, so it never occurred to me that it could be hurtful to someone or become an impediment to their learning. So I would tell that story a lot of times. I would just say, "We all make big mistakes because we have habits that we build up over time that we haven't examined." So it was that kind of work and I really enjoyed doing it. It was great. I met lots of wonderful people and some friends that I have made for life simply because we had been in those kinds of workshops.

20-00:25:18

Wilmot:

I remember you said that sometimes this work can be extremely volatile, or because it was dredging up issues that people oftentimes weren't ready to address, and I wanted to ask you how were you, A, supported in doing this work, and B, where were your teachers? Where were you learning about doing this kind of work? So it is kind of the same question. During that time, in the 1970's and 1980s, there was a man called Price Cobbs.

20-00:25:53

Wilkerson:

Yes. He was a psychologist.

20-00:25:53

Wilmot:

And he was someone who did work in the area of diversity training. I was wondering, who did you look to, and how were you supported?

20-00:26:10

Wilkerson:

I read a lot of books on it. I never took a diversity training workshop, they were just kind of starting around the time that I was doing this, so I never actually took one. I was in a few situations where there were some people who talked about it, but I was never in an actual workshop that I can remember.

But there were some very good books and I just can't remember them all. There was one in particular, and I wish that I could call the name of it, because I used it a lot. It was full of all kinds of exercises, like the one designing a racist institution, of kind of taking people from a notion of racism being a personalized attack, to an understanding of it being a systemic issue.

And I left all of those books in California, so I don't honestly remember the names, but I read a lot and talked to people and listened.

Where was I supported? Well, let's see. My campus didn't know that much about it. These were things that I did outside the campus. I might have talked about it with some of the staff on the campus particularly, as we were trying to train graduate students and things like that, but I didn't do a lot of that on the campus. I would say that one of my most important supports was in the Lilly Endowment Workshop, and Ralph Lundgren, who, as I said, believed in this kind of work and felt that he wanted it to be a part of his workshop, and kept me there for fourteen years to do it. That was one of my major supports, simply that he was willing to stick with that. That gave me a lot more courage than at least he, and the workshop that I was working on all those years, was a good training ground for me.

20-00:28:16

Wilmot:

I am wondering also about the work that you did around multi-cultural pluralism with regards to institutions of higher education. This would be at the Lilly Endowment. How did that dovetail with the academic area of research that you were developing at the same time, as I understand, which had to do with equity and education and in particular the trajectories of women of color and institutions of higher education. Is that right?

20-00:28:47

Wilkerson:

Right. That is true.

20-00:28:49

Wilmot:

How did those two connect?

20-00:28:51

Wilkerson:

Well, I got interested in this area and I did begin to write some in it and also was asked to write, I see here from my CV [laughs] that you so kindly supplied me with—

20-00:29:06

Wilmot:

[laughs] With the color codes?

20-00:29:07

Wilkerson:

Let's see. Where is it? 1983. Yeah, 1983. I didn't have a lot of time to write at the Women's Center, quite honestly. I wrote a few things. But I supervised a lot of publications because we had some money from the Ford Foundation [laughs], to do a post-doctoral program. And we brought scholars in and so on. So I supervised a bunch of things and I also wrote the conceptualization for the center, and all of those kinds of things. I didn't have lots and lots of time to write, because I was doing the administrative work. I did do some articles in my field, in drama.

But as I continued in the Lilly Endowment Workshop and then moved more into an academic slot, leaving the Women's Center and moving into an academic slot, I was called upon, and had a little more time, to write some of these other pieces that I did. Again, in the writing I was trying to unpack certain kinds of issues that were taken for granted like, I am looking at one called *Majority, Minority and the Numbers Game*- a kind of ironic, sort of cynical title- the way in which we play with the numbers of who is dominant and who is minority and all of that kind of thing, and that we really need to go beyond the numbers in order to understand what is really at stake. Beginning to go beyond simple representation- we have x number of this and that and the other, without looking at what the quality of the experience is. Not only for minorities, certainly for minorities, but also for the dominant groups as well. The whole issue of white privilege, and what does that do to people who have white privilege. What does that do to your sensibility, your understandings? I tried to push on some of those issues as best as I could.

We did a report on the status of black women in education, and this was published in a very fine book called *Slipping Through the Cracks: The Status of Black Women*, edited by two economists. So I ended up being in publishing and journalism with people who are not in my field, who were not in theatre. Which I am sure was confusing to Berkeley. That just had to be, because here was somebody who was publishing but who was publishing in a couple of fields. Sometimes what that means is that you are dabbling in places that you shouldn't, that you don't know enough about, because you don't have enough depth of knowledge.

20-00:32:31

Wilmot:

Dilettantism.

20-00:32:33

Wilkerson:

That's right. But, one of the reasons why I felt comfortable in doing it was that I was actually publishing with people who were trained in social science disciplines. So I felt that if I was really off course that I would have heard it from them because they would not have wanted my articles to be [laughing] in their work. Then there were things like "Lifting as We Climb" I remember, which was almost like a manual about the practice among the people of color, often, and certainly black women, of helping others to develop, even as you are trying to develop your own career. You try to bring others along. That really was a saying, "lifting as we climb." We are climbing, but we are also bringing people with us. We are not climbing and leaving people behind. And to try to validate that using some of my literary background and cultural background to validate that concept, by really showing how that was turned into actual action and behavior on the part of women. There was an article that I wrote that I particularly like, and I can't go into a lot of detail at this point with it, but it was called "Masks of Meritocracy and Egalitarianism." It was published in *The Educational Record* in 1982, and there I was really trying to deconstruct, if you will, the notion of meritocracy. I did some research on how it got started, who it privileged, who it didn't, and so on, and I tried to reexamine the concept in a contemporary context. I was very proud of that essay because I was grappling with, and really attacking, some concepts that were very popular at that time.

There was something else I wrote—maybe I didn't publish it, maybe it was a speech—on academic institutions as ethical institutions. This was a kind of extension of the work that I had

done and the workshops that I had done on systemic racism and systemic sexism and so on. What I tried to do was to categorize or describe institutions as having an ethical framework by virtue of what they endorse and what they didn't endorse. By institutional behavior there was an ethical framework or ethical lenses that should be laid over the work and the behaviors of institutions. And I remember the then president of the American Council on Education, I was at one of their workshops or something, and he really took me to task on it because he didn't agree that institutions—

20-00:36:13

Wilmot:

—had that mandate.

20-00:36:13

Wilkerson:

That there was any such thing as ethics for an institution. And it wasn't five years before that was what folks were writing and talking about.

20-00:36:22

Wilmot:

That is interesting. Did that kind of bump up then against different kind of organizational theories?

20-00:36:31

Wilkerson:

Yes.

20-00:36:31

Wilmot:

You know, how people say, "Well, actually organizations just exist so that"—and actually this is social theory too—"organizations exist just so that we can reproduce societies."

20-00:36:44

Wilkerson:

Yes. Yes. They are neutral. They are value neutral.

20-00:36:45

Wilmot:

Value neutral. They perform this function that has nothing to do with ethics. That was that kind of the argument that you bumped up against?

20-00:36:54

Wilkerson:

Yeah. Yeah. That's right. That is exactly right.

20-00:36:56

Wilmot:

How did these kinds of dialogues come to a head later on, say in 1995, 1996, around the time of Special Proposal 1 and SP2—actually, let's say even earlier than that. How did those kinds of issues and the idea of an ethical organization versus a "value neutral" organization? How did that kind of come to a head in, say, the anti-apartheid movement in Berkeley in the eighties?

20-00:37:30

Wilkerson:

I don't think that the debate and the discussion ever resolved the issues. They came to a head around actions, like the anti-apartheid movement, and I don't think there was a moment where people kind of said, "Okay, I agree with this or that or the other," I think those concepts are still in contention. They're not necessarily framed around values and not necessarily framed in that way, but clearly they are issues that are still with us. I was on the admissions committee at the time when we revised the requirements of admission and developed mechanisms for admissions that allowed prospective students to be screened several times, for several different aspects relevant to diversity—class, income level, race and ethnicity, gender. We had about twelve or so different lenses and that was just one part of it, but those were the criteria that were struck down with SP1.

20-00:38:43

Wilmot:

SP1 and SP2.

20-00:38:44

Wilkerson:

Yeah. They were struck down by those who, I guess, rejected the quota or something. I am not really sure what it was anymore because there are always different arguments for admissions being totally blind, somehow. Or, we are not really blind, but really relying on test scores first, and grades second. And I think there is enough research out to debunk a lot of that, but obviously it is not the research that drives the agendas. So in the University of California system, we quote unquote "lost affirmative action." They went to, as I understand it, a kind of comprehensive review of student applications, which they do in a number of schools.

But the notion that a standardized test can predict the success of, and capabilities of, a student to matriculate successfully in a college or university, is really just not accurate. It has never been a predictor for minority students. There have been plenty of studies that show that motivation is much more important. Often grades are a better predictor. But sometimes the motivation is actually the critical factor. So there are just—these contentions and debates, and we get caught up in larger political agendas, and I think that is part of what has happened in California.

20-00:40:55

Wilmot:

Yesterday, off camera and off tape, you mentioned 1995 and in 1996, when you were serving on the Committee on Committees, and were working around the task of nominating Senate members to the admissions committee. What were the dynamics that unfolded on that committee, specifically in that time in response to SP1 and SP2, which dismantled affirmative action at the university level, followed by proposition 209 which dismantled affirmative action at the statewide level?

20-00:42:00

Wilkerson:

Well, you know, these were confidential discussions. The Committee on Committees had a very important role of recommending membership on all of the faculty committees, as well as on the penultimate faculty committee—the budget committee, which deliberates on and recommends

promotions and tenure decisions, and hiring decisions as well. So it was a very important committee to be on. I never thought that I would ever be on it because you have to be elected to do this. But a colleague—a white male colleague, and I won't name him—came to me while I was heading up the drama department and asked me would I stand for it, would I run for it? And I thought, “Well, why?” and he said, “Well, we need someone with a more progressive sensibility on the committee.” So he said, “I will write everything up for you. I will take care of it,” because I was very busy [laughs] with the drama department. He said, “Just give me the basic information, I will take care of it all. I will go and get the references for you.” You had to have two or three people who endorsed you, or nominated you essentially, and those names appear with you on the ballot, so that if you didn't know the candidate personally, you could kind of understand where that person is coming from because of the nominees. So I was elected. I was shocked. Shock of all shocks.

20-00:43:32

Wilmot:

To be on the Committee of all Committees.

20-00:43:33

Wilkerson:

Just, you know, and people laugh, especially when people who aren't from Berkeley, when I say that I served on the Committee on Committees! They said, “Only Berkeley would have a committee on committees!” But it is a very important committee. There are dynamics you see on any committee, and particularly on that one, and that has to do with disciplinary background. “What discipline do you come out of?” I am not going to make generalizations on the kinds of people that study certain things. That is not what I mean. But if you are in particular disciplines, you have a greater likelihood of exposure to a diversity of students. If you are in one department, you will see more students of color, more women perhaps than you will if you are in some others. Now that does not mean that you are a racist because you are in math or engineering, departments have had a real dearth of women and people of color. But unless you bring something else to your work, knowledge from some other kinds of experiences or situations where you have learned something about this and understand something about discrimination, then you are not likely to learn it while you are working in that discipline in a university setting.

There was another issue that drove me on the committee, and I was not alone: how should the committee be set up? The committee had women on it, maybe one or two, but it had no people of color on it, and affirmative action issues impacted people of color. It was seen as a minority issue. There was no faculty on that committee who were of color, when that happened. And my whole effort, with some of the others on the Committee on Committees, was to make sure that we had somebody, or more than one, of color, faculty of color, on that committee to bring the debates inside the committee.

It is a strategic move. The minute that you set up a committee where you don't have representation of a diversity of views, or you don't ensure that, when they have to act on something controversial, you are setting that committee up for tremendous confrontation from outside and public forces. My whole reason for trying to diversify the committee was to allow those debates to happen inside the committee. I thought that was the best thing that we could do, with the hope that in the smaller setting and with very articulate people on all sides, that they

could reach a better compromise than what they had done before. Because the earlier committee's decisions were just lambasted across the campus and what have you. So I thought that the stakes were pretty high in terms of getting somebody of color on the committee.

20-00:47:05

Wilmot:

In addition to yourself. You were on the Committee on Committees. You are talking about the Admissions Committee?

20-00:47:11

Wilkerson:

I am talking about the admissions committee. I was the only person of color on the committee, male or female. But I was not alone, because I had allies. And at Berkeley, I have to say that I found many allies of all colors. And we had enemies of all colors too [laughing], or not so good allies, let me put it that way! Part of what I learned at Berkeley was to reach out to and recognize and work with allies across the spectrum. It really made a difference, and that kind of started with my work on women on the campus. That is where I began. I kind of cut my teeth on that one.

20-00:47:57

Wilmot:

Were you successful in nominating a person of color to the Admissions Committee?

20-00:48:03

Wilkerson:

Yes we were, actually.

20-00:48:06

Wilmot:

Who was that?

20-00:48:06

Wilkerson:

[laughing]

20-00:48:09

Wilmot:

Is it a secret?

20-00:48:10

Wilkerson:

[laughing] I can't say. I mean, you look back in the records and see, but I can't, I shouldn't say, and I can't remember if it was one or two, but I know that we got one.

20-00:48:22

Wilmot:

Can you speak to earlier about how you work to strategies around that, strategies to do that? How did you- strategies is too general of a word, but how did you make that happen? Was it an easy thing to make happen?

20-00:48:35

Wilkerson:

Was it easy?

20-00:48:36

Wilmot:

Yes.

20-00:48:37

Wilkerson:

Not really. We thought that it would be. In fact, at one point we had kind of made the decisions already about who we would ask to be on the committee, and I was getting ready to travel and I was going to miss the next meeting. The Committee on Committees met every week. That is how heavy the workload was. It was either every week or every two weeks, but I think that it was every week. We had a staff. We had made up our minds about this and had set this thing in motion, and I would miss the next meeting because I was traveling. So I wanted to make sure that this got on the agenda so with the others that we work with, we made sure that this got on the agenda. It did.

When I came back I discovered that a kind of amnesia had happened among some members of the committee, as if this had not happened, not been settled. And fortunately we had notes, which said “Yes, we had decided this and these people were supposed to be asked. “ You think that you have taken care of an issue, and if you don’t keep the paper trail, you don’t keep the records— You have to stay on it, in other words. And again, it was important, even though I was traveling, there were others there who cared about the issue and who could make sure that it didn’t get turned around.

That was a change for me, because in the earlier years when I was on committees—not all committees, but some—you knew that if you weren’t there and some issue came down the pike, you weren’t sure that you had allies who would actually help with that. They might help if you were in the room, but if you are not in the room, will they take the leadership? And that did change over time. And it changed with a more diverse faculty coming in—and I mean diverse not only racially, ethnically, gender-wise, but also in terms of ideas and attitudes—younger faculty that were coming in, it really did make a difference and we began to see the difference even in the votes of the faculty Senate. We could begin to see the difference.

The early years, we [laughs]—this is when I was at the Women’s Center, it was funny. See, as a Lecturer with Security of Employment (I think I told that story earlier about my being that status for many years), you were a member of the Faculty Senate, so you could vote. You could come and you could vote, and I remember the early years when the women’s movement was going stronger on campus, the faculty women were making their move, and that was mostly white women because there weren’t a lot black women there. Barbara Christian was the first tenured black woman, so you know, there weren’t a lot there. But they were making their move based on a report from the Faculty Senate Committee on Women and Ethnic Minorities, SWEM, that had counted the number of faculty, tenured faculty, and it was something ridiculous, like 2%. It was a famously small percentage. So they were making their move on that basis, and if an important vote was coming out in the faculty senate, the word would literally go out on the campus, you would get a phone call, “Such and such a vote is coming up, come to the meeting to vote.”

Because the senate (at least it did in those years) had notoriously small numbers of people who came to those meetings. So you could easily have a small core of people who ran everything. But the word would go out. They would say, “You have to come and cast your vote on this issue,” and we would go, so our voices would be heard. So we started out with that kind of strategy and effort. There were people who kind of organized faculty and made sure you put your body there to vote.

20-00:52:47

Wilmot:

Do you remember who would give you the call, where you would get the call from?

20-00:52:50

Wilkerson:

Oh, gosh, well, from different people, because we would do a kind of a phone tree, but folks like Sue Irvin Tripp, who I think might have been chair of the SWEM committee at that time that this happened. Sure Irvin Tripp was one, and Arlie Hochschild. I am not going to say “older,” because [laughs] I am old, too, now—but we cultivated faculty who had been there longer and who had been tenured longer and who were very committed to increasing the numbers of women faculty on the campus. And many had alliances with those of us who were pushing a racial ethnic agenda as well. And that worked out very well. It was an important time.

20-00:53:31

Wilmot:

You were at Berkeley until 1998? 1998?

20-00:53:39

Wilkerson:

Yes.

20-00:53:40

Wilmot:

And then you came to Ford.

20-00:53:42

Wilkerson:

And then I came to Ford.

20-00:53:43

Wilmot:

So you actually were there for two years after proposition 209?

20-00:53:48

Wilkerson:

Yes.

20-00:53:48

Wilmot:

What kind of differences did you notice in the student body and the faculty? It may have been too soon

20-00:53:53

Wilkerson:

It was too soon. It was too soon to notice, and I think some of the impact of it is just now being seen, actually, I remember hearing about the low, low numbers of students of color admitted and so on. Mostly it was dispiritedness. It was kind of shock and despair at what was happening, because those were hard fought battles, and that ground that was gained was hard. It was difficult to gain ground on this issue. And to have it roll back in that way, at a time when the research and the results of what have been done and so on, in affirmative action, were really incontrovertible. They are unassailable, the successes of that work. Things like the fact that the law school (I saw this buried in an article in one of the local Bay Area newspapers), where they had been practicing affirmative action very aggressively, they show that a much higher percentage of minority students coming out of Boalt had passed the bar exam the first time than white students. Well, where have you heard that? So there were all kinds of successes behind this, and to see it roll back as a result of just a seriously political agenda, not based on any kind of real knowledge base, was very, very, disappointing. People were angry about it and were arguing about it, but you felt very powerless, as if you couldn't do anything about it. That is what I experienced in those couple of years. I am not sure what the feeling is like now, but that is the way that it was before I left.

20-00:55:43

Wilmot:

I had a follow up question which I had neglected to ask about your workshops you led. Did you feel effective, did you feel that your work was affective with the representatives and leaders in higher education, and the kind of executive leadership program at Harvard?

20-00:56:02

Wilkerson:

I do. I do, with some. I am not going to say that it converted everybody, but I heard from people afterwards about things that they had tried differently in their classes, because one of the things that I had talked about, the racial and ethnic and gender agenda, in a sense in the class, but, using my theatre background as a director and that sort of thing, I also tried to use that to encourage people to use more interactive learning techniques. One of the things that my class at the Lilly Endowment Workshop always did, we always had some kind of program- not quite faculty hi jinx, but sort of. I always had my group prepare some scenes that they performed out of women's literature or some black or Latino literature, or what have you. We'd bring these performances to the entire group—all those who weren't smart enough to [laughs] take my seminar!

20-00:57:05

Wilmot:

Interesting.

20-00:57:06

Wilkerson:

Or they would do a choral reading out of some of this literature, or we would do both- stuff like that, so that we shared with the entire group, because we had 100 people or more there, some of the things that we had learned, and exposed them to some of it. Now, that is exposing people to the literature and stuff, which you could say is kind of the race/gender agenda, but it also got faculty who were teaching, and even administrators, to use a different aspect of their talent, so

they would have to get up and speak. They would have to get up and act, or so on. And we would do these things in class. I mean [laughs], I put them through actors' warm up techniques and all. Standing in a circle, for example, a big circle, and reciting the vowels, and trying to hit the person across from you with the vowel. What that did was to force you to speak up, to force you to project yourself and for some people who are very shy, and who are very sort of inward and all of that, it helped them to just hear their voice in space. And I try not to put people through weird stuff, because I don't particularly like weird stuff, and I don't want people to be uncomfortable, so I would do it with them. But just to try to get them to see the value of using whole body movement, of being able to help people to speak and project themselves, to take on a different persona. We explored all of those kinds of techniques. I remember a couple of people who said to me that they had never acted or performed in a play or recited poetry or anything since they were in high school. After that, all of their learning had been pretty sedentary. And because they were exposed to this and encouraged to do this and supported to do this in a workshop with their peers, they felt more comfortable now trying to use some of these techniques in their classes. And if people were being truthful to me afterwards, there were any number who said that they tried this. I always told them, you have to act within your comfort zone. Don't push yourself outside of it. You have to go with what you are comfortable with, because using interactive teaching techniques means that you have to relinquish a certain amount of control over the class. You have to be able to admit the input of your students. And everybody is not comfortable with that because we haven't been taught to do that. We teach like we have been taught, so if we were lectured to all of our lives, most often we are going to just lecture. But to try to analyze what it takes to do this. We had some wonderful things that happened in the class and also with people who tried them out, tried some of the techniques out. So I had the sense that, yeah, it was effective with some people. I am not saying everybody, but with some. Yes.

20-01:00:24

Wilmot:

Okay. I think I want to stop and change all of our disks.

20-01:00:29

Wilkerson:

Okay.

[End Audio File 20]

[Begin Audio File 21]

Wilmot:

We are recording here. You mentioned that there was another publication that you wanted to talk about which was important.

21-00:00:11

Wilkerson:

Yeah. My work with women's groups and women's issues took me across disciplines. I mentioned how I published with some economists and women economists and other social scientists. I also participated in some conferences that were sponsored by the Office of Health Resources Opportunity at San Francisco State, and they got some funding from the department

of Health, Education, and Welfare. So these were health/science people and they asked me to do a keynote. I entitled it “Minority—Professional—Woman: The Creative Tension.” And one of the things I always tried to do, if it is not evident already, was to use my background in theatre and my knowledge of creativity and stuff like that, in all of the work that I did. So what I tried to do in this speech, which became an article, was to take the, how can I put it, take the various identities that women of color, minority women, embody, and try to present them in a positive light. In those years, we thought of those multiple identities as being in conflict with one another. Like, I am at home working in the home, taking care of children, but I am also doing volunteer work and maybe I have a part time job or whatever, and this is tearing me apart.

So I talked in this speech and then essay about turning that tension into creative energy. And that that is where some of the creativity of minority women comes from and can come from. I mention that only because it was kind of unlike some of my other speeches that I had done, and I found that I got a lot of response from that speech and that article. A lot of women of color either wrote to me or called me, or said to me, “This really made a difference to me, to think of it in that way.” That was done in 1979, so it was early on, in terms of those kinds of discourses.

There’s another thing I remember in terms of using my theatrical background. I think that I did this at UC Davis. I can’t remember exactly where, but I was asked to talk as a woman administrator, and how did I learn to do that, who were my mentors and that kind of things. So what I did in that speech was to talk about administration in terms of my background in theatre as a theatre director and kind of apply that lens to what I was trying to do. That, in many ways, being an administrator and or manager is very much like being a theater director. You have time constraints around projects. You are working in a very pressured situation. You are trying to get a whole group of people to understand their roles and to work together and to come out with a product. All of these kinds of parallels that I drew from my own experience with the discipline that I had learned, to help me reflect on being a better administrator.

I guess the more subtle message is to be willing to draw from unusual sources in helping you to understand how you can perform. This goes back to the early days of the women’s movement. Women who had been working in the home for most of their lives would go out into the work force for whatever reason. I remember one woman who was married to one of the television hosts on one of the shows on the Bay Area. She was white, blond woman, and when I was at the Women’s Center advising returning women who were returning to school, she said, “You know, I have never done anything, I have just been his wife. I have been hostess for his events, blah, blah, blah, and he divorced me to marry a younger woman, and I am lost. I don’t know what to do.” And so what we did was talk about what were the skills that she had developed in the home. In other words, to look to yourself and look to the knowledge that you have. That may not be enough, but certainly you can begin with that. That is basically what the subliminal message was, but I just thought about the fact that I seemed to be, and was [laughs] in very disparate areas in working in two or three kinds of fields, but there was a connection because I worked to find what that connection was and to use it, to keep me whole.

21-00:05:42

Wilmot:

There was actually another paper that you had written about women and welfare.

21-00:05:50

Wilkerson:

Oh, I know. Yeah. *The Nation* issue.

21-00:05:52

Wilmot:

I'm looking at [flipping pages] *Sexual Politics of Welfare: The Racialization of Poverty*, co-authored with Jewelle Handy Gresham. This is a special issue about scapegoating the black family. July 1989. How did this come to be, why was this a debate that you entered?

21-00:06:25

Wilkerson:

Yes. Well, Jewelle Gresham is the executor of the Hansberry papers, and I met her through Bob Nemiroff. She was his wife, and when he died, I worked with her as the executor of the papers. And we had both seen a documentary done by Bill Moyers. Now, I have since met Bill Moyers. And he is a wonderful man, and I love the work that he is doing in his PBS program "Now." I think that it is absolutely critical to us at this time. But at that time he did a documentary on the black family, and [breathes deeply], it was very, very controversial. I can't remember every detail, but I remember that the camera followed certain black women and families and what have you, and I remember that one of the women was shown in a not particularly complimentary light. He filmed her choices and what she was doing and she actually committed suicide after she saw the film. I am not saying that there was a direct connection. I remember that Jesse Jackson went to the funeral. And even before that happened, Jewelle and I had conversations and were very, very concerned about intentional or unintentional scapegoating of the black family. I was still in California, but Jewelle lived here, she had connections with *The Nation* and Victor Navasky, who is the editor of the magazine. And she was able to get him to agree to a special issue on scapegoating the black family. And then Jewelle and I worked as co-editors and brought articles in and so on. That is how that happened.

21-00:08:38

Wilmot:

So you were an editor, you edited that?

21-00:08:38

Wilkerson:

We co-edited. We were co-editors, and I have to say that she was the driving force behind it, but we did co-edit. And she and I, I am trying to remember, did I do an article in it [laughs]? I may have. I think I did, but I certainly co-wrote with her. The Moyer's black family documentary centered around welfare and what were the dynamics of that, and why the men weren't in the home and why they weren't supporting the family and what choices the women were having to make, and all of that kind of thing. I think that he was trying to unpack certain kinds of issues, but it left out a lot. We thought that it didn't have the proper framing, and so we felt that we wanted to do it.

Now, the interesting thing is that our issue of *The Nation* was one of the five finalists nominated for the magazine of the year award, or something like that. So we were in a group of five, which was great. Even more importantly, we heard that for a long time, *The Nation* received more

requests for reprints of that issue than any other they had ever done. And *The Nation* is a very old magazine.

21-00:10:08

Wilmot:

What is the cover of that magazine look like? I am trying to think if it is the issue that I am thinking of? I am not sure if it is.

21-00:10:16

Wilkerson:

I sorry, I can't [laughs] remember what it looks like!

21-00:10:18

Wilmot:

Oh, okay.

21-00:10:18

Wilkerson:

I honestly can't remember. But the—

21-00:10:22

Wilmot:

Do you have copies at home?

21-00:10:23

Wilkerson:

I do have copies. I don't know if I have them at home. They may be in California. I had to make terrible choices moving to New York, and leave two-thirds of my babies, my books, in California. [laughs] But, for example, some groups had a number of them reprinted and distributed to all of the Congressmen, all the black Congressmen, and whatever. And so it was a very important issue. I don't know if it had direct impact on anything. I never heard that, but Jewelle would know that.

21-00:11:15

Wilmot:

Did you work with your colleague at Berkeley, Troy Duster, who does work around reframing reframing issues of poverty?

21-00:11:22

Wilkerson:

I never actually worked with Troy in that. We had that connection over the publication. We worked on a lot of committees together, but he worked with other sociologists. But we were very sympatico on a lot of things. And I have since seen him, because the Ford Foundation has called on him a lot, because he is such a great scholar.

Wilmot:

Margaret, I wanted to turn now to your time at the Ford Foundation with an eye toward examining where these different threads in your career and interests have come together here at the Ford. First, of course, I have to ask you, why did you chose to leave Berkeley and go to the Ford Foundation?

21-00:12:32

Wilkerson:
[laughs]

21-00:12:32

Wilmot:
What was the motivation? What were the motivating factors for that decision?

21-00:12:35

Wilkerson:
Well, first of all, it was a very difficult decision, and I honestly did not apply for the job, not seriously. I did interview for it, but I didn't expect to get it at all. They were looking for someone to handle their sort of, loosely called, their Diversity Portfolio—Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, African American Studies, and the Minority Fellows Program. And I think that they had been conducting a search and had not been successful, because they were collapsing two or three portfolios into one. So I got a letter and a phone call asking me if I would apply. And I told them that actually I had been in the position in the theatre department for only about two years, something like that. I really had personally committed myself to five years. When they approached me, I was getting close to retirement, either early or almost early. And I figured I would do three more years in the theatre department, and I would retire and kind of just, you know, do my thing. I could write, and I would control my schedule, and all of these kinds of things.

And Ford kept saying, "We would love to have you apply." Well, I was also trying to get a grant from the Media Arts and Culture Unit and I really worried that, if I didn't apply, I would offend someone, and so I better go ahead and send it in. I didn't really update my CV, I did a little addendum to it, a couple of pages, and I sent them a tiny cover letter, which basically said, "Well, I am applying because you requested, but really with no commitment." I mean, I think that I said that. I didn't really have any expectations, because I was committed to this other thing, but they asked me. So I was doing a presentation at Vassar College, which is in upstate New York, and so I said that I was coming through. So they put together the interview committee, and on the way out on the plane, I thought, "Well, you know, what are some of the things, if I had a free hand and some resources, what would I do in these areas? So I just jotted that down, and I had a conversation. I mean, I really took it very lightly, but not so lightly that I would offend them. But I said, "This would be a chance to talk to people," and whatever.

21-00:15:16

Wilmot:
I think sometimes things go best when there is that attitude—

21-00:15:21

Wilkerson:
Yeah, I will never do that again [laughs]! But the next day I was at Vassar and they called me and offered me the job, and I was totally dumb-founded. My husband and I spent \$100 talking long distance on the phone to try to talk about this. He had retired a year or so earlier. He said, "Well, I am packing my bags, I am ready to go!" [laughs] I said, "Well, I don't know!" So, we considered it, and it meant two or three trips out here to figure out if we could afford it, a whole bunch of stuff.

But you asked me, why did I do that? Well, I had been at Berkeley a very, very long time. About twenty-eight years, actually, not counting my years as a graduate student. And there were many days when I drove up the cross-campus road behind Dwinelle Annex to park and I asked myself, “Why am I here? I am still here, all of these years.” Every now and then that question would hit me. Ford offered a challenge to bring together a lot of the areas that I cared about in terms of opportunity, of race and ethnic people as well as women and so on, and to do it with some resources. I had been on the other side for a long, long, long, long time, and I thought, “Gosh, if I had some money, to do some of this work, where would I take it?” And then on top of that, I knew the vice president that I would work with, Alison Bernstein. I had met her when she was a young program officer at the government agency, the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education, at the start of her career as a grant maker. And she was a very bright, young person. I was on the advisory committee. She loves to say that, “Margaret used to be my boss.” [laughs] No one ever bosses Alison! But I was really taken with the possibility of working with her, also. My husband and I talked about it, and I thought, “Gosh, you know.” I have always been a person who is attracted to new challenges. And of course, if you remember some of the things that we have talked about, sometimes they worked out and sometimes they haven’t. But, I took it as a challenge and as an opportunity. And I thought, “You know, it would be interesting to live in New York, for a while.” Not to move forever, but for a while. So I came.

I inherited two or three portfolios, so I had a lot of grants that I was having to deal with, but I wrote a line of work, which was called a program officer memo, suggesting how it would go forward. And just about the time that I finished writing that and was ready to start implementing it, I was asked to become director of the Media, Arts and Culture Unit, because of my dramatic art background and also because of my management background, and all of these kinds of things. And Alison also liked working with me and felt that we could work together. So I decided to do that. It was a higher salary, and so that was a motivating factor, but it was also an opportunity to try to put the arts more at the center of what I have done. Higher education has always been the center of what I have done. I was never in a theater department until they needed my help—

21-00:18:59

Wilmot:

To save it.

21-00:19:01

Wilkerson:

To bail it out, in sense, or help it to bail itself out. So I thought, well, it would be interesting to try this. So I went over to do it, and it has been [laughs] quite a rollercoaster ride because there were issues in the program unit, low morale and things of that kind. So I had a lot of work to do around that. And I had to learn, also, because I moved up an echelon, in terms of the Ford Foundation. I learned a hell of lot more [laughs] about how a foundation works, what goes into consideration. Some things you want to know, some things that you don’t want to know! But it is a great organization, and there are wonderful people to work with. And I really did feel, and continue to feel, at home with the people who work there, because most of the people who come to the foundation come with a set of values that are consistent with those of the Ford Foundation.

In higher education, we all value education, but there are lots of other things that we don’t have shared vision on. So it was interesting and challenging and wonderful, and continues to be, to

work with people who share a lot of values of peace and social justice and creativity, and all of these wonderful things.

What happened when I was in a position then to place the arts at the center of what I was doing? For one thing, I found that I didn't know a whole lot about arts institutions outside of higher education. So I had a lot to learn there. Ford has a long and distinguished history in building the field of non-profit arts organization. So I had a lot to learn about that. And then as I had the opportunity to hire new people as people's contracts ended and I had to hire new people, I was able to attract people who had shared values around equity and excellence, who understood the meaning of the demographic change that the United States is undergoing, with lots of new immigrants, and a population who have made some strides—African Americans born in this country, Latinos—but there is a really unfinished agenda. And these groups of people will be collectively a majority in this country. And what does that mean in terms of the arts?

Now, we had been, all of my life, on the margins trying to push to the center. Now we are in a situation where government funding has dropped out of the picture pretty much. State councils aren't putting as much money into the arts. Arts organizations are expected to be more entrepreneurial. At the same time, the traditional audience for the major, big arts institutions is declining, and for midsize institutions as well. So there are big challenges for us ahead, and those challenges center around the fact that we are a more diverse country, a much more diverse country, and that globalization has tied us into the affairs of countries all over the world. So that is a great, wonderful challenge.

21-00:22:48

Wilmot:

Yes, it is.

21-00:22:48

Wilkerson:

And I have a great team of people to work with. That is just the arts and culture side.

And the media side is extremely important. I didn't know a lot about the makings of media and how all of the various kinds of organizations and that sort of thing, but I have always been a media watcher and I have been concerned for a long time about what we see on our evening news and on national news and all that, and I know a lot more about the ecology of the media environment.

21-00:23:26

Wilmot:

Interesting.

21-00:23:26

Wilkerson:

And I have three wonderful program officers, full-time, who work on this in the United States. So, at first I entered the directorship as a kind of management thing- -let me center my arts and so forth. And then I woke up one morning, not too many years ago, and said, "Well." I mean, there are such incredible things that are happening in this world, and media has become a real player in this game. Media has become a global force and is it acting—that is, US media—as

responsibly as it should? Is it serving us as a democracy? Is it providing us with the kinds of information and the range of views that we really ought to have? I mean, really the range of views. I decided that, now I don't want to sound like our dear president [laughs]—"God speaks to you through me"—but I realized that I was in a very pivotal kind of position at a very critical and unusual time in the history of our country. And I thought, well, are you going to take this charge on, really take it on, and try to accomplish something here, in particular around media, but also around arts and culture, or are you just going to tinker for a while and pass it on to somebody else? So that changed, in a way my plans. I mean, I didn't have any plans in particular, I was just trying to learn and come to grips with a very complex and difficult situation, just trying to head the unit. But I realized that it was a real opportunity to do something, and maybe do something important, because I had a great group of people to do that. And I can't do that by myself, because I am not a specialist in these areas. So we have started moving things ahead and getting, making requests of special moneys from within the foundation to do some major things in media and so on, and I am just very excited about that.

And we have the same potential in Arts and Culture. We have an individual artist initiative going that attempts to work with other funding partners to develop, really, an infrastructure to support individual artists. They don't have live-work space, they don't have insurance, necessarily, they don't have the funds and support to really make their artwork, and so on. And there are many, many ways in which individual artists just kind of fall through the cracks. People look at the MacArthur "Genius" Awards and say, "Well, see, if you are really good, you can succeed and prosper." But even some of those people who have gotten those genius awards of \$250,000 and so on, have said, "It is a one-time thing. So I ate well and I had health insurance while I had that money, and when that money was gone after several years, I am back to where I was." So there is a lot of work to be done and I got excited about doing that. I know that my time for doing that is limited because I do want, at some point in my life [laughs], to have more choice about what I do, or what my day is going to look like. But there are some things that I would like to get accomplished before I leave the foundation. And so I am excited about them.

21-00:27:01

Wilmot:

I want to ask you how has the post 9/11 environment affected your work with your Media portfolio at Ford?

21-00:27:08

Wilkerson:

Well, it's huge. I mean, it is absolutely huge. In both Arts and Culture and Media. The 9/11 attacks really traumatized the country, particularly in New York. I think particularly the people on the East Coast didn't quite know how to process this, and I feel personally that we didn't have leadership that really stepped up to the plate and helped people through this, instead of playing on our fears. And so I am very concerned politically about what is happening in the country.

But I was particularly disappointed in the way in which media responded. And particularly the corporate media, not feeling, not having enough courage, actually, to raise questions when they needed to be raised. Now, the few who tried to were intimidated because this government, our government, intimidated certain people. When Peter Jennings asked the relatively innocent question, "Where was the president's plane at the time after this happened?" folks came down on

him pretty hard and he had to back away. Media, which is supposed to be independent, should be serving us in a democracy. When you see anchor people wearing American flags, now you could say, “Well, what is wrong with that?” You could say, “Well, yes, they are American.” But wearing an American flag sends out a particular kind of signal about not raising some of the critical kinds of questions that needed to be raised. About Congress not raising questions, and so on. Media has tremendous power in this country and in the world, and so I think that this is a moment to try to help to rebuild, or to build independent voices and diverse voices. By that I don’t mean just left-leaning voices, but we need the full spectrum. We need the O’Reilly and we need the Al Franken. We need the whole spectrum represented in an equal way with equal voice, in a sense. And then it is left up to the people to decide. Now that is a hard thing to do. We claim that intention all of the time, but you know, I would love for everybody to agree with what I think and do what I think should be done, but if you really believe in democracy, it is supposed to be the will of the people. But that depends on the people having the range of information that they need. It also depends on the people having a good education system. It depends on a lot of things.

Those are the kinds of issues that I get involved in. [laughs] So I work in my field, in the fields that I work in the foundation that I work in, in Media and in Arts and Culture, and in helping to lead program officers in the United States and abroad, but all of those fields are connected to the quality of our lives. And I think that has always been my mantra, if you will, in terms of what I tried to do in higher education, wherever I was. I always felt tied and committed to democracy and the quality of our lives, and empowerment of the people. That has always been what is my value, and that is one of the reasons why I, in pursuing the arts, the dramatic arts, I never really was attracted to being in the professional theatre, because I really saw theatre and the arts as an educational medium, connected to all of these other issues of poverty, issues of justice, all of these kinds of things. Sometimes it is the way that we define, particularly, the arts. [laughs] We think of it as, you know, it is arts for arts sake. It is beautiful and it is not connected to any of those things, but I think that it is, in lots and lots of ways. So, in a way the foundation allowed me to bring a lot of these interests together, and to have some resources to do it. So that is how I got there. [laughing]

21-00:31:51

Wilmot:

Do you have allies at other foundations that are working with whom you kind of coordinate around on these initiatives?

Wilkerson:

We do. We have partners in various foundations, because no one foundation can do it all. And it is important to have partners that give you perspective, also. So yes, we do, and we are trying to build more of those.

21-00:32:15

Wilmot:

Having been a part of one institution and now being part of another institution, what have you carried forward, or what kind of stands you in good stead? Maybe networks or conclusions about the way in which institutions operate, or—

21-00:32:47

Wilkerson:

Let me see. I should see where my thinking takes me. [laughs] I think that having worked now in two institutions and in lots of other workshops and stuff, I think that I have learned that organizations, no matter how well meaning they are, have their own kinds of inertia. That it is easy to sort of get bogged down in the traditions, the expectations, and so on. And that one of the things that I think is very important is to be able to critique yourself, and to have in your organization people who help you to do that. And I know that I always felt that way at Berkeley. It was one of the reasons why, despite my work with the American Council on Education, and women administrators, and trying to promote them to presidencies and all of that, I flirted with presidencies a little bit. But I really decided that I didn't think that I wanted to do that. I didn't want to spend my time raising money, as important as it was for any institution. I didn't want to spend my time always wrangling with the faculty, which the provost sometimes has to do. I wanted to be a sort of creative thorn in the side of the institution, in a nice way. I wanted to be among those voices that supported the institution but also tried to critique it or tried to help it to rethink sometimes what it was doing. And I found that I tried to do that both at Berkeley and also at Ford. And I would probably do that anywhere that I was.

I also learned that it is important to take risks and I really learned this at the Women's Center. You have to make a decision whether you want to be short or long term in an organization. Regarding risk, like with the Women's Center: do you want to flame out like a meteor or do you want to last for a bit? I chose in that instance to try to last. But that does not mean that you do not take risks. I think that you have to take risks, and I think that the minute that you stop taking risks you no longer build the courage to continue to do that. We were talking about that yesterday with the young woman from program consulting at the foundation who was getting ready to take a job as an assistant professor in a university here on the East Coast. Someone had advised her, "Don't take any risks until you are a full professor or until you are tenured." And I said, "I don't agree with that. I think that you should take some calculated risks as an assistant professor, with good judgement, but you should take some risks, because if you don't, you don't learn how to take risks and you don't know how to live with risk."

I saw full professors at Berkeley who I thought ought to be able to, excuse the expression, kick butt, because they had tenure! Not just tenure. They were full professors. But they were still afraid to take a risk, though nobody could do anything to them. You might lose a friend here and there, but nobody would do anything to you, and usually your worst fears don't come true necessarily. And even if they do—you stand for something. You have got to stand for something. And you learn to do that as you go along, you don't just protect yourself and then just suddenly say, "Oh, okay, I am going to risk now," because all of your success has been built on not risking anything. So I think risk is a very important concept, and I don't know—some people would probably look at my career and say, "Well, you haven't risked enough," and that is probably true, but I do try to keep to that value. And risk sometimes means speaking truth to power, and maybe you will be heard. You may not be heard, but maybe you will be heard. I think those kinds of risks are really important to take. And sometimes it is something more than that. Sometimes it is something more than that. So those are a couple of things I learned.

Networks are extremely important. Find your allies. Look for them in all kinds of places, because they don't always look like you, like your mirror image. I learned the importance of networking

within an institution, but also of keeping networks outside of the institution for support. In those early years when there was so few of us—there are still few of us—black women, in colleges and universities, our networks were not necessarily inside the institutions, they were long distance calls back east, south- wherever. Wherever other women who were working in these same kinds of situations [phone rings] were. So, are we going to stop there for a moment [laughs]?

[interview interruption]

21-00:38:09

Wilmot:

Margaret, when you reflect on your career, what do you remember as being the risks, or a big risk? At either Ford or UC.

21-00:38:25

Wilkerson:

Yes, yes. Well, when you have lived as long as I have it is hard to do that, but I think of two kinds, maybe, of risks. If I can contextualize them maybe that will help—now, I don't want to lose the second one, I have the first one in my head. So let me just jot a note [laughs, paper flipping] to make sure that I capture the second one.

Most of my life—and don't laugh at this—most of my life I have been a shy person, really. [laughs] Well, maybe quiet. No, really, I remember as an undergraduate at Redlands, I was in a seminar and my professor, who was a wonderful man, talked to me in his office hours and, "Now, Margaret, I need you to speak up," because I wouldn't talk, necessarily. I mean, if I thought that I had something to say I might, but I was very reticent, because I never had enough confidence that I really knew the right answer. And I usually knew the right answer. My husband, who was with me—he and I went to high school together and we were in some of the same classes—does an impersonation of me: "Well, I am not sure that this is the right answer, but..." I always prefaced with that. Wherever that came from, I am not sure. So being able to speak your mind, particularly to someone who has more power than you do, for me was a risk in a sense. It might not be for other people, but it took some gumption for me to do that.

I will just give one example. There are lots of times when I have tried to do that, but one in particular was when I was still Lecturer with Security of Employment. I was co-chair of the Special Scholarships Committee with Leon Henkin. And we were getting a grant from the San Francisco Foundation. But the head of the San Francisco Foundation, the president, the CEO, wanted to talk to the chancellor about affirmative action, about faculty Affirmative Action. His condition for giving the grant and approving the grant was that he wanted to have this conversation with the chancellor, because he thought that Berkeley wasn't doing enough. This was when Chancellor Bowker was there. So at the committee level we schmoozed and talked about it and said, "Well, you know, it is a good opportunity." You know Leon—he was ready to go. So we went, and this is when Mike Heyman was his vice-chancellor.

I think I mentioned that Bowker's demeanor could be mysterious. Sometimes you didn't know if he was listening to you or hearing you or whatever, because he would sit there very, very quietly. So in this conversation I think we were talking about the need to have more women faculty. Mike said, "Well, you know that we just don't have the numbers." In other words, the supply is

not enough. I worked with Mike under him in the Women Center and all, and I have a lot of respect for him, but when he said that, I replied, “I know the research that says differently, that the pools of good candidates are much larger.” And they were. We were still working with that 2.5% or whatever of tenure. But I decided, what the hell, let me say this. So that was a risk for me, to say this in front of Bowker, to Bowker, to the chancellor and the vice chancellor. Now, remember, I didn’t regularly work with them at that point [laughs]! I was just the lowly director of the Women’s Center, of all things! And a Lecturer with Security Employment. I wasn’t a full professor. I wasn’t anything like that. But I said to him, “Well, you know, the data shows that the availability pools are much larger in many of the fields. And so we aren’t hiring up to the numbers that we should.”

It was just kind of quiet, you know. I don’t remember what the response was. It just kind of went on. The conversation went on. And Bowker sat there and sat there and sat there. And towards the end of the meeting he said, “Well, I think there are some things that we need to do,” and he named one or two and then he said, “And I do think that we should be able to hire more women because there are more qualified women out there.” I didn’t know a lot about Bowker’s background, but as it turns out he was the architect of open admissions in New York City, so I had kind of played into that. But you see how, for me, personally, it was a risk. I didn’t know enough about him to know how he would receive this. Would this mean that I would get a bad mark and whenever I went up for promotion I would never get anything? A system like Berkeley’s kind of semi-secret system of promotion feeds all of that. So that was one kind of a personal risk for me. It has always felt risky to me to speak up. And I have tried to do it more and more to learn.

I still tend to be quiet in meetings unless there is a point that is not being made. If someone else makes the point and it doesn’t need to be reinforced, I never feel any need to speak just so somebody pays attention to me. So that has always been a kind of struggle for me, and so that was one kind of risk.

I think that probably my work at the drama department was risky in a lot of different ways. First of all, I was a former graduate student in the department, so some of the faculty were still around who had been my teachers. They were good about it, though. But the other thing is that the choices that I was making, particularly around productions, and so on, were very visible. And it is not exactly like directing a show where it could succeed or fail. That is enough of a risk. But when you choose the season, as I did for a while before I put a committee together to do it, if it fails, if nobody comes, and you lose money and so on, it is really visible and big. I think that just taking that job on and trying to bring greater diversity to the regular season, trying to make it a welcoming place for all students, was a very risky kind of venture to be involved in because, I had some allies in the department, and a lot of those allies were students—graduate students, for example. But I didn’t have very many faculty and most of the faculty really were adjunct faculty. We only had three senate members: one full professor in theatre, one full professor in dance, and then one lecture with security of employment in dance. So I didn’t have a lot of faculty colleagues that I could depend on. I did have to build an external group in order to develop the graduate program and all of that kind of stuff.

I think just taking that job on was risky. I didn’t march in like a savior, but I knew that if I didn’t take that job that I could no longer criticize [laughs], because I had an opportunity to try to do

something about it. I went ahead and did that. I think just taking that job on and the kind of visibility of the kinds of decisions that you make was a risk for me. Because I had been talking for so long about how we needed to have diversity in the arts and so on, and then you are put in the position to try to make that happen. And if you fail in that, then in a way you are saying that, “Well, it can’t be done.” I don’t know [laughs] if that qualifies, but that is the best that I can do today!

21-00:47:26

Wilmot:

Well, that is wonderful. That is wonderful. Well, Margaret, I think that we are close to the end.

21-00:47:32

Wilkerson:

Okay.

21-00:47:32

Wilmot:

I am going to take a quick look at my notes and then I am going to think about closing.

21-00:47:45

Wilkerson:

Yes.

21-00:47:45

Wilmot:

[pages flipping]

21-00:47:56

Wilkerson:

While you are looking at your notes I think there is probably one thing that I wanted to say. I am not saying that I have never had any difficulties, but I think that I have lived a very privileged life in lots of ways, in that I had two parents, loving parents, a grandmother—though I didn’t always appreciate her. [laughs] I really had a lot of support in my life. I have a very supportive husband. I have had his support through graduate school. I have fine children, adult children and so on. And it is not to say that you never have any problems, or issues or troubles, and that sort of thing, but when I think about the lives that so many people have who don’t get that basic kind of help, I feel very privileged in that sense, and I feel very blessed, and it makes me work all of the harder because I don’t deserve that any more than anyone else does. And it is one of the things that keeps me going, it is one of the things that makes me a workaholic and drives me crazy, because I feel like my time on this earth has been purchased by so many people who supported me in so many ways.

I feel that those of us who have these kinds of opportunities must give back. Must give back. And the struggle is trying to take care of yourself [laughs] in doing that. But I really think that we have to do that because there are so many others who have lived in such terrible circumstances and died in terrible circumstances. And we owe it.

21-00:50:04

Wilmot:

[pause] Do you have anything else that you want to say today?

21-00:50:06

Wilkerson:

I don't think so [laughs]! But thank you for being such a great interviewer.

21-00:50:10

Wilmot:

Oh, thank you for being such a delightful interviewee.

21-00:50:13

Wilkerson:

Thank you. [laughs]

21-00:50:14

Wilmot:

All right. Let's close then.

21-00:50:16

Wilkerson:

All right.

[End of Interview]