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Interview of Napoleon Jones-Henderson

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Transcript

Preface

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 11.5.3. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Speakers are indicated by their initials.

Interview

Napoleon Jones Henderson

AFRICOBRA Interviews

Tape NJH

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(Background Conversation)

NJH: Okay, what I have here is a portfolio. A suite. It's a portfolio suite of four prints that were done for the first bien- a print biennale in South Africa, after Mandela's release from incarceration.

And, it was an edition of 60 prints, four different prints in the suite, and the suite is based on four African-American spirituals and/or jazz themes. And, some of my favorite musicians are clearly represented in this body of work.

This particular print we have here, this one is ...

(Background Conversation)

NJH: Okay, this particular print here is entitled "Bebop Kuba". And it's an 11-color silkscreen print. I'm sorry, not "Bebop Kuba." This is the "Straighten Up and Fly Right." And, that's a tune I grew up with my mother and father and uncle and aunts and all of them having their weekend parties and what have you, when they had a party with all the children they were raising. And, this tune is one of those that I remember from that period of time.

And as indicated, you know, I was showing the other day my signature, which is in the form of a pyramid shape, with the Ankh, the Egyptian symbol of life, in the center, when I'm not necessarily signing my work with my own script.

And, the second print in this particular suite is based on a tune from one of my other favorite singers, Nina Simone. And, her presence in this suite is consistent with the principles and ideology of AFRICOBRA and the Black Arts Movement in general. And if anybody is familiar with Nina Simone, she clearly represented the ethos and the sentiment of the Black Arts Movement, Black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and surely, the whole Civil Rights period as a larger, overarching period of time.

So, this piece is based on one of her pieces, "Nuff." And it's an element of one of her songs, when she comes through that line, she says, "'Nuff said."

This piece is based on a rendering of utilizing the Kuba sculptural and spiritual elements of the Kuba people from the Congo. And, it's an arrhythmic time based on the music that Charlie Parker and Dizzie Gillespie and others were noted for, as they call bebop. And this is entitled "Bebop Kuba."

And, it's a manner and an expression of, if you will, a kind of transatlantic, or transAfrican mode of visual expression. And, this piece is emblematic of that particular amalgamation of both the African continent and the African diaspora.

And this last piece of this suite is entitled "Weepin' and A-Wailin'." And, it's based on a religious spiritual that has to do with the individuals' response to the passing of someone dear to them. And, it's utilizing two elements that are very significant in terms of African iconography. The background here is primarily based on the kente cloth fabric, which I've got a piece on my neck. I usually am always wearing a piece.

And the lower register has these faces in profile, with the eyes that you see here ... if you're familiar with Egyptian hieroglyphic writing ... that the eye, in this particular format, with these little configurations at the lower level, are representative of an eye which is actually crying, a person who is crying. Thus, weeping and a-wailing.

And so, it's the lamentation of those who, the outward expressions of the loss of someone. But at the same time, it's a joyous expression as well. It's not one of simply depression or for the loss of an individual, but it is one of an expression of that, as well as an expression of the fact that they no longer have to suffer the travails of the life that we as people suffer or experience within the context of the living experience.

So, this suite is a suite that was based on and created for the exhibition celebrating the reintroduction of the larger world in participation with South Africa, as a country that had been lifted out of the rigors of apartheid. And so, in a sense, one might say this is an apartheid victory suite. So, this is a suite of four prints, based on the first print, "Biennale in South Africa," after the release of Nelson Mandela.

Q: Did you meet him?

NJH: No, I didn't. I haven't met Nelson yet, and I have been on that journey to go to South Africa. Because I refused to go to South Africa in all of the earlier years, because I would not allow my passport to be stamped with a ... before the lifting, if you were black and went to South Africa, if you were allowed in, your passport was stamped as an honorary white.

Q: That's a good point.

(Background Conversation)

NJH: This, again, is the "Weeping and Wailing" print. Then, the image size on this is 11 x 17. All of them are 11 x 17 in size, and that was because they had a standard configuration they wanted for ...

(Background Conversation)

NJH: What it was, this exhibition, all these artists that participated in this particular exhibition were from all over the world. And all of them did a print that was related to the ending of apartheid South Africa. And so, we all did an edition of 60, so that every one, all 50 of the participating artists, got back a portfolio. And the portfolio has a number of prints. I think the full portfolio that we all received back as a participating artist had something like 50 prints.

There were 50 artists. That's what it is. Fifty artists, so I have a portfolio of fellow artists from around the planet who were a part of that exhibition celebrating the end of apartheid in South Africa, and 10 of the edition of 60 went to various institutions in South Africa that have the same portfolio collection of the 50 participating artists. So ...

Q: Cool.

NJH: And, you know, this body of work, it's a body of work that was done not too far back in our recent past. But it is a body of work that harkens back to the earlier exhibition we had, by invitation from the Anti-Apartheid Committee at the United Nations. I think it was in 1987. And that was based on the suite ...

Q: It was an AFRICOBRA exhibition?

NJH: Yeah, it was a AFRICOBRA exhibition. We, as AFRICOBRA, were invited because we did a suite of work based on the uprising that occurred in South Africa in 1976, the young kids in Soweto. And, the aspect of the spelling of the township where these young people were protesting the government position on educating them in Afrikaans.

And they knew, as a part of the struggle, and having international understanding of what was taking place in South Africa. Moreover, those young people understood the importance of education and dialogue, in the sense of working with others around the world who were concerned about the removal of that evil of apartheid from South Africa, protested that, if they were not going to be educated in their traditional languages, they wanted to be educated in English, so they could speak to the rest of the world, in terms of what was happening in South Africa.

And so, the town's name, Soweto, we were sitting in Africa, we're meeting in the aspect of looking at Soweto and taking English, So We Too shall determine our own future. So it was really emblematic in that body of work we did, which was the work that we were invited to exhibit at the UN, in their celebration regarding the anti-apartheid movement.

(Background Conversation)

NJH: This is "Bebop Kuba." And it, at one time, had a ...

(Background Conversation)

NJH: Well, basically, on the Kuba image, the traditional image from the Congo, and bebop having to do with that whole visual, auditory language of ... if you say visual in terms of Dizzie Gillespie, because he was clearly a visual musician. Charlie Parker. Duke Ellington is a part of that whole piece, because this area right here pretty much represents a kind of stylization of the piano keyboard. And all the rest of this is in here, pretty much the

format of horn players, bass players, and other kinds of sound instruments that would be used to create visual representations in terms of this particular "Bebop Kuba" piece.

And, this one is entitled "Straighten Up and Fly Right," and it's an old tune that Nat King Cole was very much known for, as one of his pieces out of his retinue of songs. Moreover, being an extraordinary piano player, which is what he started out to be. But this piece is "Straighten Up and Fly Right," and Straighten Up, in terms of the verticality of the figure, the frontality of the figure, and its posture looking out at the future. And the context of AFRICOBRA's principle of forward, projected, positive imagery.

And the symbol on his shirt pocket is the Akan symbol from the Akan people of Ghana. And that symbol indicates, its prophetic representation, in terms of a spoken symbolism, is, I am my brother's keeper. And so, this particular symbol, which you can see by its shape, are two oblong shapes that are joined at the center. And so, in that sense, there's a shared oneness between two people.

And so, symbolically, what that means is that we are our brother's keeper, be it Africans here or Africans in the continent, or throughout the diaspora. Which, by extension, really, is all of humanity. Because, what we are dealing with, in terms of the works of AFRICOBRA, if I am free, then others are free. So, these works are representative of a myriad of experiences and representations, based on the last 44 years of AFRICOBRA. Forty-one years, not 44 years. Forty-one years of AFRICOBRA's work.

And the last one being my Nina Simone. I can't leave her out of this. She's a part of the quartet. And, she is truly one of those individuals who ... no, that was Eartha Kitt. But Nina Simone had a rough time, too, for some of her political positions in this country, and was unable to get work in the United States for several decades.

Which, we have historical references of individuals such as Paul Robeson, whose passport was taken during the McCarthy period as a supposed Communist. But his petition to the United Nations on the issue of the violation of African-Americans' human rights, and his champion of other people around the world's human rights, by the degree of oppression that they were under. Various countries. So, that's the suite.

(Background Conversation)

Q: Can you just tell me your full name?

(Background Conversation)

NJH: Okay. My name is Napoleon Jones Henderson. I'm originally from Chicago, and a member of the group AFRICOBRA. Which started in Chicago in 1968.

(Background Conversation)

NJH: My name is Napoleon Jones Henderson, and I'm a member of AFRICOBRA, founded in Chicago in 1968.

Q: Now, can you tell us a little bit, the moment you actually joined AFRICOBRA? Just very briefly, how did it happen? Who called you? How was that experience?

(Background Conversation)

Q: The question is, how did you join AFRICOBRA? Who invited you? Just a little bit of history. What happened that day, and what took place?

NJH: Well, I became ...

Q: (Inaudible).

NJH: Yeah. In 1968, I became aware of the forming of AFRICOBRA through my affiliation with a number of the other artists here in Chicago. Jeff Donaldson, Barbara, Jae, and Wadsworth Jarrell.

The larger community of artists and the activists here, cultural activists, through OBAC and other entities, we were all engaged with each other in various manners. I mean, the visual arts, the performing arts, as well as the musical arts and all of the other forms, poets and writers, were engaged, interfacing with each other on a very regular kind of basis.

So, whenever we had an exhibition any place, all of the other artists would be in attendance, as well as the musicians and poets. They would come, and they would actively just become a part of the exhibition, the celebration of the opening of the exhibition, and just the general atmosphere that took place at any given opening.

So, when Barbara and Jeff indicated to me that they were forming a group, invited me to the group ... because at that time, I was still an undergraduate student at the Art Institute in Chicago, because I had decided, since 1962, I was going to travel all around the world and do a whole number of other things, instead of going straightaway to college. And, I don't have any regrets for that, because it really seated me quite well, in order to do what I did at the university level.

So, I came to the meeting, and of course, we had the discussions that resulted in the principles and the ethos and aesthetics of AFRICOBRA. And, that was my introduction to the group as a group, because we were not necessarily a group at the time. We were talking about becoming a group.

And as a result of those discussions, we just finally arrived at a name. And the name was consistent with our ideology individually and collectively. And so, that is the genesis and birth of AFRICOBRA and my relationship with AFRICOBRA.

Q: What is the meaning of the cobra?

NJH: Afri-COBRA, which is A-F-R-I-C-O-B-R-A, which is in caps, C-O-B-R-A. The African Commune of Bad, Relevant Artists.

And, even though "artists" is the last word in the name, we primarily identify ourselves as image-makers. And the reason we say image-makers is because art, artist, is a construct and a context that necessarily is not in sync with the ethos and aesthetics of AFRICOBRA. But they're not oppositional to it. But, the identification of one's self, the name by which one calls themselves, is a reality in the life in which one lives. And so, we were about the business of making images, as opposed to art.

Because, intrinsic to our body of work individual, as individual members, or as the collected group, the human form is very much a part of that. And the human form is an image. And when we make the works that we make, we're creating a reflection of ourselves. And I say ourselves, it's not me, the artist who's making the work, but the person who's looking at it. We want them to see that work and engage that work as an image of themselves, because the works were about projecting positive images. And consequently, the term, and identification of ourselves individually and as a collective, as image-makers as opposed to artists.

Q: What were the ...

(Background Conversation)

Q: The positive images as opposed to what?

NJH: Well, we choose the term positive image, as opposed to the sometimes unconscious, and the crippled psyche of generally occupied and colonized peoples of themselves. And that image is, as a rule, negative. Because of the relationship which we understand about colonialism, or imperialism, or the occupation of any individual people.

And so, when we say positive images, we're talking about an image that looks like yourself. And by such, when looking at that image, you see that image as a positive image in the sense that you have a sense of dignity and pride and self-affirmation. And so, those images were about self-affirmation. And so, if you are affirming yourself, that in and of itself is a positive thing. And so, that's what we mean by the term "positive imagery."

Q: Can you talk about the African power of the word AfriCOBRA? The spelling of it and the influence of the culture.

NJH: Well, the influence and the place from which "Afri," which is just simply the C-A left off of the name of the continent of Africa, is the prefix that establishes our origin. And, all too often, most colonized people ... and particularly from the perspective of African-Americans, or Africans in the Western Hemisphere, for that matter, tend to refer, all too often, or used to, all too often, and unfortunately still do, all too often ... refer to their historical origins as stemming from the place of enslavement.

So, "Afri," Africa, is the prefix to COBRA, which allows for us to have the ancestral connection. And, that clearly is a response to the time in which AFRICOBRA came into being, the politics and social activism and activity and circumstances that were prevalent at the time. And that's not to suggest that it's not prevalent today. Quite the contrary.

But the degree of that presence, of that circumstance of condition, made it necessary, and it was at the forefront of our thinking, that our experiences that we were responding to did not start from enslavement, and that our essence and origin, our sense of aesthetics, our sense of self, our sense of identity, did not start, and moreover, could not move forward, if we maintained that it started with slavery.

And so, Africa is the place from which we stem, to the place from where we are, to the place where we are going. Because, commune is a community. And that's different than the word community, in the sense that commune means that we all have a shared place that we wish to move to. And so, in doing that, we have linked the past with the present. And that present was the formulation of a set of principles and a philosophy, move us forward to the future.

(Background Conversation)

Q: Can you talk a little bit about historical events, and (Inaudible) taken place? Just as if you were talking to a 12-year-old black kid in America now, that has no idea (Inaudible) in the early '60s, and motivated things like (Inaudible) and AFRICOBRA. Just events, people, big influence that happened.

NJH: Right. Well, when you think about the execution of the Wall of Respect, which was a pivotal exercise and a pivotal activity in the communal and collective consciousness, that had its origins not necessarily in the present moment in which it came into being, but it had a foundation. It had a place from which it stemmed. And those places started as far back as Harriet Tubman and Denmark Vesey and coming forward.

But when we fast-forward that to the contemporary times, I will come and start from the place of Paul Robeson, and move that forward ... and clearly not forgetting about which goes a little bit back before Paul Robeson, is Marcus Mosiah Garvey. Coming back to Paul Robeson, moving on to Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, and Dr. Martin Luther King, and Patrice Lumumba, and those individuals.

So, with that underpinning, and an ideology and a sense of self-affirmingness, we had a platform in which to create the Wall of Respect. I didn't actually work on the Wall of Respect, but I knew the artists who worked on the Wall of Respect. And my energy and my spirit was a part of that. So, the context of whether one actually laid paint on the surface, or as some photographers put their photographs on the surface, or some poets did their writing on the surface ... you weren't a part of the creation of the Wall of Respect simply because you actively made a mark on that surface. You were part of it because you were a part of that collective spirit.

Q: Is there any poem that you can remember that (Inaudible) you were going to do? I mean, it's okay if you don't, but if you do, (Overlap/Inaudible) ...

NJH: No, not a poem per se, but clearly poets. Carolyn Rodgers, Haki Madhubuti, Gwendolyn Brooks. And Gwendolyn Brooks in particular, because I remember ... which is something I shared with her many, many years later ... is that when my three brothers ... there was first the four of us of the nine children. When we were very small, we lived around the corner from a library, Hall Branch Library. And, we used to go to the Hall Branch Library after school. (Laughs). The four of us trickling around to the library as other activities.

Gwendolyn Brooks actually used to read her poetry at the Hall Branch Library. And, when I was well grown, and got to know Gwendolyn Brooks as a person and as a word activist ... because she was that before the period of the Civil Rights movement, or the Black Arts movement, or Pan-Africanist movement, or any of the rest of that. She's always been that. Her and Margaret Walker and others, and Margaret Burroughs.

I shared that with her, and she said, "Well, you know, that's interesting, because I used to see, a lot of you little pea-head little boys used to come around to the library and listen to the poetry." And she said that it was, for her, a way of sharing and helping to foundation us toward who we were, and what our potential was.

And, I really thanked her for the fact that, unbeknownst to myself, at that early age, that she was a part of my grounding, as my parents and the rest of my community and extended family were engaged in. You know.

So, not a poem per se, but a whole lot of poets. And I only stayed within the framework of Chicago, because I was influenced by these poets from all over the African world. But, those, I had another kind of personal contact with. Because Haki and I were classmates at Wilson Junior College. You know. In our early, maybe a little less radical, so to speak, days.

(Background Conversation)

Q: If you could talk to us a little bit about the relevance of AFRICOBRA, in terms of, like, the struggle. As a reaction of the struggle. Then and now. If you could just tell me a bit about both.

(Background Conversation)

NJH: The relevance of AFRICOBRA, in terms of struggle. There clearly, at its birth, was a struggle. Which, most no one's actions about anything start apart from the personal. So, the Civil Rights movement ... or, I should say the Civil Rights activities, because the movement is not over ... were the elements that triggered, or helped to trigger, all that led to the forming of OBAC on the front end, AFRICOBRA as an extension out of that, the AACM,

the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

And, as we were engaged in that particular struggle, in the '60s, we were very clear in our endeavor to intellectually expand our base, individually and collectively, as a people and as a nation. We were very aware of the liberation struggles throughout the Caribbean and throughout South America, and throughout Southeast Asia, as well as the continent of Africa.

And, many of the people that we were ... as I go back and refer to Paul Robeson ... I mean, these were men who actually knew Kwame Nkrumah. I mean, Malcolm X went over to Kwame and he and Kwame talked about things, and as a matter of fact, had been to Congo with Patrice Lumumba.

And so, we were tangentially connected to the international struggle. And, we were re-introduced to that through others who were iconic to us, such as Malcolm, and such as Paul Robeson and others.

That, the struggle started, of course, personally, and presently, where we were situated and grounded. But by extension, its tentacles extended into and were a part of that international struggle. So, those are the elements that nourished our cultivation of an identity-driven movement. In the visual arts, as well as in all the other art forms.

Q: So, I mean, could you say, would it be correct ... and you could (Inaudible) ... that, out of the struggle was the (Inaudible) of Martin Luther King, (Inaudible) of Malcolm X, all the riots and the violence that was going on there, and the need, in the '60s, Civil Rights, et cetera. Would you say that AFRICOBRA was a reaction to that violence and that negativity, into just the opposite trends? You fight against it through positivity and pride. And, if you agree, could you elaborate on that?

NJH: I would say that AFRICOBRA was an outgrowth of that, as opposed to a reaction. And, there may not be but a small degree of difference between a reaction and an outgrowth. But again, as I said, you are the name you identify, or respond to. And so, we were an outgrowth, because we were ingesting all of this spiritual, political, cultural and creative energy, from all these various places. And, that was being filtered through our personal experiences, and by extension, our family experiences.

Q: So, can you talk to us a little bit about Jeff Donaldson, and the importance of Jeff Donaldson in the ...

(Background Conversation)

Q: Just about him, about maybe the first time you guys connected. What was his role in AFRICOBRA and why (Inaudible), he imparted you in some way. What was that?

NJH: Yeah, Jeff Donaldson. Anybody who knew Jeff knew he was a very imposing figure. First, his stature. He was six and a half feet tall. And, Jeff, like all other brothers during that period of time, and to this period of time, and the time past and preceding us, if we were grounded, we were very sure of ourselves. And, he was a handsome brother, and all the sisters always would let us know those sorts of things as well.

But intellectually, and creatively, Jeff was an energizing individual. He could motivate people to actually believe that they could do whatever they believed they could do. And, he inspired all of us to do the things that many of us grew up knowing from our parents and extended family that we could be anything that we wanted to be. All we had to do was make a decision, that was what we were going to do. And be willing to make the commitment to doing the things necessary to do that. But underpinning all of that, one had to have a passion for it. And if you did not have the passion, you couldn't fake it.

And, Jeff was the kind of person that, it was very clear, whatever his position was, you agreed with it or not ... which, at that particular time, no one used the term politically correct ... but whether it was politically, gender, or otherwise correct, if that was a position he held, or a statement he wished to make about a subject, within the context of the discussion or the context of whatever was taking place at the time, Jeff was strong enough to make that, and take whatever came with it.

But by doing so, it wasn't want to be adversarial or anything else. It was just simply his ability, as Jeff himself, to express himself, and be comfortable about making that expression. You know, and it wasn't about whether anybody else necessarily agreed with it or not. But he was a catalyst, in many ways.

Q: Did he have a sense of humor?

NJH: Oh, hell yeah. Jeff had a sense of humor. And, in one sense, between he and Wadsworth, I would say they were probably the elements, in terms of members of AFRICOBRA, who were the driving force behind a lot of the good humor of AFRICOBRA. But Jeff definitely had a sense of humor, and he had also a drive for no-nonsense. Which is basically the ethos, and all of us in AFRICOBRA expressed it differently, but similarly. We had no time

for nonsense.

Q: What makes your (Inaudible), your work, AFRICOBRA? What would you consider (Inaudible) AFRICOBRA?

NJH: Well, I would say, what makes our work ... if you would take an overarching look at it ... that makes it AFRICOBRA is that it is an expression of the spirit of African people. So, as we clearly looked at ourselves by the reflection of seeing ourselves through looking at our people, and distilling out of what we saw before us, and the things that were just a part of our being because of our upbringing.

We took those elements because they were, in one sense, sacred. And in the other sense, they were just simply celebratory. And we infused them into the visual works that we did, and we infused them in the, if you will, manifesto doctoring the philosophy of AFRICOBRA.

And, when you take all of that, and you marinate it and you massage it and move it back and forth throughout the whole context of the cultural activity, what you come up with is what was given to you and it comes through you. And it becomes the work that we created.

So, I guess in a sense, if I were to synthesize it, or bring it to a nugget, it would be that what makes AFRICOBRA work AFRICOBRA is that it reflects the people.

Q: Can you talk to us a little bit about this piece we have right here?

NJH: Yeah, this piece ...

(Background Conversation)

NJH: This particular silkscreen print that we're looking at here is entitled "If You Want to Hear Our View, You Ain't Done Nothin'." Which is clearly impregnated into the design of the piece itself.

But this piece was a silkscreen print of a tapestry that I also made. The tapestry's roughly three feet by four feet. But, I work in a number of media. So, sometimes I'll do a silkscreen print that ends up being a tapestry. Sometimes a tapestry ends up being a silkscreen print, or whatever direction that might move. But this particular piece was done in 1976, and it was a piece that somewhat spoke to ... not in celebration of, but spoke to, the bicentenary of the United States.

I moved to Boston in '74, and in '74 they had just begun the busing, integration of the school system there, the public school system. And, I was invited to be a part of an exhibition because I'm a weaver. I am a black weaver. I'm a man weaver. And that is, unbeknownst to myself at the time, necessarily, in an overt way, that's a rarity.

I moved to Boston. The art community, how they did, I don't know, but they knew of my presence there. They invited me to be a part of this textile exhibition celebrating the bicentenary at Boston City Hall. And of course, Boston City Hall was where Ted Landsmark, the attorney who was at City Hall one day, and this Pulitzer Prize photograph of him being speared by the American flag during that protest of the white citizens of Boston, against the busing of black children into their schools, and so forth and so on.

Then, when I submitted slides of the work, somehow they found out ... I got a call that said, "Look. Well, the exhibition is not going to any longer focus on the bicentenary. You can just do any kind of nondescript work." I don't have any nondescript work. All my work is energized and is focused around purposeful statements, positive energy, and the imagery that speaks to the experience and the direction to which we as AFRICOBRA want our people to move.

And so, especially when they saw this piece, and it was explained to them what it meant ... because you have this amalgam of African people in profile. They're both male and female, on the left-hand side of the composition. Which is, if we take the compass direction, as we are oriented from looking at the compass directions, from a European perspective, is that, our left is the west and our right is the east, and our head is the north and foot is the south. That, these Africans here are representative of Africans in, quote, what we call the New World, or the Western Hemisphere.

Looking back through the pyramid of ancient Egypt in the background behind them, and it's striated in three tiers of red, black and green, emblematic of the flag that came out of the UNIA of Marcus Garvey, which has become, more or less, the flag of African-Americans in particular.

And we see here, somewhat stylized configuration of Stevie Wonder. The great Benin ivory mask, which presently rests in the British Museum, which the Nigerian government, or the nation of Benin, has been pursuing to get back into its patrimony, through the UN Charter of National Heritage.

And then, behind it, you have the American flag, symbolized in the red, black and green, and the stripes. And this clearly is the contribution of Barbara Jones, as she spoke about using the American flag, which is a five-pointed star. And so, if you take it and extrapolate it, or abstract it, you've got the hood, the two arms and two legs of the hooded klan. And we know that's a very significant American symbol. And some of the language of the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, you know.

And, at the bottom, you have two vertically striated red, white and blue coffins, which represent Crispus Attucks, and the one other white rebel rouser, as they call them, during the resistance to the British Army by the colonists.

And so, Stevie did a piece at that time, and that's one of the versus, or one of the lines out of his song, is, "If you really wanna hear our view, you ain't done nothin'." And if we were talking about celebrating ... well, if the exhibition was speaking of celebrating the bicentenary of America, I can clearly understand why they would not necessarily want to have a work in there that said that, "If you really wanna hear who is our view?" And our view was myself and my people.

So, that's what this piece represents. And again, that symbol there is my signature, in terms of a symbol that's impregnated into the piece itself, which is the Egyptian symbol of the ankh. Which is the sacred symbol of life, and is also the symbol that signifies when you see a figure in Egyptian hieroglyphics, or Egyptian papyrus drawings, or any other ancient Egyptian visual representation, the ankh is held in the hand of the pharaoh. And it is a world symbol.

So, this piece here is a piece that was circumstantially connected to the celebration of 200 years of the United States of America.

Q: Can you talk to us about the importance of music in your work, and the ...

NJH: The importance of?

Q: Music in general, in your work. And the (Inaudible), maybe in the process of creating music and the process of creating visual art, if you agree that there are ...

NJH: Yeah. Well, music is very much a part of the palette of material that I and the rest of AFRICOBRA uses to create the works that we create. And, very clearly, the references here, in this particular piece, "If You Want to Hear Our View, You Ain't Done Nothin'," with Stevie.

But, as I indicated earlier, the OBAC, and the subsequent organization that came out of that, which was the AACM, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and the AACM ... music helps to feed the spiritual energies that are harnessed or drawn upon, personally, myself and us as a group, to inform the kind of pattern, the kind of color, rhythm, and the manner of visual, if you will, syncopation of all of the elements of any of our compositions.

So that, not only do they read as a visual representation, in terms of form and shape and design and the formal elements of making “art.” But they also resonate as a spiritual and a kind of psychological and inner connection to the work.

I mean, we can hear music when we see it. Sound has color to it. And those vibrations of color and sound, and the rhythms of the process of being engaged and manipulating the material to make manifest all of those particular kinds of energies, into something that is visually exciting, is an integral part, and integrally related to music.

Bessie Smith, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Sun Ra, Coltrane. Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald. You know, Mahalia Jackson. The Soulsters. Sam Cooke. You know, Otis Redding. You can go on. All of them. Because there is no particular ... if you will a genre of music that informs the work. It's all of that. Because, what they call blues, and what they call rhythm and blues, and what they call soul, and what they call spirituals, and what they call gospel, and what they call jazz, free jazz, you know, all of that, it's all one music.

It all comes from that ethos of your African- ness, that polyrhythmic African-ness, and the kind of synergy that has come into being as a result of our experiences with native people in the Western Hemisphere, and the elements that we also have ingested and revitalized that come from those who have been our oppressors as well. So, we are never without an aspect of all of those things that we encounter on the journey. And, I see my life as a journey. AFRICOBRA is clearly a journey, because we have been on this journey for 41 years. And, we know where we want to go. But, we are still on the journey.

And so, music, yes, very definitely is an integral part of my work. And as a matter of fact, if I were to crystallize it, I would say that I'm in the business of making visual music.

Q: Were there (Inaudible) musicians that were somehow a part of the social circle of AFRICOBRA? Like, did ...

NJH: Yeah.

Q: ... Lester ...

NJH: Yeah. Very definitely. As a matter of fact, Lester Lashley, the bass player, and other percussive instruments that have been here with us ... Lester is a visual artist as well. A very powerful visual artist. And, Lester and I were at the Art Institute together as undergraduates, and I think Lester is 15 years my senior. He and I have been tight since the day we met at the Art Institute in Chicago.

And, we shared a studio. Murray DePillars, Lester Lashley, myself, Arnold Barnes, a brother by the name of Rob Barrett, who was a textile artist here in Chicago. From Chicago. He lives in Ghana now. Were a part of the living experience of our studio. And the AACM, or various members of the Art Ensemble, or AACM, used to rehearse at that big 2,000-square-foot studio we had over in South Shore.

So, the music, the living music, the musicians, The Pharaohs, Richard Muhal Abrams, Mina Claudia Myers, we would go down the street not far from the South Side Community Arts Center on Wednesdays, at a regular little blues club, or a neighborhood club ... because we didn't call them bars. It was club. Had a bar in it. Club and a bar, two different types of things. Like art and image-maker, okay? So, we went to the club.

Sun Ra used to play on Wednesdays. And, if anybody's familiar with Sun Ra, no one that came to the club knew what the hell Sun Ra was playing. But, no one left.

On the other days of the week, all the other blues or regular genre of music, expression, was executed there. Live performance. But, people like Sun Ra and The Pharaohs, and all those people, and what's his name? Pharaoh Sanders, of course, and Leon Thomas. And King Pleasure. You know. And so, some of these are names that maybe someone might want to do a little bit of research and check out who they are.

(Background Conversation)

[Switches to next tape here]

Q: You have a unique perspective as a weaver (Inaudible) the group.

NJH: (Laughs).

Q: And, as a part of a collective, you know, also (Inaudible)?

NJH: Yeah, well ...

Q: And I also want you to talk about, I would imagine, being a weaver is a very spiritual (Inaudible). Or just the whole process of the art, (Inaudible). So, could you talk about that a bit?

NJH: Yeah. Well, the interesting part about AFRICOBRA, one of the things we attempted to do at the formation of AFRICOBRA was, we were interested in having an individual who represented many of the different disciplines. And, understanding that from an African ethos. Textiles is an integral part of that.

So, as a weaver, it presented some particular challenges for me that were not present for the painters or the print-makers and things of that nature. Is that, weaving takes time. It's a long process. It truly is a process that, if you don't have patience, you either develop it or you step out of that and pick up another medium.

And it's a spiritual journey, because, for example, if you deal with cotton, it has to be cultivated. Has to be harvested. Has to be picked. And cotton ... as supple and as wonderful as 300 and 500 per inch woven Egyptian cotton sheets feel when you get up under it at night, or during the day, or whatever ... in no way reveals the anguish and the hardship of picking cotton. Because the cotton ball has burrs on it, and those who pick cotton bleed, and have rough hands. They don't have soft, supple hands.

And then, you have to gin the cotton, separate the fiber from the seed. Then you have to take the fiber and cart it. Then you have to spin it. Then you either dye it. Then you then take it and skein it, or put it on a cone. Then you take it out of a cone or a skein formation, and you make it into butterflies, or you wrap it on a shuttle. And then you thread a loom with the warp, and then you set that warp up in the manner in which you manipulate the warp and the weft. And then you have to go through that process. That's a long process.

But it's a spiritual journey, because it's a process that, in and of itself, is communal. Because, the planting, the harvesting, the carting, the spinning, the dyeing, I don't do all of that. And so, I understand and am connected to all of those whose bodies sweat, and love has been invested in all that material that I use, then, to take that

which I receive from those who I respect and love, and then put it back out as a finished piece of work.

So, yes, it has all those types of challenges, and the element of our discussion and our critiques of AFRICOBRA, and bringing our works in process, was definitely a special challenge. But it was a challenge that I was able to ... and through the understanding of my passion for what I did, and what I do, and what was entailed in it, because that which I've just explained was what I explained to my fellow AFRICOBRA members, because they were not familiar with it, the intricacies that I'm aware of it.

That they were able to have a critique to me about what was yet not realized in having already been woven, but what had already been woven, and understanding maybe my small thumbnail sketches, and so forth, of where I wanted to go with this work. And that place of where I wanted to go was connected to all of the aesthetics and the philosophy of AFRICOBRA. So, yes, it has a very special kind of place. It is a spiritual journey, you know?

And, moreover, when you look at all cultures ... but I focus more specifically on African culture in particular ... is that textiles is very much tied to the theology of the culture. Because your priest ... and we can analogize that from religious practices in non-European, or any of the non, quote, three religious practices that we are most often familiar with ... that those who are the priest, the shaman, the herbalist, the spiritualist, the santos, the individual who we look to to interpret that theology, is always draped or cloaked in some type of fabric that is sacred to their position and role in that culture.

So, textiles is, in one sense, an ontological kind of relationship. And then you take that and extrapolate that to the aspect of coolade colors. The way we dress and adorn ourselves is an expression of that sacredness of cloth on the body, and that relationship of what you project out to those that you come in contact with.

We dress to express ourselves. And so, whether you wear very flamboyant and flashy material, or whether you wear very subdued ... and when I went to New England, I found out what earth colors were. Gray, brown. You know, I said, please. Won't work. All colors are earth colors. Blue is cobalt. Red, cochineal red, is from the little cochineal bug that lives in Peru and South America, that they take millions of them and grind them into a powder and put them together. It's a beautiful color.

So, yes. There are some very particular kinds of things that are specific to being a textile artist. But, see, Jay Wadsworth ... Jay Jarrell, rather ... is a textile person herself. She's a fashion designer. Barbara told me she was interested in fashion.

So, again, I've also always been involved ... and am still, more so now involved, in the intervening years from '68 to now ... involved in theater. Costume design. I do a lot of costumes. I do a lot of design. I've made a lot of carrying cases for musical instruments for musicians, out of leather and textiles over the years.

And, theater is very much a part of what I do as well, because I grew up, in high school, acting. Interestingly enough, my high school English teacher, Mr. Green(?), was friends with Lorraine Hansberry. They were contemporaries. And when "A Raisin in the Sun" was on Broadway, because of his relationship to Lorraine Hansberry, we were the only people ... and that was my high school, George Washington Carver High School. We were the only people who had permission to perform her play. And I was Walter Lee.

So, I think back, you know, occasionally, and this is an occasion that helps me to bring forward things that I unconsciously, in this way of speaking ... now, in this particular discussion ... consciously become aware of the role those things played in me being the person that I am.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about the Unite?

NJH: Unite.

Q: And, the (Inaudible).

NJH: Oh. Well, (Laughs). Again, you know, within the context of using words and language in our images, to communicate positive images, we see words and statements as a positive image. A word is an image. People respond to what they are called. And, Unite is one of those words that has a myriad of meanings, and it has a power behind it that, depending on the context in which it's used, people respond differently.

But, we ... well, I in particular. Others of AFRICOBRA here and there do it, but we do it in a different kind of way sometimes. As Michael talked about. The fact that we were crossing the George Washington Bridge, and we all chimed right in to the Thelonious Monk's piece, the four of us, as we were driving along. I mean, we have this interpretation and this ingesting of, and then bringing back out, the music.

And so, as the blues griots do, they take a word and they turn it. And so, you know, the aspect of being good is one thing. But then, when someone else is gooder than you, that's an entirely different space of being. Being

gooder than the other person is very different than just being good, or being very good. But being gooder is an entirely other kind of thing.

And so, that kind ...

Q: (Overlap/Inaudible). We're all good, but when we're good together ... gooder(?).

NJH: Oh, well. True. Right. As you take that and then ...

Q: Could you say that ...

NJH: ... metaphorically speak about good, with relationship to AFRICOBRA. Each one of us, individually, are good at what we do. But collectively, we're gooder. You know. So, as a collective, we're gooder than we are as individuals. And so, I can work with that. You know? We've been working with that 41 years, working every day at becoming gooder than we were yesterday.

So, the play and the twist of words is the same thing we do with the play and the twist of colors and pattern and design. And, if you will, giving a new kind of meaning to that. Because the term "Bad," I mean, which are, Wadsworth's painting of Angela Davis, is primarily composed of the letter "B" and the word "bad." And at the time in which that became a part of the lexicon of activist, if you will, language, the Jackson 5, and Michael Jackson, you know, we understand that.

So, "Bad," it's the double entendre, you know? We take it and flip it. You know? And flipping something is not a real estate term, that they went through in the '90s, you know, making profit off of ...

Q: So bad is good.

NJH: Bad is gooder. Bad is actually gooder. See? Because that would be the flip. To say bad is good would be staying in line with Webster's Dictionary of bad and good. But, when bad was flipped from being the other thing that we understand it to be to the thing that we made it into being, being good is flipped to become gooder, which is the other side of what we turned it into. So, we have taken it and given it a new energy.

And, if nothing else, I mean, when you hear somebody turn a phrase, or turn a word in speaking, and they turn it in a manner that's not, if you will, standard English, it gets your attention right away. And you pay very close attention to it. It causes you to have to re-engage your understanding of whatever that is that was spoken, and twist, or flip.

Q: Michael had mentioned, how could people ... critics of the group, who might look at it as ...

(Background Conversation)

Q: ... look at it as negative.

NJH: Look at?

Q: Look at AFRICOBRA as militant or, you know. How could something constructive be destructive?

NJH: Okay.

Q: Can you speak to that? Like, what would the critics say? How would you combat that?

NJH: Well, when you take into account the pejorative landscape of, if you will, art criticism, the response of individuals regarding AFRICOBRA's philosophy and sense of aesthetic, and the manner in which we approach our work, the images we make, the choice of individuals that may be honored in those works, rubbed against the paradigm for, quote, correctness, or what was the manner in which, quote, fine art was made.

But see, that kind of response failed to understand, we were not in the business of making fine art. We see art as an instrument for change. So, what we were in the business of doing, we were creating instruments of change. And, the change that we were making, or were interested in making, or being a part of the catalyst that drove that change, was not a change in the art world. Because we weren't addressing the art world. We were addressing our people.

So, those criticisms were grounded in a paradigm that was not ours. And so, what we were in the business of doing was creating, or affirming, or reaffirming, a self. Which had nothing to do with the paradigm for criticism of fine art. So, fine art was not a part of our matrix of material that we were dealing with.

So, whether those individuals were concerned with or critiquing, if you will, our work as being reactionary or

oppositional, or confrontational, if you flip all three of those words, we were that. But we were that from another angle. We were revolutionary in the sense that we were speaking about and affirming ourselves. We were reactionary because we were about affirming our own image. Our own selfhood.

And we were ...

Q: Confrontational.

NJH: ... confrontational, in the sense that we were confronting ourselves and our people. We were not confronting anybody else. We were challenging ourselves to see ourselves as we are. You know, Black is Beautiful is not a slogan. It's a reality. It's an adjective. It's a noun.

Q: That's cool (Inaudible). (Laughter). That was good.

NJH: So, you know, the larger community, including a lot of African-American art historians and art critics and so forth, tend to find themselves allowing themselves to be locked into discussing AFRICOBRA, and artists of that particular kind of sensibility, as being oppositional. When I'm affirming myself, I'm not opposing anybody.

So, we reject those ...

(Background Conversation)

NJH: So, as these individuals might describe AFRICOBRA and the body of work that we do, and the body of work of other individuals who similarly work as we do, as oppositional, oppositional it's not, in the sense of opposing something else from the outside. We are opposing those things that we have subconsciously ingested, and then reflect back out, as to who we are. As opposed to, accepting the who we are, and/or affirming and identifying the who we are.

So, you know. I don't have a problem with those terms. It's just that when the person brings the term to me, when they leave with my response to the term, then they have been reoriented. Now, more often than not, then their response is the oppositional response.

(Background Conversation)

Q: Two things. One, a moment ago, you were talking about music and art, and some motivating factors in your life. And you mentioned that, you know, how effective. You used the analogy of, you know, many different people, the original members of AFRICOBRA were different individuals with different styles of art ...

NJH: Right.

Q: ... and different approaches to art, but they had things in common. And it's like, you mentioned, when we were listening to Thelonious Monk in the car, we all picked different things, but we were all on the same page, the same vibe. And you said, we're all different, but together, we know where we're going. And I wanted to ask you, where are you going?

NJH: To borrow a phrase from Sun Ra, and the title of one of his albums ... or it might be the AEC, Art Ensemble of Chicago. But it doesn't matter. They're all on the same vibe. The past, into the present, into the future. So we're going into the future.

What the future will be, I'm not sure. But I have a vision for what I want it to be, and I want it to be a future that's more humane. Because the false constructs that have been over the centuries, structured to undergird certain kinds of agendas that are contrary to humanity, are the things that AFRICOBRA's work has always sought to address. Is, we seek to stimulate and encourage the humanity of people.

And, it's not oppositional to or opposed to anybody else, but that humanity that I'm principally focused on is the humanity of African people. And I say that because, as a breathing individual, I firsthandedly know the abuse that our humanity has, you know, endured.

So, my first and foremost agenda is to cultivate and reaffirm the African humanity, and by extension, the humanity of all people. So, it's an agenda that is particularly focused.

But tangentially, it belongs to all of humanity. Because I know, experientially, that all of humanity has responded to the AFRICOBRA works over the 41 years we've been doing work and exhibiting all over the world. So, emblematic of that is just to refer back to the exhibition we were invited to have at the UN, you know, in terms of the South Africa Free Apartheid Committee.

So, that's the future. That's where I wish to go. I'm in the present. I draw upon my past. And I project toward

my future. And, in 1968, I didn't know my future would be sitting here in 2010. I thought very surely, all of us did, that we would be in our future by the actions we were taking in the '60s, by 1971.

But, you know, we understood that was a struggle, but we surely had desires and wishes for the struggle to be short-lived. Not that we were opposed to the struggle, but short-lived, and the accomplishments of what that struggle was about would be achievable and recognizable much earlier. But, having an eight-year-old granddaughter, I'm very glad that the future she has, and has been delivered into, is a hell of a lot better.

(Background Conversation)

Q: When you talk about past, present and future as ... you're so young, so I hate to even put it this way. As the older of the current members, how important is it to keep the rules of AFRICOBRA intact, and how has it transformed? I mean, it's transformed, as far as the aesthetic goes. But the roots of AFRICOBRA. Is it still important to take from the past and continue to cultivate it as it relates to what's going on socially now? And just continue to have it live?

NJH: It's absolutely essential to continue to look back and go forward as the sankofa bird, is to look back at one's past in order to enable you to go forward into your future.

So, being that this is 2010, issues and circumstances of the inhumanity still exist in 2010, as it did in 1968. And I see all of that in terms of levels and degrees, because, if the degree to which people honored other people, and if this particular country, the United States of America, had grown to the point ... or, I should say, had evolved to, or transitioned to, the degree of humanity that we as AFRICOBRA seek to move people to, as we move along with those people ... because we're not there. We're evolving as well. We wouldn't have the kinds of idiotic discussions about whether Barack Obama was a U.S. citizen. I mean, the idiots who would say that clearly don't know the states of the United States of America. You know, if you're born in Hawaii, that's an idiotic kind of statement.

So, that's the same dumb statement as, repeated many times in the '60s, when, you know, students were escorted by the U.S. Army into Little Rock High School.

So, of course one has to continue to draw upon that past, because that's the energy for the present, for continuing moving forward to the future. Because the future is ever ongoing. The future is the very instant after the word I've spoken has moved into your ear.

And so, for me, the future is always the present. And the present is always the past. So, we do draw upon the past. And all of the past that we have always drawn upon, we have selectively drawn upon the past. And one has to be selective. You know? For many reasons. So, yes. I would say, very definitely, things that have already transpired are things that are a part of the energy that helps to generate the current body of work that we do, with the agenda of there being a much more humane future.

Q: And what have you kept, from the aesthetic? With the aesthetic?

NJH: What have ...

Q: There's a lot that hasn't been kept. But what ...

NJH: Yeah. Well, we still work from the same set of principles. In terms of shine and awesomeness and frontality and the elements of the horovacea(?), and things of the nature of making sure the mimesis at midpoint, where the back and the forward is not necessarily easily distinguished. You have to come forward and go back in order to fully engage what is being projected in the works.

Those, for us, for 41 years, have proven to be the bedrock that doesn't change. And, along with that ... or not so much along with it. If you were to take all of those principles ... shine and frontality, and the aspect of positive imagery, and all of that, and collapse it into something, you might best call it attitude. Or 'tude. Because we have an attitude. We had it then, and that was what caused us to actually come together, was an attitude.

And within a engagement of that attitude, we distilled out of it those particular points that are the points that allow for us at each juncture of this journey to revisit that attitude, and to keep that attitude moving forward. Because that attitude is the thing that causes us to do what we do. And so, we would not be able to do what we do unless we continued with that attitude.

But that attitude also, as all things do, it matures. It grows. And as we have brought on younger members into the group, the element of its continual growth is replenished and re-nourished, and re-invigorated.

So, I would say that, taking all that, and collapsing it into a single nugget, that nugget would be attitude. And AFRICOBRA work does have attitude. And it's not accidental that we have attitude. It was purposeful.

(Background Conversation)

Q: What is the purpose of art? And in your case, is your art an instrument for (Inaudible)?

(Background Conversation)

NJH: Well, you know, when we think about the term "art," in so many cultures, there necessarily is not a word for art, because art is an outward expression of living. Living with others. Because, actually, I'd be hard-pressed to imagine that necessarily that would be, if you will, art, or expressive creativity, if you were the only being alive. So, with community, there is a collective expression. And so, that expression, in some cultures, is called art.

And, I would say that, for AFRICOBRA, as I earlier indicated, we see ourselves as image-makers and not as artists. That, the works we create are created with an overarching, if you will, attitude of seeking to move people to a better place than where they were when they first came upon our images. So, through what our images are composed of, in terms of form, design, and all that, the formal elements of, quote, art, we seek to have that energy of those works to move people to a better place.

So, that better place does not have to say that you agree with me. That better place is that you understand me. Because it's not about, quote, a love fest. It's about respect for each other. See, I am not interested in necessarily you being my friend, or you liking me. But you must respect me.

So, for us, what we seek to do with our art is to move people to a better place. And so, in a sense, that would be, if we say art, take it and say, AFRICOBRA images are about moving people to a better place. Quote. And if you want to line that up next to, or above, or below, or collapse it on top of, art, then we're talking about the same thing. But it comes from a different groundswell.

Q: So, is art power? Is art powerful?

NJH: Oh, absolutely. Art is power. Art is ... well, as I said earlier also, it's an instrument of change. And, anything that causes something to change does have to exert some sort of energy. And so, energy, in the sense of physics, is then described as power. You know. So, yes. It's about power.

And it's not power in the pejorative context of ... well, I would say not just pejorative, but the Western context that power, as its definitional reality is, basically is force. And that force is, more often than not, used to subjugate someone or something else. And we're not about subjugating. We're about uplifting. And, seeking to be a part of the journey forward, as opposed to the conflict and confrontation. It's not oppositional. It's not reactionary. It's none of that. It's clearly an illuminating adjective.

Q: Would you say that art was an important part of black power? And if that's the case, would you maybe incorporate it into your answer?

NJH: Well, absolutely. Because, all the marches, the march on Washington was a performance piece. You had Mahalia Jackson. You know, you had Harry Belafonte. You had Dr. King. You had however many thousands of people that were there. They were actively engaged in call-and-response, that deep, down, flat-out, straight out, in the present, African performance.

And, when that occurred, in one sense, I was very fortunate and very blessed, in one sense. But I was very anguished, in another sense. Because I wasn't here to be in Washington at that march. I was actually at Orly Airfield, which it was called then. It's now, since '63, renamed DeGaulle Airport, in Paris, France. Where Africans and Frenchmen and Germans and English and anybody else who was there in Paris at that time, who were celebrating, or congregating together in celebration of the March on Washington when I was there.

I was there at that time as a young student, and I had taken with me, for me sustenance, in terms of reading, I took James Baldwin's "Another Country." And I guess, in retrospect, I had just gone to another country. So, being in another country from another country. It was an unconscious kind of wonderful thing.

But, it's a performance piece. It's an active enterprise that we engaged in.

Q: You were talking about attitude earlier. And I think it's important to note, and I think it has a lot to do with the times, when you think about musicians that inspired (Inaudible). It was a coolness, too. And I don't know if it had a lot to do with how you were being taken. Seriously, directly. Not confrontational.

NJH: Right.

Q: But, you know, every picture that I see, from Ten in search of a nation to any other portrait, you guys just have a certain coolness.

NJH: Yeah.

Q: Can you talk about that?

NJH: Well, I don't know how necessarily, with language, spoken language ...

(Background Conversation)

NJH: I would say, I don't necessarily know, I wouldn't necessarily be able to express, coolness or attitude orally. Because I'm not an oral person, which may seem like a contradiction. But, I'm not an oral person. I work with color, form, shape and that thing. I deal with images, in that manner.

Cool is a spiritual thing. It's an essence. It's something that comes from within. I mean, you know, as I think about it, there were a number of people I grew up with, and clearly, we would identify them as being cool. But if you separated one from the other to the other, and saw how they manifest that coolness, they were as distinctive as each AFRICOBRA artist is in our own identity of our work. But, that collective energy that is also present in all of our works, as a collective, and in our works as an individual, is that coolness.

It's sort of like Eric Delfri(?) said once. You know, someone asked him to play that tune again. He say, "It's out there. It's in the air." So, you know, you can't play that tune again. So, when you experience it, that experience of that first performance of that piece can not be repeated. Now, the next time he plays it, it will be equally as cool.

But cool is not something you can concretize, from where I see it. It's an essence. It's something beyond us. It comes from another realm. And, it embodies all that one has experienced, and all that one is the heir to, from the collective past. So, you know. That's the best I think I can do, in terms of being able to give an oral description of coolness or attitude.

(Background Conversation)

Q: As I learn about your art, in the literature of the time, I read an article from Ebony Magazine. Whole article devoted to the capital B in Black.

NJH: (Laughs).

Q: And now, when I write letters, especially when I think of your time, I capitalize Black. And it's understood, among your generation. Can you talk about the small B and the big B, and what that means to you?

NJH: I'll talk about blackness, as Rahsaan Roland Kirk said, you know, B-L-A-C-K-N-E-S-S, blackness. The black keys on a piano. The capitalization of "black" is the transferral, or transference, or synchronization, or the iconification of the self, from the diasporic experience. We, collectively, generally speaking, can not have, do not know we have, we're not able to identify, a particular place from which our pre-slavery ancestry derives from.

So, outside of my being able to say I am Beninian, Cameroonian, Ethiopian, whatever, Black represents a nationalism, an ethnicity, a sense of selfhood. And if that is, in fact, the case, which it is ... and I only say if it's in fact the case, being that, if you look at it before you get to it. But now that we are to it and I'm in it, it is a proper place. Therefore, it is a proper noun.

Q: It's nation time.

NJH: It's nation time. It comes out of nation times. It comes out of Uhuru. It comes out of unity. And so, for me, when I use the term Black, I'm not necessarily and always talking about color. (Inaudible) self.

So, when I ... and this is personal. Because early on in the '60s, and through the '70s and the '80s, '90s, and still today, I have these discourses and this discussion with some of my fellow colleagues in the academy, and some of my fellow co-conspirators in the arena of the cultural arena, about whether it should be capitalized or whether it should be lower-case. It's not an argument for me. It's not any kind of discussion. It is. I am who I am.

So, I would say it's a non-issue. It's a proper noun. I'm a proper person. I am. So, as I am, I am capitalized. So. I hope that answers the small B and the big B.

But Hoyt Fuller was right on the money, though. Because, see, Hoyt was dealing with the element that we were talking about when we used the word "bad." Because he understood that flip, that double entendre. Because, Hoyt is as instrumental to the Black Arts movement as Jeff is ... and it's not was. Deceased he might be, but is ... to AFRICOBRA.

And Hoyt was central, in many ways, to the existence of AFRICOBRA, because he was a central figure in the cultural arena here in Chicago and beyond, but here in Chicago in particular, because his being at Ebony Magazine. And that's understandable in the context that, when he took over the magazine, it was called Negro Digest. And then it was retitled Black World.

So, that is, again, a capitalization of the selfhood. A reaffirming of the African-ness. The establishment of the nation time. You know. Because, when you say Negro Digest, that's here. You say Black World, it's universal. And it includes, and in a way of speaking, it's kind of what you would call either Pan-Africanist, or Black Nationalist, or TransAfricanist. It encompasses and encapsulates all of that. So, from my perspective, it's a non-issue. It's always capital.

(Background Conversation)

Q: A thousand years from now, looking back at this (Inaudible), this effort. When you tell this story as sort of a fable, something that's passed on from generation to generation. So there's a little bit of a beginning, let's call it 1967. There's a middle. There's an end. What is that fable? Like, a 30-second, a minute, a little short story. (Inaudible).

NJH: A little short story. I'll answer that by sharing a discussion I had with my eight-year-old grandbaby. She came home with a homework assignment. And her assignment was to write a story. And she said "Baba" ... you know, that's what she calls me. She said, "I have to write a story." And I said, "Okay. Why don't you start the story?" She said, "No, I want you to tell the story." And I was quiet. And she said, "Well, no. Come on. Start the story."

And she looked. She said, "No, you're supposed to start in the beginning." I said, "No. All stories don't start with 'In the beginning.' That's necessarily not how you start a story. 'In the beginning.' It doesn't have to have a middle or an end. It is a parable that you're putting out there."

So, a thousand years from now, I would be pleased if what I am doing now has resonance a thousand years from now. So, I'm not in control of that. But I am sure enough in what I'm doing that I feel that it will have a role a thousand years down the road. But there's another African proverb, saying, "As long as somebody alive speaks your name, you're not dead."

So, forward, is where I'd like to see that be a thousand years from now, is that AFRICOBRA is still spoken of. So, that would be the thousand-year-old Chinese egg. That's the delicacy that we're laying into the cauldron to be cultivated, looked after and nourished from here forward. So, if in a thousand years, AFRICOBRA is spoken of, that's cool.

If it isn't, that's cool too, because we made our point, and we made our contribution here. So, whether we're spoken of or not, the contribution's always there.

Q: Okay.

Q: Thank you, Napoleon. (Applause).

NJH: Thank you all.

(Background Conversation)

(END OF TAPE)