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Robert L. Allen

*Robert Allen: From Segregated Atlanta to UC Berkeley,
A Life of Activism and African American Scholarship*

Interviews conducted by
Todd Holmes
in 2019

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Robert Allen, 1967

Abstract

Robert L. Allen is an award-winning journalist, author, editor, and professor of African-American Studies. Born in 1942, Allen grew up in segregated Atlanta where he experienced firsthand both the harsh realities of racism and the growth of the Civil Rights Movement within the Black community. Upon his graduation from Morehouse College, he moved to New York City and began a career in journalism as the first Black reporter for the *National Guardian* in New York. He became a leading voice in documenting the intersection of the Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements during the 1960s, and even helped create the anti-draft group African Americans for Survival after he formally refused his own draft notice in 1967. That same year, his reporting for the *National Guardian* took him to the International Peace Conference in Czechoslovakia as well as a tour of North and South Vietnam. Allen moved to San Francisco in 1968, where he earned a PhD in Sociology from University of California, San Francisco and transitioned from journalism to scholarship focused on the African American experience. He served as senior editor of *The Black Scholar* from 1975 to 2012, a publication long-considered one of the most influential journals of Black Studies, and held professorships in at San Jose State, Mills College, and the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of numerous books, most notably *The Port Chicago Munity* (1989), which played a significant role in creation of the Port Chicago National Memorial. In this oral history, Allen discusses growing up in segregated Atlanta; the impact of Emmett Till; the rise of the Civil Rights Movement; Harlem and the Black community in New York during the 1960s; traveling to Vietnam in 1967; activism in California's Bay Area; editorship of *The Black Scholar*; academic career in African American Studies; the Port of Chicago book and memorial; as well as his other books and writing projects.

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Interview 1: April 18, 2019

01-00:00:01

Holmes: This is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is April 18, 2019. I have the pleasure of sitting down with Robert Allen for his oral history. This is our first session, and we are here at his beautiful home in the city of Benicia. Robert, thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with me today.

01-00:00:27

Allen: I'm delighted.

01-00:00:28

Holmes: In our forthcoming sessions, we're going to explore a lot of your life, career, and various activities. In this first session, though, I want to focus on your family background and childhood. You were born in Georgia. Is that correct?

01-00:00:53

Allen: Yes.

01-00:00:54

Holmes: Tell us a little bit about your father and his family.

01-00:01:01

Allen: Okay. Well, I was born May 29, 1942 in Atlanta, Georgia. And, I was born into the African-American community there, which was very large. In fact, it constituted one-third of the population of Atlanta even at that time. And now it's probably getting to be a majority. But I was born at a black hospital in Atlanta that was actually within walking distance of where my mom lived at that time. We lived totally within the black community, of course. And, my family, my father's family, had been in Atlanta for a couple of generations. It's interesting—with his family, when you look at the people, you realize that there's a lot of Indian blood in the Allan family, and that there must be some history. But nobody knows the history. Nobody knows about the background. There must have been some Native American background.

And I think the reason for that is simply that in 1830 all the Indians were removed from Georgia. They moved out to Indian territories—the Trail of Tears, the terrible march from Georgia to Oklahoma. A lot of people died along the way. And, for those who left, they started a new life there in Oklahoma. But actually, not all the Indians left. This is my theory, that not all of the Indians left on that march. And, in order to stay behind, though, in Georgia, you could no longer be an Indian. Now, remember, there's already been some race mixing and everything. There are already mixed people there. But now, this politicizes it, actually, because if you're an Indian, you're not supposed to be in Georgia anymore. You're supposed to be in Oklahoma. So, what do you do?

01-00:03:20

Well, in order to stay, people had to give up being Indians, basically. They had to become African-Americans. They had to give up any evidence of Indian culture, language, anything to do with Indianness, and become African-Americans. And this is what happened over the course of that generation after 1830 for those who wanted to stay. I don't know how many there are because there's no way to know how many there are. They disappeared. They were no longer Indians. They don't show up anywhere. And they don't show up as a different kind of African-American either except when you see people on the streets or in families like my families, and you look at them and say, "You've got a lot of Indian blood, right?" Well, the answer is yes, but nobody knows what. We don't know which tribe. Well, you can guess; there were only a couple of tribes in Georgia.

But, this is my theory of why it is that my father's family, why it is that there are so many of them that look very Indian as well. But nobody talks about Indianness. Nobody ever mentions that. Is that part of our heritage at all? Yet it's very obvious in the biological heritage that there's a connection. So, this is my theory, which is that that connection was severed completely for those who decided they were not going to Oklahoma. And if they wanted to stay in Georgia, they could no longer be Indians. But they had to literally give up their culture and become African-Americans in the course of this one generation, which was my great grandfather's generation, I think.

01-00:05:13

So, anyway, when you look at the pictures of my grandparents on my father's side, the Allen family, you can see very much my grandmother, for example. There are photographs of her with a long braid down the back—very Indian. You look at her and you see her and you say this woman is an Indian. You look at my uncle—yeah, he's Indian. But, they're African-Americans, culturally and in every way. Biologically, we have some Indian heritage. But culturally, it's all been lost, which is sad to say. But it was necessary in order for them to stay in Georgia.

In any case, they stayed. They grew up in an area called Buckhead, as a matter of fact, which is now a very fancy neighborhood in Atlanta. But if you think about that name, Buckhead, what's a "buck?" A buck is a negative term for an Indian. Buckhead, what is that? It suggests that there was some sort of community there originally, some sort of Indian community called Buckhead. And they all left except for those who stayed. They were no longer Indians. So, that's a little footnote here because people sometimes ask me that. They say, "Do you have an Indian background?" And I say, "Well, yes and no."

01-00:06:42

Also, obviously, a lot of white blood as well is mixed in because of slavery and the forced mixture that happened during slavery, racial mixtures that occurred. And so, we've got that as well. But of course, we're not white either. So, it's a curious kind of racial background, racially mixed. But the

mixtures have sort of disappeared culturally because they don't come forward with us in our history. In fact, we've become Negroes. And that's who we are, what we have been now for several generations.

There are a lot of light-skinned Negroes in Atlanta. At least there used to be. There are a lot of Indian-looking Negroes in Atlanta. They're all Negroes. Nobody has any knowledge about that history now except maybe a few people who have studied it, of the Indians who were in Georgia. But in any case, my father's folks come from this hidden Indian background. My mother's people come from a little town called Sparta, Georgia, which was a prosperous little slave town back in the slavery period. And, they would have been descendants of slaves in that area, but mixed, and this time mixed with white.

01-00:08:34

My grandmother, if you saw her, on my mother's side, looks completely white. My mother looked completely white. You would never have thought, meeting her on the street, that she had any other heritage in her. But, she's an African-American by law. And remember, all of this is by law because in Georgia at that time, race was defined. It would have been the law. At time of birth, your racial background was stated on your birth certificate—Negro. So, the heritage there then, the Negro heritage, becomes the dominant heritage. And then we grew up in the African-American community, that's who we are. I can't say anything else about that except that's who we are.

I've always been very comfortable with that because, for one thing, I didn't know that we might be anything else. How can I know that? Nobody ever talked about it. And, it wore well because, as I said, in the African-American community, light-skinned people were not unusual in the South. It's not an unusual thing to see very light, even truly white-looking people who are "Negroes." I don't know if they still are because there, of course, you have an option. We can opt out. But back in the day, that didn't exist because, for one thing, you had a record that followed you around. Your birth certificate, your driver's license, your school records, everything says "Negro." So, you can't escape that when you move to other areas and people get your records.

01-00:10:15

For the most part, light-skinned people stayed in the community and became part of the community and inter-married with dark-skinned people. And you get the kind of people you see in Atlanta and throughout the South. People that can look everything from completely black to virtually completely white—all Negroes. So, that's how that came about under the law in Georgia. And, it was the fact of the matter that you simply couldn't be an Indian anymore and stay there, and you couldn't be white, that was impossible under the law. And so, a lot of light-skinned colored people were the result of that process.

On my mother's side, she grew up in the prosperous town of Sparta, Georgia, which after slavery, a large black population moved in there and settled, built businesses, stores and so on. In fact, my grandmother's family owned a store in Sparta, Georgia. And, I think that that store is described in Jean Toomer's book [*Cane*, c.1923], where he talks about the Negro section of the town owned by a black family. He doesn't say who the family are, but he describes them—very light-skinned people. I think this might have been my grandparents' family, and that they may have actually encountered Toomer at the time that he was there. They would have been there then, too.

01-00:12:06

But in any case, I think he is describing, actually, the black community in Sparta at the time that my folks would have been there. And they would have owned this business. But, there were other complications for the black community there, and that was its own divisions, because not only were there people of different colors in the black community, but they were also sometimes divided by color. There was, in Sparta, an actual division between light-skinned and dark-skinned Negroes. There was a road in Sparta called the Dixie Pike. And they tell me that that was actually the dividing line between a community of largely light-skinned Negroes on one side and dark-skinned families on the other.

And guess what? My grandmother came from the light-skinned community. My grandfather came from the dark-skinned community in Sparta. And that was a big problem for them because the light-skinned people didn't want inter-marriage with the dark-skinned people. In fact, it was recognized in the churches because in the light-skinned community, their church was called the CME Church, which stands for Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. They were a spinoff of the Methodists, a colored spinoff. And they had "colored" actually in the name of the church. And, when they came to Atlanta, they established churches, and they established a church called West Mitchell—because it was on West Mitchell Street—CME Church. That was my church. That's the church I grew up in, West Mitchell Colored Methodist Church.

01-00:14:11

The dark-skinned side of town were AMEs, African Methodist Episcopal Church. So, the church on the dark-skinned side of town was called the African Methodist Episcopal Church. People tended to be darker skinned in the church, although you could find light-skinned people and dark-skinned people by this time on both sides. It was not a hard and fast line. But it was still a line. It was, in fact, so severe that my grandmother's people, the light-skinned people, did not want her to marry my grandfather, who came from a dark-skinned family. They did not want her to marry him. They refused, they said, "You cannot marry this man."

This is how racism, the weirdness of racism, gets incorporated even into the oppressed communities. And when we reproduce a kind of racism in our own

communities, discriminating against dark-skinned people in our own communities, we imitate the white world. This is very sad, and it's something that's changing now, I think, and has been changing for some time. But it was a sad heritage of slavery and racism that we brought forward into the 20th century in our own communities.

01-00:15:44

When I grew up, I was very aware that our church was called the Colored Methodist Church. But I had friends who were AMEs. And I couldn't understand, as a kid, what that was about because we're all Negroes. Why are we divided into these two different churches? Of course, there were other divisions as well. But that's important, though, because it did shape and affect my consciousness growing up, the colorism thing—I call it colorism—within the black community, and the discrimination against dark-skinned people. Now, bear in mind, my own grandfather is a black man—I mean, black, literally black man. My grandmother from the other side of town is very light-skinned and could have passed for a white woman.

It's hard for me to imagine how they lived in Atlanta except to realize that even by that time the black communities were large enough for you to have a life entirely within the black community. You didn't have to deal with white people. Unlike slavery, where white people were a part of our daily lives because we were their slaves and had to follow their orders, after the Civil War you could have black communities developing which white people just did not appear. You could have children like me grow up in those communities. I was born in a black hospital. I went to all-black schools, starting with kindergarten all the way through college.

01-00:18:06

When I traveled outside of Atlanta, we went to the countryside to visit our families who lived in the country who all lived in segregated communities in the rural areas. I didn't go north until I was much older. And to see communities in which whites and blacks lived together, that was unheard of. Right there in Atlanta we had people who looked white and people who looked black living together in the black community. Everybody's black. Once you say everybody's black, then there's no problem. It's so bizarre.

01-00:18:46

Holmes:

Well, tell me a little bit about your father now. He was a mechanic, yes?

01-00:18:50

Allen:

Yes, yes. My father grew up in a large family—he had four brothers and two sisters. He actually was a boxer, that is what he wanted to be. He dropped out of school, unfortunately—a big mistake, as he never learned to read. He was illiterate. Dropped out of school, wanted to be a boxer, went into boxing. But this was at the time of the outbreak of World War II. And, all of his brothers go into the military service, which was what you did then. If you were a young black man, you went into the military.

My father, who was apparently the most athletic of them—the physique, the strength, all of that—was rejected by the Army because he had a heart murmur. He couldn't believe it. It destroyed him in a way because his whole dream was to become a professional boxer, and winning a championship. And he'd been working on that some years before he gets called up for the draft and finds out that, of all of the brothers, he's the only one who's rejected. It was a tragedy for him because he had at that time no skills.

01-00:20:42

But, because the war was on, and because there was Lockheed in Marietta, Georgia, which was just a few miles north of Atlanta, and Lockheed was building aircraft for the military, he got a job as a welding trainee while his brothers went off to serve in the military. Nobody went overseas, I don't think. They served domestically. But my father went to work for Lockheed and learned to be a welder, giving him a skill for when he came out of the military. And even though he came out, in some way he was destroyed by this rejection. I still do not understand it. Being rejected as unfit, when he considered himself, and so did everybody around him, to be one of the most physically fit of any man anybody ever knew. Yet he had a bad heart, which didn't kill him until much later.

But, it destroyed him psychologically because it was something that he had been working on for years, this idea of physical perfection, physical success as a boxer, which had been his dream. Now that was completely out the window—no chance for that at all; he couldn't box, they wouldn't let him box. Eventually, he finds a job working as a service worker in the public housing projects. Basically, he was the man who did the cleanup there and did some repairs—they knew he could do mechanical things, so they had him do some mechanical repairs and so on.

01-00:22:44

Eventually he got the idea for maybe starting his own garage and becoming a businessman himself and running a garage. He even built a garage. By this time, we had moved to my grandfather's house. I'm three or four years old. And, we had originally gotten a little home with some friends. But then we moved into my grandfather's house that he had built. I'll tell you how his story continues later, but he eventually, as pretty much everybody did, got out of the gambling bit. And, you know what? Of course, this was the beginning of what we now called the lotteries that every state has. They had these things that were called numbers writers back in the day. And every oppressed community had that business. It was a local business, the numbers writers. Everybody knew who the writers were. Everybody knew who the runners were.

My grandparents, upon their arrival in Atlanta, my grandmother became a numbers writer and my grandfather had become a numbers runner. The writer is the person who actually writes down the numbers. You come to

somebody's house. You sit in the kitchen. You talk. They say, what number? You've got to play four numbers. And the winning numbers were based on the last four digits of the closing stock market for that day. So, it was in the newspaper. Everybody could read it. Everybody could see what are the closing, so it kept it honest. You knew what the winning numbers were publicly. So, it was an honest business, but it was a criminal business, too, you know? So, a lot of people were getting arrested.

01-00:24:38

But they had this business, and this is what they were doing to support themselves at first, which was very funny considering that they later became stalwarts of the church. But there they were running this illegal business—and they were not the only ones—to survive. There was no violence involved, it was actually just an honest business like it is now. We've got the numbers now.

01-00:25:10

Holmes:

Maybe you can clarify, what's the difference of the number writer and the number runner?

01-00:25:16

Allen:

Well, look at basically what it says. The writer is the person who stays in one place, and people come to that person to write the numbers. The writer then gives those numbers on slips of paper to a runner who delivers them to headquarters, wherever that is that day. You've got to bring them all in to some central place where they will then be compared with the number for that day. That central place is where the boss lives and carries on business. And they have to move about, of course, because the police are constantly rousting them. But it was a business. And so, he delivered the numbers at the end of the period, when people could write numbers. He delivered them from the writer, his wife, to the business headquarters, where things would then be sorted and read. And, if people were winners, the money would be put with their slip of paper.

01-00:26:13

The winnings were never much. Twenty dollars was a big winning. If you won, it would be put with your slip of paper and delivered back to your number writer, and that's where you would go to collect it. Simple business, honest business, because if you were dishonest, there might be some gunfire. So that's what my grandparents were doing at that time. And there are stories, of course, of Grandmama running out the back door as the police were coming in the front door. But, they did this apparently for some years. They also joined the church. And ironically, since my grandfather was good with numbers and figures and calculations, he became the treasurer of the church.

So, by the time I was born, they were no longer "minor criminals." They were now stalwarts of the church. They had built a house. My grandfather was the treasurer of West Mitchell CME Church. He became a CME—Colored

Methodist Episcopal—where he had been before African Methodist Episcopal. The Colored Methodist people welcomed him because he was married to my grandmother, who was one of them.

01-00:27:51

Holmes:

What were your grandparents' names?

01-00:27:53

Allen:

Joseph C. Sims and Sadie Caine, C-A-I-N-E, which interestingly enough is the title of Toomer's book, which is *Cain*, C-A-I-N. I always wondered about that, because I really felt that he had met my grandmother. I think he knew my grandmother. I think he had an affair with my grandmother. But, what can I say? There's no evidence. There's nothing. However, in *Cain*, his book, he writes about things that connect him with the Caine family. So, I think there's something there, but it will never be known now because all the principals are dead and there's no record of it that I've been able to find. Of course, there would not be a record.

But they made the transition, my grandparents, from being AME, him, to being a CME and being accepted into the middle classes. This was part of the acceptance into the middle-class black community in Atlanta. Numbers writing was not an acceptable occupation, but being a treasurer of the church and the job that he got, which made all the difference in the world. He got a job in the US Post Office. That made a huge difference for so many black men at this period.

01-00:29:37

The Post Office was one of the few federal offices that hired black men regularly. And the reason they did it, of course, is because they had to deliver mail all across the country in segregated black communities. They weren't going to send any white people in there, so they hired black men to be postmen in black communities. It was one of the only good things about segregation, is that it set aside some jobs like mailmen for black workers. You could get that job, and you got paid pretty much the same as what the whites got paid, which was a livable salary. You could support a family being a postman.

Back then, he was so lucky that he got that job. The reason he got it was that he was literate. And my grandmother was literate. They had actually, in Sparta, gone to the local black schools there and were both literate. So, my grandfather was literate, he was familiar with dealing with numbers and calculations, and he became the treasurer of the church. Therefore, they had enough money from his job with the Post Office to build a house, a two-story house, and become a stalwart himself in the black community.

01-00:31:25

Allen:

This is slow here. But it's all history that I'm not seeing in other places, the fact of the two communities, the two black communities in a town. The

importance of the two churches and things like this in the African-American community are not commonly known. But, this is the way we grew up in the South. In the big cities of the South there were black communities like this which were themselves divided by class and color because that's what the division was. It was a class and color division.

My grandfather was accepted across the color line, so to speak, and into the middle-class light-skinned community because he had a good job. Being a postal worker qualified you to be in the black middle class because it was a steady job, and it paid a living wage. And that was the main qualification. But, it was something, though, that my father's family were much lower class than my mother's family. They would have both been the same when I was born. But over time my grandfather pulled himself up, got a job as a postman because he was literate. My father's family, his brothers, who went to school, were able to pull themselves up. And, because they all served in the military, they actually got good jobs, too.

But my father was left out of that because of his health condition. Instead, he wanted to try to set up a business, build a business based on that skill that he had, which was now welding. Unfortunately, the other thing though that he brought with him was alcoholism because by that time he had become pretty much an alcoholic. All of his brothers were alcoholics, too. And remember, all of them have some Indian heritage. I don't mean to be racist about this or anything, but alcoholism has been a problem in Native American communities, as we know.

01-00:34:16

Holmes:

I wonder if that's also because of the lack of exposure, perhaps.

01-00:34:23

Allen:

Well, it was lack of exposure. But I think there is a genetic aspect to it.

01-00:34:26

Holmes:

Yeah, absolutely. I think there's a missing enzyme, a missing an enzyme that would break the alcohol down.

01-00:34:27

Allen:

Yeah, that makes it especially threatening, because it is a serious health problem. And it was for my father. He started drinking and it had become a serious problem by the time he met my mom. She was a student at Spelman College because, again, my grandfather's status had brought him up to that level so that his daughter could go to Spelman College. Now, remember, she's very light skinned-looking. She got the heritage from her mom, who was light-skinned. So, my mom was very light skinned-looking. In fact, they sometimes had trouble on the streets because people thought my grandfather had this white girl hanging out with him, and the white people had questions about that. There would sometimes be some issues on public transportation, because in public transportation it was segregated. Whites up front, blacks in

the back. “Well, what’s this? Hey, what’s this white girl doing sitting in the back?” people would ask. “Well, she’s not white. She’s black.”

So, the class difference was big. My grandfather had an education, he could read. He still subscribed to the black newspaper that was published in Sparta, Georgia. He had it delivered in Atlanta. He liked to read, he kept books in the house. This is why I became a reader, because he was a reader. When they met, my mother and father, they met mainly because they lived in the same neighborhood of colleges. She was at Spelman College and I think they met somehow through mutual friends and so on.

01-00:36:35

My grandfather did not like my father. He was uneducated; he drank. My grandfather did not think this was a suitable man for my mom to marry. But she insisted on it, and they had huge fights. In the end, my mother married my father on her graduation day from Spelman College, which was like kicking my grandfather in the face because the last thing he wanted her to do was to marry my father, and certainly not on her graduation day when he hoped that she would be at the beginning of a new career, not at the beginning of a marriage to a guy who had no future. It was a great disappointment for my grandfather. But he accepted my father.

He welcomed us into his house, by the way, after they were married because they didn’t have any money. My father didn’t really have a job then. My mother, when she graduated from Spelman College, the most elite black woman’s college in the world, what’s the job that she gets? She gets a job as a ticket taker at the Negro theater. There were two Negro theaters at that time. At the Negro theater, she becomes a ticket taker, goes to work and gets pregnant immediately. I was born within a year of her graduation—another big disappointment for my grandfather. He says, “If you’ve got to marry this man, don’t get pregnant. Get yourself a good job first. You’ve got this degree. Now you’ve got a college degree. You don’t have to take this shit job. He’ll work.”

01-00:38:47

But she was happy. It was love. It was infatuation. It was all these things. My father was a very handsome guy, you can see why she married him. You can see why he married her. All of that notwithstanding, it was still a bad match. But there was nobody there who could really persuade them of that. And, of course, I wouldn’t be there if they hadn’t married. So, they married, and I was born within a year. At first, they lived with a friend of theirs. My mother unfortunately, didn’t know anything about raising children. When she had me, she had a girlfriend who had an apartment, and we lived upstairs and their friends lived downstairs. They’re all good friends and hang out together and so on.

So within a year I'm in a little Tailor Tot [stroller] pushing myself around and so on, and my mom is still sort of in the college frame of mind, keeping up with her girlfriends and talking to people on the phone. One day she was talking on the phone—my father had gotten a job somewhere and was off at work—and I was pushing myself around in this Tailor Tot. It was like a carriage, but you could take the pusher thing off, and you could take the platform off the bottom, and the child could then push themselves. Even though you couldn't walk, you could push yourself around in the little carriage.

01-00:40:37

So, my mom was in the bedroom talking to a friend, and I was in the little carriage. I guess she didn't know how well I was doing. I was pushing myself around in the living room in this little carriage and holding onto the rail. They had, in the living room, a potbelly stove, that's how we kept the house warm, a potbelly stove. And the potbelly stove was blazing away. I'm pushing myself around and I push myself into the potbelly stove. My hand gets trapped between the rail and the stove, and I get a severe burn, which I still have to this day, on the back of my hand. I screamed. My mother dropped the phone. She comes in, grabs me, and her friend—I think she was talking to the friend downstairs—comes up. They both have the sense, at least, to know what to do, which is to run up the street to the colored hospital with me.

I can't believe that there was a colored hospital within running distance. People hear that and they say, what? But this was a fully-functioning community. We had hospitals. We had churches. We had schools. We had businesses, all black. It was all black. I didn't see white people except the white people in the black community. I didn't see white people. They were not a part of my life.

01-00:42:11

So, they take me up there, and I'm sure my parents had a terrible fight over that, the fact that my mother let me get burned. And it was really severe, I couldn't use this hand for some time. And, I'm sure he was very angry about that, and I think that was the beginning of serious problems between the two of them. Unfortunately, it also revealed that my mother was not really ready to have a child yet. She didn't know anything about taking care of a little kid. I end up with a burn that I still have. And I even use it to identify myself. I say I have a burn on the back of my right hand. It's an identifying mark. And that's how I got it.

But I know, given the dynamics between my parents, which I saw later, that this would have infuriated my father. He would never have forgiven her for that. And I'm sure that was one of the things that was the beginning of the problems between them that I saw. That scar, and carrying that with me for the rest of my life, it becomes sort of a point of reference for me. I think, "Is this before the scar or after the scar? Which is it?"

01-00:43:49

In any case, we soon start living at my grandfather's house. We're actually doing well because they don't have to pay rent there, so my father actually makes enough to feed us. And, I end up with this scar. I don't actually remember getting this burn. I have completely blocked that memory. I don't remember it at all. I remember the house. I remember the stove. I remember all the events around it but not the actual burn itself.

01-00:44:35

Holmes:

How old were you?

01-00:44:37

Allen:

I would have been about two years old or younger. I wasn't walking. I was just pushing myself around, I had to be less than two. So, I dealt with it by just blocking it out because it's not there. I've never been able to recall that. I've tried at times to recall it, but I can't. But it became, I think, one of the sources of tension between my parents. I don't have evidence for this, but I just know that, given my father's nature, he would have been really upset about this and blamed her for it.

Subsequently, another event of that sort that occurred was when I was about three years old. My first sister had been born. I have three sisters, all younger. And, by this time we were living with my grandparents. But now the two of us, my sister and myself, were in the extra bedroom. There was only one extra bedroom, and we were in that. My parents were beginning to think about getting a house of their own and moving someplace else. But in any case, we were living, all of us living in there together.

01-00:45:54

And, I'm three years old, so I have toys and stuff. Anyway, one night I remember being awakened by my father shaking me and waking me up. And he said, "Look what you did. Look what you did." And he shows me this huge gash in his upper arm that's bleeding. And blood is falling on the floor. And he's waking me up and pulling me to look at this. And he's saying, "Look what you did." He's saying to me, "Look what you did." I'm just astonished. I'm waking up from sleep. My father's obviously very angry and bleeding, and he's got this huge gash in his arm. And he says I did it.

My mother comes in, grabs him and says, "Bobby, go back to sleep." She says, "I've got to take your father to the hospital to get this cut stitched up," which meant they were going to the colored hospital, I guess. No, no, by then they would have been going to the white hospital, I think, because you had to go there for surgery. They didn't do surgery in the colored hospital. And they went, and I was left just to meditate on that, not knowing what I'd done.

01-00:47:23

The next day, my mom tells me, "You know, you left a truck outside on the steps, the front door steps. And when your father came home, drunk as usual,"

I remember she said that. "When your father came home, drunk as usual, he fell over the truck and fell onto something, a tool, and gashed himself. That's how he got that big gash. It was from the toy that you left on the step." So, that's why it was my fault. And I guess it was my fault. I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have left that there. But, it was a huge shock and a huge thing for me for the rest of my life, really, because I felt that I unwittingly caused serious injury to my father, a huge, bloody wound. And he's mad at me, and it seems to me that, yes, it was my toy. He fell over my toy.

So, I've always carried some guilt about that, even though I know rationally that it wasn't my fault. I know all of the psychological reasons why I should not carry that. But I still carry it. And I carry it so much that it really affected my relationship with my father because I felt that I owed him something for having done this, for having made this terrible thing happen to him. I always felt that I owed him something for that. I couldn't figure out what it was, but I had some kind of guilt about it that was kind of hidden away. But I think it played a big part in how I related to my father thereafter because when we moved to our own house and my father's drinking too much, he's acting out, he's becoming loud, I became the one who dealt with him.

01-00:49:33

And I sort of took that on as my job. It was what I did every night, every night. He'd come home drunk always, and he was inclined to be violent and loud unless I got to him and started talking to him and listening to him, mainly listening to him complaining about everything that was wrong with the world. But if I listened to him, then he would not hurt anybody else because the issue was that if he becomes violent, then he's going to be violent to everybody including my mom and my sisters. And mostly he's going to be violent to himself and do some more damage to himself because that was always happening. He was doing foolish things like knocking out the window in the back door and getting a huge slash in his own wrist. Things like that, it was just common, a nightly experiences.

And it really was every night. I had to be prepared to deal with this for at least a couple of hours, maybe three hours, sometimes until the end of the night when he went to sleep. So, any homework I had to do was done before that, and everything was done. And we were just prepared for him to come home whenever he did, and we knew what would happen. My mom and sisters would retreat to the back of the house, and I would stay with him as long as it took to get him to sleep. The object was simply to get him undressed, get him into bed, get him some food—my mom would fix him some food in the kitchen and bring it up to him. He might eat a little bit. He might not eat anything. Get him to eat, get him into bed, and then just stay with him and listen to him because there was no point in arguing with him. There was no way to win an argument, just listen to him and his complaints until he finally drifted off to sleep. And then I went to bed. That was the daily, nightly,

routine from age eight or nine, when we moved into that house, until I was about sixteen years old and left to go to college. Every night, it was like that.

01-00:52:12

Periodically, though, the minister or my grandfather or somebody would persuade him to try to stop drinking. He would stop, sometimes for as much as a couple of months. But he always went back. And when he went back, it was the same routine again. Sometimes he became violent. And then the object was to try to keep him from doing much damage, any damage, hopefully no damage to us and no damage to himself. He did most of the damage to himself—knocking out windows and shooting a gun off and all this stuff he did. It was just daily. But I think I put up with that because I felt I owed him something. Somewhere in the back of my mind there's still this thing. I did a grave injury to him. Don't I owe him something? It's a weird way of thinking, a child's way of thinking.

01-00:53:16

Holmes:

Well, do you think it's also to protect your mother and sisters in a lot of respects as well?

01-00:53:22

Allen:

Well, that was the main thing because as long as I stayed with him, he stayed in bed. If I didn't, he would get up and start wandering around the house and harassing people, my mom and my three sisters. So, that was the thing about it. But I also had this feeling that this was my duty and that somehow I even owed it to him. My mom always said, "You know, it wasn't your fault that he fell over the truck. He was drunk. It was his fault." But I could never accept that because of that shock of when he came in the room with this gash and said, "You did this." It just went right into my brain and has never left.

01-00:54:14

Holmes:

And your father was named Robert as well, right?

01-00:54:16

Allen:

Yeah. I'm junior.

01-00:54:19

Holmes:

And your mom—

01-00:54:20

Allen:

Sadie Sims Allen.

01-00:54:23

Holmes:

And then, how about your sisters?

01-00:54:25

Allen:

My sisters, the oldest sister's named Damaris, and she's two years younger than me. The middle sister is Teresa, and she's four years younger than me. And then there is the youngest one, Rebecca, who is another couple of years younger.

01-00:55:03

Holmes:

Well, why don't we talk a little bit about growing up in Atlanta. Now, you've mentioned a lot about growing up in the black community there in the city. Maybe discuss a little bit more of that experience. And perhaps we can start with your first encounter of learning the racial boundaries of segregation. Did your parents discuss that with you, or your grandparents?

01-00:55:32

Allen:

Well, people did, but they never did it directly. They just said sometimes when we were driving in certain areas, they said, "This is a white area, and you can't come here," or "That is a white neighborhood over there, and you can't go there." That's just the way they put it. And at first, I didn't know what they were talking about. I mean, who were the white people? We had our people in our own community. Who were these other white people? I didn't know. I hadn't met any of them. But I knew there were white people somewhere else, and they were dangerous.

Well, when I really found it out was—when was it, 1957, when Emmett Till—was that '57?

01-00:56:21

Holmes:

1955.

01-00:56:22

Allen:

In 1955, Emmett Till was murdered. By then, I was old enough to have a *Jet* magazine delivery route. Now, you know *Jet* magazine, right?

01-00:56:40

Holmes:

Yeah.

01-00:56:46

Allen:

Now, most people have never heard of *Jet* magazine, much less that you could have a delivery route delivering *Jet* magazine. Really? What? Yeah, because all the Negroes read it. All of us read it. So, you could have a delivery route. And I had a delivery route delivering *Jet* magazine, and I remember that issue. *Jet* magazine basically published a whole issue on the death of Emmett Till. They published all the pictures of his body, including his face, which no other publication published. No other publication showed how he had been beaten and brutalized and mutilated by these white people who killed him. But *Jet* magazine did. And I looked at those pictures, and I just could not believe it. It was horrifying.

And I realized this was done by white people to a black boy who was accused of whistling at a white girl. What? Why? Who were these people? Why did this happen? But this is when I realized that the white people were not only dangerous, but they were dangerous to all of us including me because he was my age. He was a little bit older than me.

01-00:58:16

Holmes: I think he was fourteen years old.

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Allen: Fourteen years old, and I must have been—he was older than me.

01-00:58:21

Holmes: Well, it was in 1955, and you were born in '42, so yeah, you were about thirteen.

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Allen: So, that was when I realized that there was something really wrong here, a whole setup. And I didn't understand it. But I didn't know what it was even yet. Then, subsequently, we had relatives living in Chicago, and I got to visit the relatives living up there once. They lived in the Black Belt, of course. I didn't know it was the Black Belt. I just thought this is the way Chicago looked. It's all black people just like Atlanta. But, there were some light-skinned people living in the ghetto, except they actually were white. I didn't know that at the time. They were actually real white people who were forced to live in the ghetto. So, they were not light-skinned Negroes.

But I didn't know that. To me they just looked like some of the light-skinned people that we saw in Atlanta in the black community. So, I played with them and everything. I didn't realize I was playing with white children. I would have been much more cautious. But I didn't know that. So, the bizarre thing here is that, in a racialized society, it's possible if you're really in that society to grow up and be unaware of race, especially if there's no TV. You don't get white magazines. You only listen to the black radio station. And all the institutions you go to, all of them are black. Why would you think anything else except the world must be black?

01-01:00:12

And remember, we were not seeing the magazines that we all see now. You're not seeing TV. So, what else was there to think? That's what I thought. I thought there were some people called white people who lived on the outskirts of the black community, and they were dangerous. They were very dangerous people. But why? I didn't know why except some people would say things like white people don't like black people. Why? I could never understand why they didn't like us. What was the problem here?

But anyway, when I saw those pictures, I knew I had to change my whole attitude towards white people here because, clearly, they're dangerous. And you've got to watch out what you say to them or what you do. But, you never know. How do you know when they're going to try to do something? It was just a great mystery to me.

01-01:01:10

Holmes: Had you never encountered any stories before Emmett Till of racial violence around Atlanta or Georgia?

01-01:01:18

Allen:

No. We didn't talk about that. Adults didn't talk about that with children. They may have talked about it amongst themselves, but they didn't tell us those things. Sometimes, yeah, there were lynchings. Du Bois talks about when he came to Atlanta and he saw, what was it, the bones of a person, the fingers of a black person that had been lynched and displayed in a store window. That was even earlier. But, as I said, these are things that the adults knew that they were not going to tell us. They just would say things like, "Be careful when you go downtown. Watch out and be careful around the white people. They can get mad at you very easy." It was like that.

And again, which white people were they talking about? There was obviously some white people who were really dangerous, and there were light-skinned Negroes who were not. How do you tell them apart if you see them in a crowd? That's when I realized that that divide was really dangerous and that I had to start paying more attention to it. But I didn't know quite how. But, this is 1955. The Supreme Court decision had been in 1954. I think somewhere along in there we got a TV. And I actually remember watching some of the national civil rights demonstrations on TV. And that's when I realized that there's a whole other world out there that I don't know anything about. There's a whole world out there of race and racial hatred that I don't know anything about. And who are these white people? Why are they so hateful towards us? All big mysteries to me.

01-01:03:11

And remember, when we traveled, we traveled entirely within the black community. When you drove—when you went to the North, you drove because Negroes couldn't stay in hotels. So, you had to drive and drive all the way in one shot. We'd see white people in the streets but nobody to interact with. When we went to the country in the South, we went to visit our relatives there who were all black or sometimes light-skinned. So, this was my world. Television showed me another world and made me realize that the world I'm living in must be really tiny.

01-01:04:01

Holmes:

Was there a difference in these kind of interactions if you were in, say, rural Georgia versus Atlanta?

01-01:04:08

Allen:

Yes, yeah. In some cases, they were even more intimate in the sense that white people and black people did, in fact, live side by side in the rural areas of the South. But it was still "segregated" in terms of work, in terms of churches, and in terms of institutions. But people might actually live fairly close to each other. And then you would have a different set of relationships. Sometimes the white people and black people would in fact be friendly.

But in the cities where there was this formalized racial segregation, it was a different experience altogether. It was a segregated experience. And so, I only

remember one white person who came to our neighborhood, and that was an insurance salesman knocking on our door, trying to sell us some insurance. That's the only time I remember seeing a white person come to our front door to ask something. So, the black community, for us children growing up, was a safe place. It was a haven. It was a place where we could live and be safe. But we didn't know that. We didn't know the danger beyond it. We would not learn that until basically high school when we'd begin to move about on our own.

01-01:05:42

When television arrives, that was the biggie because that's when we realized there was a whole other world out there that was mainly white. In fact, if you watch television, you wouldn't even think there were black people in the world except for Nat King Cole. Nat King Cole was on TV.

01-01:06:03

Holmes:

And Sammy Davis Jr. later on, right?

01-01:06:04

Allen:

Sammy Davis Jr., yes. Thank God for them. But, what would you make of it as a black child growing up in this community where it's all black? The only white people you see in great numbers are on TV now. But you realize, "Well, from what I see on TV, the white people seem to be in charge. But I don't see that around here. But who is in charge?" Well, it was the white people, of course. I would learn that later. And that was during the Civil Rights Movement, which begins in Atlanta in about 1957, I guess. It was the year before I graduated that the first demonstrations were held.

Once the demonstrations start to happen and are on TV and newspapers, that's the beginning of my real education. I began to understand what it is to talk about racism and to experience racism and what that is, and then what it means to be in the society that is racist and has these kinds of divisions in it. In college, of course I met people who came from the North, black people and white people. So, we had some white professors there who came from the North. We had one or two white students who were exchange students who came to Morehouse. That was the great awakening for me along with TV. Going to college, and all of a sudden there's another world here.

01-01:08:03

Now, I grew up right next door to that campus. And I used to cross that campus every day going to elementary school and high school. And I loved that campus. It was a playground to me, right in the back yard, this huge, beautiful playground. But now I'm learning it as a student, and this great place of learning and information and all this stuff that I'm finding out about that I didn't know before, not even in high school. And I loved it. I loved being in college, especially since it was right next door.

01-01:08:40

Holmes:

Well, let's talk a little bit about your school experience. You went to segregated schools, obviously, during this time. Maybe let's start with your elementary and middle school experience. What do you recall about the school and the environment and even the resources there during those early years of your education?

01-01:09:06

Allen:

Yeah, well, the schools—well, actually, the first school I ever went to was kindergarten. I went to Mrs. Scott's School for Colored Children, which was a kindergarten. I could walk to it from my grandfather's house, Big Daddy's house. I could walk to this school. All colored children, of course. The main thing I remember about that was this was where I saw a girl that I think I fell in love with at five years old or something. Her name was Bobbie, too, Bobbie. Oh, beautiful brown-skinned girl, and I just fell in love with her. But I just felt so inadequate. I didn't even speak to her. I would just watch her in class, and when people would gather around, I would gather because she was always the center of attention, very popular girl. I knew I didn't have a chance. What was I thinking about anyway? But this was the first time I realized that girls were different. But I didn't really know what the difference was. And girls were somehow attractive, too. I didn't know why, but I felt that.

But a very embarrassing thing happened. I decided I was going to say hello to her. And I finally one day figured out how to get up close enough to be able to say hello. And just as I was getting in position to say hello, and I'm very nervous about this, I'm very nervous it, I pooped on myself. What, five, six years old, I pooped on myself in school, in kindergarten. And, people started smelling it and pointing at me. Mrs. Scott grabbed me and took me off. I was totally embarrassed. I was so ashamed. I was just so embarrassed. Mrs. Scott made me clean myself up, and then she sent me home with everybody laughing at me. I was never interested in girls again for a long time. I said, "See? This is what happens if you mess with girls. You get so excited you poop on yourself."

01-01:11:39

And when I got home, my mom and my grandmother were not too happy either. They made me dress in a diaper for the rest of the day. It was very embarrassing. I was totally ashamed. When my father got home and saw me in the diaper and heard what had happened, he at least had the grace not to say anything. He just looked at me funny. And I sat there in the garage with him until I was able to change back to regular clothes. I thought that's one of the saddest things that happened to me as a kid. I mean, even the burn, it overshadows the burn because I don't even remember the burn. But this event, with the first girl I ever liked, where I just totally embarrassed myself, it always registers with me. When I would think about going out on a date, I would think, okay, am I ready for this?

But, I think it made me shy about girls, definitely. But I don't think that it had any other effect because nobody—the next day, the next few, it was something else was happening. It was forgotten. But I never got to meet her. I never really got to say hello. I never really got to say I liked her and I thought she was really cute. I regret that, but—want to take a break?

01-01:13:22

Holmes: Sure.

[side conversation deleted]

01-01:13:28

Allen: Keep on with school then?

01-01:13:30

Holmes: Yeah.

01-01:13:32

Allen: I was going back. So, in kindergarten, elementary school, the elementary school I went to was called E. R. Carter School. It was an all-black school, too, of course. And it went from first grade through—what have we got there?—seventh grade. We didn't have junior high then, and so you went from the seventh grade to the eighth grade when you were in high school. But in the elementary school, at E. R. Carter School, I think this is where I started to become myself. Number one, I liked school. I enjoyed school. It gave me a break from home, to put it bluntly. It was my escape from home.

And, I loved learning. And I always took on other things to do that I got interested in, hobbies and so on. Building model planes, amateur radio were things that I got into in elementary school and in high school. Oh, but also organizing—I organized the first organization that I ever organized—well, actually the only one because the others I joined. They already existed. It was called the Blue Star Club. I don't know why. But I have this history of it—I think I may have shown you this somewhere—that I wrote back in 1956, The History of the First Blue Star Club, because there were several of them.

01-01:15:38

And I decided that I wanted to make this look like an old document, so I rubbed glue into it so that it would look like an old document. Why am I thinking that? Why am I thinking that? An old document? And I've saved it all these years since I was whatever. Let's see, what's the date on here? 1957, my first archive. And I created this club, and I made some membership cards here, membership cards. One of our members here, Mary McCluster. I had membership cards, and I had other things like that. And, I think I had, aside from my sisters, who were all members, of course, required, I had maybe two or three other members at school in the Blue Star Club.

And I think we had one meeting. And at some point I realized we need something to do because the club finally fell apart, not that it was ever really

together because, as I said, we only had one meeting. And it became apparent that we had nothing to do. So, that's when I realized that if you're going to have an organization, you've got to have something to do. You can't just form an organization. But nevertheless, I love it that I had this archive here that I created back when I was in elementary school. I created an archive. What was I thinking? How could I be even thinking that? I wanted it to look old. How can I be thinking that?

01-01:17:24

But in any case, I enjoyed school. I really liked school. I liked all the classes. And, I did well. I did well in elementary school and then in high school as well. Of course, it's an all-black environment, all-black teachers. Everybody was black. There were no whites around at all. And I felt that we were all encouraged in school. The teachers were good. They encouraged us. But we were using books that were thirty, forty years out of date, hand-me-down books from the white schools. I didn't realize how bad that was at the time. To me, they're just books. They look a little old, but hey, they're books.

And, it was the same in high school. I went to Booker T. Washington High School, which still exists, in Atlanta. And it was one of the first high schools built for Negroes. It was actually built for Negroes rather than a white high school that was handed down to the Negroes. This one, Booker T., was built for us. And it has a big statute of Booker T. out front lifting a veil from a slave, although us devilish kids would say he's actually putting the veil over him.

01-01:18:58

And that's when I even more found out about the big world and the white world, because of course at that age now, moving about, I'm getting some jobs cutting grass and things like that that take me to different parts of the town—never to white parts of town, but just to some of the black parts of town that I hadn't seen before. And in fact, one of the things I realized about the black community in Atlanta is that we had all classes as well. My grandfather represented the solid working class. But there were Negroes there who had businesses who were millionaires. I'm trying to think of a couple of families now. People owned buildings. People owned property. It was a solid community.

And again, this is why I didn't notice the oppression that we lived under, because to me, this was a beautiful world that had everything that I could possibly need right there, the African-American community in America. What else would I need? Well, you don't know that until you go somewhere else and see what else you need. But at this point, elementary school, I'm still—I haven't traveled much then except to the country, and so, this is still a world. High school, I'm meeting people from—some of the students in high school were from the North. They had moved down with families to the South, and they were in high school. There were people with different experiences from

me in high school, and I began to realize that even among black people, there were very different experiences that some people were having from anything that I'd ever experienced.

01-01:20:51

Having money made a difference. Not having money made a difference. And so, this is when I began to realize the importance of things like the fact that my grandfather was a postman and that in that job, he had a job that was better than most of the people who lived and worked in Atlanta because it was a federal job, paid a decent wage. He could afford to build a two-story house. I began to realize the class differences within the African-American community and that my grandfather was in the middle class, even though I knew from some of the history that they came from a poor family. But he's solidly middle class. He's my idol, as a matter of fact. He's the man I looked up to here. He was the one I wanted to be like because he had his own house. He had a good job. And he was taking care of people. And he was the treasurer of the church, so he was very highly respected.

So, to come up in a family like that, I actually felt very privileged as I realized how poor the other people lived right there in our own neighborhood. There were folks who were really right on the edge. And, I knew this. So, I knew that we were very privileged, and I was fortunate to have the grandfather I did, because he could take care of all of this.

01-01:22:28

Elementary school, though, I began to see another world. Not everybody was—another part of the black world, which was that not everybody was privileged like that. Most people were, in fact, poor. And we were. At least they lived in houses that were not so nice. They lived in hand-me-down houses from the white folks. My grandfather had built a house. Other people lived in—it had once been a white neighborhood, and these were run-down houses from that neighborhood. And that's where we lived, most people.

But, so I always had this role model despite my problems with my father. I had another role model, which is my grandfather, who was a hardworking man, devoted to the community, devoted to the church, devoted to his family. So, this was the other male model in my life coming up. And I think that had a big influence on me because my grandfather was a reader. He read books. He read the newspaper from Sparta, Georgia. He encouraged me to read. And he was the man who clearly had responsibility in the community.

01-01:23:39

So, all of that registered with me and gave me a role model for how to be a black man in the black community and how to be responsible in a family. That was my grandfather. And I feel so blessed that I had him to counteract the sort of disintegration of my father because of alcoholism. And that's what I came to understand, that it was the alcoholism that was the issue. But we could never get him to stop and really stop. We could never get him to do that. And

so, the other way of dealing with it, the one that I described of just living with it, is what happened.

But, in high school I realized there's a whole—there are many worlds out there that I know nothing about because here I'm reading in books about history, geography, the rest of this country, the rest of the world. Everything opens up. And, the Civil Rights Movement is taking off, too. 1955, 1954, then 1955, all of the—when the demonstrations start to happen, our community is immediately engaged. The young people and the adults are immediately engaged. TV is coming along at this point, too.

01-01:25:14

And so, everybody begins to see that there is a something called a movement that's going on, a Civil Rights Movement that's going on. And here it is now in Atlanta. We had a local committee there called the—what was it called? The Committee on Appeal for Civil Rights [ed. note: Committee on Appeal for Human Rights?], COAHR. It sounded like Core. Committee on Appeal for Civil Rights, which was our local civil rights organization. But of course the national organizations also, like NAACP and King's outfit, was headquartered in Atlanta. And, Martin Luther King, of course, was a graduate of Morehouse. But he was not yet famous.

01-01:26:05

Holmes:

Were you acquainted with the King family?

01-01:26:07

Allen:

No. They were ahead of me. They were ahead of me. They had four or five years—more than that. He was more than that. They were ahead of me.

01-01:26:18

Holmes:

Well, and they were also Baptists.

01-01:26:19

Allen:

We had two black communities in Atlanta. Remember, we had a community on the west side where I lived. But there was another huge black community on the east side of Atlanta, around Auburn Avenue, which is where the Kings lived. And that was kind of a different world. I didn't really have friends who lived on the east side, so I didn't get over there very much. But the civil rights organizations were mainly headquartered there. And the demonstrations tended to take place there, too, except when the colleges got involved. And by the time I came along, the college students were now getting involved.

And so, I became—you didn't actually become a member of an organization. You just started coming to the demonstrations. So, that's what I did. I started going to the demonstrations. And, I was able to produce—well, I had a car. By then I had a 1953 Ford. And, they needed people with cars for the movement to transport demonstrators back and forth because you had to—if you mobilized on the college campus, you could have a march downtown, yeah.

But once you got the marches downtown, then if you wanted to replenish them, we'd have to bring them in our cars. So, I had a car.

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And, by then I was a ham radio operator, so I had a portable ham radio in my car. And we set up a ham radio in the church where the demonstrations were being organized. And I could actually keep in touch by radio with the church. I never realized at the time how bizarre that was. If the white people thought that Negroes with—I don't know what they thought when they saw a Negro with a microphone in a car talking to people. But they pulled me over. They pulled me over on some pretext. The tire was going flat or something. The cops pulled me over just to see what I had in the car.

And I said, "I'm an amateur radio operator, and this is my transmitter. And I have a license for it. Here's the license." There was nothing they could arrest me for, so they had to let me go. But I know they wanted to arrest me. I know they wanted to arrest me for something. But they'd never seen that before. I'd never seen that before, a Negro ham radio operator. What? The white people wouldn't have us, the white ham radio operators, because they had a convention there and they said we could not come.

01-01:29:20

Holmes:

In regards to the Civil Rights Movement, you also had *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Was the community in Atlanta aware of this? Did you follow that news?

01-01:29:32

Allen:

Yes, we followed the news.

01-01:29:34

Holmes:

What was your observations and thoughts on that, like people's reactions?

01-01:29:37

Allen:

My observations were that nothing happened. Okay, Supreme Court decision. Now what? Nothing. Nothing happened. It wasn't for several years that they began to realize that they had to do something. And they began the process of racial integration in the schools. Now, this was around 1957 or so. But, that's the public schools. By then, I was in college. And so, it didn't affect me at all. It affected my sisters, though, because what they did in the early period was, they did it sort of experimentally. They would select a group of black students from a black high school to go over here to the white high school. They didn't ever send any white people to the black high school. What? Come on. What? Why not? But they never did that. Of course not.

But they would let black kids, some selected black kids, including my sister, come over to a white school and enroll there. It was not a happy situation. They didn't want it. Our kids didn't want to be there, and the white kids didn't want them there either. But that's the way it began. You would have to

either—you would be selected, and then you were supposed to represent the race by going over to a white school and being harassed.

01-01:31:03

Holmes:

That's a lot of pressure.

01-01:31:03

Allen:

Yeah, a lot of pressure. My sisters had to deal with it, but I didn't. I stayed in the black world. I went to Morehouse College. I didn't leave the black world. But, whites came to us because white students at Emory and Agnes Scott were getting involved in demonstrations. And, we sometimes had demonstrations together with the white students. And I can remember several times that we would march from our campus, and we would meet downtown with white students from Agnes Scott or Emory—those were the two schools that mainly supported us—and we would have a joint interracial demonstration.

And, most of the stuff that happened in Atlanta was peaceful. It was well organized. It was peaceful. We had objectives. For example, we said we're going to hit Rich's department store today, and here's what we're going to do. We're going to be outside. And then we're going to send some people inside just to disrupt things, cause a little confusion, because if you're outside doing a demonstration, then they don't want you to come inside. But if you say you're a customer coming inside, they can't just tell you you can't come in. You're a customer.

01-01:32:28

But it would always confuse things. And if we came inside, then it would provoke them to call the police. And once they called the police, then everything gets shut down—not good for business, not good for business. So, we had smart white people in Atlanta. They realized that business is more important than civil rights and that Atlanta is about business, and that therefore we want to deal with these demonstrations and stuff. We want to just chill this out and get back to business. That was the attitude of the business community in Atlanta. And there was an attitude that you could work with because they didn't say that nothing's going to change. That was not their attitude. Their attitude was that we will do things that are reasonable.

And so they began hiring people and hiring black clerks in the white stores, which they'd never had before, black service people in the white department stores. And all kinds of jobs where there were never black people before, they began opening up jobs. So, that was actually a good thing that came out of it. The whole thing was the segregated schools and trying to desegregate them. That went so far, and then it didn't go so far. But in fact, over the next few years, white people started moving out of Atlanta to the surrounding suburban areas. And Atlanta neighborhoods that were once white became increasingly black.

01-01:34:13

And there was a period there when there were quite a few “interracial” neighborhoods—or what we would call neighborhoods in transition—and people lived perfectly at ease. There were not really any—the last big riot in Atlanta was 1906, I think, the last big race riot. There were no big race riots in Atlanta. There was nothing like that.

01-01:34:44

Holmes:

So, both your sisters went through as selected into the desegregation era? Your two sisters were chosen to attend white schools.

01-01:34:54

Allen:

Yeah.

01-01:34:56

Holmes:

Did they notice a difference in the education? One of the things I wanted to ask you on just the education front was how the history of slavery, and even the Civil War, was taught when you were in high school, or even in elementary school.

01-01:35:10

Allen:

They were not discussed. Slavery and the Civil War? That is not on the southern agenda. It was not discussed. I don't remember ever reading anything about slavery in school until—I mean, we knew about slavery. But we didn't know about it from textbooks. We knew about it from our families. But no, it was either—to the extent that it was covered, mentioned, in any books, it was basically just—what's the word? It was defended. These were southern textbooks. It was defended as a reasonable thing for the time—It was always “for the time”—and that the South was terribly abused and defeated in that war, and that that was a great injustice to the South. That was the official line. And there were all these Confederate statues all around everywhere, too. So, yeah, jeez, I guess we lost.

But how could we lose? We got free, right? Yeah, but are we really free now? We're working on it. So, from the standpoint of black people, if you knew about the Civil War, it was more from your own community, stories you heard, than it was from the textbooks because the textbooks either simply glorified it as a terrible southern defeat, or they ignored it.

01-01:36:59

Holmes:

For your sisters, their experience, I imagine, going through high school as probably one of the few African-American students at a white school—

01-01:37:10

Allen:

No, I didn't go to a white high school.

01-01:37:11

Holmes:

Now, I'm talking about for your sisters.

01-01:37:12

Allen: Oh, my sisters, yeah.

01-01:37:14

Holmes: And looking at the ages, so they're graduating in the 1960s, it seems. Things probably—

01-01:37:25

Allen: Had the textbooks changed?

01-01:37:26

Holmes: No, I'm talking about but even their experience at the white high school.

01-01:37:30

Allen: It was not good.

01-01:37:31

Holmes: They were harassed, most likely?

01-01:37:32

Allen: They were harassed. They were not welcome. It was a terrible experience. I'm glad that I didn't have to do it because a year earlier and I would have been one of those students. But my sisters were very upset about that experience. They hated it. They were always the objects of something or another at those schools. There is mistreatment, jokes, all kinds of stuff, the bad jokes and all kinds of harassment, basically, all the time. My sister did not like it at all. The last thing she wanted to do was to go off to a white school because she knew what was going to happen. They were going to harass her. And that's what happened to most of the students who were the early ones to go in, is that it was just—you just had to sit there and take it.

So, as I said, I'm glad I didn't. I just missed that. But I know from my sisters what it was like, and it would have been horrendous. I don't know if I would have gotten through it without having some problems. So, I admire all of those students who were the first ones to go. And that's what it felt like. They're the first ones to go. I feel so sorry for them. They don't know what they're getting into. But, in Atlanta, it was less horrible than it was in many other places.

The most virulent aspects of racism—no, I can't say that. There was lynching. No, Atlanta was not immune to any of that. So, everything did happen—lynching and earlier riots and so on, all kinds of mistreatment. But, there was a white establishment in Atlanta that was, I would say, moderate. And they were moderate because it's a business town. And so, what you want in a business environment is you want everything to remain calm so we can do business here.

01-01:39:54

And that was their attitude. And, if doing a little desegregation would help to keep things calm, all right, we can do that. We'll do a little desegregation.

Yeah, we can do that. We'll have some Negroes here and over there. Yeah, we can do that. That's the way it was to the whites. This is the way they actually talked about it. Yeah, we can do that. We can do that, because they thought that it was only going to take a little doing, and then it would be finished. But once the momentum got going, population dynamics changed. White people started moving out of the city. More black people and other people of color began moving into the city just like everywhere else.

01-01:40:35

Holmes:

Yeah, I think it's by maybe the late sixties or even early seventies. Certainly by, I think, by 1970 it's an African-American majority in Atlanta.

01-01:40:46

Allen:

Yeah. It happened very quickly in Atlanta. And as I said, the transition was basically not gone. There were instances, a lot of individual instances, but no major riot or anything like that.

01-01:41:04

Holmes:

How about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which happens in 1955? They're in the South, and of course Martin Luther King is in the Southern Christian Leadership—

01-01:41:18

Allen:

Conference.

01-01:41:18

Holmes:

—Conference, yeah, was involved with that. Was that widely covered and discussed in Atlanta?

01-01:41:25

Allen:

Yes, yes. By then, there's TV. And so, I know one of the first things I ever saw on TV was a hearing. This must have been around the McCarthy time. It must have been the McCarthy Hearings. I remember seeing the McCarthy Hearings on TV. That was the first time I saw TV, McCarthy Hearings.

01-01:41:59

Holmes:

It was probably the McCarthy Army Hearings, maybe, because I know those were televised, certainly.

01-01:42:03

Allen:

Yeah. And the rest of TV was just basically old movies. In the beginning, they didn't have anything to show on TV—old movies and then maybe some news. But the news, they had the news. And so, the news, every day was something about demonstrations, arrests, beatings and so on. So, we became very aware of it even though that was not what was happening so much in Atlanta. We were having demonstrations, but they were mostly peaceful. They were mostly—and things were in fact changing.

But in other cities, we could see that it was much rougher. It was much rougher for the black community in many of these other cities to try to get any

change really done. But Atlanta's always had this veneer of progressivism, which I think mainly comes from there's a very strong business community they have which takes the attitude that if we want to do business here, we've got to have control of things. And, we don't want any riots. That was the main thing. They said we don't want any riots here.

01-01:43:22

And they were willing to make some concessions, mainly hiring and then desegregating the schools. And it was a mess in the schools for the first couple of years because nobody wanted to be there. The white kids didn't want to be there. The black kids didn't want to be. Nobody wanted to be there. But, about three or four years later, we now have black kids who've been in these schools for two, three years. And this is the only school they know. We have white kids who've been in these schools with black kids now for two, three years. It's the only situation they know. Once you get to that point, where people are in this, and it's the only thing they know, the only way they know how to be in the world is together here with blacks and whites, it begins to change.

01-01:44:16

Holmes:

I was going to ask you something on that front. About college, did you grow up thinking you were going to college? Was this discussed in your family?

01-01:44:27

Allen:

With the expectation, yes. Yeah, we knew that Big Daddy—we knew the course we were all going to be on was education and that we were going to be sent to college. We were going to be sent to college. I got a fellowship. My sister, one of my sisters got a fellowship. The others went to college. They were sent by my parents. And yes, of course. Again, this was the attitude in many middle-class black houses in Atlanta. But in my home especially, that was it. There was no doubt about it. You are going to college. All of you are going to college. And we all went.

01-01:45:20

Holmes:

Speaking of the—also, to follow up and to—as we're here at a close, the Civil Rights Movement, so as this was taking place in Atlanta, you started our session discussing the various divides within the black community itself—class but also colorization.

01-01:45:40

Allen:

Color issues.

01-01:45:45

Holmes:

Did you observe any tension or divides over civil rights within the black community, like we should do this or we should do that?

01-01:45:53

Allen:

Oh, yeah, the Muslims, the black Muslims, who were around at that time, were very critical of the Civil Rights Movement for its integrationism. Yeah, they said it was demeaning. But in Atlanta they were not a large force. But we

knew about the Muslims and their opposition through television because it was there on TV. And, of course, with the appearance of Malcolm X, everybody found out. Everybody knew.

But, the Muslims were not especially demonstrative. And, their main thing was to be able to have their religion and then be able to have places where they could practice their religion. It wasn't until Malcolm X showed up that they'd become politicized. But even then, the main thing is always still the church itself and maintaining the church. And out of that, Malcolm wanted to build a movement, and he did. And he brought politics to that movement that was not there before. And we can talk more about that later. The Muslims, they were not an issue in that manner. They just were not an issue. They were neither harmful nor positive. They were part of the community. They took part in the community actions. But there was no Malcolm X in Atlanta.

01-01:47:37

Holmes:

What about the reactions, do you remember, of your grandparents and your family in regards to the Civil Rights Movement?

01-01:47:43

Allen:

Everybody was supportive, absolutely, yeah. They were worried. The fear was always that we were going to get shot or lynched or something. The kids like me who participated in the demonstrations, the adults were always fearful of that, especially after Emmett Till was murdered. They were always fearful that we were going to be murdered by some gang of whites. So, I know that was always in the back of the adults' minds. But, for us young people, we didn't think about it. We just felt the energy of the movement itself.

And, as I said, when the white students got involved from Emory and the other side of town, we also had a whole new set of people there to interact with, white students whom we had never known before, and discovering what that was all about. So, there was a lot of interracial romance. There were friendships that developed. There were people who eventually would go some of the white schools when they were desegregated.

01-01:48:55

But for the students, the most exciting thing was the demonstrations themselves, getting out there and being out there in a picket line around a department store, on a march or something like that. And to have the white students come along with us and join us, we felt powerful. We felt like, yeah, things are changing here. Things are changing. We may not be changing the older generation, but we can see in these white people who are with us here, things are changing.

And so, as with time, as more and more white youth became involved, and white adults as well in Atlanta, that was the most noticeable change I think I would say we saw in the movement, was the number of whites who eventually came into it, southern whites, and were supportive, and were supportive.

Many of them were hurt and arrested as well in the demonstrations. So, it was something we were happy to see. But it was at the same time something we were a little bit cautious about, too. People would say, "Well, they like that now. But what are they going to be like when they're grown? The white kids are here. They can do this now. They don't have many responsibilities. But what happens when they have jobs and families? Are they going to be like their parents or what?" We didn't know. But it was a question.

01-01:50:28

Holmes:

Well, I think this is a good place to stop, Robert. And we will pick up from right here in our second session.

01-01:50:35

Allen:

Yeah. Okay.

01-01:50:37

Holmes:

Awesome. Thank you so much.

Interview 2: May 14, 2019

02-00:00:56

Holmes: This is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is May 14, 2019. And I am sitting down with Robert Allen for the second session of his oral history. Oh, and we are in his beautiful home in the city of Benicia, right by the water.

02-00:01:17

Allen: Right by the water.

02-00:01:19

Holmes: Robert, thanks so much for taking the time to sit down with me again.

02-00:01:24

Allen: Thank you. I'm enjoying it.

02-00:01:26

Holmes: We left off talking about your early childhood and growing up in Atlanta in our last session, and you were just finishing up high school in 1958. And, from there you entered Morehouse College there in Atlanta. Now, you were the first of your family you go to college. Is that correct?

02-00:01:49

Allen: No, actually not. My mother was the first to go to college, and she was a graduate of Spelman College. This was about 1958 is when I was recruited, actually, to Morehouse. Now, keep in mind Morehouse was in my blood. By this time we were living at 841 Greensferry Avenue, which was literally in the back yard of Morehouse College, which means that Morehouse College was my back yard. It was the place where I played with my friends. There was a vacant field up there. We always had our softball games and football games there for the neighborhood. And the college was just a presence in my life at all times. I had to walk across the campus to get to elementary school and to get to high school. I had to take that same walk. I walked across the campus every day. So I feel like, in a way, it was in my blood without quite knowing what was going on there. I knew it was a college, a place of higher education for Negroes because it was a black college—and remember, I'm living in an all-black world at that time—and that I liked it. Of course I liked it. It was my playground. It was a very familiar place to me.

So, in the tenth grade, Morehouse started offering some early admission scholarships to certain students in the black high schools in Atlanta who had done well in, what would have been, their first three years and who would be admitted to college on an early admission basis. That is, you'd come in after the tenth grade and then get a head start on a college degree. And as it turned out for me, I also got an extra year in there because part of my college experience was living a year in Europe as a Morehouse College student. But in any case there was a recruitment process and interview and some tests, intelligence tests and academic tests and so on that I took in the tenth grade.

And then, they offered me a scholarship the next year to come to college. I was very surprised — very happy, of course, because it meant I could stay at home. I could be right in an environment that I already knew very well.

02-00:04:27

By then, my mother had risen up from being the ticket seller at a black theater over on Auburn Avenue to getting hired as a switchboard operator at Atlanta University Center. Atlanta University then was a graduate school. So, she was beginning a shift in her career that would bring her back into college after having that marriage with my father, which actually took her down several steps, and she ended up working as a ticket seller. But she started building a career, and all the time I'm observing her as she does this. I don't know what she's doing, but I know she's doing something here, and she's back on the campus now. So, interestingly enough, we both kind of come back to the campuses at the same time, my mom as a switchboard operator and myself as a freshman student there at Morehouse living at home. So, in the morning she'd go off to Spelman and I'd go off to Morehouse to class one block away. I couldn't ask for a better situation.

And of course it was a fantastic school. I was enthralled the whole time I was there. I loved school. I loved everything about school. And so, I admittedly was enthralled with the academics, and I liked the idea of the broad education that they gave. I didn't know quite what it meant, but I loved reading literature, and I loved having the sciences. Math and physics were what I was drawn to increasingly because of high school. My favorite teacher in high school was Mr. Anderson, who was my math instructor for three years there. And he was just an incredible person. He gave me a love for math, which was developed into a love for math and physics when I went to Morehouse. So I'm having dreams here of being some kind of an engineer, astrophysicist, fantastic things like that.

02-00:06:33

And, these all looked like possibilities even in the face of a segregated world, which I'm now aware of, mainly through TV. By this time, TV has made its appearance in the front rooms of Americans— including black Americans. And I realized, my God, there's a huge other world out there way beyond anything I've ever seen here, even with my trip to Chicago. Of all things, I got hooked on the McCarthy hearings. Why? It was a confrontation. It was a confrontation going on every day on TV. They'd broadcast the thing, I think, every day. I guess they had nothing much else for TV then. But I watched it because it was what was on TV when I got out of school. There were those hearings. And I became an avid anti-Communist. Even though they were after this guy, the whole thing about the conspiracy—because I'm in this situation of racial segregation. How did this come to be? What is the evil force behind it? Because now I realize this segregation system is fundamentally racist. The term "racist" is now coming into my vocabulary. It's dangerous. People get

killed like Emmett Till. It's dangerous to young people. And it's one of the main things that's holding black people down—racist violence.

And so, it's the whole notion of conflict and so on in society, the racist violence. There's the whole anti-Communist thing that's going on in the US and also in the bigger world. There's this place called the Soviet Union, which is a threat to us. And so, I'm becoming aware— through TV mainly— of a larger world out there. But it's a skewed point of view, watching the McCarthy hearings. But, in any case, that was sort of my introduction to politics. And, in fact, I was one of the first members of Young Americans for Freedom, which was one of the right-wing youth group. Somehow I heard about them. Maybe it was on TV or something. I wrote to them, and they said, "You're the first person who's written to us from the South, and we want people to join. We want members in the South." I was one of their first members, the only member, and I'm sure probably the only black member ever, but certainly at that time.

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And there's certainly an anti-Communist agenda that's going on, and I'm buying it because I'm looking for something that explains why there's this horrible situation in the world, which I'm coming to realize now racial segregation is. It's not some pastoral, wonderful life that I lived as a little kid where I was protected from everything. It's now a horrifying life where we're surrounded by people who are basically our enemies and who are doing things to do harm to us at all times, meaning black people, do harm to black people. So, this is the world that's coming up with the experience of Emmett Till and going to college. But, in that world then, a lot of windows get opened and questions get asked. Soviet Union? What's going on? What is this Communism thing? Why is it so dangerous? The Civil Rights Movement itself, the notion of struggle for change, that you don't just sit and pray and hope for change. You get out there, and you march. You do things. You become active.

The whole idea of becoming active in some way to take control of your own life and do something, which is implicit in the Civil Rights Movement, really appealed to me. And it was something about my character, or the shaping of my character, I think, that the Civil Rights Movement played a really important place there, which was the idea of individual activism, individual volition, contributing to something that's larger, namely a social movement, that all of us together, marching together, can accomplish something that none of us individually could do. It was an incredible sense of empowerment to be involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

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But, there were the dangers, of course. The dangers were well known in terms of the violence that can be done against us. But in any case, I'm in a safe place. I'm in college. I'm going to school. I'm enjoying it very much and

participating as I can in marches and demonstrations. We'd always start at the campus, and we'd march downtown.

02-00:11:32

Holmes:

Was there a lot of civil rights activity on campus?

02-00:11:34

Allen:

Yes, there was a lot going on in Atlanta then because the headquarters of—remember, King's movement, their headquarters were at the church in Atlanta. And several of the civil rights organizations had either their headquarters there or an important outpost there. And so, there was a sense of organization, activism, that the people, the people in the community, ordinary people, were moving and accomplishing something and beginning to make change. And it was all by the power of the spoken word. It was through the power of mobilizing, getting people to do things in a calm and collective way. And I found this all really empowering and thrilling to be a part of it.

And, during the course of the time I was there, I began taking sociology courses there, too, because I'm getting interested now in social issues, not just "science" or "nature," but social issues having to do with society and history. This is taking more and more of my attention.

02-00:12:50

Holmes:

Were you able to be exposed to African-American history at Morehouse?

02-00:12:55

Allen:

Yes. There were one or two professors there that were also knowledgeable in terms of—historians. African-American history was taught there. And, I loved it. I loved that, too, because I looked at it as one long story of struggle here. I said, this is incredible, and where is this going, and where did it come from? How did it begin? These were all huge questions. It grabbed me and made me interested in college and what I could learn in college, and in particular what I could learn at Morehouse, and increasingly what I could learn from the Civil Rights Movement, because I was beginning to see now that we're actually doing something new here. These big movements are really a new thing here. Even I could tell that. The horrors of the past were being challenged, and there was the possibility of a possible new future. But what might it be? What might it look like? I couldn't really say.

But, with that kind of thinking going through my mind, in my—what was it—the third year at Morehouse, they offered occasional scholarships for students to go abroad. And they offered one to me, that I could get a scholarship to study abroad for a year, which was really daunting because there were no flights to Europe then. You had to take a boat. It was a long trip, and it was a miserable trip. And you were in a strange world. You don't have the internet. You barely can get a phone call through. And then it's a lot of difficulty and very expensive. So, if you go to Europe for a year, you're going to be out of

touch with your family, with the whole world that's going on in America where you live. So you're going to be in a completely different environment.

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But I was eager for that by then. Keep in mind there was both the interest in new experience in going. There was also a desire to escape from my father always, always in the back of mind, this man who was doing such foulness in our family all the time, all the time, and where I was the one who would basically put him to bed every night. I would stay and talk with him until he finally fell asleep. And I felt guilty. I'm leaving my family, my mother and my family. And my mother was very encouraging, though. She said do it, do it. Get away from here and have a new experience. See what life is like somewhere else. Do it. So, I decided to do it. I accepted that scholarship.

And, it was a lonely, long journey because you really were there. There was one other fellow from Morehouse who was with me for one semester of that experience, and then we didn't see each other again until we got back to the college. So I was there basically as a loner with some letters of introduction to the University of Vienna, where they had an international studies program housed, and I was a part of that. And they got a place for me to live in the city. And my roommate fortunately was the guy from Morehouse, the other guy from Morehouse, so we became friends and got through it.

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But it was an incredible time, and it deserves a full telling on its own because there were two things that happened to me in terms of my development, I think, were really in part a deeper understanding of racism and, for the first time, beginning to question all the bad news about Communism, so much so that I decided to go to Russia and see for myself. The racism stuff I wasn't looking for. It just was there, which is that even Europe, I found myself a target of racism. Why? Because I'm a Negro? No, because they thought I was an Arab. They thought I was an Arab in Vienna. And when I would walk by people, they would spit. They would say nasty things about me in German. They didn't think I knew German. They thought I was an Arab.

And I realized for the first time, you know, we black Americans are not the only ones having to deal with this racism thing. I wouldn't want to be an Arab here. I mean, I am an Arab here. What is it? I don't want to be an Arab here. No. And I realized there were Arabs everywhere. There were Negroes everywhere. Every culture had its Negroes or its Arabs who whoever were the people at the bottom. It was one of the big discoveries that I made. And I wanted to know what was the mechanism which so successfully reproduces racism every generation. What is this system?

02-00:18:16

And that became ever more fixed in my mind as a result of living in Europe and often being taken as an Arab, never being taken as a Negro. I say I'm African-American. They say you're bullshitting. Don't lie to me. You're an

Arab. So, that was one thing, learning that racism is virtually everywhere, but it's recognizable also by the way that it operates, and that this is a history for a lot of the world's peoples. A lot of the world's people have had to deal with this thing called racism and its brother, colonialism. But in any case, that was one thing that was very powerful, and that was reinforced, actually, by the experience in Vienna, and also I had consistently in the rest of Europe, because wherever I went in Europe, who was I going to be seeing? White Europeans. There were very few blacks or Jews or Arabs or anybody of color in Europe at that time, very few. And so, that was the world I lived in was, once again, a white world in which I am a sort of object at the bottom of this pot and trying to figure out what's going on.

But the other thing was Soviet Union. I had this fixation in my mind that I'm going to go there. There's so much talk about it on TV and Communism. How could I go to Europe and not go and see for myself? That was my feeling. I've got to go there. But, I had one problem. I didn't speak Russian. However, one of my fellow students there from the United States somehow had learned to speak Russian. And I talked him into going with me on a visit to Moscow in February, February of 1963, which is not a good time to visit Moscow because the snow is piled about twenty feet high everywhere. It's really difficult to get around. And everybody wonders, why are you here now? Why are you here now?

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But, my friend and I, we went to Russia. And I told him, I said, "the mission here is to see with our own eyeballs if we can detect some racial divisions here in the Soviet Union, okay? We're here on an objective mission eyeballing. That's what we're going to do. We're going to look around. We're going to ask questions." And the question is, is this a non-racist society? Is this a racist? What kind of society is this? Because by then I'd read the Communist propaganda. I started reading Marx, preparing myself for this meeting. I read Lenin. I had stacks of books by and about Communism that I was reading there in preparation for going there and presumably exposing the great lie of the Soviet Union.

Well, I went, and I looked, and I talked to people. I talked to students. One of the most invigorating times there was when I went to the University of Moscow and hung out with a bunch of Russian students who were just there, talking to them. And as luck would have it, this was the time of the great—what was it called in the Soviet Union at that time? A Great Opening.

02-00:21:47

Holmes:

Oh, the Thaw, yeah.

02-00:21:48

Allen:

Yes, Great Opening. And so, everybody in the Soviet Union was talking about everything. If you wanted to be there at a time when it looked like a glorious society, that was the time. And to go to the university and sit and have these

exciting students, Russian revolutionary students, I said, “my God. This is a whole different society here from what I thought it was. And I have to change my whole way of thinking about this thing called Socialism and Communism,” which led me to start reading even more deeply into it and also beginning to think about, well, is there a Socialist movement in the United States? Who is it? What are they doing?

So, the opening towards the left, towards the idea that there’s some sort of left alternative here, and that it might even exist in the United States. It seems to have gotten a foothold in the Soviet Union, so there’s hope. So there’s hope. So, that was the two great things I came back with intellectually from that voyage. One is that racism is pretty much universal. In fact, it was everywhere I went, including in the Soviet Union, too, because it was clear that darker people there were having a harder time. But there was no structure that said darker people are inferior. The Communist ideology, the Socialist ideology, is one of equality. And so the notion that there are inferior peoples is officially counter to the whole notion of Socialism. Unfortunately, it’s not always true in practice. But at least in theory that was an opening that basically said all people are equal and tried to make that, in some sense, the practice of the society.

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But, in other parts of Europe, it wasn’t even the case. There were people who were bad people, and that was that. The Jews were categorized still that way. And then, as there were beginning to be people from other parts of the world... Arabs, they got categorized that way, too. But I’m still a lone Negro, and they don’t know anything about Negroes. And anyway, I’m so light-skinned, how can I be a Negro, right? But this is the experience I went through and I came back with there, one of excitement at the possibility that there can be other ways of organizing society, and that maybe racism is not necessarily fundamental to human nature, but here’s a society— Russia— that at least in principle says they’re working against it.

Cuba was another example by that time, too. And I would eventually go to Cuba to have a look at that one, too.

[Narrator Addendum:

During the 1970s my wife and I took part in the Venceremos Brigade. The Brigade was a solidarity organization in support of the Cuban Revolution. Groups of Americans would go to Cuba as an act of solidarity. Our group, the Sixth Contingent, went for two months and built houses for Cuban workers. It was a great experience. At the end we were taken on a tour of the island. Since by that time I was a known journalist and activist I was asked if I could organize a group of African American activists to come on a special visit to Cuca, which I did. I think it was a dozen people I had met over the years that I invited. In Cuba we met with Cuban scholars for several days and discussed

the state of the black movement in the U.S. At the conclusion of this workshop I stayed on for a few days and discussed the possibility of inviting a Cuban scholar in African American studies to the U.S.

A year or so later we got visas for three Cubans to visit the U.S., an Afro-Cuban scholar and two assistants to help. I met the group in Atlanta and showed them around. We visited the black colleges, had lunch with former Morehouse president Benjamin Mays, met with the first black Mayor of Atlanta, Maynard Jackson, who knew my family, visited black areas, poor and middle class, as well as a black agricultural coop. Afterward the group came to the Bay where I introduced them to activists and black scholars and visited black communities. The Cubans were quite impressed with the whole experience.

At the conclusion of the visit the Cubans asked to see where I lived. At that time I was divorced and living in a studio apartment in the Fillmore district of the City. Not very impressive. While at my place the Cubans noticed a bullet hole in my window. I quickly explained that I didn't think the shot was meant for me since my apartment was on the fifth floor. I said I thought it was just part of the random shooting of guns that happened sometimes in the Fillmore. Still, it was a rather sobering ending for their tour.]

But my eyes were opening to a much bigger world and struggles that were much bigger than what was happening simply in the United States, and also beginning to see that racism in itself was one of the great struggles of the world. It just takes place locally. It's always a local struggle.

02-00:25:05

Holmes:

I wanted to ask just some follow-up questions on Morehouse in relation to that. You discussed that it was your first exposure to African-American history. Would you say, as one who became an African-American scholar, that there were some roots there from your experience at Morehouse that you would carry on in your further education, and then later scholarship?

02-00:25:32

Allen:

Oh, yes. Well, for one thing, the fraternities there always had an academic component in terms of what they were trying to do. And I joined one of the fraternities. But the main thing was the professors themselves. I mean, Staughton Lynd was there, another famous historian, white historian. I can't get the name right now. It'll come to me. [Narrator Addendum: Howard Zinn] He was there with Staughton Lynd at the same time. Both of them were teaching at Spelman, but Morehouse students could take courses at Spelman, which I did. So, when I got back from the Soviet Union, I sought those professors out because to me they seemed to be the representatives of this other way of thinking on the campus. And black professors were also opening my mind to other ways of thinking. And of course the students were always looking for answers to these questions more and more of us had.

02-00:26:42

Holmes:

How would you characterize the student, or what was your impression of the student body at Morehouse?

02-00:26:49

Allen:

One of great excitement and activism. Now, this is when I come back, but remember, I had been away for a year, and this was a year of huge growth for the movements. And so, when I come back to the campus, the campus is now politicized way more than it was when I left. But it was something that I was ready for because I was politicized as well. So I come back ready to join a social change movement, and the Civil Rights Movement was what was happening. And I joined fully in my senior year. And in fact, I even made *Jet* magazine. Actually, I didn't make it. My car made it. But I have a relationship to *Jet* magazine, so I was always reading it.

But, when I got back I had a 1953 Ford somehow that I acquired. And I had got interested in ham radio, another one of my interests aside from model airplanes when I was much younger. Now I'm interested in ham radio, amateur radio. And I've actually got an amateur radio license. K4TDX was my amateur call letters, K4TDX. There were four or five of us who became interested in amateur radio and formed a club in Washington High School. We knew of nobody else who had this interest. And, of the white people that had this interest, none of them wanted to have anything to do with us, not one.

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So, we did the club, and we did the whole thing. We taught ourselves how to build these ham radio sets and how to talk to people. And at some point they manufactured a small one that could be—you could even take in a car and run it out of a cigarette lighter access. I bought one of those, and I put it in my '53 Ford. And I became the communication between the demonstrators downtown and headquarters back in the church near the campus, because that's the way things worked. The demonstrators would be dispatched from some central location, a church nearby. But how could they be in touch? Well, you'd have to have runners going back and forth, finding out what was going on.

But, I showed a new way. It's not what I set out to do, but it just became convenient because I was doing it, and that is to use amateur radio for social movements, for keeping in touch with demonstrators who were out in the field doing things, to keep in communication. So, that's what got a photograph in *Jet* magazine, a photograph of that little radio sitting in my 1953 Ford. I was so proud of it. I was so proud of it. Nobody believed it. They said, "you're not there. How do we know who?" But that was another outcome, and that was a long period that I was interested in ham radio. And I talked to other people all over the world, which was another thing, that it sort of internationalized me, too.

02-00:30:00

But, this is happening. And so, that's the way in which my particular participation at that point. I'm there. I'm the communication person. The cops tried to bust me a couple of times, but on what? I'm just driving around in a car. When I talk on the radio, I stop the car and talk on the radio, right? I don't drive talking on the radio. So they couldn't bust me. I didn't go into the buildings. I was not a marcher. I was just driving around in a car talking on the radio. They hated it. They really hated it. They said, these niggers are just learning too much now. [laughs] I know that's what they said.

But anyway, that was sort of the high point of that last year, being in the movement itself and getting that charge. It's really sort of an emotional charge of being with other people who think in the same way and are willing to put their lives on the line to do something—in a nonviolent way always—to make change. And, I think that set the course of my life right there. That last year in college, and before that, that year in Europe, they put quote marks around it and made it something I needed to focus on and that I would focus on, which is the structure of racial inequality in the United States and globally and the ways in which it plays out. And, what is the opposition to it? What is the vision for a different kind of life? Who is working on that? So, these are the questions that developed back then and that I'm still grappling with today. I don't know how much progress I've made, but it's nevertheless been what my life has been.

02-00:32:01

Holmes:

Well, I wanted to talk about the next step of after you graduate from Morehouse College in 1963. Is that correct, in '63?

02-00:32:11

Allen:

Yes, when I graduated I was offered a job by IBM, yeah. And I was hired as a trainee that summer. That was the summer of '64, which is why I wasn't at the movement, the demonstration, because I was working for IBM. But the thing that I learned there is that although I had a great interest in technology and that science and technology was what I had studied, that was my official major. But my real interest is in the social workings of the world, of humanity. How do we organize ourselves into societies? And how do these societies operate? Because, by then, seeing what was happening in Europe and realizing that racism is fully alive there, knowing that it's alive in the North when I'm living there, and realizing that this is a great ogre here that has the whole world in its grasp. And what can we do to fight it? What can we do to fight this thing called racism?

So, while the physical sciences I still loved, and still love—I love to read books on physical sciences and the history of physical science—sociology seemed more like what I should be studying if I were looking at an academic discipline that allows one to study the history and workings of societies, that or maybe something like anthropology. But I wanted an emphasis on the industrial society, so that was sociology. So that's why I switched to sociology

when I went to the New School. Upon graduation, I was offered a fellowship to go to Columbia for a transitional year and to strengthen my education, is the way they put it, because they were still thinking a black school is never as good as a white school, so you cannot come out of a black school fully educated. You have to do something more. And we're going to put you in Columbia for a year so you can get polished. That was the message there. So, I was there being polished, and in the process I was also still out in the streets involved in the demonstrations because stuff was happening in New York. Malcolm X was in New York. The Muslims were. Everybody was in New York.

02-00:34:51

Holmes:

Talk a little bit about that, yeah. How long did you work for IBM?

02-00:34:57

Allen:

One summer.

02-00:34:58

Holmes:

One summer?

02-00:34:59

Allen:

One summer.

02-00:35:00

Holmes:

And then you moved?

02-00:35:02

Allen:

I moved to New York on a fellowship that had been given to me by the college. So I had a choice, to go to graduate school or work for IBM. I realized that if I had stayed with IBM, I might have made it pretty much to the top. But I would also be dead, I think. I think the work there and the life there would have not been in the interest of my good health. [laughs] But I might have made it to the top, or close to the top, because I would have been the first "Negro" hired by IBM anywhere in the South. And they liked me. They hired me. But, I just realized that, "no, this is not where I want to be. I like to study about some of this stuff, but I don't know if this is my career. This is not my life."

02-00:35:53

Holmes:

What was your grandfather's reaction to choosing to go to New York and continue your studies rather than stay at what promised to be a very comfortable middle-class job with IBM?

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Allen:

Nobody could understand why I did that. Nobody could understand. You turned down a job with who? What? IBM? Well, I didn't actually turn it down. I softened it. I said, "I'm going to go away to graduate school here and do this year at graduate school, and then I'll have a look at it again." And they said okay, even though I think everybody knew then that I would not be coming back. But I myself even found it very difficult to say no, just plain

outright no, to that job. But eventually it came down to that. I did work at the IBM lab, the lab they had there in New York. But when I went to Columbia and then dropped out of Columbia, everybody knew that I had changed course—me, for the first time. Others had seen it coming.

But the course was one that had been set by my grandfather, not my father, because clearly I had to reject that course that he had taken for whatever reasons, because the damage it did to him and the family was apparent. Big Daddy was someone I looked up to and admired. But I also knew I didn't want to be a postman. I knew that that was a dead-end job for a black man. You can be a postman, but you cannot be a superintendent. You cannot rise in that job. But you can be a postman.

02-00:37:49

And I wanted something more. I didn't know what it was more I wanted. But I had by this time come to the conclusion that technology in and of itself, science and technology, while they fascinate me, this is not what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to do something that would be more social, in the social arena. And the Civil Rights Movement showed me a way, which is to be an activist in that movement, except you don't get a career that way. You can get a life that way, but it's not going to be a paying career. And that was always the problem. But I solved that one, too, even before I left New York, and that was journalism.

And the way that came about, it was also beginning to be near the end of the time I would be in New York, was with the assassination of Malcolm X. I started going to Malcolm's meetings. The first time I heard Malcolm was when he spoke at Morehouse College when I was a senior there. And I was so taken aback because all I heard about Malcolm X were terrible things that everybody said. White people, black people, everybody hated Malcolm X. but then I heard him come to speak in the chapel on our campus, and he was fantastic. He was brilliant. He had an argument about racism that seemed to be pretty solid to me.

02-00:39:20

But he was not a madman. And he had a great sense of humor. I loved his sense of humor, which doesn't really come through in the writing, or his formal speeches. But he could make the most outrageous jokes. And he always had people laughing at some truth that, when you finished laughing, you would think, wow, that is true, isn't it? He was a brilliant teacher, in other words. And I admired that. He by then had broken from the Muslims, and I admired that he had broken from this other group, whom I didn't think very much of them.

02-00:40:05

Holmes:

The Nation of Islam?

02-00:40:08

Allen:

Yeah, the Nation of Islam, yeah. I didn't like them because they seemed basically a religious sect that was turned inward. But Malcolm was a leader who was turned outward. He was talking to the world, not just to black people. He was talking to the world. And he had a powerful message, which is you've got to do this for yourself. You've got to work for change yourself. There's a God up there, and God will help us, but we've got to help ourselves first. That was basically his message. And by helping yourself, he meant fighting against injustice, which Mr. Muhammad did not necessarily mean, the original founder of the Nation. His was a religious organization, not a social change organization. Malcolm was working on social change.

And so, when he split from the Muslims, a lot of us jumped for joy. And that's when I started going to his meetings, because his organization was in Harlem. He had them there. I started going to the meetings. And, as fate would have it, I was there the night he was assassinated. Did I talk about that before?

02-00:41:16

Holmes:

No.

02-00:41:17

Allen:

No? Okay. Yeah, I was working in the welfare department in Harlem by that time. And, of course, Malcolm was well known throughout Harlem, and I'd heard him speak on street corners. But I wanted to go to his meetings since I went to a couple of meetings. And on this particular meeting, I'd invited a friend, actually a white friend, a fellow social worker in the department of welfare, a white woman I had met there. We were both new recruits, and we worked side by side. And I knew that Malcolm had no problem with having white people at his meetings. There were white people at his meetings all the time.

And, sometimes I thought, are these people spies? Who are they? Are they police? Are they reporters and so on? No, they were people who believed in what Malcolm had to say. But there were very few of them, but they were there. So, I felt, okay, I can bring a white friend here and there won't be any problems. And so, we're sitting there, and Malcolm comes out and he does his usual greeting. It was a very familiar settings, because I've been there numerous times for other meetings. He had guards placed along the front. He spoke—it was upon a stage—from a lectern, an audience of about a couple hundred people sitting out here. And he had some guards posted along the front of the stage and some other guards here and there, because there had been threats made against his life at that point. And everybody knew this, had he took it seriously. So, he had guards posted as he did at all of his meetings.

02-00:42:58

But that evening—or afternoon, it was the afternoon, late afternoon—the place was full, as it always was. And there were maybe three or four-hundred black people, a handful of whites scattered through the audience. I imagine

probably a lot of people thought I was white, too, because if you just see me, how do you know? And, I had picked a spot to sit sort of about midway back looking right straight up at Malcolm, because I wanted to be there to hear what he had to say. So, we sit down, and he begins speaking. And suddenly there's a loud noise and a commotion in the back of the room. Somebody jumps up and is saying—I don't know what the words exactly were, but it sounded something like, "Get your hands out of my pocket."

And this guy jumps up and grabs his hand, and another guy jumps up. And they start scuffling. Everybody turns to look back. What we don't see is that, up closer to the stage, two other men have also gotten up. Nobody's looking at them, though. In fact, I don't think Malcolm—Malcolm might have seen them both, because he was looking directly out at what was going on. So, there are two men in the back of the room scuffling. Everybody's looking at them. And there's two men who quietly get up there at the front of the room wearing coats. Under the coats they have guns.

02-00:44:31

They come out, and I see this out of the side of my eye. I'm still looking back there, too. But out of the side of my eye, I see some movement going on up front there. These guys pull out guns and start shooting Malcolm. I don't know how many shots they fired. And he falls back. The two of them run around to a side door to escape. The other guys in the back are now running out. The audience is stunned. What has happened? No police were present in the room at all when this meeting was taking place. At some of our previous meetings there had been police present because of the threats made against Malcolm. And Malcolm did not object to the police being present in his meetings because he said, "I'm not doing anything criminal. They can be here if they want."

But that night, there were no police present. And I noticed it. I remember seeing out front there were no police out front tonight. I go in and sit down in the hall. I look around, don't see any police because they would be stationed around, too. And I noticed Malcolm had his guards there, but the policemen aren't there. I never have known why the policemen aren't posted that night, that evening, but they were not. So these guys actually managed to get almost away. They do in fact get caught, but they have assassinated Malcolm. And, there's nothing. There's nothing. By this time, Ryoichi [*sic*] Kochiyama, a Japanese woman who was one of his founders and a nurse, she was up trying to help him. Apparently, he was still alive for a short time. But then by the time the ambulances got there, he was dead.

02-00:46:23

We came outside and stood around with the people outside and waited to see what would happen. "Was he still alive or not?" And when he was brought out, we knew. That experience... was just completely stunning to me, to be present when somebody is assassinated before your eyes, and somebody

you'd been looking up to. I didn't know what to do. I was just so stunned. I couldn't think. But at some point, I started writing. And I wrote an account of that experience, going to the meeting and him being assassinated. This is some days after this, and it may have even been a couple of weeks after the assassination. Anyway, it was after the assassination.

So, the news about the assassination is dying down. I wrote it. I didn't know what to do with it. I put it in a drawer, and it stayed there for a year. A year later, on the anniversary of Malcolm's death, I pulled that piece out and I read it, and I said—by then I'm shifting more towards journalism. The bookstore has failed. I realized I've got to do something else here. And I'm thinking about journalism, and I'm looking at stuff. And I pulled that out, and I said, damn, this is a good piece. Even I had become distanced from it. This is a good piece. I wonder if any of the newspapers would be interested.

02-00:47:59

So, I take it down to the *Village Voice* first. They said it's a good piece, but it's not for us. And then I go over to the *National Guardian*, which is the old *National Guardian* that was published by the Progressive Party back during World War II. And a lot of white leftists left the Communist Party and joined the Progressive Party. But then eventually it failed, too. But they left behind a newspaper called the *National Guardian*, which was independent, although a lot of the old Progressives supported it. And so, I took it to them, and they said, "this is great. Do you have anything else?" I said, "no." "Do you think you can go out and be a reporter? Have you ever done it?" "No, I've never done that." "What do you do?" "I write. I go to meetings." "You go to meetings, huh?" "Yeah." "You go to Malcolm X meetings?" "Yeah, I went to his meetings." "How would you like to be a reporter for us?" [laughs]

They're all white, right? They had one black writer there, Julius Lester; but he was not a reporter. Julius had a column. He wrote a great column for them. I don't know if you know Julius. He wrote a great column for them. He was their only black writer, but he was not a reporter. And they realized with the black movement going on, they've got to have a black reporter. You wouldn't get into any of these meetings. So, they hired me. No experience, no writing sample except that one piece, nothing showing that I would do any better than—that I could be a reporter. The only thing I had going for me was being black and willing to go into a black neighborhood. Oh, that's enough. [laughs] So, they hired me on the spot, and that was my job, to go up to Harlem.

02-00:49:49

Holmes:

And how long had you been in New York by this time?

02-00:49:51

Allen:

By then I would say I had been there for a few years, yeah. I was there in New York, in all, about five years, a year at Columbia and then a couple of years fumbling and fiddling around with other things like the bookstore.

02-00:50:05

Holmes: Where was the bookstore located?

02-00:50:07

Allen: The bookstore was in Harlem, and it was one block from City College, which is why I thought it was a great location, because all these kids who went to City College, they had to walk to the subway. And to get to the subway they passed within one block of my bookstore on the way to the subway. And, keep in mind, City College at that time was all white. It's all people of color now, but City College at that time was all white, and they're in Harlem, which I hadn't properly calculated. So, I said, "here are all these students. They'll be interested in intellectual books." And so I stocked the bookstore with all kinds of intellectual stuff and history, which I loved to read. And, in fact, I used to sit in the back of the bookstore and read a lot of my own books. [laughs]

But the kids, what happened was, they are white kids coming from a largely white school. They have to walk several blocks in Harlem—which is a black community on the verge of exploding. And they have to walk through that to get to the subway because none of them live in Harlem. They were all white students who lived out elsewhere, a lot of Jewish students. It was still pretty much Jewish then. And this is nothing against Jewish people. It's just about how Jewish segregation intersects with black segregation.

02-00:52:36

And, what I realized is that, unfortunately, they were all too scared to go one block out of the way and come to my bookstore. I used to go up there with leaflets, handing out leaflets. It's a great bookstore just one block away. All you have to do is walk one block. They wouldn't do it because that one block would have been in Harlem. The other path they followed was sort of a police-protected path to the subway. None of them would leave that. Another lesson, another lesson. Okay.

So, the bookstore, which was called Browser Books, failed. I was basically the only customer, and a few of my friends. But I loved it because even with it failing I could sit in the back and read and still learn. But it lasted about seven months. And during that time I was going to Malcolm's meetings, and I was doing my political stuff and so on, taking part in demonstrations and actually becoming, although I didn't know I was doing this, a political activist. So, I was actually into political activism by then before I went down to ask for that job, which was a year after Malcolm's assassination. And by then, Harlem is my stomping ground. I'll go anywhere in Harlem, of course. [laughs] And I did. I did. I went anywhere in Harlem to follow the story.

02-00:53:05

Holmes: Tell me a little bit about your move to New York and then moving into Harlem. Did you see much difference between Harlem and—what did you notice? What was your first impression?

02-00:53:16

Allen:

What I saw is the same situation only built even bigger, much grander, than anything I've seen in Atlanta, a grand edifice of segregation, which I loved, Harlem, because it seemed that everything was happening in Harlem. That was the place to be if you could. The Apollo was there. You had all kinds of clubs. All the political activity was there. If you were black, you had to be in Harlem. So, to me it was a very exciting place to be. Going to Harlem is where some people going to New York—some people say, "I'm going to New York," and it's the big thing. Black people say, "I'm going to Harlem," and it's a big thing. And that's the state I was in, because I had come from a segregated society, and I moved into a segregated society, and it seemed perfectly normal to me. Nothing was out of place. Everything I knew, all the people there, I knew who they were. I could talk to anybody.

And so, that's what it was. I just, I was completely comfortable, and everybody was completely comfortable with me. And when I told them that I was colored they said, "Oh, so that's what it is. We knew you weren't white. You're colored. You're colored. Yeah, we knew that all along." Anyway, being light-skinned at that time can provoke some interesting situations. But it was never about not being black. That was never part of my way of thinking because it was always so comfortable to be black except at home. Everywhere else, it was very comfortable. I never had any sense of being deprived, even though we would read in the books that we were deprived and didn't have this and didn't have that and so on.

02-00:55:09

And I would think, well yes, that may be so. But I know some poor white crackers around here. Pardon my language, but I knew a lot of poor white crackers here who are a lot worse off than I am. Hey, but they can get a hit. They can get on and they can get a hit. I can do that, too. I can do that, too. So, I never had a feeling of being in any way less than a white person. That never occurred to me. And it took me a while to get used to white people as being something that was other than on TV, because the only time I saw them in large numbers was on TV. And to realize that these are human beings just like I'm a human being, and they probably have suffering and things just like I have and so on, I had to kind of work on that because they were not part of my world until I got to college.

And it was just another world. That was what it was like. Living in the black community and the white community and stuff, they were just two different worlds. They didn't interact very much. And if you were lucky and lived in a black world like there was in Atlanta, you pretty much had everything you needed. I don't say that to justify segregation at all. But if it's a truly segregated world, things will be actually equally divided. And in Atlanta the Negroes there had tried to get it as equal as they could. [laughs] They accepted segregation, but they said, "We have to have equality on both sides." That was the position in Atlanta.

02-00:56:47

And it worked because Atlanta is first and foremost a town about business. It's about business there. And if you can look at things as a business proposition, you can make a lot more headway. But in any case, this is kind of the setting within the community in which I am growing up. I come up, and then come out of this into the college to New York. And this is kind of the baggage that I'm bringing with me, which I never felt—sometimes they say that if you've been discriminated against or mistreated or something, you're injured. You're injured by that in some way. I never felt injured by it all. I felt angered by it all, but I never felt injured. I never felt that I had been done some personal harm here.

And I know for a lot of black people, that sense of personal harm is personal because they don't live in protected communities. They live exposed in "ghettos" which are exposed to the white police. We didn't have any white police in Atlanta. We had black police in our communities. Of course we'd have black communities. And the social workers were black, so that if you're going to do segregation, you do it completely. But we didn't have it completely. The police were white. The black police were equally brutal, the handful of them they were. And so, the violence of the society is the thing that I hated because I knew that it was violent everywhere. The day-to-day life didn't make any difference to me. That we lived in different worlds, that was okay with me. I never had a problem with that. I liked the world I lived in. I never wanted to be someplace else. And when I went to Europe, I never wanted to stay in Europe. I was glad to come back here to this racist society. At least it was familiar.

02-00:58:55

Holmes:

Well, tell me a little bit after the bookstore. Then you got a job with the welfare department in Harlem. Is that correct?

02-00:59:02

Allen:

Yeah. I was a welfare worker. I was your classic welfare worker. I would come in with a notebook, knock on the door. I'd have to look in all the rooms. That was my job. I looked in every room, see who's there, make sure there's no man in the house. Rule number one, no man in the house. Then I would sit down with the woman, and the children would come and hang out. And I'd talk to her about how things are going, and are they doing this and doing that and so forth and so on? Make some notes, and I'd take them back to the office and put them in a big folder of other notes that had been made about this family over the last ten years, a big folder like that. I put mine in there on top of it, close it, and that was that. Nothing would be done. There was nothing to do. We were just having contact with them. Make sure they were still there.

And the big rule was, no man in the house, no evidence of a man in the house. If you find that, they're off the rolls. So, that's how mean it was. It deliberately broke up families, deliberately broke up families. And we're still suffering from that today because the welfare system still breaks up families.

It just doesn't do it quite so brutally. And the people I was dealing with when I'd go in and talk to them and see them, and I'd realize these are the same people I grew up with in the South, but they moved up here and things got worse. They're worse off up here than they were in the South. They at least had family in the South who could help them. Up here they didn't know anybody. The only thing that helped them was the "welfare system."

02-01:00:46

And that was the basic message. We were the caretakers of a surplus population. And we made sure they didn't quite starve, but it wasn't our business to help them get better—that is, the welfare department. And as soon as I figured that out, which didn't take very long, then I realized I'm not going to be in this job very long here, but I don't know where I'm going to go. And so I stuck with it, and it was a large part of the learning for me because I think you can get a sense of that in the *Black Awakening* book, the sense of being at the bottom is really a terrible place to be. And being at the bottom and segregated, too, is even worse. But I came to that by seeing it every day. That was my experience going to people's houses and seeing how they lived and then making some pronouncement on it which would determine how they would continue to live.

So, it finally got to be too much. I just realized I'm becoming part of the very thing that I said I hated. I'm now an instrument of this monstrous system that is screwing up people's lives. I'm now one of its instruments. And that's when I realized I can't stay in this job of being a welfare worker. And I'm looking around for other things, but I don't know what. I'm going to Malcolm's meetings, which doesn't give you a job. But that's where I was when the shooting occurred.

02-01:02:18

Holmes:

And that led you into being a journalist?

02-01:02:20

Allen:

Yeah. And that made me into being a journalist, not by intent, and not right away. I had to write a piece first and wait a year before they would have me. How do you know? You cannot predict anything like that. It's just the way life unfolds. And it was the way mine was unfolding, but I would never have been able to say what track it was going to take. But it took this track, as I said, almost by accident, becoming a journalist. And if you stop and think about it, it was in the most racist of circumstances, too, when you think about it. I got hired because I was black and because I was willing to go and work in a black community. What? Yep, that's why I got hired. [laughs] It's the truth.

But, I did get hired. And that, to me, was the important thing at that moment. What I would find out, I did not know; although I had some hints. I had some hints. And going to Malcolm's meetings gives you more than hints. But I loved Harlem, and at first I loved working there because I lived there, too. I still lived where I always had lived, on 110th Street, which is the borderline

between Harlem and—so, I lived there. I worked there. I had a bookstore there and a fail there. I didn't go downtown until I sort of exhausted what I could do, what I could find in Harlem initially. And then I went downtown.

02-01:04:00

Holmes:

Well, tell me a little bit about your decision to get a master's degree from the New School.

02-01:04:07

Allen:

Yes. Well, when I went downtown, I found the New School. A lot of people that I had been dealing with in the student movement and so on—remember, I had one finger in the student movement, which is interracial. I have another finger in Harlem, and the Black Power movement's going on there. So, what was I saying? What's the topic now?

02-01:04:38

Holmes:

Deciding to attend the New School for a master's degree.

02-01:04:41

Allen:

New school, yeah. Well, I'd always been an academic, too. Still am, in many ways. And, I went to the New School to hear a couple of lectures, and I thought, "I like this. I like the students there." Everybody, of course, is progressive. And there are a lot more people of color there than you see in other places. So I said, "I like this." And I had dropped out of Columbia, and I rejected all of that. But by now, having been in Harlem for these years and having seen what's going on there, the political thing, the unemployment thing, I'm realizing there's some need here for some analysis, something. If I'm going to write about it, what am I going to say about it? What perspective can I offer, anything?

And so I went back there to enroll in the New School, and I loved it. I loved it. It was a big urban school and huge lecture classes and all these old German scholars, refugees from World War II. And they were great. And so, it was a curious place to be. And, as I said, it had a kind of European feel to it, too, because the way the students were, you didn't live in dorms. People lived in the city. They didn't live in dorms. And I got my master's degree there.

02-01:06:04

Holmes:

In sociology?

02-01:06:05

Allen:

In sociology. And that's when I realized I really am on a new path now, and it's one that's going to be using social analysis rather than mathematical analysis.

02-01:06:18

Holmes:

Tell me a little bit about the curriculum. At this time, what would become, which we can discuss here a little bit later, but also what would become the kind of analysis you're looking at, the position and struggle of African-

Americans. That type of literature was very few and far between during this time. What kind of books were you reading at the New School that really—

02-01:06:44

Allen:

A lot of books written by Marxist and pro-Marxist people. That's who was basically there. These were the refugee Marxists from World War II, the intellectuals. And, the New School was, in fact, basically a Marxist school. But it was a Marxist school, not an American Marxist school. It was Europeans in there. And they were somehow more serious. American Marxists have always seemed a bit flighty and I don't know what. But these guys from—well, for one thing, they've been through a whole hell of a lot, too. They were refugees, number one, and then scholars. But, the courses they gave had, I think, deep insight. I spent many years working out some of those insights, I admit. But that was my real intellectual introduction to Marxism.

But it wasn't the Marxism of the Communist Party. It was the Marxism of people, many of whom were anti-Communist, but they were Marxists. But they hated the Communist Parties because of what they had done in Europe, what they had done in Europe. And so, that's what they were then. They would call themselves independent Marxists. And that's who was at the New School. And that's how I realized I fit, because this is where you can think on your own and come up with what you feel you understand and talk with other people about it without fear that anybody's going to either put you down or lock you up. It's one or the other if you're somewhere else.

02-01:16:22

But I loved that about it, the discussions that would go on in the classes. And even though they were big classes, we would somehow manage to get a discussion going. And I loved it, and I think I would have stayed there if I thought I could get into the PhD program. But there were so many people trying to get into the PhD program there, I realized I probably wouldn't be able to do it. And at some point while working for the—oh, so I went looking for the job at the Guardian. So, that was after this period with the New School. And, the Guardian, one of the things that happened there, well, so first of all, I'm their first black reporter at the Guardian. And these are all lefties and good people and so on.

And I start writing, and I start writing this stuff about the black movement. And I start writing pieces that are beginning to develop some kind of analysis that will lead to the *Black Awakening* book. Bits and pieces of that are starting to come out. The anti-war movement is going very strong now, too, the anti-Vietnam War movement. And, I'm a young man, subject to the draft, and I get politicized around that, too. And actually, they did try to draft me, but that's another story.

02-01:09:49

And, the politics then that I'm developing is a kind of independent left Marxist politics. That's how I'd put it. It's me being introduced to Marxism

over and over again in different ways—school, movements and so on, reading on my own and putting together something that begins to make some sense to me that also incorporates an analysis of racism. So, can you do that in Marxism? Yeah, you can do that in Marxism. But, so I always have sort of my particular angle on these things. But anyway, that all gets played out because my draft board decides they're going to draft me. And where's my draft board? In Georgia. And they're looking for a lot of Negroes to go to Vietnam.

So, they called me up. And, what happens? There's a couple of things that happened. But basically, I refuse. I refuse to be inducted. First of all, I get a lawyer. Conrad Lynn was my lawyer, Conrad, great wonderful West Indian guy who was a lawyer for a lot of the leftists during this period. Conrad Lynn was my lawyer, and he says, "well, what you've got to do is, you have to go through all the steps in this process they're going to put you through before they put you in jail." [laughs] "You have to go through every step because if you want to appeal, you have to have gone through every step already. Otherwise there's no appeal." Okay.

02-01:11:35

So the steps are, they induct you, and then you can write something back and say—and what do I write back? Well, I write back what I feel. I said, "This is an imperious, racist war. I'm never going to be fighting against the people of Vietnam." I take that whole stance that a lot of us young men took at that time, which was, "To hell with the war. We're not going." Georgia board loves that. You think you're not going? We're sending you next, which they do. They called me up right away. Conrad Lynn says, "Don't worry, everything is on track here." [laughs] He says, "What you do now is you do everything they tell you to do. You're going to go through a physical exam. Do everything. Don't refuse to do anything until you get to the last step. You'll know it's the last step because you'll be at the Whitehall Street Induction Center, which is where everybody in New York was inducted at that time, Whitehall Street Induction Center." There were hundreds of us there, inductees.

"They're going to put you all in lines, and it'll be the end of the day. And they'll say, 'now you have now completed all of your physical exams. All of you have passed the physical exams. And you will now be ordered to take one step forward. When you take that step, you will be in the US Army.'" Conrad Lynn said, "Don't take the step. That's all you've got to do. Don't take the step." He didn't say what was going to happen next. So, that's how it goes. All these guys stepped. "Congratulations. You all passed the exam. Now we order you all to take one step forward into the United States Army."

02-01:13:24

Me, standing back there, didn't take the step, didn't take the step. By this time, so many young men have done that in the US, in the Whitehall Street Station, because that was where a lot of people were being sent to be drafted,

and a lot of them were not going to go. They already had a procedure set up to what to do. The army was ready for it. They said, "Okay, you, out. Step out of line. You wait here for a few minutes while we deal with these men. Then we have something else for you." And they were going to send me to the officer who specifically deals with people who refuse induction. They had an officer assigned to handle that. It was so many coming through.

And, after a while they came back and said, "The officer is on vacation. You go home. We'll call you." [laughs] So, my wife was so surprised to see me come back home that night. When I left in the morning, I told her. I took my toothbrush, and I said, "I may not be back for a few days or ever, but I think I'll be able to call you." And we thought that was the last we were going to see of each other, at least for a few days, that I would be in jail. But I came back that night, and she was very surprised, as I was. I said, "They said they'd call me." [laughs] That's how casual it had gotten. By that time, so many men were refusing, and they just couldn't process all of us.

02-01:14:50

Holmes:

And what year was this? Was this '67? What year?

02-01:14:56

Allen:

'67, '67, yeah. It's the height of it. This is the most intense, one of the most intense moments in the war. Thousands of young men are refusing the draft. Nobody knows how many actually refused. We know how many got arrested. Many more refused and didn't get arrested, like me. But that day, for some reason, I was the only one. So, I felt pretty much alone there. But nobody, none of the draftees said anything. I was expecting that they were going to start calling me names. None of them, none of them said anything because by that time this process had been happening so much and already been reported in the press that the sad truth is that those guys who took the step forward, they knew they were going to war and they might die in the war. And they knew that I, who didn't, I would live because I wouldn't be in Vietnam.

What could that have meant to them, you know? First of all, angry at me, but then it's not my fault. And in fact, they don't want to go either. They don't want to go either. But they just couldn't refuse. They had too much at stake. They couldn't refuse to go. So I'm thinking all of this stuff and just realizing what a horrible situation to be in. I was lucky. I was blessed. I didn't have to go through this kind of soul-searching. I had already done it, I guess I should say. But, these guys, I looked at them as they walked out, and I realized a lot of these guys are walking off to their deaths. They're walking off to their deaths right now.

02-01:16:47

Holmes:

They talk a lot about with draftees the struggle had a lot to do with family, that there was a lot of pressure, particularly from maybe their father or grandparents, of disappointment. How did your grandfather react when he heard that you chose not to go?

02-01:17:07

Allen:

My family had trouble with it. My parents had trouble with it. They couldn't understand why it is that I would not support our own government which is fighting against these Communists in Vietnam. That's exactly the way they would put it. How could I not support that? These Communists are taking over Vietnam. We're trying to help the Vietnamese. How can you refuse and say we should not be doing that? Well, I had a set of arguments, but it didn't dissuade anybody because it had some theory in it, Marxist theory woven into it. And it had stuff about imperialism in there and racism and all these big words that nobody wanted to deal with. Nobody wanted to deal with this. Is it right or wrong? It looked right. It looked right to most Americans except when all those body bags started coming home and they realized, "why did my boy go and die? What did he die for?" People started having really deep thoughts, second thoughts, about that war.

But anyway, this wasn't to that point yet. So, those of us who had refused the draft and who were African-American, we formed a little group, seven people, and called ourselves African-Americans for Survival. And we were explicitly an anti-draft group. Everybody in our little group had refused induction and was now waiting for the dispensation of their case. And, it was a curious kind of group. We had a couple of meetings and talked about why we were doing this and tried to give support to each other. One of us went to jail, Eddie Oquerdo. And the others, in some way or another, including me, managed to not be drafted, or go to jail.

02-01:19:00

And in my case it was just the luck of the draw once again because we went back and forth for several years with the letters between my lawyer and the letters to the draft board and blah-blah-blah, and this appeal and that appeal, that finally the last letter I got from the draft board, which I have around here someplace, says, "you have now exhausted all of your appeals, all of your objections, all of your everything that has—every effort you have made to not be drafted, and you've lost every single one of them. However, you are now twenty-six years old, motherfucker, and we don't want you anyway." [laughs] The "motherfucker" wasn't in there, but I could hear it. "We don't want you anyway."

That was all they could come up with at the end—"we don't want you anyway"—because it was true. The law said no men over twenty-six years of age should be drafted. [laughs] If you just live long enough sometimes, that pays off. So, I didn't get drafted, and I didn't go to jail. Everybody was mystified. How did you do that? "It's just the luck of the draw," I said, "just the luck of the draw, nothing else."

02-01:20:24

Holmes:

Well, and a helpful lawyer.

02-01:20:26

Allen:

And a good lawyer. [laughs] Right, a good lawyer. But even he could not have brought about the luck of the draw the way it was there. So, that was a great politicizing experience for me, to do that. And then, when I went to work for the Guardian, the Guardian organized—by this time there were international peace gatherings happening all over the world. And one of them was going to be in Czechoslovakia. And somebody from the board at the Guardian was on the organizing committee for this international peace conference, and they said to the Guardian, “why don’t you send somebody to this peace conference?” And for some reason they looked at me. “You want to go?” I said, “sure, why not,” not knowing what was going to happen. It’s just, “okay, go to your peace conference, then come back.”

We went. They had the peace conference. There were people from all over the world, and there were conferences. There were papers, everything for about a week. And then at the end of it—and there were people from North and South Vietnam at the conference, which was held in Czechoslovakia, people from the North and the South, meaning Communists for sure. At the end of it, the North Vietnamese delegation made an announcement that they were going to invite some of the Americans to come to North Vietnam and see the damage done by America. Oh, okay.

02-01:22:03

Lo and behold, I was one of those invited, completely unexpected. I was expecting to go back home the next day, and I get invited to come to North Vietnam for a week, maybe longer, maybe less. It depends on what’s happening. The Americans had not yet started bombing Hanoi, but they were bombing in parts of North Vietnam. And there was a question of safety because you don’t really want to be in a country that’s being bombed.

02-01:22:35

Holmes:

So is this ’66, ’67?

02-01:22:37

Allen:

Yeah, this is now ’67. There’s going to be a huge anti-war demonstration in Washington that year, protesting the fact that the US is going to now be bombing the cities in North Vietnam. And, I say, “go, yep, go.” Tom Hayden is one of the people who was on this delegation, a couple of other well-known people. There were about seven of us who were apparently selected by the Vietnamese to see North Vietnam. And so we had to hang around in Paris for a day or two, because there weren’t a lot of flights to North Vietnam during the war. And you’d have to get on a special flight. We’d have to go to Cambodia and wait for another week because in order to actually get to Hanoi you have to take the—there are no commercial flights. There’s only an international flight that’s operated by some international commission. And you have to go on that flight which goes once a week.

So, we waited in Hanoi and got to go on this plane. And, as we were flying, so we left Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and we were flying along the border of North Vietnam. And then we were going to cut over and go right over to Hanoi. And we flew along the border just outside of South Vietnam, we could look over into South Vietnam and see the damn war going on. We could see bombs exploding in paddies and places and villages that we were flying across the border from, but high enough to see into North Vietnam and actually see the war going on. And I was thinking, "holy shit. What are we doing here?"

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But they were bombing. They were bombing, and so we fly up, and then we cut over and land in Hanoi. Everything is sort of lights out and all that sort of stuff because of the American bombing, which has been happening already. But now they are starting to bomb in the cities as well. And, lo and behold, so there we were there to do a tour and avoid the bombs. We get taken to see several places that had already been bombed in the city even though the Americans said they were not bombing in the city yet. But they were. There were some things that had been bombed, and we got to see those. And then they took us out to the countryside, and they said, "We want you to see something here." But they made sure we didn't know where we were going because we were blindfolded.

We went out somewhere in the countryside, and we found this inauspicious-looking place. It was a clump of trees and a little half-ass road. But then you could open up that area, and there was a big door there, big enough for a truck to get through. And you open it into a tunnel that led to a huge underground complex of factories, schools and hospitals, all underground. They had moved their factories. They had moved their children. They had moved their injured people to safe places deep underground. They must have worked like hell to dig those places out. And they showed us several of them. Then they said the Americans can never touch us here. And when I looked at them I said, "Damn, this is why the North Vietnamese will not be defeated." The American bombs can't reach them. The bombing will not change anything. And it didn't.

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But we were the first to see that, I think, and realize it. They had put all of their productive part, the educational part, the medical part, all of that was underground. They had had years to do it. They had years to put it underground. But they knew what was coming. They knew eventually the Americans would bomb them and try to destroy everything above ground. But if it's underground, they can't reach them. And I think that's why they won the war. We could not defeat North Vietnam. That was just a plain fact. We could not defeat those people. We could not defeat them. And eventually they, along with the South Vietnamese Communists, overran South Vietnam. And we had to get the fuck out of there in such an embarrassing and humiliating way, so humiliating, because we were so fucking wrong.

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Holmes: So, they showed you the sights. And then you were also spending time with Tom Hayden, who later becomes—

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Allen: Not a lot of contact there, because actually we were split. I think there were seven of us, but we tended to move in smaller groups because they didn't want us all together all the time. So, I got to meet people and talk to people, but I was always interested in talking to the Vietnamese because I kept trying to figure out, "what are they thinking here? How are they going to defeat the Americans?" And I didn't know until the end when I saw how they're defending against the Americans. And I realized, "you can't defeat these people. We can't defeat them."

02-01:28:06

Holmes: What were your impressions of the country?

02-01:28:12

Allen: It was a beautiful country, and the city of Hanoi is a beautiful city. And even with all the bomb pock marks all over the place and everything, it's still beautiful. And the people are so beautiful. I don't know if I'm being chauvinist or what in talking about them this way, but the Vietnamese people are the most American people I've met outside of America. The sense of humor and ways of talking about each other, there's a familiarity there and an easiness there that reminds me of the South. That's all I can say. It reminds me of people in the South, people who are just out, just friendly.

Their nature is to be friendly. Their nature is to be helpful if you're in trouble or having some problem. And, that's all I can say, is that my impression of the people was that these were fine human beings who deserved to be left alone to build their own society. And why were we here trying to prop up our corrupt regime in the south? Everything was upside-down. Everything was wrong about the situation, which is the truth and what I think America finally realized, but only after we were defeated, that it was the wrong war at the wrong time and never should have taken place. The Vietnamese should be our allies, not our enemies. That's the way I look at it.

02-01:29:48

Holmes: So, you come back, and you're obviously writing pieces.

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Allen: I'm writing about this, yeah.

02-01:29:53

Holmes: You're writing for that.

02-01:29:53

Allen: I'm going on a speaking tour. I come all the way to California. That's how I got to San Francisco the first time. I was on tour. I came all the way across the country with this speaking tour I was doing. And I know I had agents of the

government at every one of my meetings because I later got their records, and I saw their notes from my meetings. But, that was, again, a transformative experience, totally transformative experience for me, because now I knew why I was fighting against the war. It wasn't just for us, and to save American lives. It was to save Vietnamese lives, too, because why are we doing this to these people, of all people? They should be our allies. That's what I kept thinking. The Vietnamese, they should be our allies. They're just like us—sense of humor, character, many feelings, and which I still feel is true now.

You know what now? Now I meet North Vietnamese in Oakland, my barber, people from North Vietnam. And I'm so glad that I don't feel like I'm an enemy or they are my enemy or we ever have been, because I like them. What can I say? I like the Vietnamese people. I like something about their character, and there's an interesting sense of humor in a lot of them that I like. And I hope I'm not being racist in saying these things, but that's what I came away with. I came away feeling, "gosh, it would have been so wonderful if we could have met these people under different circumstances" — rather than coming here to try to apologize for destroying their country.

02-01:31:41

Holmes:

Well, talk about the speaking tour and coming out to California.

02-01:31:47

Allen:

Well, the speaking tour, my wife and I—Pamela Parker was my wife at that point—got in a car after I got back from the tour. Oh, and I got to deliver a message from Ho Chi Minh to the demonstrators in Washington. It wasn't a big message. But, so I took off on this speaking tour, driving, and went through the South, the Midwest. And when we got to Kansas, I got on a plane, and my wife drove back. And this is in the winter, so it wasn't an easy drive. But it would have been more difficult if we tried to drive all the way. But I got out and came to California in December, San Francisco.

Now, some Decembers in San Francisco, as you know, the Bay Area can be very sunny and warm. You can have some days that are almost like spring here in the middle of December. Well, we had some days like that when I came out here. And I said, "If this is the way California is in December, I'm going to move here." And at the time the Guardian actually had an office out here. When we moved out, I came out to run the *National Guardian* newspaper office in San Francisco. I became the head of it. So, that's how I managed to survive. I think they paid eighty-five dollars a week or something like that, which was plenty, enough to live on.

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And we rented an apartment and settled in. Pam got a job. She was working with some groups in the women's movement who had a bookstore, and she started working there. I continued to work for the Guardian. But now my job was to cover the Black Panthers. "Where are you? You're in San Francisco? That's across from Oakland, right? Okay, cover the Panthers." So, I became

the correspondent writing about the Panthers, which is how I found out about the Panthers. And, of course that was very interesting and exciting at times and scary at other times.

02-01:34:03

Holmes:

Well, talk a little bit about that. You were on the fringe of the Black Power movement back in New York. And you were just talking about attending the meetings of Malcolm X. How did you compare the Panthers to what you had come into contact within New York?

02-01:34:24

Allen:

They were very different, very different. For one thing, Malcolm is just one person, you know. He had some people who were working with him in the organization, but he didn't actually have a chance to build the organization he could have because he was assassinated very quickly. What he could have built would have been different, I think. But he had a program, and that got people out to these, when he was giving those street-corner speeches. But he didn't necessarily get people into his organization. And I think he was a little hesitant, too, because if you recruit a lot of people, you're certainly going to get some spies amongst them, and you don't want to do that. You want to know who it is you're recruiting.

So, it was a different feel with the Panthers. With the Panthers, they wanted everybody they could get because they were mainly young people who hadn't had time to become agents for anybody. They're kids out of school, young people. The people in Malcolm's movement tended to be older men, working-class men with families. The Panthers, everybody's young. Everybody's young and willing to take the ultimate risk, no problem. They have no families, no responsibilities. So, when you look at the social class basis of Malcolm and the two, they're quite different.

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And the dynamics become different then, too, then, because where Malcolm would have been very cautious about putting his people in situations where they could be shot, the Panthers were all about that because the Panthers were in fact a deliberately provocative organization. Their job was to provoke confrontations with the police in order to show how bad the police were because they should not have been provoked into those confrontations. It was crazy what the police were doing. The police were getting into shootouts over nothing, over nothing. If it had been just some crazy person out there doing this kind of stuff, they would have said, "Okay, go out. Everybody be careful. Don't try to kill anybody. Get them in here and lock them up."

Not with the Panthers. They would shoot to kill almost from the first, almost from the first. They hated the Panthers, because the Panthers didn't try to soften anything. They never were about softening anything. They said pigs when they meant police, and that's what did it. It was at that level. And unfortunately the police department in Oakland has a history of racism going

way back, and so in a way it was nothing new in the department. But how widespread it was, and among the category of people—black youth who have a lot of energy and not much to lose—this is who the factors face off against each other then.

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And the police, of course, they act like pigs. There's no control of the Oakland police at that time. They're literally assassinating people. So, this is the environment in which the Panthers emerge as an organization, and you can understand why they would say, "We believe in self-defense. We believe in self-defense. And we will fight rather than simply be shot." And, you know... I don't know. I don't know if this is something I really believe or not. But, you know, when the Panthers were around, we didn't have the kinds of shootings of young black men that we have now. When they shot, they were shooting to kill Panthers, and the Panthers were fighting back. When they shoot and kill now, they shoot unarmed men just because they're black. And they're getting away with it. They're getting away with it.

It's horrible. It has in fact gotten worse since the Panthers. With the Panthers you know, okay, well, in the Panthers they're fighting. They're fighting back. If some of them get shot, they were fighting. These young men out here being shot now are not. They're not. And they're getting shot for just taking anything out of their pocket. They'll get shot right away. No matter what it is, they're going to get shot. So, I don't know. People say, oh, it's better now than when the—I don't think so. I don't think it's better than when the Panthers were around. I don't think so at all. It's just that there's no resistance, not the kind of resistance that was out front when the Panthers were around.

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But what's happening now, though, I think is really an interesting phenomenon because it is mobilizing young people, large numbers of young people now, black young people, under leadership of women. I think this is an interesting time because when you look at these over and over again, these shootings of these young men and the people who come out, the victims are men. But the people who come out are women. Women and children are the leaders of this movement now. The young men are being shot. The women and children are the survivors. And they are the ones who come out there at these little protests they have around the city where somebody's been shot. Who comes out? The women and the children. That's the leadership now, I think.

I think the leadership of the black movement has, over the last ten years, shifted more and more towards women. A lot of the men are being either jailed or bought off. The middle class has effectively been bought off. The black middle class has been incorporated, step by step, into the dominant Capitalist society and offered opportunities and their leadership taken out of

the movement then. And instead the movement now is women and children and young black men who get shot.

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But I think this is really a significant change in the movement itself is that there is still resistance happening. And I think the resistance is getting stronger as the black women feel stronger, too, because not only do we have women at this grassroots level who are resisting these assassinations. But now we're also beginning to get black women going into regular politics. And many of them come from community backgrounds, and they are bringing, I think, the possibility of a new kind of resistance into the political system.

And, Kamala Harris is one of the young people who is an example of what I'm talking about. But if you look at any meeting of Democrats, you'll see a lot of black women there who are now leaders and who are going to be the main leaders, I think, of the future, not because of desire but because of necessity. The males are being assassinated or put in jail as much as possible. The system is abandoning the women and children to ghettos and shanty towns and so on. The only people who are speaking up and who will be able to speak up are the women. And we're actually seeing that now, I think.

I think that's why we're seeing this phenomenon of a—it's not quite a movement, but there's clearly an upwelling of black women's leadership around the country now, everywhere, everywhere. And many of them are participating the political system and making some progress, making some dents in it. But others work as social workers, people helping, in the helping professions. And I think this is due to the assassination of black male leadership in the community with the youth and then the jailing, the jailing of so many other black men, many of whom could have been leaders. But they're instead in jail.

Interview 3: May 23, 2019

03-00:00:00

Holmes: All right, this is Todd Holmes from the Oral History Center at UC [University of California] Berkeley. Today's date is May 23. We are starting our third session here with Robert Allen for his oral history. And we are here at his beautiful home in the city of Benicia, right next to the water.

03-00:00:33

Allen: [laughs] We are, yes.

03-00:00:34

Holmes: Right next to the water. Robert, thanks again for sitting down with me. I wanted to kind of pick up where we left off last time. And to recap, this was around 1968. As a journalist, you had come to San Francisco and we talked a little bit about your coverage of the Black Panthers and other issues. I wanted to have you discuss maybe what your initial impressions of San Francisco—was when you moved in 1968.

03-00:01:03

Allen: Well, we missed the Summer of Love, which was 1967. I think that would have been a very interesting time to have arrived but arriving in '68, we got to see the aftermath of all of that, which was a lot of people on drugs, a lot of people freaked out, all kinds of weird things going on because there really was a big drug scene then, people always experimenting, all kinds of things. So, that was a scene in and of itself, the Haight-Ashbury and the drug scene, the hippies, and so on, which we were sort of on the fringe of because we lived nearby there and—but it was something that—that particular scene, never got much into because it really didn't have—there was no politics there. It was just drugs. There was no real politics there and the—what was happening was that the Black Panther Party, number one, number two, the anti-war movement, which was getting very large then. This is the time when Richard Nixon is in office and going through all of that. But the anti-war movement was the main thing, one of the main things going on, I think, there was—and that was very powerful. And I wrote several articles, I think, about the demonstrations here and—as well as the national demonstrations that were being held in D.C. [District of Columbia]. And Students for a Democratic Society, SDS, was active in a lot of that, as well as, of course, they were sort of allies of the Black Panther Party, as well. The Panthers, who were the main thing happening in Oakland and, to some extent, in San Francisco, too, as far as black activism is concerned—the Panthers continued to take this spin towards armed resistance, the path that they had gotten on. And it's understandable why because they were under attack by the police. The Oakland police were attacking them and on many occasions. It was totally outrageous. But the Panthers, unlike the civil rights movement, called for armed resistance and they engaged in it. And, of course, it resulted in the death of many Panthers and the arrest of others like [Eldridge] Cleaver and

people and eventually the death of Huey Newton, who died of basically a drug overdose and getting killed.

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It was a terrible and tragic end to what the Panthers had been trying to do and I cannot help but think that there was some sort of interference by the government in terms of drugs, making drugs available to people, because they understood that that's the way to knock people out of the movement: get 'em on drugs, you incapacitate them. And so, I think a lot of what was going on with that drug scene at that time was, in fact, instigated by the government in one way or another as a way of destroying the social protest movements and especially the anti-war movement and the draft resistance movements. And it was something that I had seen myself in New York when I talked about the fact that they're talking with a police agent who is trying to recruit me to come to a meeting where they were going to discuss shooting police and—which is a, yeah, obvious example here of the police and the government attempting to bring about some illegal action so that people can be arrested. But that sort of thing was happening very commonly and it was one of the reasons I was very careful and kind of stayed clear of some of the movement scenes that were going on because I knew the police were involved with it. And so, you don't want to put yourself in that kind of situation. But the destruction of the Black Panther Party that occurred was deliberate, systematic, and successful. They did destroy the party and they did, in fact, kill Huey Newton. And I think that this was a huge blow for a lot of people who had had a lot of faith in the Panthers in the early years when they were doing the food programs and the programs for children because it showed an interest in the community, that they really were interested in the people of the community and not just raising hell with the police.

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Holmes:

Do you see the Panthers in line—as one who attended a lot of the meetings with Malcolm X that the Panthers were—carried on in many respects that same kind of model and vision that Malcolm X would discuss?

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Allen:

I think so, yes. I think that's what Malcolm would have done. He would have built an organization that engaged in communities at all levels—community needs, police questions, legal questions, and so on—that would have been the kind of movement he would have built. And so, I think that that's why the Panthers were very sympathetic and, to them, Malcolm was a hero as he was to a lot of us because we had a sense that he was not just interested in confronting the police but in doing something to help raise the community, to help uplift the community through self-help, actually, the old idea of self-help but now with a sort of revolutionary edge to it because it's independent self-help, that we will help ourselves. We don't need the helping hand of the police here or necessarily any government agencies. We need your help but we need a help where you hold—we're on an equal basis. So, the police destruction of the Black Panther Party occurred during this time and it was ostensibly

because of the Panthers' gun-toting but I think it was actually about the fact that the Panthers were successful in organizing the community. And, in fact, out of that came, of all things, the electoral politics, too. They eventually became involved in the electoral politics but I think they had no experience with that and that was not a good path for them to take and they didn't really get anywhere with that. Runs for election but it didn't really inspire people in any great. The things they did that inspired people were the things that they put on and the way they showed their support for the community like the free breakfast program. I think that had a big impact on communities because it was really about getting some help here. We need food, food for our children.

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And the fact that the Panthers were the only ones who took that seriously and, in fact, began organizing that kind of program, I thought that did so much for their image in the community and for the work that they were actually doing in the community because it really inspired a lot of people to look at that path. And I think a lot of young people who went into college at that time and wanted to—went there with the idea of learning to do something for the people were inspired by the Black Panthers. And a lot of them came out and—to do that kind of work, but usually with social service agencies and things of that sort rather than with—and the independent political party or social party like the Black Panthers. But the Panthers were an inspiration because they worked at all of these different levels. They weren't just an armed group but they were doing things to help the community on a daily basis.

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Holmes:

Tell us a little bit about your observations really of that Bay Area scene. A lot of people make distinctions between San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland and that all three were very vibrant places but also very different. What were your observations?

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Allen:

Very, very, very different, yeah, yeah. Well, Berkeley, of course was headquarters for the student movement or what was likely the white student movement and the anti-war movement in the Bay Area at that time. They did a fantastic job. Somewhere around here, there's a photograph of me giving—haranguing a crowd on Sproul Plaza [laughs] in about 1968 or somewhere along like that. But you know, I was talking about the war. But the student movement was very powerful and the students were supportive of the Panthers and the Panthers were supportive of the student movement because they recognized that they had things in common here in terms of resistance to government action because, of course, the government was coming down on the student movement, too, and arresting people and going after people who were, quote, draft resisters and all of this. So, the student movement was getting its share of repression at the same time as the Black Panthers. And for that reason, I think, both the Panthers and the largely white student movement who—are to some extent allied during this time, not so much necessarily formally but they were allied around anti-war work. They were allied around

the idea of draft resistance and supporting young men who would be draft resisters and they were allied around support for the African American community, particularly in Oakland. Nationally, as well. So, these were a national phenomena. So, the link between the African American community, anti-war activity, political independence and beginning to talk about independent politics, as well as seeing these struggles as being part of an international struggle, as well, because this is a time then of the people going to Cuba on the—with the Venceremos Brigade. This was a time of support for the Vietnamese and the resistance to the U.S. [United States] military. There were a lot of international connections between U.S. movements and students and international revolutionary movements, as well. So, it was a powerful time when a lot of the forces for change in the United States came together around a common—to the common themes of anti-war activity, support for communities, anti-draft activity. And that was very powerful at that time. And I think that that was a de facto alliance between the student movement, which is mostly white students and the Black Power movement, which was mostly black students and black communities—and not in a formal alliance but a working together around many issues. That was very powerful. It was a good thing to see happening.

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Holmes:

And so, in both those factions that you were talking about, that kind of alliance, it really seems to center around Berkeley and Oakland. What was the scene like—I mean, you mentioned a little bit—like Haight and Ashbury by '68 had become—really, there's no—

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Allen:

The hippie ghetto, yeah, basically. The flower power movement basically devolved into basically drug power, I mean, if you can say a drug power movement. But the fact of the matter was, though, that it was—and it was never very political, the hippie movement, the flower power movement, and so on. I think it was more about a sense of personal freedom and the desire to have personal freedom in the face of a fairly strongly regimented society and that that—what became the flower power movement was an expression of that. And at that level, it was fine, it was, because it was about cultural creativity, let's put it that way, which is, generally speaking, I think, a good thing, to experiment with new cultural forms, set up new cultural forms, and to develop relationships with people whom you would not normally be connected with. And so, the whole connection between the white student movement, the black nationalist movement was a unique and culturally creative thing that happened, mostly in the Bay Area. I don't think it was so much in New York or Atlanta or other cities. Maybe a little bit to some extent in Chicago. But it was a time when these movements worked side by side, even if they didn't work hand-in-hand.

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Holmes:

I wanted to ask: at the same time, on the other side of politics, Ronald Reagan is governor of California. What were your observations? I know there were

instances such as People's Park in Berkeley, and this was probably in 1969 and other instances—

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Allen: Yes, yes.

03-00:15:38

Holmes: What were your observations of the state politics with Reagan in office?

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Allen: Well, I think Reagan was a force who stirred a lot of resistance to his politics, which I think was a good thing because it brought a lot of people into struggle and it gave a lot of people an outlet for the things that they felt were wrong here with the quote-unquote system, which Reagan became the primary, in the state, representative. So, actually, that was a unifying force for the left. It was another reason why Panthers and SDS and groups like this could work together even if they didn't seem to have that much in common because all of them were opposed to the Reaganesque policies of that time and it created a unity in the movement that I don't think we've seen since then, which is a sad thing to say, though, because—right? Why does it take your enemies to get you unified around something progressive? But that's a story we've seen before. But I think that the resistance to Reagan was a unifying factor and a hotspot for activism, as well, because he became such a target for the things that he was doing, which were so politically backward, that it just mobilized people. He was a mobilize of people in resistance to what he was trying to do and that was one of the best things that happened, actually, is that people saw who this man was and that it was necessary to work against him. But the outcome of that and how that has played out, we all—well, we see it's still playing out today, in a sense. But it helped to launch a whole new period in American politics, I think, because it brought a whole new generation into traditional politics. And, while there was a whole lot of people out on the streets at the same time. So, I think this had a big impact on the American political scene generally pushed it somewhat to the left but still not getting to the point when we never came close to having a revolution here, I don't think. And we had a lot of riots, rebellions, and things of that sort but we never had any kind of unified national leadership that can make a national change of any sort. And that was the weakness of the movements is that they never got to that point of being truly national and able to mobilize people on a national basis except in the anti-war demonstrations which did, in fact, have a huge impact, I think, on the ending of the Vietnam War, which came down to Nixon, of all people, but he—that's what happened. It was the kind of collapse of the American forces. Basically the collapse of the American forces in Vietnam. And we were defeated in Vietnam, just we have to just finally say that. We were defeated in Vietnam and it was a terrible, terrible blow to the national ego and it should have been a powerful lesson, though, that you should not be—[laughs] this whole thing of trying to run other people's lives in other countries can—it's not a good plan for international politics.

03-00:19:35

But, we were still being the bully at that point. Still are at this point, too, for that matter. But we were the bully then and thought we could push these little people away and destroy their country, drive 'em back into the Stone Age as the generals said. But, as I told you, when I went on that trip to Vietnam, I saw the evidence that these people were far from being defeated and that more likely, the United States would be defeated in this war. But the war itself, though, was another radicalizing impact for the social movements, though, because, again, the resistance of the government to listening to the people who were saying we don't want this war, we didn't want it from the very beginning. We don't want it now and it looks like we're going to be defeated. That was the message through the whole thing but the government refused to hear it. They were so arrogant, they thought with all of their bombs and material superiority, they could destroy a so-called Stone Age society. Their arrogance defeated them. That's what I think happened: their arrogance defeated them and it lead to a complete national disgrace for the United States. It was a national disgrace and we're still recovering from that. But it's so interesting because there are a lot of Vietnamese people now in the United States from the South and from the North. [laughs] People living here no problems, they're living here just fine. And apparently in Vietnam, the two—it's united now and it's rebuilding. So, it's so sad to think that. Why did the United States have to do that? Did we really have to do it? No, no, we didn't have to do it. We could have negotiated a solution right from the beginning. The French had already been defeated. Everybody was ready to negotiate something. But what did we do? No, we start the war up again. So, I think it was our own arrogance, the arrogance of our leaders who lead us to take over when the French had already been defeated and learn nothing from that and still—and managed to fight a long, horrendous, and deadly war in terms of the number of casualties that we had and to have learned nothing from history, to have learned nothing at all. And I think the great danger now is we're going to repeat that. Once again, we're going to ignore history and find ourselves in a war someplace, and probably somewhere in the Middle East, and we're not going to do well. It's not going to work.

03-00:22:41

Holmes:

I wanted to get your thoughts, 'cause we were talking about this shift of politics. And so, you come out to California in 1968 and '68 is also a big year on the national scene. What were your observations of the 1968 election? Well, I mean, well first of all, I mean, I guess that to break that down, do you remember when Robert Kennedy was assassinated in—tell us a little bit about that or what you recall of that.

03-00:23:12

Allen:

Well, it was a great blow to have his brother have been assassinated those years before and now Kennedy, who had sort of stepped into the role of being the voice of liberalism, I guess. I think it was a time when a lot of older folks lost hope and a lot of young people became even more angry because here, again, we had lost a good leader, a man who appeared to be relatively

progressive as his brother had been and now he's dead. I mean, I think it was a huge blow. Not as much as the assassination of John Kennedy but still a big setback to any kind of progressive politics in this country, I think, because I think he was the voice of it after his brother was assassinated. And he was, he became the voice, then, of any kind of progressive or liberal politics at the national level. And to have him die, as well, I think just a lot of people became discouraged and just dropped out altogether, feeling like there was no hope, that our leaders, progressive leaders, are going to be killed.

03-00:24:47
Holmes:

Well, and then, so, the Democrats select, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that same year, selected Hubert Humphrey as the candidate, the official candidate for the Democratic Party. From your observations as well as those who were, that you were also affiliating with here in California, what were your thoughts on that and especially, also, the riot that happened in Chicago immediately after?

03-00:25:19
Allen:

Yeah, Humphrey represented the old school. He was part of the—I think a lot of people would have said he was part of the problem because he had been—his commitment to the Democratic Party, his—even though he was somewhat progressive himself he was not the person who could lead the country at that point. Although he was an attractive candidate in terms of what he said—what he was able to do, though, I don't think was—he was not a powerful politician. He didn't have a really strong following, I don't think. I think he was a person who had basically a progressive political history but not a history of taking strong action and making a difference himself in what he is doing and the way he's carrying out his leadership and so—and he was not going to win. And any Republican who's making noises against the war and with a strong right-wing position, I think, would have been able to defeat Humphrey and that's—he didn't make it, so—

03-00:26:45
Holmes:

So, Richard Nixon ends up winning the election.

03-00:26:52
Allen:

—yes, yes, now Nixon was both [laughs] much more—what's the word would have been looking here—crafty in his approach to politics, of course, as we know. He was an opportunist, he had no loyalty to his friends, he was Donald Trump before Donald Trump was Trump. [laughs] He, this guy, he was corrupt. He was just plain corrupt, so that they—his election and then the outcome of that, his having to basically leave in disgrace was, I think, another lesson for the country because he would not have been able to lead the country because of his own flaws. The man just had his corruption, his actual criminality—as I say, I think, in a way, he was the model for Trump because he was a criminal. He was a criminal. Trump's a criminal; we know that. But both of them got elected and I think that's troubling that they both did get elected. That's troubling. But on the other hand, maybe that's one of the risks

you have to take if you have a democracy, that if it really is a democracy, for time to time, some jerk is liable to be elected, somebody who's an opportunist is likely to be elected, somebody who's a criminal may be elected. But how do you stop that? Where do you stop that, at what point? If, I think—in an ideal society, to the extent that we could ever have such a thing, that would be the possibility of really open debate about any of these issues, if not in the Congress than in some other kind of national forum so that people could actually hear what these issues are and have a chance to discuss them. I think we're moving a little bit that way in the civil rights movement because people were organizing little committees all over the country, having to do something—kind of civil rights change. And it felt like a time of great democratization because the movements were arising and the movements were essentially democratic because if you want to get involved, come along, you're welcome. You don't have to have a card, you don't have to pay a fee, you just have to join the struggle. And it was a time of great, I think, hope, which Nixon managed to ride in on. But then, his own criminality, his own corruption lead to his defeat and ouster. Unfortunately, we didn't get anything much better till [Barack] Obama comes along but that's another story.
[laughs]

03-00:30:46
Holmes:

So I want to turn to your Ph.D. [doctor of philosophy] work but before we do, before we move on, I wanted to ask: so, Richard Nixon is elected and you had mentioned even after Robert Kennedy's assassination that there was desperate hope, right. After the election of 1968, do you remember where you were when the election took place, that night?

03-00:31:12
Allen:

Yes, yeah.

03-00:31:13
Holmes:

I mean, discuss that a little bit and the sentiment of the various people that you were associating with at that time.

03-00:31:23
Allen:

Well, there was a lot of anger, which was that this was the candidate. And, of course, people had a sense of who Nixon was. But basically, the youth movement rejected him and I think people were—suspected his motives, that he would—and also, that he would not end the war. And the man just—
[laughs] his character, who he was just did not come—there was no saving grace there, I don't think.

03-00:32:20
Holmes:

Were those within the large umbrella of the civil rights movement—obviously they probably had questions about him, the war, but what about for pushing forward the civil rights agenda within the U.S.?

03-00:32:37
Allen:

What do you mean?

03-00:32:39

Holmes:

What was the view of those around you and even yourself during this time for civil rights, with Nixon—was Nixon seen as a threat to the advancement that civil rights had made over the last—

03-00:32:56

Allen:

I think Nixon was mostly seen as basically an obstacle but that the path was through the courts. That's what I think we had learned is that we can make progress through the courts. The political arena, we don't know who you're going to get, you don't know how people are going to really vote. But the courts were seen as allies and the fight in the courts, people, I think, came to see that as the main front and that big demonstrations could help, too, sway public opinion and then maybe that might have an impact on the courts, you don't know. But in any case, you want public opinion on your side and that was what had changed. With the civil rights movement, white public opinion was not favorable towards civil rights in the South or the North for a long time. I guess it was after, maybe after the civil rights workers were killed in Mississippi that some white people—the white population, liberal population, came out in support of civil rights. But never strongly and it was almost always the youth who were in the demonstrations. And even in the negotiations very often when you saw pictures of—in various cities where the city was now negotiating, they were negotiating with young people rather than the traditional leaders who had not done anything. Now I'm sort of losing track of where I'm going with that. The youth movement did not connect so much with electoral politics as the way to make change, that a failure in that arena would stop them. So, this election of somebody like Nixon actually could give impetus to the movement because he was so bad and he was a known character of ill will, [laughs] so that, in a way, somebody like that is easier to organize against than, say, maybe a Bill Clinton or somebody of that sort. And I think that's what partly happened with Nixon is that the guy is—he alienated not only young, he alienated just about the whole thinking population. But the fact that he was the leader actually created a target for the movements and, in a way, that was a good thing because that's, in a way, it's easier to organize against a target like that who is a bad person in a position of power, you—it's easier to do that. But, in the end, he brought himself down. In the end, the movements didn't do it; he brought himself down. I think that's going to happen with Trump, too, actually. I think he's going to bring himself down 'cause nobody else can. [laughs] But he's right on that path.

03-00:36:55

Holmes:

All right, well, I wanted to switch gears a bit and talk about your graduate work at UC San Francisco. You came to California as a journalist. When did you decide that you were going to take up your work on a Ph.D. in sociology?

03-00:37:15

Allen:

When I came across the Port Chicago story.

03-00:37:19

Holmes: Talk a little bit about that.

03-00:37:21

Allen: Well, as I said, I was a journalist for *The Guardian* when I came out here and they—I think they were paying me a salary of \$125 a week and that's what we lived on at first. This is another part of the story, got a part-time teaching job. And so, that was how we mostly survived. But what was the question again? I lost track of the question.

03-00:37:52

Holmes: When you decided to take up studying at UC San Francisco to earn your Ph.D. in sociology.

03-00:37:58

Allen: Oh, okay, yes, and, yeah, I was going to be talking about the Port Chicago story. That was tied to my discovery of the Port Chicago story because it, in effect, gave me my research topic. But I had been writing for *The Guardian* and I had—oh, yes, it was a story about some kind of revolt on a U.S. ship during Vietnam where there'd been a protest of some sort by black sailors and there was something done and people were put in jail and so on. And I wanted to look at the history of this to see, well, have there been any other things like this where the black sailors have risen up or does anything. And so, I decided to go to the ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union] Library in San Francisco, which has a fabulous library of working class newspapers and so on, going back through history. And I was looking for articles on any kind of revolts on ships and guess what I found? I found that pamphlet on Port Chicago, the one—we should have a copy of it here to show it. But it's in the book; the cover is in the book. And I read it and I thought I realized I'd never heard of this so-called mutiny back in San Francisco and where is this place Port Chicago anyway? Found it on the map and I always thought it was near Chicago. No, no, it's right up, closer to Benicia than it is to San Francisco. In fact, you can see it from the waterfront down here. And I read it and I thought this is incredible. This is something I would want to research if it were possible. So, I actually started researching it and somebody was—somehow, I learned about the graduate program at UC San Francisco, that they had a small program in sociology tucked away up there in one of their buildings and that it was something I might consider—somebody said I should consider, oh, Robert Staples, Robert Staples who was on the board, a black sociologist who was on the board of *The Black Scholar*. I think Staples who suggested that I might apply at UC San Francisco. Staples was on the faculty there. He's a sociologist, he was on the faculty there, familiar with my work, and said, "You should apply here because we do qualitative research here and that's what you do. So, you should come here rather than to Berkeley because they only do quantitative work in Berkeley." [laughs]

03-00:40:59

Holmes: Number crunchers.

03-00:41:01

Allen:

[laughs] So, I said, “Okay, what’s this,” right? Very close. I was living in San Francisco at that time and I went over, talked to the people, and I really liked it. Anselm Strauss, who is a great sociologist and who’s written many books, and a specialist in qualitative methods—talk with him, talk with some other faculty there and applied. Meanwhile, though, I had already started working on the research that I wanted to do because whether I got into graduate school or not, I wanted to write about this Port Chicago thing and do some research on it. So, I had already started to contacting the Library of Congress and people like that, the Navy Department to see what kind of material they had on it, which is a vast amount, understandably, and that there was a transcript of the mutiny trial and that it was possible to get a copy of it. And I went, actually I went to the Library of Congress for a visit and found a copy of it there and ordered it. Just say, “Make me a copy,” [laughs] which was pretty cheap in those days. No more kind of what the—now—but that was when I was deciding that I wanted to do this research and applying to graduate school. And, of course, put the two together and that obviously was going to be my research project. And I’d pretty much made that clear when I came in that I was coming in with a research project but it was exactly the kind of thing they do in that department, which is they go out and interview people, they put together books on how—what they are learning about how people negotiate their lives, how people work problems, and how people mobilize to make changes. That was part of their approach there, which is exactly what I wanted to do with the Port Chicago research. So, from the beginning, I had my Ph.D. dissertation in mind and had made it—they were open to that and that the methodology that they used was something that I wanted to use because I was already employing it in my own research. It’s just that I hadn’t thought of it as a methodology. But the qualitative research methods as opposed to quantitative methods—qualitative methods was what they specialized—still do—at UCSF. And that’s what I wanted to study. So, it was a good fit. It was a really good fit. And Anselm Strauss, Virginia Olesen, who was my advisor there, both were very supportive through the whole program. And I loved it! I’ve always liked being in school. And I loved that graduate program there and they gave me the opportunity to actually do this research and, in the process, earn a Ph.D.

03-00:44:33

Holmes:

Discuss your—how would you describe the environment at UCSF? It’s mostly known as a medical school—

03-00:44:41

Allen:

Yes, yes, it is but we had a little building, a house. [laughs] The sociology program had its own just off campus. You know how they have all those big buildings over there and everything? Well, across the street from the big buildings, and they’re all up on the hill, there’s a slope that goes down and there’s some residential homes there, some of which have been converted to laboratories and classrooms for UCSF. We had a whole house to ourselves just off the campus, [laughs] enough so that we felt like we didn’t have to deal

with the bureaucracy over there. We were in our own little house over here, the whole sociology program. But we had access to all of the amenities of this great university right outside our door. So, it was a great place to study and I liked the other students who were there because everybody was interested in qualitative sociological methods. So, we had a strong, common interest. We were able to support each other in the various projects that people were doing, and that was how I was able to do that research and combine it with—and working on an academic degree. It was the luck of the draw. If I hadn't been in San Francisco at a school that would accept qualitative research, I don't know what would have happened. I don't know if I would have been able to do that research because I didn't have any money, I didn't have a grant. I did, in fact, though—once I got it started, I applied for a [John Simon] Guggenheim Grant and got that and that financed a year of the research for my doctorate. It financed the research year, which is when I traveled around, when I did the Greyhound bus thing, traveling around and interviewing people. So, I got one year of basically a paid research opportunity, which I took and did the interviews for Port Chicago. So, it worked out very, very nicely that—being able to get into school at UCSF where there were sympathetic, empathetic instructors there who, even though they didn't know anything about this disaster in the military, they were able to support me, though, in the type of research that I wanted to do, which was interviews with people about their experiences.

03-00:47:16

Holmes:

How would you describe the student body there in the sociology department? Was it a large department, very small?

03-00:47:22

Allen:

No, no, no, we had seven graduate students and then we—in the medical school, they have some sociology classes for the nurses and doctors to take there. So, we taught those classes, our faculty did and our graduate students who are the teaching assistants in the sociology classes in the school of medicine. They had some social science courses there at that time and our department taught them. And those classes were for nurses. At least all the ones I saw, they may have been classes for doctors, too, but mainly they were for nurses and they were big classes, hundreds of students. We were the teaching assistants in those classes and our faculty taught the classes. So, that was the real workload of our department. We taught the undergraduate courses to the nurses in social sciences. That's what we did. And we had seven graduate students whom they were training with to be Ph.Ds. That was the department. Two aspects to it, then. There was the one, the work life, and we all worked right over there in the big buildings next door, teaching classes to the nurses or being GSIs [graduate student instructors] for those classes. But we considered our work to be what we did there at the house right off the campus where we were in the sociology department.

03-00:49:15 It worked very nicely because people got—it was a training experience in teaching and it was a—and also, a wonderful opportunity for people to do research in an environment that seemed so much smaller. Our environment in the program was very intimate and very close. We knew our professors by first names. And so, we had this intimate edge in a learning environment at that level for us in the graduate program. But then, we went back—every day, we were out there with the masses of [laughs] undergraduate students teaching them, as well. So, you got both things: you got the big undergraduate school program that you're teaching and typical thing for the graduate students and then you're doing your graduate study with a smaller group of colleagues and faculty. And if it works, it works very well.

03-00:50:29
Holmes: So, what year did you start there at UCSF?

03-00:50:40
Allen: I think it must have been about '67 but I'm not sure. It would have been about the same time.

03-00:50:51
Holmes: 'Cause you came in '68.

03-00:50:54
Allen: No, no, no, I came in—when did I come? No, that's true. Not, it was '68, yeah, okay. It would have been within a year after I arrived. Would have been '69 or '70.

03-00:51:08
Holmes: What year did you finally finish or submit your PhD?

03-00:51:13
Allen: I think I did it in five years. I went straight through. Like I say, yeah, four or five years. I kept up the writing for *The National Guardian* for the first year that I was out here. But then, they had a political split in New York and all of a sudden I found myself out, [laughs] no longer working for *The Guardian*. That's when I started the teaching, actually, when I lost *The Guardian* job and realized I got to do something here to support myself. I had written *The Black Awakening* book by then, too.

03-00:52:02
Holmes: I was about ready to turn to that—

03-00:52:04
Allen: Sixty-nine, that came up.

03-00:52:06
Holmes: Nineteen sixty-nine. But let's turn to that because then I want to turn to some of your teaching positions that followed, I think, at the same time. *The Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, which was published in 1969. So, discuss the general genesis of this book and how you—I mean, this always seems to

be coming from a lot of your—not just activism and participation in the movements but also some of the coverage that you had been writing on—

03-00:52:37

Allen:

Yes, yes, yes, all of that. All of that comes together in that book which—I didn't know this but I had started writing that book, I think, with the assassination of—after the assassination of Malcolm X 'cause I wrote that first piece and then I wrote some other pieces thinking about, well, what happens to the leader—what happens in black social movements? And what happens in particular and after what we were calling the black anti-war movement, the Black Power movement, these words were being used. What is this all about? And I was writing about it for *The Guardian*. I covered some of the Black Power conferences and talked, interviewed a lot of the leaders. I did a bunch of interviews for *The Guardian*, too, with civil rights and Black Power leaders. So, all of this is working in my mind as I'm writing in New York. And then, when I come out here, I'm out here as the stringer for *The National Guardian*. That's my official reason for being out here. I was writing for them and getting a small salary for it. That writing all shows up in *The Guardian* and some of those pieces were multi-part pieces that I wrote about particular things that were happening in the movement, anti-war movement, the Black Power movement. That was my beat. And in New York, a lot of that was done in Harlem because the Black Power activism and a lot of the antiwar activism was taking—there, as well, as well as down in the [Greenwich] Village and at the schools like Columbia [University] and the other colleges there in New York. All of them had some sort of anti-war movement going by this time. So, this was my beat and when I came out to the—San Francisco, that was it. That was my beat, as well, here. Obviously, this is what I was covering. And looking at the notion of protest, rebellion, and so on in, within any kind of framework.

So, when I came across this story about the Port Chicago revolt or work stoppage, I always prefer the term work stoppage rather than mutiny because it wasn't, I don't think, a mutiny. But that work stoppage, that was something that immediately drew my attention because it was, one, it was black sailors. So, we're talking about young black men here who have not had any experience in any kind of movement or protest or anything like that. To the extent it was organized, they did this themselves. There were no outside agitators there. And I found that really an interesting thing to look at because it was not—nobody from the outside organized that. This was not handed to those men as something to do. They came up with this entirely on their own and to the extent that it was organized, they organized it on their own without any outside help or interference. So, that was particularly of interest to me as a sociologist and somebody studying social movement and here's a spontaneous thing that happens. That changes the whole Navy and it's just these guys, most of them hadn't even been to high school. These eighteen-year-old black young men, it's an action that they took that begins to affect and change the entire U.S. Navy. And by the end of the war, the Navy's integrated. It's the

first branch of the service to become integrated, [laughs] unbelievable as that may sound. And it was because of this work stoppage at Port Chicago that initiated the process and caused it to go to its logical end, which was desegregation. So, this is what I saw when I looked at this incident that happened at that explosion, the horror of the explosion, the loss of life and so on and all of that. But the long-term impact of it was tremendous. It changed the U.S. Navy and nobody'd ever said that before. Nobody had ever talked about that event. Nobody had ever written about that event. But to find something like that, an incident in the U.S. history that had a huge impact which has never been discussed, I mean, that's a scholar's dream. [laughs]

03-00:57:44

Holmes:

But to get back to *Black Awakening*, right you're operating, in a sense, in some respects, on a different lens here, right, of looking at—I mean, asking the same questions, similar—

03-00:57:55

Allen:

Yeah, yeah. It's still about social movements, right, and I've got a particular instance, now, here, a little microcosm.

03-00:58:04

Holmes:

In *Black Awakening*, you're also looking at—I think that you were also aware of maybe growing up was also class relations within the black community.

03-00:58:14

Allen:

Yes.

03-00:58:14

Holmes:

Right? Talk a little bit about that and how you discuss that in *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*.

03-00:58:23

Allen:

Yes, well, having grown up in Atlanta, which was very class-oriented at that—and talking about the black community, class within the black community, I grew up with that and I grew up with a particular location, which was the black middle class. And by black middle class, I basically meant, at that time, that the man in the family had a decent working class job. [laughs] You could be middle class in the black community if you had a good working class job because it meant that you could feed your family, you could clothe your children, you could get a house, and you could send your kids to school. Those were the prerequisites, shall we say, for middle class standing in the black community. And it really makes a difference because people were very aware, through the churches, for example, that in some of the churches you found more middle class people. In some of the churches, you found more working class people. In some of the churches, you found more dark-skinned people, in the other churches more light-skinned people. The churches were like this, they were already socially structured by racism and by class. So, for example, the Episcopalians, who are well to do, and there were some black Episcopalians, [laughs] so they had—most of the black community, though,

were Baptists and Methodists. But there were many different Baptist and Methodist churches and you—from everything from just a little storefront place to wonderful churches that looked like cathedrals, they—and our church was sort of in the middle of that, we—our church was a very nice brick building and we had several hundred people who were the members of our church: West Mitchell Christian Church at the time.

03-01:00:50 No, no, here's what it was, yeah: the official name was West Mitchell Colored Methodist Church, right? That [laughs] "colored" in there was in the names of lots of black institutions at that time because that's how we identified the places where if you wanted to go as a black person you could go there. They had "colored" in the name. Our church had "colored" in the name as did many others. And it's now, though, called the West Mitchell Christian Methodist Church. After desegregation, they dropped the term "colored," as did a lot of the churches and other institutions. And, in fact, do you know—probably have said this already but the only organization I can think of by predominantly black organization that still has "colored" in its name, what black organ—and if the churches, many of the churches had "colored" in the name of them, something-something colored church. Schools were like that. Sometimes, other businesses were like that, but with the desegregation, everybody dropped the term "colored" and made it Christian or they just dropped it altogether, as did our church. But the thing is, oh, where I'm going with that?

03-01:02:24
Holmes: Well, the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] might be the only organization that probably still has—

03-01:02:28
Allen: No, no, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Southern Christian, no, [laughs] that's not it. I think I'm getting tired here now 'cause I can't remember what the name of that organization was. Something-da-da-da that had—yeah, anyway, forget that for now. It was a footnote anyway.

03-01:03:05
Holmes: You know, I wanted to ask, so, you discuss these class relations within the African American community but also how middle class African Americans also have similar interests to middle class businessmen of the white community, in a sense discussing how social activism will only come so far but you still—you're still running into business interests within both communities.

03-01:03:34
Allen: Right, right.

03-01:03:37
Holmes: And on top of that, though, what you're also framing is a model of internal colonialism, which you're discussing throughout that book—

03-01:03:49

Allen: Right.

03-01:03:49

Holmes: —which becomes very important later on in both, in—variety of fields of ethnic studies.

03-01:03:53

Allen: Exactly, yeah.

03-01:03:55

Holmes: But I want to say that this is actually one of the first references, at least one of the earliest references because at least, in Chicano studies, this doesn't really become prominent until 1970, '71, '72. Were you reading other works that helped you kind of frame this discussion within *Black Awakening*?

03-01:04:20

Allen: Yes, I was reading—let's see, when did I start—by the time I'm at the New School, I'm reading things like Fanon, I'm reading [Karl] Marx, I'm reading people like Oliver Cox who's a left-wing black sociologist. And so, these are the people that I'm reading and thinking about as I'm seeing all of this, especially in New York and then also looking back on the experience in Atlanta, where I begin to understand that this was already an internal colonialist situation because they had set up, it gets formalized during the civil rights period, but this is the way they had been working all along. That would be a leadership group of the African American community, usually some ministers, maybe a couple of teachers and other people. And that would be the white business class who would be the main sparks for some notion of cooperation, whatever that might turn out to be. And then, in fact, they formed a, what do they call it? Biracial committee. Biracial committee in Atlanta during the civil rights movement so that the leadership of the black community and the white community could meet together and decide what to do. [laughs] And that was new because it's the first time that the whites have decided that they need to have some discussion here with the blacks about how things are going to go and so that it doesn't become like what we were seeing in some other cities where there were—it was turning to riots and people getting shot and things like that. In Atlanta, they wanted a smooth transition. And so, there was a biracial committee set up which was the beginning, then, of the neocolonialism as I would call it later on because the biracial committee was basically run by the white business class and they were—but they were, in fact, consulting with some leadership of the black community and making suggestions, shall we see, about how things should go to black leaders. So, a mechanism, a neocolonial mechanism was set up in Atlanta very early on, this biracial committee.

03-01:07:14

And there was never a riot in Atlanta. I don't think there was a killing related to civil rights. Atlanta became sort of an example of how to do civil rights without having a violent struggle and it was because of this biracial

committee, which apparently nobody else did. It was just the whites are going to run things and that's it. But Atlanta has always been about business as they like to say there: "We're about business here." So, they're not about making any kind of examples of anybody for racial reasons or anything like that. They were about doing business and whatever will help do business better, that's what they're looking for. So, there was a different mentality among the business class in Atlanta because it was the business class and it was in a city that was really growing before the Civil War. And after the Civil War, Atlanta took off. It happened in some other cities, too, though, where they talked about biracial committees. I've heard that there were some other cities where it happened, too. But that's the beginning, then, of the neocolonial—formalizing the neocolonial relationship. It's the so-called biracial committees which give—create a formal line of communication, then, between the white ruling class, business class and the black shall we say comprador class. And they see their interests as linked and their possible success as linked. And in any case, keeping the lid on things is what they want to do because that's good for business. And that's what they wanted in Atlanta, first and foremost. "We want an atmosphere there that's good for business."

03-01:09:22

Holmes:

So, in many respects, as you're discussing, *Black Awakening* is both a product of your journalism, a product of also having you reflect on the environment you grew up—

03-01:09:34

Allen:

Grew up in.

03-01:09:35

Holmes:

—with the books from the graduate department there at UCSF—

03-01:09:39

Allen:

Yeah!

03-01:09:39

Holmes:

—allowing you to [laughter] begin to put this in frame.

03-01:09:42

Allen:

You got it, you got it. Don't need to say anything else. That's it. But that's exactly what happened. It was sets of experiences that I had which, I look back on now, a lot of people had these experiences but I don't know what people made of them. There was one other element, which is learning about Marxism because that would become an important analytic method in my thinking. And the sources of that, interestingly enough—now, let me make sure about this. Well, the sources of those were [W.E.B.] Du Bois because he had been himself a Marxist in many ways and I read all of his stuff and a lot of, in college. Then, there were people like Staughton Lynd and Howard Zinn teaching. They weren't at Morehouse [College]. They were teaching at Spelman [College], which is right across the street, and where all of us who went to Morehouse—could take classes over there. I had a class with Howard

Zinn. I didn't have a class with Staughton Lynd but I used to go to meetings where he was present and spoke because he was active in civil rights from the very beginning the civil rights committee of the students and so on. So, the introduction to Marxism, I think I would say that actually happened at Spelman College, of all places. [laughs] So, from—mostly from these two instructors, in particular, in Atlanta. Then, of course, in New York, I ran into a lot of folks who would call themselves Marxist and so on and started reading Marxist literature, Marxist and communist literature. In fact, when I came back from Europe, I had a trunk full of Marxist tracts. [laughs] I don't know why I had brought all that stuff back and I had so much. But I had been reading as much of Marxist literature as I could get my hands on because it seemed to be a method of thinking about social structure and social action that was very useful and that did a lot more than most of the sociological theories I was studying. Marxism had more substance. More substance. Well, of course it does because it has—by then a, what, seventy-five years of practice, movements all over the world. Lot of stuff you can draw from the say, okay, this is the way of doing social movements. Not the only way, of course, but it was sort of what was happening then and what I was looking at in terms of—and it was also the motive for me going to Russia when I had that year abroad because everybody, including me, now, when I look back at it, was astonished. Why does this Negro want to go to Russia? [laughs] We don't go to Russia? I didn't know until years later that my going to Russia for my vacation when I was in Europe, and my vacation is the winter vacation, which was January. So, I went to Russia in January, which is not the time to visit Russia. You will only see snow. [laughs]

03-01:13:33

I think I've talked about that already. So, it was a great experience because it made me less hostile to communism to the extent that if it's an outgrowth of Marxism then I can see some logic here and also a strong interest in Marxism as an intellectual system and a system of thinking about society. As a political party, though, always had trouble with them. The Communist Party was very close to *The Guardian* at one time and, well, they would try to recruit me but I was never interested 'cause to me, the American Communist Party, anyway, seemed lost. It seemed like they didn't really know where they were going and—or who they were working with because it would—number one, mainly white. They had very few black members, all of whom I knew. [laughs] And they, the black members, had their own problems with the party. But it was the only system of thought that I thought was useful at that time in thinking about issues of race and social structure and so I paid attention to it. And I went to the Soviet Union in January and apparently sparked a storm of discussion in Atlanta among my old friends when they found out about that. It sounded completely insane. [laughs]

03-01:15:19

By then, I was off on my own path anyway—this is what I was going to do, just as when I went to Cuba some years later, same thing. People said, "What? Are you a communist?" I said, "No, I'm not a communist but I'm interested in

communism and how it works in these societies. And that's about as close as I came to it, actually. I knew a lot of people in the leftist parties. In fact, I think I knew somebody in just about every one of the leftist parties because I had to go to them to talk to them when I was writing stories. I had to get their viewpoint on it: Progressive Labor Party, the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Parties and all the other little string parties that came out of those I knew and I talked to people in those parties all the time. So, actually, the people I found most interesting were the Trotskyists and the Socialist Workers Party. And Malcolm spoke at Socialist Party where—he spoke at their meetings, which I saw him at a couple of times. He found them very interesting, too. I don't know what it is exactly. I never had a chance to talk to him about that. But he would speak at the Socialist—the Militant Labor Forum in New York was run by the Socialist Workers Party, the Trotskyists. And Malcolm spoke there several times and I got to hear him there once, at least, and so that sort of stimulated my interest, too. "What does Malcolm see in this?"

03-01:17:01

But in any case, Marxism, then, it was integrated into my worldview without the help of a Marxist party. And I think that's what's different about me: I have been in and about all the Marxist parties but I never joined one of them and I think that's because of who I am. As a person who's trying to understand social structures, I'm interested in anybody who's got some analysis of that and I want to look at it and examine it critically can so on. So, I wasn't just looking at these Socialist Party people. I was also looking at other social organizations and other people who were fighting racism in various ways. Why didn't I join? I wasn't really a joiner. I don't think I never really joined any organization. Why? I think I always had some doubts about movement organizations because they so often seemed to end in internal fights between the people who are in the movement. I mean, these people who are in the same party, ostensibly, yet they have a fight and suddenly there's a split and they're at each other's throats. Same thing happened in the Black Panther Party, too. So, that was something, I think, that kept me at a distance, then, because I said there's some problem here in the way these parties organize because they always split. But I couldn't figure that one out. Still don't know what exactly is the reason except is it human nature? I don't want to resort to that but it's just hard to put together organizations, especially sort of on the fringes of society, I think, because you don't—you have not only the fringes within the society but you also within your—the people within the organization also have different ideas about what the organization should be doing. And so, splits are easy to happen if they don't have some way to work it out and they usually don't.

03-01:19:37

And instead, what they do is they throw people out. They say, "Okay, you're a traitor to the cause. You're banished." The party did that, Panther Party did that a lot, the Communist Party did it all the time: throw out the dissidents. Well, if you can't work with the dissidents and bring them in and find some common ground, you're never going to get much of anywhere. And they

didn't. They were, instead, splitting into smaller and smaller groups and had been doing it for years. So, that discouraged me from joining a party 'cause it felt like if I join a party, five years from now I'm going to be leaving that party and with some disgust or whatever, in a fight. Why should I do that? Why don't I try to simply work within—with these groups, help when I can because I think the work they're doing is important, the leftist groups generally, the work they're doing is important and I want to be supportive. But I don't want to be under the control of any of these party leaders that I know because I don't trust 'em. And that's what it just basically came down to. I did not trust their judgment because I'd seen so many breaks and splits and fights amongst these folks. I realized I don't want to be a part of that side of the left, that part of the life of the left and so, if I want to do it, I can do it as a journalist but I can't do it as a member of a party.

03-01:21:25

Holmes:

In a sense, what became the start of your academic career, as you were mentioning in 1969, you began teaching at San Jose State.

03-01:21:36

Allen:

Yeah.

03-01:21:38

Holmes:

And you were hired in the new college and department of African American studies, which was just starting at that time if I'm correct

03-01:21:48

Allen:

Yes, at San Jose State.

03-01:21:51

Holmes:

Well, discuss the environment of San Jose and how this opportunity arose for you.

03-01:21:59

Allen:

The book. I had written and published *Black Awakening* by then, it was published, yeah. The first or second year I was in the Bay Area, it was published. I got an invitation out of the blue from somebody at San Jose State to come down and talk about the book. That book has opened a lot of doors and that was the first one. And after I spoke in what was then called the New College. This was a time when all of the colleges, feeling the pressure of the student movement, they were introducing some kind of liberal version of their curriculum that can be run by the students and they were doing that thing at that time, trying to make some adjustment to the student movement, bring students in for participants, not just people to sit and listen. That's what the experimental college at San Jose State was about. It was for those students and people who were interested in a kind of an alternative college education with more freedom in terms of choice of subject matter and readings and so on. So, it was a good idea. I was invited to come teach there, which I did for a year. San Jose State had set up a black studies department. This is also the year, '69, when everybody's setting up black studies department—and I got invited to

teach in that, as well. So, I taught there and I think it was about maybe three years. Maybe three years. And it was fine. I enjoyed it and I liked San Jose State a lot. But that was a long way to drive every day, too, 'cause I was going down every day and I was still living in the city and I hadn't moved, didn't want to move to San Jose. And that's when the job opened up at Mills College. Same way. I was invited by the students to come give a lecture and then the students sponsored me to join the faculty there.

03-01:24:10

Holmes:

Well, before we move on to Mills, I wanted to talk a little bit about what kind of classes you were teaching at San Jose. What did the curriculum of the black studies department look like?

03-01:24:23

Allen:

Let's see, what was it? Well, typically, and this happened within many other departments, too, there was a social science track and a creative arts track within the black studies department. So, you could study literature and art, you could study history and sociology and get a degree with that kind of emphasis. So, a lot of what I was teaching the social studies, sociology classes, and with the book out now, I developed a class that I call Race and Capitalism. Well, some version of that title. The basic course I taught the whole time I was teaching was just some version of this Race and Capitalism class because that's really what interested me. And every time I taught it, I learned new things. And so, I found it really very helpful to my own thinking and writing to have that as a field of study and teaching. And obviously, some of my writing came out of that, as well, especially in *The Black Scholar* because I had also, by this time, joined the staff of *The Black Scholar*. And I was, at that point, I guess, assistant editor or something like that. I joined in, what, about—

03-01:25:58

Holmes:

Nineteen seventy-two. Yeah, we'll get there—

03-01:26:00

Allen:

Yeah, okay. But I loved teaching. I loved teaching. The class was taught as a reading and discussion. Students would have short papers to write. We would set up panels for the students to discuss their papers, the usual kind of thing. I ran 'em like seminars if it was small enough. If it was a big lecture class, I had GSIs in a couple of the big classes. And I ran it as a combination of a sociological—shall we say something like a sociological look at black history is what I did in that—what did I call it? In *Capitalism and Race*, I think, is what I called the class. *Capitalism and Race*. And so, I ran it as a course with reading. My book would be a part of the reading. We might have Du Bois and we might have some other people. Fanon I had at a time. By third world scholars, let's say, dealing with imperialism, capitalism, and racism. And by then, that was a good bit. These were the books that we read in those classes. And I would have them write papers in class, which we would then discuss, and they would write a final paper and be graded on participation, papers, and

the usual stuff, yeah. But discussion was important in the class and so I always organized the classes in such a way that every student would have to, at some point, lead the discussion, even it was just for five minutes on some topic of theirs that they had developed when they were on one of the panels. So, I wanted the students to learn to organize the presentation to speak before a group of people and to answer questions. That was the skill that I wanted them to develop in the class and the material was looking—using civil rights and African American history.

03-01:28:32

Holmes:

What was the student reception to the class? I mean, I think if we go back, I mean, this certainly could be among some of the earliest African American studies, what we think about as African American studies classes.

03-01:28:48

Allen:

Yes.

03-01:28:49

Holmes:

You know? We're thinking of '69, '70 through '72. What was the student kind of response to and—you know, to these classes?

03-01:29:01

Allen:

Well, it varied. Some students who had already had some sort of introduction or knew—had some knowledge of civil rights or who participated in some of the movements were very enthusiastic because this gave them, as it gave me, a way of understanding these movements that were happening. And so, there were those who were very enthusiastic about it. And there were other students who were not necessarily—so much enthusiastic about it but they were interested because it helped them to understand something or another that was happening close to them in their family, in their community, their city if they came from out of town. In other words, they made a connection with the subject matter and their own personal lives and that was often what people would write about, too, in their papers, making some connection between something they had experienced at home or on the streets or in their lives which they now see as connected to a larger issue of racism or colonialism. They would write papers about that. And that was good, that they may or may not have a—much documentation to back up much of their claims because they were talking a lot about their experiences. But if they could write about it in a rational way and make an argument or present a case, then I would accept that because they had struggled with the material. They had struggled with the material in the class and they had now tried to make something of it and that's what I wanted from them. That's what I wanted from some original effort here to try to understand what's going on here. So, the students tend to like it because it was that routine, the whole methodology I used was something that was new to them and that—but the level of participation was new to them, too. So, they generally liked the class but how they would do in terms of grades was, well, how they did. If they did the work, they'd get a good grade. If not, if they just sat and talked, [laughs] didn't hand in stuff, no, nope. Can't

get by that way. So, they had to work, they had to speak in class, and they had to turn in an acceptable term paper at the end.

03-01:31:43

Holmes:

What were your observations of San Jose State at this time? Also the early years, which probably starts around 1965, efforts to diversify both faculty and the student body. What were your observations by 1969 of San Jose State?

03-01:32:08

Allen:

I liked it there. It was much more working class than Berkeley, more diverse than Berkeley. And I liked that about it, that there—Berkeley is an elite institution. People come there from all over the world but they tend to be middle class, upper class, and so the—but this was strictly working class, so they had everybody in there. So, we had a lot of experiences, actually, to draw upon. We had students in there who had been working for years and can talk about that and encounters they'd had in the work life. And we had students who had never been anywhere before and this was all new to them. But it was an exciting time to be there. Probably not as exciting as Berkeley 'cause something was happening every day at Berkeley. Not quite like that at San Jose State. But how to put this? The student body seemed calmer, much more calm at San Jose State and I think it's because they, well, you know what? A lot of them were actually already working. A lot of them were already working to help support their families, as a matter of fact. Here's what it is. I think they were more mature, these—I think the students of the same age at Berkeley were less mature. They might be smarter and they might have had more quote-unquote knowledge but they had less maturity, less life experience whereas the students in San Jose State, being mostly working class, they had a lot more life experience 'cause, for one thing, a lot of them had been working themselves and were working while they were still there in the college. But being working class gives you a different set of experiences, I think, than middle class life in this country, anyway. And a lot of them were Chicanos, as well, which was not true at Berkeley. Very few Chicanos at Berkeley. So, I liked that about it. It was a more diverse student population there than at Berkeley.

03-01:34:47

Holmes:

And what about activism on campus? There was always as you were saying, it was—

03-01:34:50

Allen:

Yeah, yeah, that was a lot—not quite as much as Berkeley but there was a lot of political activism there because this was what was happening. The war, civil rights they were involved in, as well.

03-01:35:06

Holmes:

Well, in 1973, you joined the faculty at Mills College.

03-01:35:14

Allen:

Yes.

03-01:35:18

Holmes: You're hired there in the ethnic studies department.

[Side conversation deleted]

You arrived in 1973. Yeah, discuss again—I think you mentioned it a little earlier—discuss how this opportunity arose for you. How did this opportunity at Mills College, how the job opportunity arose for you?

03-01:35:58

Allen:

Let me think, now, who was it? Oh, my friend Daphne Muse was teaching there and she—I think it was Daphne who told me about a position opening there at Mills, that they—like everywhere else, black studies departments were popping up, including one at Mills. And I was, at that point, still teaching at San Jose State but that was a year-to-year thing and then you never know who the—whether you're going to be reappointed or not. Plus, there was that long drive. So, when she said that there was a position opening in Mills in the black studies department, she suggested that I apply for it, then I did. It was a very small department. I think there were, at that point, four faculty and an assistant and that was it. It's still a very small college, as you know. But it's close as is sort of easy place to get to, so that was a big factor. And it was a women's college, which felt so familiar to me. [laughs] I had been around a women's college my entire life. Spelman College. By then, by this time, my mother was actually teaching at Spelman because she had finally gone back and re-started her career. And she started out as a secretary and then she got a master's degree and she was hired as faculty at Spelman College where she had gotten her undergraduate degree. So, she was teaching at Spelman College. I had taken classes at Spelman College when I was a student there because Howard Zinn and Stutman were teaching at Spelman. And we students at Morehouse and the students at Spelman could take classes at either college and get credit. So, I'd taken a few college at Spelman College. So, the environment, in a sense, was familiar to me, going to Mills College and—as an all-women college was not a strange—something that I'd never done before. Obviously, I had been—these classes many times before and I'd done presentations and so on. So, in a way, it was not something that was new to me and as far as I was concerned, the women students, I mean, was same as the male students in terms of academic expectations and requirements and so on.

03-01:39:05

Holmes: How was the environment in comparison, though, to San Jose State? I mean, Mills College is also a private liberal arts college correct?

03-01:39:14

Allen:

Yes, yes. It was a little bit more upscale, shall we say? They had a nice gym and swimming pool and grounds. I mean, it was lovely. It's a lovely campus, actually, a lot like Spelman. [laughs] And I don't know why but it is: about the same size, student enrollment. So, it was very familiar and it had a kind of feel like Spelman, too, which was not genteel but it had a different feel. I

mean, you don't get the roughhousing and some of the stuff that goes on at a men's college like Morehouse. I mean, totally, and craziness, male behavior. [laughs] You don't see that at a women's college. You don't see that at Mills, anyway, and you don't see that at Spelman. So, there's a little bit more expectation of seriousness, I guess you could say, on the part of the students and on the part of the faculty, that we're here for, to doing serious work. The students, in terms of the work they did was very good. It was very good; I was impressed. There's something about private colleges and the students they recruit because I think they're just inherently more selective than the state programs because the state programs sort of have to take everybody. But the private schools are very selective and they take people who are going to do well. And that was true of Mills and that was true of Spelman and Morehouse, too. So, in a sense, it was not anything new about that environment because I had been in a private college environment, my own undergraduate experience and women's college was part of my own experience and women's school. I'd taken classes myself at Spelman, [laughs] so it didn't seem that strange to me. It was just, oh, I've been here before was the feeling.

03-01:41:40

Holmes:

What about the diversity of the college at that time?

03-01:41:45

Allen:

Which college, Mills?

03-01:41:46

Holmes:

Mills College.

03-01:41:47

Allen:

Oh, Mills? It was overwhelmingly white, had a small black student population, and I think a few Asian students. I don't remember any Chicano students there. I think it was because there's a small black middle class on the West Coast and they sent their daughters there but there was not a huge difference. The clubs were somewhat different, I guess, the type of clubs they had there were different. But they had sororities, they had the usual clubs you find on any campus.

03-01:42:42

Holmes:

You taught in the African American studies department. How did that curriculum—how did you do the curriculum there at Mills?

03-01:42:56

Allen:

Oh, I liked it because that's where I begin learning something about what I call ethnic studies because I hadn't before. But I loved it because it gave me the opportunity, as well, to become more familiar with the literature I did not know, particularly on the Chicano experience and Asian experiences, which are important here on the West Coast for sure. This is where I learned about it for the first time. And so, I was as much a student in those classes as they were. [laughs] I was only a few pages ahead of them in reading. [laughs] So, it was that kind of situation but fortunately, in the course of my own reading

over the years, I had done some reading with regard to the Mexican American experience as we called it then and what that whole colonial process had been like and similarly for the Japanese and Chinese people here in this—who were the only ones here at that time, Japanese and Chinese learning a little bit about their history, especially the history of the Japanese, which was a great shock, as it always is, because I didn't know that the incarceration and the mistreatment that was done during war to the camps and everything. So, again, it was an experience where I was learning with the students and I found that to be very interesting because the questions they had were the questions I had and we were learning together. We were learning together.

03-01:44:39

Holmes:

Talk a little bit about activism on campus. I mean, by the time you start, activism towards Vietnam had subsided probably substantially. Civil rights was still a little bit there but not as present as, say, fifteen years ago.

03-01:44:59

Allen:

Yeah.

03-01:45:01

Holmes:

But how about women's liberation? I know that by this time in the 1970s, and you'd imagine maybe at an all-women's college—anyway, discuss your observations of political activity on campus.

03-01:45:14

Allen:

Yeah, there were politically active students on the campus but the campus itself was not particularly a site for political activism. I don't remember any big demonstrations there or protests but we were—I was always talking with students about the state of the movements and things they were involved with in the Bay Area because they tended to be involved in the anti-war movement and what else you got going on. And, of course, when the women's movement arises, they're—they also become involved with that and I think that was a women's student collective that was organized at that time. But this was also, this was new subject matter for all of us because the older faculty at Mills, women faculty, there had been no movement like this when—in their life experiences and there was not any literature on it, really. So, none of them, none of us, as faculty, were really prepared in the sense of a background in literature for these classes, partly because there was no literature very much at that time and partly because it simply was new. But the students there embraced, as you would expect, embraced, for the most part, the women's movement. There was a women's collective there but I don't remember any demonstrations on campus, though, any demonstrations against the administration or anything like that at Mills. It was kind of a genteel place, actually. [laughs] People were a little bit more well-behaved there than at Berkeley, but—and I hope I'm not just spouting a stereotype here. But it was a much quieter environment than Berkeley, just let's put it that way. But it doesn't mean that the students didn't have an interest in and were not participating in these other movements. It's just that they were not happening

on campus. The students were participating; I can assure you of that. But the organizations were not a presence.

03-01:47:58

Holmes:

During your time at Mills, you advanced your way up on campus. I believe you were first hired as a lecturer and then became head of the department and assistant professor. And in 1984, you left Mills. Why did you decide to leave?

03-01:48:18

Allen:

What was going on then? Well, a part of it had to do with *The Black Scholar* because I had by that point become the senior editor and that was a full-time job. We ran that as a business, which means we had to be worried about getting the income and selling subscriptions. We had to worry about all of the aspects of running a small publication, the four of us who were doing that. And I started out as a part-timer but by this point I'm working there full-time and teaching. And I'm working full-time at the *Scholar* because we need that. But it doesn't pay. It was paying, at first, a small salary but that stopped by the second year. [laughs] So, this is unpaid labor here for the most part and it's big, it's running a small publication, running any kind of publication is very demanding because you have to do it every month or every other month or whatever your schedule is. So, you're always planning ahead, you're always looking ahead, and I started it out on the edge of that, writing more than editing. But by this time, I am the editor and it's just too much.

03-01:49:45

Holmes:

Well, and you start there, I guess we should put that in, moving on to discussing *The Black Scholar*. You started in 1972, I believe and would work there for fifty years.

03-01:49:59

Allen:

[laughs] Yes, fifty years, fifty years.

03-01:50:03

Holmes:

Or close to fifty, forty years actually. My math was off. [laughter] You can't trust a historian and their math.

03-01:50:08

Allen:

Well, fifty years for the book.

03-01:50:10

Holmes:

Yeah, yeah, and you served on various boards. Now, this was the leading national journal of black studies and research in many respects. And Robert Chrisman was the publisher and editor-in-chief. Discuss how you got involved with *The Black Scholar*.

03-01:50:30

Allen:

Well, it was originally Nathan Hare and Robert Chrisman who founded the journal in what was it, '69, at San Francisco State, all right? So, now I was not at San Francisco State although I was out there a lot covering the strike 'cause they had a big strike out there for black studies. But the people who were

running the black studies program at San Francisco State were Nathan Hare, who was the head of it, and Robert Chrisman, who was, I guess, maybe second in charge or something like that. Anyway, they have the big strike out there, they shut the campus down, it really is a strike, and it ends when the administration fires Nathan Hare and Robert Chrisman. [laughs] And they went off to start *The Black Scholar*. *The Black Scholar* comes directly as a result of a firing of these two men from their academic jobs but they decide to continue working on the periphery of the academy by publishing a journal. And they publish the first issue of *Black Scholar* at San Francisco State. And, as they say, it's sold like hotcakes and they—I think they printed something like 20,000 copies, they—somebody gave 'em a grant to do this and that—in '69 and they started publishing it, at first on a monthly basis but then they realized they couldn't sustain that and went to a quarterly business. And it was in '72 that they had a conference and, oh, and I had written for them. I wrote for them, too. Yeah, I wrote an article or two for 'em and then they had a conference of black studies scholars and they invited me to come to the conference and give a paper. And then, after that, they asked me would I consider being the assistant editor at the journal? And I said I would consider it, yes. They said, "We can pay you sometimes [laughs] and it's not much." I said, "Okay, that's what I'm used to." So, about a year, let's see, when was it? When was I hired, '75? Was it '75? What do I say here about when I was hired? Do I have it down here?

03-01:53:09

Holmes:

For *The Black Scholar*?

03-01:53:10

Allen:

Oh, well, I have it started in '72. Yeah, I started in '72 but this is now, what, a few years later, I'm not exactly sure. But by 1975, I'm working there and at first we got paid but then, as things got tighter, which they did very quickly, we were not able to pay regular salary to our staff. And so, that meant that either we had some other work someplace or we had a bank account. And since nobody had a bank account, we all had jobs elsewhere. And this is when somebody told me about the opening at Berkeley, that African American studies had an opening there, I should consider applying for it, and I had been not working for a while at Mills and not having an income except a publication which only pays occasionally. My wife was working then and so she was supporting me but the family, much more so than I was because I was at Mills, I only taught two classes. It wasn't really full-time. And when I started at Berkeley, I was only teaching one class but I was getting paid initially by *The Black Scholar* but that was over within a year, the payment. So, I was ready for another job and when the offer came, I said yes.

03-01:54:55

Holmes:

Before we go off to *The Black Scholar*—so, you had balanced this over—so, your forty years that you were affiliated with *The Black Scholar*, between 1972 and then your official retirement in 2012. You had balanced this off and on with teaching.

03-01:55:16

Allen: Yes.

03-01:55:17

Holmes: Discuss that type of workload. I mean, that I think it goes often overlooked how much work actually goes into a publication.

03-01:55:25

Allen: Yeah, and a lot of people do this in the academy because there's so many journals. And who's publishing these journals? The faculty! And who? Lot of junior faculty trying to become known. So, [laughs] I think this is the case with almost every academic journal is that there are some dedicated faculty putting in a lot of time and not getting paid. That's your experience? [laughs]

03-01:55:52

Holmes: Yeah. Yeah, probably, yes, I know, a lot—

03-01:55:55

Allen: That'll be your experience.

03-01:55:56

Holmes: Yeah.

03-01:55:56

Allen: That'll be your experience, yeah. But you have to do it. It's an expectation. Now, we at the *Scholar* didn't have to do it because we were outside of that network, however, in practice, we ended up doing the same thing. We didn't have the money to pay salaries so it becomes, then, part of your duty to do this work on this publication like it is on the campus. It's part of your expected—now is expected that you will work on a journal.

03-01:56:28

Holmes: What kind of content made up the—that you were receiving as submissions for the journal?

03-01:56:36

Allen: What kind of—

03-01:56:37

Holmes: Content, what kind of articles were people submitting to be published by the *Journal*?

03-01:56:41

Allen: Ah, well, you know the kind of stuff we publish. And what we were looking for, we liked articles that had both discussion, analysis, but also had—and which the implications for activism, if there were any, would be drawn out, as well, because our notion was that scholars are also activists and that our scholarship is not just for our sake. It's about changing the world, too, that the scholar—as black scholars, that what we are about here is changing the world through our scholarship. So, that becomes, then, a part of the mission of *The Black Scholar*, explicitly, and I think a lot of other journals it's implicit that

this is the way it's working. But we were pretty much explicit about it and so that the—but we didn't get it, the university didn't help us. For example, some universities, they'll give you a course release if you're working on a journal. Not Berkeley, at least not then. So, working on a journal was not considered a contribution to the university. At least working on a black journal was not considered so, we got no credit for that and obviously no pay. But it was enough to get by if you have a working wife. [laughs] That's what I have to say about that. I don't think I ever made \$10,000 a year from my writing, if that much, or working for the journal, and there was a lot to make up.

03-01:58:54

Holmes:

Were the articles of *The Black Scholar*—did you peer review them?

03-01:59:00

Allen:

No, they were not peer reviewed, no. When we did special issues we would sometimes have them peer reviewed but again, the problem there is you can have peer review but if you can't pay people, you're not going to get anything back most of the time. Why? Because they don't have the time to do it. And if you're not paying and if there are no consequences if they don't do it when there are big consequences for us because then we got to find somebody else so, that was always the scuffle is that we would get someone to commit to write but you always had to have more people committed to write because you knew not all of them were going to come through.

03-01:59:45

Holmes:

What kind of submissions? How did you see the submissions change over your decades at *The Black Scholar*?

03-01:59:59

Allen:

Everything became more academic. [laughs] The writing style has changed more towards a straight-up academic style. We, at that time, we were not focused on the writing style. We were focused on the content. And so, people could write in all kinds of styles and at first, we were not very strict about that. But over the years, it has become more and more a consideration because we actually are now an established journal and competing with other journals out there so we have to follow the rules. And that means, then, everything has to be according to the format, that proper format, journal format, and things like that. So, it has become more professional and professional-looking over time. But it's still basically what it always has been: an independent journal that publishes material related to black studies, which implies that it's also related to the black civil rights struggle. And that is still a difference. Our journal is still connected with an identifiable social struggle and we feel some obligation to doing that in the best way we can because it's not a matter of anything of—it is about a personal interest, of course. But we're looking here at the development of a field which is a new field and which is becoming more and more exciting as we get more and more young people involved in it. And this piece I'm writing now for the 50th anniversary of *Black Awakening*, my book, is another instance of that to see how the things have changed over time.

There are many more young people writing and doing this kind of research now than when I came along and they're better prepared because social change scholarship is now more acceptable in just about every university, scholarship that has a focus of social change, like black studies, women's studies, which almost by definition are about some kind of social change so that these departments have opened a niche in academic study that I don't think was there before but is important. And it gives young writers coming along now more options for expression and acceptance than we had.

03-02:03:04

Holmes:

How did your years working with *The Black Scholar*, how did that impact you as a scholar and a teacher?

03-02:03:19

Allen:

What it did was it gave me an opportunity. [laughs] It gave me an opportunity to write, to do research and writing because, of course, I was expected to do that as part of my work at the journal, that I would also be continuing my research and writing, and that was great. It was a boon to my work and it was a great opportunity to meet scholars from many different fields, black scholars in many different fields because we occasionally had these get-togethers where we would invite thirty or forty writers to come to a conference and we'd discuss some issue and that issue would often become a special issue of the journal then. The topic would become a special issue of the journal so that there was always this connection between the idea of your social action and being involved in social action and also being a scholar and a writer. And I think that was something that we enabled a lot of young scholars coming along now to make a case for writing about social issues from a personal standpoint as being acceptable, that is: using your own experience in a movement is acceptable data. And I think we have contributed to that because when we start—when black studies started, there were no standards of—quote-unquote objective standards for measuring or assessing research. So, how could you do it? And the thing is, people had to experiment and people still are experimenting with what styles are acceptable, with what ways of formulating your argument are acceptable, what kind of data are acceptable in academic writing. A lot of that has changed, I think, as a result of black studies and women's studies, which has also taken a similar track of invigorating the academy. I think that's one of the things that we've done here is invigorate the academy, not only with new people but with new ideas, especially new ideas. So, this has been exciting and this is what we're still doing, basically, with the journal. And although I'm not so much attached to it or connected with it now because we've handed it on to the next generation, but I think they're doing a good job. I think they're bringing the journal out, they're doing interesting issues and they're doing a good job. I'm proud to see that it's still being published.

Interview 4: May 24, 2019

04-00:00:04

Holmes: This is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is May 24, 2019. I have the pleasure once again of sitting down for our fourth session with Robert Allen. We are here at his home in the beautiful city of Benicia right by the water. So happy Friday, Robert. [laughter]

04-00:00:28

Allen: Same to you. Same to you, my friend.

04-00:00:29

Holmes: So we finished up in our last session discussing your time, of course, finishing up at Mills College and around the 1980s. I wanted to take this opportunity to maybe start off this session to have you reflect on your observations and the development of the field of African American studies, an academic field that, as we'll talk later in this session, you continued to contribute to both in your writing as well as in your teaching later on at UC Berkeley.

04-00:01:02

Allen: Yes, yes. Completely.

04-00:01:03

Holmes: And you were very much actually very active early on. If we look again, as we discussed in our last session, your position at San Jose State, that was one of the very first black studies departments—

04-00:01:16

Allen: Correct.

04-00:01:18

Holmes: —both in the United States. What strikes you, maybe that's the way to start, of that first generation of—the development of the field.

04-00:01:34

Allen: Back in '72 is when they first got into contact with me. What had happened was that at San Francisco State, coming out of a strike on the campus there, they had established the first really black studies department. And they hired Nathan Hare, who was a black scholar, a sociologist at Howard, and something of a nationalist, black nationalist, to come out and head up that department that was just being founded. There was a big strike at San Francisco State over the question of what the direction of the department was going to be. Was the administration going to really accept it? The usual issues that would plague black studies almost for the next ten years popped up right there. Basically the legitimacy issue, I think. But in the course of that dispute, which went on for—strike—it was actually a strike at San Francisco State at that time that went on for months—two of the organizers of the faculty in the strike, Nathan Hare and Robert Chrisman were fired by the administration.

The two of them, who had been working together for some months on the strike, decided with their new spare time they would organize a black studies journal, which they actually proceeded to do. They had another colleague there, a printer, who was also a member of the founding group who's actually a white person who was supportive. I think he was close to the party at some point or something like that. But anyway, he was very supportive of him. Had a print shop. Allan Ross was his name. Had a print shop and offered to back the first issue if they could put it together, if they could organize it. And so they did and that was the very first issue of *The Black Scholar*. And immediately there's controversy about what is this journal, what's going on here.

04-00:04:04

But what happens in this period is that Chrisman and Hare to some extent, too, represent three different tendencies here that were all happening in the struggles at that time. Hare is a nationalist. Chrisman is a Marxist, independent Marxist. And Allan Ross, although he didn't play a particularly strong ideological role there, he'd come out of the old Communist Party in its heyday. But Ross didn't play a big role in the politics of the *Scholar* because he was basically caught up with running this press and keeping the thing floating for that story for the first few months. But the thinking that comes out at that time is, okay, so what is the *Scholar* then? What is it going to do? Is it going to be a journal of theory? Is it going to be a journal of practice? What are we about here? And what happens is that the discussions between Chrisman and Nathan Hare mostly, and other people in the field, too, there's a discussion going on about what it should be. What emerges is that it combines two aspects of interest in the black movement at that time. One was, of course, community development and the idea then that we need to find some way to develop our communities and make them more healthy, strong, however you want to put that in some positive way. Politically powerful. And that on the other hand, we also need to think about social theory and questions of social theory. And, of course, at this time there are big arguments going on between Communists and nationalists and independent people within the movement. And the *Scholar* takes it upon itself to embrace all of that. Theory and practice, the debates about what course to take, all of that becomes part of then the mission of *The Black Scholar*. And that's what it remained for most of its history and still is to a great extent.

04-00:06:39

And it was very interesting, though, because it gave us ears and eyes in all parts of the struggle. People from all parts of the struggle, whatever their political persuasion might be, felt that they could contribute to *The Black Scholar*. So within the journal they always carried a variety of views. Marxist, nationalist, independent socialist, liberals, all sorts of voices in the journal. But what they have in common was the idea then of some sort of black integrity, black independence, black thinking that is supported by the community itself and not itself tied to an institution. So, in fact, *The Black*

Scholar was not tied to the department at San Francisco State. They set it up as independent journal tied to no other institution, which was a great idea but hard to carry out in practice because of financing. If you've got an institution you've got a source of financing. If you're truly independent, you've got to wing it, you've got to figure out ways to raise money. And that's what we did. That's what we did when I came aboard.

04-00:07:58

I came aboard in 1975 when *The Scholar* had its first anniversary conference. It had actually been founded in, what, '69 and five later they have the anniversary conference. And they bring in people who represented all wings, intellectual currents within the black community to this conference. I was invited to come as well. And I had been writing for them up to that point, doing some writing. I was invited to this conference. And at that time I was free from teaching. And at the conference, Nathan and Robert Chrisman asked me if I would be willing in joining the staff of *The Black Scholar* because, number one, I was a journalist. I'm familiar with production of a newspaper or a magazine. And I know about reporting. So they thought that I would make a good assistant editor for them and that it would be an opportunity for me also to develop because it would be something that I was already doing out there in the movement, reporting on and thinking about it, trying to write about it having now done a book on it. So it was right up my alley, so to speak, and I was very happy to join them.

04-00:09:31

And the fact that they were independent of any academic institution, although connected to the academy in broad terms through our readers and subscribers. But we ourselves, we're independent entirely of the academy. And we funded that journal through subscriptions and advertising. We had a classified advertising department that had positions for jobs, all sorts of advertisements which you would expect in a journal like that. All sorts of advertising. Could be automatic ads for academic positions that were open in universities. And that's how we financed it. That's what we did. We never had an angel except one of our initial founders. In fact, what he did was to give us free publishing for a while. But he died shortly and so we were on our own, the three of us, Chrisman and Hare and myself, who were basically the people who were running it then as the active staff.

04-00:10:44

But we learned how to run it as a small business, amazingly enough. [laughter] That's what I learned, anyway, because it was my job as the assistant there, assistant editor—I was also the assistant everything else—but I mainly was focused on two things. Recruiting articles and editing and also then the issue of circulation because I was in effect the de facto circulation manager. And so things like getting out mailings, doing mailings to solicit subscriptions, advertising, all of this stuff of the capitalists in the publishing world we had to learn and we had to learn it fast because nobody was going to pick us up if we failed. And so we had to figure out how to do this as a small

business. And that was a big part of my job. Chrisman and I together really. And we figured it out. Each time we figured it out. Okay, you got to get out a mailing, you got to solicit subscriptions, you got to do this, you got to solicit advertising. All of these processes of production that are involved with getting out a magazine. And that was a surprising education, and unexpected because I hadn't quite been in that position before. Although when I was working for the *National Guardian* I became somewhat familiar with it because that was a small operation, too. And everybody sort of knew what was going on in the different departments. So I had a sense of that already and the rest it was possible to learn by doing basically.

04-00:12:31

That was how we actually ran that journal. People ask us all the time, "Who's your angel?" We didn't have an angel. You could say we had one at the start-up, Allan Ross, who funded the first issue. But after that we were on our own. In the whole history of *The Black Scholar* I think we got two grants. Every other journal who does this kind of publishing has to get grants from somewhere to survive. We were able to get two grants, I think, in that whole period because of our politics, of course, because we were fiercely independent both of the left and the center. We were beholden to no one. There was nobody outside of the three of us who called the shots for the journal. Nobody who influenced us outside of the three of us. And since the three of us had no money we had to figure out how to raise money and we did. And we kept that journal afloat and it still is afloat now, although it's attached to an institutional base now. But it's still afloat and publishing.

So that was completely unexpected but it makes sense when you look at my history and my background with reporting and publishing and the Black Movement, that whole complex of things there. This was already part of my background, so when I moved into working with *The Scholar* it was just taking it to another level at a more professional, more academic, and about still about dealing with the issues before us at the moment in the Black Movement.

04-00:14:19

Holmes:

Do you think *The Black Scholar* helped? Because I know that was probably one of the first of quite a number of journals that thought to participate and address the issues with African American studies. Do you think that helped African American scholars get some legitimacy, meaning that you could publish? Get their ideas out there and publish?

04-00:14:42

Allen:

Certainly. We certainly did. In fact, there were a number of people who got their teaching jobs because of the work they had published in *The Scholar*. It opened doors to other publications. So you published in *The Scholar*, you might actually be able to publish someplace else because we were respected for what we did. We kept a high intellectual level of discussion in that journal. And it was always professional. It was always professional. This was no fly

by night newsletter. This was a professional journal and that's the way it looked, that's the way we wanted it to be, and we kept it at that level. So bit by bit we actually gained the respect of some of the other journals that were publishing on the left at that time. As you know now, *The Scholar* gradually became accepted across the spectrum of black academic journals. And so we are now indexed and recorded in every library and all of that. But at the start, though, it was really just the three of us trying to figure out how to do this in the absence of any support beyond that first issue.

04-00:15:53
Holmes:

And speaking of the development of African American studies, and this would be more on the teaching level in these departments, again you taught in one of the first departments at San Jose State. Discuss your recollections and your observations of how black studies was welcomed at many of these universities or viewed by both studies but also faculty.

04-00:16:22
Allen:

It was tolerated. Eventually it became an acceptable component of the academy, which I would say it is now. But at that time we were rebels within the gate. [laughter] They didn't know quite what to do except they knew they couldn't throw us out again because then there would be an eruption. And this is speaking metaphorically now. Once black studies, that idea develops, it's going to grow across every campus, which it did. And we were one of the vehicles by which it was transferred from campus to campus because we were the journal of black studies. So we were not appreciated by most administrators. We were regarded as interlopers, as fake academics. Really we were just revolutionaries here trying to organize some wing on the campus. When they respected us they said that. When they didn't they said worse things. But we were seen as a threat. It was completely ridiculous, of course, and it took some years though to finally get that settled.

04-00:17:43

The first generation of scholars that we developed had that task. Into the seventies other departments had developed the department at Mills College and other places had developed across the board, across the country, one by one, departments are popping up. So this is a phenomenon now. It's just picking up energy on its own. They can't stop it. So basically the academic power structure in this country, so to speak, grudgingly accepted *The Black Scholar* as one of the academic journals that is known and accepted but always though with a grudge and always when they could reject something they would. But by and large, though, we came to be an accepted part of the community of academic journals, which means you get things like listings in guides, you get people who keep your back issues in the library so they can be referenced. All those kinds of things that you don't even think about but that are privileges that academic journals get gradually came our way as well. So you can now find *The Black Scholar* in all of the standard indexes and references and you find us in most of the big libraries, the back issues, all of that on microfilm and now electronically. So that we gradually developed into

a respected journal but always with doubts, though, always doubts. What are these people really up to? [laughter]

04-00:19:33

Holmes:

Which, as you're relating, is a similar sentiment that they looked at the entire field of African American studies?

04-00:19:40

Allen:

The entire field and then after that, coming right along next, ethnic studies, too. So ethnic studies has to go through that. And by this time the ethnic studies department at Cal has been established right upstairs and I get recruited to teach a class or two in ethnic studies, as well. So that's how I end up teaching full-time, because I'm half-time in each department.

04-00:20:05

Holmes:

I wanted to ask. In another project I had the pleasure of sitting down with many of the first generation Chicano scholars who were right there, kind of like on those wing tails of African American studies, within that movement of creating departments of Chicano studies. And Rudy Acuña was saying that—who developed the Chicano studies department at Cal State Northridge in 1967 and that's one of the things he was saying, is if it wasn't for the African American scholars and the creation of those departments and then their acceptance of creating ethnic studies, it opened a door. In a sense, that success of that first generation, those first departments, really opened the door for many other—like you were just saying.

04-00:20:52

Allen:

That's true.

04-00:20:56

Holmes:

The various departments of ethnic studies. What was your observation on that, particularly at places later on in your career?

04-00:21:05

Allen:

Well, I was very happy to see it and I thought it was a logical outcome of the process that we had already gone through, which is the idea of ethnic scholarship and the idea that you can have journals that develop to the intellectual experiences, history of particular groups of people and that that's a legitimate field of study. And of course it was because there's already a long history of that when you look at white history. Oh, yeah, I study Irish history, I study this, I study that. Well, of course. So that was what we brought into the academy, was an openness to that, not only for black people but for all people of color, as we say today. We legitimized that. The black scholar played a huge role in the legitimizing that and opened the door for other communities of color to develop their own intellectual growth process, as I would look at this, according to their needs and their interest. I think it has turned into just a tremendous flowering of ethnic scholarship and creativity and all sorts of things coming out of that. Writing, creative writing, scholarship, that it's been a tremendous flowering and a blessing to the country, I think, although it's not

always seen that way. But I think increasingly in the academy it is accepted. Not without argument. There's always going to be a little resistance. But there's a shift that has occurred that's fundamental, I think, and I don't think we can go back now.

04-00:23:08

Holmes:

I wanted to ask, as one who's been around the field of African American studies really since the beginning, what works and scholars really stand out to you as foundational in those formative years?

04-00:23:26

Allen:

[laughter] Ah, so many. I can't remember all the names. But, you know, all of this has a history that goes way back before any of us were even here. Du Bois. How can we have black studies without Du Bois? And then the same thing in Chicano studies. There are certain figures who were doing this long before we were born. And now they are canonical figures in our fields and we look to them as the founders really, although they didn't call it black studies or Chicano studies. These were the founders of these disciplines. So we don't see a break. There's no break here where suddenly everything shifts over to black studies or Chicano studies. This is what black and Chicano scholars have been doing all along. It's just that it has never been organized and recognized as a field of study in and of itself. And when you look at it that way, well, that's not revolutionary. You're just incorporating a new field of study. Hey, happens all the time. Yes, it does. So why the resistance to this particular field of study? Because it's not just academic. It's politics, too. And it's a class struggle. It's a struggle at many different levels because of the racism and sexism and all of the -isms in our society which divide us and therefore require that people have to look at their history and make their own conclusions, draw their own conclusions about what that history means. And it is not a lot of simply letting others tell you what your history is. You must discover it for yourself.

04-00:25:22

Holmes:

Well, speaking of contributions, I wanted to discuss one of your books. I believe this is probably your second book, titled *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States*. And here, as you were just describing, is actually a real incorporation of taking, say, movements that were already discussed within a typical US history framework but then we add the lens of race into this and we see, okay, where do these reform movements go. Discuss the genesis of this project. How did you get involved with this?

04-00:26:04

Allen:

Well, I think of it as a natural outflow of the first book because the first book looks at a particular instance of this process, the modern black power movement. And so that begins with history in 1969 basically and looks at what happened in the next few years. Well, you read that and you think about, well, hey, as something like this, what was the previous history here in terms of the relationship between black community and white power structure. What

was the previous history? Well, you ask that question, you go back and you look and you see, my goodness, there's a whole history of social movements here which have struggled with that question. The abolitionist movement, the labor movement, the women's suffrage movement. All of these social movements which are big in American history have had to grapple with this issue of race and to what extent are they going to deal with it in a positive way, are they going to simply ignore it? Are they going to use it in some opportunistic manner? All of these questions then are right before you once you start that work. And whatever group you're talking about, non-white group, it pops up to them and in terms of white history it's always occurring because the dominant white society is always dealing with an influx of new groups who usually are not white. So it's a constant theme in the US society, as it is today. So I felt we were not bringing something new, entirely new to the table. We were just seeing what was on the table in a different way.
[laughter]

04-00:27:54

Holmes:

Well, which is right. You examine six reform movements. So as you were mentioning, abolitionist, populist, progressivism, the women's suffrage movement, labor, the socialist. I think that's six. And other works have built on this later on when we look at that. Even Charles Postel's award winning work on populism goes and has to add two new chapters saying, "Listen, that there was African American members of the populist party." And that he even talks about that struggle and I think he's also drawing on your work right there. Is that struggle, that here was a class based and very broad, even by racial movement, but it was that biracial movement that caused some people to have to give pause. And that in some ways doomed its downfall.

04-00:28:56

Allen:

Yes. Right, right. Yes. It's a common theme in American history. It's just that it's been a subcurrent or a subtheme or not really recognized. To many white scholars, the white population is something they don't want to look at because, number one, it's a shameful history that this country has in that regard. Number two, it's in your face all the time so that you don't want to see it. But it's a powerful theme in American history and it's the hidden theme. It's the one that nobody really wants to talk about. And they are uncomfortable when it's brought up. But in the academy that's what we do, supposedly. We look at anything and everything with a certain critical eye. That's supposedly our job. Well, okay, this is a process that's happening big-time in the society. Can't we look at that with a critical eye, too?

04-00:30:03

Holmes:

Well, it is. I mean, I think that's one of the things from this work, one of the most important lessons is for future reform movements. That, listen, for something to be broad and successful it has to mirror largely the diversity of the US, of the United States itself within the ranks of its supporters.

04-00:30:24

Allen:

Yeah, yeah. It's true. If you think about it, how could that be otherwise in this society? Maybe in some other societies that are more single ethnicity or one or two ethnicities. But in a society like this, which is fundamentally multi-racial and multicultural and many histories being woven into a national history here, why would it not be the case that there's going to be a lot of confusion, struggle, chaos because it's a process that actually I don't think has happened before in this manner in history. And I don't think it can happen again either, because what happened is basically a land that was sparsely occupied, North America, was taken by another people. And many other groups of people. And this really hasn't happened before. And where all of those groups still survived, people didn't all kill each other, except we tried to kill all the Native Americans but the Native Americans are still in this area, in this country, too.

04-00:31:42

So there's a kind of new society that's developing and I think we need to look at it in every possible way so that we don't actually end up destroying ourselves somewhere along the way, which, of course, would be tragic and a waste. But it's a powerful situation and how we manage that I think is going to say a lot for the history of humanity on this planet. If we can manage it in such a way that we keep a great society great, and I think this is a great society. I think what has happened here in terms of the cultural mix that we have here is phenomenal. And that we managed to somehow keep it going, although with a lot of back steps and problems and so on is really a tribute to the people who did come here and who did engage in building this new society. For all the big mistakes they made, they also did accomplish the creation of a new type of society of which all of us are a part and to which all of us contribute. So I think that's where we are today. If we can look at it that way, yeah, we are many people here. Many peoples. But we all are capable of supporting and contributing to society and for the simple reason that we all want what's best for our children. And if you're planning to live here with your children you've got to think about that. And that, I think, is the most powerful reason why people are thinking about it. They realize I'm going to die and I'll be gone but my children are going to have to continue to live in this. What do I want them to live in? What kind of society? That's a question for every single person in this country. And if you look at it that way, then we see that we have a common task, which is to make that world for our children a better place. That's the common task.

04-00:33:56

And if you can see that through working with one group and then expanding that to working with other groups, which is a simple process, then this is how we expand our consciousness and our ways of cooperating with people anywhere. And for me that was one of the great lessons of the Civil Rights Movement, is to see in that movement people that I'd never even seen before, not even on television. Oh, my God, what. And I realized we're all in the same movement here, which is about equality. Equality of citizenship. And that's on the one hand very simple but in this society it's a huge process because of the

complexity of ethnicity and race and genders in this culture. And the fact that we've been able to do it so far and not destroy the whole country I think is a tribute. But it's a tribute to the people who've struggled to do that. It's a tribute to the fact that people like Du Bois and Douglass and others who went before and were able to engage in that struggle in a non-violent way and to show how this can be a process of working through relationships. They're the heroes and they're the heroes for all of us. That's what I think is the vision of the ethnic studies movement. It's a vision not just for inclusion but for a reconceiving of the whole society and how we relate to each other. And we don't know where that's going but it's going. And wherever we end up with that I think is going to be a great victory for humanity because we will have survived killing ourselves in some great race war. And if we survive that by not having that, then we are in a good place. [laughter]

04-00:36:19

Holmes:

Well, I wanted to talk about your third book, which came out in 1987. *As Wonderful As All that?* Henry Crowder's memoir of his affair with Nancy Cunard and you wrote the introduction and epilogue of this book.

04-00:36:34

Allen:

Yes.

04-00:36:36

Holmes:

And this was actually written by Crowder and journalist Hugo Speck, I believe.

04-00:36:40

Allen:

Yes, Hugo Speck.

04-00:36:42

Holmes:

Well, discuss how you got involved with this project. Because I know by the time this was published, I know Crowder himself had already passed.

04-00:36:49

Allen:

He had passed, yeah.

04-00:36:50

Holmes:

I think he passed in 1955 or something like that.

04-00:36:53

Allen:

Yes, yes. He was gone.

04-00:36:54

Holmes:

Well, discuss how you got involved with this.

04-00:36:56

Allen:

Well, actually, I was with Alice Walker at this time in my life as my companion and she of course is a person of literature. The literary world. And she had mentioned Nancy Cunard and this work, so I knew of it. And I actually had gotten a copy somewhere of *Negro* and this fantastic folio sized

book that she published with Crowder. It's an incredible collection. The first black anthology before there was a black movement, before the Civil Rights Movement, before any of this this rich white woman publishes this incredible volume.

04-00:37:43

Holmes:

Well, that's what I wanted to ask first because I think it's really important to point out, is that Nancy Cunard is—I mean she was, I think, a shipping heiress. Very wealthy—

04-00:37:52

Allen:

Yes. The Cunard shipping line. They still are in business.

04-00:37:56

Holmes:

I mean prominent family out of England. But yes. Go ahead, go ahead.

04-00:37:58

Allen:

They had a huge estate in England. She was the first hippie. She ran away from home to Paris and adopted this hippie lifestyle. Met this guy Crowder from Georgia who was a refugee from the south and who ends up as a musician in Europe, as did a lot of black men, especially black musicians end up in Europe because it was one of the few places where they would be accepted as legitimate musicians because they were black. But there was more openness in Europe. And so Crowder came over as a musician and Nancy, who was in her hippie stage then, was living in Paris and came to hear him play. She got interested. She was taken by the music and also apparently fascinated by Crowder and they developed a relationship. It was a relationship that turned into a partnership because she, through Crowder, begins to meet more and more black people. Exiles in Europe. And also they eventually make this trip to the States and she gets introduced to all kinds of people in the Civil Rights Movement. She herself becomes completely fascinated by African American history because it is so complex and so much has happened and it is so deeply engraved in the US society. I think she was more in a way aware of this than Crowder because she was a stranger to it. So all of the practices, the racism in US society which she saw as she was traveling with him, these were all new things to her. The way he gets treated, the way she gets treated by contrast. So she's learning American racism in this relationship with him and she gets interested in it intellectually and begins collecting this material and comes up with a volume of work on African American history.

04-00:40:27

They go to New York. She meets Du Bois, who encourages her work. I don't think she talked to any publishers there. I don't know if they had it finished by that time. But they have some incidents that happened. Nothing violent. But she is aware of the hostility of whites toward them as an interracial couple. She can even feel that. So she noticed that this thing of racial hostility towards black is a real thing in the US and it was not imagined. It's a real thing. It becomes an obsession with her to try to intervene in that in some way which

becomes then the book, which is a fantastic book. I don't know if you've ever seen it but it's a wonderful book. It's really the first anthology and it's a big folio sized thing. It's amazing what she put in there. Well, she had money and could do it. Nobody else could have done that book but her because she put her own money into it and got it out and did a good job, too. And she had actually started earlier a press of her own.

04-00:41:38

Actually, when Nancy got away from her mom, she actually did a lot of good stuff. But the mom could not appreciate it because of, well, racism. But she became interested in black literature. She was already interested in black music. So that was a real wonderful relationship that developed between them. The problem, though, is it was inherently unequal because of race and class. That would always be this division between them in terms of the experiences he's had as a black man and the experiences she's had as a really privileged white woman even though she's a runaway hippie. And these were just facts. Even in Europe there's a difference in how people of color were treated, even then. And so these things register with her for the first time. Of course, Crowder has always had to deal with that. But she manages to turn it into something that's creative, which is the book that they produced together. But it puts a stress on their relationship, too, as racism always does on interracial or multiracial relationships. Not just black relationships. So the stress of that relationship I think was something bothersome to him because it meant always that he would be the mistreated one. He would be the one seen as her servant. If you just saw the two of them together in Europe you'd say, "Oh, the black guy's her servant." That's what everybody assumed when they were in Europe. It wasn't that the black guy couldn't come in but he would come in as a servant. Have you seen that film, the new film about the black musician and his white driver? [laughter]

04-00:43:45

Holmes:

Oh. No, no, no. I haven't.

04-00:43:47

Allen:

Go see it. This is what was going on between them. [ed. note: *Green Book*] It's a good film in that regard. So actually the racism affected their relationship and she was always the white wealthy woman because everybody knew her name and he was always seen as her servant or maybe her secret lover or something like that. But they were not equal in the eyes of anybody white, that is, because this is {inaudible} racism. That's what it means. You don't see people of color at the same way that you see a white person. He felt that and he was really upset by it because it was everywhere still. He would be treated as her servant and it damaged their relationship. And I don't think they really found a way to deal with it. But it played out in breakups between them from time to time and finally at the end they split. He came back to the United States, I guess to his family here. He had a family here but I couldn't find out anything about them.

So it's a story of an interracial couple and the racism that they encounter actually even in Europe before the war. Supposedly this was the time of great liberalism and cultural experimentation and all. But it was within limits and the limits were this is white people, this is for white folks. You colored folks are not a part of this except as servants.

04-00:45:45

Holmes: So how did you get involved with this?

04-00:45:51

Allen: How did I get involved?

04-00:45:51

Holmes: Well, editing this manuscript.

04-00:45:53

Allen: I'm a journalist. This is what I do. So I see this footnote in a book that I'm reading about Nancy Cunard and it talks about this autobiography that Crowder wrote. And it's just a footnote. They don't even quote from it, I don't think. They just say he wrote this thing. So there I am. I've got a footnote. I can run with it. So the footnote said that there was a copy of this manuscript now in the possession of another party all together unrelated. Had not been to Europe but had some sort of connection to, who was it, somebody there who had gotten it. Oh, it was through the journalist, some friend of Crowder's, a journalist who had got a copy of it. Didn't do anything with it. Eventually took it back home to Texas and that's where I found it. I finally got somebody's address that had a copy of that, wrote to them and said I was interested in having a look at it and maybe publishing it. And he agreed and sent it to me. And when I read it I said, "Oh, my gosh, this is incredible." It's the first account by a black man of a relationship with a white woman of power, for one thing. [laughter] Wow. Whoa. And how they managed that, which is always very interesting. But it's a story, too, about race relations because that is playing out in their lives, too. So I was just fascinated by it and the way in which they worked it out. It was like reading a novel. And then when I realized it had never been published I said, "Why has this never been published?"

04-00:48:04

Holmes: Well, and what's interesting on that, too, Robert, is if we think about—in 1955 Emmett Till is killed because of allegations that he whistled at a white woman, right. And here you have an African American and a prominent white woman well before 1955, right, parading around both European and American society, right.

04-00:48:33

Allen: Yes, right.

04-00:48:35

Holmes: Right.

04-00:48:36

Allen:

If I'd have been them I'd have been scared. [laughter] I would not have come back to the US. Are you kidding me? I wouldn't have come back to the US. So I was just taken aback to find it, to read it, be fascinated by it, then follow up on the footnote and realize this thing has never been published and I may be able to get a copy. What am I going to do? Well, what am I, anyway? I'm a journalist and I'm a publisher. Well, at that time *The Black Scholar* was not interested in publishing it. But I thought whoever was the publisher of that, to actually bring it out. But it didn't really fly because—we setup our own publishing company, Alice Walker and I, called Wild Trees Press, and we published the book and we published five or six other books. Wonderful little books, all of them, having a different kind of charm and interest and all of them multiracial. We published, what, five or six books, of which that was one. And that was a project that we did together and I loved it. I loved every book that we published and all of them are completely different. [laughter]

04-00:50:09

Anyway, the process of writing that opened me up to other kinds of writing, too. So I began thinking about maybe writing something that's more creative, doing this and doing that. But I never have done that because there are just so many live stories out here that are living that you don't have to go trying to imagine anything. It's all out there. Just find it and write about it. That's been my experience. If you look you will find something. But you need to have your eyes open and to be able to see whatever's in front of you. So I enjoyed that. That was sort of an exercise in a different world but in a related world at the same time, which is personal relationships.

04-00:51:03

Holmes:

And that you were also able to take a manuscript that otherwise would have been lost and bring it to the world. Because now that it's published it's in libraries and it's able to be accessed.

04-00:51:18

Allen:

Yeah. Well, I thought about that, too. But I didn't know. I didn't know what was going to happen. And, in fact, the women's movement hated me because Nancy Cunard is one of their angels and here I was writing this book saying she was a racist. That didn't win me any points. [laughter] But you know what? She was just a person of her time. I don't blame her anymore for that. I blame her for being able to overcome it and actually work with Crowder and they together published this incredible book. This was a big accomplishment in spite of racism. And the fact that they stayed together for some years in this struggle over the nature of their relationship, because it was never easy for them. In Europe it was never easy. They were always being pointed out, always stared at. So it was not an easy relationship for them to maintain it. That was something I thought about a lot, which is why were they together in the first place? They're so different. But then I've seen other relationships like that, too. In fact, I've been in relationships like that. [laughter] If you live long enough it's not so hard to understand.

04-00:52:49

Holmes:

Well, I wanted to talk about a book you published in 1992. You co-edited this with Robert Chrisman there at *The Black Scholar*. *Court of Appeal: The Black Community Speaks out on the Racial and Sexual Politics of Clarence Thomas vs. Anita Hill*. Now this obviously was a huge event in here. And one that I could imagine, and when you go through this book, that you see that the African American community was very much divided on because on one hand here you have the first African American judge who has been nominated for the Supreme Court. And then on the other hand here you have another very prominent African American lawyer and law professor who is then accusing him here in 1992 of sexual harassment and misconduct. What you ended up doing is editing a collection of forty-one essays spanning the political spectrum. Discuss that process and you and Robert Chrisman's decision to—"We need to bring an anthology together and capture this moment."

04-00:54:08

Allen:

Well, when that happened and it blew up into such a big thing and the hysteria of the press about it, because this was sort of a great opportunity—okay, black man against black woman over sex, sexual harassment, oh, that's what we've been waiting for. [laughter] So the media jumped on it. It loved it, of course, because it was a way of having a spectacle entirely about black people and misbehavior by a black man, sexual misbehavior. It had all of this kind of hysteria about it. And so we decided to enter in that to sort of try to address it in a way that was non-hysterical and by getting some people who had thought about it and had written about other issues to engage with this topic, as well, because there was so much going on. One is it was on the one hand a legitimate issue in the sense that harassment of a black man, of a black woman is and should be an issue, as harassment of any man, of any woman should be an issue. But in the historical minds that this country can get at around issues of race, this one just boiled out of control. But the idea of trying to address it in some calm thoughtful way, which we decided we wanted to do by publishing that collection which was originally in *The Black Scholar*. And so we tried to get people who we thought would be thoughtful in writing about it, men and women, and who would offer some sort of perspective on it to understand what had happened here and, of course, why it becomes such a matter of hysterical interest for the whole country, which was another question. And that was what we wanted to address.

04-00:56:25

What it did, if you want to say what it did that was good aside from this sort of hysteria stuff that was happening, is it did push the idea of a conversation about relationships between black men and black women, it pushed that forward I think in a way that had not happened before because it did raise the question of harassment of black women by black men which had not been on the public agenda before or the agenda of the black community except quietly. Women themselves often talk about this. And it's not a secret in the black community but it's one of many topics that is not "discussed" because there's some way in which it is problematic or shameful or however that might be.

But this put it out there in the public so that it became a topic for discussion by anyone. And what we wanted to was engage in some sort of an informed discussion in the journal by people who were mature and should be able to offer some insights on it. And that's what we got actually. It was a good collection of essays that looked at this from many different perspectives and that took it on but not as a spectacle but took it on as you might take on a disaster or something like that. This is a serious thing that's happened here. We can't laugh at this. We need to talk about this seriously. And I think that's the way that discussion went.

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And so as we could push it anyway in the black community, which was that, yeah, this is an issue and although the white press is going crazy with it as a spectacle and it's on TV everywhere and it makes us as black people feel bad, nevertheless it's a real issue and it's one that we have to confront because it happens. This kind of harassment, a black man by black woman, happens and it happens to often. So as somebody in the black community and other people in the black community who felt similarly about it, this is why we felt like there's a way in which we can address it, which is to promote a discussion of this at a level that's above the gutter. And that's what we wanted to accomplish. And to take it seriously. This is a real issue. We're not going to say she's lying. No. No, no. We accept what she said and we accept what he did. That is not that we accept it. That is we accept that he did that and for whatever reasons that he did it, he in fact did it and so now where are we as a community? What do I have to say about it? That was the question that we were posing. Within it was the implicit notion that this is a problem in our community. And not just in our community. Harassment of women is not just a problem in the black community. We start with that. However, it is a problem in the black community and one that we should not be pushing under the rug, especially in a time when it's all in the public media now. We have something to say about this and we should say it in a way that others can hear, too. So that was our objective in putting that issue together. We thought here was an opportunity to intervene in a discussion that might otherwise just be everybody blowing off steam.

04-01:00:35

Holmes:

Did you receive any negative pushback for trying to promote that kind of discussion? Any negative pushback maybe from the community that said, "You guys are doing just as bad as the TV. In a sense, let's not address the issue. We should just keep this quiet."

04-01:00:57

Allen:

Well, unfortunately that was impossible and everybody knew that. So you can't just sit there and say nothing. That was impossible. And that was what we were confronting because everybody was coming out with an opinion. Every hack, every newspaper, everybody was coming out with an opinion on it but virtually nobody in the black community except black women. Some were saying, "Yeah, that's happened to me. Yeah, that happens to me on the

street all the time." And it was those voices that I was thinking we have to have something to say, "This happens to me all the time." What are we going to say? And that's where the idea came from, was that there were black women telling us and we had seen in our own lives as black men that this kind of behavior happens all the time and we should not condone it. And if we have somebody here who's standing up saying, "This is wrong," we should support that person and not harass them further. So that was the way we were thinking about it when we put that issue together and we didn't really know what we were going to get from people because we just asked them to write what do you think is going on here. And they were uniformly horrified by what had happened and what was being done publicly to Anita Hill on the TV because it was like a public assault on her not only by him but all the commentators, as well, at that time. Virtually nobody except white women and black women took her side. Nobody accepted what she said.

So we had to take a stand there and we did. I think most people respected the way we handled it because we took it as a serious problem. We weren't making jokes about it. We took it as a serious problem in our community and we gave our community, men and women, a chance to speak about it. I think it was one of the best things we did. It was an example of what I thought should be the mission of the scholar, which is to intervene in a thoughtful way about current social issues that affect our community. To intervene in a thoughtful way. And I think that's what we did.

04-01:03:40

Holmes:

Well, Robert, I wanted to also now turn to a book that we spoke a little bit about yesterday in an earlier session. *The Port Chicago Mutiny*.

04-01:03:53

Allen:

Yes, yes.

04-01:03:54

Holmes:

The story of the largest mutiny trial in US Naval history which you originally published in 1989.

04-01:04:00

Allen:

In *The Black Scholar*.

04-01:04:02

Holmes:

And so you were recounting that you came across this story, an interesting story, in a sense as a journalist first, which then, of course, blows up into not only your dissertation and everything that, of course, that then came after. Maybe recount for us again that kind of journey of here's a really good story that I wrote about as a journalist but I want to dig deeper and then now I need to find sources, et cetera. Talk about the growth of the project in that manner.

04-01:04:44

Allen:

Well, again, it was one of those things that came my way. When I look back on it I'm inclined to say, well, I think it was meant to come my way but who

knows. Why hadn't it come somebody else's way. Yes. At that point I had just moved to the Bay Area and I had published the first book and I was thinking about graduate school. But I was actually still writing for the *National Guardian* at that point and there was some article in the press. This would have been '67, '68. The war is still going on in Vietnam and there was an article in the press about sailors on one of the ships, US ships revolting and refusing to work or to do something. They asked me to see if I could find anything about this, anything like this ever happen before and you want to write something about it. The question was were these black sailors, were they being mistreated or what? We didn't know but we thought we should look into it.

04-01:06:03

Anyway, in the course of looking into that and not ever actually writing an article about that incident, as a matter of fact—but in looking through some files at the ILWU Library in San Francisco where I did the research, I came across a copy of that pamphlet that's in the Port Chicago book that has the big question mutiny, was this a mutiny? I said, "Well, what is this?" And it had a picture of a bunch of black sailors on the front there. And I thought, "Uh-oh, what's this? I never heard of this mutiny." And for a long time I never met anybody who'd ever heard of that mutiny either. So I began to doubt has this really happened? Is this a story somebody made up? So I went back through the *Chronicle* newspaper and I found it and I said, "Yes, it really happened and it was a huge disaster right up there where Port Chicago used to be." And that these black sailors had engaged in some kind of work stoppage, which is what I always called it. They said work stoppage. I didn't know if it was a mutiny or what but it was clearly a work stoppage. And that the whole place had blown up. So this is big. This is not some minor thing that happened here. Why is there nothing written about it? So that is when I began that research. I was just fascinated by this huge thing that had happened to the war and nobody had ever written about it. Everything else in the war had been written about. At least I thought everything had been written about. But no, here's another story. So that's what I saw. I saw, okay, well, this is what I'm going to work on here.

04-01:07:55

So I began the process. First of all, I located the trial transcript from the mutiny, which was in the Library of Congress. I got them to send me a copy of it, 1200 pages, and I read that page for page, all the way through, and I said, "This was a frame-up. This was not a mutiny trial. This was a setup and then these guys were framed for this. But how am I going to show that? How am I going to do anything here?" This happened back in 1944, two years after I was born. This is an ancient thing here. But I could not let it go. It was always in my mind. By this time I found newspapers that corroborated what had happened there and as far as the newspapers were concerned, these guys were accused of mutiny but nobody could actually find a mutiny. What they found was a peaceful protest where the sailors refused to go back to work loading

ammunition after the explosion. Well, that's a big surprise. But no violence. No violence by the sailors was ever reported. But they get charged with mutiny. Something's wrong here.

04-01:09:14

So that was the beginning of that research. And what was different about that was that it involved historical research, for one thing, and it involved a large group of people who had been involved in an incident. And then there seemed to be nothing written about it. I would have to go back to all the original documents to be able to even write about this. How am I going to do that? Where are these documents anyway? Well, none of them were in the Bay Area, although since my book has been published they have moved copies of those. The documents are now at the branch down here of the federal library. The national library has copies of it now. But at that time you could only get a copy at the National Library in Washington. You'd have to pay to have it made. So I did that. Had a copy made, read it, and studied it and began to realize that I wanted to research this. How do I find these people all these years later?

04-01:10:30

Well, you start where it's logical. They're in the military, there must be some military record. And that's where I started. I first went and got the names of the men, which are in the court record. All the names are there. That was no problem. And then I went to the Navy department as a scholar working on a research project and said I wanted to send a letter to these men asking if they would consent to an interview with me and I had found all of their addresses in the record, where they were living at that time rather. And I wrote letters to all fifty men telling them of my interest in writing the story and telling it truthfully and telling it fully and letting them know I wasn't trying to frame them because I'm sure they would be worried about that. But that I would be open to their point of view, whatever that might turn out to be. And several of them wrote back. I got several letters back because the men were deceased. And in the end I ended up interviewing I think seven that first time around.

04-01:11:51

I wrote to them. They wrote back and they said either yes or no. If they said yes then I wrote to them and said, "I would like to come visit you." By this time I was enrolled in graduate school. Had no money. I was not working for the *National Guardian* anymore. Somewhere in there I left when I got back to graduate school. So I really didn't have any money to even travel. And the only way I could do it was on a Greyhound bus. The only way I could afford it. Because for \$100 at that time you could ride a Greyhound bus for a month and go anywhere in America that you wanted to go for one month on a Greyhound bus. That was my ticket. That was the way I did it. I bought that ticket, went across the country. As it turned out, all of my interviewees were back east. Which is not surprising because at that time there weren't that many black people living on the West Coast and these were all draftees, so they were drafted from the East Coast.

04-01:12:58

And all of them, the ones who had agreed to be interviewed, basically told the same story, which is that there was this terrible explosion. There had been some worry among the sailors about the fact that the way they were working, which was always being pushed to be faster and faster—well, there's a war on. The guys overseas need these bombs right away. Faster, faster. But the sailors, whether they were black or white, were never trained for loading this ammunition. They were just told, "You go, you watch what the other guys are doing and then you do the same thing." That was the extent of training they got. So the sailors, all of whom were black who were doing this loading, were very worried about, of course, the danger of an explosion. But they went to work every day and they did the loading.

04-01:12:58

Except at this point where there was the bombs that were being loaded had the fuses on them. Most of the time when they loaded the bombs they did not have the fuses in them that would make them explode. The fuses were put in just before they were dropped. But there were some bombs that had the fuses put in and those were very dangerous and they were loaded last because they could be put on top and they could be done gently without dropping anything. And something went wrong there. Nobody who was close enough to see what went wrong lived to tell about it. But apparently the last load, which was these bombs that had the fuses in them, apparently that load was dropped or one of the loads that was going up with those kinds of bombs was dropped and that set off an initial explosion which then set off all of the bombs that were stored inside the ship because they were finishing up when they put those Torpex bombs in. Those were the last to be loaded, which means the whole ship was full of bombs. Boom. It goes off. A split second later the whole ship goes up. It's horrible, horrible disaster. Four hundred people. Hundreds die. Hundreds die.

04-01:15:42

Everybody has to come and do the clean-up. And, of course, the clean-up is finding bits and pieces of your friends scattered all over the base. It was customary in a situation like that where a unit of military has suffered a big disaster, where many of their members were wiped out, it was customary to give that unit of sailors or soldiers a break from the war for a while, a week or so, and give them a chance to recover because they just lost all of their friends. Well, not for these sailors, though. Not for the black sailors. They got no time off. They didn't get to go home. The officers did, though. The white officers got to go home. And this upset them because they've been through this explosion. They'd had friends die. They're horrified just like the officers. Why are they not given a week of leave or something to go home and see their families? So they feel not only have they been put through this terrible explosion thing, which some of them had warned was going to happen, because they knew that the way they were working was not the way to be handling these bombs because they're always being pushed to go faster, faster, take shortcuts. And none had been trained for the work.

So not surprisingly, when they are ordered to go back to work a few days later doing exactly the same thing with nothing changed whatsoever, under the same officers or other officers equally untrained—because the officers were not trained either. They just stopped. They just wouldn't move when they were ordered to go back to work. They just stood there. No violence, no yelling, no pushing, no nothing. And so the officers basically had them basically go back to the barracks and wait and they reported it in to the high-ups and they immediately began the process of accusing these men and charging them with mutiny for which they would be put on trial.

04-01:18:00

Initially there were several hundred of them who stopped and would not go back. But when the officers came back and said, "If you continue to refuse, you can be put on trial for mutiny," everybody agreed to go back except for the fifty men who were put on trial. And each of them had different reasons for not going back or for not working. Although basically it was the same thing as everybody else. "I'm afraid this stuff is going to go off again and the way we are being pushed by the officers makes it dangerous." And that was the grievance of the black sailors. Not that they had to do this work but that the way they were pushed by the officers led them to work in unsafe ways. And the sailors thought that that was probably a contributor to the explosion. Nobody knew for sure but it was a reasonable argument and a reasonable thing to be worried about because, in fact, there had been an explosion. So these are the guys who are put on trial, these fifty for mutiny.

Thurgood Marshall got involved because the NAACP heard about it and Marshall came out from New York to argue on behalf of the sailors. But because it's a military trial he was not allowed to intervene directly. But it was also a public trial so he was allowed to sit in on the trial and hear the testimony, which he did and which he wrote that pamphlet that I had found. The pamphlet that I had found all those years later in that file in the library of the Longshoreman's Union. Thurgood Marshall had written it and this is about what he found when he went to the trial and the fact that these sailors had not committed mutiny. There was a work stoppage but there was not a mutiny because one of the things a mutiny implies is use of force. There was no force whatsoever used by the sailors. None whatsoever. So that was that story and eventually it has played out all these years because those sailors are still convicted mutineers. Up until this past year we've had survivors and we always hoped that we would eventually get those convictions overturned so that they could get honorable discharges, even if they were now dead and we have not been able to get it in the, what is it now, twelve years we've been working on this and we still have not been able to get even Obama to sign off on a presidential decree declaring that these men did not commit mutiny.

04-01:21:02

Holmes:

Who have you been working with in those efforts?

04-01:21:04

Allen:

All of our local people here in the Bay Area. Primarily the representative from, what is it, Contra Costa County where Port Chicago is located. So it was George Miller when Miller was there and now it's the new person. Before that it was whoever it was. We've also gotten support from the entire California delegation. Barbara Lee has supported us. Almost everybody on the California delegation has supported us and we keep going to Congress and Congress doesn't do anything. And as I said, we haven't been able to get any action from the president, too. But we're going to keep trying. We're going to keep trying. And every year we try to think of something different to do to bring it to the attention of whoever's president.

04-01:21:57

Holmes:

Yeah. I was going to ask. In regards to the contributions, I mean, not only is this an amazing story that was long overlooked, particularly in its relation to the United States and World War II, but of also thinking of the African American experience in World War II. The history of World War II now highlights what was called the Double-V campaign. The victory abroad against fascism and the victory at home against racism, which that war represented to the African American community. Where do you see this, the Port Chicago story fitting in with that?

04-01:22:44

Allen:

The Port Chicago story is a part of this larger story that you just described. Very definitely. But what you see about this thing is that it's a part of the story not because anybody was organizing this. It's a part of the story because of the oppression that the men served and the mistreatment that was done to them in this work. That's why it happened and that's what happened in almost all of these instances of mistreatment of soldiers and sailors of color. It's almost always something that they can be charged with, of some sort of misbehavior which was actually maybe in resistance to a crazy order. But all of them knew this and all of them at various times in their career in the military, I'm sure almost all of them came to points where they had to make that decision. "Am I going to do this now or am I going to say no?" And people said no. Or rather people said, "Yes, I am going to do that." But in this case they said no because it was so clear that if there was a disaster hundreds of people would be killed. This would not be just one or two people getting killed by one bomb. This would be hundreds of people being killed by an explosion that was the magnitude of an atomic bomb. Really. And so good reason to be afraid, especially when your officers are acting in this manner where it's clear that they don't really care about your life. So it's different from a situation in combat because the people always said if you're in combat you have a chance. You've got a weapon, you can defend yourself. You may get shot but you at least can fight back against a visible enemy. When you're loading these ships there's no enemy. There's nobody to fight back against. But there's always the danger of an accident for which "nobody" will be to blame but it's going to kill us all and we'll all be killed, no doubt, when that happens. So it's just an entirely different magnitude that this represented for the soldiers and for the

sailors on the ship, which is that it would be a disaster that would kill everybody. There would be no survivors. And that's what happened. That's exactly what happened. Everybody was killed.

04-01:25:22

So if you see that happen and you realized that that was what would happen if there was an explosion, you know, "Mm, mm, un-unh, I'm not going back to doing this. No, no. Jail is better." But, in fact, it became a contest that would turn the Navy around. It would contribute to that process. Because by this time there was already all kinds of criticism coming from people like Mrs. Roosevelt, for example. Criticism of the military's continuing segregation of soldiers and sailors of color during World War II. And, in fact, it was beginning to change in the Army and finally also in the Navy. Both departments and other departments of the military had begun experimenting with a little bit of integration. You know, we'll integrate the crew on one ship and we'll see how that goes. And they would do that and it would work out okay. But then they wouldn't integrate the rest of the ships. They would just stop. "Oh, okay. It can work. But we're not going to do it now. This is the middle of a war. We're not going to do it now." Well, eventually they had to do it now. They integrated during the war. The Army actually went first and then, by the end of the war, the Navy was integrated. So much so, ironically, that when the sailors who were put on trial and convicted and put in prison for participating in a mutiny, when they were finally released after the war had ended, guess what? They were assigned to go back to work but on ships for the first time. They were actually put on ships as a part of the crews and sailed off into the Pacific to unload ammunition. [laughter]

04-01:27:22

But this is what they had hoped for and expected from the beginning. I mean, as simple as that sounds and also as deadly as that sounds, but this is what they had been expecting and calling for in that work stoppage. Just give us a chance to serve like every other sailor. Okay. Just give us a chance to serve. And look what it took to get that chance for these sailors, anyway. This horrible tragedy. But the tragedy at least, in the end, we can say that it led to a good outcome because it was a step. It was a step in the process of desegregation because after that the Navy—even the Navy realized it was stupid the way they were doing this with untrained sailors. It was absolutely stupid. But what a thing. What a process to go through to learn that lesson. What a loss of life to bring about to learn that lesson. A lesson that seems so obvious if you just stop and think. Yes, we need to have these guys trained and, yes, we don't want to have racing and competition in loading ammunition. No, that's not good. Even a child can figure that out. But the Navy could not.

04-01:28:48

Holmes:

Well, we're going to return to the Port of Chicago book in our last session because I want to talk about also the overall aftermath that this helped contribute to in regards to the national memorial that is now there.

04-01:29:02

Allen: Yes.

04-01:29:04

Holmes: But I want to turn to now joining the faculty at UC Berkeley. Now, you were hired as a visiting assistant professor in ethnic studies and African American studies I believe in 1993.

04-01:29:19

Allen: That sounds about right. Ninety-two or ninety-three. Yes.

04-01:29:21

Holmes: And in 2003, then you were promoted to a full adjunct professor. Discuss how this opportunity arose. How did you get—

04-01:29:32

Allen: How'd I get that?

04-01:29:33

Holmes: Well, not just how you got that but how did you finally decide that it was time to return to the classroom?

04-01:29:38

Allen: I was hired at Berkeley because, who was it, Carlos Muñoz was going to teach a course one year. He was not going to be able to teach something. And somebody said, "Hey, call Robert Allen. He's working right down the street. Maybe he can come up and teach that class." *The Black Scholar* office was four blocks away from campus. And they knew about us. Of course. Each of the departments—some of their people had published in our journal so they knew about us and they knew my work. And by that time I had the master's degree. So I was invited to come up and cover a course for someone. I think it was Muñoz. And so that was the first course I taught. Then a year later I was invited to come in, do another course. And the courses were in both departments. One time it was African American studies, another time it was an Ethnic Studies class. And that went on for a couple of years and somebody said, "You know, we've got some courses here that Allen might be able to teach regularly." So I was asked to do that. But all of this as a visiting professor. So they said, "Can you do that?" I said, "Sure, I can do that." Because, hey, *The Scholar's* paying nothing. I'll take whatever you've got." So I was never actually offered a job there. I just was invited to come in and teach classes from time to time and finally it got up to be a full load. But at that point I looked around and I said, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I'm teaching full-time here now and I don't have any benefits whatsoever because visitors don't get benefits. I don't have any benefits and I'm doing the same work as everybody else around me. Something is not right about that."

04-01:32:00

And went and talked to a lawyer who was actually, Fania Davis, who was Angela's sister. And she said, "You should first of all write a complaint about

this and request that you be considered for a regular position. And that if they refuse that, then we've got a basis for legal action." And that sounded right to me. So I went back and I wrote this long statement of what I've just described to you, the process being how one course, one course, and then finally a full load and just like regular faculty. And the dean was there and had decided—that's part of this meeting, because it was at a higher level than the department. Dean is there now. The dean looks at this and says, "Well, yes, I think we should do something about this," and they offered me a full-time job, full benefits, including retirement and healthcare. I got a nice boost in salary. Not quite up to everybody else but pretty close. And so that's what I accepted. That was my first appointment, a regular position, although I had been teaching there for two years at least. If I hadn't said, "Will you appoint me to a regular position?" I'm sure they never would have. Why? Why do that? I didn't quite say it this way but I let them know I had a lawyer and that I was doing what I was doing on the advice of the lawyer and that therefore there would be some possible legal consequences if they didn't do something about my situation here because clearly I'm being exploited and the departments are really getting away with it because it's coming out of their budget and it's very little. I'm sure they were not happy with me applying for a full-time position at regular pay but they had to support it because it was clearly unjust what was happening. I was being exploited.

04-01:34:36

And because of the intervention by the dean, who could have done the whole thing on his own anyway, he offered me a position then. As I said, there was a regular tenure track position, full pay, full benefits which I happily accepted. By then I was already a member of both departments. I mean, I was coming to meetings, I was teaching classes for the last two years, three years. So it felt like it was a place where I wanted to stay and continue teaching. I liked the two programs because they were different approaches to ethnic studies or black studies, a variety of faculty there, interesting people teaching. It was a great time to be at both departments. So I wanted to stay. I was happy to stay and continue teaching there and I continued to work with *The Black Scholar* as well. But it came as a result of having to finally to say to them, you know, "You're exploiting me in this situation and I'm not going to take that anymore."

04-01:35:57

Holmes:

I wanted to ask that. What were your impressions of the environment at Berkeley, especially in comparison to your teaching positions that you had had at San Jose State and Mills College?

04-01:36:10

Allen:

Entirely different. [laughter] A different world altogether. Let me show you something here, if I can find this. Just a minute. A photograph.

[Side conversation deleted.]

04-01:36:26

Holmes:

I was just asking you to comment on the differences in experiences and environment between Berkeley and—

04-01:36:37

Allen:

Yes, yes. I was also an outside agitator. Before I was on the faculty I was an outside agitator at Berkeley because of the *Bakke* case which came up, which was a case about affirmative action. It was before the Supreme Court. There were student demonstrations going on. And one of the student demonstrations took place on the Berkeley campus, Sproul Plaza, in April, I think, 1977, before I was working at Berkeley. [referring to a photograph] So I came there as an outside agitator to speak on the campus and there's actually a photograph of me in this pamphlet. Haranguing a crowd at Sproul Plaza in April of 1977 about the *Bakke* case.

04-01:37:32

Holmes:

And that's you there speaking behind the microphone.

04-01:37:35

Allen:

And that's me there haranguing them. And I'm purely an outside agitator there. I had nothing to do with the campus at that time. I was certainly not employed. But there I was up there haranguing the crowd on Sproul Plaza. So I feel honored by this. How many people have a photograph of themselves haranguing a crowd at Sproul Plaza. [laughter] But that was a big case at the time and the students at Berkeley played a big role in that demonstration. I was happy to be a part of it.

04-01:38:20

Holmes:

So how did coming to Berkeley and your teaching experience there, how did that compare to San Jose State and Mills College?

04-01:38:30

Allen:

By that time the departments were much better organized. Remember, I arrived at San Jose State when the department had just been formed. They had just hired their first chairman and they were developing the curriculum and so on. The enrollment there was smaller, too, in the department. So it was a more intimate feeling for one thing, because the faculty's small. They gave us a house somewhere right there on the campus. So we felt like a small community of scholars who were working together here for a couple of years. But the direction of the department was not clearly fixed because all of us were at that point thinking about, well, what should black studies be? What should we be doing here? But it was an interesting time because we were thinking about those questions and in a small department where we could meet and consider various alternatives. But I left them before the department was fully developed, although it did in fact become a regular department there. Lenny Jeffries was the first chair of it when I was there.

But years later I was invited to come back if I wanted a full-time position there. But that commute. It's a fifty-mile commute. It was just getting to be a

little much for me and by then I had gotten an offer at Mills, as well, which was also a commute but closer.

04-01:40:12

Holmes: Which is a good point to make because by the time you show up at Berkeley African American studies as a field is much more matured and developed.

04-01:40:24

Allen: Yes, yes.

04-01:40:25

Holmes: The departments of ethnic studies and African American studies at Berkeley as well as other institutions are also much more well-developed and established. In a sense you're not pioneering and inventing the wheel at this point anymore.

04-01:40:43

Allen: No, no. This is a different—

04-01:40:43

Holmes: You're participating in a much more established discipline.

04-01:40:47

Allen: Yeah. This is, what, five years later and by then dozens of departments had been established all around the country. It's almost like a movement, an academic movement here. But black studies departments were being established on virtually every campus, including by then San Jose State and ethnic studies, Chicano studies in particular, was following close behind and also establishing departments, especially places like Berkeley where there was a significant Chicano student enrollment. But the way it played out is that in most cases there were black studies departments established but where there was significant populations of Hispanics there might be a Chicano studies or an Hispanic studies department established, as well, and Asian studies on the West Coast where there's a large Asian population also became a department. Native American studies has been around for a long time but it's been segregated at Indian schools and so you didn't even know it was there. But Native American studies have been around for a long time.

04-01:42:04

Holmes: What were your observations and thoughts on the reception of ethnic studies? Broadly speaking, the larger umbrella, you know, of that department and African American studies there at Berkeley? So you arrive in 1993, which, again, is over twenty years after many of these departments are established. By the time you showed up at Berkeley was it a welcomed and accepted core department?

04-01:42:37

Allen: Well, I don't know if it's welcome even now but it's certainly accepted as a legitimate department and it has proven itself with publications, books, journals. It's an established academic department now, as is Chicano studies.

And Native American studies, as I said, has been around even longer, actually, at the so-called Indian colleges and at some bigger colleges, too. By '77, '80, most of the battles over whether the departments are legitimate or not, that was done. It was legitimate. It had taken the route that every academic discipline takes, establishing journals, establishing departments. It was established. There were still arguments against it, though. Departments like that are almost inherently anti-racist and so they come in with a perspective that might be a challenge to some of the other faculty. That is always an issue. There is always an entrenched racist element somewhere in there on the campus and they're going to object to a black studies or ethnic studies program.

04-01:44:09

Holmes:

What was your interaction with the students at Berkeley?

04-01:44:13

Allen:

Oh, it was great. I loved it. I loved working with the students. This took me back to my student days and being a student activist in the Civil Rights Movement back in Georgia in the—what was that—fifties, sixties when I was there driving around in that car with the ham radio outfit going to the demonstration gathering places and mobilizing people and taking people here and there and marching myself. That's what I saw a lot of in black studies. Not quite so much of the on-street activism but activism of the mind. Thinking, thinking at all times about new possibilities, new ways of seeing the world, and that's what was exciting about black studies. We could look at history, our own history, and see it in an entirely new light. That's liberating. That's a fantastic thing to be able to do, to actually reclaim your own history in that way. And then the excitement that the students feel studying about something that is connected to their lives, even if it happened 150 years ago. It has something to do with where they are today. That's a big thing for black students and Chicano students who are told they have no history. They're told, "You come from slaves and agricultural workers. You don't have a history." Not true. So it's a tremendous boost to the self-esteem of students of color, which means also that they do better in the academy because they feel better about being there and they really want to do well.

04-01:46:05

And it's at the point now that it cannot be rejected. It has brought something new to the campus, not only a new population but new ways of thinking and seeing the world and it has really heightened and improved the educational process by making it broader and more inclusive. The more people who we're able to include in our education the better it becomes, I think, because populations require teachers and the teachers should be people who come from those populations, if possible, because they share some of the experiences of the students and that's something that also happens with this process. That not only do you get students coming into schools where they were not welcome before, but you get teachers there, too, who are bringing different perspectives, maybe even different ways of teaching to a school that

has otherwise been basically the same for all these years. So I think that black studies, ethnic studies is a boon not only to black students and students of color but to all students because it gives everybody a different way of seeing things, a way that is valid but different and it also introduces you to a new body of history that you never knew about before and a new way of looking at who you are and where you live. What's this country? Where am I? All of that is possible because of the presence of the ethnic studies and black studies programs and now women's studies programs on campus because they enable us to have a broader world, of our world, especially the social world, the people who are around us and in which we live every day. It gives us a much deeper and broader view of that world.

04-01:48:11

Holmes:

You know, I was going to ask you, because it's that same contribution is—and I believe it happened right around the time either that you first arrived at Berkeley that the administration made an ethnic studies requirement for all undergraduate majors.

04-01:48:30

Allen:

Yes.

04-01:48:31

Holmes:

Was that right around the time or a little bit before?

04-01:48:35

Allen:

I think that was about that time. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm not sure. But I thought it was a good thing they have some sort of requirement like that because the students don't know. If everything was left up to the students, we know what they would choose. But students choose tough subjects because they are required and when they do those tough subjects they see a different world and they see a world where they can accomplish things that they thought they could not. So I think that's one of the things that the required courses do or should do, is to enable you to see something that you otherwise would not see that will be helpful to you.

04-01:49:27

Holmes:

When you arrived at Berkeley and then where you taught for nearly another twenty years you were there at Berkeley. How have you seen the curriculum of, say, the ethnic studies department and the African American studies change? And here I'm thinking of ethnic studies really because of the development of these fields. That you were able to have a more kind of comparative discussion, I mean, of looking at the African American and the Chicano experience and putting them together and allowing students, as well as other scholars, begin to think about both of those experiences in different ways. Was that also going on in the—

04-01:50:11

Allen:

Certainly at Berkeley, yeah, because we had all of those departments there and all of those students there. I don't know if that was true on smaller campuses.

And not only did we have all those departments but in the same building. [laughter] I mean people had to meet and have interaction with each other outside of the classroom as well as in the classroom. So that requirement, I think, is a good thing because it introduces students to a new aspect of their own world. And it enables them to interact with other students and faculty who exist in that world and I think this is part of the process of, number one, maturation in a multiracial society such as we have here and also of developing new skills, interaction skills, skills for interacting with people who are different from you and feeling comfortable with that because you're in a class together and you get to know people and you get to feel like, "Oh, these are not aliens. These people have the same needs and desires as all of us but they have a different way of speaking about it, maybe a different way of looking at it. But basically the same." So that's a good thing because this is looking at our common humanity here and I think that in order to see the common humanity you have to see the common humans, the people who are that humanity. And we do that through classes. We do that through meeting and classes, having discussions and through working together on projects, academic projects of one sort or another. And I think this is the value then of this kind of interracial interaction in a large or small environment. Same thing could happen in Mills, too. But it gives us that chance to be more than who we are. That is, we can be like other people. We can have some of the experiences of other people. We can be more than what we are now. That's what ethnic studies opens up. In a way it's like what literature does, too, I think. Literature opens you up to all kinds of new worlds. It's just that you can't talk back to them and you can't have a discussion with them. You can read them but you can't have a discussion. Ethnic studies gives you the chance to have a discussion, sit down and have an argument with somebody who's had a very different experience from you but is sitting right there beside you and able to talk anytime. [laughter]

04-01:52:53

Holmes:

Well, Robert, I think that's a great place to leave it today and we'll pick this up in our last session.

04-01:52:59

Allen:

Okay.

04-01:52:59

Holmes:

All right, thank you.

Interview 5: June 5, 2019

05-00:00:10

Holmes:

This is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is June 5, 2019 and I'm sitting down with Robert Allen for his fifth and final sessions for his oral history and we are here at his house in the beautiful city of Benicia, right next to the water. Robert, thank you so much for, again, taking this time in these past couple of sessions to share your stories and experiences with us. I wanted to pick up where we left off in our last session, in which you were talking about, of course—I think we left off with your experience of teaching at UC Berkeley and I wanted to continue that strand of talking about your scholarship that you continued to write throughout the years and also in conjunction with your work at the journal of *The Black Scholar*. So maybe we should pick up with your 1995 anthology *Brother Man: The Odyssey of Black Men in America*. Maybe start by telling us what was the genesis of this work and how this got off the ground.

05-00:01:21

Allen:

Yes. Well, this was at the time when I was still working with the *Guardian* newspaper but we moved to California. Things were operating out of California. I was teaching part-time. But when I was living in New York I had met another writer, African-American writer living in Harlem, Herb Boyd, who was both like myself, a journalist and a freelance writer. We became friends and saw each other at a lot of the same news events. And we had a common agent. By this time I've gotten a literary agent. Marie Brown was her name and she had an agency that had been around for some time, working mainly with black writers. And she had been talking with a publisher about doing a book on black men and is this something I would be interested in and perhaps doing it with Herb, because Herb was also a known writer and had been writing about gender issues, as well. So yeah. I liked working with Herb and we said we'd do this. And they gave us pretty much free reign in terms of choices we would make and how much space we could have. It ran to almost a thousand pages when we finished and we thought, "Oh, my God, are they going to actually publish this or what?"

The idea of the book, though, what I liked about it and what I had proposed was that we organize it around the lifecycle so that when we have a way of looking at men's lives and following them through the course of their lives. But we were going to use available literature. So essays, stories and so we weren't asking people to write anything new for this. We were going to use available literature, which there's quite a bit of out there. And it was great fun working on it and making selections and reading this material. We had so much material. Much of it is really great stuff but, of course, we couldn't use all of it. So we made selections looking at the lifestyle of early relationships, work, growing old. You know, the cycle of life. So that's how the book is organized. And it gives us a very effective way then of looking at things

comparatively, too, because we're looking at men at different stages of their life and their relationships.

05-00:03:51

And it was fairly successful. It did well. It came out in paperback. It's still in print as far as I know and was used in a lot of college courses because of what it did. It gave you the experience, a chance to present literature here and look at something that is also talking about real life people, the real lives of actual people here in many cases. They're autobiographical as well as being created.

It was a good experience working with Herb in this, too, because we had a great time doing it. It won a couple of awards and it's still in print and I'm very pleased with how it's done. And it was a good experience, too, because it gave me a chance to get away from the sociological and look at things a bit more close-up, personal and to organize this in a way that we thought it might be helpful to men in getting through their lives, black men getting through their lives and relationships. A book like this might be helpful.

05-00:04:56

Holmes:

I mean, there's not just like, say, on one hand, an academic contribution. But you were also looking at African American society on the popular front.

05-00:05:06

Allen:

Well, yeah. In a way this has always been true of my writing. I don't think of it so much as a contribution I'm making. I don't even think of it so much as, okay, what tradition am I in here? I discover these things as I go along but that's now how I go about thinking about it myself. I look at it and I see experiences and I see experiences here that I want to make some kind of sense of. And writing is one way of doing it. Working in social movements is another way of doing it. But it's about making sense of our experiences here and the experiences of others in order to make sense of our lives and I think this is a task we all have and we do it to some extent, each of us, and it's something that I have been intrigued with trying to understand, that life path and how there's so many different patterns for doing it in anybody's life and it's just a tremendous source of creativity. So that was how I came at it, this way of looking at the lifecycle and how each of us goes through that cycle and what can we say, what can we learn from this? There's no psychological or sociological analysis there. It's like a book of materials for such {inaudible} analysis. But it's so powerful to read and you make of it what you will. But it's so powerful to read and I think it's really helpful to men and women to have something like that to browse.

05-00:06:51

Holmes:

You also published a book, I believe, a couple years later in 2001, *Strong in the Struggle: My life as a Black Labor Activist*.

05-00:07:00

Allen:

Yes, yes.

05-00:07:01

Holmes:

And this is an oral history with Lee Brown, who was a prominent labor leader in the south and west in the post-World War II era. Discuss how you got involved and what interested you in this project.

05-00:07:16

Allen:

Yeah. Among the social movements I've been interested in of course is the labor movement and so I've made a point of getting to know people in the movement, labor movement, especially those who have been around for a while and can talk about the history of it. And that was true with this fellow Lee Brown, who was a member of the LWU and he was there in the final years when it was beginning to decline because of the mechanization of the ports and getting rid of all the stevedores. Lee Brown had been an organizer in New Orleans, too, of the longshoreman's union there, which was very powerful, as well as here in San Francisco. And it was just a story of his life growing up in the south and basically elementary school education and a life completely devoted to the labor movement, first in New Orleans and then when he came up to the West Coast in San Francisco.

And he's one of these guys who was just a true stalwart in the struggle. He's always there. He comes to every demonstration. You can always count on him. And a hard worker. A hard worker. So that was the kind of man my father—reminded me of my father a lot. Maybe somebody my father might have become. Working class, not well-educated, but he knew which side he was on always in these struggles and he fought hard for the rights of working people, especially black workers. And that was a very powerful thing to write and I didn't realize at the time that I was writing it that it would be one of the last books about that union because it's gone, basically. Mechanization of the port. Longshoremen. There are no longshoremen out there anymore. The longshoremen are all dead or retired and in Vallejo. That's where I see them.

05-00:09:33

But I knew that that was happening, that that process of decline of that union, the change in the technology was happening. But to see its effect on the actual people who worked there and what it meant. It was the end of their lives in a way. The work they had done, the union itself. So it was an important story to capture because it's the last moments of a great union and somebody who worked in that union for most of his life. So I was happy to be able to do that and to have an opportunity.

And we published it and it did reasonably well. It's not so much how large the sales are but where the sales are. Are we getting sales in colleges? Are we getting sales in communities? Are we getting sales here? I want the sales to be as broad as possible rather than as many as possible and I think that's what these books have done. They've reached communities, they've reached college students, they've reached ordinary people. And a book like this, *My Life in the Struggle*, was one of the last stories about a great union. And I

didn't know at the time that that's what it would be but it has turned out to be so. So I'm certainly glad I had the chance to write it.

05-00:11:01

Holmes:

I wanted to ask you, connected to that note of getting out into the world and finding the stories. Again, when one is trained as an academic scholar that's not always discussed or always pushed. That's at least not the first place that we're taught, say, in graduate school. However, I wanted to get your opinion. Because you've done that with a lot of your work, of being out in the community and finding those stories. Was that kind of an influence of being a journalist before you were, I guess, an academic or is that also a piece of sociology, as well, because sociology is also very much—

05-00:11:47

Allen:

Sociology, as well, yeah.

05-00:11:48

Holmes:

—getting into the community.

05-00:11:51

Allen:

The kind of sociology I studied at the University of California and Anselm Strauss and Virginia Olesen, that school of sociology, their whole focus is on what we call qualitative studies rather than doing a lot of statistical work and mechanical relationships with the computer. You instead are telling stories and trying to work out what is the meaning in this story from a sociological point of view, various social points of view here and enable your students to be able to do that, too, to ask these kinds of questions. The social meaning of what we see going on here. And that's what I learned in graduate studies at the new school and at UC San Francisco, was qualitative research methods, which are very akin to journalistic research methods and so there was quite a lot of overlap there. And it worked well for me, too, in terms of doing my research because this is what people want to talk about. If you go out and start a conversation with someone they're going to tell you a story about their life and it'll have some meaning for them and some reason that they are telling it to you now and if you can figure that out you may be able to make some sense of this story and what it means in their life in conversation with them and what it might mean in the lives of people around them, as well.

05-00:13:23

So that the notion then of seeing storytelling as a way of building our mental and social realities is part of what we are doing when we do this kind of sociology. Looking at people's experiences and helping them and ourselves to make sense of it and write it in such a way that other people can see the sense here, as well. So it's not exactly the most hidebound type of qualitative sociology that we see in a lot of studies, which is also valid without a doubt. But this approach enables you to get a better understanding of motivation, what are people's motivations in doing certain things or what do they think their motivations are and then what is the outcome here and what is the meaning for the larger groups around them. So I like doing that kind of

sociology because it's very close to what I'm doing as journalism, too, and the same kind of observations are valid in both cases. So it didn't take long when I started doing journalism to realize, "Wow, I just did this story here of so and so but there's a lot more behind this story and I would love to know it sometimes." And occasionally I got to know it. And that was the blessing of working as a news reporter, is every now and then I came across a story and said, "I've got to do something more with this."

05-00:14:54

Holmes:

Well, on that same note, a few years later, after your book on Lee Brown, you worked with the Carter family. It's a 2003 book honoring Sergeant Carter and family's journey to uncover the truth of an American hero. And this is about Edward Carter, Jr., who was among one of the very select few African American recipients. He was a soldier, I believe a veteran of World War II who also received the National Medal of Honor—

05-00:15:24

Allen:

Yes.

05-00:15:24

Holmes:

—from President Bill Clinton. Discuss how you became involved in this project.

05-00:15:31

Allen:

[laughter] Well, I got a call from a member of his family and he was at that time deceased. He had died recently and he had gotten the Medal of Honor posthumously. And she was telling me about this story and how she had all this material on his life and didn't know what to do with it and could I offer any help or advice. And I said, "Well, let me come down and have a look." She was living down in Southern California. "Have a look at what you've got there." And I went down and she had all this stuff collected from Eddie's life. And stories and things that she had attempted to write about it. She had been trying to tell the story and had done a lot of research herself. And I became fascinated with the guy because he had fought in all three phases of World War II and I'd never heard of anybody else who did. He fought in Spain. He fought in Europe and he fought in Asia and all of the wars leading up to and including World War II. [laughter] I said, "Who is this guy? How did he manage to get into all of this stuff?" And he was a true hero of World War II that nobody had ever heard of. Never. And the reason is the government didn't know what to make of this guy. He is fighting everywhere on the US side but who is he really? And they began to suspect that he was a Communist and they never really trusted him and he didn't get that Medal of Honor when he was still alive. It was only after he died. Somebody else had to come along and discover the story and make sure he got that medal. But he was a suspected Communist and that's what they did. His service to the country was never known, never appreciated until after he died. And that's the story. That's the story that I tell here. Just this incredible person who fought. His whole life was devoted to defending his country, defending it. He was the

ultimate soldier. He was always soldiering but he got totally stepped on by his country, as well, and that's what you see in the story.

Fortunately we all lived long enough for the country to see that and to correct it and they did eventually before the book came out. Gave him the Medal of Honor which he had earned and which the records showed that he had earned but he had never been given. To give him that Medal of Honor and to bring his name into the record as a person who served honorably, not some sort of suspected Communist. He was never a Communist. Never involved in social movements.

05-00:18:56

Holmes:

Going through the book, I always wanted to ask you on that front. Do you believe race played much more of a role in him not receiving that medal and that recognition, particularly if we're looking at the two, three decades right after World War II versus communism?

05-00:19:21

Allen:

Yeah. I think it was the same mentality that was at work with the Port Chicago sailors. The inability to see these men as human beings the same as you are. Meaning if you were white. Human beings, the same qualities, the same strength as you have. But it just seems to be an impossible thing to do for this society. And it almost always fails. But that was what I was saying. I was saying, "God, this guy has done everything you could possibly ask him to do for his country and they've turned their backs on him. They turned their backs on him. How is this possible?" Well, unfortunately it's possible when you're black and it happens all the time because they cannot believe that you have the same qualities and strength as whites do and therefore the same value as a human being. But it was a great, for me satisfaction to be able to write that book and to be able to come to the conclusion that this man was not a criminal or a dog. He was a hero. He was a hero for this country in three different wars that were going on at the same time, one after the other. He was there for every one of them and he was a hero in every case. What else do you want? That was the question there. And, again, the satisfaction there was being able to bring his name out of the mud, which is where it had last been seen and to identify him as a true hero to World War II. A true hero. And we have no reason to suspect him of anything. Anything that would have been contrary to his country. Not a thing ever. But they did. They did suspect him. What can you say?

05-00:21:26

Holmes:

Well, then, right after that, I mean, which is on a very similar note you in 2011 co-edited a book again with Robert Chrisman as well as Charles Henry on the Obama—

05-00:21:45

Allen:

Charles Henry. Yeah, mm-hmm.

05-00:21:45

Holmes: The Obama phenomenon toward a multi-racial democracy. Discuss how this project arose.

05-00:21:51

Allen: Well, with the election of Barack Obama as President, that was something we were quite interested in and we did a number of issues around aspects of his presidency because we saw this as an opportunity for us as scholars around the country to ask the question what does this mean, what does it show in terms of possible opportunities for advancement, what does it tell us in terms of how the country might be able to change. There was a lot of reasons to be hopeful with that election.

05-00:22:26

Holmes: And this is with your work with *The Black Scholar*. Is that correct?

05-00:22:30

Allen: Yes, right. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. [laughter] Yes. Clearly we saw some special issues in there on aspects of his administration, which we published. And so we were very happy to do that. It gave us a unique opportunity in a place in history to be able to be the academic journal that really reports on this thing that has only so far happened once in our lifetime, the election of a black person as president and what that might mean to the country and to the world. So we did a number of issues that related to Obama and connected to him and then we published this book. Sorry. And then we published that special issue and eventually a book, *The Obama Phenomenon: Toward a Multiracial Democracy*, which was a book that was co-edited with Charles Henry. All of those essays there had come from *The Black Scholar* and been published over the years of the Obama Administration. This was 2011. It was a time of not euphoria but of great hope that we had a president here who was a different kind of person, who himself had much more worldly experiences than many of us had. Had himself been raised—he was raised in Hawaii. He was a man of wide experiences and coming from a family which is descended directly from Africa. He has a connection with Africa, too, that a lot of black people claim but, yeah, he's got it. He's the son of an African. So it was a time of almost euphoria when he was elected and a lot of hope that this meant the country was finally turning around and willing to treat African Americans fairly. So we thought. So we thought.

05-00:24:54

But there was always one voice in there that we should have paid more attention to and that was Trump. When he started that campaign saying that Obama was not an American, that he was not born in the United States. That was the beginning of his hatred for Obama which continues even now.

But to put that issue together was, again, a kind of a landmark thing for us because it gives us a way of making a statement or gives our community a way of making a statement because there are many voices in that book we put together. I've got it over here somewhere. We put together these anthology

issues but this is like a super anthology where you can do it as a book and you get much greater variety in it. And we wanted to have something that would be a memoir of his administration and what that was like so that that would not be forgotten. We had a feeling that he would only be one or two terms and we wanted to be a part of that and help to leave something of that legacy from a scholarly standpoint. It's a book that was sort of called by the times rather than something that we said, "Oh, let's do this book." It's kind of, "How can we not do this book now?" [laughter] How can we not do a book assessing Obama?

05-00:26:31

Holmes:

Well, I wanted to ask. What do you recall of your feelings and observations of when Obama was elected? As someone who grew up in segregated Georgia, segregated Atlanta, who also witnessed or at least heard about in a contemporary manner of the death of Emmett Till, which I know influenced you and impacted you significant, what do you remember of Obama's election and how did that move you?

05-00:27:09

Allen:

It was a great moment, without a doubt. The idea, first of all, that he would run for office. First people are thinking, "Who is this guy and how does he expect to get elected?" But as he continued and as other people gathered around him and as Michelle—he's got a great wife who is a tremendous asset to his presidency. She was more and more appreciated, as well. I think they were a wonderful political couple to see in action because they are very graceful people but very political at the same time and able to deal with the hard knuckle stuff if you have to deal with that. But for the most part they are people who prefer to work in the light rather than in the shadows behind the chairs. But to work in the light and to assume that we all want to work in the light. And that's something new. What? Politics in the open? What are you talking about there? But the thing is that if politics is about building a society, if that's what it's supposed to be about, then we should all be able to talk about all of these things and talk about them reasonably. And I think that was something that was an underlying notion in the Obama presidency. The whole notion of the reasonableness of what we're trying to do here and how it is reasonable for actually all Americans to participate. But there were people who, from the beginning, did not believe that and, of course, Trump was one of them.

05-00:29:00

But he brought a new spirit of caring. That may sound silly but caring, C-A-R-I-N-G, for the country and for the people of the country as a president. He brought that to the presidency. And I think everybody felt it. People felt this young man was really concerned with what happens to America and Americans. And that he was willing to sit down and talk with all of us about that and what we can do. And that was a new kind of President because he wasn't a father figure. No father figure. He wasn't a general. He wasn't a multimillionaire. None of those things. He was actually a very regular

ordinary guy except that he was black and he had a degree. That made him extraordinary in this country.

But to be able to write about that and then to put it into this anthology, writing about him, that was our task. How could we not do that? By that point we know what we are here for now. When we started the journal we weren't quite sure but by that point we knew what we were doing here. After having to deal with Clarence Thomas, then we were very happy to be able to deal with Obama and to in fact show him as the man, the quality and caring that he is and always has been apparently. And it's a surprising thing. People keep waiting for him to break down or do something wrong and he just doesn't. [laughter] He just doesn't. So you've got to accept that. This is who the guy is. He's a good guy and what are we going to do about that? We going to support him or we going to let him fall?

05-00:31:11

But we got through that and now we're on the other side of that dealing with ogre here. I think Obama will be back in some way. I don't think he's going to run for office again but as a senior person in our culture. I think he and his wife represent that for the next ten or twenty years, that they will set a standard for morality and concern in this country that we haven't seen before. So I still think that they both will be around in the future. They both will have a political role to play and we will appreciate them.

05-00:32:03

Holmes:

Well, I wanted to move on next to the Port Chicago memorial. We talked in our last session I believe about the book you wrote on Port Chicago and the mutiny and how that arose. And that book ultimately led and helped with the cause to I believe create an actual national memorial there recognizing the Port Chicago mutiny. Discuss how you got involved in that and your observations. I know this wasn't an overnight process. I know this was more of a lengthy process that started in the 1990s and then I believe was expanded and made official by President Obama in 2009. But discuss your observations of that journey as well as your own involvement.

05-00:33:02

Allen:

Yes. That actually started back in the—what was it? I think it was 1976 was when I actually first became aware of that story. I have a copy around here someplace. But we published an issue of *The Black Scholar* on Port Chicago. I think it was 1984. And I had been working on the story since about 1976 or '77 because I discovered the story when I was in graduate school at UCSF. It's really strange. In graduate school in New York I came across that story, the events that led to Port Chicago and in graduate school at UCSF I came across the history that would become the Port Chicago book.

You know, but I kind of feel like if you keep your eyes open you will see things that you could work with. Anyway, that's what happened. This is when we got out to the West Coast. I'm writing stories on the longshoremen's union

and Lee Brown's story and I'm at the longshoreman library one day and browsing through there. There had been a story in the press about some kind of riot or something on a US ship during Vietnam and I was trying to find some report on that to see if it was true and then what was going on. And in going back through those files of ILW, lo and behold I come across a pamphlet written back in the 1940s. It was barely there. It was beginning to come apart. But it was there. The pamphlet was all readable and I could make a copy of it and it was the story of Port Chicago, the explosion, the so-called mutiny and the trial of the mutineers and the fact that they were all given these hard terms, long terms. And that this all happened back during World War II.

05-00:35:22

And I think back on what I know of World War II and what I've read and I think, "I never heard of anything like this. Nobody's ever talked about this Port Chicago. Where is it anyway?" Is it near Chicago?" No, no. It's a little town called Port Chicago here in the Bay Area. And when I realized that, that it's here in the Bay Area and that these stories about it, this pamphlet had been written, of course then I go to the library and look in the newspapers to see if anybody had written about the story and it's the front-page news everywhere. On July 17, July 18, every paper in the country has this story on the front page. Explosion at Port Chicago. Hundreds killed. And I realized this is an incredible thing that happened in the middle of the war and that this facility at this nowhere place called Port Chicago is hugely important to us because that's where all the bombs and material are going out for our troops in the Pacific. Most of it went through Port Chicago. Hugely important base. So for it to be shut down for a few days after the explosion was a cause for concern because that means that weapons and material is not going out to our troops.

05-00:36:45

But I wondered where is the book on this? I looked in the library. Nope, nothing's been written but it's on the front page of every paper. Nothing written about it. So of course I say, "I need to look into this. I need to find out more here." And that was the beginning of the research that I would do and it so happens that it coincided with enrolling in graduate school at the UCSF. When I enrolled there I really didn't have a subject for my research but within less than a year I did have a subject and it was Port Chicago. And the way I worked it was that the sociology department there is also at UCSF a qualitative sociology as opposed to quantitative sociology. They were interested in looking at things of process. What processes do people go through in making decisions? How do they act when they make a decision? We were looking at social interaction rather than counting how many people vote this way or that way. So I realized it's a perfect research project for this program that I'm in and they all like it immediately.

However, I found no survivors in the Bay Area and very few people that even remembered the story. Very few people at first remembered the story. But the ones that I met confirmed it and then I decided, well, if there was a trial there ought to be records. I got to get all this stuff. Well, there was and there is and it's all back in DC in the archives there. So the first thing I had to do was

arrange to get a copy of the trial, which is like 1200 pages and I got that from the National Archives. Everything was declassified by the time I came along and it was all available to researchers. I read the trial transcript and I realized there's something really badly wrong here and somebody needs to write about this and I guess I'm it. Nobody had heard of the story, nobody remembered the story. It was like a forgotten episode.

05-00:39:13

So I started working, first getting the trial transcript and from the transcript I got the names of sailors who had participated in the work stoppage. The Navy department agreed to give me the addresses of where the men lived at the last time they had contact with them, which was back in the 1940s and so a lot of the men were moved or deceased. But I managed to get hold of about ten of the men who had been there in the work stoppage and were still alive and those were the people I interviewed for the book. And to a man they told me the same story, which is that there was no mutiny. That is, there was no plan to stop working. But that the aftermath of the explosion, the shock of that and then the hope that they would get some liberty time to go home, see their families, or to get out of this for a minute, which the white sailors were granted. They were granted thirty days leave to go visit their families. The white officers and the white sailors who worked around that base got leave. The black ammunition loaders did not. So injustice after injustice here. So they're quite upset by that, is that they're treated unjustly, unfairly when compared with the white sailors who were there at the same time. They were all there at the same time. Why'd some get leave and others don't?

05-00:40:49

But in any case they were all put on trial, the fifty of those who engaged in the work stoppage, which was originally over a hundred. Fifty of them said they're not going back, period, and they were the ones charged with mutiny. And all found guilty, as you know, and given long prison sentences of, I think, fifty years initially but those were eventually reduced. Because the war ended almost immediately, because we're talking late 1945, the war ends and so the sailors were released at that point and did not serve out the remainder of their time. But they were required to serve out the remainder of their time in the service of the military. So they got what they had been thinking they were going to get all along. They got put on ships and they got to be real sailors. [laughter] And so after going through this horrendous explosion and being charged with mutiny and serving time they finally, in the last few months of being in the US Navy, they get to get on a ship and be a member of the crew, just like anybody else. Just like the white sailors. In fact, they finally meet white sailors they can talk to because everybody has the same rank and everybody's in the same situation. Basically guys who come from poor families and this is how they're surviving in the military.

05-00:42:24

But that was such an incredible experience, as well, because it was like having a conversation with the past, with the people who participated in all this, finding them and interviewing and finding out what happened was just so astonishing to me. And so angry making, too, though. It just made me angry.

How could that have happened? Well, we know how it could happen. Racism is alive and well. But it, in fact, though, turned out to be one of the key events that turned the military around and led to the general desegregation of the military in the months after the war. The irony here is the Navy, which was the most segregated of all, was the first to desegregate. [laughter] That's the irony. And it was because they were the worst. They had a revolt and that's why they had to desegregate. But, in fact, everybody desegregated but by 1946 something that half the white people in this country said could never be done was done in a matter of months with no problems. No problems. Once the orders came down from on top saying this is what we're doing now, that's what they were doing now. No doubt about it. So that was, again, just a powerful experience for me to go through that with the men who had gone through it fifty years ago. And to see how much it was still affecting them because it was clear that they were still upset about what had been done to them and that they felt that justice still wasn't done because to be released but not pardoned or to be released and not getting exonerated, it meant you're still guilty but we're going to let you go. And the men were never guilty. They were never guilty. So there should be not just a pardon, there should be an exoneration, which is what we're pushing for now. Exoneration means we're going to remove the charges altogether. It's as though you were never charged with this crime, which is what they should do because it was not mutiny.

05-00:44:59

Holmes:

Well, in 1994 a memorial there at Port Chicago was created in a sense to pay tribute to both the event as well as the men. Were you involved in the creation of that?

05-00:45:15

Allen:

Yes, yes, yes.

05-00:45:16

Holmes:

Could you talk a little bit about that?

05-00:45:17

Allen:

Well, by that point I had met Reverend Diana [McDaniel], as we say, who is the head of our committee, the Port Chicago committee that's defending the sailors now and attempting to get the convictions overturned and them fully exonerated. We have a committee that's working on that and has been for years. There are about five of us who pulled that together back in what would have been the nineties, the early nineties, what, 1994. From the beginning we worked with the Parks Department and the Navy Department because, of course, by now there's completely different commanders and a different model and a different role for these institutions anyway. So it was like having a fresh start. Though when I went over there the first time there were just one or two people I met over there at Port Chicago who remembered the explosion. But everybody had read about it and knew about it. These are among the officers that I was talking to. Because I went over there as soon as I found out where the place was and that they were still in business, I went over

there to talk to them. [laughter] And I got a good reception. I explained what I was about, what I was doing and what I've just explained to you and they were curious basically. They were curious about did this really happen, how could it have happened and what was the outcome. Whenever I tell people this story that's the response. How could this have happened and what was the outcome? And so I've been able to bring a lot of people along and every time the story's told, every time it's put out there in any way it generally brings people along to say this was a great injustice, it shouldn't have happened, we should make amends. Everybody says that except the President. So far we haven't been able to get a President to say that. But we're going to keep working. We're going to keep working.

05-00:47:43

Holmes:

Well, if I'm correct, in 2009 didn't President Obama sign a bill or a resolution that expanded or did—

05-00:47:55

Allen:

No, it wasn't. That was something that he signed but it was not a clearing of this. Bill Clinton also basically exonerated one of the sailors. Okay. Because only that one person had applied for this and so he only exonerated the one even though everybody else was in exactly the same situation. I don't understand that. And Obama's was not an exoneration. It was basically some kind of pardon. But as we say when we talk to people, is the pardon says you did something wrong but we're going to forgive you. These guys didn't violate the law so there's nothing to forgive them for. The only thing to do is to exonerate them and say, "We're sorry. You shouldn't have been charged with this." That's what exoneration is. A pardon is the other. It says you did wrong. We're going to pardon you and we'll forgive you.

05-00:48:57

Holmes:

Well, maybe I'm also thinking too, here, that the Park Service as well as the Obama Administration I think—did they expand the site for the memorial?

05-00:49:08

Allen:

Yes, yes. What they did, which we were appreciative of, of course, is that they are creating a memorial space there for remembering the history of that place. So the explosion and the other aspects of the history, too, that they want included. And that's fine with us. This is being done by the Park Service so this is not the Navy or the military doing this. This is the Park Service, who have played a very good role here because they've managed to get a parcel of land there on that site, which is still in business, by the way, still in business. A parcel of land there that will be devoted to remembering the history of that base, including the explosion. So that's how we are working with the Park Service and the Navy is cooperative. They're not attempting to stop anything from happening up there. They've been quite supportive, including allowing the setting up of some memorial plaques right there at the site of the explosion, which is right where they're still doing the loading. And in general civilians cannot go out there. In order for us to have an event there we have to

get special permission. We have to get the names and addresses of everybody that's coming and give it to the military ahead of time. And that's how we can have events right there at the site. Otherwise we have to have the event somewhere else a few miles away. So it's still a hot spot because it's still a hot spot. It's where the ammunition is being loaded and shipped overseas. Even now, as we speak, that's what they're doing out there. It hasn't changed. And so obviously they are not going to let civilians get too close to the hot spot but they do let us come out there one day a year for a memorial event.

05-00:51:11

Holmes: Which is, I think, it's coming up this July.

05-00:51:15

Allen: Correct.

05-00:51:16

Holmes: Which will be the seventy-fifth anniversary.

05-00:51:17

Allen: Seventy-fifth. Yeah, yeah. And I have such mixed feelings about that because on the one thing I had been hoping that the seventh-fifth anniversary would be one where we would celebrate the exoneration of the sailors. I felt so certain that that was going to come. I thought surely we're going to get that from Obama. I tell you, I really thought we were going to get that from Obama. But we didn't. And we're not going to get it now unless Trump does one of his clownish kind of things and says, "I'm going to exonerate those sailors," you know, just to provoke people, the kind of things like that that he likes to do, you know, provoke people. But I don't think we're going to get a serious exoneration until we can finally get a president in there who says, "I'm going to do this." Because the Congress isn't. The Congress is too divided. And you're divided can't do something like this. It will take a presidential action and the president has the authority to do this. We just need a president in there who will do it. So I'm waiting to see who that president is going to be.
[laughter]

05-00:52:33

Holmes: Well, I wanted to ask. Many have credited your book of playing a very significant role in not just sharing the story but also in creating the memorial, in creating that impetus among many people to do this type of work and also to create the memorial. What are your thoughts on that? As a writer you're always looking to not just share a story and you hope it has some effect. And here is real life proof that your story had some serious effects.

05-00:53:08

Allen: Sure does, yeah. I have been completely surprised. I never expected this story, anything like this to happen. What I thought I would be doing was sort of writing about community struggles, the stuff I was writing about for the *Guardian*. I didn't think that it would be some big historical event that might grab my attention and then pull me in that direction but that's what this is.

Although it has meaning for the president, as well, because it's a story about what happens when you mistreat people, when you mistreat people on the basis of race and put them in a work situation where because they are lesser beings they can do the more dangerous and dirty work. That's the mentality, this thinking about this. And it's another version of the classic racist mentality that we've had in this country for so long, which is the idea that people of color are less than white people and therefore it's okay to endanger their lives, to treat them less well. All these ideas that {are carried?} about that. So to be involved in a challenge to that, as this has turned out to be, I feel like this is a good thing. I mean, I'm happy that this has happened. I feel proud of it. I still feel such sorrow and shame for the country that it happened though. I mean it's a shameful thing that happened. And that the country still has not admitted that. The president, the person who should be able to say, "We're sorry. These men did not commit a crime and we're going to put that in the record books." The president should be able to say that and it should be done. But no, we haven't had yet a president who would do that. So the test is still there before the country. We'll see the next time around what happens.

05-00:55:24

Holmes:

Well, I wanted to move forward here. And you retired. You retired in 2012. Not just retired from UC Berkeley but also retired from *The Black Scholar* after many, many decades. I mean, in both cases many decades of work.

05-00:55:41

Allen:

Many decades.

05-00:55:43

Holmes:

Many decades of work. Discuss your decision to retire. You've dedicated at least over forty years of your life to the field of African American studies, to work that was important to the community as well as yourself. They often joke that some academics and some scholars, they have a really hard time letting go and retiring. What was your decision process in deciding that it was time to go to the next stage of your life?

05-00:56:24

Allen:

Ah, yeah. Well, it is a next stage in a manner of speaking. On the other hand, I see it as also a continuation. I will continue to write and research. I can't say at this moment what it might be about but I'm expecting to continue writing and researching and at the moment, though, I'm completely caught up in the process of passing this on to history at this moment because of all the material that I've got to hand over and the files and so on. But I expect to continue writing. As you can see, the topics that I am going to write about I cannot predict in advance. [laughter] I can't predict them in advance but I have a feeling that this is not the end, that there will be more writing. And it'll be a surprise to me.

05-00:57:27

Holmes: Was there a struggle over that decision or were you comfortable with it? That, no, this was the time and I'm still going to continue to do my thing.

05-00:57:36

Allen: I was comfortable with it because, as I said, my way of looking at it is not that this is the end. This is simply another transition here for me and there's nothing I have done if it hasn't been transitions through my life entirely. So it's not unexpected. It's not something I particularly worry about. It's just something I think is—this is the pattern of my life. As long as I live this will be the pattern. There's no reason to think that it's going to change but it's an unpredictable pattern, too.

05-00:58:17

Holmes: Speaking of next projects. You had floated and played with the idea of doing a biography on C.L. Dellums, who was a porter with A. Philip Randolph in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

05-00:58:37

Allen: Right. I did that.

05-00:58:41

Holmes: Have you finished that work?

05-00:58:43

Allen: Yes, yes.

05-00:58:45

Holmes: I didn't see it on your CV. That's why I'm asking.

05-00:58:46

Allen: It should be here. Wait a minute. Hmm.

05-00:58:59

Holmes: I didn't see it in your CV. That's why I—

05-00:59:01

Allen: Another lapse. See. One of the things that does happen when you get older is you have lapses.

05-00:59:09

Holmes: All right. Can we put this in—

05-00:59:11

Allen: You can count on that.

05-00:59:12

Holmes: There it does. It actually is not the current project.

05-00:59:13

Allen: Exactly.

05-00:59:14

Holmes: It's done?

05-00:59:15

Allen: I finished it after I retired. [laughter]

05-00:59:18

Holmes: After you retired. Yeah, let's see if it's—

05-00:59:20

Allen: What's the date in there?

05-00:59:22

Holmes: Oh, it's 2014. So this was just a few years after that.

05-00:59:27

Allen: Yeah, yeah.

05-00:59:27

Holmes: Well, let's talk about this project before we move on to your reflections. Obviously A. Philip Randolph is a name that is found much throughout African American history and American history.

05-00:59:45

Allen: But in Oakland Dellums is a name that's still known by many people. Many people. Not only because of Ron Dellums, who was the nephew of this Dellums, but because people still remember C.L. Dellums. C.L. Dellums was the labor leader in Oakland for many years because he was the head of this Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union, which was a wonderful union.

05-01:00:11

Holmes: Well, it was a very powerful—it was one of the very first unions for African American workers. Yes.

05-01:00:14

Allen: And a very powerful union. Right. And he was the organizer and the person who ran it. He has a fascinating story to tell of his life. Born and raised in Texas and then came up to the Bay Area and got involved in the labor movement and became the head of this union. I like the story because it's a real kind of basic bread and butter kind of story about building an organization completely independent. And in a way it's a model for African American organizations and has been and was for years because how do you run an organization so that it can stand up to any opposition and have a source of income that will enable it to remain independent? How do you do that? Well, the labor movement has shown us how you do that and this is what Dellums was doing. Following the model of this labor movement. Organize a union of the workers, build a structure of leadership for that union, and then press management for changes to better the lives of those workers. That's what Dellums was doing with the Sleeping Car Porters Union. And he could do that. He could build a union there and not in other places and Lee Brown

could build a union on the waterfront for the same reason, which is that these workers had regular employment, had regular wages, and in a way there was a contract, even if it wasn't written. There was a contract between the employer and these regular workers like this, the brotherhood workers and the longshoremen. Because, number one, they are essential workers. In order for commerce to along you need these people to be doing that work. And they are working for powerful corporations, the railroads and the shipping industry, that can actually afford to pay more. So it's not an unreasonable demand at all to be making. And thirdly, this is the core of the black population, the working class. Most black people are working class and to be able to have working class leadership then of our civic organizations and our unions is very important. So that class base and mentality is always there.

05-01:02:58

And this is what Dellums, I think, really understood and why he was able to build this union. Because he understood that in order to have improvement for the black community we had to have organizations within the community that were actively pushing for those improvements. Not just civil rights organizations but every organization. So labor organizations, the churches, any kind of independent organizations within the community have a shared stake in the advancement of the community as a whole and this becomes then the basis for people like Dellums being able to get the brotherhood to work with people in the community, to get the support of the community in order to do what they're doing in the railroads. It's a way of thinking about the workforce as embedded in the community and therefore you cannot organize the workforce without organizing to some extent the community, at least to support these workers who are doing this. And Dellums knew that. And so he was a great organizer. He didn't alienate the very people he was trying to organize. He didn't alienate them at all. He drew them together. And this made him a great organizer and a very respected man and he had great success.

The first contracts with these railroad companies were made by this union. So there are a lot of lessons here not just for African Americans. But if you think about it, the labor struggle and the idea of having unions that are rooted in the communities and therefore that increases the power of the union, things like that can help in a union. In a union. And so there are lessons here that I think African Americans have learned that are valuable and helpful to others, as well. And that's the way it should be.

05-01:05:15

Holmes:

Well, I'm glad we got a chance to discuss that.

05-01:05:18

Allen:

Yeah. There's some others in here I don't think you know about either. Let me see here. Oh, here's one.

05-01:05:25

Holmes:

Well, I was going off your CV.

05-01:05:28

Allen: That one's the most far afield ever. Went all the way to Europe to write this. [laughter] You ever seen it? Nancy Cunard.

05-01:05:38

Holmes: Oh, we talked about this last time.

05-01:05:47

Allen: That's about as far afield as I could get. [laughter] And it's the same story over and over again. I discovered it. Where'd you find it? I found it in a trunk in somebody's attic. How do I find these things? I just ask. [laughter] I just ask people. People know you write they always want to bring you something they have they think should be written about. And you know what? Sometimes it should. [laughter] So you've got to pay attention to all these people because you never know which one's going to be bringing the story. And that's my approach to writing actually. Everybody has stories. Every single one of us has stories to tell about our lives, about the things that have happened. And those stories, the reason they stick with us is because they have some meaning for us. And if they have meaning for us they have usually some meaning for others, too. And that begins to make the links and to make maybe a story. Because my story is always more than just my story. It's the story of everybody who has come in contact with me. So it's always a bigger story than just ourselves. And more things are happening than just to ourselves. And to be able to write about that is usually worth it. Even if you don't sell the book it's worth it just to write it. [laughter] You tend to understand more. I know that doesn't pay the bills but, hey, it makes life fuller.

05-01:07:41

Holmes: Well, that's nicely put. That's nicely put. Well, Robert, before we end I wanted to get your reflections and thoughts a little bit. And maybe to start out, what are some of the accomplishments you were most proud of?

05-01:08:02

Allen: Well, one of them is definitely the anti-war stand because that one was a real political statement and there was a real risk associated with it. And it took a lot of thinking about to figure out that, okay, am I ready to go to jail? Eh, have to work with that. But that's what it came down to. The idea of making this kind of a sacrifice. Not because I was afraid of going. I mean, I was just opposed to that war. I said we shouldn't be there. We shouldn't be killing the people there. We shouldn't be having our children kill there. This is insane. And that was it. That was my real feeling about it. And I didn't want anybody else to go. I was trying to stop the war. Not just stop inductions, stop the war. And it was just very powerful for me because being a part of a people who are unjustly treated every day, to see another people who are even poorer than we are being bombed back into the Stone Age supposedly was a horrible thing to see, to experience. Even if it's 9,000 miles away, how can my country be doing this? If it's my country I got to try to stop this. And that's what it came

down to basically. It's just totally inhumane what they were doing. So those of us who join the anti-war movement and the draft resistance movement I think had those kinds of feelings in common. And that's what we were trying to get the country to understand, that this was the wrong war at the wrong time in the wrong place all together. And a shameful, shameful war, too. Shameful war.

05-01:10:31

Holmes:

You were also involved early on with the struggle for civil rights. How did that experience of being involved in that impact the life that you lived afterwards and to also see the change that that brought, particularly as we were just speaking of someone named Barack Obama? Barack Hussein Obama, right, being elected President.

05-01:11:05

Allen:

Well, the Civil Rights Movement came out of the experience of growing up in Atlanta and at first it was a paradise for me. Hey, this is my world. Until I discovered that, no, just a tiny bit of it was our world and not even really ours and the rest of it belonged to somebody else. Oh. Oh. Okay. Somebody that didn't like us. And that was a shock to me actually because I grew up in the bosom of the black community. You can't be safer than that. [laughter] And it was such a shock to realize that no, that's not the world. This is the little bit of the world that you live in and you're privileged to live there. I always thought it was a privilege to be black because look at what I have here. This is a great community. But the Civil Rights Movement I learned that no, it's not a privilege, that you're paying a price for this and, number two is your life can be in danger at any point, at any time. For no real reason they can just kill you, which is what I learned from Emmett Till. You know, you can just be shot and then they'll pretend nothing happened.

But I didn't know that there was something you could do about it or that you should try to do about it or anything like that, though, until I started meeting the college students. In high school we didn't talk about this. But in college that was topic number one because by then the movements had started in the north and in the south. My place in this was constantly changing because from feeling safe in my own community, now I'm beginning to feel nervous because we don't know actually who's doing what here. And the thing about the criminology, which they are always putting on the African Americans, oh, your community is just filled with crime, crime, crime. I started hearing that and hearing—where is this crime? Where is all this crime that we supposedly have? I wasn't experiencing it and I didn't know anybody who was but that was the story, all this crime.

05-01:13:35

But anyway, the contradictions, living in a safe place, what is a safe place. Seeing that you're part of this world but it's just a small part of a much bigger world which looks a lot more dangerous. These things began to make me nervous as I get older because I'm becoming more and more aware that there is a much larger world over which we as black people don't have any control

but we have to live within it. And that was the shock of segregation. It did not occur to me until I was in high school that we were in this community not by choice but by force. I mean, I'm born there so I don't have any choice but I'm born there because my people are there by choice, I think. But that's not what's going on. We're there by force and that's the way it's going to be. But how does this work? Why does it work this way? I don't know where that came from. You know, except I think a little bit of this came from my father, though, in a curious kind of way. My father was a mechanic. He was a good mechanic when he wasn't drunk and he taught me a bit about mechanics, fixing things and so on. And, in fact, what I learned from him is that if you have the right knowledge you can fix almost anything. And I saw him do it time and time again. And I think a little bit of that way of thinking sort of spilled over into my social thinking, as well. If you can just understand what is really going on here you can fix it. Well, you may or may not be able to fix it. In the social arena you may or may not be able to recognize it. You can't say for sure. But that idea that these things are fixable, that this is not God given or given by some immutable natural force but is given by the way we set up our interactions with each other and those can change. They have changed over history.

05-01:16:09

At first it was a very unsettling thing, this thought of being at the mercy of other people and other communities. But I gradually came to terms with it by seeing the movement, what people were doing. I was more of an observer in the movement than an active participant. I never got beat up or hit or anything like that. Partly because I was in the car driving around with my little radio talking to people and finding out what was going on here and here and reporting back so that I wasn't actually out there getting my head beat. But I knew about that. I knew what was actually going on and that this is the price that so many have paid. But that also this is the price we have to pay if we want things to change. We have to be willing to put ourselves on the line, whatever line that is, but be willing to take some action. And this is where I think we were different from our parents, because our parents had come to some sort of terms with it. There's nothing you can do to change it. It's in God's hands. All of these kinds of rationales, you know. But the young student generation coming along and I think almost everybody who saw those pictures of Emmett Till, they said, "No, we're not going along with this anymore. No more. No." That event turned so many people around because so many saw it in *Jet*. It's just astonishing when I think back about that. Because parents were hiding those pictures from their children. They didn't want them to see how horrible it was. But there I was delivering it to their doors. Large contradictions like that.

05-01:18:09

Holmes:

If you think back from your childhood and then you compare it now, are you astonished with how much things have changed or do you think things have not changed enough? What is your observation of that?

05-01:18:21

Allen:

Well, actually, I am astonished. I am astonished. I think it's changed more than a lot of us thought it would change. We were so used to gradualism and getting so little for so much effort that it's hard not to believe that's the way it's going to continue. Okay. Things will get better but it's going to be very slow and it's going to be very gradual. And that was the approach that we in a way were taught to expect growing up in the South. That if it changes, it'll be very slow and it'll be very gradual and can't do anything about that. So to see it change so fast—if you live long enough everything seems to happen fast. But that really did. I never would have expected, well, to be living like in a place like Benicia. Never would have expected that. I never would have expected to be able to go to Columbia or San Francisco, University of California San Francisco. Wouldn't have thought those places would have been open to me. And it was not until I was really in college and saw that change could happen, but that it would take courage, it would take a willingness to put yourself literally on the line and it would take working with other people. And all of that was asking a lot. But people were ready for it. I think people were ready for it and I think it had a lot to do with what happened to that child who was killed. Nobody could get over that. Nobody could get over that, what they did. And it was in a way wanting to avenge that that was, I think, a motive for many of us at the start, too. What can we do to avenge what has been done to him? Well, we didn't get to avenge anything but we got to change a lot and that's good.

05-01:20:56

Holmes:

Well, you were just mentioning as a young man growing up in segregated Atlanta to coming to California, to not only going to Columbia, as you mentioned, to earning a PhD and then becoming the author of numerous books. Was that something, as you were growing up, that you thought was on the horizon or it's something that you—

05-01:21:23

Allen:

No, no.

05-01:21:25

Holmes:

As everybody says, "When I grow up I'm going to do X," right. Did you see that in the cards at all or—

05-01:21:34

Allen:

I was always a kind of a dreamer. I did things like build model airplanes and build ham radio stuff. Nobody else was doing that. Although I always found one or two friends who were interested in it and wanted to do it and we'd form a club. [laughter] Which I think is typical not just in my case but I think that's true for a lot of people, that the way—well, social organization, of which a club, an informal club is one form of social organization. But I think social organization is key to our growth, all of us, to our growth as individuals. We have to be connected to other people and see what they are doing in order to understand what our own possibilities might be. And the students who were

just one generation ahead of me, not even one generation, they were just one step ahead of me in terms of classes, I could see what they were doing. They were out there on the streets putting their lives on the line and getting things changed. And I said, "This is what I want to do." What I wanted to do was to be involved in changing things somehow. But I never had a clear idea on how to do that and I still don't. But I know that I like to be involved with anything that's about change. Change for the better. And I'm ready to join up.
[laughter]

05-01:23:13
Holmes:

Well, much of your career was also contributing to the field that became known as African American studies. And if we think back to your first teaching, you know, college teaching assignment at San Jose State I would say the field has changed dramatically and come a long way. What sticks out in your memory of the development for you? Looking at the field today versus when you first started teaching your first class at San Jose State, what changes really strike you?

05-01:23:48
Allen:

Well, one of the things I like about it is the quality of young people who are being attracted to the field. And teaching at Berkeley, which is a PhD program, I loved working with our graduate students because in them I saw myself at that age but I saw them as having many more possibilities, too, because we're so much farther ahead. We have departments, we have journals in terms of black studies. Anybody interested in black studies, there is actually a field out there that's now fairly well defined, has journals, and has an academic foothold and acceptance, acceptance for the most part. And I'm happy to see that happen and I'm really happy to have been a part of it. And I encourage the students who are coming through now to understand that this didn't happen just because some of us decided to get out there and do it. This happened through a lot of work and struggle and this is your heritage here now. And that there's a lot of opportunity to make contributions in the form of discovering knowledge, in terms of writing, in terms of creativity. Lots of terms, lots of possibilities for making contributions. So the work in building this discipline has been very, very exciting because you never quite know where it's going to take you. And I certainly don't know and I've been in a lot of different ways around this thing. But there's an excitement there because what we're doing is new. What we are doing is exploring a field that never has been explored before. And that's exciting. That's exciting when you stop and think about that and realize that it means that you're sort of on the forefront here of intellectual thought, academic advancement. And that boosts the ego a bit. And it also feels like this is something I need to take seriously because this is hope. This is hope for a different future and it's one way to arrive at that future through knowledge, knowledge of human beings, knowledge of ourselves. And that's what the discipline is about, I think. I think it's about self-discovery and it's about self—what is the word I'm looking for? Self-development. Becoming as much as you can be. Becoming your best self.

That this discipline offers that for the people who choose to be involved with it and I think this actually is true for all disciplines though. It depends on what it is that interests you and how you want to study it. That's what the disciplines are there for. But some of them have a more direct connection with our personal lives, I think, because we're struggling about what's happening in our personal lives, the lives of our families, the lives of our communities. And so it feels like it has significance, social significance.

05-01:27:35

Holmes:

We, of course, stand on the shoulders of others, particularly in academic disciplines. Are there scholars who have passed that you wanted to recognize?

05-01:27:38

Allen:

DuBois. I love DuBois. He had a lot of contradictions, too. But the guy just kept going. He's my role model, somebody who's just doing this because it's there to be done and he gets satisfaction out of it. Obviously he got a lot of satisfaction out of it. I don't think he made much money. But that's the other side of this coin, is that it's not just a struggle, it's not just hard work, but it gives you satisfaction. It gives you the satisfaction of feeling like you're contributing something to society or to a certain group of people or to your own children, making the world better for your own children, whatever that might be. And that's satisfying. That's something that enables you to move forward with some hope.

05-01:28:36

Holmes:

Well, Robert, is there any final thoughts or reflections that you would like to add before we end?

05-01:28:41

Allen:

[laughter] Well, I feel very blessed to have been able to have this life. I know so many others, friends who are not here now who didn't have that chance and I hope that this will make a better world for my children and for all children really. I mean why shouldn't everybody have a chance. But you got to be willing to do it on not a lot of money. [laughter] That's the only drawback. You don't get much money doing this. You get a lot of satisfaction, though, and that's why I do it.

05-01:29:30

Holmes:

Well, thank you so much for your time, Robert.

05-01:29:33

Allen:

Thank you, Todd.

[End of Interview]

Afterword: Act Like a Man

One of the most powerful social change experiences I had was working with the Oakland Men's Project. OMP was founded by a small group of men, including at that time Paul Kivel, Harrison Sims, Allen Creighton, and Heru Nefera Amen. Paul was the author of a powerful book entitled "Men's Work" that challenged men to examine the roots of male violence in their lives and personal relationships, especially violence against women. Paul was aware of my writing and I felt a connection to his work and OMP. Basically, OMP organized role-playing workshops that enacted various scenarios in which a confrontation escalates into violence. They showed how male violence was rooted in male attempts to dominate and control women, and to perpetuate, often unwittingly, a culture of violence among their own sons. This resonated with me in my relationship with my father. OMP led consciousness raising workshops for men and boys. I enthusiastically volunteered to learn to be a workshop leader.

The workshops were held anywhere an audience could be found – schools, colleges, churches, prisons, workplaces, and so on. There was no charge for the workshops.

The purpose of the workshops was not to make men feel guilty, but to empower men to change their behavior. Since men as sons are often victims of violence by their fathers the idea was to make the "son" in each of us conscious of the meaning of their own experiences and to interrupt the process of passing along the violence to their own sons and to the women in their lives.

Since OMP had no big funders (Paul donated the income from his book) renting an office and keeping the organization afloat was a big challenge. One of the best things that happened for OMP was when the Oprah Winfrey Show called and invited OMP to do a workshop on her TV show. It was a scary thing to do since the workshop would be real with real participants and no script. It could have been a disaster but it went incredibly well.

Unfortunately, anti-male violence work is not popular in American culture and it didn't exactly catch on. Not that we expected it to. There are powerful forces at work in American society that require men, especially men of color and working class men of all races, to be violent and keep women subservient as the men go off to fight wars on behalf of U.S. imperialism.