

**Interviewee:** Dr. Von Washington, Sr.

**Interviewer:** Scott Brent

**Location:** Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, MI

**Date:** February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015

**Transcribers:** Meredith Edwards, Scott Brent, Andrea Johnson, Melissa Acosta

This interview was reviewed and edited by Donna Odom, Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society.

**Scott Brent:** Very good. Well, my name is Scott Brent and this is me conducting the second interview with Dr. Von Washington, Sr. at Kalamazoo College on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

**Dr. Von Washington Sr.:** All right.

**SB:** Dr. Von Washington, I'd like to start with some questions about your time at the Air Force.

**VW:** Okay, good.

**SB:** That's very good. Awesome. Can you clarify the dates you were in the Air Force and where you were located?

**VW:** Yeah, I started in 1961 of July, I believe, I went into the Air Force. I'm from Albion, Michigan. And my first assignment was, after basic training, I went to Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls, Montana. I stayed at Malmstrom for, I guess, slightly under five years. Left Malmstrom, and

went to Vietnam and spent a year in Vietnam. The final eight months of that year, was at Saigon<sup>1</sup>. And then I left there, came back to Colorado Springs, and after Colorado Springs I went to Europe for five years. It was after I left Colorado Springs, that, well, no, after I left Europe, I came back to the United States and got out of the Air Force.

**SB:** Very good. And while you were in Colorado Springs, Europe, Montana, how did your time abroad inform your understanding of U.S. race relations?

**VW:** Oh boy. I'll tell you. When I left Montana, I was still under the understanding of what life was like from being a black American male, now married with two children, in the United States of America. I left there going to Vietnam and what Vietnam gave me an opportunity to do was to reflect on my life. But I had started taking college classes when I was in Montana and I realized very soon that I knew nothing about the African-American experience and so I started taking a look at things that were happening in the world of folk like me. Fortunately, I took a class. I'm trying to make sure that I remember where I was when I took the class. I took a class in Shakespeare. I may have the place, the exactly, the base, scuttle butted right now, and I'll, I'll clear it up later, but I took a class in Shakespeare. And taking this class in Shakespeare, I took it because I was studying English. I was cross-training into journalism to become the communications person, and so I was trying to improve my knowledge of words, my vocabulary and so forth. And I took this class and it was an African American teacher teaching Shakespeare. Now this was very, very odd to me. I had never had an African American teacher since integration in the United States of America. Before that, all of my

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<sup>1</sup> Ho Chi Minh City, commonly known as Saigon, is a city in southern Vietnam famous for the pivotal role it played in the Vietnam War.

teachers were African Americans. And when integration came they sent me to Dalrymple in Albion, Michigan and after that I had no black instructors. With the absence of black instructors, all references to my life as an African American went away. So I finished high school and so forth. I never read a book, nobody ever used any, any reference to African American anything. I read one book when I was in high school. It was *Silas Marner*<sup>2</sup> and he was a recluse kind of guy, but I liked Silas Marner because he seemed to be an outsider like me, but I never read a book about African Americans. So, leaving Montana on the way to Vietnam and having this slight interest I had developed, I started reading as many books as I could. I didn't have anything else to do in the war zone after you get off the job, and I read some of the strangest books. One of them was *The Whites Had Went*, and it was all about when black Americans would take over America because something happened to all the white Americans. And what the book teaches you is that the black Americans started acting just like the white Americans. And that was sort of a mind-opening kind of experience for me, because I had never thought about that, but, you know, you, they begin to teach you how the American system was running and how corrupt it was, and if you were going to be in that corrupt system, you were going to be corrupt. So you found out there were no, there was no advantage for becoming a white American. You were just going to be as bad anyway. And then I read a book called

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<sup>2</sup> *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe* is the third novel by George Eliot, published in 1861. An outwardly simple tale of a linen weaver, it is notable for its strong realism and its sophisticated treatment of a variety of issues ranging from religion to industrialization, to community.

*Manchild in the Promised Land*<sup>3</sup> and it was the first time I read a book about the black American experience from a black writer's perspective. And so then at that particular time, James Baldwin<sup>4</sup> was very popular. So, I read his book, *Another Country*, and he was writing from the African American male experience. Then, several other books followed that. I read everything that James Baldwin wrote, all of his essays and everything, because he was very, very instructive for me. And his father was a minister and my grandfather was a minister and my mother might as well have been a minister, because I think she wanted me to be one, but, I think my mother was reading my signals a little bit like a mother would read them, so it was a little bit different. So all of this is what that evolution began to have on me in the reading and then I started thinking about teaching. And by the time I got to Germany, the Revolution<sup>5</sup> was on and I started writing plays. And I wrote a play called *The Day*

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<sup>3</sup> *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965) is an autobiographical novel written by Claude Brown. It tells about the author's coming of age amidst poverty and violence in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s. Published at the height of the civil rights movement, the book reached far beyond the traditional literary world, drawing new attention to the lives of those living in urban environments.

<sup>4</sup> James Arthur Baldwin was an African-American novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and social critic.

<sup>5</sup> The Black Power movement was a political movement to achieve a form of Black Power and the many philosophies it contains. The movement saw various forms of activism some violent and some peaceful, all hoping to achieve black empowerment.

*They All Went*, and that was about the march to Washington, D.C.<sup>6</sup> I think the Poor People's March<sup>7</sup> was one of them and there was another one, but being introduced to Martin Luther King<sup>8</sup> also.

**SB:** So, would you say that because you were exposed to all of this literature, I think you, I want to confirm this with you, would you say you answered my question: How did your involvement in the Air Force influence your participation in the Civil Rights Movement?

**VW:** Oh, absolutely.

**SB:** Because you were exposed to all this?

**VW:** Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

**SB:** Excellent!

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<sup>6</sup> The March on Washington was one of the largest political rallies for human rights in United States history and demanded civil and economic rights for African Americans. It took place in Washington, D.C. Thousands of Americans headed to Washington on Tuesday August 27, 1963. On Wednesday, August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, delivered his historic "I Have a Dream" speech in which he called for an end to racism.

<sup>7</sup> The campaign demanded economic and human rights for poor Americans of diverse backgrounds. After presenting an organized set of demands to Congress and executive agencies, participants set up a 3,000-person tent city on the Washington Mall, where they stayed for six weeks in the spring of 1968.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. was an American Baptist minister and activist who was a leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement. He is best known for his role in the advancement of civil rights using nonviolent civil disobedience based on his Christian beliefs.

**VW:** Yeah, uh-huh.

**SB:** Then, I suppose we can move on to this question.

**VW:** Okay, good.

**SB:** And that is: Can you tell me about any protests or social movements you were involved in, either during the Air Force, or anytime in your life, once you were exposed to this material?

**VW:** Well, yeah. Being exposed to the material sort of got me in trouble. Because I begin to notice what the irregularities were in the military. One of them that stands out clearer than anything was they made us smoke. In the military, it was sort of like a push. You weren't a man until you smoked cigarettes. Okay. Not marijuana, just cigarettes. And so, you learned to smoke, but African American men had to shave because the military was about shaving. You could not have a beard. You just could have a mustache. Well, during that particular time, we found out that that wasn't really a very good thing to be doing according to our ancestral background. And, eventually, some of the people who were following and pushing this came up with or made us aware of the term: pseudo folliculitis. And that was the ingrown hairs that black men get, and so at that time you would notice that a lot of black men had ingrown hairs. This meant we really weren't supposed to be shaving, definitely not close. So, you got a fight now with the government and the government will put you in jail. So we had to decide to demonstrate against it. And so all of the demonstrations that were happening were sort of fueling me that all African Americans had to fight for what was right. So, I stopped shaving.

**SB:** And given that you were fueled by this mandate to shave -

**VW:** That's right.

**SB:** - I guess, how did you see yourself as a product of this revolution, once it ended?

VW: I don't think it's ever ended. It's still going on. It's still going on in different ways. And some of it has begun to happen within the race, not always against others. And, of course, with further education, you're finding out all of the subtleties now, because folk don't want to talk about it, but they want to do it. And so, you still find that you have to clarify the company that you're in. You got to find out where they're coming from, what they're shutting up about, what they don't want to talk about, but how they really feel behind closed doors. So the Revolution, sort of, has never ended. Now, a hell of a lot of things have changed, because more African American males are marrying white women, and more African American black women are marrying, are now beginning to marry white men. And so we have a school of or a whole slew of children of mixed marriages coming up. And this is causing new kinds of developments within the society. Now, a long time ago, I read that by a certain time in America, it's gonna be an all-colored society anyway. And so now the writers are talking about that. They are actually telling everybody, fifty or sixty years, it's going to be a brown world. We were reading about things like this a long time ago, but it's actually happening. And now the writers, who happen to be white writers also, are talking about this. Well, all you had to do was run into some of the people who were writing earlier and they were telling you that this was going to happen because we found out that sexually we like each other. Ah, didn't want to tell anybody, but that thing was really busting in everybody's head. When I read about what is considered to be the Mandingo<sup>9</sup> experience, and where the information was coming about the African prowess, and the equipment of the black American male, and how this got the attention of all others. There was a series of books called the *Falconhurst Series* and nobody was telling you about those books. But, being the inquisitive young man I was, I found out about the *Falconhurst Series*, and in the *Falconhurst Series* were series of books about Drum, Drum's son, and the son of Drum, and they

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<sup>9</sup> A member of a people of western Africa in or near the upper Niger valley.

were all about sexually equipped and promiscuous black males and their relationship with white females on the plantations and so forth. We already knew that the white males were having their relationships with the black females, but these were books about the white females who wanted the Mandingo man. So, these particular things were also coming out, and of course, being a person who was writing and reading, I ran into a lot of that.

**SB:** When I asked you what it was like to be involved, so you had mentioned picking up the subtleties based on books you read regarding co-color integration.

**VW:** Yes, that's right.

**SB:** Okay. Well, that covers my, well, I guess there's still one question that I did miss. Could you state what it meant to you personally to be involved? Were there any ties or obligations you had outside of the fact that you read all these books, that you needed to put yourself out there?

**VW:** Well, I have to admit after two years of being in Europe, I became a race relations specialist, which meant that I was then selected to work in the seminars with trying to make the military experience more palatable for those who were not white. They had to deal with rank, so in these particular seminars, you left your rank at the door. Nobody wore their rank to the seminar. You, you came to that seminar with your intelligence and your sensitivity. Sometimes it was good. Sometimes it was bad, but you didn't have to fight the rank thing. So that was very, very important. Being a race relations instructor and specialist sort of put me in an advantageous position because I had the ability to teach the classes very well, to run the seminars very well. In most of the seminars, they had two instructors. Generally the instructor would be one officer and one NCO<sup>10</sup>, but the people who were

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<sup>10</sup> Non-commissioned officer

running it decided that I did not have to have anybody teach with me. I was the sole instructor, which made it very, very convenient.

Now, this put me in a position to meet some very powerful people. That is one of the ways that I met Arthur Ashe<sup>11</sup>. I experienced Whitney Young<sup>12</sup>, who was the head of the NAACP<sup>13</sup> at that time. They were bringing these people from the United States through Europe. Many of the people who they

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<sup>11</sup> Arthur Robert Ashe, Jr. was an American World No. 1 professional tennis player. He won three Grand Slam titles, ranking him among the best tennis players from the United States. Ashe was the first black player selected to the United States Davis Cup team and the only black man ever to win the singles title at Wimbledon, the US Open, or the Australian Open.

<sup>12</sup> Whitney Moore Young Jr. was an American civil rights leader. He spent most of his career working to end employment discrimination in the United States and turning the National Urban League from a relatively passive civil rights organization into one that aggressively worked for equitable access to socioeconomic opportunity for the historically disenfranchised.

<sup>13</sup> National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

were using were from Detroit - doctors, lawyers, and so forth. I met all of them. I met Wally Terry<sup>14</sup> who was in Europe at that time, writing a book that became very, very popular called *Bloods*. So I was very, very fortunate in that respect in that it moved me up to a very advantageous position. As a matter of fact, I will just mention, the man who became the next Commander in Chief of the United States Military Services was my direct boss. And that was, when you do your research, that was, David Jones.<sup>15</sup> And I still have letters from him and many, many of the generals because I was also running seminars for the officers, and their wives, their families when I was there.

**SB:** And I give it that you were such an excellent public speaker, you had mentioned that was advantageous to be a race relations facilitator. You mention that you had exposure to some very powerful people. I would like to know, though, what challenges did you face while you were in this position?

**VW:** Well, I say for a while I had my, my regular job and I was a communications specialist and as a communications specialist I was editor of the newspaper and I had a job on the airbase. I was one of the people, I had a top secret clearance, and I was in charge of a lot of the things that went down from my office. When things didn't go right and they had inspections on the base, I would be the person that they would come to because I was from the information office. And, sometimes, they

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<sup>14</sup> Wallace Houston Terry, II was an African-American journalist and oral historian, best known for his book about black soldiers in Vietnam, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* (1984), which served as a basis for the 1995 crime thriller, *Dead Presidents*.

<sup>15</sup> David Charles Jones (July 9, 1921 – August 10, 2013) was a U.S. Air Force general and 9th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

didn't do things right and you were supposed to take the hit. You aren't supposed to tell what your boss and everybody else didn't do, which includes the commander. Well, I wasn't the kind of guy that was going to just take the hit, particularly if I asked them for the information that they were supposed to have given to me. So being in a leadership position and not being worried about it, that kind of pressure put it on me, and I couldn't do that because the men who I was representing would look at me as a-

**SB:** - as a fall guy.

**VW:** Oh yeah, absolutely. So I wouldn't do that. So, yeah, being in that position sort of went to my head, but in the right way. I knew what was going on, and I wasn't going to take the hit for it. So I did have a few experiences like that and sometimes frankly considered to be an Uncle Tom by some people, because I wasn't supposed to tell the man exactly what was going on with the fellas, but that puts you in a Catch 22.<sup>16</sup> I wasn't going to be the fall guy for anybody. So pretty soon it became apparent to me that I needed to leave the service. I got to a place where I knew too much.

**SB:** Any more transformative moments you want to touch on while you were in the Air Force or involved in civil rights personally?

**VW:** Yeah, because it affected me. I started getting the people together and working with them and their families to help to change the way we were treated in all levels. This was very, very helpful and it helped me also in becoming very, much closer to the theatre that I wanted to be involved in, so that

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<sup>16</sup> A dilemma or difficult circumstance from which there is no escape because of mutually conflicting or dependent conditions. Joseph Heller coined the term in his 1961 novel *Catch-22*, which describes absurd bureaucratic constraints on soldiers in World War II.

was very helpful to me, because I didn't know that when I got out of the service that I was going to go into the theatre. I got out wanting to become a sociologist or a socio-psychologist and I was studying that. Skinner<sup>17</sup> was big at that time. I had a very good feeling about Freud,<sup>18</sup> but I realized after a while that even Freud was a little flawed in his calculations about what was going on in the world. At least, I thought that way. And Skinner was talking about rats in a cage, so that didn't please me very much, so I went to the theatre where the real people were. It was dealing with the real people that sort of set me up, even now, for what I'm writing because I had a game that I would play when I was doing characters. I would interview the character first, before, and this is a phrase of mine, I would breathe life into them. Since they were going to be using my breath on stage, I figured I had a right to know something about them. And so I interviewed all of them. I interviewed Othello.<sup>19</sup> I

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<sup>17</sup> Burrhus Frederic Skinner, commonly known as B. F. Skinner, was an American psychologist, behaviorist, author, inventor, and social philosopher. Skinner considered free will an illusion and human action dependent on consequences of previous actions.

<sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud was an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis, a clinical method for treating psychopathology through dialogue between a patient and a psychoanalyst.

<sup>19</sup> Othello is a tragedy by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written in 1603. This work revolves around four central characters: Othello, a Moorish general in the Venetian army; his beloved wife, Desdemona; his loyal lieutenant, Cassio; and his trusted but ultimately unfaithful ensign, Iago. Given its varied and enduring themes of racism, love, jealousy, betrayal, revenge and repentance, *Othello* is still often performed and has been the source for numerous adaptations.

interviewed Macbeth.<sup>20</sup> I interviewed all the characters that I played. Sometimes I would interview the people that I didn't even have contact with, like for instance, well I did get into contact with Lady Macbeth. But one of the most interesting interviews I had was with Lady Macbeth. If you know the principle behind that story, when her husband came home from the war she wouldn't make love with him. Now, as far as I was concerned that was the damndest thing that you could do. The cats been out there, put his life on the line for the time that they got to be out there in war. Yeah, they had convenient women coming to the war site to take care of them but they were prostitutes. But some men decide, yeah. I'm not going to deal with this. I mean you can't. All kinds of diseases and stuff came with them. And so he held himself clean. All he did was fight the war and then go home and his wife says, 'No, you can't, not unless you kill Duncan.' That's my buddy. The king was his friend. And then, she used against him the desire for his sons. Because she also knew that the witches said that if you do this, your sons will be kings. So she used that against him. Of course, it stopped him. It made him think. And that drive that he had for the sex went away, and he went to take care of the legacy of his sons. And, of course, that undid them all, so if you know that story then.

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<sup>20</sup>Macbeth is a tragedy written by William Shakespeare. Set mainly in Scotland, the play dramatises the damaging physical and psychological effects of political ambition on those who seek power for its own sake. *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy, and tells the story of a brave Scottish general named Macbeth who receives a prophecy from a trio of witches that one day he will become King of Scotland. Consumed by ambition and spurred to action by his wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan and takes the Scottish throne for himself. He is then wracked with guilt and paranoia, and he soon becomes a tyrannical ruler as he is forced to commit more and more murders to protect himself from enmity and suspicion. The bloodbath and consequent civil war swiftly take Macbeth and Lady Macbeth into the realms of madness, and death.

**SB:** Would you say interviewing your characters in the play provided your most significant experiences in your education slash career?

**VW:** Always, always when you interview a character. I'll talk about a character today that sort of is meaningful because I saw a gentleman and his wife when I was coming in here and that's the character of Muddy Waters<sup>21</sup>. And I did Muddy Waters much later in my career but Muddy Waters is mentioned in my autobiographical piece. And the reason why is because, for one thing, I wanted to sing the songs. I've sung in plays before, but I've never sang Muddy songs, the blues, and I was very much in love with jazz and blues. But Muddy had a way in dealing with life and he put it in song. So Muddy was doing the same thing I was doing. He wasn't always singing his song. He was singing the song of all men and therefore he was using his breath to give life to them. And I felt that that's what I was doing when I was preparing a character to go on stage.

**SB:** Now talking about singing the blues and songs that nationally represent a group of people, what would you say, just bouncing off of that, what does being educated about black history mean to you?

**VW:** Well, gosh. It gives you an important, to understand what has gone down in the world. Mine goes all the way back to my teaching, them teaching me in church. Because when you're being taught in the African American church, a lot of the times the stories that they are using are stories of the Jewish existence. Now, nobody told me anything about Nigeria or Tunisia or Sudan or Senegal or any of those particular places when I was going to school and when I was going to church. So when you come out of school in America, you are absent one aspect that they say is the most important aspect - to know thyself. That's the first rule of teaching a child to exist in the world and they weren't

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<sup>21</sup> McKinley Morganfield, known by his stage name Muddy Waters, was an American blues musician who is often cited as the "father of modern Chicago blues".

teaching us that. I knew more about the Germans, the French, the British, the Russians, everybody, but nothing about the African. So learning about myself was very, very important to me and that's what I started studying in the military, is to know about what it meant to be a black guy. And I really had a hard time dealing with the church experience. My mother was so, so taken by it that she never knew why I had the attitude about the picture of the white guy on my wall and that was Jesus. Even then finding from background studies, well, that was the white American interpretation of Jesus. Why didn't you give me the right one, the one that would state that he had dark skin and curly hair? Okay, I could have gone along with that, because at least to a certain degree he would've looked like me. And that's a powerful image to know that you are on top.

**SB:** So to internalize, more so than externalize, is one of the key points about being educated as an African American.

**VW:** Oh absolutely, yeah.

**SB:** Wonderful. Do you see, and now that you know that, did you recognize any differences in racial dynamics in a public university versus a private university while you were going through education?

**VW:** They can both be very, very messed up. That's all to it. It's according to what the leaders of those universities have decided to be, the principle, the guiding principle for life. Most of the public and private institutions in this country, and I can throw the black school in too, still have the guiding principle, the people who have the money. It comes down to that. If you got the money, you got the world, even though they're telling us now that the one percent of people that are running the world are the people that have the money. And most of those aren't your average everyday black guy, Native American, Spanish, Mexican, Latina, what else and or women that we know. So the all-mighty dollar is the ruler in reality. Capitalism in America is the reason. You know, we came here with this idea of some religious belief and so forth, but basically it's who controls the dollar. Who

can buy the seed for the crops? Who can, who controls the land? Who can clean the land? And if you don't get a chance to do that, you are behind.

**SB:** Can you just go back and clarify how does a public or private university communicate that message though?

**VW:** Well, they don't, they don't really tell you that. They want that, want you to think that there's something broader, that there's some divine reason why we're here and what we're doing. Manifest destiny - the gods decree it, and so forth. Well, in reality, the gods in my estimation now, don't decree anything. And if I'm gonna use them, I'm gonna use them like me. And then that means they will be decreeing from my perspective. And this is the perspective, when the truth is toned, told, that they built most of those particular things off of, particularly Christianity. Now, that's my position. They studied the Africans, the Africans were telling the world what was going on. All we've got to do is go back to Nubia<sup>22</sup>. Back there when that's the only thing we know. And then we know we migrated from there. Even all of them would tell you that if they go with the evolutionary story.

**SB:** Before we go to our current questions, I just, this is something we've been talking about in Baldwin really quick. So how do you see Christian values effacing black values?

**VW:** Oh, it doesn't teach it in the first place. You know, it doesn't say let's go to the average African American home and see how the mother's taking care of the child, how the fathers taking care of the child. What does the father have that he gets to use in the African American home? What do they do

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<sup>22</sup> Nubia is a region along the Nile river located in what is today northern Sudan and southern Egypt. It was one of the earliest civilizations of ancient Northeastern Africa, with a history that can be traced from at least 2000 B.C. onward and was home to one of the African empires.

on Sunday? Do they go to the church on Sunday, The Baptist church, all of the churches that they have? The Protestant churches? And do they study the word that comes from the Almighty in that home from that perspective? They don't do that. I knew more Jewish stories than anything when I was growing up.

**SB:** So was the fact that these, these - I don't want to say these rituals, because I don't think that's the right word, but these practices, these cultural practices. Is it the matter that they weren't being taught or that they weren't being taught correctly? I just want to get some clarification on that. Because you said when I go to the church, you said they never went to the church, yeah.

**VW:** Right. Well, how about both of them? [laughs] They weren't being taught, and when they were being taught, many of them were not being taught correctly. For instance, here's one that's always been curious to me. When we sing "Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land. Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go." Now, this is a primary song that's sang many, many days in the black church, but they're talking about going down to Egypt. They're talking about going down to Africa. "Let my people go." So if you aren't looking at the curious nature of that then, I think something is missing there, okay? Because all of the people in Africa at that time are from Africa. They're Africans and they're talking about letting the people go. So it now is the African offspring has taken that song and made it a big part of their existence. Well, that's curious to me, to me anyway. You know, that you're singing a song, okay, about let the Jewish people out of Africa. And that is--

**SB:** They're also Africans in the native homeland?

**VW:** Oh yeah, yeah you're talking about, "Hey, tell your people to let them people go." Slavery has been all over the world all the time.

**SB:** So messages can be misconstrued.

**VW:** Oh, yeah, definitely.

**SB:** And this actually transitions well within our current, I guess, part of our discussion. And that is the first question I have, is: How have you seen racial relations change over your lifetime, whether in Michigan or in the U.S. in general?

**VW:** Okay, well, here's one that's really, really close to me. Whenever we would travel with my father, my father--particularly if we were going Indiana or anywhere South--we would be instructed to how to, how we had to conduct ourselves. Because Daddy would always let us know these white people will kill you. Okay. No whistling at white women, for one thing. Don't even talk to them. Don't even look in the way of them, because you can get killed for it. So, it's guiding your life. Mom's telling you where to go in town, where not to go in town. Mom is telling you, leave them white girls alone. These folk will kill you. They'll put you in jail. You gonna be there. It's tough anyway, because that's where they expect black boys to end up. Now, here's the problem. You go to school and who messing with you? White girls, okay? Who's the easiest thing to get to the back of the tree? White girls, okay? You got a problem right off the bat and nobody is telling you that.

**SB:** Particularly, why focus on this subject of intimacy, or like this cat and mouse game that the white girls are playing?

**VW:** Because that's the first game you play in life. You're spending time in the back yard with your buddies watching your pubic hair get ready, you know. You're getting ready to use the equipment that nature has given you, and they getting ready to use theirs. We're drawn to that, that's how you make life. That's the only way to make life. That's the only way I know. So that's the first thing you start working and the girls are looking at it too. And so if you, growing up, if you, you know, and hey, as far as I was concerned - I was the oldest boy in the Washington household and I was considered to be a good looking one. I was a football player. I was a track player. I've had basketball

and everything else, okay? So I'm a hot piece of item, item here. So this is a part, a big part, of life up to that time. And your Momma, her conversations are when you get married. Okay, how you treat your wife, how you, you know. She's not talking about when you take the bank over. They're not talking about when you run the next country, not talking about when you become President. They're talking about when you make that thing that you can have. And then you on the corner with the boys and they always talking about how many girls they got, okay? It's the biggest conversation that's going on.

**SB:** Gotcha.

**VW:** Yeah.

**SB:** And in this regard, what racially specific lessons have you passed on to your children? Having been first hand, having first-hand experience with this?

**VW:** Well, I didn't have to hand too much to my son. Now, my grandson is 21 and he play basketball for Western Michigan University. And we are experiencing the number of girls that he brings home, okay? Now, he knows the world is his. He can choose anybody. We watched them. I knew that in his father. You know, as a matter of fact I was on the girls' side when it came to his father because I thought that he was treating them bad. And he was dating girls from all across the spectrum. So he got to sample them here. I didn't get to sample them until I went to Europe. Although, there were girls who I knew had an interest in me. Well, sometime, when I go back to class reunions and so forth, they start telling me, "Oh yeah, I knew you," and so, but well, you didn't tell me you knew me. They were, they were paying attention to you. So in the world we live in today, they don't have to worry. When we went South, we would have that message from my dad - how you conduct yourself, where we could stay, where we could go, where we could eat, and so forth. Well, you can go to the South and eat anywhere now. I mean I don't suggest that you get on too many deep back roads and

think you got the world made, but for the most part you can stay in the hotels that are there. They want to make the money. So the world has different, the world is different. I don't, I don't care, I don't understand anybody that doesn't see is that one thing is that I can travel the world. I can go to Paris when I want to go to Paris. I can go to London. My shows are done in different places in the world. This world is not the same world that it was when I was coming out of high school. All the books are there. I can go to the Internet and see who's writing, what they're writing about. I can find myself in those books. I went to the show the other day to see Selma, and there we are. That wasn't when I was coming up. You didn't find out anything about what it meant to be black, other than those old shows where they were attempting to make you look stupid and ignorant. So that's not the same case today.

**SB:** I guess, wow, okay, you meant, it sounded like you were saying that the girls today if, like what you talked about, black men were to go with any number, it would detract from learning about their identity.

**VW:** Well, I don't know that today that it'll detract from learning about your identity. No. I'm not saying that. I'm saying you can learn about your identity all over. The thing is you've got women from all races trying to hook up with you and you can hook up with them without fear of getting lynched. Watch out though. Don't get too egotistical here. You go down South and get in the wrong place. I just wrote a play called "Obituary Blues" that sort of deals with that, the complexities of being in the wrong place with the wrong ideas.

**SB:** Did that offer any current perspectives on race relations in the U.S. today?

**VW:** Yeah. Because I had people from Tampa call me in the last two days who want to produce one of my plays. It's called "The Black American Dream." Well when I was in New York, we changed the title to "Brainstorming." They asked for both copies because they want to add music to it now.

They say, well no, we don't want, we don't want to make it a musical, but you know. I says, yeah, I don't have a problem with it, just make it a collaboration. You gonna use mine to collaborate to a new level". That's all I wanted them to do anyway, is to get the idea, because you got to deal with males and females in there. And at the center of that piece, it's black male-black female relationships; it's black fathers and their children relationships that I am addressing. So, to a certain degree, the world has changed in that way, but yeah we still interested in each other. Males and females are interested in each other. Yeah.

**SB:** But outside of the male and female exchange like I was also referencing Ferguson<sup>23</sup> and the Eric Garner<sup>24</sup> case.

**VW:** Yes. Right.

**SB:** Do you want to talk a little bit about that and -?

**VW:** Yeah, that's a development in the world that we live in now. Okay, because after slavery, after that next period, Reconstruction, after the Revolution, we had hoped that we would not end up with a

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<sup>23</sup> The shooting of Michael Brown occurred on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, a northern suburb of St. Louis. Brown, an 18-year-old black man, was fatally shot by Darren Wilson, 28, a white Ferguson police officer. The disputed circumstances of the shooting of the unarmed man sparked existing tensions in the predominantly black city, where protests and civil unrest erupted.

<sup>24</sup> On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner died in Staten Island, New York City, after a New York City Police Department (NYPD) officer put him in what has been described as a chokehold for about 15 to 19 seconds while arresting him. The New York City Medical Examiner's Office attributed Garner's death to a combination of a chokehold, compression of his chest, and poor health. NYPD policy prohibits the use of chokeholds.

bunch of males, particularly because the center focus for most of the are the males. It's the males that are killing the males. It's not the females killing females. It's the males killing males. And we, there's still an effort in this particular society that works against giving the African American male the opportunity to control the dollar factor in the society. White males don't want to give up that. I mean, that's the leadership position. So why am I going to produce and give African American males the opportunity to take over everything that is here? As far as I'm concerned in the political structure, that's what Obama is dealing with. "We don't want this man to be good, and we still have a way to keep him from being good - that's don't cooperate with him." If you don't understand that in the American society, where is your brain? I mean everybody knows that's what's going on, okay? So Obama's got a problem. Now, when they felt that they could use Cain [John McCain],<sup>25</sup> and I'm using names now. Okay, the Republicans were trying to get him, until they found out that he had already messed up too bad. So now they gotta find somebody that the world will pick. And all they have to say is, "We'll work with him. Okay, we'll stop that. And now aren't we good guys again." Unless somebody comes up with a black male. Notice I didn't say a black female, a black male that they got the problem with again.

**SB:** Because when they hired McCain he promised he could control the dollar factor and that's what sort of swayed all?

**VW:** Yeah, but he was, all man, man he was all over the map. [laughs] He's lying to everybody.

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<sup>25</sup>John Sidney McCain III is the senior United States Senator from Arizona. He was the Republican presidential nominee in the 2008 United States presidential election running against Barack Obama.

**SB:** How did you, but I guess my basic questions from when you went to control the dollar factor, how did you see that sort of motive within these political tensions?

**VW:** Well, one of them I see clearly.

**SB:** Okay.

**VW:** They don't want to give any money to anybody or everybody to get medical. Okay, that's just gonna cost too much money for them. And as far as immigration goes, it was okay for them if we brought the immigrants in to take care of the fields and so forth, but we didn't want to take care of their children too. We didn't want to make education available to them too. Okay? This is costing us too much money. And that's that one percent they're talking about. So it appears to me if you've got any intelligence and you're in any classroom and you don't have that slant, and I don't have to have it. I don't teach it anymore. Then you can see that that clearly is a bona fide number one concern - who is going to control the society? Now, here's another thing, I don't blame anybody for not wanting to be number two. Who wants to be in the number two position? Leadership is still, the number one position is still, a place that a lot of people want to be. And who you want there may not be another female. May not be a female at all. May not be a black male. May not be a black female. It may be that I want it to be white male, and I can understand that. Because I fight for number one also. So I can understand that a man wants to be in the number one position and run the world. I mean, what an idea. [laughs] So I can understand that.

**SD:** So it's a probable impossibility that the number one is going to be able to represent the voices of the number two, at least all of them.

**VW:** God, that's a rough one, man. Isn't it? God, unless you get the right guy, okay. Now there are a lot of people in the political sphere, okay, who are married and integrated circles and just follow the political cloud that goes with that. Okay, you've got a problem there. And I mean you take a look at

[laughs]. I don't want to beat him because I like the guy, Hillary Clinton's<sup>26</sup> husband, okay? Yeah, Bill Clinton,<sup>27</sup> you know. Bill made a little mistake there, a traditional male mistake, okay? But, you know, they let Bill off the hooks, so to speak. They don't to want to let Martin Luther King off the hook. They want to keep that damning thing on him. Hey, hey, you know he had girlfriends. He had girlfriends Hey, Clinton was doing them under the seat in the White House, come on. So I'm just saying, we begin to show our true colors. We begin to show the places that we want to be and what we want to go on. And even Hillary has to be careful right now if she decides to run for president. I don't know why anybody would. Because, you know, Hillary wanted this medical situation that Obama has made possible and the people now that he's headed out, they want to get rid of that. And they've made it clear they're going to get rid of that, unless the voters make it clear, "No, you're not." Now, that's going to be one of the number one political things, as far as I'm concerned. I could be wrong, but I do believe that everything is leading to that.

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<sup>26</sup> Hillary Diane Rodham Clinton is an American politician and the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party in the 2016 United States presidential election. She is the first female candidate to gain that status for a major American political party. She served as the 67th United States Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013, the junior United States Senator representing New York from 2001 to 2009, First Lady of the United States during the presidency of Bill Clinton from 1993 to 2001, and First Lady of Arkansas from 1983 to 1992.

<sup>27</sup> William Jefferson Clinton is an American politician who was the 42nd President of the United States from 1993 to 2001. Clinton was previously Governor of Arkansas from 1979 to 1981 and 1983 to 1992, and the Arkansas Attorney General from 1977 to 1979. A member of the Democratic Party, ideologically Clinton was a New Democrat

**SB:** I'd like to focus just a micro-, a kind of a microcosm of, of the United States. So, how do you see the current relational climate in Kalamazoo? We can touch back on [inaudible].

**VW:** Oh yeah. Kalama-, Kalamazoo is a wonderful place. Life is gonna have challenges, by the way. We aren't gonna find a utopia where there are no challenges, and all of the challenges that I hear are showing up. Now, if you're reading the newspaper, you pay attention to the news, you know what is going on on the east side of Kalamazoo, on the north side of Kalamazoo, on the west side of Kalamazoo and, and the south side of Kalamazoo. Okay?

**SB:** Yes.

**VW:** So the papers are telling us that if you are looking at the news, you see who's getting shot, who's killing, who's tearing up, okay? And you are finding out are the black males doing it to black males? Are they black males doing it to white, to, to black females, and so forth? All you got to do is follow the news and you know that there is trouble in, in Kalamazoo with the black American experience here, okay? And those who don't have money, and those who don't go to the university, and if you go to Kalamazoo College, or if you go to Western Michigan University, and if you go to KVCC<sup>28</sup>, there is a whole thing. You can tell it happens here, so you're going to have challenges, no matter where you are. There have not been, been eliminated, but you get to choose your challenge and I think that is what we still have coming to us in life - choice. And I think it is important that we know that.

**SB:** And, how do you compare these relations with when you first arrived here as a prospective university teacher?

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<sup>28</sup> Kalamazoo Valley Community College

**VW:** Well, for one thing, I think I have helped even the, the battlefield.

**SB:** How so?

**VW:** Twenty-five years at Western Michigan University, and the, the shows that I produced or directed there and the children that I taught. When I first came to Western Michigan University, we had one or two African American students in the theatre department. Before I left, we were up to at least half of those students. And in the time that I was there, they got to deal with shows that dealt with their life. And in the time that I was there, the emphasis changed, because we began to get more females. We began to get L-, more LGBT<sup>29</sup> students and so forth, okay? We began to mix in all aspects of the society within what we offered in the view of what living in America was about. So, I feel that we made a lot of progress in that. Will it stay the same? I don't know. I'm retired now. The world changes. The emphasis is for our, what goes on in the world changes. And I am still happy to be here. I am working downtown now. I am trying to make things happen down there. I always have worked there because I realized one day I would leave the university. And the university is a world here and the town is a world here and you have to be dealing with both of them.

**SB:** That is a great point actually. In this one city, there are a bunch of different attitudes being held to be certain, I guess, spheres of influence.

**VW:** Oh right, absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah.

**SB:** That is a great point to make. And, and bouncing off of that, I guess you would call a parallel between what is happening, what happened in the Civil Rights Movement and what's happening now at K.

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<sup>29</sup> Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender

**VW:** Oh yeah, yeah. There is always, students have to understand that there is always a movement and those things change as life changes. Because we're all, all looking for position in life. And so, we have to be able to evaluate that and see, okay, who is moving nowadays? What is going on now? In this particular school here, I don't know if I want to use names of the things, but there's, things are happening at this University, that were in question, five, six years ago. Who was gonna get it? Who would get the money? Who would get the influence? Who would get the buildings? And whether you're looking at it or not you can begin to see, where the money is going. Who's getting to be able to deal with it, okay? When we look at this particular institution, we know who the president is. I know who the president's husband is. I know the people who teach over here. I've been involved in this institution for a long time and I know there is some funds that are coming in this particular institution that weren't coming. They were, there was questions about who would get it. And, if you are paying attention to what is going on, you can make accurate decisions about how this has affected the community.

**SB:** Do you think the student involvement in how these, exchanges of—I guess we can call them money—are going down and you had mentioned these were things that would be questionable five or six years ago.

**VW:** Right, right.

**SB:** To what extent do you think students have a hand in, in changing that or involving themselves in that, now versus back then?

**VW:** Well, the students are, are very much involved in that. I taught here. I taught from the perspective of the African American experience. After, I, there's always been a difference in the pay scale in these institutions. My pay scale was different at Western Michigan University than it was here. I liked my Western pay scale. It influenced what my scale would be here, but that scale was

always in question. Also, I taught from a black male perspective. I did not teach from a LGBT perspective. And, my interests did not lie in those particular areas, and because of the nature of who's going where and, and, in schools in these particular areas that becomes a question, as to where you might find yourself. And I think those things have to be looked at when we're dealing with the total picture.

**SB:** I was just mentioning student involvement because I wanted to get, to how your involvement with *Essence* magazine.<sup>30</sup> You talked a little bit about that in our first interview. Your interactions with that, how did that shape the Civil Rights Movement?

**VW:** Well, the thing that I thought so fascinating was when I was a young writer, I was also a young reader. And so, when *Essence* magazine came out, I wrote a letter to the editor because I did not like the way the military man, particularly the male at that particular time, I admit, was being viewed. There were elements within this society that were calling men who—and I was one of them—an Uncle Tom<sup>31</sup>! And I, I just refused to go along with that. Because I am in the military, defending the world you are living in; you want to call me an Uncle Tom? Well, you know I, I wasn't gonna accept

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<sup>30</sup> *Essence* is a monthly magazine for African-American women. The magazine covers fashion, lifestyle and beauty and their slogan "Fierce, Fun, and Fabulous" suggests the magazine's goal of empowering African-American women. The topics the magazine discusses range from celebrities, to fashion, to point-of-view pieces addressing current issues in the African-American community.

<sup>31</sup> A black man considered to be excessively obedient or servile. The reference is drawn from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

that. Somebody was gonna have to do this job. The world wasn't going to stop for black men or black women and treating them the way they treat them just because you think that you got something to bitch about at this particular time. So I wrote it. And *Essence* really pleased me, because, they gave me a "Point of View" instead of just a letter to the editor. And so I, I always appreciated that. And I get, I got to talk about the African American men and women who were serving our country.

**SB:** Was this the only magazine that was shedding light on these issues?

**VW:** Well, I can't say that. No. I think I had a letter from, from the editor into *Ebony*<sup>32</sup> magazine at the time, but the *Essence* one was, the one that was very, very important to me.

**SB:** And I have just a couple more questions, because I noticed we are short on time.

**VW:** Okay.

**SB:** In our first interview you talked about how you felt connected to Baldwin's work and background. Can you explain in a little bit more detail, what works of Baldwin were important. You know, you mentioned *Another Country* and understanding race relations in the U.S.

**VW:** Right.

**SB:** What about those texts were so important?

**VW:** I think he did a *Fire Next Time*. I think that was one of his titles and one that went home, stayed in his home with his dad, which was very, very important to me. I forget the title of it right now and I don't wanna mis-, misquote it, okay? But I had to deal with my father too. My mother was

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<sup>32</sup> *Ebony* is a monthly magazine for the African-American market. It was founded by John H. Johnson and has published continuously since the autumn of 1945.

much closer to me when I was growing up with information about how I was to conduct myself, particularly as a male in a relationship with a female. My daddy didn't talk about it. And I think, my daddy had eighth grade education. He basically referenced the historical aspect of our family and so forth, and dealt with his dad, and so forth. But my mom, we talked about what I was supposed to be like as a man, as a father, and so forth. So I always appreciated that. And, okay, what was that question again? Because I'll--

**SB:** No, it's okay. I'll clarify. Can you expand, explain in more detail what works of Baldwin were important to your understanding of race relations in the United States?

**VW:** So Baldwin dealt with his father and then he, he dealt with the world too because he began to do essays about the African American experience within the world. And so I, I, I always liked what Baldwin did with, and then Baldwin led me into understanding a little bit more about LBGT at that time and that's when I discovered too that I had a brother, a younger brother, who was—I guess what the term would be today LG within that particular group, he was what they called a homosexual. And I love my brother! And then I realized that, you know, you don't stop loving your brother, you don't stop loving your family member, just because they wanna be with a guy, and you wanna be with the girl. You just realize, okay you take care of yours; I take care of mine. But, that was my progressive way of seeing the world too. So Baldwin led me, in *Giovanni's Room*, I begin to understand that. And because I loved Baldwin, I wanted to have what he wanted to have. You know, hey man, get your thang, you know how you do yours, I do mine, but I didn't have to go your way. And then you realize that within a group, there was so many different kinds of men and different kinds of women. And we had titles for 'em, and so forth - some good, some bad. But he led me into understanding there were a lotta things that we had to get an understanding for in the world that we lived in. It was going to be a little bit more complicated than the stories that you were learning in church or out on the block, and so forth. So he was a big, big influence for me.

**SB:** And having studied the messages of his work, what would you say is the biggest accomplishment after reading so many literatures about African American history and what the experience has been for you?

**VW:** That first one I read, you know, *Another Country*. It was, it was so amazing because symbolically it, it means that it's a different world than I came in it.

**SB:** I'm so sorry. I, I meant your biggest accomplishment.

**VW:** Oh, oh.

**SB:** I didn't mean, if that was fuzzy, I apologize.

**VW:** Okay, no, no, no! Don't worry about it. So rephrase your question there.

**SB:** What would you say is your greatest accomplishment, after having read a lot of his works?

**VW:** I think the years that I spent in the university trying to help other Americans and anybody else, particularly African Americans, to understand the nature of the world that we live in. My classes, when I created the black theatre class at the University of Michigan and then eventually took it to Wayne State University, and then took it to - I brought it to Western Michigan University. I don't think I ever had to worry about whether I was gonna have a class. Students were gonna come. When I first started teaching most of my students were African Americans, but by the time that I graduated, or retired, I had to remind the black students that if you wanna get into my class, you gotta sign up early. Because the foreign students were gonna take my class. The white students were gonna take my class. Everybody was taking my class. So I, I just felt that my accomplishments within the educational institution were great. And I still think it's a very, very important place for our children. And if we aren't teaching the right story, if we aren't telling the truth of the society, then we aren't helping our own kind, which is American students. And so, that's what I think my greatest

accomplishment was, except for the fact that, as an actor, I was performing characters from all over the diaspora. I did Ibsen's<sup>33</sup> people. I did Mamet's<sup>34</sup> people - American writers. And I crossed the line. I not only did black men, I did men. And I think that was my gift too, that is that I understood where men were coming from. And I particularly liked Ibsen. I did Shakespeare characters and interviewed all of them, so that I could bring back information to the student under these circumstances.

**SB:** Dr. Washington, thank you. That was my last question.

**VW:** All right [laughs].

**SB:** Again, I appreciate you being with me here today.

**VW:** Well, it certainly was nice talking with you.

**SB:** I appreciate it.

**VW:** Okay.

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<sup>33</sup> Henrik Johan Ibsen was a major 19th-century Norwegian playwright, theatre director, and poet. He is often referred to as "the father of realism" and is one of the founders of Modernism in theatre.

<sup>34</sup> David Alan Mamet is an American playwright, essayist, screenwriter, and film director. As a playwright, Mamet has won a Pulitzer Prize and received Tony nominations.