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Quincy Troupe An Interview

E. Ethelbert Miller

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ON THE HILL

Quincy Troupe

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4 An Interview

Editor's note:

The following conversation between the writer Quincy Troupe and E. Ethelbert Miller, director of the Afro-American Resource Center, was recorded on June 29, 1978 and subsequently broadcast by WHUR-FM, the Howard University radio station:

EEM: You attended Grambling College; you also participated in the Civil Rights Movement. Recently some writers have gone back and begun to examine the early sixties. What were some of your experiences back then?

QT: Well, I was in SNCC and I was in Mississippi and Louisiana when I was 16. Matter of fact, I got my front teeth knocked out in a demonstration sit-in in Ruston, La. And so you know my experiences in the early sixties . . . when I was in school, we were trying at that time to non-violently integrate, as somebody said—toilets, cafes, schools, etc. But the SNCC movement soon quickly turned to a kind of movement to express the kind of rage that a lot of us young people were feeling at that time. So we broke away from Martin Luther King's movement and moved into the kind of mainstream activity that continued throughout the sixties. That kind of spawned a lot of other movements in the South—The Deacons for Defense, Black Panthers. So I was in it at that point and remained in it in a sense.

EEM: Were you doing any writing at this time?

QT: No. I was a basketball player. I was an athlete. A former street person from St. Louis. If anybody goes to St. Louis and asks about the Troupes, they will tell you that . . . they would be surprised to find that I was a poet teaching in a college. 'Cause at that time I was a confirmed street person. I went to college because I was an athlete. I played basketball and was a very good basketball player.



EEM: I know you've been active in workshops across the country, especially the Watts Writer's Workshop. I've talked with Jayne Cortez sometime back about this. I guess that was a very important workshop . . .

QT: Yes. It was an important workshop in the sense that . . . well—I should explain one thing very quickly—the workshop itself, the one that Budd Schulberg started, the Watts Writer's Workshop was the one that many of the young writers broke away from.

We came in disagreement politically with Schulberg. We called it literary sharecropping, in terms of what he was doing to a lot of people. So we broke away and formed our own organization called the Watts 13. It was 13 young writers, myself, K. Curtis Lyle, Ojenke, Stanley Crouch, and others.

EEM: What type of things were you doing?

QT: Well, for one thing, we all lived in one house in Watts. On 98th and Beach Street. We had a commune. We were doing a lot of neighborhood work with the kids because we didn't have any money. Since we didn't have any money, we were teaching the kids how to type, read, write, mathematics, history. In return for that, we would get food from their parents. They would give us food, sometimes wine and beer, for teaching their kids. Basically, what we were doing was giving readings and trying to sharpen our skills.

EEM: What impact did the Watts riots have on the workshop?

QT: Actually, the Watts riots created the workshop. Budd Schulberg came to Watts . . . but I should say one thing, Jayne Cortez was in Watts trying to start a workshop before the riots; and so was Stanley Crouch. I had just come from St. Louis about six months before the riot. The revolt. I call it a revolt. So that's when I met them. Ojenke brought me to Watts. The revolt, in a sense, created the Watts Writer's Workshop as we know it classically today. But Jayne Cortez and Stanley Crouch were there before. Johnie Scott was created by the

Watts Writer's Workshop and out of that came myself, who followed Ojenke to Watts, and K. Curtis Lyle, Cleveland Sims, Leumas Sirrah, Herbert Simmons from St. Louis, who wrote a book called *Corner Boy*, and a number of other writers, like Elaine Brown who was with the Panther Party until recently.

EEM: We have a few workshops here in Washington. Can you comment on some of the objectives writers should have when they come together. What things should they try and work towards?

QT: In the first place, I think it is very difficult for writers . . . I think fellowship and support is one of the prerequisites of a workshop, since the writer's job is a lonely one. You write to four walls and then you come out. Or you write on a subway train. But it's yourself—the paper, the typewriter or the pencil. So I think that support, criticism—not so much political direction—is the primary thing . . . if a writer is dealing with language and he has a folkbase kind of way of approaching poetry or writing, I think that a workshop's task should be to push that writer to that root. If that is where he or she express themselves best, I think the workshop should push and support that.

EEM: At the 1974 Writers' Conference at Howard, you delivered a paper on Afro-American poetry. In that presentation you emphasized the importance of the folkbase. You also spoke about the genius of Henry Dumas; how his work can and should serve as a model. Can you elaborate further on that point?

QT: Yes. I think that Henry Dumas, of all the writers that come out of the sixties, in a sense for me exemplified the fusion of African and American folkthings—rhythms, the philosophical base. The way of using metaphor and language. I think that he exemplifies that kind of fusion. I'm interested in fusion, because I think that in this country, and in the world, there has to be a fusionistic approach to life.

EEM: You've always seemed to have had that. Is that an outgrowth of your experiences in California?

QT: I think . . . you see, my father was a great baseball player. And for the first six years of my life I grew up in Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, Cuba. I could speak Spanish as well as English when I was growing up. I can still read Spanish very well. I don't speak it. But I grew up in these types of societies and then we came back to St. Louis and after staying in the Black community for eight years we moved to a white community, where we were the second ones on the block. I went to a white high school. Later I went to Europe as a basketball player and played all over Europe and Russia. I played in the Middle East and North Africa. So my life has been one that has been in different cultures; and I have recognized the efficacy of cultures. I realize that Americans and Black Americans have things to contribute, but I realize other cultures have other things to contribute also. I'm not a racist, although I understand the implications and the history, and the dilemma that white people have placed us in today. But at the same time, we're still here and multi-cultural, and we have that to realistically deal with.

EEM: Now in that same speech you gave at Howard in 1974, you mentioned that African-Americans were a new race on the face of the globe. In your own words, you said "although we can trace the bulk of our heritage back to Africa, precisely where in Africa we do not know. We essentially today remain rootless. And this thus becomes our crisis, our cross to bear." I read that statement over a couple of times. I know many people who would object to that . . . some would probably proclaim that we resolved this in the sixties. Although we didn't know exactly what part of Africa we came from, we acknowledged Africa. This was very important politically. Your statement appears to be contrary to that.

6 **QT:** I've been to Africa seven or eight times now. I think the political statements that came out of the sixties—some of those people have taken them back. Baraka [Amiri] took his back. Some other people are moving back towards a more sane position because they don't know where they are from either. Many of them when they get off the airplane in Africa they are greeted by dignitaries from the resident government. So they really don't get to see Africa. What I meant by that statement—what I'm trying to do is move towards a position of clarity. I'm not saying I would not like to be African. I'm not trying to reject my African background. I'm simply saying that African-Americans are culturally American. I believe this to be a truth.

EEM: OK. It seems that you are clarifying a cultural definition. My point is that at the same time a political question is raised. It seems that you fragment a certain political cohesiveness.

QT: Well I'm not interested that much in whether it's political. I'm interested in reality. I understand where Africa is at but I'm trying to define *us* first over here, rather than trying to define myself in an abstract way with Africa. Now Africans will tell you themselves, when you get off the plane, they will call you American. I said also in that statement (if you look closely) that if we went back to Africa culturally we would have to go back 400 years—back through the South.

EEM: OK. Let's get back to the work of Henry Dumas, who you say does this.

QT: Right. I think Henry Dumas in a way bridges America and Africa better than any poet I know. In his work there is a kind of spiritual realization and connection to the mainstream of African philosophical thought, religious thought . . . which connects with the Southern residual African-American experience. I feel that in the South, in the artifacts, there is where Black America most beautifully and strongly connects with an African tradition.

EEM: Now if we look at a lot of the literature which is coming out today, we see a lot of writers moving back . . . where the subject or theme focuses on the South. The question I raise is: is this movement in terms of people beginning to use folklore, an indication of Black writers failing to come to grips with the urban setting?

QT: No. I think you can use the folkbase and at the same time come to grips with the urban question. It is a question of language. A question of the use of subject matter. A question of the use of metaphor. A question of the use of simile in poetry. In poetry and fiction—you can use the slave narrative as a base in terms of form. I'm talking about poetry and literature as form . . .

EEM: OK. Let me explain what I was saying when I said people were unable to deal with the urban setting. If you look at film, you had a lot of films that were dealing with the urban setting. A lot of people were very critical of these films. They said aren't there any good things you can show about Black people living in the city. And then suddenly we popped up with a "Sounder" that was set in the South. It was like we could not write a beautiful story with an urban setting. Therefore, people moved the location of their novels and movies to the South. I was wondering whether that was a little romantic, nostalgia for the South and an inability to deal with the urban setting.

QT: Well, I'm not saying the setting should be in the South. I'm talking here about the form.

EEM: Well the form will lead you back there . . .

QT: Yeah . . . but I think that if you ride down any street in Washington here . . . and you look on the porches . . .

EEM: Well this is the South.

QT: Well, all right, then you go to New York, St. Louis or Chicago. When I go through these cities I see basically the same things you have in Washington. So

what I'm saying is that the main part of the people in these urban areas are only one generation (or two at the most) removed from the South. And the mores that they understand basically come out of the Southern tradition, because they have their grandmother still there, or their mother who was born in Tennessee, Georgia or Mississippi. My parents come from Georgia and Tennessee. I'm the first generation to be born in an urban area. So when I'm communicating with them I'm not talking about communicating with intellectuals. I'm talking about a broad base kind of a movement of literature.

What I'm saying is the form, the language, the use of metaphor basically comes from the South. I'm not talking so much about the setting. You can have a Northern urban setting that is presented in a Southern way. There is a short story by Henry Dumas called "City Games," which is in an urban setting but talks in a Southern language. Just like people in a Northern area. You go to Harlem—I don't care how Northern it is—it is basically the same kind of syndrome. Maybe it's a little more compacted, people living closer together. But still when you listen to the language, you listen to the rhythm, you listen to that—it's basically Southern. And that's what I'm saying Henry Dumas has. His poetry was not overburdened by the kind of mundane political issues of the day. It did not get into comrade talk in the poetry, which many Black people do not understand. Now if you are going to try and convert them to Marxism you have to have a way to do that—a methodology, I feel, that is directly related to where they are coming from.

EEM: What is your assessment of Black contemporary literature today? We are having an influx of comrade talk . . .

QT: As I said in an introduction I wrote to an anthology of new Black-American poetry—entitled *Celebrations*, Black American literature is in a healthy state for the most part. But I think there are a lot of

brothers and sisters who are very confused about what they are about.

EEM: Do you mean in terms of identity?

QT: In terms of identity, in terms of methodology, in terms of strategy. For example, yesterday [June 28, 1978] when the Bakke decision came down we should have had five or six strategies going on. If it came down this way we would do this, if it came down that way we did that. So at two o'clock in the morning here is the radio station calling for us to go down and demonstrate. They should have been ready long before this . . . so what I'm saying is that there has to be a realistic kind of assessment of where we are at. I think a lot of people are very confused. For example, if I drink beer or wine that doesn't mean I won't go down with you in the struggle . . .

EEM: I remember when food and clothes use to divide people.

QT: I know people who disliked me because I wore bellbottom pants to a 1971 poetry reading. And they put me down for many years.

EEM: Now that's a point . . . when people talk about Black literature they sometimes refuse to acknowledge the differences among writers. Are there different schools of Black writers?

QT: I think so, because of geography and demographics, political makeup . . . at times there are people who tend to gravitate towards each other. When I was in the Watts Writer's Workshop—myself, Jayne Cortez, Bunchy Carter, Ojenke, Curtis Lyle, Stanley Crouch—we shared a certain kind of poetic sensibility, basically which reflects itself in a long rhythmic line and a kind of a cosmic approach to the fusionistic aspects of nature and people, and at the same time trying to put a political perspective on the poem, or whatever it is that we're writing. Not overtly, the comrade talk. What I'm saying is that there are people in Chicago—Haki Madhubuti for instance—who are coming from a different geographic and demographic loca-

tion. He's coming from a Black-white confrontation. In California it was not just Black and white. It was whites, Blacks, Chicanos, Asians, and native Americans. So the demographics were different—so we had a wider range of things going on in our poetry. At least it seems that way to me.

Writers, I think, select where they are going to live according to where they are coming from. Since I've lived in New York, I've seen a change in my work and in the work of Jayne Cortez and Stanley Crouch. Our poetry has moved away from the long line to a kind of choppy rhythm.

EEM: Well, in talking about the different ethnic groups, let's talk about *Giant Talk*. I saw *Giant Talk* being an outgrowth of *Confrontation* Magazine in terms of the direction. In the introduction you divide the work into categories. I was wondering if these seven categories you divided Third World literature into could also be looked upon as stages . . .

QT: It was an outgrowth of *Confrontation*, which I founded and edited from Ohio University from 1969 until 1972. The way we first got those categories is that I looked at myself first in terms of the evolutionary way of looking at writing. I wrote very political poems in '65 and '66 and then I went into another stage . . . so I kind of charted all these stages that I went through until I got to the point where I sort of conceptualized myself and tried to remake myself in a sense . . . I wanted to make myself over in my own vision. So that was the basis of it when I looked at my writing. So what I'm saying is that any writer that writes long enough will go through those different stages. If they don't, then they are not evolving. I think that Pablo Neruda is one of my models. Pablo Neruda, although a Marxist revolutionary, wrote about everything.

EEM: Do you find African-American writers limited in terms of their development, in terms of the area they cover in their work?

QT: I think that a lot of African-American writers limit themselves by ideology and because of peer group pressure. A lot of times they don't want to take that risk, to go out there and be left on a limb. In a lot of cases, writers write for other writers. They write for an audience that is not really there sometimes. But it's a small select group of people who are powerful and control—as the white literary establishment in New York controls—a whole lot of taste and trends in modern writing.

EEM: Well I tried to raise those questions at the last writers' conference . . .

QT: I know.

EEM: What new projects are you working on?

QT: I have a book of poetry entitled *Snake-Back Solos: Selected Poems, 1969-1977*, coming out in October or November from Reed Cannon and Johnson. And a book of poems about St. Louis, the history of St. Louis. That book establishes where I came from, and it is entitled *Skulls Along The River* and will be published in the spring or fall of 1979, by Black River Writers, Eugene Redmond's press. Also, I am finishing a novel entitled *The Footmans* and am editor of a new magazine called *The American Rag*. □