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A Conversation With a Literary Critic

By E. Ethelbert Miller

Editor's note: *The following was edited from a recent taped conversation with Stephen E. Henderson, co-author of "The Militant Black Writer" and editor of an anthology, "Understanding the New Black Poetry," among other published works. Professor Henderson, who is now teaching in the Department of Afro-American Studies at Howard University, was until last June the director of the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities at the university. Before coming to Howard, he was the chairman of the English Department at Morehouse College in Atlanta. The Institute for the Arts and the Humanities, which is no longer in operation, came into being in the early 1970s and was a major force in its early years in bringing scores of Black writers and folklorists to the campus. Its documentation series, both on audio and video tape, contain a wealth of material that cannot be matched elsewhere. The contributions of Stephen Henderson, according to E. Ethelbert Miller, director of the*

Afro-American Resource Center at the university, "have enhanced our insight into and appreciation of Afro-American literature."

MILLER: Dr. Henderson, let us begin with your growing up in Key West, Florida. I remember you talking about that experience as something that shaped your character and personality and probably grounded you in certain positions that you took in terms of analyzing Afro-American literature and Afro-American culture. Can you tell us something about growing up in Key West and what makes that part of the country so unique in terms of Afro-American culture?

HENDERSON: Well, Key West is very well known now. But when I was in college and after I began my graduate work, if you said Key West most people looked at you twice.

Growing up in Key West is growing up in a semi-tropical or even sub-tropical environment. And you even remember specific colors like the special kind of ultramarine blue, then the red-orange of poincianas. That combination just stays in my mind. I used to paint watercolors when I was younger and that was one of the things I couldn't get away from. But in addition to the sheer beauty of the place, Key West was isolated physically from the mainland of Florida and, until World War II, Key West people used to refer to other people as "mainland people." And most of the Black population is derived from either Afro-Cuban or Bahamian descent. My folks on my mother's side were derived from Bahamian ancestry. Coming to Howard in 1970 I used to hear the West Indian students talk. I always would be surprised when I turned around and noticed their ages because they sounded like the older people at home. And I felt, I



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still feel, a certain kind of gravitational pull toward that part of the world. Key West is 90 miles from Cuba.

MILLER: What about the music?

HENDERSON: Well, the music is calypso. We used to call it the Nassau dance which covers a multitude of sounds, but as I said Cuba is only 90 miles away so Afro-Cuban music was heard all day long. There was indigenous music which later became known as Junkanoo music — a sort of a modern rediscovery of the Nassau flavor. My high school in Key West had a tremendous influence on me, particularly some of the teachers. And as far as literature was concerned, we memorized Paul Laurence Dunbar, we memorized Shakespeare, we memorized quite a few things.

MILLER: So you were pretty equipped before you went to Morehouse in Atlanta in the 1940s. There was a certain tradition that had been presented to you. Did that have a lot to do with your decision to go to a Black college?

HENDERSON: Well, going to a Black college was just the way you thought if

you came from a poor family such as mine. In fact, I wasn't really considering college in a serious way until I was discharged from the army and my staff sergeant asked me what I was going to do. I said I was going to get married. He said "why don't you go to college?" That was good advice. That is how it happened . . . Everybody knew about Tuskegee and Hampton, but I learned about Morehouse through a fellow hospital inmate from Atlanta.

MILLER: Who were some of the people who were at Morehouse because I think you were in school with a number of people who are very prominent today.

HENDERSON: Well, Lerone Bennett and I were classmates. I was there when Lerone was editor of the campus newspaper, *The Maroon Tiger*, which was on par with [Howard's] *The Hilltop*. He did the yearbook. Lerone was also a musician, which most people didn't know. He was philosophical but also a very talented musician and poet. He played tenor saxophone and had his own orchestra. Martin Luther King had been there as an early admission student. I never knew him then, just heard talk about him. They called him M. L., Jr. in contrast to his father M. L., Sr. And Dr. Benjamin Mays, of course, was the guiding light to all of us. That was one of the most significant experiences in my life, particularly the chapel. You grumbled and kicked about going to chapel but in the chapel I saw Alain Locke. Mordecai Johnson gave our commencement address. That's all I remember. But Morehouse gave you a sense of identity and identification because of the whole emphasis on building men — Morehouse men. We were obnoxious in some people's way of handling things but I think both for little lost sheep and people who had made up their minds it was a good experience.

MILLER: You left Morehouse and later went to teach in Richmond. If I'm not mistaken, you roomed with Wyatt T. Walker.

HENDERSON: Yeah, well my first job was at Virginia Union University in Richmond and I was pretty young. I had gone right out of Morehouse to the University of Wisconsin with a scholarship, and I had to finish very quickly because I didn't have any money. So I got the master's degree in nine months or two semesters [and later a Ph.D. in English and art history]. And then I had to get a job so I went by Morehouse to check out my English teacher and he said, "you write everybody but check this one." So I wrote to Virginia Union and they had an opening. Wyatt T. Walker was a chemistry major when we were roommates, but he was called to the Baptist ministry. He came from a brilliant family. We were friends and I learned a lot from him. There were other people, too. I had a good friend who was an artist then and I had, and still have, a strong interest in art. I sort of hung around his gallery and workshop and picked up a few things. Virginia Union was a very good experience because, as I look back, and this is the first time I've had the occasion to look back, some of the programs that I participated in there later became incorporated into other kinds of things. They had an annual fine arts festival, for example, which is one of the experiences. I met Lois Jones Pierre-Noel there. I said I used to fool around with watercolor and . . .

MILLER: You didn't just fool around. You also had some exhibits if I'm not mistaken.

HENDERSON: I exhibited twice — in '61 and '62. But one of the interesting things was that I put these on for a local show and Lois was there and she saw certain things she liked and she offered

me a job at Howard teaching watercolor. That was fabulous. I drop that on people when I try to impress them.

MILLER: You think that offer still stands?

HENDERSON: No.

MILLER: After Richmond, you went back to Atlanta, I think around 1962. Could you talk a little about not only returning to Atlanta, but also about the mood of the country at that time? Also, could you talk about what was happening on the campus of Atlanta University?

HENDERSON: Before Atlanta you have to think in terms of the civil rights movement and the sit-ins in 1960. Some Virginia Union students were involved in the sit-ins. One of the leaders, Charles Sherrod, a student in my class, was among those picketing downtown department stores. He came to me for advice. I lived, at that time, in a dormitory with divinity students and Sherrod was one of the undergraduates who was planning to enter the ministry so I think that gave him some feeling of ease with being around me. That was the connection. I went to Atlanta because you heard all these good things, all these exciting things coming out of the South. And people were being attacked not only physically but intellectually. The Virginia Union students were being attacked, for example, in the newspapers. And when the students sat in at the counters, a columnist named Ross Valentine poked fun at them because they sat there with books. And it was unfortunate for him that he mentioned two of the books that were being used in one of the classes that I was teaching — Goethe's *Faust* — and he talked about that. So I used the words "pandering to white supremacy" in my response to him, and I know I got to him because he wrote several articles after that and he kept using the word "pander." Dr. Mays came

frequently to Virginia Union. Martin Luther King spoke at Virginia Union around 1960. He asked to see me because I had sent a contribution to the Montgomery Project and it was sort of a strange kind of feeling to have somebody that you know being transformed as if something special had happened to him. He had reached a sort of plateau in his life. It was Dr. Mays who recruited me . . . I hated to leave Virginia Union but I went and Atlanta was just a fantastic place then. There was a great deal of excitement among the students, among the faculty.

MILLER: You took an active role in terms of new ideas for curriculum, especially in terms of some of the things you felt could be improved, particularly the treatment of the Black experience.

HENDERSON: Well, maybe what you're referring to is the students' idea of "the Black curriculum." I didn't know how localized that was. I suspect that it was something that occurred in other places. But they talked about a Black curriculum. And they talked about making courses "relevant." Of course that was the catch word and the bass note of the '60s. So those of us who were young, who were liberal, and who were crazy, felt that we ought to side with the students. I learned a lot from the students. One of the majors questioned why there wasn't any course on LeRoi Jones or why LeRoi Jones wasn't included in American literature courses. Eventually the Council of Presidents of the Atlanta University Center — it was the summer of '67, I think — organized a group of faculty and students, including some visiting students from Wesleyan, to study the whole business of a Black curriculum. What we did was to look at all of the catalog offerings of all of the schools and check out the courses that seemed fit and pertinent to the Black experience . . .

And we did that and made recommendations and some of those recommendations were followed. But one of the immediate things that happened was that in the summer of '67 Spelman College inaugurated a cultural series and a program — an institute — to train teachers in the significant aspects of the Black experience, areas that border on the arts and particularly the humanities and social sciences.

MILLER: Did some of these ideas eventually help in the development of the Institute of the Black World?

HENDERSON: Well, the thing about it is that some of us who were in that group, in that committee, became part of the Institute of the Black World. In this particular case, Vincent Harding and myself. But the Institute of the Black World is another kind of story because we were not exactly welcomed with open arms.

MILLER: Let's just talk a little about that because I think that when we look at the Institute of the Black World and the people who were involved in it we see it had a tremendous impact in terms of Black thought in this country. You served from, I think, 1969-1971, as a senior research fellow but even before that your conversations with Vincent Harding pretty much shaped the development of that institute. Could you elaborate on what your aims were at that particular time, what you were trying to outline or accomplish?

HENDERSON: Well, the idea of an institute probably was floating around the country in a sort of embryonic form. The night that Dr. King was killed Vincent Harding came to my house to hammer out some ideas. We had talked earlier about literary and historical kinds of things. He said this is a golden opportunity to make our point to the nation and we ought to get the presidential candidates here to

speaking out on issues which affect Blacks and minority people. There was always in Vincent's mind the realization that we were a part of something larger than just the United States, than just Black people. But what we wanted was to have a series of open forums . . . And I remember staying up until about four o'clock in the morning waiting at Ralph Abernathy's house for him to come so that we could make contact with him. That didn't work. But after the raw edges of the loss had been set into the healing process, Mrs. King called Vincent Harding to help her set up some kind of memorial to her husband. And what we had in mind, based on previous kinds of conversations coming out of the curriculum movement, was that Dr. King's life — the memory of his life — could be served in a living way by having his ideas and thoughts incorporated into the history of the protest, the history of the civil rights struggle, the history and culture of Black people. And we had a very elaborate scheme and conception in nine parts. I don't remember all of the parts now but the Institute of the Black World was going to be one, the tomb/mausoleum was going to be two, the library documentation project, which actually got started, which was to be a repository of the papers of SNCC, and SCLC and other civil rights organizations were going to be included. The civil rights museum was going to be another. There were several other portions. But we split up as a result of ideological differences.

MILLER: One thing which I find amazing is some of the individuals — such as Robert Hill, William Strickland, yourself, Vincent Harding, Howard Dodson — were all involved with the institute back then. Today, they are still doing tremendous work and it seems as if the institute gave them a sense of purpose and direction.

HENDERSON: That was really the objective of the institute, to shape and give direction; help give direction to the Black studies movement. That's the initial thing, but beyond that was the idea of acting as a catalyst, a kind of obstetrician to a new way of thinking which wasn't really all that new on reflection. A new way of thinking about the integration of art, humanities and political struggle.

MILLER: Well, talking about that, I want to make a link here and if I'm incorrect you can let me know. There was a conference held, I think, in Idlewild, Michigan, about 1970-'71, in which you gave a paper on Black culture. Also at that conference, I believe, was Andrew Billingsley who eventually came to Howard as vice president for academic affairs. It seems as if you were putting forth certain ideas in terms of culture and people like Billingsley were looking at how they could affect or change Black institutions in terms of incorporating these ideas and disseminating them to students and teachers and preserving Black culture. It seems as if the two of you came together at that conference and one of the results was the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities at Howard a few years later.

HENDERSON: That's essentially correct, except that was earlier in 1969, to trace the institute's story a little more precisely. In 1969, in November, all of the Black studies directors that we could corral — about 40 or 50 of them — came to Atlanta to a conference. You had people who were art majors or history majors or whatever and suddenly they were thrust into the position of administrators for a highly volatile subject matter. From that meeting in which those directors told us, "You lead and we'll follow," we realized that we had to get our sense of direction and our sense of organization straight. That called for the

Idlewild conference on the Black agenda on March 24. I think it was 1970. Dr. Billingsley was there because he was also connected with the Black studies movement in California at Berkeley.

MILLER: He's also responsible for bringing you from Atlanta to Howard.

HENDERSON: That was part of what he wanted. What he really wanted and what he really offered us, and we debated this, because we were working on slim budgets and all of us had families, was to move the Institute of the Black World here. As I said, Atlanta didn't appreciate us too much and some of us were encouraged to leave at one time or another anyhow.

MILLER: Let me focus on that because when you look at Black colleges across the country there are similarities. One is that they have a tendency to be conservative. Even looking back today and looking at the things that Andrew Billingsley was writing even about the Black family, they were radical in terms of how to view Black culture and consciousness. Did you think that the ideas could be successful at an institution like Howard University?

HENDERSON: Yeah, I thought they would work in a number of schools, in fact. Those ideas that Billingsley had were meshing into what was the beginning of a national debate on the idea of a Black university and you all recall in . . . it was around 1969-'70 that there was a conference here at Howard and I saw the original proposal to the Mellon Foundation for funds for the Institute for the Advanced Study of the Arts and the Humanities and it quoted from the position paper I had presented at Idlewild.

MILLER: You left a position where you were chairman of the English department at Morehouse to come to Howard University and then you took on another admin-

istrative job as director of the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities. Did you have any reluctance about going back into administration?

HENDERSON: I was very reluctant about being the director of the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities because I had heard all kinds of stories . . .

I didn't want to be a part of because I had my domestic life to look after. And I was very ambitious in an academic sense and I wanted to write. But I was part of the planning group that formed the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities for which Dr. Billingsley deserves a lot of credit. I think people have a tendency to forget who is responsible for what but what he did at Howard during his tenure was to set up a series of alternate force fields around these departments and a lot of people at Howard didn't like that. But if there is anything that approaches positive radicalism that was it. And I eventually acceded to the request to take the position. But it was offered to other people. The person that we really wanted was Hoyt Fuller. The others included James Turner and a Chicago artist . . . Murray DePillars. And, of course, another person who would have been ideal because of his energy and his scholarship was Houston Baker. But Houston at that time was sort of split between the offer from Howard and going to the University of Virginia. So they tapped me and the price was right, too. That helped. I'm not going to be reluctant to say that was one of the deciding factors. But I had had some experience with a small group. I felt that as long as the staff was small I could be effective. I don't have any particular administrative skills that would be useful in a large situation. So as long as it was small I felt I would try it.

MILLER: Well, you tried it and immediately a number of things occurred which

affected two individuals. One is that you were able to bring Sterling Brown out of retirement, and you also brought Frank Marshall Davis whom you had been corresponding with from Hawaii to Howard. And these two writers are very important in terms of looking back at literature in the 1920s and 1930s. Could you comment about their work and also about what these men meant to you personally?

HENDERSON: Well, I'm always delighted to talk about Sterling and about Frank Marshall Davis. I was in touch with Frank Marshall Davis through my request for permission to quote from his work in "The Militant Black Writer" and he continued to write. He sent me Christmas cards and all that. You know, a lot of people didn't even know that he still existed and he's a very lively guy. And when I got a small grant from the administration I used that to bring Frank Marshall Davis here . . . He was a tremendous man . . . when he was young he looked like Joe Louis. He told all kinds of stories, very raunchy. That's why I like him. I remember the day I took Frank over to meet Sterling. Sterling was in Michael Winston's office — the old office in Moorland-Spangarn. So they sat down and started talking. Sterling Brown was setting up one of his anecdotes to tell and the anecdote was how long it took him to do such and such. Of course Sterling Brown is a brilliant man. So he said, "Steve was taping my life, Frank, and we've been here now for about four or five sittings and I'm just through the fourth grade and it's just taking a long time." So Frank said, "You must be a slow learner." So if you can imagine anybody calling Sterling Brown a slow learner. Understand? And Sterling had immense control. So he put this, what I'd call "Slim Greer" grin, on his face but he was boiling. But they got along well and respected one another. I learned a lot

from Sterling. Sterling has been a model for me of what an academic can be, among a few others. In a very personal way some teachers have been to me sort of surrogate fathers. My father died when I was 15; my mother when I turned 18. I got certain aspects of my model from Sterling. I read Langston Hughes for the first time when I was about 19. And it was the first time I had seen blues as poetry on the page in "Shakespeare in Harlem." And then with Sterling the introduction was "The Blues As Folk Poetry" which he published in 1930. That's the first time I had seen anybody take the time to treat, intellectually, this folk material. And this folk material is very important to me . . . I suppose the basic thing that motivated me as far as language study was concerned was that when I was about 14 or 15 people coming from the "mainland," you understand, would be making fun of the way we talked. And when I went into the service people would call me geechee. My father was from Savannah, Ga. They would call me geechee. That was a pejorative term. And then I heard some real geechees talk and I said, what the hell, they sound like us so what's the problem!

MILLER: Along with Sterling Brown and Frank Marshall Davis are a number of other writers who came to Howard because of your work with the institute and the National Afro-American Writers Conferences. Let me preface a question about the conferences with a quote by Harold Cruse, in "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual," where he writes about writers conferences: "During the first half of the 1960s there were no events that mirror the utter impoverishment of Negro creative intellectuals so much as those publicized glamorous meetings that go under the imposing title of Negro Writers Conferences. These literary conventions in black and tan are without a

doubt the nearest thing imaginable to those congressional talk fetes in Washington, D. C. where every elected representative knows it's his bounden duty to be present for the record.

"But only for the record because no one has any intention of passing one bit of positive pending legislation. This is another way of saying that Negro Writers Conferences settle nothing, solve nothing, pose nothing, analyze nothing, plan nothing, create nothing, not even a decent new literary review which is the least any bunch of serious, self-respecting writers with a gripe ought to do." Cruse goes on to talk about a conference that John Killens organized. We know that Killens was also with the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities and he, along with yourself and Haki Madhubuti, were key people in the development of writers conferences at Howard. Looking at the ones which were held over the years — I think we had them in '74, '76, '77, '78 and '83 — do you think they accomplished anything?

HENDERSON: I think they accomplished a great deal. Cruse — you know — looking back, I wish I had time to reread "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual" but part of that, which I try to stay out of, is the fact that some writers during the '60s and '70s — particularly with a certain mandate coming out of the Black aesthetic — misunderstood what it is that they could do. Haki Madhubuti (Don Lee) said it very, very eloquently: "I ain't seen no metaphors stop a tank/ I ain't seen no words kill." You understand? And that's a difference because people would come to a John Killens at a conference that deals with ideas and expect him to give a blueprint for the new Jerusalem. Well, of course, the problem becomes compounded when you believe that you can do that. I think writers

conferences, not only writers conferences but also scientific conferences where you're talking about nuclear physics, serve a purpose in addition to the solution of problems or the posing of questions. I think that what they do is allow people to interact . . . You're rejuvenated; you get an exposure to people's works in progress and things of that sort. With regard to these particular conferences, I'm distressed at the fact that they haven't been continued, although lip service had been given to them. But just think that of the mileage that we have with regard to the tapes — anybody can do a dozen Ph.Ds on these conference tapes. You even have a chance to get even with your enemies or people who insult you. You just put them on a conference panel between two of their opponents. But, you know, seriously, you get people together in all kinds of combinations. And you allow the students to see real-in-the-flesh Black writers. And they do discuss technique and things of that sort.

MILLER: When you look at some of the themes which were selected for the conferences do you think they were themes which enhanced one's appreciation of the literature at that particular time?

HENDERSON: I would think so because out of the writers conferences came other kinds of conferences. I am sorry that Ginny (Virginia Blandford) is not here because the institute was a small unit but everybody participated democratically. People say "secretary" with a slur on the word but our secretaries participated in the planning of the conferences and sometimes had good ideas. But in the particular case of Ginny, the idea of conferences flowered into a conference that dealt with Black women in liberation movements. That's one aspect of it. Another aspect of it is that we not

only had these writers conferences but we had two conferences on folklore.

MILLER: Talking about folklore, I think one of the key things accomplished was the fact that it removed the isolation many individuals suffered. That means that many times people got into folklore because they had a particular interest, not realizing that there might be someone across the country with the same interest. Could you talk about some of the people who were involved in those folklore conferences?

HENDERSON: Well, the folklore conferences were in '75 and '76 and Gerald Davis is the person who first comes to mind who was working, I think part-time, at the Smithsonian. He has recently published his Ph.D. thesis as a book and it's on the structural analysis of the preaching style of selected ministers from the Bay area. And he deals with this material as literature. So James Early was here with the institute and he was interested in folklore. Early was one of the young radicals from the Atlanta community, also connected with the Institute of the Black World first and then the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities. But Early was connected with the Smithsonian and he told me that Jerry was interested in setting up some kind of organization. But he was there, and then there was a very elderly man . . . as I think of him now . . .

MILLER: Folklorist?

HENDERSON: Folklorist? Oh, yeah, William Faulkner. William Faulkner was there and a tremendous man. We have him on videotape. Worth Long was there. Long eventually got a Ph.D. He was one of the poets from the '60s and '70s and a field secretary for SNCC. He brought a railroad man — Anderson — a gandy dancer to one conference. We had authentic stuff. Leon Damas was there for

the '76 conference, I think it was. Damas gave a paper on the decolonization of folklore. And Damas, of course to say the name Damas is to speak history. Just the name. He was here with us. And that's the marvelous part about having the opportunity to try these things. Even if they did not continue, the record is here. I just hope the record becomes more easily accessible to those who want to see it.

MILLER: The institute closed in June 1985 and I was wondering how much of that is because Andrew Billingsley is no longer here. Do you think that makes a difference or did the institute outgrow its usefulness?

HENDERSON: Well, it's hard to say because usefulness depends on budget. And you can have all the ideas in the world and if you don't have the budget you can't do anything with them. And for five or six years the institute was starved for lack of funds . . . I know that with Billingsley you had another kind of ideological framework. So maybe the cutting back and the retrenchment is part of the mood and the spirit coming out of the White House . . . into the Black House.

MILLER: There has been a lot of discussion about that period in terms of literature and art. But I would like you to comment on something which I find one encounters for instance when one examines the Harlem Renaissance. When does the Black arts movement begin and when does it end in terms of history? People have a tendency to use the term and just throw it out. But are there any events or things that one could point to and say this is the beginning of the Black arts movement, this is its demise? I know in an essay you cited the ending of *Black World* as a symbolic demise of the Black arts movement. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that.

26 **HENDERSON:** Well, it's problematical to me because the Black arts movement is a kind of New York term and almost a kind of New York concept. But I have always had problems with that. I know that probably the prestige, the visibility and the genius of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) did a lot to put this thing on the map nationally. But I know personally that there are people from the Umbra group, for example, who resent having the Black arts movement date from 1964 and Umbra's first publishing was 1962. And then you had a group here at Howard who called themselves the Howard Poets — Percy Johnston and others — and they were my original contact with this new spirit. I was a professor down at Richmond then. Then, of course, people resent the fact that they don't get exclusive entitlement to it. I've heard Baraka called a Johnny-come-lately. I've heard Haki Madhubuti called the same; the whole Chicago thing I've seen set up against the New York thing. I think what has influenced me has been Larry Neal's essay in *The Drama Review* and he dates the Black arts movement from 1964, the Black arts repertory theatre. I think, whatever your ideological persuasion, you have to give credit to the fact that one thing we had that we don't have today was that network of communication established by *Black World*. There would not have been any kind of vehicle for dissemination of these ideas if it hadn't been for such organizations.

MILLER: Within the Black arts movement there was one discussion which quite a number of people wrote about and debated and that was the whole idea of the Black aesthetic. Addison Gayle edited a volume of various essays on this. Looking back one sees a certain grappling in many of those essays in terms of trying to determine exactly what the Black aesthetic was. Was there some failure in

terms of actually developing a critical framework by which we could assess and evaluate our arts?

HENDERSON: Well, I wouldn't really call it a failure. I think that the questions are still there. And I think you would find similar kinds of confusion and similar kinds of attempts when people examine the Harlem Renaissance or the Negritude movement. You have people who belong to various points on the political spectrum. I think I saw a typewritten program of the Newark Black Power Conference in 1967 and the Black aesthetic was on the agenda then. The whole business of the Black aesthetic is associated very intimately with Hoyt Fuller's attempt. In the January 1968 issue of *Negro Digest*, he corrals, condenses and synthesizes responses that 20-odd writers gave to a series of questions, including the purpose of Black art and such a thing as a Black aesthetic. And I think that it largely has been associated with him. But on that I used to say that the most intelligent thing that was said was said by Larry Neal. He said that there's no need to create a Black aesthetic. One already exists, and you start from here. And when he made that statement Larry Neal linked himself almost organically with people like Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown and James Weldon Johnson in his good days.

MILLER: In some of your recent essays I notice a change. You started to use the blues aesthetic. Is this shift from Black aesthetic to blues a clarification or is it something completely different?

HENDERSON: It's really the same thing and this is one of the things I love Larry for. Larry would jump on people who said that. Well, like Sonia Sanchez said it, and Haki said it — We ain't blue, we're Black — and Larry said in effect "Well, what is blacker than blues?" You see? So Baraka and Larry in particular,

with his tremendous elegance and eloquence, made it possible to do all kinds of things. It's become very popular now to talk about blues. But a lot of people who talk about blues haven't really listened to many blues and they even correct the speech and the grammar of the people who sing the blues.

MILLER: In some of your essays you criticize a number of younger writers in terms of not building on certain traditions which were there and have been established by Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown . . . You mention them not having an appreciation for the blues.

HENDERSON: Well, it's not only blues. I think a lot of things have been said, enough has been said to reveal to any sensitive writer who is really ambitious that the Black experience is capable of supporting a multitude of epic expressions, and we have these epic expressions, some in the music . . . In Duke Ellington's music for example. And if you deal with Langston Hughes in *Ask Your Mama* all kinds of possibilities are there. And if you put all of Sterling Brown's work together it's there. I think maybe Jay Wright would do some of that. Michael Harper has some of that. June Jordan has some of it.

MILLER: We've been receiving a number of new texts put out by Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Do you see these books raising our understanding of literature?

HENDERSON: Well, I think what they're doing is a very vital service now that some of the misunderstanding has dissipated because they have to deal with some of the things that were dealt with in the '60s. And I think that what they are doing is translating into another language. They're translating the Black experience into another kind of language or they're applying a different critical vocabulary to

the Black experience. And whether that's the best or most effective way to deal with it, I don't know, but it's still legitimate. And the struggle has to be maintained in all directions and all situations. So I don't have any problem with it. I have problems when people don't acknowledge their sources, when they don't acknowledge their indebtedness. They have a tendency to acknowledge the new French and Swiss and German critics but they don't acknowledge Sterling Brown and other people.

MILLER: How do you think Black literature should be taught in the classroom?

HENDERSON: I should defer to some of my distinguished colleagues who have had more recent and extended experience. Some of the things about myself that I needed to realize are these: When you read for yourself it's one thing and when you read to teach it's something else. And when you do research on specialized problems that's one thing. When you try to give in a semester or a year a kind of capsule summary and to get people to think about the way literature works, that's another thing. So I have had a lot of problems this semester, but I think I have worked out some of them and the key is the human voice, the Black voice, and if I were to teach a course on Black poetry again I would begin with Fannie Lou Hamer's "Songs That My Mother Taught Me." I mean that's the struggle. In the Black arts movement we talk about struggle and political dimension of struggle. Lerone Bennett in an article in a recent issue of *Ebony* says it well. One of the things we have to get rid of, he suggests, is this business of old Negroes and new Black folks. It's one struggle, and the people who are struggling now are standing on the shoulders of the Negroes of the past, in so many words. And that's what I think

the crucial role of a teacher of any subject ought to be.

MILLER: One of the things many teachers today are faced with is the shortage of textbooks. You've spoken openly of doing another anthology similar to "Understanding the New Black Poetry." If you did compile another anthology what would you do differently?

HENDERSON: Well, I think I would have some of the same problems that I had with the first anthology except for the fact that the ideas and notions that I had in the first anthology are fairly well known so I wouldn't have to do that again. I think I'd take a page from Arnold Adoff. I'd get as many different poems as I could get but one of the problems that I think would plague me or anybody else would be just to find out who the new writers are. Because we don't have any national publication to provide a forum for the younger and the newer writers. So it would be a tremendous job.

MILLER: Talking about new writers and the future, my question is tied into something that the Institute of the Black World used to do and that was develop the idea of a Black agenda for a particular decade. As a former member of the Institute of the Black World and a person who is respected for his opinions on Black culture and education, what do you see as being on the Black agenda for the 1990s?

HENDERSON: That scares me. I think that, for myself, some of the same things that were always on the agenda, or should have been on the agenda, would still be on the agenda. In the Idlewild paper I talked about certain kinds of problems and I see those problems still taking form . . . the problem of discontinuous knowledge, the problem of neglected knowledge, the problem of inferiority feelings about Black culture and things of that sort. I still

see those as issues that have to be addressed. My students today were talking about the persistence of stereotypes in the media. Well, that's the same thing that's been going on and on and on. I don't think it's going to be solved until you get certain kinds of political power. . . . At the Institute of the Black World's meeting at Idlewild, they talked about everything because they realized the interconnectedness of things. And what strikes me is how optimistic, how energetic and how confident and believing everybody was. I think that is still there, that it is still a part of what makes us tick — what makes any people who survive tick. But I would be foolhardy, I think, to venture anything else except to say that many of the same problems still exist, but in addition to that there are all kinds of new possibilities in terms of developing artistic formats. And they're all around us. I think you know more about them than I do. But if you just take the music video as an art form, a potential art form, they're all of those things that could be done. But I would like to see some of the problems that Lerone Bennett has been talking about, Leo Hansberry has been talking about, Sterling Brown has been talking about, James Weldon Johnson has been talking about, Leon Damas and others, I would like to see them just continued, to be addressed. The chief problem I see is that there's such a tremendous discontinuity between the '70s and the '80s and a student honestly doesn't know who Malcolm X was, who hasn't heard "We Shall Overcome," except indirectly. And that's a kind of gut level problem that has to be dealt with and I don't know how. □