

John Wright

- Youth and education 1-
 - fourth generation Minnesotan 1
 - family connection to University of Minnesota 2
 - enters University of Minnesota, Electrical Engineering, 1963 4-5
 - few minority students 4
 - black activists from South 5
- Afro-American student activism, late 1960s 6
 - community-based 6
 - Afro-American Action Committee 6
 - role of black athletes 6
 - negotiations with Moos, Malcolm 7
 - need for recruitment 8
 - takeover of Morrill Hall, January 1969 9-10
 - demands 9
- Wright shifts from IT to CLA, 1965 11
 - anti-war activity, 1966 12
 - draft resistance 13-14
- Wright shifts to Department of English as a graduate student 14
 - only black student 14
 - Monk, Sam - Wright works with him
- Wright shifts to American Studies, 1970-73 16
- Wright directs the Martin Luther King Program 17
- Wright teaches Afro-American literature 18
 - internal trouble in Afro-American Studies Department 20-22
 - King, George 20
 - Ward, John 20
- Wright takes position at Carleton College, 1973-84 19-23
- Wright returns to the University of Minnesota as chair of Afro-American Studies, 1984 24
 - joint appointments 25
 - faculty and funding problems 26
 - department's relation to community 28
 - teacher-training program 28
 - Givens, Archie - collection 30
 - support of Keller, Kenneth 31
 - funds raised 32
 - history of blacks at the University of Minnesota project 33-34
- Wright's work with Penumbra Theater 34
 - Wilson, August 35
- White students in Afro-American Studies 37
- Importance of community participation in Afro-American Studies 39-42
 - outreach of department to community 40
 - focus on social change 40
- University of Minnesota system of rewards to faculty 42
- Blacks and local theaters 42-44
- Leadership 44-
 - Spear, Allan 44

Anderson, Chet	44
Reeves, Jim	45
Craig, Earl	45
Starks, Matt	45
Wilderson, Frank	45
Ideological divisions within Afro-American Studies	46
Larger impact of minority programs	47
Limits to Affirmative Action	48
Issue of scholarship	50
Ambiguous social role of humanities	52

Interview with John Wright

**Interviewed by Professor Clarke A. Chambers
University of Minnesota**

Interviewed on August 11 and September 27, 1994

John Wright - JW
Clarke A. Chambers - CAC

CAC: . . . afternoon which is August 11, 1994 with Professor John S. Wright of the Department of Afro-American & African Studies. John has had almost all of his learning and teaching career at the university as an undergraduate and graduate—with ten years off, eleven years off, to teach at Carleton College and we may speak about that briefly. So, John, I welcome you to posterity.

JW: [laughter] Ah!

CAC: It's posterity that we're talking to and not really to me. I'm just a facilitator.

JW: Yes.

CAC: I have found, as I suggested just a moment ago, that it's very helpful to have a little autobiography, memoir of where you came from, how you were interested. I see you have an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering. The jump from there to the Humanities is an interesting one. So, start us up.

JW: I guess there's some family background that's probably appropriate here also. I don't know what portion of the people you're interviewing here are multi-generational Minnesotans but you have one before you. I'm, actually, a fourth generation Minnesotan . . .

CAC: I am, too.

JW: Oh, my goodness.

CAC: There aren't many. Let me tell you, there are very few of us.

JW: . . . on my father's side of the family. My father's people came to Minnesota from small towns in Kentucky shortly after Statehood, apparently.

CAC: Good grief.

JW: My grandmother had an uncle who was up here. We're not precisely certain but, probably, sometime in the early 1860s, 1870s. My grandparents, my father's parents, came up in the 1890s. My grandfather had been a school teacher in Kentucky who had got his own educational training, in part, out in Fort Duchesne, Utah. His father was a Buffalo Soldier, one of the two all black cavalry regiments out west.

CAC: Yes. Right.

JW: He was stationed all over the west and was engaged in a variety of the Indian Wars. He was all over Arizona, Utah, and wherever else, and ended up in the Spanish American War.

CAC: I'm smiling because my great uncle fought, too, at the same time on the high plains in the 1870s and 1880s.

JW: [laughter] My grandparents came up here as part of a stream of black folks who were coming up to the Northwest Territory during the post Reconstruction years. This was still *way out West*, as they considered it then. I can remember both of my grandparents telling stories about their experiences in the South and Kentucky. My grandfather had long stories about his experiences out West because he had gone West as a young boy, ten, eleven years old on trains as far as the trains went, and then by stagecoach, and so forth to meet his father out West and to stay at Fort Duchesne, Utah in the 1880s.

To bring things more into the present, my tie to the university, in part, comes from having had older members of the family . . . my father had gone to the university back in the 1930s, had been encouraged by his parents. See, my grandfather had been a school teacher and he was someone who was proud of his mastery of Latin and Greek. He was a dedicated scholar, had a rather large library which I got acquainted with early on in life; and it was always presumed that a college career was going to be part of our lives. He had tried to send all of his seven children to college; although, the reality was that the university was a less than hospitable place for black students early on, and so most of his children went South, to black schools, to Fisk, and so forth. But both my father and his younger sister, my aunt, Martha Wright Wilson, came to the university in the 1930s. They had gone to North High. As children, they were both superb scholars. My aunt had been a class valedictorian at Robbinsdale, and class valedictorian at North High, and came to the university in the 1930s. She and my father were here together. My father ended up going through in Mortuary Science and my aunt, in Mathematics and Education.

CAC: You know firsthand that Minnesota dormitories were not open to blacks until the late 1930s?

JW: Oh, I am quite well aware of all of this.

CAC: Yes.

JW: The campuses were not very hospitable places.

CAC: I should say not.

JW: One of my father's and aunt's very good friends, John Thomas, was one of the more distinguished black students who went to this school in those early years. He went on to play, and is still playing, a major role in international refugee problems. He was one of the leaders of the black students here who confronted Lotus Coffman in the 1940s over the discrimination in the dormitories, and a variety of other policies on campus, and were called communists and an array of other things in process. My aunt and father were here during those days. When it came time for us in my generation—I was the oldest of four kids—to think about going to school . . . I had grown up in the [Twin] Cities near the Franklin and Chicago area until I was seven years old. My grandparents had had a farm out in what is now Crystal and New Hope since before the first World War. The family in town had grown too big for the flat we were living in. My father was working two full time jobs: one for the post office and one for the Park Board. We had to move out to what was the farm; we still had twenty acres of farm land left. The suburbs hadn't, in fact, expanded. We moved out in the spring of 1954, on my mother's birthday . . . May 22, 1954, to be exact, the week following the Brown versus Board of Education Decision [Topeka]. There were no black students in School District 281, then, at all. So, we had an initial experience with the integration process, as it were. I went through the School District 281 schools all the way through. I ended up being in one of these what was then called accelerated classes, enriched classes, which meant that we got to take classes outside of our regular grade system, classes in advance. By the time we got into high school, we were able to take university classes. In fact, in some of the cases, Robbinsdale then had some university professors who were coming and teaching some of these classes in the Robbinsdale schools to people in these accelerated high school classes. I had my first contact with university professors in the Robbinsdale schools.

CAC: Did you come in on campus, too?

JW: Yes, we had some campus visits, also. I and my sister and brothers were all in rather isolated circumstances, somewhat combative circumstances in the school districts out there over racial issues. When I had the option to leave high school early, I did without hesitating. So, I graduated when I was sixteen. At the time I was not absolutely certain about what my professional objectives were but I was good in math and science. Engineering was, then, being touted as a profession of the future.

CAC: You bet.

JW: I had been a class salutatorian at Robbinsdale and a National Merit scholar. I got a freshman scholarship at the university and was admitted to IT, the Institute of Technology, in the Electrical Engineering Program which was, then, a five-year rather than a four-year program.

CAC: Yes.

JW: Engineering schools were, then, in the process of beginning this transition from a five-year to a four-year term. When I ended, it was a five-year program. It changed mid-stream for us. That was 1963 when I entered as a freshman. There were, then, fewer than sixty black students on this campus. A significant number of those were athletes from out of state. A few years earlier, Murray Warmath had been one of the Big Ten coaches who had taken a lead in recruiting black athletes from the deep South. Of course, those athletes had enabled the university to win two national championships in the early 1960s. Carl Eller, Bobby Bell, and all the rest were in that crew.

CAC: Yes.

JW: There were fewer than sixty black students on campus. There were more students from individual countries in Asia, and Africa, and Latin America than there were African Americans students at this university.

CAC: Sure.

JW: The student population itself overall was roughly the same as it is now. There wasn't much difference, you know 40,000 students plus, than today's school.

CAC: Just to jump in, what's the population of minorities of color on the campus now . . . African Americans?

JW: It's around 1,000.

CAC: Okay.

JW: That's largely a product of the course, the great leap forward, that was made in 1969.

CAC: Yes. Well, we'll come to that soon.

JW: Yes. I was in the Institute of Technology and I was the only black student in Electrical Engineering and, I think, there might have been one other. Art. I've forgotten Art's name. Art was in, it might have been, aeronautical or mechanical, I've forgotten, one of the other engineering programs but we didn't have any contact. Throughout all of my classes, I was the only black student in any of the classes in IT, all the way through, that I can recall. That situation has changed a little bit now. There is now a cluster of eight or ten, or so, black

students in the Institute of Technology now. So, it's a little bit better but not a great deal. Most black students I went to school with in those years were in the General College and in CLA [College of Liberal Arts] in those early years. I was an undergraduate between 1963 and 1968. So, the fall of my freshman year, John Kennedy was assassinated.

CAC: Yes.

JW: In the spring of my graduating year, in 1968, of course, Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were killed. In between, in those years, we had long hot summers, as they were called.

CAC: Pretty tumultuous.

JW: Yes, those were, indeed, tumultuous years. The group of black students on campus, early on, formed organizations. The earliest one that I can recall was called STRAP. The acronym was STRAP, Students for Racial Progress. Scotty Stone was one of the leaders of that group but early on Rosemary Freeman and Ida Elam came to campus from the South . . . Horace Huntley, and so forth. The students who helped form the core of what would become what we would, then, call the Afro-American Action Committee which became the Black Student Union on these campuses during those years.

CAC: The core were students who had come from the South?

JW: Well, the leadership group were students who had come from the South, and who had been involved in the southern sit-ins, and the development of the movement there. The rest of the officership and leaders were mostly folks who were local, or regional. But students from the South who had already gone through a novitiate in the Civil Rights Movement took leadership roles in the organization on the campus.

CAC: They were blooded as we say on the [unclear].

JW: Right. Exactly. Those were tumultuous years on campus. I know that the official accounts of the university during those years pay at least some attention to those things, but there's probably not a great deal about the inner workings of the groups . . .

CAC: That's true.

JW: . . . and the array of activities, and the links with community agencies, and settlement houses, and so forth. All those things were very important for us as students coming along.

CAC: Say more about that, then, because the students themselves are so isolated, so few in number that this networking was really a . . .

JW: Yes.

CAC: You're' right. It doesn't show up in printed records. I've gone through and read them again.

JW: No, it's absolutely critical. Later on, in 1968 and 1969 when things on campus moved to a new level of confrontation, those community links became even more critical because community agencies, the Inner City Youth League in St. Paul, the Way in North Minneapolis, were important connecting points for the black student group here on campus.

CAC: Both of these were settlement house operations?

JW: The Inner City Youth League, yes. Yes.

CAC: So was the Way a kind of a settlement house operation?

JW: Yes. Yes. There were key individuals involved. Mahmoud El-Kati was working with the Way and he was another southern migrant, we might say, who'd come to the Twin Cities, originally, from Georgia. For many of us, at a time when there were no courses on Afro-American history or studies on the campus, much of that had to come from extra academic sources in the community. Agencies and settlement houses were places where, traditionally, people who were both professionally and unprofessionally trained in history and Afro-American studies gave lectures, and talks, and classes, and so forth, the things that were not part of the university curriculum. Many of us got our initial schooling in those contexts.

CAC: Informal and self taught?

JW: Yes. I think the campus life during those years was, probably, dominated organizationally on one hand by AAAC [Afro-American Action Committee] and by the athletes on the other. The football and basketball players were the most prominent ones. There were no black fraternity houses on campus and, of course, the situation in terms of the fraternities at large here was that they were, basically, exclusionary.

CAC: Sure.

JW: There was some interaction but they didn't pledge black members.

CAC: Were the athletes active in the other group?

JW: There were some athletes who were active in the Afro-American Action Committee but not the athletes in any kind of wholesale way. It was very, very clear from early on that the coaches tried to apply some brakes to the athletes getting heavily involved in political activities on campus. There were a number of other kinds of brakes that were applied to the athletes and some of those had to do with their social, and personal, and romantic lives because there were very clear constraints placed on black athletes about fraternizing with white coeds.

CAC: Yes.

JW: There were a number of confrontations with the coaches over such issues over the years. There were no black fraternity houses on campus but both the Omega Psi Phi and the Alphas had chapters here in town. My father, in fact, had been an Omega and there were a number of parent chapters around town. The fraternities would occasionally rent places or find some venue for parties, and gatherings, and so forth; so, they tried as best they might to have a black Greek presence, even if it was sporadic and not fully institutionalized on campus in that context. I guess, the sequence of events that led ultimately to the take over of Morrill Hall in 1969 is certainly worth recounting. There was a process of at least a three-year series of negotiations with the university administration about the variety of issues relating to Afro-American students, the students of color on the campus.

CAC: Did this begin in Meredith Wilson's Administration or with the coming of [Malcolm] Moos? Moos came in 1967, I think.

JW: There were some initial discussions with Wilson but they were limited. Moos was really . . . his administration was really the one that did most of the initial negotiating.

CAC: But they went on for three years before any kind of . . . ?

JW: Yes. There were a long series of meetings with the Moos Administration about recruitment plans, and so on, and so forth. I, myself, ended up involved in the very first attempt to recruit black and Native American students in a community based recruiting effort. A guy name Don Dale, who used to operate out of the old Student Activities Bureau, was linked up with Matt Stark back then.

CAC: Oh.

JW: I and a couple of other students . . . I think that might have been the summer of 1968 that we did that recruiting project.

CAC: This was with the support of Central Administration?

JW: This was with support of Central Administration . . .

CAC: But not many resources?

JW: . . . but not many resources. It was a very limited operation. We were going out door-to-door canvassing in communities in Minneapolis and St. Paul, handing out application forms, talking about university missions, about financial aid, and so forth, in the process.

CAC: Good. Did you have any support in that from any of the departments scattered around the . . . ?

JW: There was no support from academic departments at all.

CAC: Okay.

JW: This was related, for the most part, to the student support services, to student counselling links. One of the things that happened in the middle and late 1960s, also, was that there was a lot of activity in the General College. There were a variety of federal programs—WIN [Work Incentive Program], and New Careers, and a variety of others in the General College—that were bringing in students of color, non-traditional students. The faculty and counselors there offered at least some support for these kinds of activities but academic departments themselves weren't, that I can recall, involved in any kind of direct way in this.

CAC: I inquire because I know that History in 1969-1970 had a very active recruitment for graduate students only, not the undergraduate. We had a person who taught at Tuskegee [Institute] and had contacts with black colleges from that.

JW: Right. That's all post take-over.

CAC: Yes.

JW: I was on the executive committee of the Afro-American Action Committee during those two years and I'd also served as a senator in the MSA Senate. We had had a series of meetings with the administration, again over the course of a couple of years, talking about the need for recruitment, for an academic support program, about trying to develop some kind of curricular offerings in what we were, then, referring to as Black Studies. Nothing was happening. These things were all getting buried in the usual round of task forces, and over view committees, and so forth.

CAC: President Moos, himself, was responsive, evasive?

JW: Moos met regularly and intensively. The general sentiment was that Moos was *sympathetic* to these enterprises but from the advantage point of black students, he did not seem to be a particularly effective administrator.

CAC: In getting the resources to carry through?

JW: Yes, in marshalling resources and getting broader support for these things. Ultimately, the decision to escalate the negotiations and confrontation with the administration came here in the wake of the series of take overs of administration buildings that were being orchestrated by black student unions around the country. It was January 1969, when we planned the take over in

Morrill Hall. That year had been a year of take-overs on campuses around the country; so, we became part of this wave. Our basic plans, and the list of demands and requirements, and so forth, were in part patterned on those stratagems and ideas that were fairly consistently being presented to universities and colleges around the country.

CAC: There was a national network you could plug into?

JW: There was a national network.

CAC: You knew about tactics and strategies elsewhere?

JW: Yes. Black student unions were meeting in national gatherings then. There was an agenda being pushed at large. The agenda here was, I think, fairly consistent. The request for a formal program of recruitment, for the creation of a student support services program—the program that would become the Martin Luther King [MLK] Program—the creation of a Department of Afro-American & African Studies, the recruitment of black faculty, those were all essential parts of our plan. It, would take a couple of years, of course, before many of these things became operational in process.

CAC: Sure.

JW: The Department of Afro-American Studies was formed in 1970 . . . became operational, I think, in 1970. There a series of planning committees involved. I was on the planning committee for the department and was on a committee for hiring faculty. Allan Spear was on a committee. Cynthia Neverdon, who was a very sharp and well posed black woman, had responsibility for many of the support service programs. I think she was called a coordinator for Special Programs, if I recall Cynthia's title, early on.

CAC: Were you part of the sit-in yourself?

JW: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I was in Morrill the whole time. Yes.

CAC: Why don't you say a little bit more about the event itself. I know the developments are more important but this was the . . .

JW: Yes. The leaders of the Afro-American Action Committee were Rosemary Freeman, Horace Huntley and Anna Stanley. Subsequently, in part because of the publicity in the Minneapolis Star . . . The day of the take over, the *Star* photographers photographed the Afro-American Action Committee leaving Coffman Union and marching across the bridge towards Morrill Hall, and as it happened Rose Freeman and Horace Huntley, who indeed were leading officers of the organization, were out front along with a student named Warren Tucker who just happened to be there out front. He was not an officer, was not a leader of the group. He was in the photo and the county attorney then, George Scott . . .

CAC: Oh, yes.

JW: . . . a rather unenlightened and ferocious county attorney, who tried to turn this to political advantage, immediately called for an indictment. Rose Freeman, and Horace Huntley, and Warren Tucker were all named in the indictment. Again, we were in Morrill Hall for three days negotiating with the administration. The SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, were involved as allies but they were not inside Morrill Hall in an official capacity.

CAC: Whom else were you negotiating with other than the president?

JW: There were a group of administrators involved there. I can recall a [Paul] Cashman, James Reeves . . .

CAC: Oh, yes. He was one of the few black . . .

JW: He was an associate dean for Student Affairs, as I can recall.

CAC: Yes. He was probably the only black person representing the university?

JW: I believe so. Earl Craig was on campus then.

CAC: Ah.

JW: Earl was working with Student Activities Bureau in some capacity—I've forgotten precisely—but Earl wasn't directly involved in the negotiations then. It was a three day long occupation of Morrill Hall before an agreement was worked out.

CAC: But Moos himself, although Attorney Scott was anxious to move, Mr. Moos didn't call for police protection or anything like that?

JW: I don't recall that he did. There was significant involvement from community groups, of course, in the take over. There were people from the Way and the Inner City Youth League. A variety of community groups were there inside Morrill Hall and helping with the process to reinforce the students so it was very much a joint student and community action.

CAC: Yes.

JW: The significant things to come out of that were the creation of the Martin Luther King Program, and the Department of Afro-American & African Studies, and a plan for long-range financial support for students of color—not just Afro-American students—and the Martin Luther King Program, itself, was designed to deal with low income students regardless of race.

CAC: You, yourself, became active in the MLK?

JW: I spent a year—graduate student then—as an advisor in CLA lower division, basically, learning the ropes of the advising process there. Barbara Uppgren became the first director of the CLA Martin Luther King Program. MLK was divided both in the CLA and in General College during those years.

CAC: Yes.

JW: Barbara was the first coordinator.

CAC: Excuse me, I'm going to interrupt you for a minute. By this time, you're a graduate student but you've moved out of engineering? Could you say something about that?

JW: In terms of my own career, by the time I was a sophomore in the Institute of Technology, it was fairly clear to me that while I enjoyed math and physics, I was less than passionate about engineering. In my junior year when the core electrical engineering courses came, we were on a very, very intensive program then because we had started on a five-year program and it had been switched to a four-year program; so, we were taking sixteen to eighteen credits of solid math, physics and engineering courses. It was a murderous kind of pace. I realized that I wasn't really passionate about electrical engineering and began exploring the possibility of transferring into CLA. That was 1965. In those years, the Vietnam War was underway, was intensifying. The selective service was making its presence felt on the campus. I had, initially, been in the Air Force ROTC at the outset but I had lasted for no more than a term. I simply found the regimen unpalatable and gave back my uniform and all the rest, the whole plan, deferment, and so forth, that was involved with being an ROTC then. At the beginning of my junior year in Engineering when I went to my draft board and told them I was considering changing majors into CLA, I was told then that any change that would prolong my undergraduate years would endanger my deferment. So, I reconsidered . . .

CAC: Got the message?

JW: . . . my plan and decided, all right, well, engineering . . . I guess, I can hold onto this but I planned to take as many as electives as I could in those departments and fields that were of interest to me. My own interests then, in part, had been fueled by my involvement in political activities, and community ties, and so forth. I was interested in history, and political science, and philosophy and anthropology; so, I tried to take electives as best I can. As a high school student, I'd always been strongly interested in both literature and in history. I had missed that during the years at IT and I began trying to recoup my losses. I, potentially, could have graduated in 1967. I could have finished in four years but at that point again, the draft boards were waiting for us, for new graduates. I was politically firmly opposed to the Vietnam War.

CAC: I assume the same would be true of all the other persons in the Martin . . .

JW: Yes, as an organization, right. The Afro-American Action Committee was very strongly anti-war.

CAC: Yes.

JW: We were involved in a number of the anti-war protests, and sessions, symposia, and so forth, on campus here. I had no intention to fight in Vietnam, although given my training and background, the Selective Service people had told me that since I was an engineer, then I would certainly have been recruited into the officer core.

CAC: Sure.

JW: But that was no salve as far as I was concerned. Ultimately, I ended up finding a way to extend my stay because of some changes in draft policy then. I was able to extend my stay, in part, by deferring a sequence in Control Systems Theory that was offered only in the spring. I took an incomplete in the spring of 1967 knowing it wasn't going to be offered again until the spring of 1968 and had applied, again, for a one year extension of my deferment which then gave me a year in which I had, basically, one Control Systems Theory course to take.

CAC: Yes.

JW: I had been working all along in school for a variety of corporations, for the local Northern States Power, for Western Electric, and so forth; and I, then, had a job working in the research arm of Pako Photo, a processing company who was then trying to compete with Kodak developing a color processor to compete with the new Kodak units. I was working half time as a research engineer for them during that year. I spent that year taking courses in Philosophy, Political Science, in History, Anthropology, Literature, and so forth, until I completed the last Control Systems Theory course that spring. Then, I had to face the draft again. I, also, had decided what I was going to do. I still had not given up engineering completely. One of my initial professional plans had been an engineering degree and an MBA. I was offered a full fellowship in the graduate program, the MBA Program, here which I accepted. The fall of 1968, I was enrolled in the MBA Program working half time as an engineer and still involved with my various campus activities.

CAC: You were a busy young man.

JW: I was a busy young man. I, also, had taken on this job as a lower division counselor in CLA; so, it was a busy time. The political issues surrounding black presence on the campus were intensifying and that winter, in January, we did orchestrate the take over of Morrill Hall. I ended up being drafted in the fall of 1969.

CAC: Oh.

JW: They gave me two weeks. [laughter] I was originally scheduled to leave before my finals in the Business Graduate Program. I got a two week extension to finish my finals before I was to be shipped out and I had decided about what I was going to do in the interim about it. I had had a roommate then who was also staunchly anti-war, who had started law school, and who took a principal position that he was going to simply refuse induction and go that route. There was, of course, an elaborate draft counselling industry that had grown up on campus during those years.

CAC: Sure.

JW: They were suggesting a variety of things, of course, from leaving the country to draft resistance, to a variety of means and subterfuge. I was aware, at this point, that all of us who were officers in the Afro-American Action Committee were under surveillance of the FBI and the local police. We'd been routinely hassled by the local police.

CAC: That hassling would take what form?

JW: Ofttimes, I and my roommate, who was president of AAAC for while, were routinely pulled over by Minneapolis or St. Paul police, told that there were warrants for our arrest for this or that, and taken down to the police station. That was a fairly routine thing. We also knew, at various points, that there were infiltrators in our group who were black police informants or FBI informants. We, also, knew that there were FBI files on all of us.

CAC: Did you ever ask for your files?

JW: No, I did not ask for my files.

CAC: I'll bet you could do that. That would be kind of fun.

JW: Yes, it might . . . it might be at this point.

CAC: [laughter]

JW: We knew, then, in terms of draft resistance that they could only prosecute a small percentage of the people who were refusing induction and that they were doing so selectively, trying to pick targets that would be the most worthwhile in terms of the public perceptions about all of this. The experience of my roommate at the time was significant. This particular roommate was white but he was targeted, was prosecuted, was tried, and was convicted, and sent to federal penitentiary.

CAC: Good grief.

JW: He was given a three year sentence, as I recall and ended up serving about a year and one-half. It was a grueling experience for him. He came out and dedicated himself to prison reform at Law School. I had no illusions. I presumed that I would probably be targeted also.

CAC: Right. Sure.

JW: I took a different stratagem. Ultimately, through a combination of things, in part because of my political activities and some other draft counselling devices, I convinced the draft board on the day that I was supposed to ship out that they didn't really want me in the service. And so I went home that evening . . .

CAC: What on earth arguments did you use to . . .

JW: There were a number of things that we did during those years. [laughter] I had cultivated chronic medical injuries and so forth, although that was ultimately dismissed . . . if you hadn't had operations or serious kinds of medical things. I had some old athletic injuries but they were, basically, dismissed in the process. Ultimately, it was a combination of political and medical reasons that they decided that they didn't want me. So, I went home and then I had to decide what I was going to do. I immediately the next week, renounced my fellowship in the MBA program. There had been a couple of unsavory experiences I had had there that kind of contributed to it. I can recall being in a graduate accounting course in the Business School and the instructor, under the pretext of having us learn the intricacies of the local stock market, had us each doing research on companies on the local exchange as part of this course and presenting a detailed reports to the instructor in the process.

CAC: Sure.

JW: One of the things that soured me—and I think, perhaps, some other members of the class—was when at the end of the term, he announced that on the basis of our reports that he had turned a tidy profit on the local exchange.

CAC: [laughter]

JW: That was just one of a series of things. [laughter] I had been on job working in the research wing for Pako Photo here. I had been having an endless series of arguments with my engineering colleagues over social philosophy and social issues. It had become a rather unhappy work environment. I resigned my job as an assistant research engineer as well and I decided I was going to stay in Graduate School. It turned out that the only field in which I had accumulated enough credits, outside of the sciences and engineering, where I could even think about applying for Graduate School was in Literature; so, I applied to the Graduate School in the English Department. There were no African American graduate students at all. I can recall the graduate director, then, looking over my record with astonishment and saying that this was unheard of here, that I had absolutely no background for a graduate program in English but that

he would consider admitting me *provisionally* which was all the opening that I needed. So, I was admitted, provisionally, to the graduate program in English. I ended up there becoming the protégé of Samuel H. Monk. He was one of the grand old men of the English Department.

CAC: You bet.

JW: It was a rather interesting, I think, an ironic experience as it turned out. Samuel Monk was a specialist in the eighteenth century, author of a famous book on the sublime. I took Monk's eighteenth century series. We had to write critical . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Tape 1, Side 2]

JW: I was in Monk's eighteenth century series and I was the only black student in these classes or any of the graduate literature classes I was taking at the time. I had done very well and written a paper in the mid term and when I wrote my critical review for Monk, I was surprised to get it back with a note. I'd written a piece, an essay—I can recall, it was on [Daniel] Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. I had been doing some reading on the outside, basically, about [unclear] theory and was applying some ideas of it to my own interpretation of the text. Monk had written me a note on it saying—if I can rephrase Monk's rather eloquent language—"Mr. Wright, this paper is so brilliantly sophisticated that I can't help but wonder if you haven't, perhaps, relied too closely on sources that you have not cited."

CAC: Oh, my.

JW: He was accusing me of plagiarism, basically; though he said in the note, also, that he wasn't in an inquisitorial mood and invited me to come in during his [unclear] hour to discuss the matter with him. I went in to Professor Monk's office.

CAC: God!

JW: I carried my mid-term exam with me. As it turned out, in his grade book had me down for a zero for not having taken the mid-term. I had the mid-term with his AA grade.

CAC: And favorable comments?

JW: Yes, praising comments on it and soon as I showed that to him, he immediately disarmed and was effusive in his apologies for even implying that I might have committed plagiarism. From that point on, Monk and I were on the best of terms. He did his best to try to convert me into an eighteenth century man.

CAC: [laughter]

JW: But, the reality was . . .

CAC: It wasn't exactly relevant.

JW: I'd completed the MA in English and American Literature but English Department was, basically, unreconstructed. There were no courses at all in Afro-American literature, or African literature or anything outside the old canon. My interests were very eclectic and interdisciplinary at that point.

CAC: Clearly, you remain so.

JW: As I looked about for other avenues, other venues, of course, there were no graduate programs in Afro-American Studies anywhere at that point.

CAC: Of course.

JW: My interests were diasporic. I had a strong interest not just in Afro-American culture but in the Caribbean, in part, because my mother's side of the family is from the British West Indies, from Barbados.

CAC: Yes.

JW: My interests in Africa, and African history, and culture were getting stronger and stronger. I had run across some friends who had ties with American Studies. I started looking at American Studies programs and Minnesota and Yale appeared to be the strongest programs in the country and they had the best alternatives. There were some people here in American Studies who were also . . . Allan Spear was, then, starting to teach the courses in Afro-American Literature.

CAC: Yes.

JW: In fact, Spear's initial courses in Afro-American History had been attended in a significant way by members of the Afro-American Action Committee, and Anna Stanley . . .

CAC: Bravo!

JW: . . . and I, and others, were involved in that process; so, we had taken a proprietary attitude towards these things. I decided that it was between Yale and Minnesota and I had strong commitments here. I was involved, then, with the MLK Program and so on and ongoing things with AAAC; so, I decided I would stay here and move into American Studies, which I did. I was a walk-on in American Studies. There were no black graduate students in American Studies. I was not on fellowship. I worked my way through again through my working in the MLK Program.

CAC: Yes.

JW: The fall of 1970 is when I took over running the MLK Program in CLA. I was twenty-three years old then.

CAC: American Studies was a good place to bootleg things. It was precisely at this time, and for the next several years, that women were doing their Women's Studies in American Studies.

JW: Yes.

CAC: So, the same thing would be true with you?

JW: Exactly. And, also, the way American Studies was structured then—there's a different structure to the program now—you had broad fields. You had Religion and Philosophy, History, Literature, and Social Sciences and a Foreign Civilization area.

CAC: Yes.

JW: At that time, also, the History Department had gotten the History of African Peoples Program underway.

CAC: Yes.

JW: Lansiné Kaba had come aboard. Stuart Schwartz was a specialist in Brazil and Latin America.

CAC: And Allen Isaacman.

JW: Allen Isaacman. Allen Spear was involved. I went into American Studies and made Afro-American History and Afro-American Literature points of focus. My Foreign Civilization was African Studies; so, I did all the course in African Historiography and so forth. I did the courses in Anthropology and African Anthropology, etcetera. I was able to, basically, put together the kind of program that I wanted in American Studies.

CAC: That structure of the program at that time was the salvation for all kinds of people like you?

JW: Yes.

CAC: Just make your own?

JW: Yes. It suited me quite well at the time.

CAC: Oh, yes. And you found your way to Chet Anderson.

JW: I found my way to Chet Anderson in English. Chet had inaugurated teaching courses in Afro-American Literature. It was Chet who ultimately enlisted me to teach the Afro-American Literature Course there.

CAC: While still a graduate student?

JW: While still a graduate student. I got my feet into teaching in community teaching context. I did some teaching for one of the community outreach programs that ran courses in settlement context. I think it was tied up with the Urban and Regional Affairs Program in some ways.

CAC: I'll bet it was.

JW: I was teaching groups of Vietnam veterans and, also, there was a prison program.

CAC: You bet there was, yes.

JW: So, we did some work with Stillwater inmates in the process. I was doing that and some extension division programs that met over in north side, and in St. Paul community centers, and some on campus human relations courses. So, I got my feet into teaching that way. I had never planned on an academic career despite the fact that my mother was a teacher, my aunt was a teacher, my grandfather had been a teacher.

CAC: [laughter] Great.

JW: I had never conscientiously thought about teaching as a professional career myself but I ended up . . .

CAC: You've got a real natural taste for it.

JW: . . . through this elaborate process doing it. I was thoroughly immersed in it all. In terms of my own points of focus, I found in part, in Dave Noble and in Intellectual History, a way of tying together a lot of my interests early on . . .

CAC: Good. A lot of people did.

JW: . . . my literary interest, and political, and philosophical, and anthropological. Intellectual History was an excellent rubric for doing so. So, when I decided on a dissertation topic, basically, it was the topic intellectual history. My dissertation topic was "Ethiopia in Babylon: Antebellum American Romanticism and the Emergence of Black Literary Nationalism."

CAC: What a great title.

JW: [laughter] It was a big, unwieldy two-volume dissertation that had me studying, again, the ideology and political history of Afro-American Nationalism, and the American Romantic Movement, the abolitionist movement, the early immigrationist enterprises that people like Martin Delany, and [Frederick] Douglass, and Frank Webb, a whole array of these nineteenth century figures and their ties with . . .

CAC: I get a sense though that you were coming home? Did you feel that you were finding your way home by then?

JW: Oh, yes, by then, it was pretty clear. But I was, also, during those years—in 1970 to 1973 when I was doing the course work in American Studies, teaching, running the Martin Luther King Program—butting my head up against the inertia and intransigencies of the administration on several fronts and finding it frustrating. It was very clear to me that while I felt a certain sense of purpose in running an administrative program, a counselling program, that my scholarly interests were suffering. Lansiné Kaba was doing some teaching down, then, at Carleton College.

CAC: Oh, that's the connection?

JW: Lansiné was teaching at Carleton. There were no black faculty at Carleton. There was no program in Afro-American & African Studies. Carleton which had a strong liberal tradition . .

CAC: You bet.

JW: . . . had recruited black students and some Hispanic students in some numbers there. The students were confronting Carleton Administration on, of course, the same basic grounds, about curricular reform, and recruitment, and so forth. They wanted a program in Afro-American & African Studies started. Lansiné suggested to the Carleton Administration that they talk to me about coming to Carleton. As it turned out, Carleton approached me at just the right time. I had finished my course work and pre-lims. I was frustrated with the university on several fronts . . .

CAC: I understand that.

JW: . . . in dealing with the Martin Luther King Program, and graduate recruitment, and faculty recruitment, and so forth; so, I agreed to Carleton. What I originally planned was going to be a two or three stint and I would start a program in Afro-American & African Studies there, join the English Department, teach courses in Afro-American literature, and history, and culture, and so forth. So, that's what I did in the fall of 1973.

CAC: And it went on for eleven years?

JW: And it went on for eleven years. Some of the frustration that helped me make that decision to leave the university had involved the politics in the Afro-American Studies Department during those years.

CAC: Sure. Those were the years of George King?

JW: Those were the years of George King and John Ward in Afro-American Studies. There became a rather painful split between the Afro-American Studies Department and the community.

CAC: Where did the students fall out on that? Did you have to take sides on that split within the program?

JW: Absolutely. There were a number of tensions in Afro-American & African Studies. They reflected some tensions that were occurring in departments around the country.

CAC: Yes.

JW: In some sense, there was an ideological split between people who had very strong community activist orientation and those who professed . . .

CAC: Which [George] King did not?

JW: No . . . and who professed a more pristinely scholarly approach. That wasn't the split kind of here . . . there was a strong split within people who were Marxists on the one hand. We had a number of people who were in African Studies that were Marxists. There were Afro-Americanists who were non-Marxists and that was a bit of a tension but really the tension broke down around—was perceived to be—the lack of commitment of key personnel in the department, King, and Ward, and others, to community development issues and, indeed, to proper teaching in classroom context.

CAC: In the meantime, neither of them were doing much in the scholarly field either?

JW: Exactly. Had they been publishing scholars, doing significant works, it might have been something else but that was not the case. Some of the local community folk, I think, from the student vantage point pegged it right by calling them *classical race hustlers*. Those of us on campus here, basically, agreed with that.

CAC: But now, you were in American Studies. What was your involvement in the program then?

JW: As a graduate student in American Studies . . . there was no graduate program in Afro-American Studies here.

CAC: Sure. But I mean, were you called upon by community to participate in this kind of squabble?

JW: What actually happened with me was that after an altercation in the department between King, and Mahmoud El-Kati, and students, and so forth, the administration asked for a task force to investigate and make recommendations. Russ Hamilton . . .

CAC: Chair of Portuguese?

JW: . . . in Spanish and Portuguese, a superb scholar, was chairing that committee. It might have been jointly chaired by Frank Wilderson. Russ Hamilton, I know, was one of the chairs of that committee. I ended up being on that committee. I was a representative of the MLK Program because I was running the MLK at that point. From the vantage point of the Afro-American Studies Department—which ended up being split, some of whom rallied to King's support—any of us who were on this presidential committee were persona non grata. We were, presumably, arrayed against the department's interests and were so viewed.

CAC: That was a real whipsaw for persons like yourself to get caught in.

JW: Yes, exactly. We had a rather different view of what our mission was in that process.

CAC: Sure.

JW: That committee ended up recommending the suspension of George King as department chair and a number of other measures. Ultimately, of course, that would all culminate in the case against King by the university.

CAC: Right. Well, it took a number of years to get it to that point.

JW: Yes, it took a good many years.

CAC: It was chiefly Fred Lukermann's [unclear].

JW: But it was a painfully disillusioning experience . . .

CAC: Oh, terribly, yes.

JW: . . . for somebody like myself.

CAC: Carleton was a real welcome place.

JW: Yes . . . somebody like me who had been involved in helping get the department off the ground, and selecting faculty, and developing goals, and seeing the department, basically, undermined from within by faculty with no such commitments to it.

CAC: Right.

JW: And then being seen by some faculty people in the department here as being allied against department [unclear]. That all would, of course, come out in the wash, although certainly the coverage of this stuff on campus and elsewhere . . .

CAC: Some of the coverage is very misleading.

JW: Yes. No one will ever grasp all the dynamics of what was happening. I was not unhappy to leave that kind of morass behind and to take on and try to develop a program at Carleton.

CAC: Did you find Carleton a more receptive environment for your interests?

JW: [laughter] Carleton was a dramatic change, of course, from a large public Land-Grant university context to a small private liberal arts school. But again, there were no black faculty at Carleton. I came with one other black faculty member who was a studio artist and who didn't have particularly strong activist interests at all.

CAC: But they did have a core of students who were coming on?

JW: There were a core of students there. Carleton had almost 10 percent of the student body were students of color, black students and Hispanic students. They were, in many cases, very strong students, well prepared, and sharp.

CAC: You bet.

JW: They had high expectations for a program in Afro-American & African Studies and that's what I gave them. I created a very distinguished program there in which we encouraged double majors, in which we had disciplinary specializations in multiple areas for undergraduate majors in which we expected students to pursue honors theses as part of their Afro-American Studies major.

CAC: Were you able to get other persons of color to be on the faculty?

JW: We had a commitment from Carleton to try to hire faculty but it was an ongoing battle. There were some distinguished faculty already. We had Paul Reisman in Anthropology who taught African Anthropology.

CAC: Yes.

JW: Fred Easter was on the Carleton faculty in Admissions and in Student Affairs but he had a strong background in history and was encouraging that way. We ultimately were able to make some hires over time in other disciplines at Carleton, in Religion and in History, but it was always a small core of faculty. We had to rely on visitors and on borrowing courses from other departments.

CAC: That's an engaging story. But you had a challenge of awfully good students?

JW: Yes, that made it good. It was a good place in terms of the morale, students with high expectations for themselves and in, obviously, an institution that . . .

CAC: You found the time, yourself, to complete your dissertation and get started . . . ?

JW: Although it ended up taking me four years to finish my dissertation, instead of two. [laughter] Carleton called itself . . . I had had little in the way of mentoring about the terms of my appointment and so forth. As it turned out, I had a one course release in a six course load. I was teaching five instead of six courses and I was supposed to create a program from scratch with a one course release time.

CAC: [laughter]

JW: I was administering this program, and doing all this, and endless calls from black students for all of their needs. Furthermore, I was being penalized in the contract for each year that I didn't finish my dissertation. I wasn't getting a certain increment.

CAC: Yes, yes. Right.

JW: So, it was really a punitive scenario in which I was being asked to do things [which] other untenured faculty, no one else, was being asked to do. [laughter] Carleton got its pound of flesh from me in process. It took me four years to finish under those circumstances.

CAC: I understand.

JW: The Carleton years were, basically, good years for me. I stayed much longer than I had intended. Ultimately, Lansiné Kaba and Russ Hamilton convinced me to come back to the university—after eleven years.

CAC: Good. Then you came back with a joint appointment?

JW: I came back with a joint appointment in Afro-American Studies and in English.

CAC: Those kinds of joint appointments, John, were not easy to come by?

JW: They were not easy to come by.

CAC: [unclear] department was reasonably prudent, conservative about such matters then, I'm guessing?

JW: Yes. My predecessor had been Onwuchekwa Jemie who had been on a joint appointment in Afro-American Studies and the English Department. But Jemie had been on my dissertation committee. He had been one of my readers, a very helpful reader. I had gotten tenure at Carleton; and so, I came back to the university with tenure so a joint appointment was a less onerous circumstance than if I had come back to the university as an untenured professor.

CAC: Did you come back as chair, also?

JW: I was not supposed to.

CAC: Your chronology would suggest so.

JW: In 1982, I had been running programs since 1970. I ran MLK Programs here. I went to Carleton . . . I ran the program Afro-American Studies. I wanted a chance to devote myself, in an unimpeded way, to scholarship and to do my scholarly research; so, part of the terms of my agreeing to come back to the university was that I was not going to run any programs. I'm not going to run any student support programs and I wasn't not going to run any departmental programs.

CAC: And in weeks you were?

JW: Within the matter of several weeks, Lansiné Kaba, who was the chair of the department, resigned.

CAC: He was interim chair following George King's removal?

JW: Yes. Lansiné resigned and was in the process of moving to Chicago. The deans in the department came to me and asked me if I would take over the chairmanship of the department. [laughter] I wasn't even here a term and I was a department chair again.

CAC: Yes. Don't tell [unclear].

JW: [laughter]

CAC: Say something about the process, and the obstacles, and the opportunities for chairing a program within a college that defers to disciplines and an inter-disciplinary program is a third thing, a tertian quid.

JW: Yes. In some of these issues, I was aware of, partly, because of my experience as a graduate student in American Studies. Part of the way American Studies, of course, had dealt with this historically was American Studies had always insisted ideologically that it was not a department, it was a program.

CAC: Yes.

JW: It depended heavily on adjuncts. It was inter-disciplinary. It wanted to be a program, in part, so it didn't ossify the way departments did. Nonetheless, it had all the trappings of a department. It had a core faculty . . .

CAC: A very small one at that time, yes.

JW: A small core faculty and an army of adjuncts; so, it negotiated between program status and departmental status. This one did have its own budget, and its core, and was able to make tenured appointments. It had a large graduate program. Afro-American Studies was in a rather different situation because you had, again, a nominal department with a core faculty but it had no graduate program.

CAC: The faculty was inter-disciplinary?

JW: Yes, the faculty was markedly inter-disciplinary, and some had tenure in the department, and others were on joint appointments elsewhere. But the College of Liberal Arts had made the decision—apparently about 1980 that under Fred Lukermann's leadership was adhered to more or less loosely—that area studies fields would be built, primarily, through joint appointments with disciplinary units.

CAC: I think that's right, yes.

JW: The tenure lines would be in the traditional disciplines and the budget lines in the inter-disciplinary homes.

CAC: So, that meant in Afro-American Studies who made merit and promotion decisions?

JW: The merit decisions were made in the department and the promotions that didn't involve tenure could be made in the department but tenure decisions were made in the disciplinary unit with, presumably, input from Afro-American Studies.

CAC: In your case, that would be English?

JW: In my case, that would have been English. That was the situation into which I came and the department of Afro-American Studies, unfortunately, had shrunk over the years. There had

been a steady attrition of numbers. The department at one point had had as many as eleven FTEs [Full-time Equivalents], early on. It had shrunk down to, basically, half of that size.

CAC: By the time you came?

JW: By the time I came. The King line and the Ward lines had not been replaced in the department and there had been a series of other losses as well.

CAC: It coincided with retrenchment and reallocation?

JW: Which coincided with retrenchment and reallocations and these not being given back to the department. The department was in an unstable circumstance.

CAC: Yes.

JW: Part of my agreement to become chair was that, indeed, they would be able to make some appointments. The terms though were that these would be, for the most part, joint appointments. I had the, in some ways, unenviable task of trying to negotiate a series of joint appointments with traditional departments. We very clearly needed appointments in Sociology. We wanted appointments in Political Science, additional appointments in History, [unclear] and so forth. So, I tried to work out a series of appointments in those fields and we ultimately had some success in some fields and not in others. It turns out, of course, that some of these key traditional disciplines are very conservative when it comes to inter-disciplinary scholarship, and outlook, and attitudes, in part, because the uncertain status of Afro-American Studies as a field gets into being a difficulty for scholars who are specialists in Afro-American Studies. There were a series of difficulties that we had, obstacles that we confronted in trying both to work out the agreeable grounds for making appointments and, then, grounds for evaluating tenure for scholars. Some of the people who were hired under my chairmanship . . . Rose Brewer was one in Sociology. That was a troubled process at every phase of the recruitment and evaluation and tenure process. We had difficulties with History along the way, primarily, in terms of the Gail Plummer appointment.

CAC: Yes.

JW: I don't know how much we need to talk about this in this context but Gail Plummer was a very capable scholar who had had multiple specializations in Afro-American History in the Caribbean on the one hand, and on the other in Haitian diplomatic relations in particular there, and who wanted to try to develop a Caribbean studies group of scholars linked with the African Peoples Program, and so forth, who became concerned about the uncertain status of Afro-American Studies in the course of retrenchment and ultimately had her line moved from Afro-American Studies into History completely.

CAC: On her initiative?

JW: On her initiative, against departmental wishes.

CAC: Then eventually went to Wisconsin?

JW: Yes, in part, because of a variety of difficulties that she ended up having in History.

CAC: Some perceived her, as far as her personality is concerned, quite distant.

JW: She had a combination of personal and professional obstacles to overcome. In some ways, she was not an easy colleague to know and work with. There were other difficulties that she had in terms of the way in which resources and fellowships were allocated in the History Department from her vantage point.

CAC: These were all things you had to address?

JW: These were all things I had to address.

CAC: And half out of your control?

JW: And half out of my control. I tried to work with the History chairs in office there in the course of my term working these things out. I think we worked out a happy scheme here at the moment in terms of what's ongoing searches; although, we weren't successful in this past round and things ended up turning out, perhaps, more to the benefit of American Studies than would have been perceived.

CAC: Do you think that's a systemic hazard of all inter-disciplinary departments when they try to stage these kinds of programs?

JW: I think there's just built in contradictions in the way we have things set up here. If, in fact, you say that inter-disciplinary fields are going to have tenure determined by traditional disciplines and at the same time you're going to discourage the development of graduate programs in the inter-disciplinary fields, inter-disciplinary fields have no way to grow, and develop, and become full-fledged members of the fraternity of graduate research units.

CAC: Right, right, yes. The incentives are not there. They're elsewhere.

JW: They are congenitally constrained.

CAC: Yes. And deans here and in many other places have not seen that clearly?

JW: Yes, they seem not to. It's a problem that we have not fully resolved yet. The tenure code itself contributes to it because there still is not an equitable relationship between units in the case of joint appointments in the way that tenure is decided.

CAC: Say something more, in the context of your chairmanship there, of the relationship of the department to the community that was of central importance when the program was established, when the department was set up.

JW: Our initial vision that we had had as students for the Afro-American Studies Department—I think this was a fairly common vision that students involved in the black studies movement had—was that these units, at the same time that they pursued traditional academic objectives and goals in terms of scholarship and research, ought to do things that were less common in many academic units; that is, that they ought to seek an active role in community development.

CAC: Yes. That was an expectation from the community as well?

JW: That was a very clear expectation from the community. The University of Minnesota historically had had a very poor image in the local black community, either very marginal involvement or imperial relations with Afro-American communities and agencies. It had not been a happy situation. We wanted to create a context in which students could both develop professional skills and retain strong sense of personal commitment to community involvement. I mean, the prime focus was on educational involvement, and in settlement houses, and in the school teaching context, and so forth. There was some certain clear interest in getting involved in grass roots political organizing as well. We very clearly thought the department ought to be able to facilitate that kind of scenario as well as do teaching, outreach teaching, through Extension Division and summer courses, and so forth, and have an active presence.

CAC: You've done a lot of that yourself when I look at your record of reaching out to workshops for secondary school teachers in the Metropolitan area, for example.

JW: That's one of the things, I guess, that I've found a particularly fruitful way for me to operate is to help in teacher training at all levels.

CAC: And you've done that through different offices, all kinds of different groups.

JW: Yes, yes.

CAC: Do many of your colleagues do this as extensively as you have?

JW: Rose Brewer, I think, is pretty heavily involved. I'm probably the most engaged in terms of the teacher training plans and programs.

CAC: Did Geneva Southall do any of this with her music?

JW: Geneva wasn't involved so much in teacher training. She was heavily involved in Black Music Educators in the Twin Cities, the organization of music teachers and music educators. It wasn't a teacher training program.

CAC: I understand.

JW: It was involved with black music teachers in the school systems and encouraging the musical training for students.

CAC: This is an expectation of persons in the Afro-American & African Studies Program here and elsewhere that this community outreach is a central part of the mission?

JW: I think very much so. There are very few programs that don't have some kind of interest in doing this.

CAC: So, when we talk about teaching, scholarship, and outreach or service, the service component expectation is larger than . . . ?

JW: Is larger than it is in traditional departments. Probably, the closest analogue might be to some of these units here that see themselves to be applied kinds of units whether it's things like Child Development and Social Welfare . . .

CAC: Urban Planning?

JW: . . . Urban Planning. It's probably a closer analogue to the role that's expected in those kind of units.

CAC: But the rewards for merit and salary are . . . ?

JW: Are much lower.

CAC: The university places a lower . . . ?

JW: Yes. The department tries to compensate.

CAC: That's not an easy task?

JW: No.

CAC: Are there other things about your chairmanship that you should share with posterity?

JW: Well, one of the other things that I am particularly pleased about—the outcome of it is reinforced again in these community outreach enterprises—is the acquisition of the Archie Givens, Senior collection.

CAC: I was going to ask about that.

JW: We had had really no special collections in Afro-American & African Studies at this university. We have superb collections in a variety of fields with nothing here whatsoever that would attract graduate researchers in a very clear line way. The Givens collection became a way for us to provide a highly visible distinguished collection that could serve both as a resource for scholars here and as a rallying point for community groups, for teachers, and the school systems, and so forth.

CAC: Something to give real visibility.

JW: Something of real visibility.

CAC: Now, this collection was created by Archie Givens?

JW: No. This collection was created by a white dramatist and teacher named Richard Lee Hoffman in New York City. He taught at Brooklyn Technical College for more than a couple of decades.

CAC: But in your own research you knew of this collection?

JW: Yes. He had begun collecting back in the 1950s when there were comparatively few such people doing this, had an interest in Afro-American literature, and so forth. But we were interested in an Afro-American collection and one somewhat like this had been put together by a black collector named Charles Blockson at Temple University who, again, would spend about twenty, twenty-five years building his collection. Blockson had sold himself along with his collection to Temple University a few years before we acquired the Givens collection and kind of had given me at least one potential model for this. When Professor Hoffman's collection came on the block and was being promoted by a west coast agent here, they contacted our special collections division. As soon as I saw the flyers on it, I knew this was a rare opportunity for us. One of my Afro-American literature students was working up in special collections and saw the flyer on the Givens collection. He immediately let me know. I knew that we had to move quickly on this about trying to get this collection. This has a whole fascinating organizational history involved with this. The university doesn't buy special collections.

CAC: No.

JW: They come, primarily, through donations or through extended fund raising efforts. After seeing the availability of the Hoffman collection, I contacted a number of folks on the administration here locally that included Fred Lukermann here in the college, and people in the president's office, and Claudia Wallace-Gardner, and a number of others. We began brainstorming about what we might do. Ken Keller was the president here in this context. We were able to get—with the agent from Professor Hoffman's sale—ninety day refusal rights on this collection which meant that we would have ninety days . . .

CAC: To come up with the cash.

JW: To come up with an offer for this before they would offer it to any other institution.

CAC: Did you do the negotiations for that?

JW: We had a series of meetings with the dean in the college and then with the Ken Keller's people to talk about this. Ironically, one of the things for which Ken Keller would suffer mightily—which was his discretionary presidential fund which was the presumed problem that led to [unclear]—was, indeed, a source of salvation for us.

CAC: [laughter]

JW: Ken Keller came on board very early in this process supporting this enterprise and agreed, from his discretionary fund, to put up the initial money for this which we would then have to repay through a fund raising effort. All right? That was the initial agreement.

CAC: All right.

JW: Initially, out of presidential funds, we would get the initial price for the Givens collection; so, we went on that basis and secured the collection and then began this marvelous process of getting the community involved here.

CAC: Yes. What order of money was involved in this?

JW: We ending up getting a really low price. This is a collection that was, probably, worth between \$250,000 and \$300,000 if it had been broken up and sold piecemeal. Professor Hoffman very definitely wanted to keep it intact.

CAC: Together, sure.

JW: He wanted an institutional buyer with a good special collections set up. We were able to negotiate a \$150,000 price for the collection which was an inexpensive price for this collection.

CAC: Ah ha.

JW: We wanted to buy the collection. We wanted to create an endowment of the same sum from which acquisitions and other kinds of development could be made. So, that was the money we had to raise and the Givens family came on board in this process.

CAC: Ah.

JW: We wanted to make this something around which the local African American community could rally and do something that would be of an unambiguous value, educational value, community value, and very visible. The Givens family took a leadership role in this process.

CAC: The Givens family has no connection to the University of Minnesota until you went out . . . ?

JW: Archie Jr. and Roxanne are graduates of the university.

CAC: All right.

JW: They had been here when I was an undergraduate. We enlisted them as university alums and with the commitment to educational and community ventures. They took a leadership role both in terms of contributions in their own right but, also, in helping form a patron's council of other black donors or patrons who would make initial contributions to the fund for the collection and help make this a venture strongly supported by the black community. It then became a means by which we were able to rally a variety of local black organizations, teacher's groups, community groups, corporate entities, and so forth.

CAC: A lot of that fell on you?

JW: A lot of the promotional in terms of going out and doing the talk about the collection, about what it meant, about the holdings and all the rest. I spent countless hours talking to groups about what this collection was, and what it could mean, and about the uses for it.

CAC: Did you have support within the library?

JW: I think fairly early on in the process, the folks in special collections, who hadn't had any such resource . . .

CAC: That would be a great coup for them.

JW: . . . to point to in the past, saw that it was of great benefit for them, also. So, we had very strong support there. We had support from the development office in CLA. There were some key people who were very heavily involved here who played important roles in the fund raising . . . Mary Hicks, for instance, in CLA Development was very instrumental there.

CAC: Good.

JW: Claudia Wallace-Gardner was helpful from the inception of the process in orchestrating a whole array of black alumni here. Esell Jones was a central leader for us.

CAC: Ah, good. It was a wonderful outreach for the university?

JW: Oh, yes. The university has gotten tremendous . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Tape 2, Side 1]

JW: One of the things that I tried to encouraged during my chairmanship here was a sense of history in the university of the place of black students and faculty, and of the struggles with the university about the university's mission, and the African American presence in regard to that mission. It was also very clear to me, in part, in dealing with students who've come after my generation of students, that many of them had little or no sense whatsoever about the history of black students and the African American presence in this university.

CAC: Of course.

JW: That's part a function of the defective institutional histories that are promulgated, and of the instability of the oral tradition of filling these gaps, and the lack of other kind of printed sources available in the black community as well.

CAC: Yes. There's a canon for that kind of work as there is for everything else.

JW: Exactly. I have thought for a long time that a very worthwhile project would be putting together a history of Afro-American presence at the University of Minnesota from early on.

CAC: Oh, oh, you bet.

JW: So, I have encouraged students. The current black student group on campus, the Africana Student Cultural Center, has made some passes at trying to do that, trying to put together a documentary history, a film documentation on it. Myself, I spent at least some time working with students in one of the summer programs, one of the programs that La Roy Gardner [Jr.] superintends here now, a program that tries to give students of color—who have potential but who might not otherwise think about graduate careers in higher education—a summer research experience. The summer before last, I took a group of students and had them focus on African and local African American history at the university and around.

CAC: Ah ha.

JW: I spent time with them teaching them basic historical research methods, and took them into the university archives, and the [Minnesota] Historical Society, and other repositories here, and started them assembling some such materials. It's a project that needs to be dealt with in a kind of a focused way and students ought to be able to know something about this history.

CAC: Is this kind of spoken history on part of it?

JW: Well, there is, indeed, an oral history of it. Part of it is a history that had been recorded in part in local black newspapers and in some cases, in some of the oral interviews.

CAC: Are there files of TV or oral tapes?

JW: In some of the oral interviews that Dave Kahler did, for instance, for the Historical Society, there are some discussions again of the university situation. But it hasn't been done in a focused way. What really needs to be done is a series of interviews with black alumni going back early in the century here and a combing through of all the university archives, and the newspapers, and so forth, and putting all this together. It's a fascinating, untold history.

CAC: Oh, it is.

JW: There's a long list of very distinguished black alumni of this institution. The network is very broad. One of the things the university might do to strengthen its relationship with black alumni would be to put together such a history which should give black alumni some sense that, indeed, there is a tradition here.

CAC: And gives them a sense of possession of the university?

JW: Exactly.

CAC: Let's you and I talk about that.

JW: That might be another . . .

CAC: Oh, yes. That would be a spin-off that would just be very interesting.

JW: Yes.

CAC: Oh, god!

JW: All right.

CAC: [laughter] In the meantime, my friend . . . You've also been active in the local theater—with the Guthrie, I gather that's more nominal—but certainly with the Penumbra Theatre.

JW: The Penumbra.

CAC: Say a bit about that.

JW: Oh, the Penumbra is a wonderful story, a wonderful success story. Lou Bellamy who is the artistic director of Penumbra now is an old and dear friend of mine. In fact, Lou was in one

of the very first courses in Afro-American Literature that I taught at this university many years ago; and he has said that his own interest in African American drama and literature, in part, stems from the classes that he took with me early on. Lou was part of a group of black students with interests in theater here, during those crucial years in the late 1960s and early 1970s, who were imbued with some of that same collective enthusiasm and part of the impact of the Black Arts Movement. Horace Mann Bond, who is a cousin of Julian Bond's . . .

CAC: Ah.

JW: . . . came here in the Theatre Department, was here for several years, and taught courses in African American Theatre. In part, under Horace's shepherdship, and with Lou, and some other students, the idea for starting an independent black theater germinated here on the campus and in community.

CAC: Ah, yes.

JW: Penumbra has its beginnings in that early group.

CAC: So, they found a home in a good settlement house?

JW: Yes.

CAC: Hallie Q [Hallie Q-Brown settlement house]?

JW: Yes. Again, the basic notion of the ties between the community and the university.

CAC: Right.

JW: Penumbra is a wonderful example of that despite the fact that Penumbra had no formal ties to the university Theatre Department until comparatively recently. One of the other things, under my chairmanship, that I did was to establish formal ties with Penumbra and with Lou; so, Lou Bellamy now is formally part of the Theatre Department here rather than only an instructor in General College.

CAC: It was through Penumbra that you got to know August Wilson?

JW: Yes. August had come here more than fifteen years ago but he came here, basically, as a poet and not as a playwright. He did a lot of his initial work in the things that would become The Loft, Playwright Center, and so forth. But some of his, August's, earliest work was done in workshop or in trial runs at Penumbra before he, of course, moved on to the links with Yale and elsewhere.

CAC: And then came back here?

JW: Yes, exactly.

CAC: You were with him ground floor early on?

JW: Yes. August was one of the guests of honor at the dedication ceremony that we had for the Givens Collection . . .

CAC: Appropriately.

JW: . . . in the Humphrey Theatre. August Wilson and Gordon Parks were guests of honor.

CAC: Ah ha. Who also had Minnesota connections?

JW: Yes, deep Minnesota. Yes, also had family connections. Gordon Parks was a very close friend of two of my uncles, my Uncle Frank and my Uncle Tom. They had grown up with Gordon Parks here. There are family ties to him, also.

CAC: Reflecting on our conversation the last two hours or so, there's a theme of versatility in your own career but, also, reflected in the program itself in the department. Your scholarship, your teaching, your administration, your outreach all reflect basic core perceptions and they are, to use an academic term, inter-disciplinary and community outreach.

JW: I guess my basic philosophy about that—this was a philosophy that is one of the things about the Black Studies Movement that I still very strongly adhere to—is that the notion of the disciplines, that unfortunately I think too often still prevails, is one that really makes some kind of arbitrary divisions of fields of knowledge.

CAC: Yes.

JW: My notion of what ties the disciplines together is the need for education to be linked to solving the problems of living, of making decisions, and acting in the world.

CAC: Yes.

JW: Ultimately any problem that we confront in the world requires inter-disciplinary understandings. You cannot understand any social problem and act on it without having insight from what we call sociology, what we call economics, what we call psychology, what we call anthropology, from the humanities, and so forth, in order to act in the world. The need for integrating these things comes from the need to act and to live; otherwise, it's simply an arbitrary way of chopping up things that's always partial and incomplete.

CAC: How widely shared is that philosophy of learning, and teaching, and being in the world in the Afro-American Studies Departments around the country? Is it a necessary ingredient?

JW: I think to the extent that a sense of an activist intellectual mission survives, it's almost inevitable. To the extent that you become divorced from the issues of public policy, issues of personal decision making and action, and so forth, you could begin to become detached again from the links between disciplinary specialization, and what its pertinence is to ordinary living, and to broader issues in problem solving. I still have a vision of an arm of black students being able to specialize in Afro-American & African Studies and be able to train in a formal way for public policy, and for grass roots community organizing, and for the whole array of applied fields.

CAC: Yes. Are those the kind of students that are attracted to the undergraduate program here in your department?

JW: Some are, yes. I think, they are the kind of students that we steer into internships of various sorts, activist internships.

CAC: Speak about the responsibility of the department to the students who are not of color. A majority of the students are not . . . ?

JW: No, the majority of our students, now and always, have not been students of color.

CAC: Yes. But that would not be true in other universities where there's a larger student body?

JW: Well, yes, but I think the reality is that in most cases, certainly in largely white institutions, the bulk of students in Afro-American & African Studies Programs are not African American and many of the majors certainly are not. We have more majors now than we have ever had. We have more than twenty-five majors in the department now and at least half of those majors are not African American. The need for students of all kinds of backgrounds to become acquainted with the field, and for some to specialize in it, is the same as it is in almost any other field of study.

CAC: Sure. What happens to these students that are white?

JW: The reality is that the need, particularly in the educational environment we have now, and in the corporate environment, and so forth, where the issues of diversity, cultural diversity, are on the front table, however effectively or ineffectively they are being addressed . . . in those kind of contexts people who are conversant with the materials and the methods of the field have an advantage over those people who do not.

CAC: And most of your white students know that?

JW: Most of our people know that.

CAC: That's their incentive?

JW: Those who have any kind of interest in education, whether it's K-12 education or higher education, in this market are better equipped to compete than students than students who don't have any such background.

[break in the interview]

CAC: We're picking up this morning an interrupted interview that began several weeks ago. Today is the 27th of September and there were items that Professor Wright and I wanted to explore but we could not because time ran out on us. So, here we are again and it's sometimes difficult to pick up, John, but there are various items—I reviewed our conversation—that it might be interesting to explore just a bit more. Then, I know that you have a number of reflections on the larger scene of the college and the university and, perhaps, the culture beyond that. Why don't we start with some observations about your outreach. You do a lot of radio, and TV, and film production. You serve as an advisor—I don't know whether that's the right word—at the Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul. Why don't we explore that just a little bit?

JW: All right. In some ways it's ironic, I think in terms of my own career's trajectory, that on the one hand I never considered conscientiously a career in education as a younger student, certainly not in high school, and not in college either. I was on a track in the sciences, in electrical engineering and a graduate program in business; although, it was always for me a uncertain trajectory. It's ironic, in part, because my own mother was a school teacher, and my grandfather for whom I am named was a schoolteacher, and my closest aunt was a schoolteacher. One of the things that's probably reflected in my community outreach, to which you pointed attention to a minute ago, is the eclectic spread of the interest there. I do and have had a long-standing interest in all the arts: in music, and drama, in poetry, in fiction, and dance, and so forth. I think that was one of the things in me that pulled against the specialized, technical, and scientific training and also the contact with people and with young people in particular. For me, a real turning point professionally came in the later years, in my junior and senior years as an undergraduate. I was still in the Engineering Program and had been working for a variety of local corporations in research divisions for the power companies, a technical aid in computer studies for NSP, and Western Electric, the supply division of Bell, also in Pako Photo, a photo processing research company; and I found myself increasingly in laboratory contexts with little contact with people, staring at oscilloscopes, and working with field circuits, and transistor configurations, and various kinds of scientific puzzles to solve.

While around me—this is the middle and late 1960s—the social universe is in turmoil. The other side of my life was quite different, you know, politically engaged. I was heavily involved with the black student groups here on campus and we, from the beginning, had had a very strong sense of our need to work with community groups, community agencies, and to link what we did in the schools somehow to what went on in the larger community.

CAC: Bravo.

JW: We were very conscious and emphasized the extent to which our own presence on the campus was, in part, a product of community's larger struggle. My own broad interest in the social universe and the arts ultimately conspired to pull me away from the sciences and into a commitment to education on all levels and to heavy community involvement. One of the rallying cries of the Black Studies Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s was precisely that, that we were not in the academy just to pursue careerist specializations and that we had, indeed, a broader kind of mission to develop our communities and to take a much broader view of things than our own individual achievement.

CAC: Almost a quarter of a century has gone on from the time you're talking about now, the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Has that commitment and that culture changed in significant ways, John?

JW: Well, I guess I think there's been an ebb and flow and certainly the students who've come along in the wake of my years have been influenced by a whole other set of forces at work. Students who've grown up in the Reagan/Bush era and with the economic dislocations and uncertainty and the contraction of career opportunities, all those forces, along with the demise of the movement in its most energetic forms, have conspired to steer students in other directions. But there is still a very strong ethos amongst African American students that's very close to what we're doing.

CAC: And faculty?

JW: And faculty. One of the things that I think has really been marked here at Minnesota in recent years has been the vigor with which, what's now called, the Africana Student Cultural Center has dedicated itself to intensive outreach programs and activist presence on campus. That in a lot of ways is reminiscent of what we were doing twenty-five years ago.

CAC: Can you say a bit more about that center? Is it college sponsored or is it volunteer?

JW: Oh, yes, it's the black student organization that's housed in Coffman Union. They have, over the past eighteen years, put on some of the most elaborate Black History month programs and speaker forums of any place in the country. It's been amazing to watch.

CAC: With a smaller core population one imagines than would be present in many other universities?

JW: Yes, I think proportionately. Yes, probably smaller. It's been a group that's been very powerfully affected by the current ideas and ideologies surrounding Afro-centricity, Afro-centrism and also there's some resurgence, at least of some strains, of African American Nationalist thought and certainly the idealization of Malcolm X, and Malcolm X's importance, and his career, and the Pan-African idea. All those things, I think, are at work now. There is a sense of continuity in that regard as I look at now and think about the past.

CAC: Has the expectation of the community changed in significant ways over that same period?

JW: I think they are much more sophisticated now than was the case a quarter of a century ago. I think we were idealistic in a variety of ways about what the potential of the academy was as a lever for social change.

CAC: Yes.

JW: I think, also, the need for students to get professional backgrounds, or professional training, while in school is much clearer now. It's needed as both a personal achievement and a community achievement also. I think sheer activism in itself is now idealized less than it was in the past and certainly the movement in Afro-American Studies here and elsewhere in the country in the last twenty years or so has been more towards professionalizing the degrees, towards institutionalizing the impact of the field, and so forth. One of the transitional marks here for the Department of Afro-American & African Studies on this campus—and to some extent in terms of my own role when I returned after more than a decade teaching at Carleton, starting the Afro-American Studies Program there—was the rise of an interest in policy studies here and trying, basically, to channel the energies, the activist energies, of the earlier era of the 1960s and early 1970s, into formal studies of public policy and to try to develop internships for students working in a variety of public policy kinds of settings, whether it's in academic environments, whether it's in the public sector, whether it's in corporate context, whether it's with grass roots political organizing and mobilization, and so forth, but for students to acquire professional training and credentials at the same time that they pursue those commitments to social change.

CAC: The program took on leadership in that regard [unclear]?

JW: Yes, there were a number of ventures that we pursued in that respect. We worked hard on developing alliance with other departments—joint appointments, for instance, at the Humphrey Institute. We worked very hard trying to find a joint appointment that would make it possible for students with a strong interest in public policy to pursue it through those kinds of channels. One of the outcomes of that long venture is, of course, the appointment of Sam[uel L.] Myers as the Roy Wilkins' Professor in the Humphrey Affairs.

CAC: [unclear] children's welfare as well?

JW: Yes. There are a number of appointments there. But also in other departments around the campus as well . . . in Social Welfare, Child Development. There were a number of areas in which those impulses are clear.

CAC: Did the initiative have to come from the department to encourage these or was there a college or university leadership pressing?

JW: There was, also very powerful . . . There were long-standing forces from the community as well.

CAC: Ah ha.

JW: Again, here's a sense in which the missions clearly coincided. Hubert Humphrey here, of course, was a figure who was very much admired in the local African American community. My own grandmother had canvassed for Humphrey early in his careers and had a personal relationship with Humphrey. I think in the kind of image that he represented African American activists and community people and educators here locally felt that the Humphrey Institute was not upholding and we felt it part of our mission both to fully ratify Humphrey's true genuine impact and spirit on this community and, of course, to pursue our own collective interests in pushing the Humphrey Institute towards a more pro-active stance on helping train students for public affairs and public policy careers that had direct impact on African American life and related issues. That policy studies, issues orientation is one side of things. I think the interest in education, the educational world, is another persistent thing that the department has pursued here and certainly as department chair, I tried to pursue. Most of the members of our department have some kind of involvement with the educational systems outside the university here, whether it's public or private, whether it's K-12, the junior college, the community college systems. Many of us, again, teach courses, run workshops of one kind or another, and are engaged in curriculum reform, and the pursuit, in many cases, of the state's broader initiatives, and multi-cultural and gender fair education, and so forth.

CAC: This is the mission that's engaged not only you, and your role as chair when you were, but other members of the program?

JW: Absolutely.

CAC: And most notably?

JW: I think several folks. For instance, Geneva Southall, who of course is now retired, spent many, many years as a pivotal member in the local Black Music Educators enterprises which is linked up, for the most part, with the secondary schools providing music education and training for students who are pursuing both traditional careers in music and also careers that are focused on specific African American musical forms and styles in classics, or in jazz, and or in popular music also.

CAC: We had a great jazz pianist on the faculty [unclear]?

JW: Yes. Reggie Buckner was a prime example and one of the stellar models for that kind of community inter-action and involvement. I think it's something we still very much prize. It's hard within the context of the reward system at the university here to properly compensate our

faculty for those kinds of involvements but I think it's a mission that we all take to heart and pursue regardless of the rewards that are available through the regular channels.

CAC: Now, you raise a very serious question there because I hear—I've done thirty-two interviews now—a lot of talk about the reward system, the merit system, and it does not honor and reward in many places, not only community outreach but the teaching function as well.

JW: [laughter]

CAC: Your program has to have those commitments and it has fulfilled them. Then, how do you change the culture of rewards within a college and university?

JW: Well, you're subject to a variety of constraints. We have the ongoing, in some ways, the cultural chauvinism of the university and our focus, obviously, on graduate research and that mission here, which is largely focused on the academic community. That's one thing we have to struggle against. Obviously, the kind of financial constraints that this institution has been under for many, many years, that has reduced compensation and rewards of any kind to minimal levels, is not going to in any way properly reward people for those kind of efforts. I think you have to look to other kinds of motives and rewards for faculty in doing so. For many of us, one of the ways also of compensating for the still negligible presence of African American faculty and people at all levels of involvement in this institution is heavy engagement in community contexts where our presence is central and fundamental. I think all of us—myself, Rose Brewer, Rob AshShareef, and the others—have found a variety of those kinds of contexts in which we get both professional and personal rewards from those engagements. For me, you know, the arts has been a continuing source of fascination. I dabbled in a number of the arts along the way. I did some painting early on. I wrote poetry and fiction. I am a long-standing *autour* and film lover; so, I work with artists and writers in a variety of different fields and have been on a variety of local boards. I have been a consultant at the Guthrie for a good many years, and involved in many of their outreach programs, and the public symposia that the Guthrie has put together with grants from a number of sources to help engage audiences in those discussions. I've been involved with Guthrie in more recent years in trying to help them redefine the meanings of the classical canon in drama, and provide some new kinds of experiences for the Guthrie audiences, and to expand those audiences.

CAC: Say a bit more about that because African American figures in classical theater are not present. How does one pull this off?

JW: [laughter] Actually, we had a recently, I think, really enjoyable experience with the Guthrie in putting on the cycle of plays around *Clytemnestra* and revisioning again the works of Sophocles, and Aeschylus, and the other great classical Greek dramatists, and their relationship to the ancient African world. I had a number of sessions with the dramaturge at the Guthrie and with the cast talking about the relationship between ancient Greece and ancient Ethiopia and

looking into the—still, I'm afraid—too little known story of that relationship, the rather different status that ancient Ethiopia had in relationship to Greece, and Egypt as well, to the status that those parts of the world have today, later on. We provided a context, again, for thinking about the nature of Greco-Roman mythology and its indebtedness to the Egyptian and the Egyptian world.

CAC: How does this show up in particular productions?

JW: It shows up in a variety of ways . . . in casting, in the casting of African American actors. It shows up in costuming. It shows up in the handling of ritual context's performance. A number of the actors told me after our reconception of the framework for *Clytemnestra* . . . and given the role, for instance of the goddess Athena, who was a presiding figure in that cycle and we now know during recent years due to the research into the classics—the works of Martin Bernal's big trilogy of works, *Black Athena*—the extent to which Greco-Roman culture denegrofied the figure of Athena or translated the figure of Athena from these other older cultures. In part, in trying to recover the classics, we conceived the need also to try to recover more properly that kind of relationship for genealogy in Greco-Roman, and Ethiopian, and Egyptian ties.

CAC: I remember, particularly, the power of the *Colonus* production.

JW: The *Gospel of Colonus* was another prime example there. That was one of the productions in which I helped with some of the symposia that the Guthrie had . . . again, about trying to explain the relationship between classical drama and Afro-American life, and why the producer and director of that production chose that kind of equation. They, Telson and Brewer, felt very clearly that the closest we could come in the modern world to recreating the actual ritual performance context of classical Greek drama was, indeed, in the Pentecostal black church.

CAC: The music was just a powerful piece in that, oh.

JW: It was indeed. I think we tried—in talking with audiences about that—to emphasize the extent to which in some ways classical Greek drama, as it developed but particularly as it was altered by Roman tradition, was a movement away from those kind of ritual contexts. We also emphasized the extent to which the very rites and sacrifices around the god Dionysus, in part, reflected a relationship of differing cultures of one culture enslaved by another, and yet the master culture taking over the religious beliefs and rituals of the people it had conquered, their music, their passionate intensity, and so forth, and infusing their own lives and cultural forms with it. That was, in part, the relationship between the Greeks and those peoples from Asia Minor from whom the rites of Dionysus originally came. It's a relationship that very much is reflected in that between Europeans and Africans in America in the modern era. That kind of comparative approach to the human drama was, in part, what we tried to use to help define a new approach to those productions.

CAC: You counselled other theaters as well . . . most notably the Penumbra Theatre.

JW: The Penumbra, yes. My involvement at Penumbra has long-standing and Lou Bellamy, the artistic director, is an old and dear friend of mine. The founding of Penumbra was something that we all felt very proud of and its continuity over the years, dedication to high standards and to the African American tradition in drama is something that we think very precious and want to hold very tightly, too. I think it also reflects though one of the major commitments of those years of the 1960s and early 1970s. We had a very strong sense—a belief as well—that we had to do more than simply make a personal mark, or personal achievement here, in part I think, because of the spectacle of African American leadership in disarray either through dissention, or through assassination, or through co-optation, and so forth. We felt a very strong need to pull away from traditions of charismatic leaders and the dependency on charismatic leaders and to emphasize the need to build institutions that would survive the departure, or the disillusion, or the demise, or even the death of individual leaders and to build institutions that would last. Penumbra was just that kind of venture to institutionalize black drama here locally.

CAC: It's gone from strength to strength. It really has grown, not only in reputation, but is a commercial success over the years.

JW: Right. One of the things that Lou, and I, and others have talked about over the years is a dream, eventually, of having a broad based African American Cultural Center in which Penumbra would be an anchoring force but in which groups of black writers, of dancers, film makers, poets, whatever, could all congregate, and share, and draw. That dream hasn't been realized yet but it's part of a larger vision and it's not necessarily any kind of separatist vision either. I think most of us had a strong belief both that we had to develop a strong, viable, and independent African American cultural base at the same time that we sought the broadest kind of pluralist commitment from the institutions at large in the community here.

CAC: We're talking about the community. Could you say a bit more about the access that community leaders in the African American community had to the university? Whom did they come to? How did they make their interests and concerns explicit and up front for the university community? We're talking about your outreach and the department's outreach to the community but how did they get access to us?

JW: I think that there have always been a few key faculty members in various departments at the university who've been points of contact with the people from outside. That might be someone like, say, Allan Spear in History who was a very important, I think, figure here during those years of turmoil and change on campus. Allen's courses in Afro-American History were really rallying points for community contact; and he had full classes and a lot of auditors, unofficial auditors from local community sitting in, in some cases, monitoring what he did. He served as one of the rallying points for the development for the department. Later on, Allen played a very important role in the initial committee building, in all the negotiations for the department. There are other such faculty members. In the English Department, someone like Chet Anderson was really a critical person. Chet was the first person to teach Afro-American

Literature in the English Department on a regular basis, which he did through his own initiation largely. Chet was the one, actually, who was responsible for me doing my first teaching.

CAC: I remember that, right.

JW: He collared me after I had been in one of his seminars and, basically, led me to the podium.

CAC: Frank Wilderson?

JW: Frank Wilderson? Yes, in terms of his administrative role. Jim Reeves was an early force on campus. Earl Craig who early on was working in the Student Activities Bureau there—an office near Matt Starks’—the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] and so forth. These were all points of contact.

CAC: It’s interesting, except for Wilderson—and Earl Craig to a lesser degree—you’re talking about contacts to faculty and not to deans or vice-presidents or presidents, etcetera? If the Urban League wanted to make a presentation of their views to the university, whom did they come to?

JW: In that context, almost routinely contacts went right to the office of the president and the president’s assistants.

CAC: So, Gleason Glover would go to the president whomever he was?

JW: Yes.

CAC: And had access . . . and influence?

JW: Yes. And made access. I think the times were such that in many ways the university became quickly aware of the need to make access ready to leaders of community organizations like the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the Urban League, and so on. There were also other organizations here whose leaders had, I think, an important role and certainly newer groups like the WAY in North Minneapolis where people like Mahmoud El-Kati who was an absolutely vital force here among students, and who continued to be over the years and who at a time when there was no one on the faculty teaching African American Studies in any formal way was teaching many of us informally in the community context.

CAC: He was at Macalester College and not the university?

JW: Yes, although he, of course, spent a number of years here at the university in this department but there were a variety of problems that the department faced in its early years, internal difficulties and difficulties, I think also, from the way in which it was originally put together, composed. We, as students, weren’t fully aware of some of the dangers involved in

building a department almost instantaneously. The kind of fracturing that occurred subsequently within the department, the kind of political fracturing, the kind of pressures under which faculty in Afro-American Studies were placed, ultimately resulted in people like Mahmoud El-Kati and Earl Craig leaving the department or being forced out.

CAC: How much of that was systemic, I mean, a part of an abstract bureaucratic process of establishing a new program? How much of it was the early leadership, the personality and style of leadership early on in those first years?

JW: I think it's clearly a combination of things at work. There were some very real ideological differences at work amongst black academics and students during those years and some of the difficulties departments faced reflect those ideological differences, differences between Marxists and non-Marxists, between Pan-Africanists and Americanists, between radicals and conservatives, between the professional scholars and people who saw themselves, primarily, as activists. All those kinds of tensions existed. At the same time, the university's criteria for evaluating scholarship, particularly in a newly evolving field like Afro-American Studies, simply were not adequate to properly gauge the various people who were considered for jobs here and there were some very bad hires made of tenured professors that ended up hobbling and crippling the department in its early years, for more than a decade. Part of the outcome of that, of course, would come finally in the sad affair surrounding the dismissal of George King, at one time chair of the department, and of his associate, John Preston Ward. Those were, I'm afraid, symptomatic of some of those kinds of problems the department faced initially. From the vantage point of students, I think that students then had a vision about what Afro-American Studies could be and ought to be that helped sustain faculty during times when things were very difficult.

CAC: These would have to be psychic rewards and not anything else?

JW: Well, in some ways, yes. Many of those early years were very precarious years. The university was going through retrenchments of various kinds.

CAC: Almost immediately?

JW: Yes, almost.

CAC: The program was established in 1970?

JW: Yes.

CAC: And 1971 is the first retrenchment?

JW: Yes and there were a series of retrenchments and new fragile departments were, obviously, precarious in the face of those kinds of retrenchments. Ultimately the department would lose

some faculty members, also, to the fear of the departments being closed down in the face of those kind of financial crunches.

CAC: You're suggesting that it was student concern and activity that made possible the survival of the program and the psychic survival of a number of the faculty?

JW: I think absolutely. I think absolutely.

CAC: One finds the same thing in other programs that were started about the same time, that the students staying on edge made a crucial difference.

JW: Yes. Yes.

CAC: Can you reflect a bit more . . .

[End of Tape 2, Side 1]

[Tape 2, Side 2]

CAC: . . . a culture—I'm talking about the university's culture which after all is imbedded in a larger culture—for this program and for sister programs as well? You've talked about this a good deal but are there any further reflections on what that process is?

JW: Somehow or other, I remain optimistic. I think my optimism here is reinforced by some clear signs of institutional change over the years. For all of the logistical difficulties that we may have, we do now have several departments on this campus that didn't exist: the Department of Afro-American & African Studies, American Indian Studies, Department of Chicano Studies Program, Women's Studies. All of these have opened up new avenues for students and they've also, I think, had significant changes in the culture at large here. I was a graduate student ultimately in the American Studies Program—an American Studies Program that in the early 1970s was largely a Wasp Studies Program. It was possible for me, as a graduate student there, to go through class after class and seminar after seminar with some very fine professors and never see a text that had anything to do with African American life and culture. That's no longer possible in American Studies here or in any self-respecting program around the country. In recent years, we have begun a process of reconceiving the American Studies Program here. We have effected a confederation—the term that, I guess, I originally proposed for it has now come to stick—between American Studies, and Afro-American Studies, and Chicano Studies, and Native American Studies, that has reoriented it. The demography of the student population has changed and their expectations have changed. All that is encouraging. We still face all kinds of problems about dealing with the one and the many and we will continually in this culture and in this country. In some ways, it's of course quite easy for ideals of any sort, whether it's that of pluralism, cultural pluralism, or feminism, or so forth, to be marketed, processed, co-opted by

incorporation. I guess in academies elsewhere, the price of freedom remains eternal vigilance; so, students and faculty who are dedicated to those ideals and goals have to stay on the case, as it were. I think there are real changes and students coming in now can take for granted what my generation of students could not . . . what we had to struggle for from scratch.

CAC: It has proved difficult, for a variety of reasons, to have a reflection of racial, ethnic diversity in the faculty though, has it not?

JW: Sadly. Sadly.

CAC: Speak to that.

JW: The reality is—despite the counts, the statistics, that come out of Central Administration—the numbers of African American faculty on this campus have not changed substantively over the last twenty years!

CAC: That's my impression.

JW: Yes. There are still fewer than twenty tenured African American faculty on this campus regardless of all the hoopla about Affirmative Action, and the search committee [unclear] procedures, and all the rest. That may be one of the more entrenched problems that we have to contend with and the most difficult of solution. One of the problems, of course, is that we continue to train minimal numbers of graduate students at the Ph.D. level.

CAC: Many of them go into programs such as the law which drains away a number of very competent potential.

JW: That happens to some extent but even then, the numbers of students in those fields are still comparatively small. The numbers of black graduate students on this campus remain small. The shrinkage of fellowship resources and the absence of activist, active recruiting at the graduate level continues to be a problem. When I was a graduate student here—again in the early 1970s—I roomed for awhile with other black graduate students from elsewhere in the country who were parts of whole clusters of graduate students in programs . . . for instance, in Counselling, and Psychology, and Clinical Psychology, and so forth. There were eight, ten, twelve black graduate students in those programs. There are few, if any, there now.

CAC: Even in a sister department like History, we had an active recruitment program in the early 1970s, mid 1970s, late 1970s.

JW: The History of African Peoples Program was a really vital center and I took graduate courses in African Historiography and so forth with the people who were involved in that program.

CAC: But the number of our graduate students of color really declined in the 1980s and early 1990s.

JW: Dramatically.

CAC: Yes.

JW: Dramatically. In that program, there were at least a dozen student.

CAC: Now, is this a national thing or does it take a different form at this university? The offering of courses is vastly richer now than twenty-five years ago but it doesn't seem to attract the . . .

JW: I think there are several things at work there. For instance, in the African Peoples Program here, there were key faculty involved in that program: Lansiné Kaba, Stuart Schwartz, Rus Menard, Allen Isaacman—many of them are gone now.

CAC: Lansiné is the only one who is gone. The others are still here.

JW: Well, or have been drawn off into other concerns, into administrative tasks of one kind or another. The recruitment patterns that were in place twenty years ago seem to have evaporated for one reason or another. It's a frustrating scenario at this point. One of the things that we've been talking about a lot over the last few years is trying to revitalize, revive that African Peoples Program again through close cooperation between the Afro-American Studies and the History Department. We have hopes that we can do so. We're trying to pursue some joint hires to do that. But, I think there's a kind of a formal rededication that needs to take place, a rededication both of spirit and of resources.

CAC: And then the logical question is again—I keep coming back to it—How do you change the culture so that administrative decisions reflect that desire?

JW: It's very difficult when you have revolving door administrations and comparatively little continuity from one to the next, from one grand scheme for university reorganization to the next, each of them for the most part undermined either by political ineptitude or by financial distress. One finds oneself, basically, going through the same motions . . .

CAC: You have to reeducate the new dean?

JW: . . . and reenacting Sisyphus's round of purposeless toil in that regard.

CAC: [laughter]

JW: I don't think there is any easy answer there. One has to try to literally keep the faith, as the phrase used to go, and try again to continually deal with each set of administrators in their planning process and try to impress on them the import of this, not just for this institution in terms of its local scenario but in terms of our role, presumably, as a national and international institution of learning. That struggle continues.

CAC: It's remarkable that the academy would reflect this lack of institutional memory. That's really what you're talking about, the lack of continuity from one to another. You have to start educating all over again every time you change a chair or change a dean.

JW: [laughter] We academics routinely complain about the journalists of the world and their wont of memory, their inability to conceive things in more than today or the immediate past year or ten years, or fifteen years but I'm afraid that we are not free of that kind of amnesia in our own.

CAC: Yes. It's so difficult for me to understand why that's the case. Can you help me out?

JW: I wish I had the answer to that.

CAC: Okay. I think so many things have to be changed and in my conversations with others, people come back to what they perceive as the increased emphasis upon scholarship as the chief criterion for merit and for promotion, right? With programs such as we're talking about now, and have for two hours, of community outreach and teaching that have to take a major, how does one change that culture?

JW: I got restive with the [sigh] promoters of scholarship, unqualified promotion of scholarship. The unqualified promotion of scholarship would in no way have lead to the development of Afro-American Studies at this university or elsewhere, as we now know it. There were no forces within the academic world at work in the middle 1960s that would have produced those kinds of change. There was nothing about the methods, or the metaphysics, or the curricular disciplinary concepts with which the great bulk of American scholars operated that would have made those kinds of changes possible. To the extent that scholarship and the goals of scholarship are disconnected again from the lives of communities like the African American community, the cries for scholarship, scholarship, scholarship will continue to fail the needs of this society.

CAC: What did you tell the deans when you were chair in seeking merit or promotion for persons—and the college committees that deans had to depend upon—when the rationale for merit and promotion did not match the rationale that stands there as a majority cultural icon? What do you tell the deans?

JW: We told the deans, in part, that we need to discover standards of excellence for dealing with the university's mission of outreach. This is a Land-Grant institution whose founding charter goes beyond that of sheer scholarly research.

CAC: But you found resistance to that?

JW: In some ways, yes. The academy can, indeed, be a cloister. It can be constrained by professionalism in the narrow sense and all those things that can turn the scholars into professionalizing pedants. I think one of the sources of energy and revitalization for this institution and other kinds of institutions is precisely to look outside to other kinds of needs, and values, and goals.

CAC: What did you find within the institution, either persons or agencies or whatever, that would promote affirmatively what you're talking about now?

JW: There has always been in the academy, also, a certain number of faculty and students who have been engaged in, what one might call, applied knowledge, applied fields of knowledge and in formalized outreach in context with the life outside the academy here and whether one talks about the people in technical fields, or in agricultural science, or in the medical sciences, and so forth, there is a tradition of that. For those of us in the Humanities in particular that's a more ambiguous connection to pursue . . . [unclear] is the case in the Social Sciences. I think one of the ways in which Black Studies itself defined what made it different from other fields, initially, was precisely in the way in which problems were to be conceived, in which a problem solving orientation was conceived. One of the things that impressed me and many of us early on about Afro-American Studies was that in conceiving and confronting the problems we faced, we had to say that what brought together the various disciplines in dealing with any particular problem was finally the need to make decisions, to clarify one's values, and to act in the world. All right? The need for decision making and action finally is what unifies all the disciplines; otherwise they are simply a collection of arbitrary divisions of human activity, and understanding, and inquiry.

CAC: Modes of inquiry.

JW: Precisely. If one faces a problem of dealing with poverty in this world, it's the need to act in the world as it is that forces us to bring together the insights of the sociologist, of the cultural anthropologist, of the economist, of the political scientist, of the historian, of the humanist, and so forth, in order to try to create some kind of whole framework from which to help define values, and to act, and to make decisions.

CAC: At anytime—I'm making this as a statement but it's a question—you have found in various nooks and crannies of the university, persons who share that vision?

JW: Yes. Yes.

CAC: So, that's what makes it possible in a large institution whose majority standards, and values, and criteria are substantially different?

JW: Yes.

CAC: We're talking about a counterculture?

JW: In some ways, yes. For me, I've also had a sort of odd perspective—maybe not odd but at least a different perspective—in part, because I come from a training in the sciences and as an engineer.

CAC: Yes.

JW: As someone who in that framework when one is trying to solve a technical problem, you have a whole set of problems both of the mathematical, the problems of physics in looking a particular issue but you also have to deal with questions of materials, of all the elements of the system brought together finally to deal with the problem that has to be solved in the—quote—real world—unquote. That has given me, perhaps, a somewhat different perspective than some of my colleagues, certainly in the Humanities, on dealing with the issues of educational change and reform.

CAC: Do you find a burden of traditionalism still running strong in the Humanities as distinguished from other major areas of inquiry?

JW: Yes. Well, the Humanities in some ways are kind of schizoid in terms of dealing with issue of social change, can be the most radical, and the most hidebound, and conservatively entrenched. It's in so many respects in the Humanities that we've had some of the most intense and still unresolved battles about educational reform and change.

CAC: Well, my friend, do we have other reflections that you want to share before we kind of resolve down our conversation? We've covered a lot of good ground.

JW: Yes, we have. I guess, I feel a certain amount of closure here at the moment and time preparation for class is pressing on me as well.

CAC: [laughter]

JW: I'll need to get up and go meet with my TAs [Teaching Assistant] and try to prepare here to get students interested today in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley.

CAC: Ah. Phillis Wheatley after whom so many settlement houses all around the country are named.

JW: Yes and for whom many of the Phillis Wheatley Settlement Houses' patrons may have little cognizance of who Phillis Wheatley was or why her name is on the building front.

CAC: You have a good time doing this?

JW: Usually.

CAC: [laughter] That's a good answer.

[End of Tape 2, Side 2]

[End of the Interview]

Transcribed by:

Hermes Transcribing and Research Service
12617 Fairgreen Avenue, Apple Valley, MN 55124
(612) 953-0730