

Allston Fitts III Interview
23 Minutes

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

LB: So we just want to record you for reference...

AF: Um-hum.

LB: ...purposes. Uh, but I want to do the sound this way because it's much better.

WS: You'll get your sound off that?

LB: Yep. You see, it's tapped right in.

WS: Yeah, okay.

LB: So you don't really have to be aware of that. It's the microphone we're after. Well, Bill, why don't you begin?

WS: Well, why don't you tell us how you got to Harvard?

AF: Ha, ha, ha! What do you mean, how I got to Harvard?

WS: How you managed to find your way to Harvard?

AF: Oh, I started Harvard Graduate School in the fall of '61. Jonathan Daniels and I both, we both in the English Department. We were both um big frogs in small puddles. I'd been a very bright English student at the University of Alabama - got a Woodrow Wilson to go up to Harvard and I think he got a Woodrow Wilson, too, from V.M.I. He was valedictorian, which I was not. [We were both up there discovering what it meant to be a graduate student in English at Harvard, where the strike zone was much, much smaller than it had ever been.] University of Alabama, we, both in Milton, I think I was in the row behind him, and, uh, a very great Milton scholar, Douglas Bush. Very dull lecturer, unfortunately, uh, it was a fight to stay awake. He taught us immortal truths about Lycidas, which didn't mean a great deal at the time. I remembered some of them when I had a friend die young and uh, meaningless - young and meaningless - a person died a meaningless death - and of course it was Jonathan.

Uh, that was several years later. [I knew him slightly. He, uh, we were both a little unhappy, I think. Uh, we both left by, you know, the end of that first year. I wasn't really sure I wanted to be a teacher. Wasn't quite sure what I was doing at Harvard. I don't think he did, either.] Um, he was living in a graduate dorm and, uh, that's one of the reasons I was unhappy was that I was living out in the - rooming in the Unitarian rectory (laughs). An Irish Catholic from Alabama, I was a little out of place, but he, um, told him, "vacancies in Perkins Hall," you know, and uh, in fact, he helped put me in touch with my friend Henry Najako, who became my roommate in the second semester and he helped me move in and, you know, we saw each other at English graduate student things, uh, and lunch a couple of times. We had bizarre undergraduate arguments, uh, then I lost touch with him and the next time I saw his face, I was at the University of Chicago. I resumed my graduate studies and there was an account of his having been murdered in my home state. And was...it was quite a shock. It, it was for me a rather ("delayed" or "belated") version of the Lycidas experience that Milton talks about, you know, you go, uh, you grow up, you know, being told if you work hard and achieve things, things will go well, and then you, you know, someone you know who could have done great things uh, I mean, Jonathan was studying to be a saint. I've known very few people who were studying to be saints.

WS: (Unintelligible)

AF: Uh, from his writings. I did not know that when I knew him at Harvard. I don't think he was doing that at Harvard. He was...he didn't know what he was doing at Harvard. Neither did I.

WS: How did he express that? I'm just curious to know.

AF: Um, the paper he wrote after he came back from Selma that he wrote for the seminary, uh, 'twas in Cambridge, he was back in Harvard territory, a very different environment, um...in which he - his struggle to understand and to love his enemies, to understand the whites of Selma. Understand the people who were, you know, uh, did not want him to worship in St. Paul's here. Uh, you know, would not let him and his kid - and (? white ???) come to communion till the very end, um. And he struggled to understand that. And when he went back North, his refusal to bluntly condemn, um, his enemies, who would be doing these dreadful things, uh...In his paper, he tells of an incident when he and Judy were driving back....Well, of course,

they carried Alabama tags, and several black cars would pause while passing them and give them hate stares because - and they were at first appalled and defensive and wanted to say, "No, we're not rednecks!...We're not the enemy!" But then after awhile they thought, "Well, to, uh, as long as they are (?? enemies ??) as long as there is someone who is despised...you know, simply by class...we're part of that. We are Alabama rednecks. In New England, where these were despised by good liberals, just as down here they were, to use that awful phrase, white niggers, uh, when I read this, I thought, "My God, Jonathan is trying to be a saint!" Um, I didn't know that for years that he had gone that far, but simply the fact that someone whom I'd known and been in school with, in class with, had stupid arguments with at the graduate uh, dining hall, you know, shook me very much and made me commit poetry for one of the few times in my life, um...killed in my home state, you know, by my own people, in a sense, and Jonathan, my cold, dead friend, you spoil us of our past...made me literally wonder if I could come back, which I'd always intended to do, and which I did, and I think his death had some, in a way, had an influence on me getting into African-American literature. I was working on a dissertation of Shakespeare. I was supposed to get started the summer, um, that that King was killed...summer after King was killed. I was teaching at Northwestern then, to get money to finish graduate school and write the dissertation and, uh, you know, King was killed, and Bobby Kennedy and that really sort of brought back Jonathan and sort of the hopelessness of it all and I wanted to do something, so I offered to teach a course on Black Literature at Northwestern. There had been demonstrations asking for one and I offered to, and I went around trying to get someone who didn't have an Alabama accent (laughs)...get one of my liberal friends to do it because they were past civil rights, they were on into Vietnam and the Theater of the Absurd and whatever, so I...I was the most conservative member of the junior faculty, but I got up the course. Um, and then spent so much time learning African-American literature, I did not finish my dissertation on time, so I didn't get tenure at Alabama, uh, so I wound up coming to Selma and doing fundraising and public relations for the Edmundite fathers who had befriended Jonathan when he was here and it was working for them that I found Jonathan's writings, um, and discovered, you know, how far my friend had gone, uh, studying to be a saint.

LB: When you were at Harvard, um, so you must have had a friendship with him that existed outside of the classroom...

AF: Well, he helped me move, you know, he told me about the dorm, uh, you know, we...we had lunch a couple times, chatted, you know I didn't, um, you know...

WS: What were some of these insane undergraduate arguments that you talked about?

AF: Uh...

WS: Do you remember any of those? About literature, about life, about...

AF: About women...

WS: Ah, that's interesting.

AF: Well, I...well, we were both pontificating, I think, on the basis of very shallow experience...

TS?: Isn't that the truth...(untelligible)...with you...

AF: Yes, uh, but I remember one argument that just embarrassed me afterwards that there I could have...but we weren't up to arguing about literature. That was work! (Laughter)

LB: Especially after Milton! (Laughter)

WS: Did he have an attitude toward women? We're very interested in that. That you can remember at that time?

AF: Um...

WS: Can you recall?

AF: Not on the record.

WS: That's all right, we'll ask you later...

AF: Yes.

WS: That'd be interesting.

LB: How 'bout when you were studying Milton? Milton's an interesting, uh, way to be introduced to somebody....The blind Puritan, or anti-Puritan...what, uh...Did Jon ever say anything in class?

AF: Um, I don't remember his speaking out in class. You didn't speak out in Dr. Bush's class. You just listened...

LB: Right, yeah...

AF: He lectured and it...the only line I remember was when a jet plane flew by overhead and he said, "You know, the modern definition of an optimist is someone who thinks the future is uncertain..."

??

...Which was a little chilling...

WS: How 'bout, uh, anything going on in Cambridge socially? Either you, or in terms of activity...Kennedy...kind of social theories, social interests, demonstrations. We're kind of interested in yourself, you coming from this part of the world, coming into Cambridge. We were wondering socially, in terms of political theories and all, if perhaps he was running into something different there.

AF: Um, I don't know, I was, of course, to a certain extent suspect simply as a, as a white Southerner. I mean, people would ask me my views. Some people would ask me my views; some people would simply start denouncing me, you know, for my presumed views. I do remember one graduate student from Ireland, asked me my views, and after I told him, he said, "Oh, well, what about..what do real Southerners think?" (laughs) Told him I didn't think I knew any. Um...

LB: Did you start there the same year Jonathan did?

AF: Yeah. We, we were both big frogs in small puddles to Southern schools.

LB: And you were graduated in the spring of '61?

AF: Yeah.

LB: And he had as well (incomplete) And were you on a scholarship as well?

AF: Yeah, we were both on Woodrow Wilson scholarships.

LB: You must have had some initial meetings. Didn't they bring new people together?

AF: Yeah.

LB: Talk to you?

AF: Um-hum...Yeah. They did.

LB: I do find it hard myself to think about, remember the first time I met certain people. I remember the first time I met him, and that was less than twenty-five years ago, so I don't know how I would describe that, so I could see how that would be difficult to pin down. But we thought that Cambridge and Boston at that time, early 60's, would be, well, let's see, Kennedy, Kennedy was still alive and, um, you know.....people saw it as a center of progressive change in this country.

AF: Ah, well, people were very...

LB: And there's Harvard.

AF: People were very smug, and, well, I think I...I don't think I really said much, and if you're talking about role models, I don't think I really set my sights on Harvard or considered Harvard a possibility until Kennedy's nomination, you know, reminded me that Irish Catholics could do certain things. Um, and there was a great deal of Harvard self-congratulation then and you heard the latest things. It wasn't, uh, it was not as social, uh, politically intense then as it became later. I remember I wrote an article or two for this literary, uh, Catholic magazine that was being organized on campus by Michael Novak, who is now, of course, a big neo-conservative, but back then was a flaming young liberal, and he complained that it was so hard to get anybody to write on social issues. Everyone wanted to write on literature, you know, and later on I was at the University of Chicago and called him for advice and he said, "Oh, the problem is to

get people to write on social issues instead of on literature." And I said, "Well, Mike, it's not like that anymore!" (laughs)

AF: It's not Chicago in the late 60's.

WS: Any interest in civil rights on campus? Was SNCC active then? There must have been a chapter, probably not so well known.

AF: Um, I'm trying to remember. I was back at Harvard in the summer of '64, and there was certainly a chapter then. I remember...I think SNCC was, yes, I think there was, because, somebody was selling SNCC buttons, which, you know, two hands clasped, you know, uh, hands of different colors, uh, with a flag behind...I forget whether it was the American flag or the Confederate, and I...for some reason, they'd been printed in green and white instead of black and white and so I bought one and wore it and when my friends stared at it, I said, "This is the interplanetary friendship society. Green hand and a white hand."

LB: Martians, yes.

AF: Martians and Earthmen.

LB: What about, uh, Vietnam? Was there an awareness of an anti-war movement in '64? I was in Syracuse in '64, and I didn't really hear - it wasn't until about '66 that SDS started, for example.

AF: Yeah, um-hum. In the summer of '64 I was first hearing about SDS you know, and trying to find out about it. It sounded like something I might like to join, but I kept trying to find out - but who started it? I was enough of that older generation where you were vaguely, you really wanted to be sure something was safe. The kids I was talking to were way past that. I mean, who cares who started it? (???)

LB: A very interesting question. Graduate students at Syracuse tended to be more conservative than undergraduates...

AF: Well, we were a little intimidated by the undergraduates. I mean, after all, we were the provincials. I mean, we may have been big frogs at V.M.I. and the University of Alabama, but these were people who were at Harvard as undergraduates. You know, I was

told later by a friend that they were secretly intimidated by us. But I didn't believe it.

WS: I was just trying to see if anywhere during '61 you and/or Jonathan could have run into any, you know, initial uh, concerns about racial, uh, questions and/or social justice questions in general? Would '61 at Harvard have been a place where one initially began to think about such things?

AF: Ah...

WS: Even if there were a SNCC chapter? Because there were.

AF: I - I'm not that - Not that I re-re-remember. It was maybe part of my own experience which it seemed I guess I'd been going straight to school all those years - I wake in the middle of the night and think, "What am I doing here? Is this what life is about?"

WS: What was wrong about it?

AF: Uh, well, studies didn't seem to be in any way particularly related to like, you know, to what I - I didn't really know that I wanted to teach, I'd never tried to teach. I didn't know what, you know, I was, I was aging, my hair was starting to fall out, you know, and uh, I'd, uh...there was this strange environment, I wasn't really sure, spending all this energy trying to make good enough grades, you know, to stay in, uh, which I think was a very common experience for a graduate student, you know...

LB: I agree.

AF: Um...

WS: Was that Joanthan's feeling, too?

AF: (Stammers extensively throughout this passage) He didn't talk about it, but then he always had (said?) that he was sort of...unhappy, but not, or, in some of the same ways I was. Um, I know in one sense, Harvard was a very positive experience for me in that, um, it was an encounter with a mature Catholicism that I'd never been around before. Harvard was a terrific education in my faith. For me. At the Harvard Catholic Center, the Newman Center at the University of Alabama, they did film strips on "Don't play

hookey" - that's getting into the devil (laughs). Very different intellectual level, you know. Whereas coming in and filling you in on the New Criticism of the Bible and the "new" this and the "new" that, you know...a whole new intellectual....

WS: Jonathan didn't talk with you about religion?

AF: No. I do, he didn't....I think I was faintly aware that he, like me, he had a Christian background, but I don't ever remember, you know. Um, so I was a little surprised when I found he had gone into the seminary, uh, you know...I didn't know him well. Wish I had.

WS: Did ya know he didn't finish that first year?

AF: No, I didn't. I tell you, by the time I got to the (second semester?) exams, I had lost touch with most folks.

LB: So second semester you probably didn't have a class with him? It was just that first semester? Second semester, he dropped out in April in '62, so he didn't finish the term...

AF: I didn't know.

LB: So it must have just been that first semester?

WS: He was so shook at that time he was receiving counseling. He was in pretty tough shape.

AF: I didn't know that! I didn't know that.

LB: It was partly his sister's instability that ended her up in an institution...

AF: Ummm.

LB: ...and she needed to , um, money.

AF: Um humm..

LB: One reason he dropped out, we've heard, is that he had to go home to make money to....But that doesn't seem...the only reason, because we've heard from other people that he underwent a conversion. An actual...

AF: um hum...

LB: ...conversion at a chapel in Cambridge, a church...

AF: Hum...

LB: ...and just decided

WS: ...that Milton wasn't it!

LB: Yeah.

AF: (Laughs)

WS: There's plenty of people that Milton discouraged from...

LB: God....Thank God...I only had a course of Milton's Lycidas....But that's interesting, that parallel you drew between Lycidas and Daniels...

AF: Yeah, because it did, it did shock me when, you know, when I was at Chicago and this person whom I had known had been murdered in my home state, you know, an hour and a half's drive from Tuscaloosa. Um I, you know, of course so many atrocities in the South had shaken me...you know...the bombing of the church in Birmingham, uh, but it never killed anyone I had known, you know, and uh, later Father Morrisroe came, you know, back to Chicago before he left the priesthood, he came by the chapel of the University of Alabama/University of Chicago to say mass for us. He hadn't realized it was so far from the El and he had to walk and he was still on heavy crutches and all that and he got there after mass was already over and I made myself go over and introduce myself, you know, as from Alabama and I had known Jonathan and he was very sweet in an exhausted sort of way. He said he had met a lot of nice people in Alabama while he was in the hospital.

LB: Did he say anything about Jonathan? Did he add anything to that?

AF: He said something about I think...book...that Jonathan's family was going to be in Chicago in about a month or so and I did not feel I had known him well enough to, um, you know, to....

LB: And here you are here...you know...

WS: Good.

LB: Yeah, that was great.

WS: I'd like to find others who were at Harvard at that time.

finis