

## Quincy Troupe in Conversation with Justin Desmangles, Sept. 26, 2020

Quincy Troupe has been among the most frequent guests on my radio show over the past twenty years. The following transcription is excerpted from a two-hour conversation covering a vast array of topics, largely focusing on his body of work as a poet and his forthcoming collection *Duende: Poems, 1966-Now* (Seven Stories Press). For this issue of *Konch*, the editors and I have chosen to focus on two points of great interest in the recent history of American art, the departure of *Black Renaissance Noire* from New York University and the death of controversial jazz critic Stanley Crouch.

### ***On the departure of Black Renaissance Noire from New York University***

**Justin Desmangles:** When I was describing your poetry as creating the vision for the possibility of real freedom, I was thinking of it as integral to all of these other traditions that inform your writing. Because if you're listening to a Quincy Troupe poem, or you're reading a Quincy Troupe poem, and you're not moving your body, if you don't have some boogie or some stomp or some shuffle or some bounce, you're not hearing the poem! In order to really hear the Quincy Troupe poem, you have to boogie your body. You have to be able to step lively. The music that is in the poetry is the practical form of real freedom. The possibility of that imagination moving the body.

That wellspring of wisdom is also what informed the way that you shaped and moved and created the very supple *Black Renaissance Noire*, which under your leadership as editor expanded the range into all these other sensuous presentations of art.

You recently announced to your friends and colleagues that there was a departure of ways coming between you and NYU [New York University] and *Black Renaissance Noire*. Could you speak to us about that?

**Quincy Troupe:** Sure. This is the way it was explained to me. You know, I have an office down there that I never go to, so I said, let somebody else have it. I can work really well at my place, I have everything at my disposal. I got everything. So

I said, just give it to somebody else. I think that rubbed some people the wrong way. "This guy, he ain't even going to take the office." You never know what rubs people the wrong way, but somebody told me that.

Anyway, Manthia Diawara hired me because of the fact that he loved *Code* magazine so much.

**JD:** Oh yes.

**QT:** He was my contributing editor. He's from Mali. He used to provide stuff for *Code*, so when *Code* stopped, when I moved back to New York, he said "Why don't you take over *Black Renaissance Noire*?". And that's what I did, I took it over and I said, "Well you know, I am going to change it. I just want to let you know that." He was one of the one's who started it, he and Walter Mosley and Clyde Taylor. He said, "That's what I want you to do, that's why I am hiring you, because I know you're going to change it." [laughter] "I know it's going to make a lot of people mad, but I think it needs to be changed." I said, "I am going to bring in some white people and everybody else." He said, "Do it, I am giving you free reign." So that's what I did, I felt empowered at *Black Renaissance Noire*, I could do what I wanted. He said, "I trust your judgement, your editorial judgement and what you will do. I really do, I think it's going to be remarkable." So I said, "O.K., man!"

And so, I pissed-off a lot of people because I started to change a lot of stuff. I remember this guy who was one of the old editors. We had a meeting early on, maybe in the second year or so, and he came in, he was mad. He was mad with me because of the fact that I had made some changes and had rejected somebody that he had brought in. So we were sitting there . . . and I liked the guy, I liked him a lot . . . he says "Why did you do that, why did you do that?" I said, look at my title. He said, "Wha-wha-what?" I said, "Look at my title, it's Editor-in-Chief. Editor-in-Chief means I make the decisions." I learned that when I was doing *Code* with Larry Flynt. It's my decision. "If I don't like it, it's going," I said, "I have no guilt." I have no guilt about stuff like that. He said, "But I, I just . . .," and I said, "Look man, I just told you, I have no guilt so this is useless."

**JD:** Let me save you some time!

**QT:** Yeah! “Look, I’m not going to do it, man. I’m going to do what I want to do.” “Well, I’m going to quit then.” I said, “Hey, man that is your choice. I like you, man, but I am the Editor-in-Chief and you’re not.” [laughter] “You’re a contributing editor, I am the Editor-in-Chief, O.K.? Manthia told me that’s what it was and I take that stuff seriously.”

In the end what I do is what’s going to come down on me. It’s not going to come down on Manthia, it’s going to come down on me. And so anyway, that went on for a while. Then Manthia left and he said “Quincy, I don’t want to be involved with the magazine anymore. I am a university professor and I want to travel more. You can call on me or Clyde or Walter when you want to, but Deborah Willis is going to take my position.” I said, “Well, I know Deb,” and he said, “Well you know she has a kind of different take on stuff.” O.K. I didn’t know what that was, and so she took over his position.

He had been telling me that there were some mysterious white professors in the administration who were jealous. That is what he said. They admitted that it was a great magazine but they were jealous, they were envious because they were getting asked about me all the time and they didn’t like that. I understand that kind of stuff so . . .

**JD:** This is something that has happened a lot to you.

**QT:** Yeah, it happens. So one day, Deb calls me up and says “We’re going to have to make some changes with the magazine.” “What? What do you mean?” She says, “Well, they think we ought to do things like this . . .” “I’m not doing it, what do you mean?” She says, “Well, they think we should do things like this.” I said, “I’m not going to do it. I am just not going to do it.” She said, “Well, maybe, I guess we’ve reached a parting of the ways.”

Hey, it was like that, it was just like that. You know what I mean?

**JD:** Wow, this is Deb Willis talking?

**QT:** Yeah, Deb Willis, but then I found out it wasn’t even her. She was told to do that.

**JD:** I see.

**QT:** She said to me later, “Well, I didn’t want to do that, see, but the higher-ups, they wanted to do it.” She says, “I teach here,” you know, “I got to get along with these people.” I said, “Hey, it’s your decision. This is what I want to know,” I said, “since you’re going to cease publishing the magazine, can I take it with me at some opportune time and take it off campus. Maybe get money and start it over again with somebody else.” “Oh, yeah,” she said “You can do that, you can do that.”

Well, that’s what I am going to do. That’s what is going to happen. I am going to own it.

**JD:** That’s great.

**QT:** I am going to have control of it. I am just going to let it go for a while and then we are going to do it. I just have to get the money together first. I have some people. I had NYU behind me. That is a lot of money, we were coming out three times a year. It was costing some money to do that magazine like it was done. So we’ll see. If not it will just have to be gone. Maybe we can do a big one every year.

**JD:** Like an annual.

**QT:** I can be a contributing editor and somebody else can be Editor-in-Chief if we raise enough money. So that’s what happened. I know Deb is sorry now, she is really sorry it happened because she is catching grief.

**JD:** I’ll bet.

**QT:** People call me, they call me up, “What happened, what happened to the magazine?” I say, call Deb Willis, and I give them her number. And so she says to me, “Quincy, could you please stop giving my . . .” I said, “No, I am not going to take the blame. I had nothing to do with it.”

**JD:** Let me ask you this. In recent years the United States has openly embraced fascism and a lot of the trends that have been taking place in so-called higher education have reflected that. Some of the most far-right think tanks in the United States have exerted extraordinary control over curriculum on America’s college campuses and universities. Groups like the Manhattan Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Hoover Institute out here in California.

Do you suspect or do you know that the decision coming through NYU vis-à-vis *Black Renaissance Noire* has illustrated part of that larger trend? Is that fair to say?

**QT:** I would think so. I don't know. I had thought about it because it just came all of a sudden. I don't even know the people who pulled the trigger, I don't even know who they are. They're shadowy people. I never met them. If I did meet them, you know, they were very nice to me, you know what I mean?

There was a provost there who loved the journal. A gay white guy and he was married to a black gay guy. He was the provost, he loved the journal. He started teaching again, he wanted more freedom, they said. And this woman took over. She was the one who executed it, you know. Her name was Parker or something like that. I never met her. I asked for meetings when I heard all this stuff was about to happen. She would never meet with me. I don't know what happened. I just know the decision was by some higher-ups.

Some of those people in the English Department, they were jealous and envious of the journal because everybody was talking about it. They were talking about it with great esteem. [The English Department] was pissed-off. Somebody said, "Why he's not even down here, he doesn't even come to his office." [laughter] What does that have to do with the product?

**JD:** Exactly. There was something about *Black Renaissance Noire*, especially for younger readers who are not necessarily immersed in the culture, that opened up worlds within worlds for them. In other words, it became a medicinal substance for people who were otherwise in triage. I think that is part of the move that is being made here by these shadowy higher-ups. They're trying to cut off the flow of medicine to people who need it.

**QT:** Right! Right! That's what it is. That's why I am glad they are going to allow me to take it and do something with it.

**JD:** That's the best news I've heard all day.

### ***On the late jazz critic Stanley Crouch***

**QT:** I was a Jayne Cortez's house one day and Stanley [Crouch] was talking this shit, man, and I said, "Shut the fuck up, Stanley."

**JD:** Serious.

**QT:** He said, "What?" I said, "Shut up. If you don't shut up I'm going to smack the shit out of you."

**JD:** There you go.

**QT:** Stanley used to always bully people.

**JD:** That's right.

**QT:** He said, "You going to do what?" I said, "Say it again, say it again." He said it again. I knocked him out. I didn't knock him out, I knocked him on the bed with a right cross. Buh-ow! [laughter] On the bed. Jayne said, "Oh my god!" And Mel Edwards started laughing. [Stanley] never said nothing to me ever again.

He would bully people, Stanley.

I'd say, "Stanley, Stanley." He'd say "Yeah, Troupe what is it?" I'd say, "Don't go there, man, I might have to clock you again." And Stanley and I got along to the end. Because I used to tell him, that shit you talking about is stupid.

You were talking about it earlier [the up-front, plain-spoken style of the Midwest]. K. Curtis Lyle and I moved to St. Louis from Los Angeles. He still lives there and I told Curtis, "The difference between you and me, we are both intellectuals but how you express yourself is kind of like California." Now Curtis is a big guy, he will knock you out, but he's always trying to get around it. He told me one day, "Now I understand how you are, since I lived in St. Louis so long." They'll just clock you, they'll shoot you, [laughter] they don't think about it.

**JD:** It's that same Blues impulse that you hear in Richard Pryor, you can hear it in Miles Davis. You can hear it in a lot of artists that come from that area.

**QT:** That's right, that's it, man. Point blank.

**JD:** Point blank and no filigree, no adornment, just right there.

**QT:** No filigree. [laughter]

**JD:** Plain as moonlight in the forest and if you can't dig it, fine.

**QT:** Fine.

**JD:** I am glad that you brought up Stanley though because I find him to be very troubling. In as much as he seemed to spend a career just going which way the wind blows, and he became a professional assassin for his bosses.

**QT:** Yes.

**JD:** In other words, the New York literary establishment would hire Stanley to abuse and punish Black men whom they felt got out of line. I for one am very confused at the praise that is being heaped on him in death because this was a man who committed the most egregious of sins. Betrayal of the spiritual tradition that brought him into existence. In fact, there are very few people that he didn't betray. Even his mentor Albert Murray, the man who co-signed for Stanley. He betrayed him too.

**QT:** Right. I don't know if you saw it, but they had a notice of his death on Facebook and I wrote a piece . . . everybody was, like, oh shit! I talked about it. I said Stanley was brilliant. I knew Stanley from the time we didn't have no money in Watts. You know, we were running around together. He was out there with us, the Watts Writers. He was going with Jayne Cortez.

I watched him slide down that slope. I saw him just sell himself out. I said that in that piece. He was avaricious, he was evil, you know what I mean?

Let me tell you this one story. I remember when he loved Miles Davis, I mean absolutely adored, loved. We go in to a club one night . . . I'm from St. Louis, Miles is from East St. Louis . . . I saw Miles standing over there against the wall with this woman. Beautiful woman. He always had beautiful women. Stanley said, "Hey, man, that's Miles Davis, I am going to go over and say something. We're going to go over and say hello." I said, "I'm not going over there, Stanley. Miles don't want to talk to you, man."

**JD:** Exactly.

**QT:** I said, "Miles don't want to talk to you." He said, "Well, I'm going over and saying hello, man." He went over there to talk to Miles Davis, saying, I'm so and so and so and so, I'm Stanley Crouch. Miles said, "Fuck you motherfucker, get the fuck out of my motherfucking face." Just like that. Point blank, boom!

Stanley, he was upset. Up until that point he had written nothing but real praise about Miles. The next week in the Village Voice he wrote a piece putting-down Miles Davis like a dog. Just because he got cursed out. I called him up, I said, "That is some chicken shit stuff that you just did, man. You know goddamn well you love Miles Davis. The reason you wrote that piece was because he cursed your ass out. Talking about how he can't play?" I said, "Are you a fool? Just because he cursed you out, he can't play, huh? You're the only one who believes that, you and Albert Murray. Don't bring that shit to me, man, I know you. *I know you*. I'm not one of these crazy people or them white boys that you hang-out with. They don't know you like I know you. You're just chicken shit." He would tiptoe around me after that.

All that stuff that he was writing, attacking all these writers, people, musicians and everything. It's just bullshit.

**JD:** It is.

**QT:** It's just crazy.

**JD:** He was remarkably in tune with the Reagan era. That is when he really rose to position over there in New York. By following the new conservative trend of Ronald Reagan. A lot of people don't like my saying that, but it is true.

**QT:** It's true. It is absolutely true. I was there! I watched him make those moves.