

Interviewee: ELI LEON
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[SETTING UP REMARKS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. Your name at Black Mountain was Robert Stanley?

Bobby. Eli, how did you come to be at Black Mountain College?

EL: I was at the High School of Music and Art, and my ceramics teacher, Mrs. Rosen, mentioned – in case I was looking for a scholarship and wanted to go on studying pottery – She mentioned Black Mountain to me, which I didn't follow up on. But my friend Naomi Stea did end up going to Black Mountain. I went to Oberlin for my first year – the end of my first year would have been the summer of '54 – 1954. Naomi was back in New York, where we were from. I sort of ran away from home. I was kind of stuck, stuck in New York for the summer. I was having trouble being around my parents again after being away for the school year, and I just took off. She was about to go back to Black Mountain, and I thought somehow this was going to work out. I left them a note and I left.

MEH: What had you heard about the college at that time?

EL: Well, I knew it was far out, you know. I had been looking for a school that was going to speak to me, and one that I was going to be able to tolerate, and Oberlin

was a mistake. I had, somehow I had the idea that Oberlin was a much looser place. I'd interviewed at Bard and, you know, considered Goddard and so on. I ended up at Reed in Oregon the second year and for the rest of my undergraduate work.

MEH: Did you have any particular expectations when you went to Black Mountain?

EL: Oh, God, I don't remember. I'm sure I had wild expectations. Well, I had the idea that there was something fundamentally wrong with the educational system that was screwing me up, and I hoped that a counterculture educational situation would be better, would better serve whatever needs I – I don't know how clear I was about what my needs were at the time, you know. I must have been – I must have turned nineteen that summer at Black Mountain.

MEH: If you had been to Berea, then you would have been to the South before. Did you say you were at Berea?

EL: Oberlin.

MEH: How did you get to Black Mountain? How did you travel there?

EL: Took a bus. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Long ride?

EL: I guess so. I remember the ride because we were having trouble – me and Naomi, and I was quite miserable on the ride going down. (LAUGHS)

MEH: So, what were your first impressions of the college?

EL: I'm afraid I don't remember. Remembering now, I can remember that it was so beautiful, you know. We had all this space. There were only I think seven students there, and eight teachers, something like that. We shared the upper

story of a very charming house with – I think her name was Betty Kaiser? Is that her name? How is she? Do you know anything?

MEH: She died. After we finish, you can ask me about any people and I'll tell you.

EL: Anyway, she had – She was considerably older than us, and she had a suite which she kept locked. We never went in there. It was like two or three rooms. I guess it must have been two rooms, but we shared a kitchen. Naomi and I each had a room, and then there was a living room that was just ours because Betty never used it, and we shared this kitchen. It was my first experience of living, you know, where I wasn't in a dorm and I wasn't at home, and there were all kinds of rude shocks. The sink was always full of dishes and Naomi and I both always insisted that it was the other one's turn to do them (LAUGHS). Stuff like that.

MEH: Was there any – Were you just on your own there? Did you register for classes?
(OVERTALK)

EL: I took classes. Yeah.

MEH: What did you take?

EL: Well I was particularly interested in studying with Karen Karnes. She was still there. So, mostly I just worked in the pottery studio all summer, but I also took a writing class. Charles Olson– I signed up for something from Charles Olson and at some point I gave – I was always writing, anyway, and I gave him a big pile of stuff that I'd written, and he said it was great or something like that. I don't remember ever learning anything from him. Then I took a lithography class from – what's the guy's name, he had an Italian name, I think.

MEH: Joe Fiore?

EL: Yes. Right. That ended in this huge disaster.

MEH: What was that?

EL: Well, one night everybody was going to the movies. I had this splitting headache and it was also the night for the lithography class. I decided not to go to lithography class. Then when I got – I can't remember for sure – but I remember everybody was leaving to go to Ashland (SIC) to the movies – is that the town, Ashland? Asheville?

MEH: Asheville.

EL: Asheville, to go to the movies, and I hadn't seen much of Asheville and I thought, "Oh, I've got too bad a headache to go to the movies, but I could walk around town," you know. So, I drove into town with them. Then, I don't know, the next day or sometime later, he came storming into someplace that I was at, and he'd heard that I had gone to the movies. He thought I'd cut his class and gone to the movies and claimed I had a headache when I didn't. He just unloaded all this shit on me. It was amazing. After that, I wouldn't go to his class anymore. I couldn't forgive him. That was the end of my lithography career. (LAUGHS)

MEH: I hope you had a good walk around Asheville.

EL: I guess so.

MEH: So, what about Karen Karnes' pottery?

EL: Well, that was too bad also. I was not that talented, and I particularly couldn't throw, but I was determined – I like to decorate pottery, and I needed to make it in order to decorate it. The wheel just pushed me all over the place, you know, but I just wouldn't believe that I couldn't learn how to throw. Every now and then I

would eke out, you know, some little pot but for the most part I wasted a lot of time. Karen was totally unimpressed with me. (LAUGHS) I was her only student.

MEH: I was going to say, were there any other students in the class?

EL: It was really too bad.

MEH: Who were the other students there that summer?

EL: Well, besides Betty and Naomi and myself, there were these two men who were downstairs from us. I think there was a tall skinny guy, whose name might have been Michael.

MEH: Michael Rumaker, was he there?

EL: I wouldn't remember the last name. But the man he lived with, I remember his name because he married Naomi's sister, Mona.

MEH: Terence Burns.

EL: That's right. Terence. Okay, so whoever was living with Terence, a much taller guy with intense eyes.

MEH: I'm not sure.

EL: I just barely knew them. I mean I somehow managed to not have anything to do with them all summer. I don't know how that worked. I think people were kind of, you know, some combination of shy, stand-offish, private, whatever, and I think Naomi and I were kind of seen as a couple of silly kids. Maybe. I'm guessing.

MEH: Did you – If you dropped the lithography course and you weren't really doing that well in pottery –

EL: Oh, but I was working –

MEH: But you continued to go to the classes.

EL: I don't think there were any classes, but I worked all summer in that pottery studio. Yeah. I found this stamped piece that I made, and one of the things that I did [INTERRUPTION TO PHOTOGRAPH IT]

MEH: All right hold it there and let me get the light. Okay. That's quite beautiful.

EL: Well, I don't like it very well, but I'm glad I saved it. But it's interesting to me that I was so interested in repeated pattern, you know. I'm a quilt historian, and I always have been interested in pattern, apparently. So, I'd worked up this little plaster stamp, and I made many different stamps and many different tiles. I don't know what happened to the rest of them. But –

MEH: Put it back. Let me come in close on it, hold it back there.

EL: Would you like this for the Black Mountain Museum?

MEH: I was going to say I'm an independent scholar also. I'm an unaffiliated person out there. So, – What did you do that summer besides work on pottery?

EL: (UNINTELL) We would walk to the farm to get eggs and butter. Along some path, we would go somewhere where we could buy eggs and butter.

MEH: You prepared your own meals?

EL: Oh, yes. Washed our own dishes (LAUGHTER). My parents and a friend of mine from Oberlin came down to visit me at one point.

MEH: What did they think?

EL: My friend was impressed. My parents, they were glad I was still alive (LAUGHS). Some guy, named Sam I think, showed up, and he and Naomi had some kind of an affair. So, I didn't see much of her after a while. I don't know what I was doing, but I think I was real busy with pottery.

MEH: Were there any plays that summer or any of that sort of thing going on?

EL: Oh, yes, yes. There was – was his name Hillman?

MEH: Hellman.

EL: Hellman. I don't know if he was there all summer. I don't think so. I think he visited. He had a novel he was writing, and we did a reading. We all sat in a big circle and different people took different parts. Did they really? Maybe not. Maybe he just read that and maybe we took different parts for something else. Oh, yeah, I remember the drama teacher all of a sudden.

MEH: Wes Huss.

EL: Yeah, yeah. He was – I think he was trying to convince me to take drama, and I can't – I don't think I did. But I might have. But then years later when I needed to graduate – I needed some extra credit to graduate from Reed that June, I – on the off chance that, you know, I'd get an answer, sent off for a transcript from Black Mountain. Sure enough, I got a bunch of credit, and it was all very amazing, you know. Olson had given me an A in Writing (LAUGHS).

MEH: Truly generous man.

EL: Oh, Creeley was there.

MEH: Right. Did you take any courses with him?

EL: No.

MEH: What was he like?

EL: But the thing I remember the most – I hardly remember Creeley. The thing I remember the most – I remember Hellman, I remember being tremendously impressed with his writing, the novel he was writing. I don't know if it's ever been

published. Particularly, the talk that went on around it. This was unusual for me, you know, when I hear various artists and writers talking, I just want to throw up most of the time. Instead, I was absolutely fascinated by the way he was constructing this novel and how this was going to have something to do with something that happened later – things that were just – it was just very very new. New concepts for me. Unfortunately, I can't – I don't feel like I'm being articulate, but I remember being very impressed with that reading and so on. I also remember there was pottery standing around all over the place by Hamada, I think, and by Voukos. They'd both been there fairly recently, and there were broken pots and unfired things and huge things and stuff like that. It was kind of fabulous.

MEH: Did you know who they were at the time?

EL: Yes. I probably – Maybe not when I arrived, but I did by the time I left.

MEH: What do you remember about the landscape around the college?

EL: Oh, I remember it being lush and green and buildings hanging from trees. I think that was the physics department.

MEH: Did you use the lake at all, or was it too polluted at that point?

EL: Oh, I don't even – didn't know there was a lake. I probably knew then, but I don't recall a lake. Walking along the road somewhere, we used to go down to get something at some store. That was about as far as I went.

MEH: Was there a farmer there then? Who was providing you milk and eggs?

EL: Some kind of a farm, but that was in a different direction. That was a path through the woods. But Naomi and I used to walk down to some store or other. I

remember one afternoon when we were lying in the grass and thinking of our earliest memories – trading memories, you know. Which turned out to be a very valuable thing because I've since been writing a memoir, and I think it – I think I tend to remember things that I remembered before. You know, things, memories fade but if you kind of practice remembering them –

MEH: They start coming back.

EL: But also if you, you know, if you remember something when you're nineteen, you're much more likely to remember it when you're sixty than if you hadn't done that.

MEH: Right. It sort of re-stored both memories. Had you ever been in an educational situation like Black Mountain before?

EL: No. There were little – You know, I went to Music and Art, so it wasn't like I'd only been to the most parochial of the New York City public schools. But I'd grown up in – You know, the schools I went to, PS 104 and so on in the Bronx with mostly Catholic teachers, very strict, you know, starched collars, size places in line, silence at all times. So, Music and Art was already quite a bit of, you know, quite a shift from that. Unfortunately, Black Mountain was – there was too little of the trappings of a school. So, it wasn't really like I was at a place where I was getting what I was hoping for from a school. I saw it as a school that was defunct, you know, that was no longer – it was just now some people hanging out together, and there were these little vestiges of structure, but it wasn't really a school. Nobody – with the exception of that drama teacher, what was his name?

MEH: Huss. It was Huss.

EL: Blond guy? Wes? Yeah. He seemed to try to teach me, you know, or he kind of let me know what I was doing right, tried to give me some pointers. I remember him trying to teach me, you know, but nobody else made any attempt to teach me anything that I can recall.

MEH: Were there any like general community gatherings during the summer, or was it just very disparate?

EL: I think it was only those readings. I think I almost didn't see people at all, because I remember the lithography teacher's wife, who was driving the car maybe when we went into the movie that night. I don't think I even recognized her. I don't think I'd, you know, ever seen her before. It's kind of amazing. In this tiny little community of fifteen people?

MEH: How do you remember Charles Olson?

EL: I was just thinking how shocked Naomi and I were when Betty's door opened one afternoon and he came out. (LAUGHS) I remember him as kind of a blustering, big, obnoxious guy, you know. As far as I could tell, he was putting various French and other foreign language quotations into his poetry when he didn't actually have a command of those languages, because I remember him getting some pointers from Betty or somebody about, about something. It seemed like he was – I couldn't understand what the hell he was doing. I didn't really have any respect for him. But I didn't have any particular reason not to either. I didn't have enough contact with him to actually evaluate much.

MEH: Do you have any other memories of the college that summer that we haven't discussed that are particularly vivid?

EL: I can't think of anything.

MEH: Why did you decide not to stay?

EL: Well, it was pretty clear from the beginning that I wasn't going to stay, even though I was really unhappy at Oberlin. I wanted to learn a lot of things that I couldn't have learned at Black Mountain. I particularly had a broad interest in science, in many different sciences and stuff. I didn't connect with any of the teachers there. I suppose had I found, you know, somebody who I felt like I was really learning something from, around writing, which I would have wanted to go in for, or some kind of artwork. But that didn't happen. I actually went back to Oberlin, and I had to leave in the middle of the semester. I got talked into going back to Oberlin somehow, so I had a very messy semester. That's why I needed the credits from Black Mountain at the point where I was actually graduating from Reed.

MEH: Did you go from Oberlin to Reed?

EL: I went – I left Oberlin in a just really messy – I simply would not stay any more. I was so disturbed.

MEH: What was the conflict there?

EL: Well, I was emotionally pretty disturbed anyway. I hated it at Oberlin. You know, they were quite regimented. I was having to take class-, having to do things I didn't want to do. I was taking this art class that I was hoping would, you know, give me some respite from the rest of it, and it turned out that that was even worse – I really don't remember anymore. I just thought I didn't even want to be in college. I thought I'd tried everything at this point. I didn't want to go home and

I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I just kind of picked myself up and went to Chicago, just because it wasn't New York and it was kind of there. I got a job in a custom shop which was – they sold custom-made shirts – and stayed there for the rest of the semester. A month or two was long enough to convince me that this was worse than going to school though. So, I managed to get into Reed in the middle of the year, and just resumed my education. Reed was much more suited to me, both the people I met there and the school. They weren't so grade-oriented. You didn't know your grades, although, of course, they had to give them to you. Lots of things were on the honor system. You could live off campus. It was in a city, you know, you could move off campus which I soon did. So – I had plenty of trouble anyway – but that was probably the best solution for me.

MEH: And you did graduate?

EL: [AFFIRMATIVE]

MEH: Did you get a degree after that?

EL: Well, I went to the University of Chicago in experimental psychology, and I actually did get a degree, but it wasn't the one I was going for. I passed my prelims and got all my requirements settled for a Ph.D. I did all this research that wasn't panning out, and I had a marriage going that wasn't panning out. Everything kind of blew up in my face and I – at this point quite typical for me – I picked myself up and left again. But then, seventeen years later, I was a counselor, and I was in a group practice and one of the people in the practice had a Ph.D. and so, if I had a Master's in psychology, I could legitimately work

under him. It was all ridiculous because my master's had nothing to do with counseling, but I still had some stuff that I hadn't written up, so I submitted it to Chicago and managed to get a master's from them for all this work I'd done, which allowed me to be a legitimate counselor.

MEH: How did you become interested in African-American quilts?

EL: Well, in the early seventies, I was earning more money than I was spending, for the first time in my life, and there was all this stuff in the air about how the economy was going to collapse and this and that and the other thing. I can't remember it all. But I read something that advised you to become an expert in something and collect that as a way – that that was the best thing to do with excess capital because if you put money in the bank it was just going to disappear one way or another. I'm obviously a collector by nature – so that appealed to me. (LAUGHS) So, I just started collecting quilts. They'd been something that intrigued me. A friend of mine had been doing some sort of quilt business, where she advertised in a national newspaper that she wanted to buy quilts and she got these quilts from various people who went to barn sales and stuff in various parts of the country. One day I was talking to her on the telephone, and she said that she had just gotten these quilts in the mail and that she was tired of it. She had been trying to buy them and resell them in consignment shops and stuff. But she was just going to send these back, and it was just at the point where I was kind of looking for something to collect, and I said, "Well, why don't I come out and look at them?" What she had were these spectacular double wedding rings and grandmother's flower gardens, you know.

For somebody who hadn't seen a lot of quilts, I just couldn't believe how incredible they were, and they were like fifty dollars, you know. They were just nothing. So, I said, "Well why don't I buy these?" and she said – she had this shoebox full of photographs and correspondence – and she said, "Here, why don't you take this whole thing." She didn't want to do it anymore. So, I kind of looked through them, and bought some of these things, and before you knew it, I was kind of buying and selling quilts. I was collecting them, but I was supporting the collection by selling some. That went on for a long time before I got hip to the fact that there was such a thing as an African-American quilt. I started reading everything that was, you know, published about quilts, that was accessible. Nothing mentioned African-American quilts. There was no such thing as an African-American quilt, as far as the establishment was concerned. Meanwhile, I was out at flea markets, you know, looking at quilts, and I would come upon black people selling quilts. Not only were there lots of them, but they were– they were intriguing, and they certainly didn't look like the quilts that I was finding from, buying them from the Midwest and stuff like that. At one point, I was looking at this African-American double wedding ring, and something just clicked, you know. I was looking at it and I just thought, "This quilt could not be made within the white tradition. This is something different," you know. From there on in – Then I started studying African textiles, and I discovered there were some people who were interested in African-American quilts – Maude Wahlman and Robert Farris Thompson, John Vlatch and Gladys-Marie Fry had all had their first little

things published on African-American quilts, and I started reading these things
[PAUSE].

[END OF CASSETTE SIDE 1, BEGINNING OF SIDE 2]

I started reading those things and I got intrigued by the idea of an African influence, you know. So, then I got knowledgeable about African textiles and started looking at African-American quilts with an eye, you know, to how did they differ from what I knew of the standard-traditional quilt. Sure enough, it seemed to me like there was an African influence. So, I – Then I started, you know, trying to document that, and lost interest completely in what I call standard-traditional quilts.

MEH: This really became your specialty.

EL: [AFFIRMATIVE]

MEH: Now, have you continued to work as a therapist.

EL: Hardly. I really did stop, but every now and then somebody I've worked with in the past or, for one reason or another, I end up doing a little counseling. I don't call it therapy.

MEH: When did you move to Oakland?

EL: In 1961, bought this house shortly thereafter. My ex-wife and I had a brief reconciliation at that time. We bought this house together. We were both very briefly computer programmers. I think it's probably the only time in my entire life that I would have qualified for a loan. It lasted, in her case, three months so it was during that three-month window of opportunity that we bought a house.

(LAUGHS) It was a good thing for me to do. The house cost \$7,500.

MEH: Isn't that incredible!

EL: I was there so briefly (OVERTALK).

MEH: No, your perceptions were interesting, and they were also interesting because you were seeing this college, which as you said was basically disintegrating, but you were seeing it as an outsider, which is an interesting perception. What do you hope to do with these quilts? Do you still sell them? Or do you just collect now?

EL: Oh, no. Once I started the African-American collection, I stopped dealing in them. I've since started dealing a little bit in ones that I consider, mostly ones that I've actually bought for sale, ones I wouldn't have bought otherwise but thinking, gee, maybe I can make a little money. That's why I keep this thing alive a little bit longer, because I have so many of them and I've run out of money to – and space and time and energy and brainpower. (LAUGHS)

This is a piece that Naomi did. I imagine she did it at Black Mountain. I can't think where else she would have done it that I would own it. I think she did a bunch of these little – what they called? Finger somethings. I have just treasured this all these years.

MEH: Have you stayed in touch with Naomi?

EL: I'm still in touch with her. Not, not – I mean maybe once a year we talk on the phone.

MEH: I haven't talked to her. I want to soon. I've talked to her on the phone, but not in person.

EL: I've found some photographs. This is the –

MEH: Turn it toward the camera and I'll – [TECHNICAL REMARKS NOT
TRANSCRIBED] Now is this a Karen Karnes piece?

EL: No, it's mine. But that's her glaze. That's her black, you know, yeah. The same
glaze is in the tiles. A little pitcher that I'm pretty sure I must have made at Black
Mountain that I just came upon looking –

MEH: Did you do ceramics other than the ones you did at Black Mountain?

EL: Yes.

MEH: Did you continue that at Reed?

EL: I did it here and there. I have a few of those, if you want to see them.

MEH: I'd rather see your quilts! (LAUGHS) Let's see how our time goes. I did want to
put this on. Now were there other photos there, other than the one you showed
me?

EL: Nothing. Here's another pile. [PAUSE]

MEH: Did you make those photos at Black Mountain?

EL: No, somebody – It says, "Bill Kramer, Bronx, New York." It was an Olinville 4
exchange. That was our exchange when I was a kid. It must have been
somebody in the neighborhood.

MEH: Right. After you got back.

EL: The quilt warehouse is behind the wall.

MEH: My goodness. Incredible.

EL: This is the African-American collection. Do you want me to get in the light?

MEH: When did you change your name to Eli?

EL: When I was in Chicago.

MEH: You said you went to a Catholic school? Were you Jewish?

EL: Oh, no, no. Yeah, I'm Jewish. No, the teachers in the public schools in the Bronx were Catholic.

MEH: Oh okay, so you might as well have been.

EL: [AFFIRMATIVE] They treated us to whatever extent they could. [Interviewee not clear what is meant by this.]

MEH: Was Eli a family name?

EL: No.

MEH: Just your chosen name.

EL: Yeah. Actually, my whole, my entire name is made up. My grandfather assumed the name Leon when he came to this country. The name was something like Leun. He was told that would be pronounced Loon.

MEH: This really is incredible.

EL: . . . just a few hours you find maybe all but one of them? Then I'd very often have to search for days or give up on the last one. It turns up a year later or something like that. But I've got them pretty well categorized.

[END OF RECORDING ON SIDE 1, TAPE 1

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

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