

Interview with Fountain Hughes

Baltimore, Maryland, June 11, 1949.

Fountain Hughes: Talk to who?

Hermond Norwood: Well, just tell me what your name is.

Fountain Hughes: My name is Fountain Hughes. I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia. My grandfather belong to Thomas Jefferson. My grandfather was a hundred and fifteen years old when he died. And now I am one hundred and, and one year old. That's enough. [recording stops and starts again]. She used to work, but what she made I don't know. I never ask her.

Hermond Norwood: You just go ahead and talk away there. You don't mind, do you, Uncle Fountain?

Fountain Hughes: No. And when, now, your husband and you both are young. You all try to live like young people ought to live. Don't want everything somebody else has got. Whatever you get, if its yours be satisfied. And don't spend your money till you get it. So many people get in debt. Well, that all was so cheap when I bought it. You spend your money before you get it because you're going in debt for what you want. When you want something, wait until you get the money and pay for it cash. That's the way I've done. If I've wanted anything, I'd wait until I got the money and I paid for it cash. I never bought nothing on time in my life. Now plenty people if they want a suit of clothes, they go to work and they'll buy them on time. Well they say they was cheap. They cheap. If you got the money you can buy them cheaper. They want something for, for waiting on you for, uh, till you get ready to pay them. And if you got the money you can go where you choose and buy it when you go, when you want it. You see? Don't buy it because somebody else go down and run a debt and run a bill or, I'm going to run it too. Don't do that. I never done it. Now, I'm a hundred years old and I don't owe nobody five cents, and I ain't got no money either. And I'm happy, just as happy as somebody that's oh, got million. Nothing worries me. I'm not, my head ain't even white. I, nothing in the world worries me. I can sit here in this house at night, nobody can come and say, "Mr. Hughes, you owe me a quarter, you owe me a dollar, you owe me five cents." No you can't. I don't owe you nothing. Why? I never made no bills in my life. And I'm living too. And I'm a hundred years old. And if you take my advice today, you'll never make a bill. Because what you want, give your money, pay them cash, and then the rest of the money is yours. But if you run a bill they, well, so much and so much and you don't have to pay. Nothing down it's, it's all when you come to pay. It's all, you don't have to pay no more. But they, they'll, they'll charge you more. They getting something or other or else they wouldn't trust you. But I can't just say what they getting. But they getting something or other else they wouldn't want your credit. Now I tell you that anybody that trusts you for two dollars or have a account with them by the month or by the week, store count or any account. They're getting something out of it. Else they don't want to accommodate you that much to trust you. Now, if I want, course I ain't got no clothes, but if I want some clothes, I, I ain't got no money, I'm going to wait till I get the money to buy them. Indeed I am. I'm not a going to say because I can get them on trust, I go down and get them. I got to pay a dollar more anyhow. But either they charge you more or they say taxes are so much. But if I've got the money to pay cash, I'll pay the taxes and all down in cash, you know. It's all done with. So many of colored people is head over heels in debt. Trust me trust. I'll get it on time. They want a set of furniture, go down and pay down so much and the rest on time. You done paid that, you done paid for them then. When you pay down so much and they charge you fifty dollar, hundred dollars for a set and you pay down twenty-five dollars cash, you done paid them. That's all it was worth, twenty-five dollars, and you pay, now you, I'm

seventy-five dollars in debt now. Because I, I have to pay a hundred dollars for that set, and it's only worth about twenty-five dollar. But you buying it on time. But people ain't got sense enough to know it. But when you get old like I am, you commence to think, well, I have done wrong. I should have kept my money until I wanted this thing, and when I want it, I take my money and go pay cash for it. Or else I will do without it. That's supposing you want a new dress. You say, well I'll, I'll buy it, but, uh, I don't need it. But I can get it on time. Well let's go down the store today and get something on time. Well you go down and get a dress on time. Something else in there, I want that. They'll sell that to you on time. You won't have to pay nothing down. But there's a payday coming. And when that payday comes, they want you come pay them. If you don't, they can't get no more. Well, if you never do that, if you don't start it, you will never end it. I never did buy nothing on time. I must tell you on this, I'm sitting right here now today, and if I's the last word I've got to tell you, I never even much as tried to buy a, a shirt on time. And plenty people go to work, go down to the store and buy uh, three and four dollars for a shirt. Two, three uh, seven, eight dollars for a pair of pants. Course they get them on time. I don't, no, no, no. I say, I got, I buy something for five dollars. Because I got the five dollars, I'll pay for it. I'm done with that.

Hermond Norwood: You talk about how old you are Uncle Fountain. Do you, tell how far back do you remember?

Fountain Hughes: I remember [pause]. Well I'll tell you, uh. Things come to me in spells, you know. I remember things, uh, more when I'm laying down than I do when I'm standing or when I'm walking around. Now in my boy days, why, uh, boys lived quite different from the way they live now. But boys wasn't as mean as they are now either. Boys lived to, they had a good time. The masters di, didn't treat them bad. And they was always satisfied. They never wore no shoes until they was twelve or thirteen years old. And now people put on shoes on babies you know, when they're two year, when they month old. I be, I don't know how old they are. Put shoes on babies. Just as soon as you see them out in the street they got shoes on. I told a woman the other day, I said, "I never had no shoes till I was thirteen years old." She say, "Well but you bruise your feet all up, and stump your toes." I say, "Yes, many time I've stump my toes, and blood run out them. That didn't make them buy me no shoes." And I been, oh, oh you wore a dress like a woman till I was, I [be-believe [?] ten, twelve, thirteen years old.

Hermond Norwood: So you wore a dress.

Fountain Hughes: Yes. I didn't wear no pants, and of course didn't make boys' pants. Boys wore dresses. Now only womens wearing the dresses and the boys is going with the, with the womens wearing the pants now and the boys wearing the dresses. Still [laughs].

Hermond Norwood: Who did you work for Uncle Fountain when ... ?

Fountain Hughes: Who'd I work for?

Hermond Norwood: Yeah.

Fountain Hughes: When I, you mean when I was slave?

Hermond Norwood: Yeah, when you were a slave. Who did you work for?

Fountain Hughes: Well, I belonged to, uh, B., when I was a slave. My mother belonged to B. But my, uh, but, uh, we, uh, was all slave children. And after, soon after when we found out that we was free, why then we was, uh, bound out to different people. [names of people] and

an all such people as that. And we would run away, and wouldn't stay with them. Why then we'd just go and stay anywheres we could. Lay out a night in underwear. We had no home, you know. We was just turned out like a lot of cattle. You know how they turn cattle out in a pasture? Well after freedom, you know, colored people didn't have nothing. Colored people didn't have no beds when they was slaves. We always slept on the floor, pallet here, and a pallet there. Just like, uh, lot of, uh, wild people, we didn't, we didn't know nothing. Didn't allow you to look at no book. And then there was some free born colored people, why they had a little education, but there was very few of them, where we was. And they all had uh, what you call, I might call it now, uh, jail centers, was just the same as we was in jail. Now I couldn't go from here across the street, or I couldn't go through nobody's house without I have a note, or something from my master. And if I had that pass, that was what we call a pass, if I had that pass, I could go wherever he sent me. And I'd have to be back, you know, when uh. Whoever he sent me to, they, they'd give me another pass and I'd bring that back so as to show how long I'd been gone. We couldn't go out and stay a hour or two hours or something like. They send you. Now, say for instance I'd go out here to S.'s place. I'd have to walk. And I would have to be back maybe in a hour. Maybe they'd give me hour. I don't know just how long they'd give me. But they'd give me a note so there wouldn't nobody interfere with me, and tell who I belong to. And when I come back, why I carry it to my master and give that to him, that'd be all right. But I couldn't just walk away like the people does now, you know. It was what they call, we were slaves. We belonged to people. They'd sell us like they sell horses and cows and hogs and all like that. Have a auction bench, and they'd put you on, up on the bench and bid on you just same as you bidding on cattle you know.

Hermond Norwood: Was that in Charlotte that you were a slave?

Fountain Hughes: Hmmm?

Hermond Norwood: Was that in Charlotte or Charlottesville?

Fountain Hughes: That was in Charlottesville.

Hermond Norwood: Charlottesville, Virginia.

Fountain Hughes: Selling women, selling men. All that. Then if they had any bad ones, they'd sell them to the nigga traders, what they called the nigga traders. And they'd ship them down south, and sell them down south. But, uh, otherwise if you was a good, good person they wouldn't sell you. But if you was bad and mean and they didn't want to beat you and knock you around, they'd sell you what to the, what was call the nigga trader. They'd have a regular, have a sale every month, you know, at the courthouse. And then they'd sell you, and get two hundred dollar, hundred dollar, five hundred dollar.

Hermond Norwood: Were you ever sold from one person to another?

Fountain Hughes: Mmmm?

Hermond Norwood: Were you ever sold?

Fountain Hughes: No, I never was sold.

Hermond Norwood: Always stayed with the same person. [Hermond Norwood and Fountain Hughes overlap]

Fountain Hughes: All, all. I was too young to sell.

Hermond Norwood: Oh I see.

Fountain Hughes: See I wasn't old enough during the war to sell, during the Army. And uh, my father got killed in the Army, you know. So it left us small children just to live on whatever people choose to, uh, give us. I was, I was bound out for a dollar a month. And my mother used to collect the money. Children wasn't, couldn't spend money when I come along. In, in, in fact when I come along, young men, young men couldn't spend no money until they was twenty-one years old. And then you was twenty-one, why then you could spend your money. But if you wasn't twenty-one, you couldn't spend no money. I couldn't take, I couldn't spend ten cents if somebody give it to me. Because they'd say, "Well, he might have stole it." We all come along, you might say, we had to give an account of what you done. You couldn't just do things and walk off and say I didn't do it. You'd have to, uh, give an account of it. Now, uh, after we got freed and they turned us out like cattle, we could, we didn't have nowhere to go. And we didn't have nobody to boss us, and, uh, we didn't know nothing. There wasn't, wasn't no schools. And when they started a little school, why, the people that were slaves, there couldn't many of them go to school, except they had a father and a mother. And my father was dead, and my mother was living, but she had three, four other little children, and she had to put them all to work for to help take care of the others. So we had, uh, we had what you call, worse than dogs has got it now. Dogs has got it now better than we had it when we come along. I know, I remember one night, I was out after I, I was free, and I didn't have nowhere to go. I didn't have nowhere to sleep. I didn't know what to do. My brother and I was together. So we knew a man that had a, a livery stable. And we crept in that yard, and got into one of the hacks of the automobile, and slept in that hack all night long. So next morning, we could get out and go where we belonged. But we was afraid to go at night because we didn't know where to go, and didn't know what time to go. But we had got away from there, and we afraid to go back, so we crept in, slept in that thing all night until the next morning, and we got back where we belong before the people got up. Soon as day commenced, come, break, we got out and commenced to go where we belonged. But we never done that but the one time. After that we always, if there, if there was a way, we'd try to get back before night come. But then that was on a Sunday too, that we done that. Now, uh, when we were slaves, we couldn't do that, see. And after we got free we didn't know nothing to do. And my mother, she, then she hunted places, and bound us out for a dollar a month, and we stay there maybe a couple of years. And, she'd come over and collect the money every month. And a dollar was worth more than ten dollars is now. And I, and the men used to work for ten dollars a month, hundred and twenty dollars a year. Used to hire that a way. And, uh, now you can't get a man for, fifty dollars a month. You paying a man now fifty dollars a month, he don't want to work for it.

Hermond Norwood: More like fifty dollars a week now a days.

Fountain Hughes: [laughs] That's just it exactly. He wants fifty dollars a week and they ain't got no more now than we had then. And we, no more money, but course they bought more stuff and more property and all like that. We didn't have no property. We didn't have no home. We had nowhere or nothing. We didn't have nothing only just, uh, like your cattle, we were just turned out. And uh, get along the best you could. Nobody to look after us. Well, we been slaves all our lives. My mother was a slave, my sisters was slaves, father was a slave.

Hermond Norwood: Who was you father a slave for Uncle Fountain?

Fountain Hughes: He was a slave for B. He belong, he belong to B.

Hermond Norwood: Didn't he belong to Thomas Jefferson at one time?

Fountain Hughes: He didn't belong to Thomas Jefferson. My grandfather belong to Thomas Jefferson.

Hermond Norwood: Oh your grandfather did.

Fountain Hughes: Yeah. And, uh, my father belong to, uh, B. And, uh, and B. died during the wartime because, uh, he was afraid he'd have to go to war. But, then now, you, and in them days you could hire a substitute to take your place. Well he couldn't get a substitute to take his place so he run away from home. And he took cold. And when he come back, the war was over but he died. And then, uh, if he had lived, couldn't been no good. The Yankees just come along and, just broke the mill open and hauled all the flour out in the river and broke the, broke the store open and throwed all the meat out in the street and throwed all the sugar out. And we, we boys would pick it up and carry it and give it to our missus and master, young masters, told we come to be, well I don't know how old. I don't know, to tell you the truth when I think of it today, I don't know how I'm living. None, none of the rest of them that I know of is living. I'm the oldest one that I know that's living. But, still, I'm thankful to the Lord. Now, if, uh, if my master wanted send me, he never say, you couldn't get a horse and ride. You walk, you know, you walk. And you be barefooted and collapse. That didn't make no difference. You wasn't no more than a dog to some of them in them days. You wasn't treated as good as they treat dogs now. But still I didn't like to talk about it. Because it makes, makes people feel bad you know. Uh, I, I could say a whole lot I don't like to say. And I won't say a whole lot more.

Hermond Norwood: Do you remember much about the Civil War?

Fountain Hughes: No, I don't remember much about it.

Hermond Norwood: You were a little young then I guess, huh.

Fountain Hughes: I, uh, I remember when the Yankees come along and took all the good horses and took all the, throwed all the meat and flour and sugar and stuff out in the river and let it go down the river. And they knowed the people wouldn't have nothing to live on, but they done that. And that's the reason why I don't like to talk about it. Them people, and, and if you was cooking anything to eat in there for yourself, and if they, they was hungry, they would go and eat it all up, and we didn't get nothing. They'd just come in and drink up all your milk, milk. Just do as they please. Sometimes they be passing by all night long, walking, muddy, raining. Oh, they had a terrible time. Colored people that's free ought to be awful thankful. And some of them is sorry they are free now. Some of them now would rather be slaves.

Hermond Norwood: Which had you rather be Uncle Fountain?

Fountain Hughes: Me? Which I'd rather be ? [Norwood laughs] You know what I'd rather do? If I thought, had any idea, that I'd ever be a slave again, I'd take a gun and just end it all right away. Because you're nothing but a dog. You're not a thing but a dog. Night never comed out, you had nothing to do. Time to cut tobacco, if they want you to cut all night long out in the field, you cut. And if they want you to hang all night long, you hang, hang tobacco. It didn't matter about your tired, being tired. You're afraid to say you're tired. They just, well [voice trails off].

Hermond Norwood: When, when did you come to Baltimore?

Fountain Hughes: You know when, you don't remember when Garfield died, do you? When they, when they shot Garfield? No, I don't think you was born.

Hermond Norwood: I don't think I was then.

Fountain Hughes: No, you wasn't [overlaps with Hermond Norwood]. Well, I don't remember what year that was myself now, but I know you wasn't born. Well, I come to Baltimore that year anyhow. I don't remember what year it was now myself. But if I laid, if I was laying in the bed I could have remembered. But uh, I don't remember now.

Hermond Norwood: But did you go to work for Mr. S. when you came to Baltimore?

Fountain Hughes: Oh no, no. I work for a man by the name of R. when I first come to Baltimore. I used to, I commence to haul manure for him. The old horses was here then. No elec, and no electric cars, and no cable cars. They were all horse cars. And I used to haul manure, go around to different stables, you know. Why people, everybody had horses for, for their use when I first come here. They had coachmen, and men to drive them around. Didn't have no, automobiles, they hadn't been here so long. And uh, and then they put on a cable car, what they call cable car. Well they run them for a little while, or maybe a couple or three years or four years. Then somebody invented the electric car. And that first run on North Avenue. Well, uh, that run a while and they kep't on inventing and inventing till they got them all, different kinds of cars, you know. It was, uh, horse cars. Wasn't no electric cars at all. Wasn't no, wasn't no big cars like they got now you know. I just can't, I just can't think of, uh, what year it was. But uh, [pause and then some unintelligible conversation]

Hermond Norwood: You're not getting tired are you Uncle Fountain?

Fountain Hughes: No, no I ain't. I'm just same as at home. Just like I was setting in the house. And uh, see what. I was thinking about oh, now you know how we served the Lord when I come along, a boy?

Hermond Norwood: How was that?

Fountain Hughes: We would go to somebody's house. And uh, well we didn't have no houses like they got now, you know. We had these what they call log cabin. And they have one, old colored man maybe one would be there, maybe he'd be as old as I am. And he'd be the preacher. Not as old as I am now, but, he'd be the preacher, and then we all sit down and listen at him talk about the Lord. Well, he'd say, well I wonder, uh, sometimes you say I wonder if we'll ever be free. Well, some of them would say, well, we going to go ask the Lord to free us. So they'd say, well, we, we going to sing "One Day Shall I Ever Reach Heaven and One Day Shall I Fly." Then they would sing that for about a hour. Then they, next one they'd get up and say let's sing a song, "We Gonna Live on Milk and Honey, Way By and By." They'd, they'd, oh I can hear them singing now but I can't, can't, uh, repeat it like I could in them days. But some day when I'm not hoarse, I could tell you, I could sing it for you, but I'm too hoarse now. And then we'd sing, [pause] "I'm Gonna," "I'm A-Gonna Sing Around the Altar." Oh, I, I wish I could, I wish I could sing it for you, "I'm Gonna Sing Around the Altar."

Hermond Norwood: Well I wish you could too. [overlaps with Fountain Hughes].

Fountain Hughes: And they, they, well this, someday when you come over here and I'm not hoarse, you get me to come up here and I, I'll sing, I'll try to sing it for you.

Hermond Norwood: O. K. I'm going to do that.

Fountain Hughes: This is the. Now, I heard, people here now sing about "Roll Jordan Roll." Well that's a old time, that's what the old people used to sing in old back days.

Hermond Norwood: Is that "Roll Jordan Roll?"

Fountain Hughes: Yeah. But they don't sing it like the old people used to sing it in them day. They sing it quite different now. [pause] And, and another one they sing, "By and By When the Morning Come." Well they sing that different too. But the old, they're getting the old people's song. I hear them come over the radio. I know them all just as good as they, but they sing them different.

Hermond Norwood: Have different names to some of them, huh?

Fountain Hughes: [overlaps with Hermond Norwood] Yes. Well they cut them off shorter and all like that. It's a, if I had my voice, I would sing just one for you so you go in that [unintelligible] but I can't do it on account of my voice. But someday you come over here, you come in, you call me up and let me know and how my voice is. Ever since I took that medicine from my doctor, well it hurt my voice. I, I, I, now there was a preacher in my house the other night, he live right next door to me, and he played on the piano. And he played something and I sung it for him. And now he wants me to go down to his church next Sunday. I told him, I says, "Now if I go down to your church, I'll not sing nothing. Because if I do I'll get ho, hoarse I can't talk." But he said, "Brother Hughes, I don't care whether you sing or not. I just want you to go down there and let the people see who you are. Let them see what a, what a old people is." I said, "Well uh, Reverend, why I'll, I'll be glad to go down with you." So, on next Sunday I'm going down to his church if I living, and nothing happen. But if he, if he sing something old, I, I, [laughs].

Hermond Norwood: Just sing along.

Fountain Hughes: [Becomes excited, slapping noise in background] I feel, I feel the spirit now, but I can't, I got to keep quiet. Now you, do you ever hear this fellow that comes over the radio? I think they call him H. Comes on Sunday night about twelve o'clock, on WFBR?

Hermond Norwood: No I don't know whether I've ever heard him or not.

Fountain Hughes: Well I, you turn him on. He comes on a quarter after eleven, on Sunday night. Well, you, you must have heard him cause he says, "Can't uh, can't, can't keep a good man down." So, it makes so much noise, look like everybody ought to hear him. But now when that fellow comes around, I'm laying in the bed, don't you know, I get just so I got to be in that, because it's, it's all old time business.

Hermond Norwood: Uh um.

Fountain Hughes: And, uh, somebody don't like it. They says, "I don't like H." I says, "Why?" "Oh," he says, "he make too much noise." I say, "Well, well, the, the Bible say make a noise over Jesus? Jesus said make a noise over me, so he makes a noise over him." And I does enjoy certain of his show. Oh, he's oh everybody, he's got a big crowd and we just get so happy I got to do that too. [slapping noise in background] Boy, when you feel the grace of God you've got to jump up. I lay in bed, I got to get up. Have, you have to carry on. And then next morning I

can't talk. [break on the tape for a new reel] Doctor gave me that medicine, it just tore me all to pieces.

Hermond Norwood: Uh huh, uh, I see. I sure hope it comes back again because I'd love, I'd like to hear you sing.

Fountain Hughes: Well old people used to say, "Wonder If I Shall Ever Reach Heaven or Wonder Shall I Fly." I, I used to could sing it. I can sing, well sometimes I hear the spirit, you know and I may get to singing something again someday. People now, I [voice trails off].

Hermond Norwood: Do you go to church every Sunday Uncle Fountain?

Fountain Hughes: Uh uh. Don't go to church at all. I set and listen to the radio.

Hermond Norwood: Listen to it on the radio huh.

Fountain Hughes: Because I'll tell you why I don't go to church.

Hermond Norwood: You rather not have this on? Hm? You rather not tell me or you rather not have this on when you tell me?

Fountain Hughes: It don't make any difference. I ain't going to say nothing wrong. I ain't going to [unintelligible]. If I, I, I, I say...

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