Interview with Lillie Hyman; March 21, 2007

Interviewed by Nyasha Chikowore and Maria Paoletti

Maria: Would you please state your full name?

Lillie Hyman: My name is Lillie A. Hyman.

Maria: And what was your situation in the 1960s, as in, how old were you in the late sixties, where did you live, where did you work or go to school–

Lillie Hyman: Well, I graduated in 1968, so I was just graduating from high school. So I was eighteen, seventeen or eighteen years old during that time.

Nyasha: What high school?

Lillie Hyman: Edmondson. Edmondson High School in Baltimore, in the West Baltimore area. I lived in Edmondson Village, in that area.

Maria: Where did you do your shopping, socializing? Around there?

Lillie Hyman: Actually, no, we socialized all over the place. We traveled–at parties and things–we traveled all over the city--Cherry Hill, East Baltimore, West Baltimore. But primarily we shopped in the Edmondson Village area. Shopping centers, things like that. We didn't have too much access to the malls...well, there wasn't any malls during that time–shopping centers. But

we traveled mostly close to home, or Downtown Baltimore. Sometimes we traveled there, we didn't shop too much there. There were so many restrictions during that time, in Downtown Baltimore.

Maria: What kind of restrictions?

Lillie Hyman: As far as shopping, like in the major department stores--Hecht Company, Hochschild Kohn's–black people couldn't try on clothes, or hats, or shoes, or things like that. So when we did shop there, we were just mostly window-shopping. And even when you went in the stores, just to look, you...felt very intimidated. In Downtown Baltimore, in the major department stores.

Maria: Before the riots, what kind of interactions did you have with people of other races?

Lillie Hyman: Very limited, actually. Mostly school. The high school that I went to was, I would say, 75 percent white and 25 percent black, as far as the student population. And the teacher population was like, 95/5. 95 percent white and 5 percent black teachers. So the majority of the interaction we had was in school.

Maria: With the other students? And teachers?

Lillie Hyman: Yes.

Maria: And what do you remember about the assassination of Dr. King?

Lillie Hyman: I remember, let's see, it was '68? I was eighteen. It was just so shocking at first. Because TV was like a new thing at the time, but the images that we were seeing on TV, it was like, hopeless, it was almost like the world was ending, actually. Because the images that we were seeing on TV of the riots after the assassination...it was just heartbreaking. It was like the world was burning, because we didn't see– it was very– what's the word? The images they were showing were selected parts of the country, selected parts of the city, because where I lived, even in Edmondson Village, there wasn't any buildings burning, any rioting, anything like that, directly where I lived, so we were looking at images in other cities. And actually some in Baltimore, too, like in Pennsylvania Avenue some. But it was just...it was just devastating. And we had lost–I remember I was in eighth grade when President Kennedy was killed, and that was like, four years before, and then Bobby Kennedy was killed, you know, a couple years later, and then Martin Luther King. So it was just devastating.

Maria: So you pretty much heard about the riots over the TV?

Lillie Hyman: No, no. No, we heard word-of-mouth, but it solidified when we *saw* the riots, I mean, we saw...the images that we were seeing was just devastating, but no, we heard about it from the radio mostly, word-of-mouth, and the newspapers.

Maria: And you said that you thought that the portrayal of the situation on the television was selective?

Lillie Hyman: Yeah, it was, because I was in living in an area, you know, we didn't *see* that. Because, actually, the images that they were showing, the riots, all over the country, actually, they concentrated in the cities like New York, and I don't even think they–they did, yes, some DC, but they were the major cities. And it was like blocks of widespread–it appeared to be widespread violence, widespread looting, and building-burning. And that wasn't the case here in Baltimore, and we knew that. So we were always not very trusting of the media anyway, but just seeing that, it was just a hard time.

Maria: Do you think that...how do you think the national news portrayed the situation in Baltimore–did they mention Baltimore at all on the national news?

Lillie Hyman: Yeah, some. You know, the local news, because you know, you had local news stations, news broadcasts. And they...not too much. They didn't mention it too much. They concentrated on–they didn't mention Downtown, which was, there *was* some looting, but it wasn't...they mentioned mostly Pennsylvania Avenue, because Pennsylvania Avenue was populated by mostly blacks. So they only showed mostly where the blacks were rioting or looting. And we knew, we found out later, it was other races, and other places, too.

Maria: And what was the impression that you got, living where you lived, of the neighborhoods that were affected? You heard about Pennsylvania Avenue, primarily–

Lillie Hyman: Yes. We had family living there, so it wasn't just that we heard about it, we had

family living all over, see, in the black community, you have family in every part of the city. So we knew, from talking with our families and visiting the areas, how bad it was in places.

Maria: What was your impression of the type of violence that was occurring?

Lillie Hyman: I understood it, even at eighteen. Seventeen, eighteen. I understood it, because there was a hopelessness, it was like, "what's the use?" kind of thing. It was like, Martin Luther King was our–in fact, my family and I had traveled over to DC to hear his speech, you know, a couple months before he died. So that was *so* great, and hope was built up that things were going to change, and blacks were going to have so many opportunities, and then when he was killed, it was like all hope was dashed. So it was very...it was just a very bad time. The only word I can think of is like, *hopeless*. You felt a sense of hopelessness, and vulnerability, because all of a sudden, you know, you're living this average life, and then all of a sudden you see people dying like this. People like Martin Luther King. And it was just a very bad time.

Maria: Did you have to change anything about the way you went about your life during the days of the riots?

Lillie Hyman: Well, there was a curfew. I believe there was one in Baltimore—I know there was one nationally, you know, in the larger cities there were curfews. But in Baltimore I think it was like, just one or two days, something like that. And I think it was only because the politicians didn't know what people were going to do, that kind of thing. So other than a curfew where you had to be in your house—or not particularly in your house, but close to home—I think that was the only limitation, you know, that was the only limitation during that time.

Maria: Was the National Guard in your neighborhood at all?

Lillie Hyman: No, not in our neighborhood. But they were here; they were on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Maria: How do you think Baltimore changed after the riots?

Lillie Hyman: How soon after? I mean, now? Comparing now to then?

Maria: I would say, immediately after, or…any way you care to explain it.

Lillie Hyman: Well, it's hard to…let's say, maybe six months later, things got better, because people started to think about why the riots happened. They started analyzing, you know, what people were feeling. So things got kind of better because laws changed, you know…

Nyasha: How did they change?

Lillie Hyman: Well, I remember at that time, I was working after school at the Edmondson Village Tommy Tucker's department store. It was a major—it was something like what Wal-Mart is now.

Nyasha: What's it called?

Lillie Hyman: Tommy Tucker's. They had branches—let's say six all over the city, and one was in Edmondson Village. And they would hire blacks, but there was a line, an invisible line, in the store's hiring practices. Black people worked from hardware to the back of the store, and that's where I worked. And white people worked in the front of the store, you know, lingerie, candy, jewelry, things like that. And also, we were paid differently. I made 75 cents an hour, and the white people were paid—same thing, same age, same experience, and I knew this because some of the students that went to school with me, we were all the same ages, and went to school together—and they were paid $1.25 an hour. But the black people were paid 75 cents. So that was something that changed after that. Particularly stores like Tommy Tucker's, that had stores—they had one on Pennsylvania Avenue, they had one in Edmondson Village, and I think Park Heights, I think they had a store up there. And some of their stores got looted, too. I remember that. After that, it got a little better, where they—we never became equal, but the salaries were all of a sudden raised, I think, after the riots. I'm talking about, like, six months. I was making 85 cents an hour, maybe 90 cents an hour.

Maria: So it still wasn't the same—

Lillie Hyman: No, it still wasn't equal, but it was more, and I think because people started analyzing why people rioted during that period, I mean, what the anger was about. And I think businesspeople and politicians saw the economics of the thing, you know, because most of the stores' owners didn't live in the area. Even though in Edmondson Village, where I lived, even on my own street, we were the minority, like 25 percent blacks to 75 percent whites. Now, after the

riots, they fled. You know, they were scared. They moved to the county. So the racial mix in the neighborhoods changed, and of course the stores and things like that. Even downtown some things changed. They still didn't like the fact that you came in, but after a while, you could try on a hat. You still didn't feel comfortable because the staff was still the same, the same ideas, racial feelings about blacks and whites, but things changed that way. So, it did get better, you know, it *did* get better. But it was never equal. Even now it still isn't. We still get paid less than white people. It's still the same, you know, there still is a divide. Black-white, women-men, just like women are not paid equally to men, the same way, black-white. But it's getting better. I'm hopeful. *[Laughs]* I got my hope back! And I was young, you know, you live and you learn.

Maria: Did your interactions with white people change after the riots? Like, just in your personal experience?

Lillie Hyman: …Not much. Not much. Because it wasn't too much *personal*. You know, and like I said, we were in school together, but we didn't, you know, you didn't socialize after school—actually, you didn't socialize *in* school. You and I could be best friends, well, not best friends, but very good friends in the classroom, but at lunchtime, you went with your friends and I went with my friends. You know, we didn't eat together. So there wasn't a lot of socialization—and this is my experience—there wasn't a lot of socialization, so I can't state personally how things changed, but you knew that a lot of white people didn't like the changes. They didn't like that now blacks were getting better, you know, getting more money, so they could afford better jobs, afford better housing. And they felt like it was a threat. But there were some white people who still stayed in our neighborhood, and stayed because they *wanted* to, not

because they *had* to.

Maria: How long would you say it was until you could feel comfortable going into a store and trying on clothes?

Lillie Hyman: Oh, man, I would say like, late twenties?

Maria: So, maybe ten years later?

Lillie Hyman: Ten years, yeah.

Nyasha: And do you remember any moment where you just really, really encountered a racist…like, a racial…incident? Something that really shocked you? Like, that you couldn't believe?

Lillie Hyman: Well, see, I'm from the South. So, I came here in…I think I was seven or eight years old.

Maria: Where did you live previously?

Lillie Hyman: In South Carolina. North and South, actually. I was born in South Carolina, raised in North Carolina, Wilmington. So, nothing was really shocking; I was used the back of the bus, you know, that kind of thing, there. So when we came to Baltimore, it was the same thing. It was

streetcars…you'd just automatically, I mean, they didn't *tell* you, but there was still the black/white water fountain situation, so I can't remember anything that…I mean, I can't remember any incident…I mean, I've been discriminated—oh! Yes, I can remember one thing.

Nineteen sixty—I graduated in '67—1968, after the riots. And I was very militant. I wasn't part of the Black Panthers, but I agreed with their philosophy, I read their books, and I had this great big afro. So I was working at C & P Telephone Company, which is Verizon now. And I was the only one who wore an afro; I had this great big afro, right? And they didn't like it at all. They didn't like the fact that I wore this afro. So, there was one black supervisor and all white supervisors, and the operators were black and white, but the majority was still white, but I was the only black—see, what they did was, they tried, first they tried to get the other black operators to talk to me about—to tell me to straighten my hair. And of course I wasn't having it, you know. And then they got the black supervisor to take me out of, you know, back then it was a switchboard, where you'd have to plug in, like you've seen, I guess you've seen on TV, the old switchboard operators. They had her take me out off the board, and bring me into her office, and she was the one that said, "You need to straighten your hair, you can't wear your hair like that in here!"

I said, "Well, show me where the rule that says that I can't!" And there wasn't any rule.

And then she tried, "Well, you know, things are changing, and don't you want to progress in C & P, and you'll never progress wearing your hair like that."

And I said, "Well, I'll just never progress." So that was the…and then after that, they would stay on me, you know, I was harassed about it, legally, the way they did it, saying I didn't have enough calls or whatever, so I boosted up my calls, at end of the shift, you'd have to have a certain number of these little cards you made this call. And they'd say I didn't, even though I

knew I had enough. But I would boost up my calls, and then they would say something else, I was a minute late or something, then I would get in *five* minutes early. So it was always something—I was really harassed. But I stood my ground, and I kept my afro, and then about six months later, the other girls started wearing the afro. And they didn't like it, but there was nothing they could do. But that was the biggest incident that was, you know, that I remember during that time. I have friends now who…[?]…you know, what I had to go through with that. It was beautiful, it wasn't like…you know how these kids, well, some of these kids, because we kept it—well, I can't say, because the style has changed now. But we kept it picked out, and shaped and everything. And I had to wear my little headset over this, you know? But they didn't like it. And I had great big hoop earrings, and, you know. I didn't wear dashikis, but African print or loud print dresses, and we wore these miniskirts and stuff like that. But it wasn't the dress; it was the hair. They saw that as a militant thing, it was scary to them. And that woman, that supervisor who talked to me, she went—she did—she went far, you know, and I only stayed, I think, two more years or something, like, two or three more years. But she went far in the company, because she bought into…you know…I mean, she did what she had to do. I don't judge anybody, because I was a single woman, working two jobs, actually. I was working two jobs at the time. But I had my own apartment, and I had a new car, because I'd saved my little Tommy Tucker's money—can you imagine how long it took me to save a thousand dollars—

Comment [mcp1]: She is laughing here, not sure what she is saying

Maria: —At 75 cents an hour.

Lillie Hyman: At 75 cents an hour. And I was working after school, now! And on Saturdays, because the stores weren't open on Sundays. But…that was me! But that was the biggest

incident, racial kind of thing. I mean, it was a lot of other things, but that was the biggest one.

Nyasha: So, you said you were militant?

Lillie Hyman: Mm-hm.

Nyasha: So, did you participate in the riots, or did you have friends who participated?

Lillie Hyman: No. I don't…in fact, I don't remember any family member who participated. But no, we were…I was home. And the thing about TV at that time…I mean, it's not like now, where it's instant, everything instant, so it was like, what we saw was the next day. It wasn't an instantaneous thing, it wasn't time, you know, it was the next day when you saw things. No, we didn't participate.

Nyasha: So, what effects did you see in the black community? Like, as far as when Martin Luther King died, and after the riots, how did the black community change?

Lillie Hyman: How did it change? I think we became more militant in our thinking…it was like, *what do we have to lose?* You know, this man—actually, the black community kind of split at that time. Like, this was the time of the Black Panthers…because, like I said, I was militant, but I wasn't that far over, you know, I mean, believing in guns and all that. You know, that kind of thing, "by any means necessary." And plus, I wasn't a Muslim. And that was a thing a lot of people don't understand; most of the—well, not most—but a lot of people who were in the

Panther Party, or the Black Muslim Party, they weren't Christians, or most of them weren't. So we followed Martin Luther King, who was a Christian who preached nonviolence. And we knew that that had worked—it wasn't like we were completely hopeless, but there was a split there. Particularly the young radicals, they became *more* radical, because they said, "See? We told you!" You know? "This is a man who preached non—so what did nonviolence get him? Death! So we're gonna go down shooting, and we're going to take whatever that belongs to us!" So there was a rift that way. There was a more militant—and then on the other side, the nonviolent side, people came to say, okay, Martin Luther was killed and everything, but there still is hope, by going through the process; work through the system. There was the nonviolent thing, but working through the system. You know, getting these jobs and then making changes that way.

Maria: From within?

Lillie Hyman: From within. So that's where I saw—I think people made a stand more. Before, a lot of people were on the fence, it was this group of militants, this group of nonviolent, and you know, you would kind of straddle the fence. But I think people made more definite—after the riots, and after Martin Luther King—they made more definite commitments to…I think more people joined the NAACP, *and* more people joined the Black Panther Party, or the Muslim Party, Black Muslim. So, it was like, people made more decisions, I think, more definite decisions about things after that.

Maria: Would you say they were more convicted?

Lillie Hyman: Yes. Because, you know, it was like…it hit *home*. Because, I mean, we didn't know this man personally, but it was like a family member, it was like that. And not to say that all white people, I mean there were some, I mean, there *are*, there *were*, good white people—they felt it, too, the same thing. It was like, this was a good man, and it was like part of your family. And I think black and white, I can't speak for the white, but I think, the same way, I think white people became more convicted, you know, one way or the other, about these things.

Nyasha: And do you still see the effects of the riots in Baltimore now, 2007?

Lillie Hyman: It's hard to say, because things have changed so drastically just in the last twenty years. You know? It's such a big change. These boarded-up houses—now, during the riots, like I said, certain segments of the city were burned, mostly where there were merchants, you know, stores and things, it wasn't rows of houses, unless they were houses attached to these stores, but it wasn't whole communities. And now, you see all these vacant houses. And these…you know, vacant land. It has nothing to do with the riots, I mean, *directly*, it doesn't have anything to do with the riots, because the economics changed, it's just such—the drug culture, you know?

Oh, man, I mean, and that's another thing, too, that happened. I don't know *because* of, you know, what happened with MLK and the riots, but that people, some people, I guess, just dropped out. You know? They just dropped out, they started…and the war—you've got to remember, right after that, well, *during* that period, actually, was the Vietnam War. I lost so many friends in the Vietnam—who died right then, it was just like the war now. They were *young* kids, I mean, just straight out of high school, nineteen or twenty, fighting in a war, dying, killing. And a lot of my friends who didn't die came back addicted to drugs, you know, a lot of

them.

We just had our, this year is our 40th anniversary of high school. And in our 35th year, it was really good, but it was shocking about how many people had died. Now, we knew the ones who'd died in Vietnam, I mean, we knew at that time when they'd died, because we were still living in the community and everything. But at our class reunion, 35th year, it was shocking about how many had died from AIDS, and drug overdoses. Guys who had gone to Vietnam and gotten hooked in that period. It was just heartbreaking.

Maria: And these are all people who'd be in their early fifties at that point.

Lillie Hyman: Yup. It was just shocking. Like I said, I don't know, *because*, you know, everything is not cause-and-effect of something else, but you look at it, and you just see how things change, but the worst thing is drugs.

Maria: Would you say, I mean, you said that the emotion that you used to describe the mood in your neighborhood, or in the community was *hopeless*, *hopelessness*—

Lillie Hyman: During that week—

Maria: Right after.

Lillie Hyman: Right after, yes.

Maria: Do you think that that hopelessness was pervasive, in, you know, sort of on a broader scale?

Lillie Hyman: I think so. Hopeless, and…anger. You know? It was anger, and hopeless…not, I mean, not in a long period, I mean, just talking about a couple days, you know, a week. Maybe not even that long. Because, you know, you adjust and things change and you think about it, and you assimilate some information and stuff like that. But I think so. On a broad term. Over the African American community, I think so. Because I have cousins, like I said, all over the country, and we communicated during that time, because everybody was checking on everybody else to see what—you know, how everybody was, and if everyone was okay and everything.

But, yeah, I think those two things, anger and lack of hope during those days, those couple days, maybe a week. But then…it got better, you know? God is good. And when you have faith, and that makes a difference, too. I come from a strong Christian background. And we go down, but we get back up.

Nyasha: So, when you talked to your cousins, did they report the same things happening where they were living?

Lillie Hyman: M-hm. And the ones in New York, I mean, it was worse, and DC, and we had some people in…what part of California? Compton? I think it was Compton at the time, yeah. It was worse in those places. But they were okay. But some of them lost jobs, because the places where they worked were burned out, you know. No one lost their homes, but the National Guard was there. So there were on curfew for, I'd say two week, three weeks, some places. Where, like

I said, it was just, it may have been a day or two here in Baltimore, I can't remember. I know they were here. Now, we didn't physically *see* them in Edmondson Village, but I knew that they were in East Baltimore, I knew that they were in Pennsylvania Avenue. So it depends on where you lived, how you suffered because of the riots.

Nyasha: Is there anything else that you remember from that period?

Lillie Hyman: No, not really. It was a wonderful time in my life in spite of all that. And I believe that hard times make you stronger. You know, they do, and it's hard to see at the time, but I just thank the Lord that I have a strong—like I said, I have a strong Christian background, my parents, I have—you know, I was brought up in a strong family. And that makes a difference, too. It makes a difference where you were in your life, and your family at the time when things happened. You know, anytime, like now, war and all this. It makes the difference on, you know, how things affect you, but it depends on where you are at that time. But…God is good.