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Interview with Prexy Nesbitt

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An Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt
by Erin McCarthy, Columbia College Chicago
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beginning of interview

ERIN MCCARTHY: It’s April 1, 2009. This is an interview with Prexy Nesbitt. The interviewer is Erin McCarthy, and we are conducting the interview at Columbia College Chicago. I’d like to just start briefly by, if you could just kind of document for the camera, the years of your anti-apartheid activism, or if you still consider yourself an activist when that started?

PREXY NESBITT: Well I do consider myself still an activist around Africa issues. I would say it started around 1965 with my first trip to Africa, so that would have been in July of 1965.

EM: And, I know that you were active internationally and nationally. But maybe, if, was there a center of activism, or are there a few locations that you would point to that really was a focus of your activism, the locations of where you worked from?

PN: Internationally, I think the foci of my activism internationally would be probably Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; London, England; and Geneva, Switzerland. In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania I worked for the Mozambique Liberation Front. It was also the place in which I first became aware of the South Africa issue in particular in 1965 when I was a student overseas through Antioch College’s Year Abroad Program. I went to the University College of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. And then London, in as much as I worked in London with the anti-apartheid movement in 1968, or part of ’68, and also worked with the Chi—, the Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, and Angola and Guinea-Bissau, which was, the patron of that was the famous historian Basil Davidson, and the staff person then was a woman named Polly Gaster. Then, the third place that I would say internationally that was a very important base of my work was with the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism where I worked in 1979, January of ‘79 until 1983, April or May. And there I worked for a program that was involved all over the world in combating racism, but the focus of the Programme to Combat Racisms work was a South Africa issue because our analysis was that that represented the most complete manifestation of racism and white supremacy.

EM: Just some biographical background, what year were you born?

PN: I was born in 1944, February 23, the same day as the birthday as W. E. B. Du Bois, and Shakespeare, William Shakespeare.

EM: You share a notable birthday (laughs).

PN: Incredible birthday companions.
EM: And where, where were you born?

PN: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, Cook County Hospital.

EM: Okay, and were you raised, where were you raised?

PN: I was raised in Chicago, largely most of my years on the West Side of Chicago, in Lawndale, but I was actually living, my parents were living on South Parkway Boulevard, today known as King Drive, when I was born in 1944. And then we lived briefly in another area, the West Side, on Warren Avenue, not far from the Warren Avenue Congregational Church, a very famous church on the West Side.

EM: And where was your father born?

PN: My father, Rozell Nesbitt, was born in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. My mother, Sadie Nesbitt, was born in Ensley, Alabama.

EM: And was she raised there? Did she—

PN: No, my mother was the daughter, the youngest daughter of seven children to William Crain, who was a CME minister, and in those years—

EM: CME, that’s—

PN: That stands for, it then stood for Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, but now it is known as Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, but in those years the bishops just sent those pastors wherever they went. So I think my mother lived in about seven different cities growing up, including living some time in Chicago and Detroit, St. Louis, all kinds of places. But my father, by way of contrast, he and his four brothers were all raised solely in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, where their mother, my grandmother, cooked for the fraternity house and my grandfather was, cleaned yards and washed windows.

EM: For the university, or—

PN: My grandfather worked for anybody, and he had no desire for his sons to do anything else but what he did. My grandmother, on the other hand, wanted them all to go to college. In fact, in the middle of the Depression years, all five of them went not only to college, but to professional schools so that their end result was two doctors, one lawyer, one physicist, and my father, who was an engineer.

EM: Interesting.

PN: Very unique. And then they all lived together, always, very cooperative. So we, I al—, I was raised in a very extended family situation.

EM: And when did your father come to Chicago?
PN: My father first came to Chicago, it must have been about 1941 or ’42, something like that. He and my mother, they’d married by then.

EM: So they met in—

PN: They met in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, where my mother, besides being a student, also was a dancer. She danced, I think, I know she danced with a group called Orchesis. But I think that one of the teachers was Katherine Dunham. You must know of her, the wonderful dancer.

EM: Yes, yes.

PN: She always talked about Katherine Dunham and also Pearl Primus and all of these incredible dancers here in Chicago. She was very close to them, and then Etta Moten Barnett, who was a big powerhouse on the South Side of Chicago in terms of arts and culture issues. So my mother always kept a very close hand with arts and culture issues. She was very close to, in fact, he was known as our uncle, Robert Hayden, who was a Congressional poet. He is known as sort of the Shakespeare of black poets, much more of a practitioner than Langston Hughes was. Robert Hayden’s poetry is just extraordinary.

EM: And what is your earliest childhood memory?

PN: Probably the earliest childhood memory I have is a memory of going up to Michigan to a little town in Michigan somewhere near St. Joseph and Benton Harbor. It’s an all black town and up there one of my father’s uncles had a blueberry farm. And he had cows and he had a mule and sheep, and I can remember not being able to say the word lambs and saying Yams instead. And my uncles who had, they were all making a trip with my father there to visit their uncle, now, the uncles couldn’t understand what I wanted to see. So I kept trying to say I wanted to see the yams and the sheep, but that’s one of the memories I have that’s very, goes back.

EM: And how did you get your name?

PN: I was given my name, I believe, by one of my mother’s very, very dear friends who was a social worker on the South Side of Chicago, a woman named Helen Graham. When I was born my father was in the Civilian Volunteers Organization working with World War II, and he was stationed, he was an engineer, an electrical engineer, so he was doing work on planes. He refused to be in the Service, but he agreed to do this civilian work. Many African Americans refused to do service in World War II. And he was stationed in Texas and stationed also at Wright Penn [Patterson] Air Force Base, and also at Chanute Field in Champaign-Urbana. And my mother’s friends, this Helen Graham, because I was one of the first children of the group of friends, one of the first of the children born, she decided I would be the president of the group. So Prexy is short for president, it’s a nickname, and so she would write to my father informing him about my
mother’s condition by saying how the little Prexy was coming along. Since my real name is Rozell and I can’t stand it, Prexy was a much better alternative.

EM: And where did Rozell come from?

PN: My father had nothing to do with it.

EM: (laughs)

PN: I think it’s a name that my grandmother thought of. They are all, all five of her sons, Robert, Rufus, Rozell—

EM: Okay, they’re all Rs—

PN: Robert, there was only one L, and the rest were all Rs.

EM: Can you describe the home, your childhood home, the home you grew up in?

PN: The home that I most remember and where I certainly spent most of my childhood would have been the home at 1514 South Albany, which was an institution, it was not just a home, it was an institution, very different. It was, the five brothers bought one apartment building, it had about eleven flats, eleven apartments in it. Besides the five brothers were people that they wanted to live with them, and live very cooperatively. So it was a very multiracial house. At different times there were Puerto Rican families there, there were white families, there were, there was a Congolese family that lived there, there was a family from Scotland that lived there. The house was always full of activity, always people coming and going. The interaction between the brothers was always very strong. There was a lot of doing things together, so my thirteen cousins, we all view each other more as brothers and sisters more than just first cousins. It was a household in the middle of a changing neighborhood. Lawndale, when we first moved there in 1948 was all Jewish, and I think we were amongst the first black families, to be as it was, west of Western Avenue, in Lawndale, and I mean amongst the very few. We watched between ’48 and ’58, essentially a ten year period that neighborhood go from ninety-eight percent Jewish to ninety-eight percent black, and largely working class and poor blacks. First, when my family moved in and others it was more middle class black families, but by the end of the fifties it had become many, many poor people. And so, in the beginnings I can remember the hostility that was there. It wasn’t so much from Jewish neighbors we had, some of whom are still amongst our family’s best friends, a woman like Tommy Danish for example, is almost like an older sister to me. And, but the hostility came from the police, for example. There were many, many encounters with the police. There were encounters where the men of the family, in fact, there was a system worked out where the men had a certain car honking method when a man was being harassed out front, one of the members of the building and the others would all respond. I remember one particular instance where I snuck out the back to watch this response, and it was a very heated incident with guns involved, where one of the men in the building had a big shotgun and he put it on the police because the police were harassing my father, in this instance. They
used to shake down black people they found in Lawndale, it was part of a systematic
thing. There was a whole period of cars being stolen, the windows being broken, and all
of these things were things that the brothers and the other men in the building,
particularly the men, would respond to very collectively. But I can remember also a very
ugly incident where a white man went up against the car when my mother was driving
my sister and I, and exposed himself in the window of the car. And I remember my
mother crying, and then I remember the frustration I felt ‘cause I couldn’t, I was very
young, but she wished that I was older and then she wished that I was, my father had
been there. I remember her driving us to the police station. I don’t recall us going in, but
she came out more upset because there was a non-response to what had happened from
the police. And that took place around Madison and Independence Boulevard, also on
the West Side. The incident had occurred somewhere along Madison, in what is called
Garfield Park, which of course today is an all black neighborhood, but at that point it
wasn’t. So it wasn’t so much that an immediate Jewish neighborhoods or neighbors, it
came more from other ethnic groups, the Irish, the Poles, that lived surrounding
Lawndale, which was really the ghetto, it was really a Jewish ghetto.

EM: So, was that when you, or when did you first become aware of racism?

PN: Certainly by that time I was aware of it. I, I also remember being rolled into the
church, the Warren Avenue Congregational Church to go to Sunday school, and being
aware of the fact that I was different. And I remember once being told that I was
chocolate, that I was a chocolate boy. And I must have been very young when that term
was applied against me. I also can remember we had another cooperative arrangement
we were a part of was, with some other families, we’d go up to a place near Madison,
Wisconsin, about forty miles northeast of Madison, and I remember kids up there calling
some of younger cousins niggers and throwing stones at them. And I remember
organizing my older cousins, we all went down to retaliate against these kids that had
thrown stones at the younger kids. And I can remember fights, I can remember fights, a
lot of fights, growing up in these changing neighborhoods. Those were the things that I
think that most vividly, at that age, I can recall as direct manifestations of racism. But, I
can remember also Trumbull Park, which was an instance of race riot, a place in here in
Chicago, a very famous one, when there was an effort to try to integrate public housing
and my, one of my uncles worked on public housing, on that very project trying to
integrate housing. And as you know, anybody who knows Chicago knows that public
housing was used to segregate people very much here in Chicago. In Trumbull Park
there was an incidence when there was physical violence, and one of the women in the
building, Tommy, worked for Elizabeth Woods, who ran the CHA in Chicago. And she
brought her car home, and they had put sugar in the gas tank, so the car fell apart there at
the house. I remember all of that happening.

EM: Can you tell me a little bit about the grammar school that you went to, and, I know
you’ve commented before on your, I think it was your father’s, or maybe your mother’s,
your parent’s dissatisfaction with the education you were getting?
Absolutely. I went to the, I started nursery school at the Jewish People’s Institute, JPI, on Douglas Boulevard. I don’t think there could have been more than maybe myself and one other African American but my, another cousin, who wasn’t really a cousin but we had a lot of yard cousins in my family, that means cousins who would declare, they were in the yards, they just declared to be cousins. She would walk me over there, she went to Harrison High School. From JPI, from nursery school I went to the Pope, Nathaniel Pope Elementary School. It still stands. And it was while I was there in fifth grade that my father walked up one day and found me teaching the reading class, now this is as he tells the story. He asked me Why was I teaching the reading class. And I said Because the teacher always goes to get coffee and I teach the reading class. And he came home that night and he said to my mother, who was at that time, both of them were school teachers. He said to my mother, What’s the name of that school you’ve been looking at that cost all that money on the North Side? Put him, put him in it. ‘Cause he had just a knockdown drag-out with the principle about the practices. Then it was, it was vintage Chicago Public School stuff in the sense that there were teachers who didn’t give two hoops in hell about what was, by now, a changed student population in that fifth grade, so it was mostly, it was becoming increasingly black, and teachers didn’t care about it, and that was also, that had been the Willis years of the Board of Education. I don’t know if you know about that, that was when they brought in, to keep from integrating, integration taking place, they brought in these mobile wagons.

Oh, right.

To keep people just in the ghettos and not—

And those were their schools.

Those were the school rooms people had, as opposed to putting them into neighboring, mostly empty schools that were white. So this was, it was really, and we had in our building, a wonderful woman named Faith Rich, who was one of the foremost authorities in the city on segregated educational patterns in Chicago. So lots of the organizing against Chicago’s segregated school system came out of our building. Well at any rate, with all that swirling, my mother had investigated Francis Parker School. And Francis Parker is where we would transfer to in fifth grade. And in fact, going back to your earlier question, one of the first thing that happened at Francis Parker was that a student, who later would become a great defender of mine, called me a nigger the first day I was there, so I hit him across his nose, and bloodied his nose, and my father was a man who wouldn’t take nonsense. And he taught me very early on, oh you asked me about earliest incidences. My mother, my mother was amongst the first to integrate Marshall Field. There were two Loops in those years. There was a North Side Loop that was white, and a South Side Loop where Sears and Goldblatt’s were, and then there was a kind of middle ground, but Marshall Field, Carson’s, those were pretty much white stores. My mother used to regularly frequent Fields. And if I recall correctly, she took me once when I was very young to go and sit in Santa Claus’s lap. And Santa Claus wouldn’t let me sit in his lap. So it, I couldn’t have been more than six or seven or something, so it very much upset me. When my father came home I was still upset. He
asked my mother, Why’s Prexy so upset? She told the story, and he said, You’re wrong.
You have two choices. I can go down and kill me a white man, or else I am going to tell
my son there’s no Santa Claus. Now which do you want me to do? (laughs) So I learned,
I learned quite early that there was no such thing as Santa Claus. So that, all that is an
earlier thing in going up to begin school at Francis Parker. But then at Francis Parker
some of the race stuff continued there. But in general, in general the faculty of Francis
Parker, at that point, 1954 this is, and most of the students were completely receptive to
us. We could not possibly go there now, but relative—

EM: Because?

PN: Because of the cost. It is $27,000.00 a year or something, but at that point it was
more like $2,000.00 or $3,000.00, $1,000.00 maybe. But with my mother’s sisters
helping, who had no children of their own, we scraped up the money for my sister and I
to go there. Now my mother always did things in chords, so she very quickly organized
that the rest of my cousins also began going there, and she organized other families to
also go there. Black families, white families, she, she essentially created a posse to go to
Francis Parker.

EM: As kind of a protection?

PN: As a group, so that the transition wouldn’t be just one, it was really for—

EM: Right.

PN: It was really quite prophetic, very far-thoughted, my mother was very ahead of her
time. That’s why she, and for example, Maria Piers got along so well.

EM: Who is that?

PN: This is the woman who founded the Erikson Institute for Early Childhood
Education. She and my mother were the best of friends and between the two of them,
they introduced to the Board of Education, that people could take early childhood
education credits and get accreditation for it in the Chicago Public School system, that
was something that was done by my mother’s initiative.

EM: As a child, what did, what did you like to do with your mother?

PN: I regret never really, my mother died of cancer long before I was an adult, I guess I
was twenty-four when she died of cancer. She certainly, she loved to tease me. My
mother was a great teaser. She loved music. She was an incredible pianist, and one of
these people who just could listen to a piece of music and then reproduce it. And she
took us to a lot of music, you know, I was raised around Paul Robeson, and Big Bill
Broonzy, and these, she was very close to Mahalia Jackson. I can remember taking
recipes back and forth when I first learned to drive between my mother and Mahalia, and
she loved concerts and loved productions. I think there was another reason she wanted us
to be at Parker, because there was a big emphasis at Parker School on arts, chorus, production, performance, and it was a very progressive school. It was the center of organizing a progressive, a lot of people who were there because McCarthy’s couldn’t get anywhere else. And my mother was, as I got older I really learned that where I had thought when I was younger, was that my father was really the politically savvy one, I learned more and more that my mother was very, very political through her art and through her culture.

EM: I’m curious as to what, you called the apartment building the institution, what were meal times like there?

PN: They were night-, nightmares (laughter). We did the dishes, but they were extraordinary. It was not at all unusual for fifty or sixty people to eat, especially on the holidays. It was a three-story building, four in the front because there was a basement apartment. You would eat all through all of the apartments. You would have your main meal in one apartment, your hors d’oeuvres in another, dessert in another. They was always story-telling, reading, it was being read to was a very important part of the culture in which I was raised up.

EM: That’s interesting, that’s interesting. When did you, okay, what were your plans when you graduated from Francis Parker?

PN: When I graduated Francis Parker, again, this may be a story about my mother and my family. I had not done that well academically. I was a student government president. I did well in some subjects, but I did horribly in chemistry, so I didn’t have that good of a cumulative. So the principal in the school in those years did college admissions, and he told me that I should apply to Navy Pier.

EM: Was that the University of Illinois?

PN: That was what is called today the University of Illinois circle. In those years it was called Navy Pier. And being told you should apply to Navy Pier was a real putdown. Wright Junior College was another place. And I maybe, Elmhurst, I don’t know, whatever it was I came home and told my mother and she said “No, no no no that is not what you’re doing.” She said, “You’re applying to Yale, you’re applying to Oberlin, you’re applying to Michigan.” Sure enough, I applied. She went right back up to the principal and said that is where my son is applying. I got into all of them. On the trip my father and I made East, I stopped and visited Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, because my father had been stationed in that area during World War II. He knew of Yellow Springs, the town, because amongst black people it was called the oasis of the desert, because in the area of southern Ohio with its racism and bigotry down in that part of the world, and still some of which is there, the one town that was open was Yellow Springs, where Antioch was. So I went, with my father’s urging. I fell in love with folk-dancing, and I, who had been an all-city football player, transitioned into an interest in folk-dancing. It was, the folk-dancing, though I didn’t keep that up, becomes the bridge
to me then to that college facilitating my first trip to Africa. That’s how I, it was while I was a student at Antioch, that I took my year abroad in Africa.

EM: What year was that?

PN: Nineteen sixty-five.

EM: In ’65 you spent a year abroad in—

PN: In Tanzania.

EM: Tanzania.

PN: Studying as a student, an exchange student, the first that they had ever had in New University in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

EM: What was that year like?

PN: It was a mind, mindboggling. It opened me up to an entirely different world. I got off, I was picked up by my family’s former pastor who happened to be working there in Tanzania. That was certainly one of the things that eased my parents in terms of me making such a trip, ‘cause in ’65 going to Africa was different than today, different, just totally different.

EM: How did you get there?

PN: I went, every trip you went by Europe, you sometimes went by plane, so I remember sometimes you went by boat. I took a boat to—

EM: To England.

PN: From New York.

EM: From New York?

PN: From New York, I took a boat to England.

EM: Do you, what was that like for you?

PN: It was weeks on the boat. I was sick every day of it almost, and then flew from there to Nairobi, Kenya. This minister drove up—

EM: Now this is pre-, was this pre-, I’m trying to think, so what size of plane?

PN: A prop.
EM: A prop plane. How many people?

PN: Forty-five or fifty.

EM: Had you flown before as a child or—

PN: I had flown, I had gone to, I’d made one flight to Detroit, which was a twenty-five minute flight, right? But I had traveled because I had spent part of my summer between my junior and senior years in high school living with a Swedish family, the Holmgrens, in Sweden. My parents were big advocates of international exposure. I went to Sweden, and the next summer my sister went to live, through the same program experiment, experiment international living. She went and lived in Japan. And so, I am still in touch with that family. In fact, on this coming Sunday when I leave taking a group of forty people to South Africa, Mozambique and Namibia, a choral group out of Oakland, California called Vukani Mawethu, and with all these groups I have one, you know, for example very soon I’ll welcome a trip that’s being made by the Illinois Judicial Society, that Arnette Hubbard has been involved in. It is so important, these trips, well for me, that one of the earliest trips was that trip to get the international exposure was living with the Swedish family. So, to finish that sentence, the daughter of my Swedish brother who died in an automobile accident, is helping me to do this trip that’s going to Southern Africa that’s coming up next week. So the, that tie to that Swedish family, they have all been, many of them and their friends have been to see my family, many of my family have been to meet them. We’re like one family, this family in Stockholm, Sweden.

EM: That’s an amazing story, because I think that’s the early sixties—

PN: It was the early sixties.

EM: And what’s going on here in the States—

PN: Uproars.

EM: Uproaring, and here, this young African American parents, off you go, exchange program. I mean, it’s unusual for high school students, even today. I mean there’s more, it’s more established, but—

PN: Well one of the things I did on the trip was I remember going to hear Gunner Myrdal. Gunner Myrdal was a Swedish sociologist who wrote a very pivotal book called An American Dilemma about Race in America. And he spoke that summer at Stockholm in some institute. I remember, I don’t know, it must have been absolutely stupid what I said, but I do remember questioning him about something that he said, and of course, I was the only black person in the whole room.

EM: And, American citizen, I would imagine.
PN: Oh, absolutely. I mean, there were parts of Sweden that we all, all of these families, this whole program, we went to Northern Sweden, too. And in those Northern Swedish visits kids would follow me up and down the street thinking that I was Pelé, the great Brazilian soccer star, or another person who was very prominent in those years was Harry Belafonte. So I got called both, Pelé and Belafonte. I’ve never told Belafonte, who I do know, that I used to be called him. But it was here, this is ’61, it was another epic, really.

EM: I’d love to spend more time, but I want to be aware of moving to the story we’re supposed to be getting to. But you, I interrupted you when you said you got off in Tanzania and the pastor, your former pastor picked you up.

PN: Picked me up. He picks me up, and he and his family drove me from Nairobi, Kenya to Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. It took us at least three nights in those years. So we stopped in different places and stayed overnight, myself and this white family. And finally we reached Dar Es Salaam, and the first thing that happened was a whole group of South African refugees, which included, that group included Miriam Makeba, but she wasn’t in the group that, at that occasion, but she was part of that community in Dar es Salaam at that point in time. They met me, and they were all on the way. Now I had just driven up, and they came, they knew this African American guy was coming to be a student, and they met us and said to me, Come on go with us, we’re going to listen to this record, a ’78 record of a speech. And it was a speech that had been given just the year before, but the recording of it had just reached Dar es Salaam. It was the speech of Nelson Mandela’s “Why I’m Prepared to Die,” that he gave at the Rivonia Trial. And we would listen to this again and again and again, there in this hot, humid heat of Dar es Salaam. And frankly, I didn’t even know who Nelson Mandela was at that time. And I would think that, even though I came from a progressive and informed family, there would’ve been very few people, families in Chicago who knew who Nelson Mandela was in 1963, a few, but not many.

EM: So when did you first become aware of apartheid?

PN: Well certainly then, in ’63, this would be ’65, certainly by ’65. Well actually, let me take that back, because when I was in seventh grade I did a paper at Francis Parker School on “Cry the Beloved Country.” And so there was some awareness then, but I found that paper not long ago and I’m just embarrassed about it. I mean, for example, the word is kaffir was used in that paper, and I used the word kaffir without any critical judgment on it. You know the word kaffir?

EM: Well, only from what Dr. Brock, that that is a very derogatory—

PN: Oh please, it is the same as nigger. It’s just basically, it’s infidel swine. You can’t find a more derogatory term in the Africans language, and that was used in the book and I took it up and just used it in this paper without any knowledge. So that was my first, and that would’ve been ’56, something like that, now, that’s pretty early. My family must have, certainly have told me things, because my uncles and my father and their uncles, one of my uncles was a Garveian, he was a member of the United Negro Improvement
Association, which really followed Africa things very carefully, but that was the earliest, but to begin to substantively know about an apartheid, that would start in ’65 when I make the first trip to Tanzania. From that point on, I go back to Antioch College to finish up, and I start a committee at Antioch that’s called the Antioch Committee on Southern Africa, with a woman named Marty Houser, the daughter of a man named George Houser, who was the man who founded the American Committee on Africa, the first real national organization to work on South Africa issues. Later I would work for them as a staff person, but in ’65 in Antioch, Marty and I started this organization concerned with Southern Africa, and among other things, we, I, I stayed with it, she didn’t stay with it. We, we took over, we sat in on the trustees protesting the college’s involvement in companies that were supporting apartheid in South Africa, so that was pretty early for college to be doing that. Now we didn’t succeed in getting divestment then, it took ten years, even at a school as progressive as Antioch, but it was raised very early.

EM: This question kind of seems a little irrelevant, or that you’ve already answered it, but how did your family react to your early activism focusing on South Africa and maybe in the context, did anyone say you should, maybe, focus on what’s going on here?

PN: Well, I think that, yes they did say—

EM: I mean at home?

PN: Yes, they did say that. I heard that, and I already believed that, and was doing that, too. As soon as I returned from that ’65, ’66 period of about nine months really, a school year in Dar es Salaam, I came back to a Chicago that was in the middle of the open housing marches that King was doing out of the Warren Avenue Church, where I had been the first black person ever being at church when my dad drove me in there to Sunday School with a broken leg, must’ve been about ’48 or ’49, maybe ’47. But here I come back from Africa, and my mother said to me, go down, Dr. King is based on Warren Avenue, you have still four months or something before you go back to Antioch for your last year, go and do some things with Dr. King, and that’s what I did. I worked with that staff the whole summer, and got very close to Dr. King and to the whole staff of SCLC. Some of them became lifelong friends, like Reverend James Orange, and I got to know a guy named Bevel quite well that period. So I think that very early I tried to keep my foot in activism in both sides of the ocean. My family wouldn’t have let me not do that. My father and one of my uncles had been union organizers, for instance, of the Red Caps Union, those red caps were the old baggage porters, you remember Chicago was a big railroad town before it was an airport, airplane hub. Baggage porters were like the Pullman porters on the trains, so I, to go to Antioch, I remember working a couple Christmases and a summer as a red cap. And this, it was coming in to a work situation where a lot of people knew the name Nesbitt because my father and my uncle had been very prominent in forming the Union for the red caps.

EM: That’s interesting. What, what are some of your memories of that experience?

PN: Working as a red cap?
EM: Yeah.

PN: Well, one of the most memorable ones was around a man named Red and a knife. I worked at the Dearborn Street station, and out of that station went the trains, but the Santa Fe trains going to California, what was called the Chicagoan Eastern Illinois that went down to Mississippi, the Wabash Train, the Canadian railroad that went up to Toronto, it was busy, it was a busy station. We would catch the cabs as they pulled in on Polk Street in front of the Dearborn Street station, which now has this Bar Louie, is right there. I used to be stationed right where Bar Louie is. And we would, there was a kind of ranking, the older guys always got the richest looking people. You judged it by the number of bags, and the clothes, and sometimes the cabbies would let you know, they’d give you a thumbs up if it was somebody who had a lot of money and was a good tipper, then the older guys would get that. But the older guys always supported us younger guys who were going to college, because they wanted to see us advance. So, you’d get good ones. Well, the other thing that was happening was there were all these college girls go through. The supervisors of the train stations were all white men, mostly Eastern European, a lot of Polish guys. There was one guy in particular, I can’t remember his name, who hated seeing black men interact in any way with a white woman. And so, us young college guys used to flirt all the time with these college girls or young girls coming through, you know? It was fun, we had a good time doing it, plus, it helped with your tip. So, once we knew that this guy didn’t like it, some of us we would just do it deliberately in front of him. Well one day this girl kissed me on the cheek in front of this guy. He comes, he was a little short, squat Polish man, not as tall as I am. He comes running, and his face was just beet red, ‘You ever come doing that again I’ll see to it you get thrown out of this place quicker than—.’ He gets right in my face and I clenched my fist, and his fists were clenched. At that time, at that point, one of the red caps was named Red. We called him Red because he looked like a white man, he was white, he was virtually white, but he had been labeled as black through the social processes of this country. He was called Red. And Red came over, and he interjected himself, and he taps this Polish guy on the shoulder, and the whole time he had his hand in his pocket. He said, Don’t put your hands on that boy. Don’t put your hands on him. And everybody knew that when Red said something like that with his hand in his pocket, the next thing he would do would pull that knife. It was a serious knife, and he cut some guys in the locker room. So, Red looked out for me, and that was something that I’ve never forgot. He was, he said, I knew this boy’s uncle and his father. He said, he interjected himself, despite what it might have cost him. Now they didn’t mess with him because he had been around so long, but he was really, it was a beautiful thing, I’ve never forgot it.

EM: I’m just wondering, at the time, what did you think? I mean obviously this wasn’t your career, the rest of your life, but what were the thoughts maybe, going through your head about working with these men? This had been it for them, I don’t know, did you imagine if that was all that, that was in the future for you? Did you think about opportunity, or lack of opportunity?
PN: I never once thought that this would be all that I would do in my life. But I certainly learned that there are very different kinds of people that do different things all their life. You can never judge them by what they’re doing, but how they do it, and what kind of people they are. There were some real slimes amongst some of these guys. On the other hand, there were some people like Red who had the upmost character, you know, he had more character than the fingernails that most human beings have. It just was the nature of American structure that they never were going to move anywhere else. Some of them, they made, you could make money doing this. You had to do, one of the other things we did was arrange weapons for the guys coming in on the trains who would come in from New York and they would get a train, say to Canada. They would stay in the Pullman car the whole time. These guys would often contact some of the red caps, say Here’s $25.00 get me a pint of so-and-so, and here’s another $25.00, arrange for so-and-so to come and see me and bring me the pint. So, that’s $50.00, and $50.00 was a lot of money in those days. Then they’d gamble away a lot of it, there was a lot of gambling. But, it was good exposure for me, and it was good to learn about working with people at any kind of level that they’re at.

EM: Why do you think your parents, at that time, were really, you know, some parents would not want to expose their kids maybe to a side of life that they didn’t, they had aspirations for their child, but it seems your parents travel, politics—

PN: Well, I think that they were essentially in a very, they came out of a period of time and in orientation as a family, all of them, that was oriented towards learning out of life. There was book learnin’ and there was life learnin’, and you had to have a lot of both. Nobody on my mother’s side of the family, except my mother, went to college. None of her six brothers and sisters went to college, but all of them knew the value of it. Of the next generation, I think it’s only my sister and I that finished college, maybe a couple of other cousins finished a couple years of college, but it was, it was rare. So we were given a lot of privilege, and the other thing that you were given with that was responsibility. You were never to sort of just throw that away with what you had the chance to do. In our family, we never left the West Side. The West Side got very, very bad, very dangerous. But in our building, it was a building of professionals that lived on the West Side and stayed there, we never would’ve left had it not been for probably one or two uncles had sort of just got weak about it. When they left, and then the building was just impossible to maintain, we could not get loans in that period, even though it was this building of professionals, we couldn’t get loans from banks to do, for example, we wanted to redo all the porches and we couldn’t get a loan from the bank. That’s the way that, there were no banks on the West Side.

EM: Well that’s one way, too, to ensure that a neighborhood—

PN: Goes down. Believe it, it’s systemic, so there was no bucking that system. Then when it got to a certain point, I mean, I remember it, one of the earliest memories I have about the dope industry was walking out the back door, the back gate of the house coming across a car where a guy was driving and the whole back of his head had been
blown away. I walked up, I was the one that found that. I never forgot what that looked like.

EM: A common theme, and I’m just wondering if you, if you think this is more a stereotype, but I think a common theme in what I find so interesting in your story that, that defiance, standing up for what you believe, for African Americans could be very risky and dangerous and life threatening. And so, to that generational concern of older African Americans, the generation that pre-Civil Rights, and watching the youth really build on, but go out and really try to make change aggressively, some following very peaceful means, and others more aggressive means, and in your experience, it was both. I’m just wondering, I think the story of your parents isn’t one that comes up as often of really encouraging and not necessarily playing by the rules that the dominant white culture expected you to play by.

PN: I, you know, I don’t know. I think there was much more hidden resistance. I think there was much more story of resistance that’s present in African American families—

EM: That hasn’t been told?

PN: That hasn’t been told, you know, part of what happened to one of my uncles was a story of the one who was a lawyer, was that he basically was told by the Sheriff of Champaign County, You get out of this county or I’m going to see that you go out of here in a casket. And that, he had been involved in taking up the cases of many people being discriminated against in Champaign-Urbana, particularly men working around the University of Illinois in what must have been the thirties and forties. There is a guy doing a book now about all that, and he keeps coming across these cases that my uncle was the lawyer for. So I think there is that history, but I think there’s another history. It wasn’t always just through a degree in being a lawyer, it was also people who said, We got a gun in this house, and we’re going to stand up, and you aren’t going to just bully us out. Or, it may be that people said we are going to keep going, we may have to move out of Mississippi, but we’re going to go to Illinois and try to remake life. I mean, people resisted in different ways, stood up, and kept on going on, and I think that’s a part of it that has been very strong in my own family. It’s not always been easy, I had an uncle that was an informer. And I know that he informed, and the FBI intimidated him into talking about the things that I did. And that’s a hard, it was always hard for me to be in his company because my father made me say, my father made me promise to him that I would never confront my uncle.

EM: Did you understand why?

PN: Not entirely, but my father asked it, so, it was at my father’s request that I honored my father’s request. It was his brother, so, I think it was too much painful stuff.

EM: Well, we’ll go back to Antioch (laughter). Your final year, what were your plans then, after Antioch?
PN: I went, my final year at Antioch—

EM: What did, what was your degree in?

PN: Political Science, with a minor in Literature, Nineteenth Century Russian Literature.

EM: I just want you to pause, I’m sorry, we’re just running out of this tape.

pause in recording

EM: You were just going to talk about your last year at Antioch and what your plans at that time were.

PN: My last year at Antioch was very difficult. I had been in 1966, in Dar es Salaam which was the site of change and liberation movements and meeting people like Che Guevara and all these incredible things, and I come back to go to Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. And I had worked with King, immediately before coming back to Antioch, so it was really hard to come back and spend nine months in Yellow Springs, Ohio. I finally graduated, and immediately did Children’s Theater for the next, essentially from January of that year until I moved to New York to start graduate school. I had gotten a fellowship to go to Columbia University, but I did Children’s Theater all over Dayton, Chicago, Boston, Baltimore for the whole summer, African folktales, with a wonderful group of people. There was six or seven of us. Everything was in a one, little, tiny, mini truck. We’d hit a place, we’re all professional, we all joined Actors Equity, and we did these things that children just loved. And I was, my, I was the lead actor in a group, the man who loved to laugh which itself was funny about me. Then, I started Columbia Graduate School, working in a PhD program. And from the beginning, it was not a good fit. I did very well with the Africa courses, I did horribly with the public law and government, which was what the formal name was of the program I was in, pre-law. The lecture halls had five- and six hundred people in them. You never had any interaction—

EM: In graduate school?

PN: In graduate school at Columbia. You never saw the professor. At the end of the year, I remember just a few weeks before the take-over of Columbia University, the ’68 takeover, my advisor called me in to see him, and it was the first time I met him. He said, You, you Antioch people always have a rough time coming here to Columbia (laughs). I said yes. It was a few weeks later that SDS and some of the black undergraduates took over part of Columbia, and that started a four week occupation that I got right in the middle of, as one of the few graduate students who protested Columbia University’s plans to expand into Harlem. I was also pressing the black students to also protest Columbia’s role in the Vietnam War, which was the issue over which white SDS stood, Mark Rudd and others had originally taken over these buildings, and I was trying to broaden the political program of the black students, so we would also be anti-war. I was very much alone in that respect, but I stayed with the whole group. Immediately after the
take-over ended, that was after five or six weeks of just complete disruption of Columbia, and the disruption of New York City as well, because it was huge numbers of New York City police department got involved with this, and Harlem, and there were all these threats to the students, and Harlem would issue a counter-threat. If they did anything to these black students Harlem would erupt and all this. Right afterwards, when it came to renewing my fellowship, I’d lost the money, and there was no question in my mind what had happened. My grades were fair, they were good, some grades were very good, but they had, they linked me with this thing. Within a week after that, I was drafted to go to the Vietnam, to go to ‘Nam, to apply, to appear for my physical.

EM: Because you lost your exempt—

PN: I don’t really know to this day, but I found out later that they were late, because there was a man who worked in the Selective Service who knew my uncle, a black man who worked in Selective Service who knew my uncle, he was in Washington, D.C. and knew my lawyer uncle, who also worked at one point in Washington, in some point in his career, working for the Kennedy Presidency, we worked in equal housing stuff. This guy told my uncle that he, maybe my uncle probably asked him to look it up as I look back on this, but even, I wasn’t going to serve, so I left the country. I left, headed for, I went to the Mozambique Liberation Front for many months and said I don’t agree with the war in Vietnam. If I’m going to fight, I want to fight against something that I can believe in, and I want to fight with you against Portuguese colonials. Eduardo Mondlane, who was at that time the head of the Mozambique Liberation Front, said You can’t fight with us, but you can help build schools, because building a new society is as much a part of this war that we have to wage. So, I then went to Tanzania, but before I could get to Tanzania, because of an internal struggle going on within the Liberation Movement, I had to be for awhile in London. That’s when I worked with the Anti-Apartheid Movement in London and also worked with the Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea. I couldn’t stand London after awhile, because I wanted to be in Africa, back in Africa. So I agreed to be at a job for the World Council of Churches and the Church World Service. I agreed to work in northern Kenya doing famine relief in a war area, where there was a war between the Kenyan government, and what was called the Shiftas, the Somalis in a guerrilla war. So I was in a war zone handing out food and stuff, and I discovered in this war zone, that the provincial commissioner was stealing the salaries and using the food that was supposed to be handed out to one group, he used that to another group and stole those people’s money. And I wrote this all up and handed it in to the Council of Churches in Kenya. The next thing I knew, within a matter of three days, I had been declared a prohibited immigrant, PI’d. So I was thrown out. I was escorted up, back up, way up North where I worked to get my things with police vehicles on each side of the vehicle I drove, and they then, we drove the fifteen hours up, turned right around, they got a new driver, and put me back in my same vehicle with me driving and drove me to the airport, with me doing all this driving. I think they wanted me to die, seriously.

EM: Thirty hours.
PN: So, I drove back and they then took me to a room, where they kept me under lock and key for three days, until they put me finally on a plane. I was kept with the South African refugees, who were also, there was a lot of South Africans who would run into trouble in countries that weren’t so hospitable. Kenya was one of those countries. There was this group of PAC, Pan African’s Congress of refugees, and we all were, we just hung together, all confined in this room. I ended up in Tanzania, ‘cause I’m not going to go back to the United States, because back in the United States in ‘Nam or jail. Then I went and finally get with FRELIMO, the Mozambique Liberation Front. The problem is that, within three months of my arriving there, maybe two months even, Eduardo was assassinated, the third of February, who had been, that was the man who knew my family, he was the leader of FRELIMO. It led to a period of serious turmoil inside the liberation struggle, which lasted from February then, all the way through to August or September.

EM: Of what year again?

PN: Of ’69. And then I get a telegram that says, this was all pre-, anything to do with computers. I get a telegram that my mother was dying from my father. He said you better get back. I got back, literally, in time just to see my mother once before she died. That was in September. I lived then under a shadow, of any day the FBI was going to come and get me. But it didn’t prevent me from doing some work, and getting involved with some organizations on the West Side. One was one of the first charters whose, called St. Mary’s Center for Learning where they asked me to be Dean of Students, and I taught a course about the third world. And then I got involved with a political organization called the Young Workers Liberation League.

EM: So you weren’t underground?

PN: (laughter) I wasn’t underground, Erin.

EM: Looking over your shoulder?

PN: I see you have all these books here about Ireland, and I know you know a little bit about what Ireland underground is like. I was just looking over my shoulder, I was not underground. At the end of all of that, then I think at some point I transitioned into doing union organizing, with the Service Employees International Union, and then I started doing work for the American Committee on Africa.

EM: And what year was that?

PN: That was 1970, or ’71.

EM: And when you say doing work for them, what was your role?

PN: Organizing, organizing all over the Midwest, trying to get people to get involved on the issue.
EM: So education—

PN: Education, and mostly education in those years. And, a lot of speech giving, and a lot of travel.

EM: And did the organization, how, did they pay for you to get to one place or the other? Where did you, you know, how did you fund—

PN: All that work?

EM: All that work.

PN: There was a group of four couples that gave a grant to the American Committee on Africa to develop organizing the black community around Africa, and it was that grant that funded my work for a year, or maybe sixteen months with the American Committee on Africa. People would invite me to speak somewhere and, yeah, they would put you on a bus, or you would drive all night long, and you know, you got a t-shirt for speaking, or you got a hat, or you got a great meal, you know? You didn’t get any money.

EM: Right.

PN: You weren’t, it wasn’t about making money.

EM: And who started, or what are the, what was the origin of the American Committee on Africa?

PN: The American Committee on Africa started out of the effort of a group of people who had been in touch with people like Chief Albert Luthuli and others in South Africa. They were mostly church people. A key person may have been this guy George Houser, who was himself a Methodist minister.

EM: And was he based East?

PN: East, he was based in New York.

EM: Oh, New York, okay.

PN: And that couple, that group of four couples gave the money to open up a Midwest office.

EM: Okay.

PN: And that really was the first time that that organization had ever tried to have organizing in the Midwest. Now, Houser didn’t continue, so the next year I was without work, but I continued to do it. One of the things, for example, that formed in that period
of time in ’70 was a Chicago Committee for the Liberation for Angola, Mozambique, and
Guinea Bissau clan. And then I was instrumental in forming an organization like it in
Detroit. I did some organizing in Minnesota, in Wisconsin, just wherever I could.
EM: And is this still around apartheid?
PN: This is all around apartheid, or around the struggles in the related areas of the
Portuguese, the countries nearby colonized by Portugal, or around Rhodesia, ‘cause I also
was interested in that. In fact, Graca showed me a wonderful compliment once to me.
Do you know who she is?
EM: No.
PN: She is Mandela’s wife. She is just an eloquent woman, and on her, on my website is
this wonderful speech she gives. I was shocked. Where she, I brought a bunch of
Columbia people there, and she talks about how much work I have done in all regional
struggles. I didn’t even know she knew that, you know? She highlights for these
Columbia students, in the most beautiful way, it’s in a tape, it was just beautifully said by
her.
EM: What does that mean to you?
PN: Well, you know, here’s arguably one of the most wonderful women in the world
paying me one of the highest compliments that you can get, so she’s much more than just
a friend, she’s, she’s a model, she’s a role-model for, that all the values that mean
anything to me in my life. So it’s the kind of thing that I hope my sons and the daughter I
have that I don’t know anything about will some day tell their children about it, that I did
carry on the drum beat.
EM: That’s pretty impressive to have that kind of endorsement.
PN: It’s very, and I wish that, I do have a tape of it. It’d be great to put that in
somewhere at the end. The people who were in that trip that filmed her, she, she said all
this just as she was going to get ready to welcome the Columbia students to the seminar
with other young Mozambiqueans that she made these comments. That’s the kind of
person she is.
EM: And what year was that?
PN: Two years ago? Three years ago, two years ago I think.
EM: Alright, I have a question for you. We’ve got more time, although that’s an
interesting place to stop. I don’t think we’ll get through all of this in an hour and a half
because we are just at 1970. And so, are you interested in, you have to leave town.
PN: I have to leave Sunday.
EM: Okay, well let’s continue and see where you go, because maybe we can, when you come back we could still pick up.

PN: I think if we, can we just pick up when I come back?

EM: Yeah, at this point?

PN: At this point.

EM: Yeah, I think that, I mean, it almost I think, where you went in just that last comment, my gut feeling, my instinct was either consciously or unconsciously, you, that’s a really good place to stop here.

PN: That’s what I feel.

EM: Okay, okay.

**pause in recording**

EM: This is Part II of our oral history interview with Prexy Nesbitt. It is May 29—

PN: Twenty-eighth.

EM: Twenty-eighth, two thousand aught-nine (laughs), if I get the date correct, and we are at Columbia College Chicago. Welcome.

PN: Thank you very much, Erin.

EM: Sorry for the technical difficulties.

PN: No problem.

EM: Okay, well, we left off talking about your organizational efforts internationally, and maybe if you could start with, kind of, revisiting CCLAMG and talking about any of the kind of significant events you’re a part of with that organization?

PN: CCLAMG was the Chicago Committee to Liberate, the Committee for the Liberation for Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau. As such, it was an outcome of, it was a product of the involvement that I had had with FRELIMO, with the Mozambique Liberation Front, but also the product of relationships that I had had with the Africa Information Service in New York City, and with a man by the name of, a great leader, a great man named Amilcar Cabral. In 1970, I don’t remember the exact date, there was held in Rome, Italy, a conference in support of the people of Portuguese colonies. It was a very remarkable conference, a very high level of coverage because at the tail end of that conference in Rome there was actually a meeting with the Pope at the Vatican that was
held by the leaders of the liberation movements. This was right after Eduardo Mondlane
had been assassinated in Dar Es Salaam, I was there when he was killed. That was on
February 3, 1969, so that representing FRELIMO, the Mozambique Liberation Front, was
Marcelino dos Santos, and I think also Samora Machel, who was also a military leader, a
general so to speak, of FRELIMO. But coming from Angola was Agostinho Neto, who
would later become the first president of Angola. He was the head of the NPLA and
coming from Guinea Bissau was Amilcar Cabral. I was very fortunate to have had, to
have met Cabral at the funeral that was held for Eduardo Mondlane. So I knew who he
was, and actually, Cabral in ’70, at some point, before this conference took place in Italy,
Cabral had been in New York and it was a point when I wasn’t able to go. I was back in
the States, it seems to me at that point, and I was sick, and my sister went for me. And I
remember this distinctly because my sister and Cabral talked about this. I told her to
write down every word Cabral said. Well my sister had a very strained way of writing,
she never held a pen properly, she always curled over it like some people do. She was
very, very striking. She became one of the top models in this country, along with Lauren
Hutton, she was literally at the top with Fords agency, she was in Vogue, all of this stuff,
one of the Black’s models of the 1960s. At any rate, she came and went to every talk
Cabral gave, and Cabral who had an eye for fine looking women noticed her finally, and
he said to the whole group, reminiscing, reflecting on this to the whole group, but
humorously he was wondering who this woman was sitting in front of him everywhere he
went, writing down his every word. Well of course this was my sister, as instructed by
her brother. So she explained that, and he made the connection with who I was. She told
me about this, and it was very wonderful experience. Now, later, Cabral, who really
hadn’t seen me that many times, I was walking into the conference in Rome and
happened to arrive as he was arriving, and Cabral saw me walking toward him and said,
“Prexy, you’re here, camarada.” It was an incredible moment. Cabral was known for
this, he was known for his ability to know each and every peasant and their story in
Guinea Bissau. He had a remarkable memory and capacity to integrate the lives of other
people into his, into his whole being, and that was part of the strength of this man as a
leader.

EM: How, what, what made you tell your sister, I mean, what did you know about him
or what were your impressions of him, I mean, why did you feel that way when you
asked your sister to go in your place and take these notes?

PN: I can’t remember the exact sequence, I could reconstruct it, but it’s possible that by
the time of his visit to New York, he had already come and been given an honorary
doctorate at Lincoln University, the black school in Lincoln, Pennsylvania. If that’s the
case, an organization that I helped to found, called the Africa Information Service of New
York. We had driven him down to Lincoln, Pennsylvania. I founded this organization
with a man named Robert Van Leirop, a filmmaker, very famous for a film he did called
A Luta Continua. We then also did a book of Cabral’s speeches, “Return to the Source.”
So that’s also a part of this period of time, I can’t remember the exact sequence of things,
but whether it was before or after our having taken him to Pennsylvania, I certainly knew
Cabral and anyone in the sixties, late sixties, seventies, knew of him, and especially
anybody who was at all following these wars in the Portuguese colonies, which included
all kind of people, including Nixon, Kissinger, and everybody else because these wars were wars that were consuming an inordinate amount of resources. I mean, most people don’t even realize that in December ‘71, Nixon gave to the Portuguese $436,000,000.00 to help them fight the very organizations that I was working with, the Azores Trade Pact to help put them down. He gave $436,000,000.00 in what was called the Azores Package, so that we could continue to use the Azores Islands as a base—

EM: We meaning the United States?

PN: The United States could continue to use the Azores Islands as a base for whatever we did in the Middle East. In fact, around the Iraq War we continued to make use of these Azores Islands. So $436,000,000.00, at that time, 1971 December, it’s like three or four billion dollars now. So, Cabral, Amilcar Cabral, is also probably one of the foremost theorists of the twentieth century. I mean, he, his stature is that of Fidel and Che [Guevara], and that is certainly what happened at the Tri-Continental Conference in 1966 in Havana, where Fidel, where Cabral stole the show.

EM: Where you there at that time?

PN: I wasn’t at that conference, but I certainly knew about it. Again, because I was in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and there, everybody knows about these things. It got no coverage hardly in the United States, but that conference is one in which Cabral, and the contribution that he made to theory, to theory of change, of revolutionary change, of insurrection, of the struggles of people, of third world peoples against imperialism, against racism, it’s some of the most profound writings around.

EM: What did they hope to achieve with the meeting with, at the Vatican with the Pope?

PN: They did achieve. It was, I can’t begin to tell you how impressed I was with this meeting. It was largely organized by the Italian Communist Party, and the Italian Left was always in solidarity with the African liberation struggles. Like Sweden, this is also stuff that Italian Americans in this country would have no idea about, but there was, if my memory serves me correctly, there were two- or three thousand people there. It was very well organized. And one of the things they hoped to achieve was to get visibility of the struggles, of these struggles against Portuguese colonialism. In fact, after that, those conference, you have the beginnings of a whole new ramping up if you will, of those struggles in Angola, in Mozambique, in Guinea Bissau, in Sao Tome, in East Timor and these political, the political front, the front of getting publicity and diplomatic support of these struggles was a very, very important front and the Pope received and blessed them. This is important from another point of view, because understand that when the Portuguese colonized Africa, they did so with the blessings of the Pope at that period. So in the late fifteenth century, they went with different edicts and blessings from the
various Popes at that time, so to have the Vatican bless this conference of people struggling to end Portuguese colonialism was an extremely important moment.

EM: What did you do and what did you see there?

PN: What did I do and what did I see? What I did was to volunteer a lot. I’m the low, low of the totem pole in these conferences. I learned a lot. I did all the volunteering. I think I went there representing the Africa Information Services Organization out of New York, but at that point the Chicago Committee for Liberation of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, CCLAMG, did not exist. I certainly remember collecting these incredible papers of Amilcar Cabral that were given at this conference. I remember, I achieved also, making relationships with people that I have known ever since, people in Sweden, people in England, people in Holland, for example there’s a group called the Angola Committee of Holland, Amsterdam, Holland, and I first met some of those people at that Rome conference in 1970. There was a Finish woman from Sweden, Maj Palmberg, who later worked at the Nordic Institute for African studies, and so, these were the early years of me forging relationships with other organizations from other countries, that would be very important for the work I was to do in this country later. It would be very important as a source of information, and financially, some of those organizations gave those of us in the United States support, gave us materials, gave us publications, books, some of them helped finance us getting to meetings, whether they were in Europe or back in Africa. They came to our meetings, we coordinated activities. For example, when I, working, I don’t remember when this incidence was but in 1970, ’71, somewhere in there, I held a demonstration against a Portuguese soccer team that came to play at Soldier’s Field. And I was arrested, arrested and carted off to jail and the Chicago Civil Liberties Union, a guy named Kermit Coleman, supported me. He was my lawyer. The policeman who wrote me up charged me with handing out anti-imperialist literature, that was the crime that I was charged with. When it finally came to court, years later, the judge asked the policemen in court as I’m standing in front of him, what is the crime this man has done? The policeman said he was handing out anti-imperialist literature, the judge said, What statute is that that this man has violated? Then the judge turns to me and he says, “Mr. Nesbitt, would you explain to me what this was about? Explain to me,” he said, “and the court what this was about?” And I started talking about the crimes of Portuguese colonialism. Well, Erin, this was an ideal situation. Here’s this room full of black people in a Cook County courtroom, packed, and the judge gives me this opportunity. Well, before it was over with, I turned and wasn’t talking to the judge, I was talking to the whole room full of people. So finally he said, “You’re dismissed Mr. Nesbitt.” He said something like, You have a powerful tongue. Be careful with how you use it, or something like that. There was no case any longer. But more importantly than that part of it, Kermit Coleman, because of that relationship, then, later, is invited to be one of the few American lawyers who was at an international trial of mercenaries that is held in Angola in 1975 or ’76, an incredible event, just a global event, because these mercenaries had never been tried before, and here they are being tried and given full legal protections and Kermit, who has since died, was one of the lawyers, international jurist, who was an observer at that incredible trial. It was based on my recommendation to the people who organized the trial in Angola who wanted to have an American lawyer,
EM: How important were those, were the legal relationships? How often were, was your work undermine, perhaps, by law enforcement and that, you know, was it, was that an obstacle or was it just kind of more of a hassle?

PN: Everybody lived with that at that time. Everybody lived with constant surveillance, constant, my, in my family it’s the joke amongst Nesbitts that Prexy’s mail is always messed with mail. My family watched package after package arrive in my house, open, torn open, little apologies for it being opened, all of this, suitcase after suitcase that I would come home with, ripped open. And then, you lived with tapped telephones, I mean, that was just assumed. And then to take it further, I know that there was a file that I had because I filed under the Freedom of Information Act at one point. To do that, a lawyer here in Chicago did it for me, and sure enough, there was a file for me under a sub file under the ANC Terrorism file, that there was a, you know, it was only recently that the United States apologized for making Nelson Mandela a terrorist. They kept a file for years on the ANC. Well, every ANC representative who ever came to the United Nations or then traveled around the country, I think every one of them stayed at my house at one time or another, because I knew them from Dar es Salaam, and they knew of me, if they didn’t know me personally. So mine was a natural relationship, so of course, naturally, you’re going to have the United States government surveilling you every way they can. Now, some of it gets ugly. I mean, I have a very grim story about one of my own uncles who basically, the FBI came to him and said, we have information on your daughter, that she misused her passport. It was a total lie. If you cooperate with us, we won’t do anything to her. Your cooperation is to take the form of telling us about everything your nephew does. We now know that this uncle did that. My father would, I went to my father about it when we found it out. At that time both my father and the uncle were alive, and my father refused to let me confront his brother, because he said it would just be too disruptive. So those were things that are harder.

EM: Yeah. Are they, in your estimation, are those tactics successful? I mean, do they really put the movements back, or do they—

PN: No.

EM: Or do they inspire, I mean—

PN: I think those movements simply make people more determined to continue with the work that they’re doing, and to find ways around them. Most of those activities, they’re not movements, they’re activities, are so inept, most of them, particularly in that period.

EM: In the side of law enforcement—

PN: Law enforcement agencies doing this stuff were so inept, often, that you just laughed about a lot of it. I mean, you could, I remember once being on the phone
somewhere and hearing they had made some kind of mistake so you could hear them talking to each other on this tapped line. It was just stupid. And then you see materials where they can’t spell things, they don’t know where things are located, they are like some of my Columbian students, you know, they think Cambodia is in the middle of, or next to the Congo, so, at some level you can laugh about it. Of course, on another level, there is a very serious other aspect of it. There is no doubt in my mind, for example, that part of the reason they killed Fred Hampton in 1969 December here in Chicago, was related to Fred Hampton’s tremendous and growing international outreach. And I, I had a role, I had something to do with that because I remember introducing Fred Hampton and Bobby Rush, now Congressmen Rush, to representatives of the Mozambique Liberation Front to come to Chicago to visit me and at the invitation of CCLAMG, the Chicago Committee, and we introduced them. So, that aspect of it is of course grim, you know, when they resort to violence against people.

EM: Let’s, let’s return to your work in Chicago, and CCLAMG. What was your role in that and, and what was the responsibility of that organization from here?

PN: Our effort was to publicize the struggles in these former Portuguese colonies. The other thing was to raise and provide material aide, whether it was medical supplies or books for schools and pencils and paper, or just money. It was to provide materially, to do political education, and then to also confront any of those projects that would have been involved, or companies in supporting Portuguese colonialism from this country. Gulf oil, for example, is a classic example. Gulf was deeply involved in supporting colonialism in Angola. We did many, many demonstrations against Gulf Oil Company. Though it wasn’t in Chicago, it was during a period that CCLAMG, the Chicago Committee was very active. I remember going to Gulf shareholder meetings at their headquarters then was in Pittsburgh. Gulf is now called Chevron, and we demonstrated. I remember even being, there was a threat against our lives. Those of us who showed up at a certain, I think it was Carnegie Mellon, we had, there was a bomb threat phoned in and we had to be escorted out by the police, and I remember being escorted to the bus station, and put on a Greyhound bus, by the police (laughs). They stayed right there on the line as the bus was leaving for Chicago. CCLAMG did also other work. It’s a very famous, for a wonderful poster, that it did about Guinea Bissau, a silkscreen poster. It was part of something, its headquarters were in a place called the New World Resource Center, which, at that point in 1970, ‘71, had been largely founded by returned Peace Corps volunteers. It had a very high visibility. CCLAMG was but one of many organizations that worked out of this New World Resource Center, which had a very thriving bookstore at that time, up on Broadway or on Halsted, I can’t remember which. And there was, wonderful artists amongst those people who would have been either, Peace Corps volunteers or church, missionary volunteers. There was a woman named Trudy Pax who had done work in Brazil. And she, she, I knew her quite well because she was always quite helpful. Trudy’s Portuguese was impeccable, and she was often very much the interpreter for when we had guests coming from Angola or Mozambique or Guinea- Bissau. So those were the things that we did as CCLAMG, lots of speaking engagements.
EM: And where would some of the typical venues be for those—

PN: Engagements.

EM: Yeah, what were some of those?

PN: A lot of churches.

EM: Churches.

PN: Churches, some high schools, some of the private high schools, some of the suburban high schools. It was rare to get into Chicago Public Schools. If you didn’t have a particular teacher, there was no way that you’d get into Chicago Public Schools, because they were so rigid about what they would allow to be part of the curriculum. Now this day and age they are not as tight as they are, were at that point, but they were very, very censor-, there was a censoring mechanism to Chicago Public Schools.

EM: And did that have to do with race? Race, I mean was that part of the, I don’t know, the agenda? Were there things that they were open to having the public schools agree venues for, or—

PN: Certainly one of the things they were not as open to having as other things were things that had to do with Africans, although there were, with a large number of black or African American teachers, there was more of a possibility of openings into the South Side schools. Remember, Chicago schools were very segregated during that period.

EM: You’re right.

PN: It wasn’t so much race as an open thing, it was more covert in the way it was applied. It wasn’t quite, principals would say we refuse to have anything to do with Africa, it was more, it was more sophisticated then that, and it was about being careful that there was nothing too risqué that was being taught about, politically risqué, or that was critical of the U.S. Government. Those were the things that they were very afraid of, and I think that, that’s why it was easier to get into some of the church venues because some of the churches were very openly supportive of these events. For example, the Lutheran church, which had a big Seminary on 55th and Hyde Park, often let us use their main assembly hall for programs that we did about Guinea Bissau, about Mozambique, about Namibia. Also, the Methodist Church, we did a, at that time the United States government got most upset about Cuba coming to aid Angola in the fight against Portuguese colonialism, which South African apartheid was supporting as well. At that point, there was a confrontation which Cuba came to the aid of the Angolan Liberation Movement, MPLA. And the United States government went nuts against this. At that very moment, we had a wonderful, national conference that I was the chair of, that CCLAMG very much staffed, held right at the Lutheran School of Theology at 55th Street, that was the National U.S. Angola Support Conference, was the name of it. Now I don’t know how many agents infiltrated that thing, but there was, undoubtedly, it was
infiltrated to the max, because it was a hot issue. Cuba’s involvement made it very hot. Kissinger hated, hated what the MPLA of Angola stood for.

EM: And you said you were chair of that conference?

PN: Yes.

EM: And what, what, did you speak at that, or were you responsible for all the invitations—

PN: The invitations, I spoke at it, I chaired some of the panels. Many of my colleagues from CCLAMG also did things. There was a big article that I had gotten into some notoriety about because I had written an article “Angola’s a Part of All of Us” in the *Black Scholar*, a very powerful indictment against U.S. policies toward Angola and Africa at that time. So I was quite, I was around.

EM: And how did this activism in your work and organizing and with CCLAMG, and again, how did that impact your personal life?

PN: Well, it is a very sensitive question. I didn’t have one, I mean, I didn’t really have one. I didn’t really have one because, you know, I was around these people from the time I was very impressionable as a college student, nineteen, twenty years old. And I was around these people, and I met people like Julius Nyerere, and met all these others like Cabral, and Eduardo Mondlane, Joe Slovo, and J.B. Marks, these incredible figures in this very different time period of the sixties. And we were told not to have a personal life. We were told, if you were true to the ideals that we’re about, you won’t have personal life, we won’t be allowed to have a personal life. Your personal life is always going to be subordinate to, to the imperatives of the struggle. I think now it was all nonsense, but at the time, I very much believed it and adhered to it faithfully. So there was a woman that I was very, very in love with, an Italian communist woman that I had met in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. The United States wouldn’t allow her to come into the United States when I came back due to my mother was dying. She came, she wasn’t allowed in at that point, couldn’t get a visa, because she had been a communist in Italy. And we both decided that, we just, that’s life, that’s struggle. We just, it ended. Now, we tried, and during the course of that period she met my sister on a trip to Italy from Tanzania. My sister was then modeling in Paris.

EM: Was this the same sister that—

PN: I only have one sister.

EM: Oh, okay.

PN: In ’73 my sister was killed. She was killed by her husband, in a very brutal, brutal murder, a horrible murder, here on the West Side of Chicago. And it happened that Patrizia Maria Lanfranconi, my friend from Italy, was invited, or her sister was invited to
a conference that the National Organization of Women put on in Massachusetts. She called my family’s house looking for my sister. I happened to pick up the phone, and we had decided we weren’t finished. She was shocked to hear me pick up the phone, and then even more shocked, just, totally just devastated because she had become very fond, I mean, this was my sister, she was wronged. So she came immediately to join us. It was within, we were still mourning my sister when she came and joined us in Chicago. That was essentially, I saw her one time after that and I’ve never seen her again. But, the answer to your question is that we, you had a life that was not an integrated life in the sense of how we handled our personal relationships, ‘cause we were told we shouldn’t have them, and I think that has had a very long-term effect on me and has had it on all of us who were products of that revolutionary ferment and struggle period of the sixties. I mean, I think that’s probably true, right? I don’t know for a fact, but I think that divorce rate, for example, of people my age group who are now entering their sixties, is pretty high, if I’m not mistaken. I think that that group, who were products of that period of time, getting together your, getting in sync your political values and your personal values, it was not something you put a lot of priority on doing. We were about changing the world, not trying to line up our loves of our lives. Does that make sense?

EM: Well, it’s interesting that, you know, then you also said that you didn’t think that that was necessarily necessary, that you were in part doing what you were told.

PN: Yeah, I think that’s what was behind part of it.

EM: Yeah, so I, I mean, it sounds like, that it came at a cost?

PN: I think it did, and I think its part of, this is very, something I’ve given a lot of thought of. In the sixties too, in that period, I met a lot of Catholic nuns and priests, right here in Chicago, and there are about ten that I can name right now, ex-nuns and priests who were active here in Chicago in ’65, ’66. Remember, earlier I worked with King and the whole movement here in Chicago. They are all ex-, they all left the order after those periods of the sixties. And today, many of them remain involved, but many of them to this day still live very kind of alternative lives and lifestyles.

EM: Yeah, I mean, to deny one’s, a big portion of one’s humanity, or ask people to sacrifice that, it’s, it can have long-term repercussions (laughter). You mentioned the Catholic Church, but certainly with celibacy, I mean, that is an issue the church refuses to deal with. But, you know, I think it is very damaging.

PN: Clearly, and its lead to this huge mess the Catholic Church is dealing with now.

EM: So, but I think you get workers, right?

PN: You get workers?

EM: You get people to work for you. Then you tell them, oh no, that’s, we’re about this.
PN: That’s right, that’s right. You do get people to do a lot of volunteering and sacrificing for you, ’cause they say this poor person—

EM: I believe in that.

PN: I got to do something, it certainly is a model. I think it was a point in which people like myself who were exceedingly political, we matched up with nuns and priests. I was inside South Africa illegally when I worked for the World Council of Churches. Shortly after I worked for them, and went to a conference and met there, a bunch of Catholic nuns and priests from Ireland, who all became completely involved with the underground structures of the African National Congress. It’s not accidentally that the IRA, when it chose to finally deal with settling and negotiating, like in South Africa, it’s not accidentally that they chose some people from South Africa, like Cyril Ramaposa [who I had first met when he came to the States in the late seventies] to be part of the negotiating bodies that they worked with in Ireland, and the negotiations of the IRA. Part of that stems from those relationships that these Catholic priests and nuns forged with ANC underground people. I had, I worked with some of these nuns and priests when I was illegally in South Africa, and had to be smuggled out.

EM: And what year was that?

PN: That was 1973, after I had been, no wait a minute, 1983. Yes, I was at the World Council of Churches ‘79-‘83, so it was 1983. We had some extraordinary exchanges. It was exchanges of people who are in the midst of struggle, intense struggle, whether you were directly a soldier of the struggle, or whether you were doing support work. And where intelligence gathered, at any of those levels, for the underground of the African National Congress, necessitated and drew in, necessitated and drew in people who were from some of these church bodies.

EM: How did you get involved in the World Council of Churches?

PN: Two things: number one was that I had done work with King and the Civil Rights movement in Chicago. I had done work with people, I had come from Antioch College, which was a college that provided more people to the Civil Rights struggle in 1964 and ‘65 in Mississippi and Alabama than any other college probably in the country, proportionally. Those on the domestic side of struggle, and then the other side was that I had all these relationships with liberation movements with the African National Congress, with FRELIMO, with PAIGC by that time, with some, some Zimbabwe liberation struggles, I’d been in Dar es Salaam, I’ve worked for FRELIMO. So I was somewhat a known entity, and because of the work with Africa, the leadership of the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism invited me to come and work. They brought me to Switzerland, and they interviewed me. I think they interviewed some other people. And they chose me, and then I moved to Geneva, Switzerland. So I started working full time on the issues of racism globally. The hot, the main focus they had was to end the apartheid regime, ’cause that was their highest example, high is the wrong word, because that was the most developed form of racism in South Africa.
EM: Two questions: was this a paid position; were you finally making money? (laughter)

PN: It was a regular paid position. And in fact, I had a number to a Swiss bank account at that time. I wish I had kept the number to that Swiss bank account. No, I was paid. Your second question?

EM: Well the second question was going to be, was that your first direct involvement in the anti-apartheid?

PN: No.

EM: I mean, what attracted you to, I guess, that organization?

PN: I knew of that organization. I knew of it because in 1973 or ’74 I had been to a conference held in Arnoldshain, West Germany about two dams that were being built in Mozambique and Angola, that the movements in those countries wanted us to stop Western companies from getting involved in these dams that would help shore up Portuguese colonialism. The conference was held in Germany, and I was there. At that conference, we had a huge confrontation with the World Council of Churches staff, even though they had organized the conference because the activist groups they brought, including—

EM: Which was?

PN: It was Africa Information Services with my friend Bob Van Leirop, the filmmaker. We were with our Swedish colleagues. Sweden was very involved in all of this, see, and my history with Sweden is another whole history in itself. And I, we argued about the World Council of Churches continuing to give support to an organization called UNITA. UNITA was this CIA backed group in Angola that ultimately becomes one of the most vicious organizations that has ever surfaced. The man who ran it, a man named Jonas Savimbi, was a man who killed people in his own family, boiled their bodies, I mean, he was, he was, the first Bush, the older George Bush, the first George Bush worshipped him. Reagan worshipped him, but he was an absolutely evil human being. Dennis DeConcini the senator from Arizona, he was a big backer of his. Years later, in the early nineties when I was working at the MacArthur Foundation, I was at a conference where Senator DeConcini ended up being my roommate at one point. And Dennis and I were swimming in the pool together and he, I said, how could you ever have supported Savimbi? He said, “That was the evilest human being, that was a mistake. He was the evilest human being I ever knew.” So, we [African solidarity groups like CLAAMG] had quarreled with the World Council of Churches over recognizing and aiding Savimbi and his UNITA. I think some of the WCC staff were so impressed with us that they then invited me to work with the WCC, but by that time, by ’79, at that point I was with the Institute for Policy Studies, in Washington, very famous body, and also with the American Committee on Africa. The Institute for Policy Studies, incidentally, is where a man named Eqbal Ahmad was, where Orlando Letelier that had been with Salvador
Allende from Chile, Allende’s finance minister, he was there. And I went there just months after two people were killed in downtown Washington D.C. I don’t know if you remember this? A bomb was placed in their car in DuPont Circle. An American Ronnie Moffet and Letelier were moving around DuPont Circle, their car was blown up and both of them were killed. This was an action done by a Chilean agent who probably did it in conjunction with CIA people. So, I had had, already, exposure, exposures that early had helped prepare me, it was very natural for me to make that move to then go and work in Geneva Switzerland for the World Council of Churches.

EM: So you’re living in D.C.?

PN: I was living in New York and commuting to D.C.

EM: Living in New York and commuting to D.C. to go to the Institute for Policy Studies—

PN: That’s right.

EM: Did you have an area of expertise there?

PN: Africa.

EM: Africa.

PN: Africa, I was a Fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies. We did, I had a wonderful group of people who worked with me, one of whom went on to start an organization called Global Exchange, and his wife, Medea Benjamin, runs Code Pink, that does a lot of this stuff around demonstrations at the White House. That was, I can remember his name; it was Kevin Danaher, but then, there’s another woman named Betsy Schmidt, who went on, she’s one of the most prominent academics on African, she was a part of my team. And we did work particularly against what was called the Sullivan Principles. Leon Sullivan was a black minister who was on the board of General Motors, and was kind of an apologist for General Motors. He basically ended up saying if you sign, if corporations sign my Principles, that they’ll behave well in South Africa, then it’s alright for them to be in South Africa. Now today, some people who just don’t know what happened laud him as an anti-apartheid hero. He was never that. He was dragged kicking and screaming into a position, finally, where he renounced the U.S. Corporate support for apartheid, but for years, he was the way, this Institution for instance, I think if we look into the history of Columbia we would find, that rather than divesting, the Columbia administration probably signed what we call the Sullivan Principles.

EM: Which was a way around divestment?

PN: A way around divestment, completely. I directed a project that exposed Sullivan and what he was all about.
EM: At—

PN: At the Institute for Policy Studies. That was one of the projects that I did. We did many, many projects.

EM: It’s kind of hard to get you to talk about yourself Prexy, so that was very good (laughter).

PN: Yes, that slipped out.

EM: Oh, you’re challenging. And I am keeping an eye on this. We might have to do chapter three. We’ll talk about that later, but I am keeping an eye on the time, so if it feels like I’m moving forward it’s just, I want to make sure—

PN: I understand that.

EM: But, so, now you’re in Switzerland with the Council of Churches. How long were you in Switzerland?

PN: From ’79 to ’83.

EM: Oh, a long time!

PN: It was a good chunk of time.

EM: And again, trying to keep an eye on the prize, no blinders, kind of personal life, or did you kind of get integrated into that culture?

PN: Well, I’m keeping an eye on the prize but I went into that experience with a wonderful woman relationship, a wonderful woman, Beate Klein, who I never had the sense to marry. My father, my mother died by then, my sister was dead by then, my father kept saying you should marry Beate. But, again, this old stuff. So any rate, she was, she’s a woman who did more research and writing on Western bank loans to South Africa than any other person in the world. And I brought her into working with me At the World Council’s Programme to Combat Racism—

EM: Who was giving them money? What banks were supporting South Africa? Is that what you’re talking about?

PN: You name the biggest banks in the world—

EM: Okay, so she was documenting that?

PN: She was documenting that. She did more of the writing about that than any other person.
EM: Was she a journalist or was she—

PN: She was a product of Bennington College. She was a dancer, a flute maker, and a violin player. She came to a place to work at the African American Institute in New York in about '77 or '78, and she got turned on to Africa. She’s just a brilliant woman.

EM: An American?

PN: An American by a German, parents were born in Germany. She’s just brilliant. She’s a brilliant scholar, brilliant mind, and she was a Bennington product. She was not at all, and then she came to love Africa. She continues to do brilliant work. And I was a fool, but we are still great friends to this day. And so, between the two of us, we got the World Council of Churches to withdraw its money from banks involved in South Africa. At one of the moments I’ll never forget in all my work on this, was the press conference that we held in the World Council headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, with probably about seven hundred different members of press, fifty, sixty different cameras, a wonderful picture of us from that conference, and we announced at that time that we were withdrawing World Council money from UBS Bank, Deutsche Bank, Credit Suisse, it was a bombshell. In Switzerland, two things you don’t mess with: chocolate and banks. This was taking on their most sacred cow, banks. It was a tremendous blow to partake and it was particularly important shot in the arm to organizations all over the world who wanted to do concrete things. It was at that point that the corporate structure in the apartheid governments said wait a minute, this is, this is not just a factor any longer.

EM: So that was a real turning point.

PN: This was a very important turning point.

EM: Do you remember when you heard or were present when the Council said, alright, we’re going to do this. We’re pulling the money out?

PN: I was present. It was in a small meeting with this wonderful man, Philip, what was Philip’s last name? He was the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches. Philip Potter, who was from the Caribbean, from Jamaica, and he and Konrad Raiser, who was the Deputy President, and the staff committee put the blessing, they knew full well that it was a decision that could possibly lead to breaking their back, could lead to them being thrown out of Switzerland, but there was, for them, no other choice, no other choice.

EM: And what did that feel like to you?

PN: Well, as the person who had pushed them to do this, it felt good. I think Philip Potter honored me. I mean, there were people more senior than me in our unit, who should have been sitting next to him when he made this announcement, but that’s not who he wanted. He deliberately chose me to be sitting there next to him. And then later—
EM: Just, what year was that?

PN: That would’ve been in ’80, I believe. No, it may have been ’82, it may have been ’82 or ’81, I can’t remember exactly. No, it may have been ’80. I could look it up, but I can’t—. But, he later chose me also to speak. They had a world conference on racism, and the speaker that they were going to have was a man named Walter Rodney. Walter Rodney was probably one of the most important black voices on African history that ever lived. I’m looking at your bookcase here and I see all this Howard Zinn stuff, “The Power of Zinn.” But Zinn would say to you in a minute, Walter Rodney was who. He wrote a book, a seminal book, on “How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.” Then, in 1980, about March, we had chosen him to be the speaker at this conference, and he was assassinated in Guyana. He had been shipped, the story is that he was shipped a grenade that had a timing mechanism that killed him. So he wasn’t able to speak, and Philip Potter, the head of the World Council of Churches, honored me very greatly once by asking me to speak in his place. I said, “No, I can’t do it.” I went on and chose a man by the name of Randall Robinson. Randall Robinson would later become head of TransAfrica. You may have heard of his brother, was a guy named Max Robinson, who was an ABC anchor who died of AIDS. That was Randall Robinson’s brother, very, very articulate leader who is, if you Google Randall Robinson, you’ll find, so his beginnings really came out of his being chosen to be the speaker at this world conference on racism.

So all the work that I did at the World Conference of Churches on the Programme to Combat Racism was a significant one. I had to be for a period of time, four weeks, on a motorcycle, on the back of motorcycles in Northern Sri Lanka, riding and investigating what was happening to the Tamil people. It was a conflict in Sri Lanka between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. The Sinhalese are the majority, and the Tamils are the ones who had been fighting. Now, just last week, or two weeks ago, supposedly the war has ended after twenty-five years. Well, I was sent to investigate what was happening to the Tamils, and I moved all around on a motorcycle for three weeks, all around Northern Sri Lanka. Then I did another major piece of investigation on racism in Canada amongst Native Americans, all the way up to the Northwest Territories of Canada. I wrote a piece called “Maple Leaf Racism.” And the Bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada, the highest Primate in fact, nixed the report, refused to let it go out, because in it I had indicted and investigated and found the role of some of the Anglican Church people in abusing as missionaries, abusing Native American Indigenous women in Northern Ontario. Because that was there, he didn’t want to have this report get out, but now, for years it circulated as this sort of underground document.

EM: I was going to say, what did, did it ever leak out?

PN: Oh yeah, it leaked all over the place.

pause in recording

EM: It’s the tenth of 2009, and this is the third installment of our interview with Prexy Nesbitt. And, Prexy, when we, when we last spoke you were talking about the World
Council of Churches and the Programme to Combat Racism globally. I thought, if you want, to kind of pick up your narrative there at that point in your story.

PN: In my story, the work I did at the World Council of Churches was probably some of the most significant work that I did in a global sense because it was work that, first of all, though, it centered on the combat against the apartheid government in South Africa, it also was very much looking at the issue of racism worldwide. So I did work in Canada, I did work there around the Indigenous people and also around West Indians, and, and others from the Caribbean, and Toronto particularly. I did work in Mexico around Indigenous people. I did work in Atlanta, Georgia, around some episodes that had taken place involving African American men, the mysterious deaths of African American men. And then, I did work additionally in London around treatment of West Indians and Africans and others of color in London, and did a lot of work with Race and Class magazine, and also with a man named Darcus Howe who was part of a group that did work around police issues, policing and discrimination that went on against blacks living in London, and also in other industrial cities. I did work as well around other places in Europe, France, Germany, the treatment of Moroccans by the Germans. In France, it was a question of treatment of North Africans. The key work, though, was work around the South African issue. The World Council of Churches was early viewed as one of the most formidable enemies of the South African apartheid regime. After the African National Congress I’d say, the World Council of Churches would rank very easily as one of the other major enemies of the South African apartheid system. Sweden would be another one, and one of the things that was very characteristic of the work of, that I did with the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism was lots of it, funding came from the Scandinavian government and Scandinavian churches.

Significantly, although it raised the largest protest against the World Council of Churches, the United States churches were amongst the least contributors to the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism. It was in that period that the work that I did was work benefiting not just the African National Congress and various people fighting against apartheid in South Africa, it was also work against the struggle going on in Angola, the struggle going on in Zimbabwe. I remember, for example, in the fall of 1979, just as the Lancaster House talks were taking place, being part of a task force of executives at the World Council of Churches who were part of helping to identify for the Zimbabwean government, certain Zimbabweans all over the world who could take positions in the new and emerging government. The World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism had given special help to the educational effort and the medical effort supporting Zimbabwean refugees. The World Council never gave money towards the armed struggle in any of these countries, but it did give money towards supporting the overall goal of liberation. Because of that, it was attacked veraciously by certain quarters, for example, the United States, the Reader’s Digest did a whole special issue against the World Council of Churches called “Karl Marx or Jesus Christ? Who’s the real master of the World Council of Churches?” I remember CBS, “Sixty Minutes” with Mike Wallace did a special film attacking the World Council of Churches. And then there were these individuals who were constantly, individual legislators in the United States constantly taking out or making statements in a congressional record against the World Council of Churches. Jesse Helms, of course, is a natural one, but I think Pat
Robinson was another one. So, I was very happy to be associated with the World Council of Churches and played quite a role with their work and was very involved with work, all of the work that the World Council did around South Africa and Namibia. I edited, for example, a magazine that the World Council of Churches put out for a period, in fact, founded that magazine. That was very important, because that devoted, it was read by church people worldwide.

EM: What was the name of that?

PN: It was called, The Programme to Combat Racism Notes, PCR Notes. It went very widely throughout the world. We had special issues devoted to bank loans to South Africa, we had an issue devoted to Namibia, we had another issue devoted to the liberation movements, profiling the liberation movements. And it was on that question that I probably had the greatest controversy when I was with the World Council of Churches. I was asked by the World Council of Churches to make an investigative report about the two liberation movements from South Africa: the Pan Africanist Congress, the PAC, and the African National Congress. And I did this. I went to Zambia, I went to Tanzania, and I went, also, I think at that point I also went to Mozambique, yes, I think so, and talked with government officials, with the churches in those countries. It was all about trying to determine whether the World Council of Churches should continue giving money to the PAC, the Pan Africanist Congress. I concluded in my report, in a very detailed and lengthy report, that the PAC was an ineffectual liberation movement, and that the World Council should no longer give any money to the PAC, just concentrate on supporting the ANC. That finding, and my report, became the subject of a tremendous internal rouse with many of the PAC’s external supporters taking on the staff of the World Council of Churches, specifically me, for having written this report.

EM: And what did you find to make you conclude that money shouldn’t be given to—

PN: I found things like, in Tanzania, that the PACs armed wing was virtually at war with the Tanzanian Army government, that the Tanzanian Army government had concluded that it was very ineffectual, and that there were rebellions going on inside of the training camps of the PAC. Now, these kinds of issues came up the ANC, too. These issues of tension and conflict inside of these training camps, guerrilla warfare, and training for it, is very difficult. Many, many months would go by when these trained men and women would often not have any action to be involved in, and they wanted, they left South Africa to do action, many of them affected by the Soweto uprising, and just wanted to get back into their countries and fight to free them. Well, so there was that, but the particular situation of PAC was just, dramatic. In addition to the problems inside the camps and the conflict with the Tanzania Army, I found a lot of corruption going on with use of monies. And then, there was a big, three, four way split inside of the PAC organization. Now, interestingly enough, I got attacked for this report from PAC supporters, particularly in Australia and New Zealand, but also some from Europe, groups, some church related, some not, who supported the PAC. Some African Americans, for example, supported the PAC because the PAC believed in a black struggle in South Africa. They did not believe, as the ANC did, in a struggle by all of those who wanted to
see and knew, a non-racial South Africa. Although Whites could not join the ANC at that point, although very shortly thereafter they could, the ANC was in alliance with the Congress of Democrats, it was a white organization, the Indian National Congress, and these were mated very multiracial in its approach and content. The PAC was just the contrary. So, some African Americans liked the PAC preciously. For example, Conrad Worrill and his people here in Chicago, they liked the PAC because it was just black only, and they liked hearing phrases like, We’re going to drive the whites into the sea. All of this changes later, but that was initially the position of some very militant national groups. So, I got attacked. Defending me were the Tanzanian government and also the Organization of African Unity’s African Liberation Committee, and many of the European groups. What all came to a head, in a very ugly, ugly episode at a conference in West Germany, where the PAC publicly attacked me and called me the Black Crete Williams. Now, Craig Williams, or Williamson, Craig Williamson is a bête noire, I think that’s the phrase, of the struggle against apartheid South Africa. He is a white South African who infiltrated anti-apartheid movements all over the world. He was the one who killed Ruth First. He was a spy, he was a master spy. So when this PAC guy called me this in this public meeting in Germany, the anti-apartheid groups throughout Europe were furious that he would have the gall to do that, and they called for stopping of the whole meeting. It was a huge brouhaha. And he finally was forced to apologize for what he had done, and what he had said.

EM: Do you remember what year that was?

PN: I think that this was in 197-, ’82.

EM: Okay. And you were present when he—

PN: I was present.

EM: And what, what, how did you feel—

PN: I felt horrible. It was a horrible moment. However, I was rallied by two things: number one, I was very clear about this report, and I was very clear about what I had seen. And I, so I had already been enduring some of this backlash that had come from all over. The second thing was that the European anti-apartheid movement groups all just rallied like crazy to defend me. So I knew he could call me whatever he wanted, but that the people that were really mattered, were the people who supported me. And then, of course, the ANC view with complete support and welcome to this report. It was a very controversial paper that was done, and there was a woman on the, the World Council of Churches had a governing body called the PCR Commissioners. There was a woman from the Methodist Church of New York, from the United Methodist Church who was their representative, who herself favored the Black Nationalist kind of perspective, and so she didn’t like the report.

EM: It, it’s interesting, and maybe if you could talk to this, if you feel it’s significant, because you talked about how the World Council of Churches didn’t give money to the
armed struggles, so there’s these arms of the struggle within the ANC and PAC that is training for guerrilla warfare—

PN: To which the World Council of Churches money did not go.

EM: Did not go, so, I, I find, I mean, I think that’s interesting at least to point out that there’s arms and there’s modern parallels to that as well. And the PAC being a black nationalist group, but they would accept money from the World Council of Churches?

PN: That’s correct.

EM: Okay. So, their funding wasn’t limited to—

PN: Their funding was not limited to just black people.

EM: Their membership.

PN: Their funding and actually their membership, because they actually had a man named Patrick Duncan who was a white member of the PAC. I mean, there was all kinds of contradictions around the Pan Africanist Congress. Ultimately, these contradictions really do lead to the undoing, so that then the last election, for example, in South Africa this year, the Pan Africanist Congress got less than one percent, half of one percent of the vote inside the country. So it is, it is just withered away to nothingness. And in the years of 1994, as the emergence of Nelson Mandela, and as the negotiations, they became nothing, nothing, as an organization.

EM: But back in the early eighties obviously that wasn’t the case. Were you, were you worried for your safety? Did they see you beyond just an investigator, reporter or editor?

PN: They didn’t like me. They really did not like me, and there were other moments of confrontation with the PAC people and PAC supporters that yes, they were tense, they were tense moments. But, the other thing is that there were sufficient numbers of people who knew that what I was saying in my report was completely correct, and that there were, it was a very big, and this, this question of what is a real liberation movement was not limited to South Africa. The question also came up in regards to Angola, and the struggle in Angola. The question also came up in regards to Namibia, and there to, there were these organizations that, that that came forward that said they were fighting for the freedom of the people, but in fact they weren’t the most, called the FNLA in Angola. The, the revolutionary government of Angola in exile GRAE, UNITA, ultimately UNITA, which got tremendous projection in the United States at one time, until people found out that South African apartheid system was completely backencing, backing that liberation movement. And then they found out also who were some of the people who were supporting it, like Dennis Deconcini, the conservative Democratic Senator from Arizona, who thought that Savimbi was one of the greatest people in the world. The United States backing for both, UNITA and FNLA in Angola, is part of the story of how the United States then becomes complicit in the destruction of Angola all because of the
Cold War. I mean, the bottom of all this was the Cold War. It was heavy stuff, it was
heavy stuff.

EM: I want to ask you a little bit more about this time in your life, that it was not, but the
edit, your role as an editor and a reporter, investigator, researcher. You said it was not
the first time you had served as an editor, and you edited the Mozambique Revolution.

PN: I edited the Mozambique Revolution and had—

EM: In the sixties?

PN: In the sixties. In ’68 and ’69, in a period when, when FRELIMO was being tested
by internal issues and ultimately that testing would end up with Eduardo Mondlane being
assassinated. I had the great pleasure to work with one of the people I most admire in the
world, to this day, who’s the great leader Jorge Rebelo, who was a poet, and a
revolutionary, and he was the Minister of Information for, he was the first Minister of
Information for Free Mozambique in 1975, but prior to that he was in charge of all of the
written material, the propaganda, that came out from the liberation. And I, in that
capacity he put out the Mozambique Revolution, and I helped him with that. I translated
things, I read things over, ‘cause it came out in various languages. It came out in
Portuguese; it also came out in English, I think it also had a Russian edition, I’m not sure,
but it was a wonderful magazine full of extraordinary colors. I remember when the first
issues came that it was a color issue, then the, it had been published by the GDR, who’s
part of the East Germany’s contribution to Mozambique. One of the things about this,
about all this international stuff around these liberation movements that brings you into a
whole different world of context and connection, I still have and value immensely, the,
the work that I did. I still have the early publications, the first drafts, and value
immensely those. What I learned Jorge Rebelo, in working with him, and he still is one
of the foremost poets of Africa. There is no collections of verse that don’t have Jorge
Rebelo.

EM: I just find it interesting that you, you’ve had a significant and numerous roles as
editors of publications for these movements, and how you see that fitting into your
work—

PN: It’s interesting, it is interesting Erin because, actually I never thought about it that
way, but, you know, because of my work with the Mozambique Revolution, and my work
with the World Council of Churches, I think it was about that time that I actually at one
point wrote a major book review of a book called “African Liberation Movements.” And
that book review for Africa Today magazine was one of the challenges of this book that
was a kind of Cold War Bible book, this “African Liberation Movements,” criticizing all
these liberation movements that were backed by the Soviet Union. And the man who put
this book out, Richard Gibson, was an African American man who played a very dubious
role throughout that whole period of time. So my review, and critical review of his book,
was, I think it did make quite a contribution at that time. And you’re correct that I think
that there are other moments too, later, I would do a whole issue of Africa Today about
the struggle in Portuguese Africa, and then later, of course, I would put out *Baobab Notes*, which I worked many years later in the late eighties for the Mozambique government, and helped to found a network of people across the United States doing work and support of FRELIMO. Then we put out this wonderful little publication called *the Baobab Notes*. This came out and predates, this is all prior to email and to the computer, but it was very popular publication that we put out, this *Baobab Notes*.  

**EM:** And it’s purpose still, for the interest of Mozambique—

**PN:** It was primary, but there was no way that we could talk about Mozambique without also talking about South Africa and Zimbabwe, and Angola, and U.S. foreign policy toward Africa, because you couldn’t talk about Mozambique without putting it in the context that its reality was. Its reality was that Mozambique was at war against an enemy that was backed up by South Africa and backed up by major conservative organizations in the United States like Coors Foundation, or like the American Free Enterprise Institute, AEI, or individuals like Pat Robertson. The “Pat Robertson Club” had the rebel movement RENAMO on its show several times, and we talked about that and critiqued it in the pages of the *Baobab Notes*. But it was a little tiny whimper, we had no command over major networks. We never reproduced in *Time* or *Newsweek*, but, we did keep, keep at it. It was important, for example, in terms of helping to stimulate a man named Robert Gersony. Gersony was a worker for a State Department of the United States that did a report that likened the killing that was going on in Mozambique to the Holocaust. His phrase was it was the worst killing methodologies that had ever had happened since the Holocaust. That got tremendous, tremendous coverage in United States when a State Department Official, working for the United States government, said that phrase and used that phrase, because at that very time the Mozambicans were very concerned that the United States government, the Reagan administration, would not take the position that it took with regard to Nicaragua in backing the cultures. Had that happened, it would’ve totally destroyed Mozambique, completely. As it were, million, nearly a million people died. But, had Ronald Reagan supported doing a war against Mozambique FRELIMO in the same way that he supported the war against the MPLA of Angola, it would’ve been just horrific and horrible, what would have happened. And so, for FRELIMO, and Mozambican government, the work that we did in support of FRELIMO, was very important work to help create a network across the country. For example, we brought a wonderful sculptor and muralist, Malangatana Ngwenya, to come on a tour all over the United States, and he is a singing muralist, great, huge Mozambican man, does wonderful art. His art is among some of the most popular art all over Europe now. And he came, and he did his mural. He did a mural, for example, right here on the West Side of Chicago at the Jenner School over on the West Side. That school asks me all the time, when is Malangatana Ngwenya coming back? And because he was this person, he was a person that was so likeable, I think he, his persona became a way of telling people that Mozambicans were people. Graca Machel, now the wife of Nelson Mandela, did a speaking tour across the United States. She still—

**EM:** Is she from Mozambique?
PN: She’s from Mozambique, you see. She was the First Lady of Mozambique, she was married to the first President, Samora Machel, who was killed in a plane crash that we to this day, many of us don’t believe was an accident.

EM: Okay, I’m sorry to interrupt but let me ask you this, I think it’s a good time, that, you know, all things that you are involved with, and we’re kind of into the eighties now, I’m just wondering what, what was your, what was your plan? Did you prioritize? Did you think, there are so many issues that you are involved in and covering and watching over. Did you have to choose ever, between, did you say I’m going to focus on the anti-apartheid movement, or I’m going to focus on this specific liberation movement? Or, did you see them—

PN: We saw them as so interrelated.

EM: Yeah.

PN: We, I coined an expression. We said to defeat apartheid is to defend Mozambique, so that we believed, and I still believe that helping to overthrow the apartheid regime was helping to make it safer for the Mozambican people and the new Republic of Mozambique to be able to live.

EM: So that was the number one, but not on a checklist. But also, you saw that as just affecting everything.

PN: It was all on a list.

EM: How did you decide though, personally, what you were going to focus on?

PN: Remember that part of this time I’m working from ’87, first I would start working for Harold Washington. In ’83, when I leave the World Council of Churches and come back to Chicago, I come, I arrive back in Chicago in April just as Harold is being elected. That, I got off the plane, and started ringing doorbells with Helen Schiller and other people and Slim Coleman, and mobilizing to get out the vote for Harold. And that night that his results were announced, I remember being down at McCormick Place. I remember being part of the group of people who wanted to make sure that the focus was all on Harold and not on Jesse Jackson, ‘cause Jesse was kind of hogging the stage. And it was shortly there after that I applied to work for Harold Washington, and my typical Chicago fashion, my application got lost and it was, a woman who has since died who was a famous figure in the day, both the Civil Rights movement and the City of Chicago, named Lucy Montgomery, who was related to the Montgomery-Ward money, Lucy had been in the South with the Civil Rights movement. Everybody who was a Civil Rights worker knew Lucy. She was a bit crazy, but totally dedicated. And Lucy, who had this deep Southern drawl, saw me in a restaurant one night and said, “Prexy, I didn’t know you were back here.” I said, “Yes.” She said, “What are you doing?” I said, “Well I’m trying to work for Harold.” She said, “You trying to work for Harold? Of course you should be working for Harold. You know what I’m going to do Prexy? I’m going to call
Harold and we’re going to go see him.” She called Harold that night, and the next day I was in Harold’s office with her, and Harold talked to me for about fifteen minutes and he said, “I’ve seen you before.” And I said, “Yes, you have.” And he said, “How do I know you?” And I said, “Well I was the one who brought forward and testified in the City Council in favor of divestment against those others favoring continued American involvement with apartheid.” He said, “Clearly, you’re somebody I want on my side. I don’t want you to testify against anything I do anymore.” And he put me to work in a group that was nick-named the “Mod Squad.” It was a special unit of four people, headed by Jane Ramsey, who now heads the Jewish Council of Urban Affairs, and we worked above the level of Cabinet heads, so that there were people, for example, like Rob Mier, who was the head of economic development, or Tim Wright, who was with the economic development, we worked above those levels. We were answerable only to the Mayor and his assistant, Ernie Barefield. We handled issues, problems, anything that came up and we’d be shot, that’s why they called us the Mod Squad. It was a Jewish woman, a black man, a Japanese-American woman, and a Puerto Rican man, and they called us the Mod Squad, and we’d be shot into all kinds of situations and issues. I did that for a year and a half, or two years, I think. And then one time I got a message from the Mozambican government that the President, Samora Machel had been killed, and the new President, Joaquim Chissano, who had known me in the armed struggle years, wanted me. They wanted me to work in a special capacity as a special representative organizing all over the United States, and would I be willing to? I went to Harold and said, “Well Harold, this is the situation.” I said, “Would you be willing to let me do this?” He said, “How important is this to Africa?” I said, “It’s very important.” Harold had read a book I wrote. And I did, I do combine a little writing and reflection with this activism. I’ve written a book called Apartheid in our Living Rooms. Harold had read that, and he was very impressed with it. He said to me, “Well if they need you there, you better go to them then.” And in fact then there was a kind of dialectic, because Harold had always been very interested in Southern Africa. He gave the key to the city to a man named Alfred Nzo, who was then the Acting General Secretary of the African National Congress, at the time the U.S. State Department viewed the ANC as a terrorist organization. And at that time Nelson Mandela was on the terrorist list, Harold Washington gave the key to the city to Alfred Nzo. And Harold Washington hosted SWAPO guerrillas, that is combatants from the Southwest African Peoples Organization who were fighting for freedom in Namibia, wonderful pictures of Harold hosting these men and women from SWAPO in the City Council of Chicago. So he’s, there’s this wonderful perception that Harold had that he was an international Mayor, that he was a global Mayor, and that was very much in keeping with the view that the Mozambicans had, which influenced me at such an early age. I remember, for example, that I was working in Chimoio Province. I was working up, up in the country in Mozambique, up in the country, outside of the Capital and word came that Harold had died. Someone in Chicago contacted the Mozambican President’s office, his secretary called me and said, “Your friend died. President Chissano wants you to come back and get back to Chicago. You have to be there.” They sent a Presidential helicopter, it picked me up outside of the Capital, brought me to the Capital, put me on a first-class seat, flew me to Lisbon, Portugal, shot me straight through to Chicago and I walked into the funeral. I walked into the funeral in the church on 79th Street, straight off the plane to be there just in time.
as they were having this massive service for Harold Washington. I always said to people
that saw me, When did you-, how did you get here Prexy? “The Mozambican said you
had to be there.” So that’s, I think, the importance that they felt, and that Harold felt in
turn about them.

EM: Tell me about the funeral.

PN: The funeral, what a sad event. It was sad and it was also a victory. I re-, I was not
present but I remember Harold talking to me about the race hate stuff that surfaced in that
first term he had, the wars with Vrydolyack. I remember, I heard him once talk about
going up to a Catholic Church on the Northwest Side where they all had these signs
that said We don’t want you here. And one had, Nigger go on back to the South Side.

For the Mayor of the city! And Harold, one of Harold’s aides asked, Is nobody here
prepared to greet your Mayor? And a little boy walked out and said, “I welcome you Mr.
Mayor.” And Harold got out and he shook the little boy’s hands and they went into the
church, then the priest finally came forward to greet him and took him also, after this
visit, it took him about, well I remember a similar thing. I remember being present, for
instance, with Harold when he met with, just after his lunch with a Puerto Rican or Latino
man the pastor was beaten by the police there, knocked down. It was a horrible incident.

A group of Latino pastors and religious folk came to meet with Harold and were very
upset about this. Harold came into the meeting, I was there with him, and he put aside
the notes that he had and he said, I want to be very honest with you. I don’t control this
police force. He said, I’m going to be very honest. You all know as well as I do who’s in
control of this police force in this city. And he said, It will be awhile. It’s going to take
work, I need your support. I need you to be with me. It was an incredible meeting. And
that was, I think, part of what wedded Harold to people like Rudy Lozano, the late
Alderman who was killed in Pilsen. I think that Harold’s funeral and those days of
mourning, I remember going down to City Hall and seeing people who, it was very
multiracial. It was not just black people at that point who had decided that this was a
good man. I had a very good friend who was an Irish-American woman, and her father
had a motive for everything, but he voted for him in that second term because Harold had
helped get him better garbage cans, and that was all he needed to know. When Harold
died, he was upset. This was not a, this was not a liberal, this was a man who was very
representative of the Northwest Side white community. When Harold died he went and
he stood in line there with all those other people around City Hall to go in and pay his
respects to Harold lying in the casket there in City Hall. But I think that that was the
sobriety of that moment in the church was there too. There was, it was like saying that
we are, he made the contribution for us and we have now an obligation. I think a lot of
people felt that.

EM: And is that the victory you’re referring to?

PN: That’s the victory of, that I’m referring to. I think that Harold’s contribution led to a
victorious moment of citywide celebration and recognition of each other that we have
never retreated from. I think it’s not ever been, politically at least, it’s never been at the
level, again, it’s never returned to that level of vituperation and bitterness that went on in
the Council Wars (telephone rings) since you had things happen like Slim Coleman punching out Eddie Vrdolyac and he would totally react, all this name calling and stuff that went on in those Council, you must remember some of that stuff—.

EM: Oh, yeah.

PN: It was, it was pretty ugly stuff.

EM: Yeah, and embarrassing, and—

PN: Embarrassing, yeah.

EM: Juvenile, any word that you can come up with.

PN: It was deep, it was deep. Let’s see, how do you turn this thing off?

EM: Now I want you to talk about your work as a union organizer, but before that, because we kind of moved ahead, I want to ask you to go back to your ‘83 visit, illegal trip to South Africa. And so, was that before, obviously, before you returned to Chicago? Yeah, okay, so could you talk about that?

PN: In 1983, based on, I’m beginning to understand much more now about what, how it happened and I was able, I was invited by a group of people inside of South Africa. It was very important that it was inside South Africa. These were not liberation movement organizations in the neighboring countries, what they called Front Line States. These were people who were inside the country, who were doing a major workshop on organizing. And it was going to be held in a part of what today is called the Eastern Cape. It was then called the Transkei. It was going to be held at a Catholic, excuse me, a Catholic nun’s facility, a nunnery near a place called Lady Frere in Transkei. There were two women who were using and had used Paulo Freire’s techniques and pedagogy to do training of people. I, too, had done some Paulo Freire stuff, both at the World Council of Churches where Freire was in residence, and before I went to the World Council of Churches, when I was doing alternative school stuff here in Chicago, I and some other people hosted Paulo Freire in a workshop we did on using Freire’s pedagogy here in Chicago. Two women, Ann, Ann and Sally we would call them, contacted me on behalf of people inside the country and they asked me if I would join them in coming inside the country to do these workshops. Now to get inside the country I knew that I couldn’t get a visa to enter South Africa and the apartheid state of South Africa, its set up these homelands, these bantustans, twelve of them, that were part of a grand scheme to make it look like the South African apartheid regime cared about blacks and their black homelands. So part of what they did was to give the Transkei the right to have its own control over internationals coming directly into the Transkei, flying in. Now what they didn’t tell people was that the South African security branch pretty much still oversaw all of that. So, I ended up flying from Geneva, Switzerland and going to Johannesburg, if I remember correctly, and then flying into Umtatan, capital of the Transkei. Lesotho, once
called Basutoland, was a British high commission territory that’s totally within South Africa. And I could also have landed there.

EM: You didn’t land in Johannesburg?

PN: They wouldn’t let you out! You could land at the airport, but then you had to be under lock and key, literally. Many times—

EM: Did they know you were on that plane?

PN: Oh they knew who everybody was on planes. What they used to do was they would meet you on the plane and take you to the Holiday Inn inside the airport where you would be locked in a room and if you had to wait for six or seven hours, or overnight, you were locked in that room overnight. Locked in! And then the next day, if you had to eat, they’d come and be given, it was like you were put in a Goddamn jail! So that was what they did.

EM: But they, so they knew that you were on that plane. You were not allowed to enter the country. But they thought you were going—

PN: To Maseru, Lesotho, the British high commission territory—

EM: So they couldn’t control—

PN: That’s right. Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland were these British high commission territories where their currency was the rand of South Africa. The planes coming in and out were all controlled by South Africa. They had this rubric, this facsimile of British legitimacy that made it possible to do this. So we, I flew to Maseru and there I was met by people who had South African passports, who then drove me using various routes into the Transkei. Now I could enter the Transkei because this was one of the homelands, alright?

EM: Right.

PN: Before I had left Geneva I went and reported that I had lost my passport. So I got a new passport that showed no travel, and I used the fact that my name is really not Prexy Nesbitt, that’s not my legal name. So, I had the name Rozell Nesbitt, Rozell William Nesbitt. So then, no association, plus the passport showed no travel. So I was able to then enter the Transkei with this passport riding in the car with these white South Africans, and was taken directly, now, to show you the level of seriousness of this Erin, just to give you some idea. People were coming in for this conference to look at Freire and look at use of pedagogy of oppressed. You know Freire’s stuff?

EM: I know the name and the reference.

PN: Paulo Freire.
PN: That was part of the purpose. My role, really, was to talk about the liberation struggles in Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. That’s why, ‘cause I see, I had been funding all this from Geneva, so I know, and I’ve known this history because, so they, therefore they wanted me to come in to talk about this, because for people inside South Africa, they can’t get this news. Just, if you had a piece of paper that said SWAPO on it, that’s illegal. If you had a piece of paper that talked about Robert Mugabe, that’s illegal. You can’t have magazines that, you can’t have any of that. So, inside the country, as they’re struggling, they’re thirsting for information about the liberation struggles taking place in the neighboring countries, all of which involved white South African forces fighting in all of those. Those were places where white South Africans were being drafted to go and fight in all those countries, Angola, Mozambique, all of those liberation struggles, fought white South African Armies.

EM: It’s crazy because they’re exporting, you know, to keep down the liberation, and then the international liberation struggles are also exporting to fight apartheid and, and—

PN: It’s intense struggle.

EM: Yeah.

PN: In all of this, too, you have all of the other players. You’ve got Israel, you’ve got West Germany, you’ve got the United States. In all of these things that are happening. To show you the level of seriousness, which was a new level for me, we got there to this nunnery and it, it’s a big huge facility, all black and white nuns, mostly Irish white nuns. And the first thing that happened with every car as we entered the gates, was that they were all parked along side of a great rotund, round chapel, and the cars were parked like a circle around this chapel. I didn’t know that, but later turns out that the reason they were all put there was ‘cause all those cars coming from all parts of South Africa had all gone through roadblocks. What happens in any roadblock in that period in South Africa, maybe still happens, I doubt that though, was that they bug it. As they search the car, they bug the car, you know?

EM: Yeah.

PN: The cars then would have the bugs, but these activists knew all this. So they put their cars deliberately around this chapel because, throughout the conference, and in particular during certain key sessions, nuns would play Bach and Cantatas at full volume, full volume, neutralizing, then, the bugs, ‘cause all the bugs could pick up was the sound of all this music taking place. It was very, very serious.

EM: So, but, just to be clear, what you’re telling me too is that there is this huge oral component because the printed component is illegal?
EM: So you could speak, I mean, you are giving them the news of these liberations by—
PN: That’s right.
EM: Orally, because you couldn’t—
PN: I didn’t bring a piece of paper into that place.
EM: And they didn’t write up notes for this conference or this—
PN: Well that comes up later because, it comes up later because there is also a guy who
gets identified in the group of people who come who is a, he’s a spy. He’s an agent, and
he gets identified, and people talk about it, and they decide on what strategy they’re
going to use to deal with him. It wasn’t, now understand that by this point in ’83,
although it wasn’t as high as it would become later, necklacing is already being used.
EM: Just briefly describe that—
PN: Necklacing is when you, when angry youth, the comrades who were in the struggle,
would take spies and take a tire and dose it with kerosene and would burn them, burn
them dead, kill ‘em, put it on and this was getting ride of the spy. Now they just, they
went, there wasn’t going to be any getting ride of this guy, but they definitely isolated
him within the group. The Transkei, where we were, was run by the Transkei security
forces. I didn’t get to stay throughout the whole period. By the fourth or fifth night,
maybe it was later then that, I can’t, I’d have to look back, by the fourth or fifth night it
was exposed that myself and a Kenyan man, who was also, had done some Freire tech
training, we both had to be smuggled out early in the morning, and put in nuns outfits to
be driven to the border with Lesotho, to there get out and cross manually, I was shittin’
bricks at the idea of crossing manually by road, back into Lesotho to get out of that
country.
EM: Because they were looking for you?
PN: They had decided, the people running the conference, that it was time that I was,
gotten out of the country. Now, up until that time, there were all kinds of other stuff we
did. Because of the presence of that guy who was an informant, the general atmosphere,
you never talked in any of the buildings. We talked at night on the roads. And I had to
get used to what it was like to have intense political discussions in the pitch black
walking the roads all around this nunnery, pitch black.
EM: Not seeing other people’s faces?
PN: You couldn’t see anything. You had met the person, you knew you were walking
with, but a lot of people had those kind of meetings on that trip, because I knew a lot, and
they all wanted this information. It was in that time, for example, two things that I
learned that later just reminded me. One of them was that I learned about all the
problems Winnie Mandela was having. And she was then, she was either in isolation or
had just come out of being in a banning order in a rural part, but she was, I think by that
time she had already had some involvement with her bodyguards known as the “soccer
club” that ultimately killed a young boy, but she was already having some relationships
that people didn’t trust, she was a wild card. People loved her, and they all knew the
great stuff she had done, but they also knew that she was wild, that there was no telling
what she might always do, but she wasn’t always subject to the discipline of the armed
struggle, and the discipline of ANC, so I learned a lot about that.

EM: And so did she have, you know, I wonder if she had enough autonomy where
people, you know, there weren’t things in place that could’ve—
PN: Because they were constantly being broken.
EM: Okay.
PN: Things that were put in place, structures in place, connections and relationships, this
was underground, it was all underground stuff that’s constantly being broken, and then
new things have to be set up and constructed.
EM: And so for the white government, the apartheid government, that they wanted that
to continue? I mean they—
PN: Absolutely.
EM: So they did.
PN: Absolutely they did.
EM: Yeah.
PN: It was in this period, for instance, on that visit, that something that very few people
have talked about and written about, a few have, a lot is now coming up. I kept hearing
on these late night walks, Prexy, it would be great for you to go—
EM: Just pause for one minute. Oh, thank you, thank you very much. We’ll continue
with that. Okay.

pause in recording
PN: As I was saying that the, it was in this period in these late night walks in pitch
blackness that people kept saying to me, Prexy we want you, it would be great if while
you’re here, meaning while you’re in South Africa, you could meet with the big man.
And they kept making these illusions to the big man, and to the chief. And I, I always
thought, and I couldn’t figure out who they were talking about. I thought they were talking about Mandela.

EM: Um-hm.

PN: Then I thought they were talking about, maybe Steve Biko or someone like that, but it wasn’t until years and years later that I met after ’94 I met one of these nuns who had been in the group who explained to me, no, who the person they were talking about was a man named Beyers Naude. And Beyers Naude was an Afrikaner cleric, once head of the South African Council of Churches, the founder of the Christian Institute of South Africa. He was the man that the Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church ultimately apologizes to, because he was the one who said, I will never implement the Christianity of apartheid. He was simultaneously, he was a member of the ANC, he was underground member of the ANC, and I don’t know for sure—

EM: And he was the big man?

PN: He was the big man.

EM: I’m sorry to interrupt.

PN: He was simultaneously, because many people at that period of time in the eighties had various roles. They had a public persona that might involve being political too, but underground they were also ANC. In addition, they might be SACP, which is even then a step further because that’s South African Communist Party. And remember that in all this underground organizing and work, in many, many areas, it was this South African Communist Party people who were the most experienced in doing underground work, and had had some of the most training. And so this was, this was a very wide opening, eye opening experience, you know. I mean, it was, there were all kind of humorous stuff. I’m still in touch with some of these nuns. The priest that drove me and the other man to the border that day, he was tortured, I’m told, that day. A wonderful man named Dick Ryder, also Irish. These Irish Catholic priests, because another part of what they wanted me to work with people about was helping people get through the ideological religious convictions issue of simultaneously being committed to nonviolent struggle, but also having to deal with things. If you were a nun in a school way out in the bush and somebody knocks, comes on the door and somebody says so-and-so’s here, he wants food. Can we give him food, and he’s an MK member, it’s a guerrilla, and you’re a nonviolent person, it means that you have to have a head, you got to deal with that. And, you know, theologically by that point, although I’m not a Christian, I knew this stuff.

Theologically, the Programme to Combat Racism and certain key members of faith, of the Christian faith, had come to the conclusion that there was a just war, that there could be circumstances where armed struggle was condonable. So, for instance, within all these guerrilla movements there were chaplains. That was something I had to get used to, you know, a chaplains for the guerrilla struggle. In fact, this wonderful man, Michael Lapsley, wonderful man from New Zealand, was an Anglican priest, and subsequently I
learned many church people who were part of MK, of the armed wing of the liberation movement.

EM: So, it’s interesting, you just kind of mentioned you’re not a Christian, but, with the World Council of Churches. It’s just kind of funny with your goals, your values were the same. So they didn’t mind you weren’t a Christian? And you didn’t mind working, so, how does that work?

PN: No. Well, I think first of all that that has happened in many social change situations, that there comes to be a compatibility of values and goals. That was true against the fight against Nazism, it was true in the fight against Pinochet and Chile, and that that was also one of the things that was going on in the World Council of Churches that excited me. For example, there was a Christian unit that did nothing else but Karl Marx’s dialogue. Now that was not the kind of stuff that made Pat Robertson and others in this country very happy, but this, there comes points where there is a, an affinity of values and purposes, you know? Dom Helder, this wonderful, he since died, but he was this Brazilian Bishop at this great vault, he would always say, I give alms to the poor and they call me a saint. I ask why are the poor poor, and they call me a communist.

EM: That’s great.

PN: So that, that kind of examination, and although I’m not a Christian, I’m an honest man, and that was one of the things I’d like most about what Cabral would always say. They’d ask him if he was a Marx, and he’d say I’m an honest man. I’m looking at the things happening around me and saying how do I respond to these things? And I came out of a family that, on my mother’s side, that included a pastor who was called the gun-toting preacher. That was Reverend William Crane, he was an AME minister. They nicknamed him the gun-toting pastor. He had churches all over the Midwest, including on the West Side of Chicago, and also in the South. Why was he the gun-toting pastor? Pastors were special targets of the Ku Klux Klan. Pastors were targets because they were the learned ones. So they would ask, Reverend Crane, why do you carry that gun? You take it up to the pulpit? He said, I carry that gun. Sometimes I got it at the pulpit, sometime I don’t. But why do I have that gun? I ain’t worried about the people, it’s the Bishops that I worry about (laughter). It was anti-hierarchy, it was a peoples kind of pastor. That’s the kind of tradition and values that I was raised with in my family.

EM: You know, it’s very, I find this interesting that you go, you said your role in, at this training conference session at the nunnery was really to educate and bring news of the liberation movements to South Africa.

PN: News and analysis.

EM: News and analysis.

PN: Yeah.
EM: But you’re also there working with, in this training program, and then you come
back to Chicago. Is that when your union organization starts?

PN: That’s when my union organizer starts. And I think that, you know, I had had one
stint at least organizing before then, but then I come back and I had great exposure to a
wonderful organizing individual here in Chicago named Hazen Griffin, who was an
organizer with the Service Employees International Union. I remember him most
because of he, that that Union Local 372, the SEIU, Service Employees International
Union represented the Marshall Field workers. I’ll never forget a meeting he once had in
Marshall Field with these Marshall Field workers, it was just a classic and beautiful
meeting that taught me so much about what union, a good union organizer was. And
Hazen Griffin was that, he was a horrible father, he was a horrible husband, I think he
was married four or five times. He was very deeply involved with a woman named Mary
Beth Guinan, I don’t know what’s happened to her but she was a great activist, feminist,
very powerful here in Chicago. So they, I was working for them when I did some
organizing and a second venture of organizing, and finally toward the end I was working
for another wonderful union leader, a man named Cleveland Robinson, who was a blind
trade unionist who had worked with Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King. He was,
King used to call him his trade unionist, “Cleve.” And when I worked on the America
Committee of Africa earlier in this ’77-’80 period, when I was in charge of getting
massive institutions to withdraw their bank accounts from banks making loans to South
Africa, I was with Cleve a lot. He said to me right away, he said, “We’re going to do this
thing Prexy. We’re going to take our money out of this Chase Bank and put it in a bank
that’s not involved in South Africa. We’re going to use this as a statement to others to do
the same thing.” There was, it was about not equivocating. That was these, that was the
characteristic that they had in common, I think.

EM: So and what, now, so what was your role with the unions? Was it divestiture, or—

PN: My role was very clearly this.

EM: Okay.

PN: I both worked with three different unions as an organizer, but early, and in between
there in the ’77-’79 period I worked for the American Committee on Africa out of New
York City, before I went to work for the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

EM: Right, okay.

PN: And in that period my role was to get unions to withdraw their monies from banks
making loans to South Africa. So in that capacity, I was organizing the campaign to
oppose bank loans to South Africa. One leverage we had was to withdraw monies by
institutions. We got the United Methodist Church to do it. We go the United Automobile
Workers Union to do it, American Federation of Municipal County Employees, Drug and
Hospital Workers Union. I would work with these unions to get them to withdraw big
accounts, you know, big, that banks really rely on. So in the beginning the banks called
us the “hassle factor.” But by the end this had become a very serious and powerful threat that ultimately leads to the 1986 Passage of Sanctions by the United States government, you know, which the tremendous, very highly visible campaign around the taking over of the South African embassy, and all the people getting arrested at the South African Council, we had some here in Chicago too, all of that is highly visible. What preceded that was all this other work done all over the country, countless.

EM: So in ’86 when that’s achieved, what’s the next goal and priority?

PN: The next goal and priority was to sharpen that and to move it even further, and then to also get implementation of no weapons, no flow of weapon to get enforced, to get enforced what existed as a United Nations statement that there would be no weapons to the apartheid government of South Africa.

EM: Okay, so that is also international.

PN: That’s also an international effort.

EM: Is U.S. money going towards that?

PN: U.S. weapons were going toward that.

EM: U.S. weapons, yeah.

PN: U.S. weapons were very, definitely going to that. One of the things we most feared in that point, for example, there was a company, Space Research Corporation out of Vermont that was helping to build nuclear bullets for the South African apartheid regime. And that company out of Vermont, there’s a wonderful film about this, documentary. We feared that the South African government would, was capable of doing numerous nuclear strikes in the region that would hit Luanda, but not Maputo, it’s too close, or maybe Dar es Salaam. They could do these cities, we knew that they had that capacity. And then years later, of course, it was South Africa under Mandela who would denuclearize, to get rid of their stockpile of weapons. But we knew that they had, along with Israel and West Germany and the United States, become a nuclear power.

EM: Why do you think they didn’t use that?

PN: I think that there was so much other things happening by 1987, ’88 that were unraveling their will to keep going. One of those things was the Labor Unions. The call had gone out from ANC make South Africa ungovernable, so the strikes were just taking place all the time. The fight called Cuito Cuanavale in ’88, when the Cubans come in to help the Angolan forces and they defeat the white South African Army at Cuito Cuanavale, was such a blow to the morale of white South Africans. They still write about that, they still talk about it. It led to sharpening the numbers of white South Africans who were refusing to go to the front, refusing to serve. The numbers were leaving the country, going at Canada, going at the United States, anything to avoid dying in these
battles, ‘cause they were beginning to die now. When the white South African forces
were being killed, when they publicly acknowledged they were dying, that was a very
important transition in the struggle. The economy was going to hell in a hand basket.
Sanctions were happening all over, and at the same time they were having these talks
Mandela was doing with the government inside. Now, we had no idea of that. I had no
idea of that, I heard, you heard rumors, but they were just things you heard, okay? So
that I was as surprised as everyone else in February of 1990 when Mandela, when it was
announced that Mandela was going to be released from jail, and the others had been
released. Now that’s another whole, another whole saga because that leads to another trip
right away. But in that late eighties period, and I think another thing that’s very
important they’re stretched thin, they’re stretched very thin. They’ve got the internal
struggle happening in South Africa. They’ve got all of Namibia also happening, they’ve
got Angola happening, they’re worried about what’s going to happen with the support
they’re giving to RENAMO fighting against Mozambique. And I think that that’s, the
parallel to that is the unraveling that went on in the United States during the Vietnam War
years, the unraveling process that begins to take place.
EM: That too much is going wrong?
PN: Too much is going wrong.
EM: Of things that had previously been—
PN: Of things that previously had been fine.
EM: Or at least controlled.
PN: This was getting too costly, and there were too many things happening that we can’t
any longer control.
EM: Okay, before we end today, that beeper is bugging me, but it’s a good, it will be a
good time and we kind of got a next session, what we’ll talk about, but I want to just go
back to the union organizing. Did you see that, or was it separate, or how was it linked to
your work with these liberation movements, in particular, South Africa? Because in
organizing, was there also an education component?
PN: Oh absolutely.
EM: Okay.
PN: I saw it as totally the same.
EM: Totally the same.
PN: It was totally the same. And the unions that I worked for saw it as totally the same.
And the union people that I worked with saw it totally the same.
EM: Okay, so explain for us though, how those things are, are just flowing together in the same path?

PN: We had a lot of unions that, for example, there was an organization here in Chicago called Labor Against Apartheid, and that, those were union people who were against the apartheid and who were in solidarity with their union brothers and sisters in South Africa who were calling for them to do things in solidarity, so for me to start doing organizing work around South Africa.

EM: So, and, was that to increase the membership of these four unions you worked for?

PN: It was to both build the membership, to unionize people where there was no union, to organize, it was to organize.

EM: So did you have to, the union leadership, were they totally onboard, or was it also a grassroots—

PN: They were totally onboard.

EM: Onboard, they were, okay.

PN: Later I would learn how un-, how not onboard was the highest levels of the AFL CIO, but on these union locals here in Chicago and all around, you know, I had spoken in so many of these union halls across the whole country, and particularly, so much of the membership was black, Latino, and women. They were seeing blacks, and people of color, and women being brutalized in apartheid.

EM: So, translating that, that wasn’t hard to translate?

PN: The same struggle, same fight.

EM: The same struggle.

PN: The same struggle, the same fight, and that was the easiest thing in the world to translate. It made, I found, I felt so completely at home, I could go into a union hall and completely feel at home talking about the struggle of union people. I could feel that too in some black churches, but in union hall, you just, people got it right away. They understood right away what it was all about. I’m tired, I guess.

EM: No, this is a good point. This is a perfect point, because next time we meet we’ll talk about your work with Francis, the local Francis, MacArthur Foundation, Mandela’s release, and the end of the apartheid.

PN: And we can wrap it up.
EM: Okay, so great. Alright.

pause in recording

EM: This is continuation of the interview with Prexy Nesbitt. It is August 31, 2009, and we are at Columbia College. And Prexy, in some of your off camera remarks, as we started preparing for this interview, you were talking about the significance of the death this week of Senator—

PN: Ted Kennedy.

EM: Teddy Kennedy, thank you, and some of the things that you had learned and we agreed that really we would like this on tape, so if you could continue with your remarks.

PN: Well I, as I think I mentioned once before in this interview, Ted Kennedy was very involved in the hosting of President Mandela in his first trip to the United States after his release when Mandela came to thank the American people. Ted Kennedy was very involved in hosting him in Boston. But additionally I learned this week, that Ted Kennedy went to a meeting in 1986 apparently in Atlanta, summoned by Coretta Scott King, and upon getting to the meeting he and his staff found out that the hotel they were staying in, was a hotel that had been providing catering for the South African Airways, so in fact that hotel was being complicit with a apartheid. Well, Ted Kennedy and his staff moved out of that hotel in protest against this hotel’s collaboration with the apartheid regime. Now, I don’t know what hotel this was. It had to be either the Marriott, or the Hyatt, I would be shocked if it was the Hyatt hotels, however, it was one or the other. But that Kennedy did this is consistent with the kind of view I have of Kennedy and his family as representing a certain kind of white American Irish Catholics, that because of, and his was my thesis, because of their engagement with the issues of freedom in Ireland, especially for the Irish Catholic population, they bridged very easily to also then working on the situation of the struggle of people in South Africa. It was assisted by the fact that Irish Catholics in Ireland were so involved in the struggle against South Africa, so involved. And that relationship continued on until recent years when this Irish Catholics as they worked on their reconciliation and peace talks and negotiations, brought in ANC people to help them get this negotiated settlement, however flaky or unsatisfactory it is, to help them get that in Ireland. It was done out of the relations that were forged because of Irish Catholic engagement with South Africa. Personally, I witnessed this when I was illegally in the country and was at this nunnery in the Transkei in 1983. It was almost all, of the white Catholic religious people who were there, they were almost all Irish Catholic, and these were the nuns that I had been brought in to work with them, to get them ready to how they handled questions like if an armed guerrilla of the ANC knocks on their door in the middle of the night, how do they justify with their faith, helping that man, or that monk? So, it’s a big question.

EM: I think one of the things that struck me that you can comment on it now, or if you want to wait until the reflection section, that the theme comes up over and over again which, that South African anti-apartheid movement was not isolated and a single focus of
much of the movement, that it was international and that it was a part of other struggles, although in the United States as it seemed to be predicted in the media as it was unfolding and as positions shifted and it gained more traction if you will, or popularity, that, and I don’t know if this is something specifically in the United States, but trying to really isolate it, this anti-, or the apartheid in South Africa really looking at only singly, yes, eventually that is wrong. But for many of the people, like yourself involved in it, it really wasn’t just only about South Africa.

PN: You know, it’s an amazing thing, and it’s an amazing phenomena in the United States how much the press coverage and the discussion of social change gets neutralized, it gets delinked from entities and struggles that it’s just completely linked with, it’s integral to those struggles, so that the Civil Rights movement has been kind of delinked from the anti-Communism Movement, or from the Labor Movement, and it’s made to be sort of these visionary, nice people who wanted to just simply be able to have access to better jobs or the possibility of marrying whoever they want. When in fact, that struggle was so integrally, integrally related to the struggle of the quality of life in the United States. And it was as much about improving life for Native Americans, or all Americans, as it was. Similarly, these international struggles, when they’re depicted in the United States, they always have to be delinked. And the South African struggle that the levels that I was engaged in, I think, that that’s part of the appeal that was so, that made it so popular to such a broad base of people, was the fact that the South African struggle was always completely linked to all these other struggles in the world. It was linked to the Pilipino struggle, it was linked to the struggle of the Chilean people, it was linked obviously to all of the other African Independence Colonial struggles, but it was also linked to the struggle of the average working people all over the world, all over the world, every part of the world.

EM: Yeah, I think, I think that that often gets lost.

PN: Yeah.

EM: I think that that’s pretty threatening to—

PN: Very threatening, very threatening, which leads to this reinterpretation and delinking of it in a way that becomes less threatening. So the speech that people link to this, in this country that everyone remembers is the King “I Have a Dream” speech. But what people don’t realize at all is the real significance of power of King’s Riverside Drive Church speech when he spoke in April of ’68, and he said, it was to the clergy and laity concerned, he said in the speech we will be marching for ending Vietnams, Cambodias, Perus, and South Africas. And the fact that King was always, always very cognizant and concerned with the question of South Africa, not just South Africa. When I met with him and discussed after ’66, when he was working in my family’s church as his headquarters and he asked to meet with me, his big question to me was about Rhodesia, because he wanted to go to Rhodesia and work and use the Gandhian, the Gandhian movement of satyagraha and nonviolence, and use it in the Rhodesian Independence struggle.
EM: Can you, sorry to interrupt, name that church again just for the record?

PN: Warren Avenue Congregational Church. It is no longer called that, but it is the church that is located on the corner of what is Warren Avenue, some people call Nancy Jefferson Avenue, and Albany Street, on the West Side of Chicago in Garfield Park.

EM: In that, in that international aspect of King and also too, the story of his assassination usually gets left out of why he was in Memphis.

PN: Absolutely.

EM: And the garbage strike and, you know, how important labor issues.

PN: And, and who, and which union that was. It was not just his commitment in general to unions, but the fact that it was District 65, the Distributor Workers Union, the Union of Cleveland Robinson, who came often referred to as “Cleve,” his union man, ‘cause Cleve was just amazing, a West Indian, blind trade unionist who was always there for King, and so, when he made that call to King and said, King, I need you to join me in Memphis with this garbage workers strike, King was there like that.

EM: Yeah, I, you know, I’ll stop talking after this, but it is interesting how history, if I can use that term, kind of strips away the international, his work on Vietnam, his really close association with labor union organizations, and makes him into this very likeable and acceptable, palatable, you might use that term—

PN: That’s a great term.

EM: And an image—

PN: It’s a McDonaldization of King, it’s an ultimate McDonaldization to make King just be something that you just, Teflon, that is—

EM: Not complicated.

PN: Not complicated. Easy for Americans, it doesn’t call into question basic structures of injustice and exploitation.

EM: Well, let’s change direction just a little bit and bring it back to your experience and moving into the nineties and we, we talked about your work in Labor Organization in the eighties, and thought maybe you could start by, maybe finish that up, or maybe about your work with France Parker?

PN: Let me just say a couple of things about the work that I did with labor unions in the United States, because I think it’s so, it was such an important moment, an important part of the anti-apartheid movement that doesn’t get discussed enough. I haven’t seen really good material that goes into, in depth enough of how pivotal it was to have labor get
involved in this country. For example, I was very close to two labor struggles, two labor
moments of solidarity. One would have been the solidarity that came out of the
Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, and that was mostly when they were
involved in organizing on the East coast, around North Carolina. And they then got very
much engaged with similar groups of labor people in South Africa, and that was textile
workers in South Africa, which was a key set of unions for the events and actions that
would take place in '83, '84, '85, in the eighties which is the real boiling pot moments of
the developing struggle inside the country. So that when the textile workers in this
country, their unions began to get involved with the South African textile workers, it lead
to a lot of very concrete things that were very, very important. I think, for example, the
passage of the Comprehensive Sanctions Bill in 1986 could not have possibly been done
if labor had not been mobilized. Labor’s contribution to the Campaign to End Bank
Loans to South Africa, the trade unionist that I mentioned earlier, Cleve Robinson, I’ll
never forget going to a meeting with him to talk to Chase Manhattan Bank, talking to
their Presidents and Vice Presidents, because Cleve had already notified that he was, he
was a Secretary Treasurer, was going to withdraw the two million dollars account that his
union had with Chase because of their loans with banks in South Africa, and companies
in South Africa, their participation in loans. I remember that one of the Chase Vice
Presidents started off on a whole lot of blahblahblah about trying to justify what they’re
doing and blahblah. Cleve Robinson cut him off and he said look mister, I can’t
remember his name, I may be blind but I can see your banks support and bolster the
apartheid regime, we don’t want anything to do with. We’ll stop, so let’s not waste our
time. That was the kind of specificity and direction that came out of labor that I think
was very important. The other seminal moment with labor was of course when the
International Longshore and Warehouse Union closed down the docks on the entire West
Coast, saying we won’t touch any ships that contain South African goods on them, even
if they’re going to South Africa, coming from, they instituted this boycott from, on every
port, from Vancouver, British Columbia Canada all the way down to San Diego. It was
just done and that was it, fully stopped.

EM: When was that?

PN: This would have been in about 1984, 1985. There’s a wonderful man that should
be, there should be songs written about him in South Africa by the name of Leo
Robinson, who was really the moving force of, behind that effort. So I think that’s what
we have out of labor, these trumpet calls that if the rest of us were doing the orchestra,
the violins, the bass, then you have the trumpet comes in with these moves by labor.

EM: They don’t seem to get the credit in the annals of history that—

PN: Never, never. That’s part of, of course, why labor is in the kind of crisis that it is
today. You must have experienced as I have, you go into your class, we go into our
classes and ask, what’s a union? And they have no idea.

EM: Or, they think they’re bad.
PN: Or they think they’re bad. They think, you know, I have had students actually hold out their hands and pretend they’re a gun when you mention the word union. So it’s the, it’s been a very conscientious and corporate directed, campaign to delegitimize unions.

EM: How, how did you in your organizing deal with, because I would think that the popular image of, well, skilled, unskilled laborers, they don’t know enough about this or they’re not smart enough, or they’re not interested in these kind of issues, when the reality that you experience is that they’re very interested and willing to act on, but they’re literally willing to put their paycheck where their mouth is, and put on—

PN: I think that they, it, our experience, and I think this is something that everybody who was active in the anti-apartheid movement, particularly in the grassroots level, were in the level of the communities that were not just in D.C., our experience is that you gave people information and they ran with that information. Now we were much helped by particularly the period, let’s say, ’82 to about ’86 when there was so much visibility of the South African issue on the media in this country. You know, when people like Ted Koppel were running stories every night or every other night on “Nightline,” when you had all kinds of documentaries being shown, people were hearing the words of Bishop Tutu, and hearing about figures like Nelson Mandela, that all made it also easier. But, I think the most important thing was the fact that unionized people take it as a principled question to be involved with other union struggles, that is, the kind of slope an injured one is an injured all. It meant that they had a real starting point, to want to be involved with what happened, and concerned about what happened to other workers all over the world. And the other thing that happened that was very important was there were a lot of visits that took place, less, the American union people going to South Africa, more union people coming from South Africa who came and who came with us and went places all over this country speaking to American audiences. There was here in Chicago, a man for many, many months, he was here off and on who spoke again and again, and later his brother came. His name slips me right now, but it was, he was an amazingly important person who talked to union audiences here.

EM: How were those talks arranged?

PN: A lot of it was done by the tremendous work of the Labor Network, the Labor Solidarity Network I think is another measure of this tremendous work done by a woman named Kathy Devine, and later a man named Mike Eliot. And Kathy was supported by the unions to do this work. She was literally paid by unions here in Chicago to do this work in solidarity, educational work, putting out publications, being in touch with unions in South Africa, and part of what she facilitated were these visits back and forth.

EM: Could those speakers return to South Africa, or—

PN: They were risking, they were risking. Remember, for example, for anybody to advocate that you withdraw monies from companies involved in South Africa is a violation of what is called the Terrorism Act in South Africa. People did it, people did it anyway. They said, people, it was not unusual to hear them say my brothers and sisters
are risking bullets, and you think I’m not going to talk about that here in this country?
And they, they were just wonderful people. I remember traveling all through Kansas
with this woman named Nomonde Ngubo. Nomonde was financed by the Amalgamated
Clothing and Textile Workers Union, and she and I made a tour of maybe forty, fifty
different schools and churches in Kansas in an effort to pressure, in an effort to grow
pressure on Senator Nancy Kassebaum, whose vote was very pivotal around the passage
of the Comprehensive Sanctions Act. And we traveled all over Kansas, and you know
what really people got most excited about, when they knew that she was coming? It
wasn’t my speaking, it wasn’t her speaking, it was her singing. People would be, they’d
flood places to come and hear her sing, God, she would sing, she could sing. People
would get to the question and answer period and we knew, we knew that as soon as the
question and answer period started early on, people would say, Are you going to sing for
us? It was a very, very important part.

EM: That’s come up before the role, in a different context, the role of songs. I think
about the, my students had asked you what songs come to mind when you think about
your work and about the end of the apartheid. First like, what, what kind of question that,
and then you—

PN: Well I, I mentioned Nomonde and I just get sad. She died of AIDS in South Africa.
I got to see her in South Africa working for a union in South Africa. She was working
for the Police Union, the union for, that grew out of black policeman in South Africa. It’s
very sad.

EM: When you were traveling with her throughout Kansas, where would you stay? How
did you get from place to place? What was that like?

PN: It was a tour that was financed by the American Committee on Africa, and the
Africa Fund out of New York that recognized how pivotal Kansas was for the passage. It
wasn’t just, that wasn’t the only organization that recognized the importance of that.
TransAfrica did as well, but the Africa Fund paid for our trip. I drove everywhere and
we stayed in hotels, and we stayed on cots, and we stayed on couches, and we ate meals,
gratis that people gave us. It was barnstorming, it was organizing in its most wonderful
moments in the sense, because you’re so tied with people then.

EM: Are there, any other memorable kind of tours or circuits that you did with other
individuals that come to mind?

PN: Well, I think one of the other ones that comes to mind immediately was a tour I did
in Wisconsin and Minnesota with a woman who had been working with Allan Boesak
and I can’t remember what her name was, but it, it will come to me, she, whereas
Nomonde was an African South African, this tour was with a white South African
woman who had been brought out of the country quite literally because her life was, very
often, the churches and others would, when they felt somebody could possibly be killed,
which was not unusual, they then got them out of the country for a period of time. In this
case, this particular individual was sent out of the country. She had been working with
the South African Council of Churches, which was very much on the Apartheid
Government’s Enemies List. She and I traveled all over Wisconsin, and I think it was
one of the things that I learned out of this was how racially oriented the media of this
country is. This colleague of mine could say things and it would suddenly be the truth,
whereas I would’ve said the same thing a few minutes earlier and nobody would have
paid any attention. So we learned to play that, we learned to turn that into our advantage
and to utilize it in a way that we would take advantage of this predisposition towards the
truth only being truth if it came out of white lips as opposed to black lips. There were
others I traveled with through the course of the years. There was a wonderful man named
Chris Nteta, who was very involved in Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement in the
early seventies. Chris was a South African, a black South African minister, who was just
wonderful, wonderful speaker, and I think that one of the great, besides my personal
gains that came out of learning so much about the situation in South Africa being with
them, learning so much how to comport myself, I think the other great advantage to doing
this is that you, you learn a lot about working with people and doing work
collaboratively, and I think that that’s the greatest way to learn. We taught each other so
much by being, working together, and doing talks and, and it’s also much less lonely.

EM: That you’re not the only one out there beating the dram.

PN: You’re not the only one. You say to your colleague later, did you, did we really
hear that person say that? I mean, for instance, just walking out of places, it’s not at all
unusual to have someone come up to you after you’ve done this impassioned discussion
about, let’s say the hit squads that operated out of South Africa and killed people in the
late eighties and the late seventies and eighties, like Dolce September, who was the
African National Congress Representative in Paris and Switzerland, and she was
assassinated as she went into her office in Paris. You would talk about a subject like that
in an American small town audience, and you would have people just riveted. You
would have someone come up to you afterwards and say, Thank you. That was a great
talk you gave about Africa over there, about that situation in Africa. You’ve been sitting
there talking about the very specific situation of South Africa, but you had not penetrated
this curtain that’s there that makes for them unable to see that in the kind of framework
that you’ve presented it, maybe not just that it’s unable, it was just too hard to see it that
way.

EM: That’s a great analogy though, the curtain. It really is, and it continues.

PN: It continues, I mean, we were doing things like for instance, relating what was
happening in South Africa to the activities that Jesse Helms did in North Carolina, which
was one of the most racist legislators in the history of this country. But Jesse Helms
frequent and regular visitor to the South African apartheid regime. He got briefings from
the South African government. He got money from the South African government. He
was a regular apologist for the South African regime. That’s the kind of thing that
Americans have very great difficulty incorporating a perspective into their knowledge of
these things, that lets them then understand we are involved in this.
EM: With Helms too, and the contradictions that were discovered in his personal life that, anyway did—

PN: With Helms, with also this other one from South Carolina, these contradictions around, for example, their race and their relationships and the mixed children that they illegitimately fathered—

EM: They then didn’t recognize—

PN: They wouldn’t recognize, but would finance, these—

EM: And that’s the story of this country.

PN: That’s the story of this country, too. It fits then, hand and glove, with the story in South Africa.

EM: Interesting. So, well, tell us what brought you to Francis Parker then.

PN: It’s a very interesting story. My father and mother were both teachers. They were teachers in an era and in a period when teachers didn’t make money (laughs). My father, for example, did everything during the summers in order to supplement the pathetic salaries they got. He drove a CTA bus. I remember one night my mother and my sister and I getting all dressed up and we went to get on my father’s bus going down Kedzie as he was driving, my mother organized this. My father worked as a janitor for the CHA. He worked in the Addams, Jane Addams housing projects over on Taylor Street, which recently were torn down and now there’s a museum being created out of that public housing project. These, these activities were activities that helped my sister and I appreciate very much our parents. Well, it was my father walking into the Chicago Public School, Pope School on 19th and California, 19th and Albany on Chicago’s West Side and finding me teaching the reading class, that led to us going to Francis Parker. He said to me, or so he later told me, he said, Prexy, why are you teaching the reading class? I said, I always teach the reading class. The teacher goes and gets some coffee while I teach the reading class. Well that, my father was not one to bite his tongue on anything, went right from the classroom down to the Principal’s office, and laced her out, entirely. That night he came home, said to my mother, what’s the name of that school that you’ve been talking about up on the North Side? Put him in it. That was it. And my sister and I then started commuting up to the Francis Parker School. It was then, not just a school that cost $22,000.00 a year. It was expensive. My mother’s sisters, who had no children, helped finance us going there. We got some scholarships, but not enough. And the cost in those years was only about $2000.00 a year, but $2000.00 in 1950 was very different. And what we found at Parker, and I don’t know if that’s still the case there, what we found was a faculty that were very progressive people. Some of them, for example, that were our teachers were active in the unionization of teachers all over the Midwest. We were taught music as an integral part of the curriculum, and part of that we learned the music of Paul Robeson. We learned the songs of Earl Robinson, who did this incredible opera called “Ballad for Americans,” and another one called “Sandhog,” which was a
story of Irish workers building that tunnels in New York City, like the Hudson Tunnel, was it Hudson? It goes under Hudson, Lincoln Town, the whole construction, the story of Danny Boy, that’s his story. It was a general part of the curriculum that moved us to identify with working people and to see that you had responsibilities to be engaged. Our eighth grade teacher, a woman named Sarah Greenebaum, was this, one of the women who founded the *Monthly Review* magazine, which you know, is an independent socialist magazine. We read *Robinson Crusoe* teaching us about “the accumulation of capital.” We read Leo Braverman’s *Monopoly Capital*. And so, when people have asked me, Where does your analysis come from? Where does your perspective come from? I say, I would say it’s three sources: my family, Africa, and Francis Parker School. I’m not sure that this is what Francis Parker likes to be known for today, but in any event that was very much a part of the reality then and because of that, I then went back and served, my mother was the first African American woman I think to ever be on the Board of Francis Parker. I had another aunt who taught there. All and all, my mother always approached all these things bringing a gang, a cohort, so she brought a group, groups of people.

EM: Give us your mother’s name again.

PN: Sadie Nesbitt, Sadie Crain Nesbitt.

EM: And she was on the Board, did she also teach there?

PN: She was on the Board only.

EM: Okay.

PN: My aunt, Peggy Nesbitt, was on the Board, or taught there.

EM: What did she teach?

PN: She taught kindergarten, and she was, for example, I think she was a teacher of the current principal who is there, Dan Frank.

EM: Really?

PN: That’s right. So Nesbitt was, became kind of a, there were series of family names. The Lewis family, the Holabird family, and the Nesbitt family was a third major name, and it’s ironic that I have a second cousin who is at five, now joining Francis Parker School as a kindergartener.

EM: So when you went there, when you returned in the nineties, what were the circumstances and what did you do? What was your role?

PN: I came back to kind of help stabilize Parker. It had become a bit known as sort of a Wild West school. It was very free and free swinging curriculum. An educator named Don Monroe wanted to bring it back to some of the kind of original philosophical,
pedagogical roots that it had, and to help get it more involved with community and help
get it more honestly pursuing the kind of Dewey principles that Parker was founded on in
the first instance. You know, a school should be a model home, a complete community,
and embryonic democracy, those were the ideas, and also to bring much more diversity.

So I brought, was brought in to help create that plan and to help, also to bring a more
diverse community into the school as well as get the school more involved in the
community beyond Lincoln Park. There are still endeavors that are trying to do that. A
wonderful woman up there named Shanti Elliot is very, is a fulltime person who tries to
keep the school engaged in the city, and not just, and there is a real kind of effort to put
forward the idea that you have a responsibility to be involved. Now I think in the years
that I was there it was taken a step further, to say you have a responsibility to make
change, not just to be involved. So it was a natural bridge for me to go from Francis
Parker and then to Antioch College, alright. Then at Antioch College the mandate there
was that you go, you “be ashamed to die” unless you scored some great victory for
humanity, and Antioch is quite, impressive, as small as it was, it produced three or four
Nobel Prize winners, had more MacArthur Genius recipients than any, I never got one, I
wanted one, but I never got one (laughs). It went to becoming, and I think we paid the
price for that, it was on the FBI’s list as one of the most infiltrated schools, and we had to
deal with those kind of realities. But I think that the general principles was one that, and
in fact, we saw it playing itself out in these recent elections of Obama, and that was the
notion that you, you could make change.

EM: And so, can you tell us about any, like an example of an initiative when you
returned to Parker at the invitation of Don Monroe, or—

PN: At the invitation of Don Monroe.

EM: Okay, and what was your interaction with the students or, you know, what did you
focus on, or what did you want to bring back to Parker?

PN: Well I focused on brining, first diversity, more diversity to Parker. There certainly
is a number of students of color, all kinds, who would be prepared to testify that Mr.
Nesbitt was my dean, and my teacher, he kept my head going to the grindstone (laughter).

EM: So you were a dean, and you were a teacher?

PN: I was a dean, I was a teacher.

EM: And what did you teach?

PN: I taught history, I taught African history, I taught Third World History. I taught a
course called Twenty-One Shots, which was a course about the criminal, I call it the
course on the criminal injustice system. Since such a large percentage of Parker
graduates ultimately end up in law school, what I wanted to do was to expose them very
eyarly to the injustices around the so called correctional system in the city of Chicago. So
we did this course around that. It was continued for many years after I left Parker. I left
to go and work and now, I’m not quite sure of this whether I started out in MacArthur Foundation or and went to Parker, or left Parker and went to the MacArthur Foundation. I think it’s the former, that I started at MacArthur Foundation and went to Parker.

EM: Oh we didn’t talk about that. Okay, so why don’t we—

PN: Let me just talk a little bit.

EM: Absolutely.

PN: There’s a complete segue between Parker and the MacArthur Foundation.

EM: Okay.

PN: Here’s one reason, was that the President of the MacArthur Foundation, when I worked there, was Adele Simmons. Adele, herself, at some stage in her life had attended Francis Parker, and had very strong family links to Parker. In fact, some of her children were at Parker and I was the Dean for one of her children while that child was there at Parker School. So, there was, there’s a very strong linkage between Parker and, and, and the MacArthur Foundation. I think that, if I look back and recall correctly, there were a number of projects that I was involved in that utilized Parker’s philosophical commitment to being involved with issues. One of them that is the one that I’m probably most proud of about my accomplishments at the MacArthur Foundation, was my decision to support a woman and her project, which was an effort to ban landmines from the world, to get landmines as a weapon banned in the world. Well I knew a bit about landmines because I had worked in Mozambique, and I had seen the results of landmines and what they could do, particularly to children. And so, this woman came to me looking for funding. I think that MacArthur Foundation was either the first or the second major foundation to fund this campaign to ban landmines. Ultimately, the campaign and the woman who initiated this, Jody Williams, both received Nobel Peace Prizes. So, there was some pride that I can have that I fought for this. I was the Program Officer, I was the one who worked it through, I was the one who talked different people in the foundation into supporting this initiative.

EM: That’s pretty significant.

PN: It is pretty significant. It is pretty significant. And it was pretty nice, it was something to be very proud of. I remember a wonderful note that Adele Simmons wrote me. I think I had left the Foundation by then and must have been at Parker, but I got a note from Adele when Jody Williams was given the Nobel Peace Prize. She said, See, see what your work did?

EM: Pat yourself (laughter). So you were, as a Program Officer, part of that was identifying who would be the recipients and kind of championing individuals that you thought would be worthy of the, recipients of—
PN: The Genius Grants?

EM: Yeah.

PN: No, that was a special division, but the funding for other projects.

EM: Yeah, ‘cause MacArthur gives—

PN: It has a whole slate of other grants that it makes. When I was there, and I was in the program on international, on peace and international cooperation, which was led by a woman named Kennette Benedict, I was there for five years I think, or four I can’t remember. We did a lot of very important grant making.

EM: And how did you, what was your entry into the MacArthur Foundation?

PN: Well, I think that one of the things that people might be intrigued to know a little bit about me was that the work I had done at the World Council of Churches of course, was at a specific program called the Programme to Combat Racism. And that work, that work involved grant making. It involved us giving grants to liberation movements, so I had had previous experience in being a grant staff for programs that made grants to people. And so that, I think, was very attractive to the MacArthur Foundation. Now the other piece, as it turned out, wasn’t that significant, but I had hoped it would be, was that I had had this experience and knew Africa so well. But in fact, MacArthur didn’t have the involvement with Africa that I would, like say, the Ford Foundation did, or Kellogg Foundation, or Mott Foundation, simply didn’t, to this day it hasn’t had the same levels and profiles of grant making in Africa and around African issues. But then I stepped into another hat, which was to simply then also get very involved as I have been with grant making going to change situations in this country. And to general peace issues, too, you know, to the old issue, for example of disarmament, to the issue of truth and justice commissions, so that I was very involved with a woman named Priscilla Hayner who did tremendous work comparing Truth Commissions all over the world. Of course, South Africa had had a Truth Commission. And I was very, I had been involved in that initiative as well because the Minister of Justice who conceived of the Truth Commission, Dullah Omar, who has since passed on, had actually had a series of meetings with me and had wanted me to be employed to raise money in the United States for reparations to help right the wrongs that had been done to people. That was to be a part of the Truth Commission Process in South Africa. That was never to be, that didn’t happen.

EM: And you said, I think you said that this work continues, that you continue to work on this to this point, or—

PN: The work with MacArthur?

EM: Not with MacArthur, but with funding and grants on these different issues, or—
PN: Well I’m not with an entity that does that anymore. I mean, occasionally I get called in to testify and to help people. Certainly I know quite well how to advise people, for obvious reasons.

EM: And do these organizations, are they thriving, or has that kind of dwindled?

PN: Some of them are thriving, some are still existing. The Campaign to Ban Landmines got the support of every country in the world except China, Soviet Union, and the United States. So, there is still work that one might do, you know, we sell more arms than any other country in the world, we being the United States. But I think that, I think that there were achievements despite the big failings. There were achievements that were made in all of this.

EM: Okay, I want to ask you about Mandela’s release, but before that let’s, let’s get through just some, a little bit of the things we talked about that we want again, on the record. The liberation movements that you supported in South Africa, can you name those?

PN: Yes, there were, there are essentially six liberation movements that from years of involvement with Southern Africa, and from systematically studying these questions, I became very involved with and decided that I would put my energies into helping support them. The African National Congress of South Africa [ANC], the Mozambique Liberation Front [FRELIMO] in Mozambique, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola [MPLA] in Angola, the Zimbabwe African People’s Union [ZAPU], and then later, the Zimbabwe African national Union [ZANU] as well in Zimbabwe, the Southwest African People’s Organization [SWAPO], and then in Guinea Bissau, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde [PAIGC]. Now I never really became as involved with the struggle in Guinea Bissau, which was located in West Africa, as I did in those other, earlier five. I never visited Guinea Bissau, and I was very close and deeply influenced by its leader, Amilcar Cabral, who was assassinated in ’73, in January of ’73. The reason that I decided to support these liberation movements was because in my view they had a perspective and a set of objectives that were consistent with the creating of a world in which race would no longer be the dominant force that it is even today, though there’s so much assertion that we’re in this post-racial period in the United States, and the world. The vision of those liberation movements that I supported was one that I could believe in, and that was about creating just and equitable participatory societies. It was about changing the status of women. It was about never seeing as the enemy people based on race, it was seeing systems as the enemy. These were values, that in my belief, were values that I could really adhere to and believe in. Many people, I’m not quite in that group, are very discouraged with what has developed in these years in some of those countries. Many are discouraged with practices that some of those liberation movements did. I think that, I think that I’d have to be less, I would not have, I think that the experiences that I’ve had in other related areas of work have made me more able to keep the values and the aspirations and the perspective of the achievable and the unachievable, to give me a perspective too that said many of these goals that these liberation movements wanted to achieve couldn’t be achieved because the dominant,
world super power has to change. Years and years ago Cabral said to both of us, he said, this is this wonderful man who was assassinated from Guinea Bissau, he said, this was in a meeting in Harlem with him, he said, The highest form of solidarity you can give us is to change the conditions and circumstances of the United States. And I think it’s truer now than it’s ever been before. That is to say, that the United States sets the pace, sets the framework, shapes the framework, for so much of world affairs and of human interactions that it’s only going to be when there is real change that is happening in the United States, that there is possibilities for change in other parts of the world. I watched, for example, as systematically, really systematically the United States helped to destroy the dreams that were being shaped in Mozambique. Now, Mozambique made mistakes. The leadership of Mozambique made many mistakes. But the other thing they were up against was a global framework that the United States didn’t want to see, the kind of values that a Mozambique was talking about. Many people would cast this as Communist versus Capitalist, but it was much deeper than that. It’s much, much deeper than that. It has much more to do with human activities, not just words and labels and terms and beliefs and ideologies, it has to do with human activities. For example, in all those Southern African countries today, there’s an atmosphere of greater receptivity and warmth and hospitalities in Mozambique than there is in most of those other countries, despite the linguistic barrier, that most people speak Portuguese, despite that, and I think it’s not accidentally, it’s rooted in the historical experiences that the Mozambican people are going through. It’s rooted in the kinds of values that FRELIMO tried to instill with people, and, and that’s something I can still very much believe in. And that’s what led to me deciding that these were the liberation movements that I wanted to support. You know, as I’ve said before in this, I was prepared to go and fight, physically, to end Portuguese Colonialism. It was not an intellectual engagement for me, it was something I believed in very, very deeply. And it was something that I think is very important to this day in this country, is the fight to create and move beyond race.

EM: I’m going to take a moment to switch tapes at that point. I want to make sure that you might not have another thought.

pause in recording

PN: Of course, what is his name?

EM: If you said it I would recognize it, but I can’t remember.

PN: He’s done another doc, that was a good one too. He’s kind of on a role.

EM: Wow, that’s cool.

PN: Yeah, he’s a cool guy.

EM: That’s good, I mean, it was interesting, and it seems, one of the things that was brought up in the interview that the movie, or the documentary includes things that don’t necessarily show Rev Michael Pfleger in the most flattering of lights, but tries to give the
complexity and broader picture, which was interesting, and apparently Pfleger said, I think said he had seen it and said, you know, it is what it is, and wasn’t upset about the inclusion of lots of different material in other words.

PN: I got to see it.

EM: Yeah, yeah. So now I want to ask you about, oh, before that, anything, or what comes to mind when I ask about conflicts or tensions amongst the pretty specifically the anti-apartheid activist, we’ll focus on that, ‘cause I’m sure you know, that your experience—

PN: (laughter) Conflict of interest all over! Amongst the anti-apartheid activist, we’re rolling now?

EM: We’re rolling, yes.

PN: I think that probably, I mean, let me, let me put this simply clear. In the period from 1971 or ’72 until about 1994, ’95, with the final kind of dissolution, dissolving of the last anti-apartheid movement, one of the biggest challenges in the anti-apartheid had was to get beyond race.

EM: Within itself?

PN: In itself, within itself. There was a period from ’72 to about ’80, well maybe even ’85 when there were two anti-apartheid movements here in Chicago. There was the Chicago Committee for the Liberation of Angola, Mozambique, New Guinea, which than also in ’83 becomes CIDSA, the Coalition for Illinois Divestment from South Africa and coinciding with the Chicago Committee for the Liberation of Mozambique, New Guinea was the African American Solidarity Committee, which was a South Side, more Left, political formation, that I belonged to both. I was the only one who belonged to both.

EM: Interesting.

PN: The Chicago Committee for the Liberation of Angola, Mozambique, New Guinea was North Side based. The African Liberation Solidarity Committee which was founded incidentally, by Lisa Brock’s husband, was predominantly black and on the South side. I can remember instance after instance of bringing South African visitors to both meetings, you know. We would have one meeting on a Friday evening, at Northwestern let’s say, it’d be sponsored by the North Side group.

EM: And they were largely white, or mixed, or—

PN: The one on the North Side was predominately white.

EM: Okay.
PN: I was at, certainly in the beginning years, I was the only black person in it. Later, I think there were other, one or two other black people who were in it. The one on the South Side had no white people. It had, they had about the same number of members, both were small. And I used to say this is so stupid, because they could have been more of a combined force, but arguing against this was people who said, but we have to have, to work with the realities that we live in, and the reality of the segregation of the city of Chicago means that we cannot function as a multiracial organization.

EM: Because, you could make the argument as well if we’re working on the realities of the situation we live in that we got to work with the white guys? (laughter)

PN: Absolutely.

EM: It’s interesting that that could be argued both—

PN: I think that through time the group that ultimately prevails is a multiracial formation, and that is the Chicago Committee, CIDSA, the Chicago Coalition for Illinois Divestment from South Africa, which then becomes CCISSA, the Chicago Committee in Solidarity in South Africa, C-C-I-S-S-A. And both those formations, CIDSA and CCISSA are multiracial, but with black leadership. The stipulation was that there would have to be black leadership, and although there were times that probably the majority of the membership, anywhere from fifteen to twenty, twenty to twenty-five was white, the leadership was all black, and at least two of the leaders are affiliated, three of the leaders now are affiliated with Columbia today. Cheryl Johnson Odim—

EM: Okay, the former Dean of LAS, Liberal Arts and Sciences—

PN: Chair of LAS.

EM: Who is now Provost at Dominican?

PN: Dominican University. Myself, I was the founder of both of these things, and then Basil Clunie, who’s coming to teach here, became chair of these organizations after me.

EM: Oh.

PN: He was the last person to be the Chair of the Coalition for Illinois Divestment from South Africa.

EM: Okay.

PN: And the other interesting thing is that both, two of the three people are not Chicagoans, and one at least is a West Indian. And I think one of the things I took out of this is, Chicagoans are some provincial folk. (laughter)

EM: They got stuff in common!
PN: They got stuff in common, that’s right. The black folk and the white folk from Chicago, both have grown up in these flat lands of this city where there are no hills, you know, except maybe the Sears Tower, and the visioning and the imagining of, of a society without race is a very difficult challenge, and so, all kinds of realities had to constantly be played against the race card. The race question, where we met, where we had events, we, we had to identify those places in Chicago where you could have black and white people come and both groups feel comfortable. And then later when we tried to reach also to the Latino community, we had to find places where you also could also have, so, I was just reading something the other day, some old document, where in the course of one day we had a meeting first in a black community, and then the same meeting in the white community. The same exact meeting subject was held in both communities on the same day, the speakers—

EM: For what group?

PN: I think that was the Chicago Committee in Solidarity with Southern Africa, I think that’s what it was for. But it’s a very serious and sober question, because I think that in reaction to this segregation that we find here in this city, and the polarization, there is a defensive posture that black people take that is about not wanting anything to do with white folks, and they’ll do it if the whites ain’t involved. So, one of the things that I experienced was the difficulty of being a person who could move between these two worlds.

EM: And also thought that that was the better, or stronger way to go, or felt like it was the only choice that you had.

PN: I fundamentally didn’t believe, I didn’t believe in this, but had to do it, because I believe, Southern Africans that would come, who were my friends—

EM: What’d they think?

PN: They’d just, they thought it was so sad, so pathetic, but it was so reflective about a particular set of realities about America.

EM: Very interesting, very interesting. Alright, well now I want to ask you about Nelson Mandela’s release, and that chapter.

PN: What a tremendous and joyous moment.

EM: And that’s 1994?

PN: Nineteen ninety.

February of 1990. I was invited up to speak, I'll never forget this point, I was invited up to speak in Madison, Wisconsin, and I went on WORT, W-O-R-T's station, it's a Pacifica Station in Madison, and I was on the show that had been arranged by a woman named Gretchen Bauer, who was a PhD candidate, an African Political Science focus on Namibia, and she now teaches at the University of Delaware. We were at the radio station, and on the air, when somebody phoned in and said Mandela had been released (laughter). I was in shock, I was just in shock. I think if I can recall correctly—

EM: So you didn't know, you didn't have any idea, you didn’t know it was forthcoming?

PN: No, I had no idea that he was going to be released. I knew, there was in the air, a sort of ramblings, no, not ramblings, talk, loose talk that something big was happening. And we were worried that it was going to be bad, bad—

EM: Like a crack down, or a backlash, or—

PN: Or like somebody had sold out.

EM: Oh, okay.

PN: But when it happened, it was this incredible moment. I then called people in Europe, and called—

EM: Who did you call first?

PN: I think I called a man named Baldwin Sjollema who worked with the World Council of Churches.

EM: And why, why—

PN: Because I wanted more information.

EM: Okay.

PN: I knew that he would have that.

EM: Okay.

PN: And then I called—

EM: What did he tell you?

PN: He told me that it was true, that the release was going to happen imminently. And then I called a friend of mine in Cape Town, because when Mandela was released the first place he went was to give an address to people from the Cathedral in downtown Cape Town. This friend of mine worked as an Episcopal priest, an Anglican priest, so he...
was able to tell me, and he told me some of the inside story of what was happening, what
they were concerned about, and—

EM: What was some of that information, if you can?

PN: Well, one of them was a concern that people understood that Mandela’s release was
not going to be the end of the process, but the beginning of the process. And so people,
there was a great desire, to have Madiba speak. Now you got to remember, there is still a
lot of violence going on. So the other big concern people had was protecting Mandela.
And then, there was the other big concern of getting the meetings underway to have
Mandela meet with the rest of the leadership.

EM: Of the—

PN: Of the ANC.

EM: Of the ANC, okay.

PN: Now remember that the ANC, at this point, is still spread out all over. Part of it’s in
London, part of it’s in Lusaka Zambia, part of it’s in Angola, part of it’s in Dar es
Salaam, and part of it is in South Africa, and part of those in South Africa are also
underground. They’re ANC, but they’re underground, so it’s not a small beat.

EM: Because it’s still, even though he’s being released, it’s still illegal to be—

PN: No.

EM: No?

PN: They had been unbanned.

EM: Oh they had been.

PN: They had been unbanned. But, there was still the vigilantes who were around, there
were still these uncontrolled forces of racism and reaction, and not the least of which was
Gatsha Buthelezi and his Inkatha Freedom Party [IFP]. Later, this would lead to this
tremendous violence that’s unleashed between ’90 and his release and ’94 and ’95, after
the elections. There were 17,000 people, something like that, that died in that violence.

EM: Between ’90 and ’94, wow.

PN: I think it’s 17,000, that could be checked on, but it’s a lot of people, a lot of
violence.

EM: And blacks?
PN: Most of those are, overwhelmingly, ninety-eight percent are black people who were killed.

EM: Wow.

PN: Overwhelmingly also, most of them are the people from ANC or ANC sympathetic organizations like the United Democratic Front [UDF]. The U.S. press depicts most of this as black on black on violence. This is where our colleague Lisa has written a brilliant piece that smokes that out and lays out how a lot of it was also the operations of paramilitary types and the state itself that sponsored a lot of it, including the DeKlerk, you know, and you have in this period having DeKlerk tell this lie to Mandela in one of the most incredible political moments of the twentieth century, Mandela stands up in front of the whole negotiating intent to process and said, *You lied to me.* It was just this incredible moment. I wasn’t there, but I heard it and it’s very much available. Then, you have all kinds of killings taking place that just are vicious, people being machine gunned to death.

EM: What is happening in the United States? What are you, what is going on with U.S. relationships between ’90 and ’94?

PN: Several things happened. One is Mandela makes his trip.

EM: And what year is it?

PN: That’s 1990, late ’90. He makes the *Thank You* trip. It’s the same trip where he first had gone to the front line states, Zambia, Tanzania, Angola, to thank these countries. You’ll also have Namibia get it’s independence that was during that moment. So one of the things was that I was invited to Namibia’s Independence as a guest, and I remember being there. I couldn’t find any word to stay, it was just packed out. I couldn’t find anywhere, so I slept for three nights on a chair in the Kalahari Sands Hotel, Namibia’s biggest hotel. That was where—

EM: That was your address.

PN: That was the only place. There were a lot of people that would just be—

EM: So they invited you but said we don’t have any place for you to stay?

PN: Nowhere to stay, and I had no money, you know, most of, despite what the South African apartheid government believed, most of us who did this work, we had nothing, we had no money. They believed that we had these huge bank accounts and bankroll. We had nothing most of the time. So I arrived in Windhoek with nothing pretty much, and stayed on this chair for three nights, but I was privileged to be at one of the most extraordinary moments probably of my whole career, which was the night that the flag raised for the Independence of Namibia, and I just, just was teary-eyed, goose bumps all over me. The interesting thing of that night, too, was when the President of Namibia, of
Southwest Africa People’s Organization [SWAPO], Sam Nujoma, was introduced, the crowd in the stadium arose with this incredible bellow of sound. But when Mandela was brought up into the stadium a few minutes later, they went bananas, they just went berserk. And that was, I think, one of the first indications that I had of the power, the power and the appeal, love that existed around this man Mandela. I had seen this with other leaders, I’d seen it with Rev. King, or I’d seen it with Samora Machel, I’d seen it with meetings in which Samora would be there, people would just go nuts when he opened his mouth. He had an ability to, Jesse Jackson had a little of it, but nothing, nothing like Samora. And Mandela doesn’t have that charisma that Samora had, it’s more of a—

EM: Does, in a different context, is there a comparison to say like Muhammad Ali?

PN: Yes, very, very much.

EM: Okay. It’s amazing when he, of course I’ve never witnessed it in person, I’ve seen it on film and heard other people.

PN: I was in Cape Town once, in Cape Town when Muhammad made his first visit to Cape Town. This was about 1996, ’97, it was before his condition had really gotten bad. I was in a part of Cape Town that was very bad, it was notorious for how much violence that was there. I was driving and suddenly I noticed all these people running and running, people running out of shops, people running down the streets. Everybody was running, I stopped and asked the people. Well, Muhammad Ali is here! So I ran with them, and we ran and ran. There he was just walking down the streets, excuse me, of Cape Town being followed by thousands of people, just thousands of people up and down the street, and he was just totally at home in this. He said, My people, is what he was interviewed to say. That was, these kinds of leaders are remarkable leaders.

EM: When Mandela makes his tour of the United States then, where do you go, because he doesn’t come to Chicago.

PN: (laughs)

EM: Where, where, I mean, what’s going on with that?

PN: What a story, talking about tensions and conflict. When Mandela comes to the United States there is a committee set up to receive him. The committee was headed, and this was pretty much spirited by Randall Robinson, who was the head of TransAfrica, black, the largest black, by that time, the largest black lobbying organization on South Africa. I got put on the committee, I got put on the committee.

EM: Wait a second, I’m sorry. I just heard the—

PN: I heard something.
EM: Yeah, that’s the other recorder so I have to get a new one of that.

**pause in recording**

EM: It’s 2009 and the interview, continuing interview with Prexy Nesbitt, we’re at Columbia College Chicago, and again, Prexy, we left off with Mandela’s release, and maybe if you could speak to the significance and the impact of that on the movement.

PN: Of course, Mandela’s release was preceded by other very prominent releases of members of the African National Congress, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmad Kathrada, to name just a few. But, probably even more importantly was preceded by the unbanning of the African National Congress, the South African Congress party, the Pan African Congress, I think SACTU, the South African Congress or Trade Unions, and all of these organizations were, were made legal to operate in South Africa. And so thousands of people who had been exiled were then able to come back to South Africa. What this ushered in was an era of politics that would go on almost to the present day, which is around the question of those people who were outside the country and those people who were inside the country throughout the years of the struggle. The exile community made up largely of people in the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party was, that exile community was, many of them had not been as in touch with the situation inside the country as organizations like, for example, the United Democratic Front. Now, spanning all of these different formations, the exile politics, the international community, and those inside the country is the giant footstep of Mandela. There are a few other people who had tremendous followings, too, but nobody can match Mandela for his capacity to span these movements. In 1990, I think about June, maybe May, Mandela made a decision to come and thank people all over the world who had helped the struggle of the people of South Africa. In one of the first trips he made was to the neighboring countries around Africa: Tanzania, Zambia, Angola. A second trip he made was to Scandinavia, to Sweden, which had given tremendous support throughout this time. Another trip was to England, and I think as part of the trip to England, although I could possibly have been separated, he made a trip to the United States, which I’ll come back to. But tied to the trip to the United States was another trip that he made to Cuba, which was a very, very important trip because it is important that, and if I haven’t learned anything else from all my years of involvement, I think that the critical role played by Cuba is never emphasized enough in this country. Had it not been for Cuba’s defense of Angola and the battles that raged between the Cuban forces working hand in hand with the MPLA, the popular movement of Angola, working with the Armed Forces of Angola [FAPLA], and working with them as well were members of Umkhonto we Sizwe ‘Spear of the Nation’ [MK] of South Africa, if those struggles had not been as successful as they were in both defending Angola against apartheid aggression, and also shattering the myth of the invincibility of the Apartheid Army, if those struggles had not gone as they did, the whole unfolding of history would have been totally different, totally different. When Mandela therefore came to the United States, he knew, he knew that he was also going to make a trip to Cuba. That second trip very much impacted his itinerary in the United States. When it was announced, I remember being invited immediately by Randall Robinson and some other people on the East Coast...
to join a committee that was set up to do two things: one, was to host a visit by Nelson
Mandela to the United States, and his entourage, because he would come with an
entourage, including Winnie, his then wife. The second thing was to do, was to raise
money for the African National Congress, because the ANC needed money for the next
stage of its struggle, which would include the negotiations leading ultimately to elections.
It was decided that, this committee was put together representing various people, most of
them celebrity people or very famous people, Harry Belafonte, for example.

EM: Who, I’m sorry to interrupt, who was Randall Robinson?

PN: He was the head of TransAfrica Forum, and I think he was as much contacted as
anybody else precisely because of the success and the high visibility of the tactics
he had used during 1986 that was used toward the passage of the US 1986
Comprehensive Sanctions Act, the occupation of the South African Embassy, that led
then in turn to a series of major demonstrations in South African embassies all over the
United States, which spawned what was called the Free South Africa movement. And the
Free South African movement was largely a black led movement at the helm of which
was Randall Robinson and TransAfrica, hence, TransAfrica was asked to host the visit of
Nelson Mandela. TransAfrica put together, as I mentioned, this broad committee of
people to host this. So people from the Mayor’s office, Dinkin’s office in New York,
there were people from Los Angeles and the Hollywood community, there were people
from Washington, there were people from Boston, there were people from, I was there
from Chicago and was there in the initial meetings, but Chicago was not exactly included
from the beginning because of the fact that many people did not know how the Mayor of
Chicago would react to doing this. They knew they would get a completely open and
embracing welcome in all these other cities, but they weren’t sure what they would get in
Chicago. So, in the end—

EM: By Daley?

PN: By Daley. So in the end, there was never a visit to Chicago, and instead what we
had to do here in Chicago was to organize people to go to Detroit, which we did do. As it
turned out, really, there were other places they should have been as worried about. One
of which was Miami, for example. When the word came out to that community that
Mandela was next after the United States going to go to Cuba, there were just vehement.

EM: That Mandela was going to go to Cuba?

PN: That Mandela was going to go to Cuba. There were vehement demonstrations
against Mandela.

EM: Because of the Cuban population there that was anti-Castro?

PN: The Cuban population that’s so anti-Castro. The other force, and we go back to
something we’ve discussed before, that was very much engaged in hosting, probably as
much as TransAfrica formed, was the AFL-CIO, but particularly a union called
AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and also the pan-union black organization of trade unionists, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists [CBTU]. So, for example, with regard to Mandela’s visit to Florida, AFSCME guaranteed his security. AFSCME put together an extraordinary 2- to 3,000 man force of trade unionists.

EM: Why did he want to go to Miami so much?

PN: It was—

EM: Why was that part of the tour?

PN: It was to get a, to speak to those people in Miami who had been part of the mobilization of the, against the apartheid.

EM: So the labor—

PN: The labor, so additionally, if I recall correctly, AFSCME was having it’s convention in Miami at the time, so that was another major reason for the Miami trip. So in the end the trip went from Boston, from New York to Boston, Boston to Miami, Miami to Las Angeles, Las Angeles to Oakland, and then Oakland to Detroit, and I think Detroit was the last stop before he went back to either New York or Boston and then returning to South Africa, back to the African continent.

EM: And were you in Detroit?

PN: I was in Detroit.

EM: Okay, spend a little time telling us about organizing the Chicagoans to get to Detroit, and what Detroit, what unfolded there.

PN: Okay, I was not, I was in New York, I was also in Oakland.

EM: Okay.

PN: So I had multiple hats that I wore for that, no I didn’t make it to Oakland, I was supposed to make it. I missed the flight to get to Oakland, but I did definitely get to Detroit and to New York. The Chicago group was really, first of all there was, we expected, maybe we’d get six or seven buses of people. It ended up being somewhere like thirty, forty buses of people going from Chicago to Detroit to hear Mandela at the Tiger Stadium in Detroit. It was a very rapid trip, we went, we came right back after Mandela. It was a tremendous reception that was there. It was a very mixed group that went from Chicago, and it was a good time that was had by all. It was a, it was very embracing, and Mandela was very aware that Chicago had come to Detroit, as it were, to join the Detroiter in celebrating this man. And I think that’s about what I could say. I think there are other things about this trip that are very significant. One of the most
significant moments of the whole trip, I think forever, there are two significant ones. One, is that in Oakland Mandela was approached by a group of Native Americans who asked Mandela to speak to the issue of Native Americans and the situation of Native Americans in the United States. And Mandela did that. They wrote him a letter. He obviously had read the letter, and despite his aides saying to him he should not really get into the domestic politics of the United States, and despite the fact that he didn’t talk about the situation of African Americans in that trip in general, though he was asked repeatedly, he did speak to the issue of Native Americans and it just, it just totally wowed that community, some of whom had come from as far away as Oklahoma to join there in Oakland, California with Mandela, to welcome Mandela in Oakland. And so when he made the statement of solidarity, there was just open crying all over by Native Americans in that delegation that he had made that statement. A second statement was his, a second moment is I think this incredibly moment on “Nightline”, the Ted Koppel show. “Nightline” had done a great deal at one period of time, I would say from roughly ’84 to about ’85, did tremendous coverage of the situation in South Africa, including Ted Koppel going there and visiting at great length with Winnie Mandela. It, it became, it was an important source of making visible—

EM: Right, because this was prior to Mandela’s release.

PN: That’s right. And I think that part of Mandela’s appearing in Ted Koppel’s show was about thanking Ted Koppel for coming. At the same time Ted Koppel was anxious in a way that only the American media can be, to display his, I think it’s almost like responsibility to expose the Communist question about the ANC. And so, Koppel seized upon the upcoming visit to Cuba and he asked Mandela, how can you be going to Cuba? Why are you going to Cuba? And I think that that was one of the moments that you saw Mandela at one of his most elegant and most principled self, when he then began to lecture Ted Koppel about friends, and the importance of friends and loyalty to friends. He then went through the history of Cuba’s involvement with the Southern Africa countries and it was just an extraordinary moment where people were shocked all over the country because he left Ted Koppel speechless. At one point in this interview even, he says to Koppel, You aren’t saying anything. Have I offended you Mr. Koppel? Koppel just shakes his head because he was, in fact, left speechless by what Mandela had said.

EM: That would be great—

PN: It would be great to clip that, it’s a clip that has to be reshown.

EM: How do you deal with, in your classes, the issue of, and we’re living it now, you know, when governments label organizations, terrorist organizations, and history unfolds and as you said then unban the ANC, so, you know, the day before the unbanning they were terrorists and banned, and now they are unbanned and legal. I was even noticing in the newspaper today that the Prime Minister of England is now supporting the citizens of England’s right to pursue legal course against the Libyans for supporting the IRA and damage or injury, or death that had occurred as a result that, so I think of that as, you
know, there, or even with the founding of this country, with that kind of definition where anything that opposes the state as terrorists, and then as history unfolds those former terrorists organizations now are recognized politically, or in some manifestation, you know, how do you deal with that with students, helping them to understand that, and as I said using that example of our founding fathers with current definitions they would have been terrorists, and were seen as that by the crown, but, you know, we hold them up as heroes and making the right stand, but yet we, I don’t know, it’s difficult I think when you’re in the thick of it—

PN: I think—

EM: —not to do it like Ted Koppel said, you know, how can you, how can you, you know, support or go, go to that place with that dictator who is against us?

PN: I think that the first thing is to make people aware, knowledgeable about the history. If they’re not knowledgeable about the history you can’t change any attitudes, any convictions. When they understand the sequence of events, when they understand the reality that people were dealing with in these struggles, for example, the fact that the the African National Congress from 1912 to 1960 petitioned everywhere in the world trying to peacefully change and get rid of the apartheid government. They have to understand that, they have to know that. They have to know the extent to which the South African government was willing to go to get rid of opposition, to understand that all avenues for peaceful change were closed down, to understand the brutality of the apartheid system. And then I think to also, you have to defame Communism, because it so frightens Americans. But the interesting thing is that with my classes, my experience again and again has been that by the end of the class people were asking themselves, well wait, what is this really that we’ve been so scared of? Why is it that we are so scared of these words, as opposed to just looking at what the realities are, that are being constructed behind the words. For example, the Freedom Charter says to the world, and it still is a governing document in the South Africa of today even, it says the doors of learning shall be open to all. Well, I don’t know a school across the country or a group of students anywhere, especially students who have finished school, owing a hundred thousand dollars who can’t feel some empathy for, and like the notion of being able to go to school and not finish owing a hundred thousand dollars. Those are the kinds of real situations that you have to unclothe and make, put there naked, for people to examine them themselves, and not examine a kind of rhetorical, frightening set of terms that are around these realities.

EM: I think, again, we’re dealing in the same—

PN: We’re certainly in that period.

EM: Right now with healthcare and with Obama’s address to school students.

PN: Absolutely the same thing. I mean, in fact, what is the bottom line of the question of healthcare isn’t, has nothing to do with those healthcare, I don’t think it has anything to
do with healthcare. In fact, what we’re seeing is a very vocal minority that is yet upset
over having a black president in the country. It’s all very related to the same uproar
about whether Michelle has shorts on or not has shorts on. And the, the emptiness, the
vacuousness of the arguments that they use are just ridiculous. These are, you watch
some of these people come from out of places where they just had their Medicare
treatment and come into a hall and start protesting against government run programs. I
mean, it’s just, it’s pathetic. But, you have to work with people like that. I think the
other and ultimate thing is to get in front of Americans, people who come from these
situations in countries who can tell their life stories, because so much of this is about the
limited exposure that we have as Americans. For example, when I drop on people the
fact that the country that probably disproportionately gave of itself to support the African
National Congress was not Cuba, it was not even the Soviet Union, it was Sweden. It
was Sweden! And that the record of the Swedish involvement with South Africa’s ANC
with Mozambique FRELIMO, with the NPLA in Angola, one has, can only wonder how
did this tiny little all blonde Scandinavian country make this decision? And I think that
the basis on which the Scandinavian countries, not just Sweden, but especially Sweden,
did what they did was on the basis of the justice that’s involved in rendering justice to
people. That matters a great deal. Fairness, it’s what Jesse Jackson always talks about,
getting an even playing field for everybody. But you have to do so much educating to get
to that place for Americans in particular to understand these questions. And I think in
understanding the Southern African questions, they also, Americans particularly begin to
understand their own history.

EM: Um-hm. And you can flip it by saying their resistance to understanding it is
because they don’t want to face their own history.

PN: Their own history, absolutely. It’s really deep, it’s really deep. I have seen group
after group that I have taken to Southern Africa. I can almost predict, Erin, the moment
at which an interracial group of Americans that I bring to Southern Africa are going to
start to confront themselves and each other and in confronting each other, they’re really
confronting themselves. Black people get upset about the white people, white people get
upset about the black people being so much, taking on so much once they’re in Africa.
They get feeling guilty, and all of this operates on the group until there comes that
moment that there has to be a reckoning with all of this. It affords a great teaching
moment, then, and I have seen some discussions and some movement and some
transformation of people that has been remarkable. I think that that also reflects
something that is one of the strengths of the South African situation, is that people do
open up even when they have really backwards view of things. They talk about things,
and they wanted to analyze things. Now, in South Africa, there’s a huge discussion going
on on two questions. One is xenophobia, it is that many black South Africans have, have
taken to attacking out of jealousy and insecurity about their own economic situation, have
taken to attacking Africans that have come to South Africa from other countries, so
there’s been a wave of xenophobic attacks. A second—

EM: Like an idea of, that South Africa is only for black South Africans?
PN: South Africans, not just black, but for South Africans.

EM: Okay, interesting.

PN: Those who were pushing this, for instance, don’t push so much the idea that it can only be black South Africans, but South Africans, and they reject the Tanzanians, reject the Mozambicans, reject the Zambians, reject the Congolese and the Nigerians. Of course, with the case with the Tanzanians, the case of the Mozambicans, of the Angolans, of the Zambians, they then reject a piece of their own history, because there are so many of those people and in those countries in particular who died, who died to help free South Africa from the grip of apartheid, and so that’s been one of the things the leadership has done. I think it’s a function in part, it’s a result rather, a product, a lack of enough educational programs that tell South Africans of their own history, particularly young South Africans. It’s been mostly young men who have been most engaged in the attacks that have taken place.

EM: And has it been tied to the economy and economic opportunity?

PN: Oh, absolutely. It’s these things that spike according to this spiking unemployment, you know. In South Africa today the unemployment is fifty-five, fifty-six unemployment, actual unemployment figures.

EM: What was the second, you said there were—

PN: The second thing, the second thing is even more sensitive in some ways, is the question, it is the question of the Middle East. The other place that the African National Congress and the other liberation movements too, probably, but particularly the African National Congress very much identified with, was the struggle of the Palestinian people. That has raised a very serious question for the very significant Jewish population in South Africa of, of do they go with kind of the limitations of identity politics and just identify as Jews, or do they identify as people who are fighting with all oppressed people, even if it means taking on your own nation’s state that is wrong in regard to it’s treatment. A very significant body in South Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council I think it’s called, just made a finding, a very scientifically done study finding that the treatment of Palestinians is in fact worse than apartheid was for the African majority, and in fact that it is a new kind of apartheid that is taking place amongst the Palestinians. This in turn led to several, particularly one Jewish South African leader, Ronnie Kasrils, taking a very public, very courageous stance saying, that he formed an organization called Not In My Name, in saying that, he prefaces talking about the Jewish faith, of the quest for justice, and the quest for identifying with the most oppressed and saying that for the, for there not to be a response by the Jewish people of South Africa was tantamount betrayal of everything that Judaism stands for. It has caused a huge conflict inside of South Africa, a huge tension. In the meanwhile, the ANC has its own specific political link to the Palestinians. For years the ANC has identified with the PLO in the same way that it had a direct alliance with the Irish Republican movement. It had a direct alliance with the Cuban people. It had an alliance with African Americans fighting against discrimination.
It identified with people fighting colonialism and racism. Therefore, it has had, historically, a direct link. The other bit of irony in all of this is that while the state of Israel has done all these apartheid like things, there is in the history, also, a period in which Israel helped to build the apartheid regime, and despite the fact that some at the time, those leaders of South Africa, a man named Balthazar Vorster, in particular, had been interned during World War II for his Nazi sympathies. Despite that, Israel forged an alliance with the apartheid government of South Africa. The way in which South Africa became a nuclear power is a result of Israel, the United States, and West Germany coming to embrace the Apartheid Regime in South Africa. So that, to have that in history, and to have then also these apartheid like measures that are being taken against the Palestinian people, and the occupation of Palestine, it means that it is a great and grave moment for people of the Jewish background in South Africa to take up this challenge to be outspokenly opposed to the state of Israel’s practices, not to be against Jewish people, but to be against the practices of the state of Israel. That is the second major, big question that today is being dealt with in South Africa.

EM: What, bringing it back to your personal experience, what have you learned by, from your involvement in the anti-apartheid movement that you, you’ve kept with you since it’s conclusion?

PN: Since it’s inception?

EM: Since your work, but also the conclusion of the apartheid regime.

PN: You know, I came from a very politically aware family. My father was very politically aware, my uncles, my father and my uncles were, at least one uncle and my father were Union organizers and helped to organize the Unions here in this city for baggage porters at the train stations. They had had uncles themselves who were part of the Garvey Movement. My mother, learning more and more as I get older and older, that it wasn’t accidental that she took me to hear the Weavers [the group Pete Seeger was with] all the time, and took me to listen to people and watch people dance like Katherine Dunham. It was not accidental those were the connections that we had. I remember going through a phase of hating white people. My mother came to me one night when I was at the apex of this phase—

EM: About what age?

PN: I think I was about, I must have been about eighteen, seventeen, eighteen? And my mother came to me and she said, “Are you ready to start cooking every night yourself?” And I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “You can’t have these attitudes in my house. If you want to have your own house, you can do whatever you want, but as long as you’re under my roof, you can’t have these attitudes.” Well, with some kind of, I obviously had to cool it, chill as people might say today with some of my attitudes. But I don’t think it, I think it would’ve been just a political point made by my mother as opposed to it being the preface to a introduction to politics that Southern Africa were giving.
EM: That you had to work with people that—

PN: That you had to learn, that I learned out of all of this involvement, that it wasn’t about skin color. And I think that it was with being with people who paid the highest price you can possibly pay for your values, and being taught by people like that, that I internalized a much more clear understanding that would be the basis of the organization of all my life. Ruth First, for example, was a white Jewish South African woman. She was my friend. When I learned of Ruth First being killed I just wept and wept at the idea that the apartheid regime had just blown her to smithereens. When Eduardo Mondlane, the leader of the Mozambique Liberation Front was similarly killed on the morning I was supposed to go see him, there was not a racialized bone in Eduardo’s body, and he paid the highest price you could pay for his clear vision of building a Mozambique that would be not based on color, but would be based on people. And I’ve seen this in reality in Africa. I’m very struck by having been in the United States and in Africa, and having been interracially married, had many experiences with white people, traveling with them to the United States, traveling with them in Africa. It’s amazing to me how much more comfortable it is to be part of an interracial group, to be an interracial couple, whatever, in South Africa, even in the years of a apartheid, even in the years that it was banned to do that you could feel more comfort, more comfortable about it then you could feel, even to this day I think in the United States. There’s so much judging you based on your color in the United States, so much more than what happens in Africa, particularly by African people. African people are very clear who they are. They are very certain. They walk knowing that their land, their continent is theirs, they are not intimidated, they’re not upset, they’re not worried about the combinations of people that come. In Africa you see all kinds of combinations. I think that one of the greatest lessons that all of this has given me is this clarity about not, not letting it all just come down to the level who’s black, who’s brown, who’s white, who’s red, I mean, who are the ones who prepared to die to make it better for everybody to live in a better world. That’s what it comes down to be for me. I draw a very hard line on hypocrisy around that question. For example, I have tremendous trouble with Christians who profess, whether they are black or white or brown or red, if they profess that everybody is equal and they don’t live that way, to me they are hypocrites. If they are progressives and they say we are building a world where this is not relevant and people don’t live that way and you’re not judged by your color but by the content of your character and all that blahblah, people don’t live that way they’re hypocrites for me. For me, when you’re a hypocrite, you’re finished. I may work with you, but I will never, ever, ever trust people like that, because I have worked with people who have given their lives to, to live what they believe. I think the expression, walk the walk. They have given their lives. They, there was no equivocation in the way they lived their lives. And that’s, I think, one of the greatest lessons in all of this has been for me. It has been very, very heartfelt lesson for me that involved, I had a sister who very much loved this part, though she never got to Africa, my sister met almost all the Africa people that I was involved with who came to this country. My sister used to have, she used to say to me, Prexy just tell me one thing. I don’t want to know all of the finite nuanced questions and politics, who loves who on which side? And who are the good people that I can identify with? And that’s where she said, I’ll be. Whoever they are makes no difference. How do they live their lives? And that’s what I think has been the particular
strength that I have gained, an insight that I have gained out of these years of involvement with people from that part of the world.

EM: What would you do differently?

PN: What would I do differently? A couple minor things, a couple minor things. I might have gone to try to do, get a PhD, finish it, it would’ve increased my mobility, my capacity to impact other people. I think I would’ve insisted, insisted on joining FRELIMO’s armed struggle for freedom.

EM: Because you were told we need you, you’re more important elsewhere?

PN: That’s right. But I think that I could’ve pushed that much harder, and I think it would’ve been a more complete step for me. Instead of taking a five-fifths step, I took a four-fifth step. I wish that I had taken a five-fifths step, even if it meant I may not be living through it.

EM: Or killing other people.

PN: On that question I was very clear, because I think that that’s in the nature of the liberation war that I came to learn about, the killing of other people was the most secondary aspect. The primary aspect was winning the political struggle, and that involved making gains that are much bigger than just elimination, physically, of the enemy. It was about building a new human being.

EM: But, could that, because you specifically said the Armed Struggle. Could you do that without—

PN: No, you would have to have, I was already on the edge of learning that stuff, and learned a great deal just being on the edge about those kinds of aspects of the struggle. But that’s all secondary to the most important lessons that came out of that, and that was the lessons of building another society, of becoming a combatant to building another society. I think that that’s the hardest lesson of all. There are many people, even today, who are all very enshrouded, very wrapped up entirely in the military and Armed Struggle, who are around today, but they never did learn the new values, and that’s part of the corruption that the liberation movements turned into governments, some of those officials who were still wrapped up around money and the old things that were the prizes of the old way of doing things. There are not a lot of the leaders of those liberation movements who have kept the faith with the values that we were talking about. There are some, and there are some who were just wonderful with what they have done, and the way they lead their lives, and the families they have raised, and what they have passed on there, they are just wonderful. I think of a man named Jorge Rebelo, who is the soul of integrity. I think of someone like Mozambique’s former ambassador to the United States, Valeriano Ferrao, these are people who in Mozambique today, where sadly corruption is all over the place, it’s like Chicago, you know, these are people that can’t be bought. They are unbuyable. They’re like the old untouchables in the Al Capone era. And there are some

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like that in South Africa, they are Bonita Bennett who runs the District Six Museum,
Michael Weeder, a renown Anglican priest, these are people who represented a different
set of values, who came into the struggle to put forward and create a new person, a new
people, new men, new women, and they lived that life, and they live those values yet
today. They don’t, they’re not about money, they could’ve been. Now, on the other
hand, there are many in South Africa today who have forgotten that altogether. You
wonder what has happened to them. Tokyo Sexwale, this was a man who wept when his
comrade Chris Hani was shot down in front of him just after the negotiations started, but
today he’s this multibillionaire who... what has happened to his old values?

EM: They become people who they’ve, were fighting against.

PN: This is exactly what the “60 Minutes” interview, another great moment that should
be looked at is the “60 Minute” interview of Tokyo Sexwale, because that’s one of the
great issues in South Africa today; it is this issue of was the struggle just to have a black
gravy train, to have black owners of Mercedes and Hummers and everything else, as
opposed to white owners of Mercedes and Hummers? No, the struggle to create the
South Africa that, which the doors of learning would be open for everybody, the riches of
the land would benefit everybody. And that, that’s very much in the face of people right
now.

EM: And this country certainly struggles with that same—

PN: Oh, do we ever, do we ever.

EM: What are you most proud of?

PN: If I was to identify any one thing, it would be that there are about thirty-five, forty
places in this world, thirty-five to forty different places in this world where I can go and
be with people who have been my comrades, and that that relationship is so deep that
when my sons go and meet these people, they will be embraced. That’s much richer than
any amount of money.

EM: And that really came through your work.

PN: I think it has come through my engagement.

EM: Had you lived a different life that you would—

PN: It wouldn’t be there.

EM: And when you go to these places, what do you talk about, what do you do with,
with these people that you, you know, consider your, your comrades and that, that bond is
unbreakable?

PN: We talk about how horrible process aging is.
EM: (laughs)

PN: We talk about how poor we are. We talk about our children. We talk about the struggle, but I think we also talk a lot about, what will you share, the values we’ve shared, the richness of those shared experiences.

EM: Do you look for—

PN: We talk a lot about the people who are gone. We talk a lot about the people who have gone. And I think that’s part of the richness of what we have.

EM: I, I was going to ask you if this kind of work is, that you talk about aging, is this a young persons, you know, kind of job? Do these movements kind of have to rely on, on youth, or—

PN: Absolutely, absolutely. The Mozambicans and Angolans had a wonderful expression, “continuadores,” those who will continue things. And it’s getting harder and harder to find those people. I think it’s one of the joys that I’ve had around Columbia College from time to time, is I run into students that I know are, they have coursing through their blood, their veins, that spirit, ‘cause they say it, they say it again and again. We took this wonderful group to study history and memory in South Africa this summer, and you could just feel in those students from time to time, how much they wanted to have the kind of wealth and background that came from some of the people we talked to and interviewed, incredible people, like Mac Maharaj who helped engineer, the only attempted escape Mandela had, but they never really did, but Mac who was on Robben Island with him, was the man who conceived of the plan. He’s also the man who pirated out the manuscript of this incredible book of Mandela’s Long Walk to Freedom, No Easy Walk to Freedom. And Stephanie Kemp is a woman who withstood the worst tortures in the world. She spent all this incredible time giving, it’s the other characteristic of people like this, they give all the time of themselves, that’s the way Stephanie is. And the students that met these people, they, they picked up on that, and they kept talking about wishing that they were in that earlier period, that’s what Lisa and I would say, but you’re in a period where you have to shape that same in you, that same sense, and I think this group got it.

EM: Is that how you continue your work through education and through reaching out to younger people?

PN: Well, I think the first way that I have to continue the work is to continue the work. So, I remain very involved in a lot of issues, not as many as I would like to be, but certainly reaching out to younger people is, and passing the baton if you will, on, is something that we, many of us feel is very, very critical. A place that I start that, although I do it very gently, is with my own sons. But I do that very gently, you know—

EM: Because?
PN: Well, it’s this whole phenomenon of not wanting to push them, and instead just help
give them exposures, in the same way I was given exposures.

EM: Have you taken them to South Africa?

PN: Five times.

EM: Five times. And what, what do you—

PN: Each of them.

EM: —always want to do, I don’t know, what, what are your priorities when you’re with
them in South Africa?

PN: Well, they know that some of the priorities is that there’s a group of people that
they’ll see. It happens that in that group of people are some extraordinary people that not
everybody gets to see, you know. One of my sons came back and talked on his second or
third trip when he was in second or third grade, he talked to his teacher about where he’d
been, and he never told her that he met Nelson Mandela (laughs), ‘cause, for him, Nelson
Mandela was something he did, but he talked about the elephants who pooped toward the
car when we went to see wildlife, but he never mentioned to her that he had dinner with
Nelson Mandela. Now, he’s embarrassed about that. He wouldn’t even want to hear me
tell that story, so I didn’t identify which son it was, but they know. But it is about the
kinds of people that you expose your children to.

EM: And so what do you hope for your children?

PN: That they’re happy, that they live and that they’re happy.

EM: But what, how would you define happiness?

PN: I think that the way you define happiness is how you, how you are in relationship to
other people, and the way in which other people regard you. I don’t think it’s about
money. One of my sons at least might dispute that right away, but it is about the regard
that people have for you.

EM: So, are you happy?

PN: I have lived a very, very rich, rich life, on almost every part of life that you can
imagine. I have been very fortunate. I have an array of friends. I have not done well
romantically in this world, but I have had wonderful, wonderful people who have loved
me and that I have loved through the course of it all. Did I do well by the conventional
measures of marital life and family? No. But did I do better by the other measures of
friendship and contribution and serving? Then, I am very happy.

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EM: Well, I want to take a moment to thank you for spending this time and sharing your experiences, and philosophy and kind of knowledge of the world beyond South Africa.

PN: Thank you very much. Thank you for taking all this time to interview me, and to push me on some of these subjects. It’s very hard, I come from a generation that was taught not to talk about ourselves, so, I hope, I must apologize if I’ve caused you undo exertion from time to time.

EM: No, it was my pleasure, definitely, my pleasure. And we are at exactly sixty minutes.

PN: Voila!

EM: So here we go.

PN: C’est bon ca!

EM: (laughs) What does that mean?

PN: You speak some French?

EM: A little.

PN: This is very good. ‘That’s the victory of that!’

EM: Very good.

end of interview