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## Interview with Prexy Nesbitt

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1                                   **An Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt**  
2                                   **by Erin McCarthy, Columbia College Chicago**  
3   **2009**

4  
5     *beginning of interview*

6  
7     ERIN MCCARTHY: It's April 1, 2009. This is an interview with Prexy Nesbitt. The  
8     interviewer is Erin McCarthy, and we are conducting the interview at Columbia College  
9     Chicago. I'd like to just start briefly by, if you could just kind of document for the  
10    camera, the years of your anti-apartheid activism, or if you still consider yourself an  
11    activist when that started?

12  
13    PREXY NESBITT: Well I do consider myself still an activist around Africa issues. I  
14    would say it started around 1965 with my first trip to Africa, so that would have been in  
15    July of 1965.

16  
17    EM: And, I know that you were active internationally and nationally. But maybe, if,  
18    was there a center of activism, or are there a few locations that you would point to that  
19    really was a focus of your activism, the locations of where you worked from?

20  
21    PN: Internationally, I think the foci of my activism internationally would be probably  
22    Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; London, England; and Geneva, Switzerland. In Dar es Salaam,  
23    Tanzania I worked for the Mozambique Liberation Front. It was also the place in which I  
24    first became aware of the South Africa issue in particular in 1965 when I was a student  
25    overseas through Antioch College's Year Abroad Program. I went to the University  
26    College of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. And then London, in as much as I worked in  
27    London with the anti-apartheid movement in 1968, or part of '68, and also worked with  
28    the Chi—, the Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, and Angola and Guinea-Bissau,  
29    which was, the patron of that was the famous historian Basil Davidson, and the staff  
30    person then was a woman named Polly Gaster. Then, the third place that I would say  
31    internationally that was a very important base of my work was with the World Council of  
32    Churches Programme to Combat Racism where I worked in 1979, January of '79 until  
33    1983, April or May. And there I worked for a program that was involved all over the  
34    world in combating racism, but the focus of the Programme to Combat Racisms work  
35    was a South Africa issue because our analysis was that that represented the most  
36    complete manifestation of racism and white supremacy.

37  
38    EM: Just some biographical background, what year were you born?

39  
40    PN: I was born in 1944, February 23, the same day as the birthday as W. E. B. Du Bois,  
41    and Shakespeare, William Shakespeare.

42  
43    EM: You share a notable birthday (laughs).

44  
45    PN: Incredible birthday companions.

46

47 EM: And where, where were you born?  
48  
49 PN: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, Cook County Hospital.  
50  
51 EM: Okay, and were you raised, where were you raised?  
52  
53 PN: I was raised in Chicago, largely most of my years on the West Side of Chicago, in  
54 Lawndale, but I was actually living, my parents were living on South Parkway  
55 Boulevard, today known as King Drive, when I was born in 1944. And then we lived  
56 briefly in another area, the West Side, on Warren Avenue, not far from the Warren  
57 Avenue Congregational Church, a very famous church on the West Side.  
58  
59 EM: And where was your father born?  
60  
61 PN: My father, Rozell Nesbitt, was born in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. My mother,  
62 Sadie Nesbitt, was born in Ensley, Alabama.  
63  
64 EM: And was she raised there? Did she—  
65  
66 PN: No, my mother was the daughter, the youngest daughter of seven children to  
67 William Crain, who was a CME minister, and in those years—  
68  
69 EM: CME, that's—  
70  
71 PN: That stands for, it then stood for Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, but now it is  
72 known as Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, but in those years the bishops just sent  
73 those pastors wherever they went. So I think my mother lived in about seven different  
74 cities growing up, including living some time in Chicago and Detroit, St. Louis, all kinds  
75 of places. But my father, by way of contrast, he and his four brothers were all raised  
76 solely in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, where their mother, my grandmother, cooked for  
77 the fraternity house and my grandfather was, cleaned yards and washed windows.  
78  
79 EM: For the university, or—  
80  
81 PN: My grandfather worked for anybody, and he had no desire for his sons to do  
82 anything else but what he did. My grandmother, on the other hand, wanted them all to go  
83 to college. In fact, in the middle of the Depression years, all five of them went not only  
84 to college, but to professional schools so that their end result was two doctors, one  
85 lawyer, one physicist, and my father, who was an engineer.  
86  
87 EM: Interesting.  
88  
89 PN: Very unique. And then they all lived together, always, very cooperative. So we, I  
90 al—, I was raised in a very extended family situation.  
91  
92 EM: And when did your father come to Chicago?

93

94 PN: My father first came to Chicago, it must have been about 1941 or '42, something  
95 like that. He and my mother, they'd married by then.

96

97 EM: So they met in—

98

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

103

104 EM: Yes, yes.

105

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

114

115 EM: And what is your earliest childhood memory?

116

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

125

126 EM: And how did you get your name?

127

128 PN: I was given my name, I believe, by one of my mother's very, very dear friends who  
129 was a social worker on the South Side of Chicago, a woman named Helen Graham.  
130 When I was born my father was in the Civilian Volunteers Organization working with  
131 World War II, and he was stationed, he was an engineer, an electrical engineer, so he was  
132 doing work on planes. He refused to be in the Service, but he agreed to do this civilian  
133 work. Many African Americans refused to do service in World War II. And he was  
134 stationed in Texas and stationed also at Wright Penn [Patterson] Air Force Base, and also  
135 at Chanute Field in Champaign-Urbana. And my mother's friends, this Helen Graham,  
136 because I was one of the first children of the group of friends, one of the first of the  
137 children born, she decided I would be the president of the group. So Prexy is short for  
138 president, it's a nickname, and so she would write to my father informing him about my

139 mother's condition by saying how the little Prexy was coming along. Since my real name  
140 is Rozell and I can't stand it, Prexy was a much better alternative.

141  
142 EM: And where did Rozell come from?

143  
144 PN: My father had nothing to do with it.

145  
146 EM: (laughs)

147  
148 PN: I think it's a name that my grandmother thought of. They are all, all five of her  
149 sons, Robert, Rufus, Rozell—

150  
151 EM: Okay, they're all Rs—

152  
153 PN: Robert, there was only one L, and the rest were all Rs.

154  
155 EM: Can you describe the home, your childhood home, the home you grew up in?

156  
157 PN: The home that I most remember and where I certainly spent most of my childhood  
158 would have been the home at 1514 South Albany, which was an institution, it was not  
159 just a home, it was an institution, very different. I, it was, the five brothers bought one  
160 apartment building, it had about eleven flats, eleven apartments in it. Besides the five  
161 brothers were people that they wanted to live with them, and live very cooperatively. So  
162 it was a very multiracial house. At different times there were Puerto Rican families there,  
163 there were white families, there were, there was a Congolese family that lived there, there  
164 was a family from Scotland that lived there. The house was always full of activity,  
165 always people coming and going. The interaction between the brothers was always very  
166 strong. There was a lot of doing things together, so my thirteen cousins, we all view each  
167 other more as brothers and sisters more than just first cousins. It was a household in the  
168 middle of a changing neighborhood. Lawndale, when we first moved there in 1948 was  
169 all Jewish, and I think we were amongst the first black families, to be as it was, west of  
170 Western Avenue, in Lawndale, and I mean amongst the very few. We watched between  
171 '48 and '58, essentially a ten year period that neighborhood go from ninety-eight percent  
172 Jewish to ninety-eight percent black, and largely working class and poor blacks. First,  
173 when my family moved in and others it was more middle class black families, but by the  
174 end of the fifties it had become many, many poor people. And so, in the beginnings I can  
175 remember the hostility that was there. It wasn't so much from Jewish neighbors we had,  
176 some of whom are still amongst our family's best friends, a woman like Tommy Danish  
177 for example, is almost like an older sister to me. And, but the hostility came from the  
178 police, for example. There were many, many encounters with the police. There were  
179 encounters where the men of the family, in fact, there was a system worked out where the  
180 men had a certain car honking method when a man was being harassed out front, one of  
181 the members of the building and the others would all respond. I remember one particular  
182 instance where I snuck out the back to watch this response, and it was a very heated  
183 incident with guns involved, where one of the men in the building had a big shotgun and  
184 he put it on the police because the police were harassing my father, in this instance. They

185 used to shake down black people they found in Lawndale, it was part of a systematic  
186 thing. There was a whole period of cars being stolen, the windows being broken, and all  
187 of these things were things that the brothers and the other men in the building,  
188 particularly the men, would respond to very collectively. But I can remember also a very  
189 ugly incident where a white man went up against the car when my mother was driving  
190 my sister and I, and exposed himself in the window of the car. And I remember my  
191 mother crying, and then I remember the frustration I felt 'cause I couldn't, I was very  
192 young, but she wished that I was older and then she wished that I was, my father had  
193 been there. I remember her driving us to the police station. I don't recall us going in, but  
194 she came out more upset because there was a non-response to what had happened from  
195 the police. And that took place around Madison and Independence Boulevard, also on  
196 the West Side. The incident had occurred somewhere along Madison, in what is called  
197 Garfield Park, which of course today is an all black neighborhood, but at that point it  
198 wasn't. So it wasn't so much that an immediate Jewish neighborhoods or neighbors, it  
199 came more from other ethnic groups, the Irish, the Poles, that lived surrounding  
200 Lawndale, which was really the ghetto, it was really a Jewish ghetto.

201

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

203

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

225

226 EM: Can you tell me a little bit about the grammar school that you went to, and, I know  
227 you've commented before on your, I think it was your father's, or maybe your mother's,  
228 your parent's dissatisfaction with the education you were getting?

229

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

250

251 EM: Oh, right.

252

253 PN: To keep people just in the ghettos and not—

254

255 EM: And those were their schools.

256

257 PN: Those were the school rooms people had, as opposed to putting them into  
258 neighboring, mostly empty schools that were white. So this was, it was really, and we  
259 had in our building, a wonderful woman named Faith Rich, who was one of the foremost  
260 authorities in the city on segregated educational patterns in Chicago. So lots of the  
261 organizing against Chicago's segregated school system came out of our building. Well at  
262 any rate, with all that swirling, my mother had investigated Francis Parker School. And  
263 Francis Parker is where we would transfer to in fifth grade. And in fact, going back to  
264 your earlier question, one of the first thing that happened at Francis Parker was that a  
265 student, who later would become a great defender of mine, called me a nigger the first  
266 day I was there, so I hit him across his nose, and bloodied his nose, and my father was a  
267 man who wouldn't take nonsense. And he taught me very early on, oh you asked me  
268 about earliest incidences. My mother, my mother was amongst the first to integrate  
269 Marshall Field. There were two Loops in those years. There was a North Side Loop that  
270 was white, and a South Side Loop where Sears and Goldblatt's were, and then there was  
271 a kind of middle ground, but Marshall Field, Carson's, those were pretty much white  
272 stores. My mother used to regularly frequent Fields. And if I recall correctly, she took  
273 me once when I was very young to go and sit in Santa Claus's lap. And Santa Claus  
274 wouldn't let me sit in his lap. So it, I couldn't have been more than six or seven or  
275 something, so it very much upset me. When my father came home I was still upset. He

276 asked my mother, Why's Prexy so upset? She told the story, and he said, You're wrong.  
277 You have two choices. I can go down and kill me a white man, or else I am going to tell  
278 my son there's no Santa Claus. Now which do you want me to do? (laughs) So I learned,  
279 I learned quite early that there was no such thing as Santa Claus. So that, all that is an  
280 earlier thing in going up to begin school at Francis Parker. But then at Francis Parker  
281 some of the race stuff continued there. But in general, in general the faculty of Francis  
282 Parker, at that point, 1954 this is, and most of the students were completely receptive to  
283 us. We could not possibly go there now, but relative—

284

285 EM: Because?

286

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

294

295 EM: As kind of a protection?

296

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

298

299 EM: Right.

300

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

303

304 EM: Who is that?

305

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

311

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

313

314 PN: I regret never really, my mother died of cancer long before I was an adult, I guess I  
315 was twenty-four when she died of cancer. She certainly, she loved to tease me. My  
316 mother was a great teaser. She loved music. She was an incredible pianist, and one of  
317 these people who just could listen to a piece of music and then reproduce it. And she  
318 took us to a lot of music, you know, I was raised around Paul Robeson, and Big Bill  
319 Broonzy, and these, she was very close to Mahalia Jackson. I can remember taking  
320 recipes back and forth when I first learned to drive between my mother and Mahalia, and  
321 she loved concerts and loved productions. I think there was another reason she wanted us



322 to be at Parker, because there was a big emphasis at Parker School on arts, chorus,  
323 production, performance, and it was a very progressive school. It was the center of  
324 organizing a progressive, a lot of people who were there because McCarthy's couldn't get  
325 anywhere else. And my mother was, as I got older I really learned that where I had  
326 thought when I was younger, was that my father was really the politically savvy one, I  
327 learned more and more that my mother was very, very political through her art and  
328 through her culture.

329

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

332

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

340

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

343

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

349

350 EM: Was that the University of Illinois?

351

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

367 to me then to that college facilitating my first trip to Africa. That's how I, it was while I  
368 was a student at Antioch, that I took my year abroad in Africa.  
369  
370 EM: What year was that?  
371  
372 PN: Nineteen sixty-five.  
373  
374 EM: In '65 you spent a year abroad in—  
375  
376 PN: In Tanzania.  
377  
378 EM: Tanzania.  
379  
380 PN: Studying as a student, an exchange student, the first that they had ever had in New  
381 University in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.  
382  
383 EM: What was that year like?  
384  
385 PN: It was a mind, mindboggling. It opened me up to an entirely different world. I got  
386 off, I was picked up by my family's former pastor who happened to be working there in  
387 Tanzania. That was certainly one of the things that eased my parents in terms of me  
388 making such a trip, 'cause in '65 going to Africa was different than today, different, just  
389 totally different.  
390  
391 EM: How did you get there?  
392  
393 PN: I went, every trip you went by Europe, you sometimes went by plane, so I remember  
394 sometimes you went by boat. I took a boat to—  
395  
396 EM: I was going to say—  
397  
398 PN: To England.  
399  
400 EM: From New York?  
401  
402 PN: From New York, I took a boat to England.  
403  
404 EM: Do you, what was that like for you?  
405  
406 PN: It was weeks on the boat. I was sick every day of it almost, and then flew from  
407 there to Nairobi, Kenya. This minister drove up—  
408  
409 EM: Now this is pre-, was this pre-, I'm trying to think, so what size of plane?  
410  
411 PN: A prop.  
412

413 EM: A prop plane. How many people?

414

415 PN: Forty-five or fifty.

416

417 EM: Had you flown before as a child or—

418

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

436

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

438

439 PN: It was the early sixties.

440

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

442

443 PN: Uproars.

444

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

448

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

455

456 EM: And, American citizen, I would imagine.

457

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

464  
465 EM: I'd love to spend more time, but I want to be aware of moving to the story we're  
466 supposed to be getting to. But you, I interrupted you when you said you got off in  
467 Tanzania and the pastor, your former pastor picked you up.

468  
469 PN: Picked me up. He picks me up, and he and his family drove me from Nairobi,  
470 Kenya to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. It took us at least three nights in those years. So we  
471 stopped in different places and stayed overnight, myself and this white family. And  
472 finally we reached Dar es Salaam, and the first thing that happened was a whole group of  
473 South African refugees, which included, that group included Miriam Makeba, but she  
474 wasn't in the group that, at that occasion, but she was part of that community in Dar es  
475 Salaam at that point in time. They met me, and they were all on the way. Now I had just  
476 driven up, and they came, they knew this African American guy was coming to be a  
477 student, and they met us and said to me, Come on go with us, we're going to listen to this  
478 record, a '78 record of a speech. And it was a speech that had been given just the year  
479 before, but the recording of it had just reached Dar es Salaam. It was the speech of  
480 Nelson Mandela's "Why I'm Prepared to Die," that he gave at the Rivonia Trial. And we  
481 would listen to this again and again and again, there in this hot, humid heat of Dar es  
482 Salaam. And frankly, I didn't even know who Nelson Mandela was at that time. And I  
483 would think that, even though I came from a progressive and informed family, there  
484 would've been very few people, families in Chicago who knew who Nelson Mandela was  
485 in 1963, a few, but not many.

486  
487 EM: So when did you first become aware of apartheid?

488  
489 PN: Well certainly then, in '63, this would be '65, certainly by '65. Well actually, let me  
490 take that back, because when I was in seventh grade I did a paper at Francis Parker  
491 School on "Cry the Beloved Country." And so there was some awareness then, but I  
492 found that paper not long ago and I'm just embarrassed about it. I mean, for example, the  
493 word is kaffir was used in that paper, and I used the word kaffir without any critical  
494 judgment on it. You know the word kaffir?

495  
496 EM: Well, only from what Dr. Brock, that that is a very derogatory—

497  
498 PN: Oh please, it is the same as nigger. It's just basically, it's infidel swine. You can't  
499 find a more derogatory term in the Africans language, and that was used in the book and I  
500 took it up and just used it in this paper without any knowledge. So that was my first, and  
501 that would've been '56, something like that, now, that's pretty early. My family must  
502 have, certainly have told me things, because my uncles and my father and their uncles,  
503 one of my uncles was a Garveian, he was a member of the United Negro Improvement

504 Association, which really followed Africa things very carefully, but that was the earliest,  
505 but to begin to substantively know about an apartheid, that would start in '65 when I  
506 make the first trip to Tanzania. From that point on, I go back to Antioch College to finish  
507 up, and I start a committee at Antioch that's called the Antioch Committee on Southern  
508 Africa, with a woman named Marty Houser, the daughter of a man named George  
509 Houser, who was the man who founded the American Committee on Africa, the first real  
510 national organization to work on South Africa issues. Later I would work for them as a  
511 staff person, but in '65 in Antioch, Marty and I started this organization concerned with  
512 Southern Africa, and among other things, we, I, I stayed with it, she didn't stay with it.  
513 We, we took over, we sat in on the trustees protesting the college's involvement in  
514 companies that were supporting apartheid in South Africa, so that was pretty early for  
515 college to be doing that. Now we didn't succeed in getting divestment then, it took ten  
516 years, even at a school as progressive as Antioch, but it was raised very early.

517

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

521

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

523

524 EM: I mean at home?

525

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

546

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

548

549 PN: Working as a red cap?

550

551 EM: Yeah.

552

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

588

589 EM: I'm just wondering, at the time, what did you think? I mean obviously this wasn't  
590 your career, the rest of your life, but what were the thoughts maybe, going through your  
591 head about working with these men? This had been it for them, I don't know, did you  
592 imagine if that was all that, that was in the future for you? Did you think about  
593 opportunity, or lack of opportunity?

594

595 PN: I never once thought that this would be all that I would do in my life. But I certainly  
596 learned that there are very different kinds of people that do different things all their life.  
597 You can never judge them by what they're doing, but how they do it, and what kind of  
598 people they are. There were some real slimes amongst some of these guys. On the other  
599 hand, there were some people like Red who had the upmost character, you know, he had  
600 more character than the fingernails that most human beings have. It just was the nature  
601 of American structure that they never were going to move anywhere else. Some of them,  
602 they made, you could make money doing this. You had to do, one of the other things we  
603 did was arrange weapons for the guys coming in on the trains who would come in from  
604 New York and they would get a train, say to Canada. They would stay in the Pullman car  
605 the whole time. These guys would often contact some of the red caps, say Here's \$25.00  
606 get me a pint of so-and-so, and here's another \$25.00, arrange for so-and-so to come and  
607 see me and bring me the pint. So, that's \$50.00, and \$50.00 was a lot of money in those  
608 days. Then they'd gamble away a lot of it, there was a lot of gambling. But, it was good  
609 exposure for me, and it was good to learn about working with people at any kind of level  
610 that they're at.

611  
612 EM: Why do you think your parents, at that time, were really, you know, some parents  
613 would not want to expose their kids maybe to a side of life that they didn't, they had  
614 aspirations for their child, but it seems your parents travel, politics—

615  
616 PN: Well, I think that they were essentially in a very, they came out of a period of time  
617 and in orientation as a family, all of them, that was oriented towards learning out of life.  
618 There was book learnin' and there was life learnin', and you had to have a lot of both.  
619 Nobody on my mother's side of the family, except my mother, went to college. None of  
620 her six brothers and sisters went to college, but all of them knew the value of it. Of the  
621 next generation, I think it's only my sister and I that finished college, maybe a couple of  
622 other cousins finished a couple years of college, but it was, it was rare. So we were given  
623 a lot of privilege, and the other thing that you were given with that was responsibility.  
624 You were never to sort of just throw that away with what you had the chance to do. In  
625 our family, we never left the West Side. The West Side got very, very bad, very  
626 dangerous. But in our building, it was a building of professionals that lived on the West  
627 Side and stayed there, we never would've left had it not been for probably one or two  
628 uncles had sort of just got weak about it. When they left, and then the building was just  
629 impossible to maintain, we could not get loans in that period, even though it was this  
630 building of professionals, we couldn't get loans from banks to do, for example, we  
631 wanted to redo all the porches and we couldn't get a loan from the bank. That's the way  
632 that, there were no banks on the West Side.

633  
634 EM: Well that's one way, too, to ensure that a neighborhood—

635  
636 PN: Goes down. Believe it, it's systemic, so there was no bucking that system. Then  
637 when it got to a certain point, I mean, I remember it, one of the earliest memories I have  
638 about the dope industry was walking out the back door, the back gate of the house  
639 coming across a car where a guy was driving and the whole back of his head had been

640 blown away. I walked up, I was the one that found that. I never forgot what that looked  
641 like.

642

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

653

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

656

657 EM: That hasn't been told?

658

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

677

678 EM: Did you understand why?

679

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

682

683 EM: Well, we'll go back to Antioch (laughter). Your final year, what were your plans  
684 then, after Antioch?

685



686 PN: I went, my final year at Antioch—

687

688 EM: What did, what was your degree in?

689

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

691

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

693

694 *pause in recording*

695

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

698

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

717

718 EM: In graduate school?

719

720 PN: In graduate school at Columbia. You never saw the professor. At the end of the  
721 year, I remember just a few weeks before the take-over of Columbia University, the '68  
722 takeover, my advisor called me in to see him, and it was the first time I met him. He said,  
723 You, you Antioch people always have a rough time coming here to Columbia (laughs). I  
724 said yes. It was a few weeks later that SDS and some of the black undergraduates took  
725 over part of Columbia, and that started a four week occupation that I got right in the  
726 middle of, as one of the few graduate students who protested Columbia University's  
727 plans to expand into Harlem. I was also pressing the black students to also protest  
728 Columbia's role in the Vietnam War, which was the issue over which white SDS stood,  
729 Mark Rudd and others had originally taken over these buildings, and I was trying to  
730 broaden the political program of the black students, so we would also be anti-war. I was  
731 very much alone in that respect, but I stayed with the whole group. Immediately after the

732 take-over ended, that was after five or six weeks of just complete disruption of Columbia,  
733 and the disruption of New York City as well, because it was huge numbers of New York  
734 City police department got involved with this, and Harlem, and there were all these  
735 threats to the students, and Harlem would issue a counter-threat. If they did anything to  
736 these black students Harlem would erupt and all this. Right afterwards, when it came to  
737 renewing my fellowship, I'd lost the money, and there was no question in my mind what  
738 had happened. My grades were fair, they were good, some grades were very good, but  
739 they had, they linked me with this thing. Within a week after that, I was drafted to go to  
740 the Vietnam, to go to 'Nam, to apply, to appear for my physical.

741

742 EM: Because you lost your exempt—

743

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

775

776 EM: Thirty hours.

777

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

791

792 EM: Of what year again?

793

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

803

804 EM: So you weren't underground?

805

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

807

808 EM: Looking over your shoulder?

809

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

815

816 EM: And what year was that?

817

818 PN: That was 1970, or '71.

819

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

821

822 PN: Organizing, organizing all over the Midwest, trying to get people to get involved on  
823 the issue.

824  
825 EM: So education—  
826  
827 PN: Education, and mostly education in those years. And, a lot of speech giving, and a  
828 lot of travel.  
829  
830 EM: And did the organization, how, did they pay for you to get to one place or the other?  
831 Where did you, you know, how did you fund—  
832  
833 PN: All that work?  
834  
835 EM: All that work.  
836  
837 PN: There was a group of four couples that gave a grant to the American Committee on  
838 Africa to develop organizing the black community around Africa, and it was that grant  
839 that funded my work for a year, or maybe sixteen months with the American Committee  
840 on Africa. People would invite me to speak somewhere and, yeah, they would put you on  
841 a bus, or you would drive all night long, and you know, you got a t-shirt for speaking, or  
842 you got a hat, or you got a great meal, you know? You didn't get any money.  
843  
844 EM: Right.  
845  
846 PN: You weren't, it wasn't about making money.  
847  
848 EM: And who started, or what are the, what was the origin of the American Committee  
849 on Africa?  
850  
851 PN: The American Committee on Africa started out of the effort of a group of people  
852 who had been in touch with people like Chief Albert Luthuli and others in South Africa.  
853 They were mostly church people. A key person may have been this guy George Houser,  
854 who was himself a Methodist minister.  
855  
856 EM: And was he based East?  
857  
858 PN: East, he was based in New York.  
859  
860 EM: Oh, New York, okay.  
861  
862 PN: And that couple, that group of four couples gave the money to open up a Midwest  
863 office.  
864  
865 EM: Okay.  
866  
867 PN: And that really was the first time that that organization had ever tried to have  
868 organizing in the Midwest. Now, Houser didn't continue, so the next year I was without  
869 work, but I continued to do it. One of the things, for example, that formed in that period

870 of time in '70 was a Chicago Committee for the Liberation for Angola, Mozambique, and  
871 Guinea Bissau clan. And then I was instrumental in forming an organization like it in  
872 Detroit. I did some organizing in Minnesota, in Wisconsin, just wherever I could.

873

874 EM: And is this still around apartheid?

875

876 PN: This is all around apartheid, or around the struggles in the related areas of the  
877 Portuguese, the countries nearby colonized by Portugal, or around Rhodesia, 'cause I also  
878 was interested in that. In fact, Graca showed me a wonderful compliment once to me.  
879 Do you know who she is?

880

881 EM: No.

882

883 PN: She is Mandela's wife. She is just an eloquent woman, and on her, on my website is  
884 this wonderful speech she gives. I was shocked. Where she, I brought a bunch of  
885 Columbia people there, and she talks about how much work I have done in all regional  
886 struggles. I didn't even know she knew that, you know? She highlights for these  
887 Columbia students, in the most beautiful way, it's in a tape, it was just beautifully said by  
888 her.

889

890 EM: What does that mean to you?

891

892 PN: Well, you know, here's arguably one of the most wonderful women in the world  
893 paying me one of the highest compliments that you can get, so she's much more than just  
894 a friend, she's, she's a model, she's a role-model for, that all the values that mean  
895 anything to me in my life. So it's the kind of thing that I hope my sons and the daughter I  
896 have that I don't know anything about will some day tell their children about it, that I did  
897 carry on the drum beat.

898

899 EM: That's pretty impressive to have that kind of endorsement.

900

901 PN: It's very, and I wish that, I do have a tape of it. It'd be great to put that in  
902 somewhere at the end. The people who were in that trip that filmed her, she, she said all  
903 this just as she was going to get ready to welcome the Columbia students to the seminar  
904 with other young Mozambiqueans that she made these comments. That's the kind of  
905 person she is.

906

907 EM: And what year was that?

908

909 PN: Two years ago? Three years ago, two years ago I think.

910

911 EM: Alright, I have a question for you. We've got more time, although that's an  
912 interesting place to stop. I don't think we'll get through all of this in an hour and a half  
913 because we are just at 1970. And so, are you interested in, you have to leave town.

914

915 PN: I have to leave Sunday.

916  
917 EM: Okay, well let's continue and see where you go, because maybe we can, when you  
918 come back we could still pick up.  
919  
920 PN: I think if we, can we just pick up when I come back?  
921  
922 EM: Yeah, at this point?  
923  
924 PN: At this point.  
925  
926 EM: Yeah, I think that, I mean, it almost I think, where you went in just that last  
927 comment, my gut feeling, my instinct was either consciously or unconsciously, you,  
928 that's a really good place to stop here.  
929  
930 PN: That's what I feel.  
931  
932 EM: Okay, okay.  
933  
934 *pause in recording*  
935  
936 EM: This is Part II of our oral history interview with Prexy Nesbitt. It is May 29—  
937  
938 PN: Twenty-eighth.  
939  
940 EM: Twenty-eighth, two thousand aught-nine (laughs), if I get the date correct, and we  
941 are at Columbia College Chicago. Welcome.  
942  
943 PN: Thank you very much, Erin.  
944  
945 EM: Sorry for the technical difficulties.  
946  
947 PN: No problem.  
948  
949 EM: Okay, well, we left off talking about your organizational efforts internationally, and  
950 maybe if you could start with, kind of, revisiting CCLAMG and talking about any of the  
951 kind of significant events you're a part of with that organization?  
952  
953 PN: CCLAMG was the Chicago Committee to Liberate, the Committee for the  
954 Liberation for Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau. As such, it was an outcome of,  
955 it was a product of the involvement that I had had with FRELIMO, with the Mozambique  
956 Liberation Front, but also the product of relationships that I had had with the Africa  
957 Information Service in New York City, and with a man by the name of, a great leader, a  
958 great man named Amilcar Cabral. In 1970, I don't remember the exact date, there was  
959 held in Rome, Italy, a conference in support of the people of Portuguese colonies. It was  
960 a very remarkable conference, a very high level of coverage because at the tail end of that  
961 conference in Rome there was actually a meeting with the Pope at the Vatican that was

962 held by the leaders of the liberation movements. This was right after Eduardo Mondlane  
963 had been assassinated in Dar Es Salaam, I was there when he was killed. That was on  
964 February 3, 1969, so that representing FRELIMO, the Mozambique Liberation Front, was  
965 Marcelino dos Santos, and I think also Samora Machel, who was also a military leader, a  
966 general so to speak, of FRELIMO. But coming from Angola was Agostinho Neto, who  
967 would later become the first president of Angola. He was the head of the NPLA and  
968 coming from Guinea Bissau was Amilcar Cabral. I was very fortunate to have had, to  
969 have met Cabral at the funeral that was held for Eduardo Mondlane. So I knew who he  
970 was, and actually, Cabral in '70, at some point, before this conference took place in Italy,  
971 Cabral had been in New York and it was a point when I wasn't able to go. I was back in  
972 the States, it seems to me at that point, and I was sick, and my sister went for me. And I  
973 remember this distinctly because my sister and Cabral talked about this. I told her to  
974 write down every word Cabral said. Well my sister had a very strained way of writing,  
975 she never held a pen properly, she always curled over it like some people do. She was  
976 very, very striking. She became one of the top models in this country, along with Lauren  
977 Hutton, she was literally at the top with Fords agency, she was in Vogue, all of this stuff,  
978 one of the Black's models of the 1960s. At any rate, she came and went to every talk  
979 Cabral gave, and Cabral who had an eye for fine looking women noticed her finally, and  
980 he said to the whole group, reminiscing, reflecting on this to the whole group, but  
981 humorously he was wondering who this woman was sitting in front of him everywhere he  
982 went, writing down his every word. Well of course this was my sister, as instructed by  
983 her brother. So she explained that, and he made the connection with who I was. She told  
984 me about this, and it was very wonderful experience. Now, later, Cabral, who really  
985 hadn't seen me that many times, I was walking into the conference in Rome and  
986 happened to arrive as he was arriving, and Cabral saw me walking toward him and said,  
987 "Prexy, you're here, camarada." It was an incredible moment. Cabral was known for  
988 this, he was known for his ability to know each and every peasant and their story in  
989 Guinea Bissau. He had a remarkable memory and capacity to integrate the lives of other  
990 people into his, into his whole being, and that was part of the strength of this man as a  
991 leader.

992

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

996

997 PN: I can't remember the exact sequence, I could reconstruct it, but it's possible that by  
998 the time of his visit to New York, he had already come and been given an honorary  
999 doctorate at Lincoln University, the black school in Lincoln, Pennsylvania. If that's the  
1000 case, an organization that I helped to found, called the Africa Information Service of New  
1001 York. We had driven him down to Lincoln, Pennsylvania. I founded this organization  
1002 with a man named Robert Van Leirop, a filmmaker, very famous for a film he did called  
1003 *A Luta Continua*. We then also did a book of Cabral's speeches, "Return to the Source."  
1004 So that's also a part of this period of time, I can't remember the exact sequence of things,  
1005 but whether it was before or after our having taken him to Pennsylvania, I certainly knew  
1006 Cabral and anyone in the sixties, late sixties, seventies, knew of him, and especially  
1007 anybody who was at all following these wars in the Portuguese colonies, which included

1008 all kind of people, including Nixon, Kissinger, and everybody else because these wars  
1009 were wars that were consuming an inordinate amount of resources. I mean, most people  
1010 don't even realize that in December '71, Nixon gave to the Portuguese \$436,000,000.00  
1011 to help them fight the very organizations that I was working with, the Azores Trade Pact  
1012 to help put them down. He gave \$436,000,000.00 in what was called the Azores  
1013 Package, so that we could continue to use the Azores Islands as a base—

1014

1015 EM: We meaning the United States?

1016

1017 PN: The United States could continue to use the Azores Islands as a base for whatever  
1018 we did in the Middle East. In fact, around the Iraq War we continued to make use of  
1019 these Azores Islands. So \$436,000,000.00, at that time, 1971 December, it's like three or  
1020 four billion dollars now. So, Cabral, Amilcar Cabral, is also probably one of the  
1021 foremost theorists of the twentieth century. I mean, he, his stature is that of Fidel and  
1022 Che [Guevara], and that is certainly what happened at the Tri-Continental Conference in  
1023 1966 in Havana, where Fidel, where Cabral stole the show.

1024

1025 EM: Where you there at that time?

1026

1027 PN: I wasn't at that conference, but I certainly knew about it. Again, because I was in  
1028 Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and there, everybody knows about these things. It got no  
1029 coverage hardly in the United States, but that conference is one in which Cabral, and the  
1030 contribution that he made to theory, to theory of change, of revolutionary change, of  
1031 insurrection, of the struggles of people, of third world peoples against imperialism,  
1032 against racism, it's some of the most profound writings around.

1033

1034 EM: What did they hope to achieve with the meeting with, at the Vatican with the Pope?

1035

1036 PN: They did achieve.

1037

1038 EM: What did you see?

1039

1040 PN: They did achieve. It was, I can't begin to tell you how impressed I was with this  
1041 meeting. It was largely organized by the Italian Communist Party, and the Italian Left  
1042 was always in solidarity with the African liberation struggles. Like Sweden, this is also  
1043 stuff that Italian Americans in this country would have no idea about, but there was, if my  
1044 memory serves me correctly, there were two- or three thousand people there. It was very  
1045 well organized. And one of the things they hoped to achieve was to get visibility of the  
1046 struggles, of these struggles against Portuguese colonialism. In fact, after that, those  
1047 conference, you have the beginnings of a whole new ramping up if you will, of those  
1048 struggles in Angola, in Mozambique, in Guinea Bissau, in Sao Tome, in East Timor and  
1049 these political, the political front, the front of getting publicity and diplomatic support of  
1050 these struggles was a very, very important front and the Pope received and blessed them.  
1051 This is important from another point of view, because understand that when the  
1052 Portuguese colonized Africa, they did so with the blessings of the Pope at that period. So  
1053 in the late fifteenth century, they went with different edicts and blessings from the



1054 various Popes at that time, so to have the Vatican bless this conference of people  
1055 struggling to end Portuguese colonialism was an extremely important moment.

1056  
1057 EM: What did you do and what did you see there?

1058  
1059 PN: What did I do and what did I see? What I did was to volunteer a lot. I'm the low,  
1060 low of the totem pole in these conferences. I learned a lot. I did all the volunteering. I  
1061 think I went there representing the Africa Information Services Organization out of New  
1062 York, but at that point the Chicago Committee for Liberation of Angola, Mozambique,  
1063 and Guinea-Bissau, CCLAMG, did not exist. I certainly remember collecting these  
1064 incredible papers of Amilcar Cabral that were given at this conference. I remember, I  
1065 achieved also, making relationships with people that I have known ever since, people in  
1066 Sweden, people in England, people in Holland, for example there's a group called the  
1067 Angola Committee of Holland, Amsterdam, Holland, and I first met some of those people  
1068 at that Rome conference in 1970. There was a Finish woman from Sweden, Maj  
1069 Palmberg, who later worked at the Nordic Institute for African studies, and so, these were  
1070 the early years of me forging relationships with other organizations from other countries,  
1071 that would be very important for the work I was to do in this country later. It would be  
1072 very important as a source of information, and financially, some of those organizations  
1073 gave those of us in the United States support, gave us materials, gave us publications,  
1074 books, some of them helped finance us getting to meetings, whether they were in Europe  
1075 or back in Africa. They came to our meetings, we coordinated activities. For example,  
1076 when I, working, I don't remember when this incidence was but in 1970, '71, somewhere  
1077 in there, I held a demonstration against a Portuguese soccer team that came to play at  
1078 Soldier's Field. And I was arrested, arrested and carted off to jail and the Chicago Civil  
1079 Liberties Union, a guy named Kermit Coleman, supported me. He was my lawyer. The  
1080 policeman who wrote me up charged me with handing out anti-imperialist literature, that  
1081 was the crime that I was charged with. When it finally came to court, years later, the  
1082 judge asked the policemen in court as I'm standing in front of him, what is the crime this  
1083 man has done? The policeman said he was handing out anti-imperialist literature, the  
1084 judge said, What statute is that that this man has violated? Then the judge turns to me  
1085 and he says, "Mr. Nesbitt, would you explain to me what this was about? Explain to  
1086 me," he said, "and the court what this was about?" And I started talking about the crimes  
1087 of Portuguese colonialism. Well, Erin, this was an ideal situation. Here's this room full  
1088 of black people in a Cook County courtroom, packed, and the judge gives me this  
1089 opportunity. Well, before it was over with, I turned and wasn't talking to the judge, I was  
1090 talking to the whole room full of people. So finally he said, "You're dismissed Mr.  
1091 Nesbitt." He said something like, You have a powerful tongue. Be careful with how you  
1092 use it, or something like that. There was no case any longer. But more importantly than  
1093 that part of it, Kermit Coleman, because of that relationship, then, later, is invited to be  
1094 one of the few American lawyers who was at an international trial of mercenaries that is  
1095 held in Angola in 1975 or '76, an incredible event, just a global event, because these  
1096 mercenaries had never been tried before, and here they are being tried and given full legal  
1097 protections and Kermit, who has since died, was one of the lawyers, international jurist,  
1098 who was an observer at that incredible trial. It was based on my recommendation to the  
1099 people who organized the trial in Angola who wanted to have an American lawyer,

1100 preferably an African American lawyer, present at the trial. Kermit was a very light skin  
1101 brother, who could have easily passed, but for us he was still African American.  
1102

1103 EM: How important were those, were the legal relationships? How often were, was your  
1104 work undermine, perhaps, by law enforcement and that, you know, was it, was that an  
1105 obstacle or was it just kind of more of a hassle?  
1106

1107 PN: Everybody lived with that at that time. Everybody lived with constant surveillance,  
1108 constant, my, in my family it's the joke amongst Nesbitts that Prexy's mail is always  
1109 messed with mail. My family watched package after package arrive in my house, open,  
1110 torn open, little apologies for it being opened, all of this, suitcase after suitcase that I  
1111 would come home with, ripped open. And then, you lived with tapped telephones, I  
1112 mean, that was just assumed. And then to take it further, I know that there was a file that  
1113 I had because I filed under the Freedom of Information Act at one point. To do that, a  
1114 lawyer here in Chicago did it for me, and sure enough, there was a file for me under a sub  
1115 file under the ANC Terrorism file, that there was a, you know, it was only recently that  
1116 the United States apologized for making Nelson Mandela a terrorist. They kept a file for  
1117 years on the ANC. Well, every ANC representative who ever came to the United Nations  
1118 or then traveled around the country, I think every one of them stayed at my house at one  
1119 time or another, because I knew them from Dar es Salaam, and they knew of me, if they  
1120 didn't know me personally. So mine was a natural relationship, so of course, naturally,  
1121 you're going to have the United States government surveilling you every way they can.  
1122 Now, some of it gets ugly. I mean, I have a very grim story about one of my own uncles  
1123 who basically, the FBI came to him and said, we have information on your daughter, that  
1124 she misused her passport. It was a total lie. If you cooperate with us, we won't do  
1125 anything to her. Your cooperation is to take the form of telling us about everything your  
1126 nephew does. We now know that this uncle did that. My father would, I went to my  
1127 father about it when we found it out. At that time both my father and the uncle were  
1128 alive, and my father refused to let me confront his brother, because he said it would just  
1129 be too disruptive. So those were things that are harder.  
1130

1131 EM: Yeah. Are they, in your estimation, are those tactics successful? I mean, do they  
1132 really put the movements back, or do they—  
1133

1134 PN: No.  
1135

1136 EM: Or do they inspire, I mean—  
1137

1138 PN: I think those movements simply make people more determined to continue with the  
1139 work that they're doing, and to find ways around them. Most of those activities, they're  
1140 not movements, they're activities, are so inept, most of them, particularly in that period.  
1141

1142 EM: In the side of law enforcement—  
1143

1144 PN: Law enforcement agencies doing this stuff were so inept, often, that you just  
1145 laughed about a lot of it. I mean, you could, I remember once being on the phone

1146 somewhere and hearing they had made some kind of mistake so you could hear them  
1147 talking to each other on this tapped line. It was just stupid. And then you see materials  
1148 where they can't spell things, they don't know where things are located, they are like  
1149 some of my Columbian students, you know, they think Cambodia is in the middle of, or  
1150 next to the Congo, so, at some level you can laugh about it. Of course, on another level,  
1151 there is a very serious other aspect of it. There is no doubt in my mind, for example, that  
1152 part of the reason they killed Fred Hampton in 1969 December here in Chicago, was  
1153 related to Fred Hampton's tremendous and growing international outreach. And I, I had a  
1154 role, I had something to do with that because I remember introducing Fred Hampton and  
1155 Bobby Rush, now Congressman Rush, to representatives of the Mozambique Liberation  
1156 Front to come to Chicago to visit me and at the invitation of CCLAMG, the Chicago  
1157 Committee, and we introduced them. So, that aspect of it is of course grim, you know,  
1158 when they resort to violence against people.

1159

1160 EM: Let's, let's return to your work in Chicago, and CCLAMG. What was your role in  
1161 that and, and what was the responsibility of that organization from here?

1162

1163 PN: Our effort was to publicize the struggles in these former Portuguese colonies. The  
1164 other thing was to raise and provide material aide, whether it was medical supplies or  
1165 books for schools and pencils and paper, or just money. It was to provide materially, to  
1166 do political education, and then to also confront any of those projects that would have  
1167 been involved, or companies in supporting Portuguese colonialism from this country.  
1168 Gulf oil, for example, is a classic example. Gulf was deeply involved in supporting  
1169 colonialism in Angola. We did many, many demonstrations against Gulf Oil Company.  
1170 Though it wasn't in Chicago, it was during a period that CCLAMG, the Chicago  
1171 Committee was very active. I remember going to Gulf shareholder meetings at their  
1172 headquarters then was in Pittsburgh. Gulf is now called Chevron, and we demonstrated.  
1173 I remember even being, there was a threat against our lives. Those of us who showed up  
1174 at a certain, I think it was Carnegie Mellon, we had, there was a bomb threat phoned in  
1175 and we had to be escorted out by the police, and I remember being escorted to the bus  
1176 station, and put on a Greyhound bus, by the police (laughs). They stayed right there on  
1177 the line as the bus was leaving for Chicago. CCLAMG did also other work. It's a very  
1178 famous, for a wonderful poster, that it did about Guinea Bissau, a silkscreen poster. It  
1179 was part of something, its headquarters were in a place called the New World Resource  
1180 Center, which, at that point in 1970, '71, had been largely founded by returned Peace  
1181 Corps volunteers. It had a very high visibility. CCLAMG was but one of many  
1182 organizations that worked out of this New World Resource Center, which had a very  
1183 thriving bookstore at that time, up on Broadway or on Halsted, I can't remember which.  
1184 And there was, wonderful artists amongst those people who would have been either,  
1185 Peace Corps volunteers or church, missionary volunteers. There was a woman named  
1186 Trudy Pax who had done work in Brazil. And she, she, I knew her quite well because she  
1187 was always quite helpful. Trudy's Portuguese was impeccable, and she was often very  
1188 much the interpreter for when we had guests coming from Angola or Mozambique or  
1189 Guinea- Bissau. So those were the things that we did as CCLAMG, lots of speaking  
1190 engagements.

1191

1192 EM: And where would some of the typical venues be for those—  
1193  
1194 PN: Engagements.  
1195  
1196 EM: Yeah, what were some of those?  
1197  
1198 PN: A lot of churches.  
1199  
1200 EM: Churches.  
1201  
1202 PN: Churches, some high schools, some of the private high schools, some of the  
1203 suburban high schools. It was rare to get into Chicago Public Schools. If you didn't have  
1204 a particular teacher, there was no way that you'd get into Chicago Public Schools,  
1205 because they were so rigid about what they would allow to be part of the curriculum.  
1206 Now this day and age they are not as tight as they are, were at that point, but they were  
1207 very, very censor-, there was a censoring mechanism to Chicago Public Schools.  
1208  
1209 EM: And did that have to do with race? Race, I mean was that part of the, I don't know,  
1210 the agenda? Were there things that they were open to having the public schools agree  
1211 venues for, or—  
1212  
1213 PN: Certainly one of the things they were not as open to having as other things were  
1214 things that had to do with Africans, although there were, with a large number of black or  
1215 African American teachers, there was more of a possibility of openings into the South  
1216 Side schools. Remember, Chicago schools were very segregated during that period.  
1217  
1218 EM: You're right.  
1219  
1220 PN: It wasn't so much race as an open thing, it was more covert in the way it was  
1221 applied. It wasn't quite, principals would say we refuse to have anything to do with  
1222 Africa, it was more, it was more sophisticated than that, and it was about being careful  
1223 that there was nothing too risqué that was being taught about, politically risqué, or that  
1224 was critical of the U.S. Government. Those were the things that they were very afraid of,  
1225 and I think that, that's why it was easier to get into some of the church venues because  
1226 some of the churches were very openly supportive of these events. For example, the  
1227 Lutheran church, which had a big Seminary on 55<sup>th</sup> and Hyde Park, often let us use their  
1228 main assembly hall for programs that we did about Guinea Bissau, about Mozambique,  
1229 about Namibia. Also, the Methodist Church, we did a, at that time the United States  
1230 government got most upset about Cuba coming to aid Angola in the fight against  
1231 Portuguese colonialism, which South African apartheid was supporting as well. At that  
1232 point, there was a confrontation which Cuba came to the aid of the Angolan Liberation  
1233 Movement, MPLA. And the United States government went nuts against this. At that  
1234 very moment, we had a wonderful, national conference that I was the chair of, that  
1235 CCLAMG very much staffed, held right at the Lutheran School of Theology at 55<sup>th</sup>  
1236 Street, that was the National U.S. Angola Support Conference, was the name of it. Now I  
1237 don't know how many agents infiltrated that thing, but there was, undoubtedly, it was

1238 infiltrated to the max, because it was a hot issue. Cuba's involvement made it very hot.  
1239 Kissinger hated, hated what the MPLA of Angola stood for.

1240  
1241 EM: And you said you were chair of that conference?

1242  
1243 PN: Yes.

1244  
1245 EM: And what, what, did you speak at that, or were you responsible for all the  
1246 invitations—

1247  
1248 PN: The invitations, I spoke at it, I chaired some of the panels. Many of my colleagues  
1249 from CCLAMG also did things. There was a big article that I had gotten into some  
1250 notoriety about because I had written an article "Angola's a Part of All of Us" in the  
1251 *Black Scholar*, a very powerful indictment against U.S. policies toward Angola and  
1252 Africa at that time. So I was quite, I was around.

1253  
1254 EM: And how did this activism in your work and organizing and with CCLAMG, and  
1255 again, how did that impact your personal life?

1256  
1257 PN: Well, it is a very sensitive question. I didn't have one, I mean, I didn't really have  
1258 one. I didn't really have one because, you know, I was around these people from the time  
1259 I was very impressionable as a college student, nineteen, twenty years old. And I was  
1260 around these people, and I met people like Julius Nyerere, and met all these others like  
1261 Cabral, and Eduardo Mondlane, Joe Slovo, and J.B. Marks, these incredible figures in  
1262 this very different time period of the sixties. And we were told not to have a personal  
1263 life. We were told, if you were true to the ideals that we're about, you won't have  
1264 personal life, we won't be allowed to have a personal life. Your personal life is always  
1265 going to be subordinate to, to the imperatives of the struggle. I think now it was all  
1266 nonsense, but at the time, I very much believed it and adhered to it faithfully. So there  
1267 was a woman that I was very, very in love with, an Italian communist woman that I had  
1268 met in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. The United States wouldn't allow her to come into the  
1269 United States when I came back due to my mother was dying. She came, she wasn't  
1270 allowed in at that point, couldn't get a visa, because she had been a communist in Italy.  
1271 And we both decided that, we just, that's life, that's struggle. We just, it ended. Now,  
1272 we tried, and during the course of that period she met my sister on a trip to Italy from  
1273 Tanzania. My sister was then modeling in Paris.

1274  
1275 EM: Was this the same sister that—

1276  
1277 PN: I only have one sister.

1278  
1279 EM: Oh, okay.

1280  
1281 PN: In '73 my sister was killed. She was killed by her husband, in a very brutal, brutal  
1282 murder, a horrible murder, here on the West Side of Chicago. And it happened that  
1283 Patrizia Maria Lanfranchi, my friend from Italy, was invited, or her sister was invited to

1284 a conference that the National Organization of Women put on in Massachusetts. She  
1285 called my family's house looking for my sister. I happened to pick up the phone, and we  
1286 had decided we weren't finished. She was shocked to hear me pick up the phone, and  
1287 then even more shocked, just, totally just devastated because she had become very fond, I  
1288 mean, this was my sister, she was wronged. So she came immediately to join us. It was  
1289 within, we were still mourning my sister when she came and joined us in Chicago. That  
1290 was essentially, I saw her one time after that and I've never seen her again. But, the  
1291 answer to your question is that we, you had a life that was not an integrated life in the  
1292 sense of how we handled our personal relationships, 'cause we were told we shouldn't  
1293 have them, and I think that has had a very long-term effect on me and has had it on all of  
1294 us who were products of that revolutionary ferment and struggle period of the sixties. I  
1295 mean, I think that's probably true, right? I don't know for a fact, but I think that divorce  
1296 rate, for example, of people my age group who are now entering their sixties, is pretty  
1297 high, if I'm not mistaken. I think that that group, who were products of that period of  
1298 time, getting together your, getting in sync your political values and your personal values,  
1299 it was not something you put a lot of priority on doing. We were about changing the  
1300 world, not trying to line up our loves of our lives. Does that make sense?

1301

1302 EM: Well, it's interesting that, you know, then you also said that you didn't think that  
1303 that was necessarily necessary, that you were in part doing what you were told.

1304

1305 PN: Yeah, I think that's what was behind part of it.

1306

1307 EM: Yeah, so I, I mean, it sounds like, that it came at a cost?

1308

1309 PN: I think it did, and I think its part of, this is very, something I've given a lot of  
1310 thought of. In the sixties too, in that period, I met a lot of Catholic nuns and priests, right  
1311 here in Chicago, and there are about ten that I can name right now, ex-nuns and priests  
1312 who were active here in Chicago in '65, '66. Remember, earlier I worked with King and  
1313 the whole movement here in Chicago. They are all ex-, they all left the order after those  
1314 periods of the sixties. And today, many of them remain involved, but many of them to  
1315 this day still live very kind of alternative lives and lifestyles.

1316

1317 EM: Yeah, I mean, to deny one's, a big portion of one's humanity, or ask people to  
1318 sacrifice that, it's, it can have long-term repercussions (laughter). You mentioned the  
1319 Catholic Church, but certainly with celibacy, I mean, that is an issue the church refuses to  
1320 deal with. But, you know, I think it is very damaging.

1321

1322 PN: Clearly, and its lead to this huge mess the Catholic Church is dealing with now.

1323

1324 EM: So, but I think you get workers, right?

1325

1326 PN: You get workers?

1327

1328 EM: You get people to work for you. Then you tell them, oh no, that's, we're about this.

1329

1330 PN: That's right, that's right. You do get people to do a lot of volunteering and  
1331 sacrificing for you, 'cause they say this poor person—

1332  
1333 EM: I believe in that.

1334  
1335 PN: I got to do something, it certainly is a model. I think it was a point in which people  
1336 like myself who were exceedingly political, we matched up with nuns and priests. I was  
1337 inside South Africa illegally when I worked for the World Council of Churches. Shortly  
1338 after I worked for them, and went to a conference and met there, a bunch of Catholic  
1339 nuns and priests from Ireland, who all became completely involved with the underground  
1340 structures of the African National Congress. It's not accidentally that the IRA, when it  
1341 chose to finally deal with settling and negotiating, like in South Africa, it's not  
1342 accidentally that they chose some people from South Africa, like Cyril Ramaposa [who I  
1343 had first met when he came to the States in the late seventies] to be part of the negotiating  
1344 bodies that they worked with in Ireland, and the negotiations of the IRA. Part of that  
1345 stems from those relationships that these Catholic priests and nuns forged with ANC  
1346 underground people. I had, I worked with some of these nuns and priests when I was  
1347 illegally in South Africa, and had to be smuggled out.

1348  
1349 EM: And what year was that?

1350  
1351 PN: That was 1973, after I had been, no wait a minute, 1983. Yes, I was at the World  
1352 Council of Churches '79-'83, so it was 1983. We had some extraordinary exchanges. It  
1353 was exchanges of people who are in the midst of struggle, intense struggle, whether you  
1354 were directly a soldier of the struggle, or whether you were doing support work. And  
1355 where intelligence gathered, at any of those levels, for the underground of the African  
1356 National Congress, necessitated and drew in, necessitated and drew in people who were  
1357 from some of these church bodies.

1358  
1359 EM: How did you get involved in the World Council of Churches?

1360  
1361 PN: Two things: number one was that I had done work with King and the Civil Rights  
1362 movement in Chicago. I had done work with people, I had come from Antioch College,  
1363 which was a college that provided more people to the Civil Rights struggle in 1964 and  
1364 '65 in Mississippi and Alabama than any other college probably in the country,  
1365 proportionally. Those on the domestic side of struggle, and then the other side was that I  
1366 had all these relationships with liberation movements with the African National  
1367 Congress, with FRELIMO, with PAIGC by that time, with some, some Zimbabwe  
1368 liberation struggles, I'd been in Dar es Salaam, I've worked for FRELIMO. So I was  
1369 somewhat a known entity, and because of the work with Africa, the leadership of the  
1370 World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism invited me to come and work.  
1371 They brought me to Switzerland, and they interviewed me. I think they interviewed some  
1372 other people. And they chose me, and then I moved to Geneva, Switzerland. So I started  
1373 working full time on the issues of racism globally. The hot, the main focus they had was  
1374 to end the apartheid regime, 'cause that was their highest example, high is the wrong  
1375 word, because that was the most developed form of racism in South Africa.

1376  
1377 EM: Two questions: was this a paid position; were you finally making money? (laughter)  
1378  
1379 PN: It was a regular paid position. And in fact, I had a number to a Swiss bank account  
1380 at that time. I wish I had kept the number to that Swiss bank account. No, I was paid.  
1381 Your second question?  
1382  
1383 EM: Well the second question was going to be, was that your first direct involvement in  
1384 the anti-apartheid?  
1385  
1386 PN: No.  
1387  
1388 EM: I mean, what attracted you to, I guess, that organization?  
1389  
1390 PN: I knew of that organization. I knew of it because in 1973 or '74 I had been to a  
1391 conference held in Arnoldshain, West Germany about two dams that were being built in  
1392 Mozambique and Angola, that the movements in those countries wanted us to stop  
1393 Western companies from getting involved in these dams that would help shore up  
1394 Portuguese colonialism. The conference was held in Germany, and I was there. At that  
1395 conference, we had a huge confrontation with the World Council of Churches staff, even  
1396 though they had organized the conference because the activist groups they brought,  
1397 including—  
1398  
1399 EM: Which was?  
1400  
1401 PN: It was Africa Information Services with my friend Bob Van Leirop, the filmmaker.  
1402 We were with our Swedish colleagues. Sweden was very involved in all of this, see, and  
1403 my history with Sweden is another whole history in itself. And I, we argued about the  
1404 World Council of Churches continuing to give support to an organization called UNITA.  
1405 UNITA was this CIA backed group in Angola that ultimately becomes one of the most  
1406 vicious organizations that has ever surfaced. The man who ran it, a man named Jonas  
1407 Savimbi, was a man who killed people in his own family, boiled their bodies, I mean, he  
1408 was, he was, the first Bush, the older George Bush, the first George Bush worshipped  
1409 him. Reagan worshipped him, but he was an absolutely evil human being. Dennis  
1410 DeConcini the senator from Arizona, he was a big backer of his. Years later, in the early  
1411 nineties when I was working at the MacArthur Foundation, I was at a conference where  
1412 Senator DeConcini ended up being my roommate at one point. And Dennis and I were  
1413 swimming in the pool together and he, I said, how could you ever have supported  
1414 Savimbi? He said, "That was the vilest human being, that was a mistake. He was the  
1415 vilest human being I ever knew." So, we [African solidarity groups like CLAAMG] had  
1416 quarreled with the World Council of Churches over recognizing and aiding Savimbi and  
1417 his UNITA. I think some of the WCC staff were so impressed with us that they then  
1418 invited me to work with the WCC, but by that time, by '79, at that point I was with the  
1419 Institute for Policy Studies, in Washington, very famous body, and also with the  
1420 American Committee on Africa. The Institute for Policy Studies, incidentally, is where a  
1421 man named Eqbal Ahmad was, where Orlando Letelier that had been with Salvador



1422 Allende from Chile, Allende's finance minister, he was there. And I went there just  
1423 months after two people were killed in downtown Washington D.C. I don't know if you  
1424 remember this? A bomb was placed in their car in DuPont Circle. An American Ronnie  
1425 Moffet and Letelier were moving around DuPont Circle, their car was blown up and both  
1426 of them were killed. This was an action done by a Chilean agent who probably did it in  
1427 conjunction with CIA people. So, I had had, already, exposure, exposures that early had  
1428 helped prepare me, it was very natural for me to make that move to then go and work in  
1429 Geneva Switzerland for the World Council of Churches.

1430  
1431 EM: So you're living in D.C.?  
1432

1433 PN: I was living in New York and commuting to D.C.  
1434

1435 EM: Living in New York and commuting to D.C. to go to the Institute for Policy  
1436 Studies—  
1437

1438 PN: That's right.  
1439

1440 EM: Did you have an area of expertise there?  
1441

1442 PN: Africa.  
1443

1444 EM: Africa.  
1445

1446 PN: Africa, I was a Fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies. We did, I had a wonderful  
1447 group of people who worked with me, one of whom went on to start an organization  
1448 called Global Exchange, and his wife, Medea Benjamin, runs Code Pink, that does a lot  
1449 of this stuff around demonstrations at the White House. That was, I can remember his  
1450 name; it was Kevin Danaher, but then, there's another woman named Betsy Schmidt,  
1451 who went on, she's one of the most prominent academics on African, she was a part of  
1452 my team. And we did work particularly against what was called the Sullivan Principles.  
1453 Leon Sullivan was a black minister who was on the board of General Motors, and was  
1454 kind of an apologist for General Motors. He basically ended up saying if you sign, if  
1455 corporations sign my Principles, that they'll behave well in South Africa, then it's alright  
1456 for them to be in South Africa. Now today, some people who just don't know what  
1457 happened laud him as an anti-apartheid hero. He was never that. He was dragged  
1458 kicking and screaming into a position, finally, where he renounced the U.S. Corporate  
1459 support for apartheid, but for years, he was the way, this Institution for instance, I think if  
1460 we look into the history of Columbia we would find, that rather than divesting, the  
1461 Columbia administration probably signed what we call the Sullivan Principles.  
1462

1463 EM: Which was a way around divestment?  
1464

1465 PN: A way around divestment, completely. I directed a project that exposed Sullivan  
1466 and what he was all about.  
1467

1468 EM: At—  
1469  
1470 PN: At the Institute for Policy Studies. That was one of the projects that I did. We did  
1471 many, many projects.  
1472  
1473 EM: It's kind of hard to get you to talk about yourself Prexy, so that was very good  
1474 (laughter).  
1475  
1476 PN: Yes, that slipped out.  
1477  
1478 EM: Oh, you're challenging. And I am keeping an eye on this. We might have to do  
1479 chapter three. We'll talk about that later, but I am keeping an eye on the time, so if it  
1480 feels like I'm moving forward it's just, I want to make sure—  
1481  
1482 PN: I understand that.  
1483  
1484 EM: But, so, now you're in Switzerland with the Council of Churches. How long were  
1485 you in Switzerland?  
1486  
1487 PN: From '79 to '83.  
1488  
1489 EM: Oh, a long time!  
1490  
1491 PN: It was a good chunk of time.  
1492  
1493 EM: And again, trying to keep an eye on the prize, no blinders, kind of personal life, or  
1494 did you kind of get integrated into that culture?  
1495  
1496 PN: Well, I'm keeping an eye on the prize but I went into that experience with a  
1497 wonderful woman relationship, a wonderful woman, Beate Klein, who I never had the  
1498 sense to marry. My father, my mother died by then, my sister was dead by then, my  
1499 father kept saying you should marry Beate. But, again, this old stuff. So any rate, she  
1500 was, she's a woman who did more research and writing on Western bank loans to South  
1501 Africa than any other person in the world. And I brought her into working with me  
1502 At the World Council's Programme to Combat Racism—  
1503  
1504 EM: Who was giving them money? What banks were supporting South Africa? Is that  
1505 what you're talking about?  
1506  
1507 PN: You name the biggest banks in the world—  
1508  
1509 EM: Okay, so she was documenting that?  
1510  
1511 PN: She was documenting that. She did more of the writing about that than any other  
1512 person.  
1513

1514 EM: Was she a journalist or was she—

1515

1516 PN: She was a product of Bennington College. She was a dancer, a flute maker, and a  
1517 violin player. She came to a place to work at the African American Institute in New  
1518 York in about '77 or '78, and she got turned on to Africa. She's just a brilliant woman.

1519

1520 EM: An American?

1521

1522 PN: An American by a German, parents were born in Germany. She's just brilliant.  
1523 She's a brilliant scholar, brilliant mind, and she was a Bennington product. She was not  
1524 at all, and then she came to love Africa. She continues to do brilliant work. And I was a  
1525 fool, but we are still great friends to this day. And so, between the two of us, we got the  
1526 World Council of Churches to withdraw its money from banks involved in South Africa.  
1527 At one of the moments I'll never forget in all my work on this, was the press conference  
1528 that we held in the World Council headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, with probably  
1529 about seven hundred different members of press, fifty, sixty different cameras, a  
1530 wonderful picture of us from that conference, and we announced at that time that we were  
1531 withdrawing World Council money from UBS Bank, Deutsche Bank, Credit Suisse, it  
1532 was a bombshell. In Switzerland, two things you don't mess with: chocolate and banks.  
1533 This was taking on their most sacred cow, banks. It was a tremendous blow to partake  
1534 and it was particularly important shot in the arm to organizations all over the world who  
1535 wanted to do concrete things. It was at that point that the corporate structure in the  
1536 apartheid governments said wait a minute, this is, this is not just a factor any longer.

1537

1538 EM: So that was a real turning point.

1539

1540 PN: This was a very important turning point.

1541

1542 EM: Do you remember when you heard or were present when the Council said, alright,  
1543 we're going to do this. We're pulling the money out?

1544

1545 PN: I was present. It was in a small meeting with this wonderful man, Philip, what was  
1546 Philip's last name? He was the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches.  
1547 Philip Potter, who was from the Caribbean, from Jamaica, and he and Konrad Raiser,  
1548 who was the Deputy President, and the staff committee put the blessing, they knew full  
1549 well that it was a decision that could possibly lead to breaking their back, could lead to  
1550 them being thrown out of Switzerland, but there was, for them, no other choice, no other  
1551 choice.

1552

1553 EM: And what did that feel like to you?

1554

1555 PN: Well, as the person who had pushed them to do this, it felt good. I think Philip  
1556 Potter honored me. I mean, there were people more senior than me in our unit, who  
1557 should have been sitting next to him when he made this announcement, but that's not  
1558 who he wanted. He deliberately chose me to be sitting there next to him. And then  
1559 later—

1560

1561 EM: Just, what year was that?

1562

1563 PN: That would've been in '80, I believe. No, it may have been '82, it may have been  
1564 '82 or '81, I can't remember exactly. No, it may have been '80. I could look it up, but I  
1565 can't—. But, he later chose me also to speak. They had a world conference on racism,  
1566 and the speaker that they were going to have was a man named Walter Rodney. Walter  
1567 Rodney was probably one of the most important black voices on African history that ever  
1568 lived. I'm looking at your bookcase here and I see all this Howard Zinn stuff, "The  
1569 Power of Zinn." But Zinn would say to you in a minute, Walter Rodney was who. He  
1570 wrote a book, a seminal book, on "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa." Then, in 1980,  
1571 about March, we had chosen him to be the speaker at this conference, and he was  
1572 assassinated in Guyana. He had been shipped, the story is that he was shipped a grenade  
1573 that had a timing mechanism that killed him. So he wasn't able to speak, and Philip  
1574 Potter, the head of the World Council of Churches, honored me very greatly once by  
1575 asking me to speak in his place. I said, "No, I can't do it." I went on and chose a man by  
1576 the name of Randall Robinson. Randall Robinson would later become head of  
1577 TransAfrica. You may have heard of his brother, was a guy named Max Robinson, who  
1578 was an ABC anchor who died of AIDS. That was Randall Robinson's brother, very, very  
1579 articulate leader who is, if you Google Randall Robinson, you'll find, so his beginnings  
1580 really came out of his being chosen to be the speaker at this world conference on racism.  
1581 So all the work that I did at the World Conference of Churches on the Programme to  
1582 Combat Racism was a significant one. I had to be for a period of time, four weeks, on a  
1583 motorcycle, on the back of motorcycles in Northern Sri Lanka, riding and investigating  
1584 what was happening to the Tamil people. It was a conflict in Sri Lanka between the  
1585 Tamils and the Sinhalese. The Sinhalese are the majority, and the Tamils are the ones  
1586 who had been fighting. Now, just last week, or two weeks ago, supposedly the war has  
1587 ended after twenty-five years. Well, I was sent to investigate what was happening to the  
1588 Tamils, and I moved all around on a motorcycle for three weeks, all around Northern Sri  
1589 Lanka. Then I did another major piece of investigation on racism in Canada amongst  
1590 Native Americans, all the way up to the Northwest Territories of Canada. I wrote a piece  
1591 called "Maple Leaf Racism." And the Bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada, the  
1592 highest Primate in fact, nixed the report, refused to let it go out, because in it I had  
1593 indicted and investigated and found the role of some of the Anglican Church people in  
1594 abusing as missionaries, abusing Native American Indigenous women in Northern  
1595 Ontario. Because that was there, he didn't want to have this report get out, but now, for  
1596 years it circulated as this sort of underground document.

1597

1598 EM: I was going to say, what did, did it ever leak out?

1599

1600 PN: Oh yeah, it leaked all over the place.

1601

1602 *pause in recording*

1603

1604 EM: It's the tenth of 2009, and this is the third installment of our interview with Prexy  
1605 Nesbitt. And, Prexy, when we, when we last spoke you were talking about the World

1606 Council of Churches and the Programme to Combat Racism globally. I thought, if you  
1607 want, to kind of pick up your narrative there at that point in your story.

1608

1609 PN: In my story, the work I did at the World Council of Churches was probably some of  
1610 the most significant work that I did in a global sense because it was work that, first of all,  
1611 though, it centered on the combat against the apartheid government in South Africa, it  
1612 also was very much looking at the issue of racism worldwide. So I did work in Canada, I  
1613 did work there around the Indigenous people and also around West Indians, and, and  
1614 others from the Caribbean, and Toronto particularly. I did work in Mexico around  
1615 Indigenous people. I did work in Atlanta, Georgia, around some episodes that had taken  
1616 place involving African American men, the mysterious deaths of African American men.  
1617 And then, I did work additionally in London around treatment of West Indians and  
1618 Africans and others of color in London, and did a lot of work with Race and Class  
1619 magazine, and also with a man named Darcus Howe who was part of a group that did  
1620 work around police issues, policing and discrimination that went on against blacks living  
1621 in London, and also in other industrial cities. I did work as well around other places in  
1622 Europe, France, Germany, the treatment of Moroccans by the Germans. In France, it was  
1623 a question of treatment of North Africans. The key work, though, was work around the  
1624 South African issue. The World Council of Churches was early viewed as one of the  
1625 most formidable enemies of the South African apartheid regime. After the African  
1626 National Congress I'd say, the World Council of Churches would rank very easily as one  
1627 of the other major enemies of the South African apartheid system. Sweden would be  
1628 another one, and one of the things that was very characteristic of the work of, that I did  
1629 with the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism was lots of it,  
1630 funding came from the Scandinavian government and Scandinavian churches.  
1631 Significantly, although it raised the largest protest against the World Council of  
1632 Churches, the United States churches were amongst the least contributors to the World  
1633 Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism. It was in that period that the work  
1634 that I did was work benefiting not just the African National Congress and various people  
1635 fighting against apartheid in South Africa, it was also work against the struggle going on  
1636 in Angola, the struggle going on in Zimbabwe. I remember, for example, in the fall of  
1637 1979, just as the Lancaster House talks were taking place, being part of a task force of  
1638 executives at the World Council of Churches who were part of helping to identify for the  
1639 Zimbabwean government, certain Zimbabweans all over the world who could take  
1640 positions in the new and emerging government. The World Council of Churches  
1641 Programme to Combat Racism had given special help to the educational effort and the  
1642 medical effort supporting Zimbabwean refugees. The World Council never gave money  
1643 towards the armed struggle in any of these countries, but it did give money towards  
1644 supporting the overall goal of liberation. Because of that, it was attacked veraciously by  
1645 certain quarters, for example, the United States, the Reader's Digest did a whole special  
1646 issue against the World Council of Churches called "Karl Marx or Jesus Christ? Who's  
1647 the real master of the World Council of Churches?" I remember CBS, "Sixty Minutes"  
1648 with Mike Wallace did a special film attacking the World Council of Churches. And then  
1649 there were these individuals who were constantly, individual legislators in the United  
1650 States constantly taking out or making statements in a congressional record against the  
1651 World Council of Churches. Jesse Helms, of course, is a natural one, but I think Pat

1652 Robinson was another one. So, I was very happy to be associated with the World  
1653 Council of Churches and played quite a role with their work and was very involved with  
1654 work, all of the work that the World Council did around South Africa and Namibia. I  
1655 edited, for example, a magazine that the World Council of Churches put out for a period,  
1656 in fact, founded that magazine. That was very important, because that devoted, it was  
1657 read by church people worldwide.

1658  
1659 EM: What was the name of that?

1660  
1661 PN: It was called, *The Programme to Combat Racism Notes, PCR Notes*. It went very  
1662 widely throughout the world. We had special issues devoted to bank loans to South  
1663 Africa, we had an issue devoted to Namibia, we had another issue devoted to the  
1664 liberation movements, profiling the liberation movements. And it was on that question  
1665 that I probably had the greatest controversy when I was with the World Council of  
1666 Churches. I was asked by the World Council of Churches to make an investigative report  
1667 about the two liberation movements from South Africa: the Pan Africanist Congress, the  
1668 PAC, and the African National Congress. And I did this. I went to Zambia, I went to  
1669 Tanzania, and I went, also, I think at that point I also went to Mozambique, yes, I think  
1670 so, and talked with government officials, with the churches in those countries. It was all  
1671 about trying to determine whether the World Council of Churches should continue giving  
1672 money to the PAC, the Pan Africanist Congress. I concluded in my report, in a very  
1673 detailed and lengthy report, that the PAC was an ineffectual liberation movement, and  
1674 that the World Council should no longer give any money to the PAC, just concentrate on  
1675 supporting the ANC. That finding, and my report, became the subject of a tremendous  
1676 internal rouse with many of the PAC's external supporters taking on the staff of the  
1677 World Council of Churches, specifically me, for having written this report.

1678  
1679 EM: And what did you find to make you conclude that money shouldn't be given to—  
1680

1681 PN: I found things like, in Tanzania, that the PACs armed wing was virtually at war with  
1682 the Tanzanian Army government, that the Tanzanian Army government had concluded  
1683 that it was very ineffectual, and that there were rebellions going on inside of the training  
1684 camps of the PAC. Now, these kinds of issues came up the ANC, too. These issues of  
1685 tension and conflict inside of these training camps, guerrilla warfare, and training for it, is  
1686 very difficult. Many, many months would go by when these trained men and women  
1687 would often not have any action to be involved in, and they wanted, they left South  
1688 Africa to do action, many of them affected by the Soweto uprising, and just wanted to get  
1689 back into their countries and fight to free them. Well, so there was that, but the particular  
1690 situation of PAC was just, dramatic. In addition to the problems inside the caps and the  
1691 conflict with the Tanzania Army, I found a lot of corruption going on with use of monies.  
1692 And then, there was a big, three, four way split inside of the PAC organization. Now,  
1693 interestingly enough, I got attacked for this report from PAC supporters, particularly  
1694 coming from Australia and New Zealand, but also some from Europe, groups, some  
1695 church related, some not, who supported the PAC. Some African Americans, for  
1696 example, supported the PAC because the PAC believed in a black struggle in South  
1697 Africa. They did not believe, as the ANC did, in a struggle by all of those who wanted to

1698 see and knew, a non-racial South Africa. Although Whites could not join the ANC at that  
1699 point, although very shortly thereafter they could, the ANC was in alliance with the  
1700 Congress of Democrats, it was a white organization, the Indian National Congress, and  
1701 these were mated very multiracial in its approach and content. The PAC was just the  
1702 contrary. So, some African Americans liked the PAC preciously. For example, Conrad  
1703 Worrill and his people here in Chicago, they liked the PAC because it was just black  
1704 only, and they liked hearing phrases like, We're going to drive the whites into the sea.  
1705 All of this changes later, but that was initially the position of some very militant national  
1706 groups. So, I got attacked. Defending me were the Tanzanian government and also the  
1707 Organization of African Unity's African Liberation Committee, and many of the  
1708 European groups. What all came to a head, in a very ugly, ugly episode at a conference  
1709 in West Germany, where the PAC publicly attacked me and called me the Black Crete  
1710 Williams. Now, Craig Williams, or Williamson, Craig Williamson is a *bête noire*, I think  
1711 that's the phrase, of the struggle against apartheid South Africa. He is a white South  
1712 African who infiltrated anti-apartheid movements all over the world. He was the one  
1713 who killed Ruth First. He was a spy, he was a master spy. So when this PAC guy called  
1714 me this in this public meeting in Germany, the anti-apartheid groups throughout Europe  
1715 were furious that he would have the gall to do that, and they called for stopping of the  
1716 whole meeting. It was a huge brouhaha. And he finally was forced to apologize for what  
1717 he had done, and what he had said.

1718  
1719 EM: Do you remember what year that was?

1720  
1721 PN: I think that this was in 197-, '82.

1722  
1723 EM: Okay. And you were present when he—

1724  
1725 PN: I was present.

1726  
1727 EM: And what, what, how did you feel—

1728  
1729 PN: I felt horrible. It was a horrible moment. However, I was rallied by two things:  
1730 number one, I was very clear about this report, and I was very clear about what I had  
1731 seen. And I, so I had already been enduring some of this backlash that had come from all  
1732 over. The second thing was that the European anti-apartheid movement groups all just  
1733 rallied like crazy to defend me. So I knew he could call me whatever he wanted, but that  
1734 the people that were really mattered, were the people who supported me. And then, of  
1735 course, the ANC view with complete support and welcome to this report. It was a very  
1736 controversial paper that was done, and there was a woman on the, the World Council of  
1737 Churches had a governing body called the PCR Commissioners. There was a woman  
1738 from the Methodist Church of New York, from the United Methodist Church who was  
1739 their representative, who herself favored the Black Nationalist kind of perspective, and so  
1740 she didn't like the report.

1741  
1742 EM: It, it's interesting, and maybe if you could talk to this, if you feel it's significant,  
1743 because you talked about how the World Council of Churches didn't give money to the

1744 armed struggles, so there's these arms of the struggle within the ANC and PAC that is  
1745 training for guerrilla warfare—  
1746  
1747 PN: To which the World Council of Churches money did not go.  
1748  
1749 EM: Did not go, so, I, I find, I mean, I think that's interesting at least to point out that  
1750 there's arms and there's modern parallels to that as well. And the PAC being a black  
1751 nationalist group, but they would accept money from the World Council of Churches?  
1752  
1753 PN: That's correct.  
1754  
1755 EM: Okay. So, their funding wasn't limited to—  
1756  
1757 PN: Their funding was not limited to just black people.  
1758  
1759 EM: Their membership.  
1760  
1761 PN: Their funding and actually their membership, because they actually had a man  
1762 named Patrick Duncan who was a white member of the PAC. I mean, there was all kinds  
1763 of contradictions around the Pan Africanist Congress. Ultimately, these contradictions  
1764 really do lead to the undoing, so that then the last election, for example, in South Africa  
1765 this year, the Pan Africanist Congress got less than one percent, half of one percent of the  
1766 vote inside the country. So it is, it is just withered away to nothingness. And in the years  
1767 of 1994, as the emergence of Nelson Mandela, and as the negotiations, they became  
1768 nothing, nothing, as an organization.  
1769  
1770 EM: But back in the early eighties obviously that wasn't the case. Were you, were you  
1771 worried for your safety? Did they see you beyond just an investigator, reporter or editor?  
1772  
1773 PN: They didn't like me. They really did not like me, and there were other moments of  
1774 confrontation with the PAC people and PAC supporters that yes, they were tense, they  
1775 were tense moments. But, the other thing is that there were sufficient numbers of people  
1776 who knew that what I was saying in my report was completely correct, and that there  
1777 were, it was a very big, and this, this question of what is a real liberation movement was  
1778 not limited to South Africa. The question also came up in regards to Angola, and the  
1779 struggle in Angola. The question also came up in regards to Namibia, and there to, there  
1780 were these organizations that, that that came forward that said they were fighting for the  
1781 freedom of the people, but in fact they weren't the most, called the FNLA in Angola.  
1782 The, the revolutionary government of Angola in exile GRAE, UNITA, ultimately  
1783 UNITA, which got tremendous projection in the United States at one time, until people  
1784 found out that South African apartheid system was completely backening, backing that  
1785 liberation movement. And then they found out also who were some of the people who  
1786 were supporting it, like Dennis Deconcini, the conservative Democratic Senator from  
1787 Arizona, who thought that Savimbi was one of the greatest people in the world. The  
1788 United States backing for both, UNITA and FNLA in Angola, is part of the story of how  
1789 the United States then becomes complicit in the destruction of Angola all because of the



1790 Cold War. I mean, the bottom of all this was the Cold War. It was heavy stuff, it was  
1791 heavy stuff.  
1792  
1793 EM: I want to ask you a little bit more about this time in your life, that it was not, but the  
1794 edit, your role as an editor and a reporter, investigator, researcher. You said it was not  
1795 the first time you had served as an editor, and you edited the *Mozambique Revolution*.  
1796  
1797 PN: I edited the Mozambique Revolution and had—  
1798  
1799 EM: In the sixties?  
1800  
1801 PN: In the sixties. In '68 and '69, in a period when, when FRELIMO was being tested  
1802 by internal issues and ultimately that testing would end up with Eduardo Mondlane being  
1803 assassinated. I had the great pleasure to work with one of the people I most admire in the  
1804 world, to this day, who's the great leader Jorge Rebelo, who was a poet, and a  
1805 revolutionary, and he was the Minister of Information for, he was the first Minister of  
1806 Information for *Free Mozambique* in 1975, but prior to that he was in charge of all of the  
1807 written material, the propaganda, that came out from the liberation. And I, in that  
1808 capacity he put out the *Mozambique Revolution*, and I helped him with that. I translated  
1809 things, I read things over, 'cause it came out in various languages. It came out in  
1810 Portuguese; it also came out in English, I think it also had a Russian edition, I'm not sure,  
1811 but it was a wonderful magazine full of extraordinary colors. I remember when the first  
1812 issues came that it was a color issue, then the, it had been published by the GDR, who's  
1813 part of the East Germany's contribution to Mozambique. One of the things about this,  
1814 about all this international stuff around these liberation movements that brings you into a  
1815 whole different world of context and connection, I still have and value immensely, the,  
1816 the work that I did. I still have the early publications, the first drafts, and value  
1817 immensely those. What I learned Jorge Rebelo, in working with him, and he still is one  
1818 of the foremost poets of Africa. There is no collections of verse that don't have Jorge  
1819 Rebelo.  
1820  
1821 EM: I just find it interesting that you, you've had a significant and numerous roles as  
1822 editors of publications for these movements, and how you see that fitting into your  
1823 work—  
1824  
1825 PN: It's interesting, it is interesting Erin because, actually I never thought about it that  
1826 way, but, you know, because of my work with the Mozambique Revolution, and my work  
1827 with the World Council of Churches, I think it was about that time that I actually at one  
1828 point wrote a major book review of a book called "African Liberation Movements." And  
1829 that book review for *Africa Today* magazine was one of the challenges of this book that  
1830 was a kind of Cold War Bible book, this "African Liberation Movements," criticizing all  
1831 these liberation movements that were backed by the Soviet Union. And the man who put  
1832 this book out, Richard Gibson, was an African American man who played a very dubious  
1833 role throughout that whole period of time. So my review, and critical review of his book,  
1834 was, I think it did make quite a contribution at that time. And you're correct that I think  
1835 that there are other moments too, later, I would do a whole issue of *Africa Today* about

1836 the struggle in Portuguese Africa, and then later, of course, I would put out *Baobab*  
1837 *Notes*, which I worked many years later in the late eighties for the Mozambique  
1838 government, and helped to found a network of people across the United States doing  
1839 work and support of FRELIMO. Then we put out this wonderful little publication called  
1840 the *Baobab Notes*. This came out and predates, this is all prior to email and to the  
1841 computer, but it was very popular publication that we put out, this *Baobab Notes*.

1842  
1843 EM: And it's purpose still, for the interest of Mozambique—

1844  
1845 PN: It was primary, but there was no way that we could talk about Mozambique without  
1846 also talking about South Africa and Zimbabwe, and Angola, and U.S. foreign policy  
1847 toward Africa, because you couldn't talk about Mozambique without putting it in the  
1848 context that its reality was. Its reality was that Mozambique was at war against an enemy  
1849 that was backed up by South Africa and backed up by major conservative organizations  
1850 in the United States like Coors Foundation, or like the American Free Enterprise Institute,  
1851 AEI, or individuals like Pat Robertson. The "Pat Robertson Club" had the rebel  
1852 movement RENAMO on its show several times, and we talked about that and critiqued it  
1853 in the pages of the *Baobab Notes*. But it was a little tiny whimper, we had no command  
1854 over major networks. We never reproduced in *Time* or *Newsweek*, but, we did keep, keep  
1855 at it. It was important, for example, in terms of helping to stimulate a man named Robert  
1856 Gersony. Gersony was a worker for a State Department of the United States that did a  
1857 report that likened the killing that was going on in Mozambique to the Holocaust. His  
1858 phrase was it was the worst killing methodologies that had ever had happened since the  
1859 Holocaust. That got tremendous, tremendous coverage in United States when a State  
1860 Department Official, working for the United States government, said that phrase and used  
1861 that phrase, because at that very time the Mozambicans were very concerned that the  
1862 United States government, the Reagan administration, would not take the position that it  
1863 took with regard to Nicaragua in backing the cultures. Had that happened, it would've  
1864 totally destroyed Mozambique, completely. As it were, million, nearly a million people  
1865 died. But, had Ronald Reagan supported doing a war against Mozambique FRELIMO in  
1866 the same way that he supported the war against the MPLA of Angola, it would've been  
1867 just horrific and horrible, what would have happened. And so, for FRELIMO, and  
1868 Mozambican government, the work that we did in support of FRELIMO, was very  
1869 important work to help create a network across the country. For example, we brought a  
1870 wonderful sculptor and muralist, Malangatana Ngwenya, to come on a tour all over the  
1871 United States, and he is a singing muralist, great, huge Mozambican man, does wonderful  
1872 art. His art is among some of the most popular art all over Europe now. And he came,  
1873 and he did his mural. He did a mural, for example, right here on the West Side of  
1874 Chicago at the Jenner School over on the West Side. That school asks me all the time,  
1875 when is Malangatana Ngwenya coming back? And because he was this person, he was a  
1876 person that was so likeable, I think he, his persona became a way of telling people that  
1877 Mozambicans were people. Graca Machel, now the wife of Nelson Mandela, did a  
1878 speaking tour across the United States. She still—

1879  
1880 EM: Is she from Mozambique?

1881

1882 PN: She's from Mozambique, you see. She was the First Lady of Mozambique, she was  
1883 married to the first President, Samora Machel, who was killed in a plane crash that we to  
1884 this day, many of us don't believe was an accident.

1885  
1886 EM: Okay, I'm sorry to interrupt but let me ask you this, I think it's a good time, that,  
1887 you know, all things that you are involved with, and we're kind of into the eighties now,  
1888 I'm just wondering what, what was your, what was your plan? Did you prioritize? Did  
1889 you think, there are so many issues that you are involved in and covering and watching  
1890 over. Did you have to choose ever, between, did you say I'm going to focus on the anti-  
1891 apartheid movement, or I'm going to focus on this specific liberation movement? Or, did  
1892 you see them—

1893  
1894 PN: We saw them as so interrelated.

1895  
1896 EM: Yeah.

1897  
1898 PN: We, I coined an expression. We said to defeat apartheid is to defend Mozambique,  
1899 so that we believed, and I still believe that helping to overthrow the apartheid regime was  
1900 helping to make it safer for the Mozambican people and the new Republic of  
1901 Mozambique to be able to live.

1902  
1903 EM: So that was the number one, but not on a checklist. But also, you saw that as just  
1904 affecting everything.

1905  
1906 PN: It was all on a list.

1907  
1908 EM: How did you decide though, personally, what you were going to focus on?

1909  
1910 PN: Remember that part of this time I'm working from '87, first I would start working  
1911 for Harold Washington. In '83, when I leave the World Council of Churches and come  
1912 back to Chicago, I come, I arrive back in Chicago in April just as Harold is being elected.  
1913 That, I got off the plane, and started ringing doorbells with Helen Schiller and other  
1914 people and Slim Coleman, and mobilizing to get out the vote for Harold. And that night  
1915 that his results were announced, I remember being down at McCormick Place. I  
1916 remember being part of the group of people who wanted to make sure that the focus was  
1917 all on Harold and not on Jesse Jackson, 'cause Jesse was kind of hogging the stage. And  
1918 it was shortly there after that I applied to work for Harold Washington, and my typical  
1919 Chicago fashion, my application got lost and it was, a woman who has since died who  
1920 was a famous figure in the day, both the Civil Rights movement and the City of Chicago,  
1921 named Lucy Montgomery, who was related to the Montgomery-Ward money, Lucy had  
1922 been in the South with the Civil Rights movement. Everybody who was a Civil Rights  
1923 worker knew Lucy. She was a bit crazy, but totally dedicated. And Lucy, who had this  
1924 deep Southern drawl, saw me in a restaurant one night and said, "Prexy, I didn't know  
1925 you were back here." I said, "Yes." She said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well I'm  
1926 trying to work for Harold." She said, "You trying to work for Harold? Of course you  
1927 should be working for Harold. You know what I'm going to do Prexy? I'm going to call

1928 Harold and we're going to go see him." She called Harold that night, and the next day I  
1929 was in Harold's office with her, and Harold talked to me for about fifteen minutes and he  
1930 said, "I've seen you before." And I said, "Yes, you have." And he said, "How do I know  
1931 you?" And I said, "Well I was the one who brought forward and testified in the City  
1932 Council in favor of divestment against those others favoring continued American  
1933 involvement with apartheid." He said, "Clearly, you're somebody I want on my side. I  
1934 don't want you to testify against anything I do anymore." And he put me to work in a  
1935 group that was nick-named the "Mod Squad." It was a special unit of four people,  
1936 headed by Jane Ramsey, who now heads the Jewish Council of Urban Affairs, and we  
1937 worked above the level of Cabinet heads, so that there were people, for example, like Rob  
1938 Mier, who was the head of economic development, or Tim Wright, who was with the  
1939 economic development, we worked above those levels. We were answerable only to the  
1940 Mayor and his assistant, Ernie Barefield. We handled issues, problems, anything that  
1941 came up and we'd be shot, that's why they called us the Mod Squad. It was a Jewish  
1942 woman, a black man, a Japanese-American woman, and a Puerto Rican man, and they  
1943 called us the Mod Squad, and we'd be shot into all kinds of situations and issues. I did  
1944 that for a year and a half, or two years, I think. And then one time I got a message from  
1945 the Mozambican government that the President, Samora Machel had been killed, and the  
1946 new President, Joaquim Chissano, who had known me in the armed struggle years,  
1947 wanted me. They wanted me to work in a special capacity as a special representative  
1948 organizing all over the United States, and would I be willing to? I went to Harold and  
1949 said, "Well Harold, this is the situation." I said, "Would you be willing to let me do  
1950 this?" He said, "How important is this to Africa?" I said, "It's very important." Harold  
1951 had read a book I wrote. And I did, I did, I do combine a little writing and reflection with  
1952 this activism. I've written a book called *Apartheid in our Living Rooms*. Harold had read  
1953 that, and he was very impressed with it. He said to me, "Well if they need you there, you  
1954 better go to them then." And in fact then there was a kind of dialectic, because Harold  
1955 had always been very interested in Southern Africa. He gave the key to the city to a man  
1956 named Alfred Nzo, who was then the Acting General Secretary of the African National  
1957 Congress, at the time the U.S. State Department viewed the ANC as a terrorist  
1958 organization. And at that time Nelson Mandela was on the terrorist list, Harold  
1959 Washington gave the key to the city to Alfred Nzo. And Harold Washington hosted  
1960 SWAPO guerillas, that is combatants from the Southwest African Peoples Organization  
1961 who were fighting for freedom in Namibia, wonderful pictures of Harold hosting these  
1962 men and women from SWAPO in the City Council of Chicago. So he's, there's this  
1963 wonderful perception that Harold had that he was an international Mayor, that he was a  
1964 global Mayor, and that was very much in keeping with the view that the Mozambicans  
1965 had, which influenced me at such an early age. I remember, for example, that I was  
1966 working in Chimoio Province. I was working up, up in the country in Mozambique, up  
1967 in the country, outside of the Capital and word came that Harold had died. Someone in  
1968 Chicago contacted the Mozambican President's office, his secretary called me and said,  
1969 "Your friend died. President Chissano wants you to come back and get back to Chicago.  
1970 You have to be there." They sent a Presidential helicopter, it picked me up outside of the  
1971 Capital, brought me to the Capital, put me on a first-class seat, flew me to Lisbon,  
1972 Portugal, shot me straight through to Chicago and I walked into the funeral. I walked  
1973 into the funeral in the church on 79<sup>th</sup> Street, straight off the plane to be there just in time

1974 as they were having this massive service for Harold Washington. I always said to people  
1975 that saw me, When did you-, how did you get here Prexy? “The Mozambican said you  
1976 had to be there.” So that’s, I think, the importance that they felt, and that Harold felt in  
1977 turn about them.

1978  
1979 EM: Tell me about the funeral.

1980  
1981 PN: The funeral, what a sad event. It was sad and it was also a victory. I re-, I was not  
1982 present but I remember Harold talking to me about the race hate stuff that surfaced in that  
1983 first term he had, the wars with Vrydolyack. I remember, I heard him once talk about  
1984 going up to a Catholic Church on the Northwest Side where they all had these signs  
1985 that said *We don’t want you here*. And one had, *Nigger go on back to the South Side*.  
1986 For the Mayor of the city! And Harold, one of Harold’s aides asked, Is nobody here  
1987 prepared to greet your Mayor? And a little boy walked out and said, “I welcome you Mr.  
1988 Mayor.” And Harold got out and he shook the little boy’s hands and they went into the  
1989 church, then the priest finally came forward to greet him and took him also, after this  
1990 visit, it took him about, well I remember a similar thing. I remember being present, for  
1991 instance, with Harold when he met with, just after his lunch with a Puerto Rican or Latino  
1992 man the pastor was beaten by the police there, knocked down. It was a horrible incident.  
1993 A group of Latino pastors and religious folk came to meet with Harold and were very  
1994 upset about this. Harold came into the meeting, I was there with him, and he put aside  
1995 the notes that he had and he said, I want to be very honest with you. I don’t control this  
1996 police force. He said, I’m going to be very honest. You all know as well as I do who’s in  
1997 control of this police force in this city. And he said, It will be awhile. It’s going to take  
1998 work, I need your support. I need you to be with me. It was an incredible meeting. And  
1999 that was, I think, part of what wedded Harold to people like Rudy Lozano, the late  
2000 Alderman who was killed in Pilsen. I think that Harold’s funeral and those days of  
2001 mourning, I remember going down to City Hall and seeing people who, it was very  
2002 multiracial. It was not just black people at that point who had decided that this was a  
2003 good man. I had a very good friend who was an Irish-American woman, and her father  
2004 had a motive for everything, but he voted for him in that second term because Harold had  
2005 helped get him better garbage cans, and that was all he needed to know. When Harold  
2006 died, he was upset. This was not a, this was not a liberal, this was a man who was very  
2007 representative of the Northwest Side white community. When Harold died he went and  
2008 he stood in line there with all those other people around City Hall to go in and pay his  
2009 respects to Harold lying in the casket there in City Hall. But I think that that was the  
2010 sobriety of that moment in the church was there too. There was, it was like saying that  
2011 we are, he made the contribution for us and we have now an obligation. I think a lot of  
2012 people felt that.

2013  
2014 EM: And is that the victory you’re referring to?

2015  
2016 PN: That’s the victory of, that I’m referring to. I think that Harold’s contribution led to a  
2017 victorious moment of citywide celebration and recognition of each other that we have  
2018 never retreated from. I think it’s not ever been, politically at least, it’s never been at the  
2019 level, again, it’s never returned to that level of vituperation and bitterness that went on in

2020 the Council Wars (telephone rings) since you had things happen like Slim Coleman  
2021 punching out Eddie Vrdolyac and he would totally react, all this name calling and stuff  
2022 that went on in those Council, you must remember some of that stuff—  
2023  
2024 EM: Oh, yeah.  
2025  
2026 PN: It was, it was pretty ugly stuff.  
2027  
2028 EM: Yeah, and embarrassing, and—  
2029  
2030 PN: Embarrassing, yeah.  
2031  
2032 EM: Juvenile, any word that you can come up with.  
2033  
2034 PN: It was deep, it was deep. Let's see, how do you turn this thing off?  
2035  
2036 EM: Now I want you to talk about your work as a union organizer, but before that,  
2037 because we kind of moved ahead, I want to ask you to go back to your '83 visit, illegal  
2038 trip to South Africa. And so, was that before, obviously, before you returned to Chicago?  
2039 Yeah, okay, so could you talk about that?  
2040  
2041 PN: In 1983, based on, I'm beginning to understand much more now about what, how it  
2042 happened and I was able, I was invited by a group of people inside of South Africa. It  
2043 was very important that it was inside South Africa. These were not liberation movement  
2044 organizations in the neighboring countries, what they called Front Line States. These  
2045 were people who were inside the country, who were doing a major workshop on  
2046 organizing. And it was going to be held in a part of what today is called the Eastern  
2047 Cape. It was then called the Transkei. It was going to be held at a Catholic, excuse me, a  
2048 Catholic nun's facility, a nunnery near a place called Lady Frere in Transkei. There were  
2049 two women who were using and had used Paulo Freire's techniques and pedagogy to do  
2050 training of people. I, too, had done some Paulo Freire stuff, both at the World Council of  
2051 Churches where Freire was in residence, and before I went to the World Council of  
2052 Churches, when I was doing alternative school stuff here in Chicago, I and some other  
2053 people hosted Paulo Freire in a workshop we did on using Freire's pedagogy here in  
2054 Chicago. Two women, Ann, Ann and Sally we would call them, contacted me on behalf  
2055 of people inside the country and they asked me if I would join them in coming inside the  
2056 country to do these workshops. Now to get inside the country I knew that I couldn't get a  
2057 visa to enter South Africa and the apartheid state of South Africa, its set up these  
2058 homelands, these bantustans, twelve of them, that were part of a grand scheme to make it  
2059 look like the South African apartheid regime cared about blacks and their black  
2060 homelands. So part of what they did was to give the Transkei the right to have its own  
2061 control over internationals coming directly into the Transkei, flying in. Now what they  
2062 didn't tell people was that the South African security branch pretty much still oversaw all  
2063 of that. So, I ended up flying from Geneva, Switzerland and going to Johannesburg, if I  
2064 remember correctly, and then flying into Umtatan, capital of the Transkei. Lesotho, once

2065 called Basutoland, was a British high commission territory that's totally within South  
2066 Africa. And I could also have landed there.  
2067  
2068 EM: You didn't land in Johannesburg?  
2069  
2070 PN: They wouldn't let you out! You could land at the airport, but then you had to be  
2071 under lock and key, literally. Many times—  
2072  
2073 EM: Did they know you were on that plane?  
2074  
2075 PN: Oh they knew who everybody was on planes. What they used to do was they would  
2076 meet you on the plane and take you to the Holiday Inn inside the airport where you would  
2077 be locked in a room and if you had to wait for six or seven hours, or overnight, you were  
2078 locked in that room overnight. Locked in! And then the next day, if you had to eat,  
2079 they'd come and be given, it was like you were put in a Goddamn jail! So that was what  
2080 they did.  
2081  
2082 EM: But they, so they knew that you were on that plane. You were not allowed to enter  
2083 the country. But they thought you were going—  
2084  
2085 PN: To Maseru, Lesotho, the British high commission territory—  
2086  
2087 EM: So they couldn't control—  
2088  
2089 PN: That's right. Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland were these British high commission  
2090 territories where their currency was the rand of South Africa. The planes coming in and  
2091 out were all controlled by South Africa. They had this rubric, this facsimile of British  
2092 legitimacy that made it possible to do this. So we, I flew to Maseru and there I was met  
2093 by people who had South African passports, who then drove me using various routes into  
2094 the Transkei. Now I could enter the Transkei because this was one of the homelands,  
2095 alright?  
2096  
2097 EM: Right.  
2098  
2099 PN: Before I had left Geneva I went and reported that I had lost my passport. So I got a  
2100 new passport that showed no travel, and I used the fact that my name is really not Prexy  
2101 Nesbitt, that's not my legal name. So, I had the name Rozell Nesbitt, Rozell William  
2102 Nesbitt. So then, no association, plus the passport showed no travel. So I was able to  
2103 then enter the Transkei with this passport riding in the car with these white South  
2104 Africans, and was taken directly, now, to show you the level of seriousness of this Erin,  
2105 just to give you some idea. People were coming in for this conference to look at Freire  
2106 and look at use of pedagogy of oppressed. You know Freire's stuff?  
2107  
2108 EM: I know the name and the reference.  
2109  
2110 PN: Paulo Freire.

2111

2112 EM: Yeah, yeah.

2113

2114 PN: That was part of the purpose. My role, really, was to talk about the liberation  
2115 struggles in Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. That's why, 'cause I see, I  
2116 had been funding all this from Geneva, so I know, and I've known this history because,  
2117 so they, therefore they wanted me to come in to talk about this, because for people inside  
2118 South Africa, they can't get this news. Just, if you had a piece of paper that said SWAPO  
2119 on it, that's illegal. If you had a piece of paper that talked about Robert Mugabe, that's  
2120 illegal. You can't have magazines that, you can't have any of that. So, inside the  
2121 country, as they're struggling, they're thirsting for information about the liberation  
2122 struggles taking place in the neighboring countries, all of which involved white South  
2123 African forces fighting in all of those. Those were places where white South Africans  
2124 were being drafted to go and fight in all those countries, Angola, Mozambique, all of  
2125 those liberation struggles, fought white South African Armies.

2126

2127 EM: It's crazy because they're exporting, you know, to keep down the liberation, and  
2128 then the international liberation struggles are also exporting to fight apartheid and, and—

2129

2130 PN: It's intense struggle.

2131

2132 EM: Yeah.

2133

2134 PN: In all of this, too, you have all of the other players. You've got Israel, you've got  
2135 West Germany, you've got the United States. In all of these things that are happening.  
2136 To show you the level of seriousness, which was a new level for me, we got there to this  
2137 nunnery and it, it's a big huge facility, all black and white nuns, mostly Irish white nuns.  
2138 And the first thing that happened with every car as we entered the gates, was that they  
2139 were all parked along side of a great rotund, round chapel, and the cars were parked like a  
2140 circle around this chapel. I didn't know that, but later turns out that the reason they were  
2141 all put there was 'cause all those cars coming from all parts of South Africa had all gone  
2142 through roadblocks. What happens in any roadblock in that period in South Africa,  
2143 maybe still happens, I doubt that though, was that they bug it. As they search the car,  
2144 they bug the car, you know?

2145

2146 EM: Yeah.

2147

2148 PN: The cars then would have the bugs, but these activists knew all this. So they put  
2149 their cars deliberately around this chapel because, throughout the conference, and in  
2150 particular during certain key sessions, nuns would play Bach and Cantatas at full volume,  
2151 full volume, neutralizing, then, the bugs, 'cause all the bugs could pick up was the sound  
2152 of all this music taking place. It was very, very serious.

2153

2154 EM: So, but, just to be clear, what you're telling me too is that there is this huge oral  
2155 component because the printed component is illegal?

2156



2157 PN: Right. Then the struggle—  
2158  
2159 EM: So you could speak, I mean, you are giving them the news of these liberations by—  
2160  
2161 PN: That's right.  
2162  
2163 EM: Orally, because you couldn't—  
2164  
2165 PN: I didn't bring a piece of paper into that place.  
2166  
2167 EM: And they didn't write up notes for this conference or this—  
2168  
2169 PN: Well that comes up later because, it comes up later because there is also a guy who  
2170 gets identified in the group of people who come who is a, he's a spy. He's an agent, and  
2171 he gets identified, and people talk about it, and they decide on what strategy they're  
2172 going to use to deal with him. It wasn't, now understand that by this point in '83,  
2173 although it wasn't as high as it would become later, necklacing is already being used.  
2174  
2175 EM: Just briefly describe that—  
2176  
2177 PN: Necklacing is when you, when angry youth, the comrades who were in the struggle,  
2178 would take spies and take a tire and dose it with kerosene and would burn them, burn  
2179 them dead, kill 'em, put it on and this was getting ride of the spy. Now they just, they  
2180 went, there wasn't going to be any getting ride of this guy, but they definitely isolated  
2181 him within the group. The Transkei, where we were, was run by the Transkei security  
2182 forces. I didn't get to stay throughout the whole period. By the fourth or fifth night,  
2183 maybe it was later then that, I can't, I'd have to look back, by the fourth or fifth night it  
2184 was exposed that myself and a Kenyan man, who was also, had done some Freire tech  
2185 training, we both had to be smuggled out early in the morning, and put in nuns outfits to  
2186 be driven to the border with Lesotho, to there get out and cross manually, I was shittin'  
2187 bricks at the idea of crossing manually by road, back into Lesotho to get out of that  
2188 country.  
2189  
2190 EM: Because they were looking for you?  
2191  
2192 PN: They had decided, the people running the conference, that it was time that I was,  
2193 gotten out of the country. Now, up until that time, there were all kinds of other stuff we  
2194 did. Because of the presence of that guy who was an informant, the general atmosphere,  
2195 you never talked in any of the buildings. We talked at night on the roads. And I had to  
2196 get used to what it was like to have intense political discussions in the pitch black  
2197 walking the roads all around this nunnery, pitch black.  
2198  
2199 EM: Not seeing other people's faces?  
2200  
2201 PN: You couldn't see anything. You had met the person, you knew you were walking  
2202 with, but a lot of people had those kind of meetings on that trip, because I knew a lot, and

2203 they all wanted this information. It was in that time, for example, two things that I  
2204 learned that later just reminded me. One of them was that I learned about all the  
2205 problems Winnie Mandela was having. And she was then, she was either in isolation or  
2206 had just come out of being in a banning order in a rural part, but she was, I think by that  
2207 time she had already had some involvement with her bodyguards known as the “soccer  
2208 club” that ultimately killed a young boy, but she was already having some relationships  
2209 that people didn’t trust, she was a wild card. People loved her, and they all knew the  
2210 great stuff she had done, but they also knew that she was wild, that there was no telling  
2211 what she might always do, but she wasn’t always subject to the discipline of the armed  
2212 struggle, and the discipline of ANC, so I learned a lot about that.

2213

2214 EM: And so did she have, you know, I wonder if she had enough autonomy where  
2215 people, you know, there weren’t things in place that could’ve—

2216

2217 PN: Because they were constantly being broken.

2218

2219 EM: Okay.

2220

2221 PN: Things that were put in place, structures in place, connections and relationships, this  
2222 was underground, it was all underground stuff that’s constantly being broken, and then  
2223 new things have to be set up and constructed.

2224

2225 EM: And so for the white government, the apartheid government, that they wanted that  
2226 to continue? I mean they—

2227

2228 PN: Absolutely.

2229

2230 EM: So they did.

2231

2232 PN: Absolutely they did.

2233

2234 EM: Yeah.

2235

2236 PN: It was in this period, for instance, on that visit, that something that very few people  
2237 have talked about and written about, a few have, a lot is now coming up. I kept hearing  
2238 on these late night walks, Prexy, it would be great for you to go—

2239

2240 EM: Just pause for one minute. Oh, thank you, thank you very much. We’ll continue  
2241 with that. Okay.

2242

2243 *pause in recording*

2244

2245 PN: As I was saying that the, it was in this period in these late night walks in pitch  
2246 blackness that people kept saying to me, Prexy we want you, it would be great if while  
2247 you’re here, meaning while you’re in South Africa, you could meet with the big man.  
2248 And they kept making these illusions to the big man, and to the chief. And I, I always

2249 thought, and I couldn't figure out who they were talking about. I thought they were  
2250 talking about Mandela.

2251

2252 EM: Um-hm.

2253

2254 PN: Then I thought they were talking about, maybe Steve Biko or someone like that, but  
2255 it wasn't until years and years later that I met after '94 I met one of these nuns who had  
2256 been in the group who explained to me, no, who the person they were talking about was a  
2257 man named Beyers Naude. And Beyers Naude was an Afrikaner cleric, once head of the  
2258 South African Council of Churches, the founder of the Christian Institute of South Africa.  
2259 He was the man that the Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church ultimately apologizes to,  
2260 because he was the one who said, I will never implement the Christianity of apartheid.  
2261 He was simultaneously, he was a member of the ANC, he was underground member of  
2262 the ANC, and I don't know for sure—

2263

2264 EM: And he was the big man?

2265

2266 PN: He was the big man.

2267

2268 EM: I'm sorry to interrupt.

2269

2270 PN: He was simultaneously, because many people at that period of time in the eighties  
2271 had various roles. They had a public persona that might involve being political too, but  
2272 underground they were also ANC. In addition, they might be SACP, which is even then  
2273 a step further because that's South African Communist Party. And remember that in all  
2274 this underground organizing and work, in many, many areas, it was this South African  
2275 Communist Party people who were the most experienced in doing underground work,  
2276 and had had some of the most training. And so this was, this was a very wide opening,  
2277 eye opening experience, you know. I mean, it was, there were all kind of humorous stuff.  
2278 I'm still in touch with some of these nuns. The priest that drove me and the other man to  
2279 the border that day, he was tortured, I'm told, that day. A wonderful man named Dick  
2280 Ryder, also Irish. These Irish Catholic priests, because another part of what they wanted  
2281 me to work with people about was helping people get through the ideological religious  
2282 convictions issue of simultaneously being committed to nonviolent struggle, but also  
2283 having to deal with things. If you were a nun in a school way out in the bush and  
2284 somebody knocks, comes on the door and somebody says so-and-so's here, he wants  
2285 food. Can we give him food, and he's an MK member, it's a guerrilla, and you're a  
2286 nonviolent person, it means that you have to have a head, you got to deal with that. And,  
2287 you know, theologically by that point, although I'm not a Christian, I knew this stuff.  
2288 Theologically, the Programme to Combat Racism and certain key members of faith, of  
2289 the Christian faith, had come to the conclusion that there was a just war, that there could  
2290 be circumstances where armed struggle was condonable. So, for instance, within all  
2291 these guerrilla movements there were chaplains. That was something I had to get used to,  
2292 you know, a chaplains for the guerrilla struggle. In fact, this wonderful man, Michael  
2293 Lapsley, wonderful man from New Zealand, was an Anglican priest, and subsequently I

2294 learned many church people who were part of MK, of the armed wing of the liberation  
2295 movement.  
2296  
2297 EM: So, it's interesting, you just kind of mentioned you're not a Christian, but, with the  
2298 World Council of Churches. It's just kind of funny with your goals, your values were the  
2299 same. So they didn't mind you weren't a Christian? And you didn't mind working, so,  
2300 how does that work?  
2301  
2302 PN: No. Well, I think first of all that that has happened in many social change situations,  
2303 that there comes to be a compatibility of values and goals. That was true against the fight  
2304 against Nazism, it was true in the fight against Pinochet and Chile, and that that was also  
2305 one of the things that was going on in the World Council of Churches that excited me.  
2306 For example, there was a Christian unit that did nothing else but Karl Marx's dialogue.  
2307 Now that was not the kind of stuff that made Pat Robertson and others in this country  
2308 very happy, but this, there comes points where there is a, an affinity of values and  
2309 purposes, you know? Dom Helder, this wonderful, he since died, but he was this  
2310 Brazilian Bishop at this great vault, he would always say, I give alms to the poor and they  
2311 call me a saint. I ask why are the poor poor, and they call me a communist.  
2312  
2313 EM: That's great.  
2314  
2315 PN: So that, that kind of examination, and although I'm not a Christian, I'm an honest  
2316 man, and that was one of the things I'd like most about what Cabral would always say.  
2317 They'd ask him if he was a Marx, and he'd say I'm an honest man. I'm looking at the  
2318 things happening around me and saying how do I respond to these things? And I came  
2319 out of a family that, on my mother's side, that included a pastor who was called the gun-  
2320 toting preacher. That was Reverend William Crane, he was an AME minister. They  
2321 nicknamed him the gun-toting pastor. He had churches all over the Midwest, including  
2322 on the West Side of Chicago, and also in the South. Why was he the gun-toting pastor?  
2323 Pastors were special targets of the Ku Klux Klan. Pastors were targets because they were  
2324 the learned ones. So they would ask, Reverend Crane, why do you carry that gun? You  
2325 take it up to the pulpit? He said, I carry that gun. Sometimes I got it at the pulpit,  
2326 sometime I don't. But why do I have that gun? I ain't worried about the people, it's the  
2327 Bishops that I worry about (laughter). It was anti-hierarchy, it was a peoples kind of  
2328 pastor. That's the kind of tradition and values that I was raised with in my family.  
2329  
2330 EM: You know, it's very, I find this interesting that you go, you said your role in, at this  
2331 training conference session at the nunnery was really to educate and bring news of the  
2332 liberation movements to South Africa.  
2333  
2334 PN: News and analysis.  
2335  
2336 EM: News and analysis.  
2337  
2338 PN: Yeah.  
2339

2340 EM: But you're also there working with, in this training program, and then you come  
2341 back to Chicago. Is that when your union organization starts?

2342  
2343 PN: That's when my union organizer starts. And I think that, you know, I had had one  
2344 stint at least organizing before then, but then I come back and I had great exposure to a  
2345 wonderful organizing individual here in Chicago named Hazen Griffin, who was an  
2346 organizer with the Service Employees International Union. I remember him most  
2347 because of he, that that Union Local 372, the SEIU, Service Employees International  
2348 Union represented the Marshall Field workers. I'll never forget a meeting he once had in  
2349 Marshall Field with these Marshall Field workers, it was just a classic and beautiful  
2350 meeting that taught me so much about what union, a good union organizer was. And  
2351 Hazen Griffin was that, he was a horrible father, he was a horrible husband, I think he  
2352 was married four or five times. He was very deeply involved with a woman named Mary  
2353 Beth Guinan, I don't know what's happened to her but she was a great activist, feminist,  
2354 very powerful here in Chicago. So they, I was working for them when I did some  
2355 organizing and a second venture of organizing, and finally toward the end I was working  
2356 for another wonderful union leader, a man named Cleveland Robinson, who was a blind  
2357 trade unionist who had worked with Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King. He was,  
2358 King used to call him *his* trade unionist, "Cleve." And when I worked on the America  
2359 Committee of Africa earlier in this '77-'80 period, when I was in charge of getting  
2360 massive institutions to withdraw their bank accounts from banks making loans to South  
2361 Africa, I was with Cleve a lot. He said to me right away, he said, "We're going to do this  
2362 thing Prexy. We're going to take our money out of this Chase Bank and put it in a bank  
2363 that's not involved in South Africa. We're going to use this as a statement to others to do  
2364 the same thing." There was, it was about not equivocating. That was these, that was the  
2365 characteristic that they had in common, I think.

2366  
2367 EM: So and what, now, so what was your role with the unions? Was it divestiture, or—

2368  
2369 PN: My role was very clearly this.

2370  
2371 EM: Okay.

2372  
2373 PN: I both worked with three different unions as an organizer, but early, and in between  
2374 there in the '77-'79 period I worked for the American Committee on Africa out of New  
2375 York City, before I went to work for the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

2376  
2377 EM: Right, okay.

2378  
2379 PN: And in that period my role was to get unions to withdraw their monies from banks  
2380 making loans to South Africa. So in that capacity, I was organizing the campaign to  
2381 oppose bank loans to South Africa. One leverage we had was to withdraw monies by  
2382 institutions. We got the United Methodist Church to do it. We got the United Automobile  
2383 Workers Union to do it, American Federation of Municipal County Employees, Drug and  
2384 Hospital Workers Union. I would work with these unions to get them to withdraw big  
2385 accounts, you know, big, that banks really rely on. So in the beginning the banks called

2386 us the “hassle factor.” But by the end this had become a very serious and powerful threat  
2387 that ultimately leads to the 1986 Passage of Sanctions by the United States government,  
2388 you know, which the tremendous, very highly visible campaign around the taking over of  
2389 the South African embassy, and all the people getting arrested at the South African  
2390 Council, we had some here in Chicago too, all of that is highly visible. What preceded  
2391 that was all this other work done all over the country, countless.

2392  
2393 EM: So in '86 when that's achieved, what's the next goal and priority?  
2394

2395 PN: The next goal and priority was to sharpen that and to move it even further, and then  
2396 to also get implementation of no weapons, no flow of weapon to get enforced, to get  
2397 enforced what existed as a United Nations statement that there would be no weapons to  
2398 the apartheid government of South Africa.  
2399

2400 EM: Okay, so that is also international.  
2401

2402 PN: That's also an international effort.  
2403

2404 EM: Is U.S. money going towards that?  
2405

2406 PN: U.S. weapons were going toward that.  
2407

2408 EM: U.S. weapons, yeah.  
2409

2410 PN: U.S. weapons were very, definitely going to that. One of the things we most feared  
2411 in that point, for example, there was a company, Space Research Corporation out of  
2412 Vermont that was helping to build nuclear bullets for the South African apartheid regime.  
2413 And that company out of Vermont, there's a wonderful film about this, documentary.  
2414 We feared that the South African government would, was capable of doing numerous  
2415 nuclear strikes in the region that would hit Luanda, but not Maputo, it's too close, or  
2416 maybe Dar es Salaam. They could do these cities, we knew that they had that capacity.  
2417 And then years later, of course, it was South Africa under Mandela who would  
2418 denuclearize, to get rid of their stockpile of weapons. But we knew that they had, along  
2419 with Israel and West Germany and the United States, become a nuclear power.  
2420

2421 EM: Why do you think they didn't use that?  
2422

2423 PN: I think that there was so much other things happening by 1987, '88 that were  
2424 unraveling their will to keep going. One of those things was the Labor Unions. The call  
2425 had gone out from ANC make South Africa ungovernable, so the strikes were just taking  
2426 place all the time. The fight called Cuito Cuanavale in '88, when the Cubans come in to  
2427 help the Angolan forces and they defeat the white South African Army at Cuito  
2428 Cuanavale, was such a blow to the morale of white South Africans. They still write about  
2429 that, they still talk about it. It led to sharpening the numbers of white South Africans who  
2430 were refusing to go to the front, refusing to serve. The numbers were leaving the  
2431 country, going at Canada, going at the United States, anything to avoid dying in these

2432 battles, 'cause they were beginning to die now. When the white South African forces  
2433 were being killed, when they publicly acknowledged they were dying, that was a very  
2434 important transition in the struggle. The economy was going to hell in a hand basket.  
2435 Sanctions were happening all over, and at the same time they were having these talks  
2436 Mandela was doing with the government inside. Now, we had no idea of that. I had no  
2437 idea of that, I heard, you heard rumors, but they were just things you heard, okay? So  
2438 that I was as surprised as everyone else in February of 1990 when Mandela, when it was  
2439 announced that Mandela was going to be released from jail, and the others had been  
2440 released. Now that's another whole, another whole saga because that leads to another trip  
2441 right away. But in that late eighties period, and I think another thing that's very  
2442 important they're stretched thin, they're stretched very thin. They've got the internal  
2443 struggle happening in South Africa. They've got all of Namibia also happening, they've  
2444 got Angola happening, they're worried about what's going to happen with the support  
2445 they're giving to RENAMO fighting against Mozambique. And I think that that's, the  
2446 parallel to that is the unraveling that went on in the United States during the Vietnam War  
2447 years, the unraveling process that begins to take place.

2448  
2449 EM: That too much is going wrong?

2450  
2451 PN: Too much is going wrong.

2452  
2453 EM: Of things that had previously been—

2454  
2455 PN: Of things that previously had been fine.

2456  
2457 EM: Or at least controlled.

2458  
2459 PN: This was getting too costly, and there were too many things happening that we can't  
2460 any longer control.

2461  
2462 EM: Okay, before we end today, that beeper is bugging me, but it's a good, it will be a  
2463 good time and we kind of got a next session, what we'll talk about, but I want to just go  
2464 back to the union organizing. Did you see that, or was it separate, or how was it linked to  
2465 your work with these liberation movements, in particular, South Africa? Because in  
2466 organizing, was there also an education component?

2467  
2468 PN: Oh absolutely.

2469  
2470 EM: Okay.

2471  
2472 PN: I saw it as totally the same.

2473  
2474 EM: Totally the same.

2475  
2476 PN: It was totally the same. And the unions that I worked for saw it as totally the same.  
2477 And the union people that I worked with saw it totally the same.

2478

2479 EM: Okay, so explain for us though, how those things are, are just flowing together in  
2480 the same path?

2481

2482 PN: We had a lot of unions that, for example, there was an organization here in Chicago  
2483 called Labor Against Apartheid, and that, those were union people who were against the  
2484 apartheid and who were in solidarity with their union brothers and sisters in South Africa  
2485 who were calling for them to do things in solidarity, so for me to start doing organizing  
2486 work around South Africa.

2487

2488 EM: So, and, was that to increase the membership of these four unions you worked for?

2489

2490 PN: It was to both build the membership, to unionize people where there was no union,  
2491 to organize, it was to organize.

2492

2493 EM: So did you have to, the union leadership, were they totally onboard, or was it also a  
2494 grassroots—

2495

2496 PN: They were totally onboard.

2497

2498 EM: Onboard, they were, okay.

2499

2500 PN: Later I would learn how un-, how not onboard was the highest levels of the AFL  
2501 CIO, but on these union locals here in Chicago and all around, you know, I had spoken in  
2502 so many of these union halls across the whole country, and particularly, so much of the  
2503 membership was black, Latino, and women. They were seeing blacks, and people of  
2504 color, and women being brutalized in apartheid.

2505

2506 EM: So, translating that, that wasn't hard to translate?

2507

2508 PN: The same struggle, same fight.

2509

2510 EM: The same struggle.

2511

2512 PN: The same struggle, the same fight, and that was the easiest thing in the world to  
2513 translate. It made, I found, I felt so completely at home, I could go into a union hall and  
2514 completely feel at home talking about the struggle of union people. I could feel that too  
2515 in some black churches, but in union hall, you just, people got it right away. They  
2516 understood right away what it was all about. I'm tired, I guess.

2517

2518 EM: No, this is a good point. This is a perfect point, because next time we meet we'll  
2519 talk about your work with Francis, the local Francis, MacArthur Foundation, Mandela's  
2520 release, and the end of the apartheid.

2521

2522 PN: And we can wrap it up.

2523



2524 EM: Okay, so great. Alright.

2525

2526 *pause in recording*

2527

2528 EM: This is continuation of the interview with Prexy Nesbitt. It is August 31, 2009, and  
2529 we are at Columbia College. And Prexy, in some of your off camera remarks, as we  
2530 started preparing for this interview, you were talking about the significance of the death  
2531 this week of Senator—

2532

2533 PN: Ted Kennedy.

2534

2535 EM: Teddy Kennedy, thank you, and some of the things that you had learned and we  
2536 agreed that really we would like this on tape, so if you could continue with your remarks.

2537

2538 PN: Well I, as I think I mentioned once before in this interview, Ted Kennedy was very  
2539 involved in the hosting of President Mandela in his first trip to the United States after his  
2540 release when Mandela came to thank the American people. Ted Kennedy was very  
2541 involved in hosting him in Boston. But additionally I learned this week, that Ted  
2542 Kennedy went to a meeting in 1986 apparently in Atlanta, summoned by Coretta Scott  
2543 King, and upon getting to the meeting he and his staff found out that the hotel they were  
2544 staying in, was a hotel that had been providing catering for the South African Airways, so  
2545 in fact that hotel was being complicit with a apartheid. Well, Ted Kennedy and his staff  
2546 moved out of that hotel in protest against this hotel's collaboration with the apartheid  
2547 regime. Now, I don't know what hotel this was. It had to be either the Marriott, or the  
2548 Hyatt, I would be shocked if it was the Hyatt hotels, however, it was one or the other.  
2549 But that Kennedy did this is consistent with the kind of view I have of Kennedy and his  
2550 family as representing a certain kind of white American Irish Catholics, that because of,  
2551 and his was my thesis, because of their engagement with the issues of freedom in Ireland,  
2552 especially for the Irish Catholic population, they bridged very easily to also then working  
2553 on the situation of the struggle of people in South Africa. It was assisted by the fact that  
2554 Irish Catholics in Ireland were so involved in the struggle against South Africa, so  
2555 involved. And that relationship continued on until recent years when this Irish Catholics  
2556 as they worked on their reconciliation and peace talks and negotiations, brought in ANC  
2557 people to help them get this negotiated settlement, however flaky or unsatisfactory it is,  
2558 to help them get that in Ireland. It was done out of the relations that were forged because  
2559 of Irish Catholic engagement with South Africa. Personally, I witnessed this when I was  
2560 illegally in the country and was at this nunnery in the Transkei in 1983. It was almost all,  
2561 of the white Catholic religious people who were there, they were almost all Irish  
2562 Catholic, and these were the nuns that I had been brought in to work with them, to get  
2563 them ready to how they handled questions like if an armed guerrilla of the ANC knocks  
2564 on their door in the middle of the night, how do they justify with their faith, helping that  
2565 man, or that monk? So, it's a big question.

2566

2567 EM: I think one of the things that struck me that you can comment on it now, or if you  
2568 want to wait until the reflection section, that the theme comes up over and over again  
2569 which, that South African anti-apartheid movement was not isolated and a single focus of

2570 much of the movement, that it was international and that it was a part of other struggles,  
2571 although in the United States as it seemed to be predicted in the media as it was unfolding  
2572 and as positions shifted and it gained more traction if you will, or popularity, that, and I  
2573 don't know if this is something specifically in the United States, but trying to really  
2574 isolate it, this anti-, or the apartheid in South Africa really looking at only singly, yes,  
2575 eventually that is wrong. But for many of the people, like yourself involved in it, it really  
2576 wasn't just only about South Africa.

2577

2578 PN: You know, it's an amazing thing, and it's an amazing phenomena in the United  
2579 States how much the press coverage and the discussion of social change gets neutralized,  
2580 it gets delinked from entities and struggles that it's just completely linked with, it's  
2581 integral to those struggles, so that the Civil Rights movement has been kind of delinked  
2582 from the anti-Communism Movement, or from the Labor Movement, and it's made to be  
2583 sort of these visionary, nice people who wanted to just simply be able to have access to  
2584 better jobs or the possibility of marrying whoever they want. When in fact, that struggle  
2585 was so integrally, integrally related to the struggle of the quality of life in the United  
2586 States. And it was as much about improving life for Native Americans, or all Americans,  
2587 as it was. Similarly, these international struggles, when they're depicted in the United  
2588 States, they always have to be delinked. And the South African struggle that the levels  
2589 that I was engaged in, I think, that that's part of the appeal that was so, that made it so  
2590 popular to such a broad base of people, was the fact that the South African struggle was  
2591 always completely linked to all these other struggles in the world. It was linked to the  
2592 Pilipino struggle, it was linked to the struggle of the Chilean people, it was linked  
2593 obviously to all of the other African Independence Colonial struggles, but it was also  
2594 linked to the struggle of the average working people all over the world, all over the  
2595 world, every part of the world.

2596

2597 EM: Yeah, I think, I think that that often gets lost.

2598

2599 PN: Yeah.

2600

2601 EM: I think that that's pretty threatening to—

2602

2603 PN: Very threatening, very threatening, which leads to this reinterpretation and delinking  
2604 of it in a way that becomes less threatening. So the speech that people link to this, in this  
2605 country that everyone remembers is the King "I Have a Dream" speech. But what people  
2606 don't realize at all is the real significance of power of King's Riverside Drive Church  
2607 speech when he spoke in April of '68, and he said, it was to the clergy and laity  
2608 concerned, he said in the speech we will be marching for ending Vietnams, Cambodias,  
2609 Perus, and South Africas. And the fact that King was always, always very cognizant and  
2610 concerned with the question of South Africa, not just South Africa. When I met with him  
2611 and discussed after '66, when he was working in my family's church as his headquarters  
2612 and he asked to meet with me, his big question to me was about Rhodesia, because he  
2613 wanted to go to Rhodesia and work and use the Gandhian, the Gandhian movement of  
2614 *satyagraha* and nonviolence, and use it in the Rhodesian Independence struggle.

2615

2616 EM: Can you, sorry to interrupt, name that church again just for the record?  
2617  
2618 PN: Warren Avenue Congregational Church. It is no longer called that, but it is the  
2619 church that is located on the corner of what is Warren Avenue, some people call Nancy  
2620 Jefferson Avenue, and Albany Street, on the West Side of Chicago in Garfield Park.  
2621  
2622 EM: In that, in that international aspect of King and also too, the story of his  
2623 assassination usually gets left out of why he was in Memphis.  
2624  
2625 PN: Absolutely.  
2626  
2627 EM: And the garbage strike and, you know, how important labor issues.  
2628  
2629 PN: And, and who, and which union that was. It was not just his commitment in general  
2630 to unions, but the fact that it was District 65, the Distributor Workers Union, the Union of  
2631 Cleveland Robinson, who came often referred to as “Cleve,” his union man, ‘cause Cleve  
2632 was just amazing, a West Indian, blind trade unionist who was always there for King, and  
2633 so, when he made that call to King and said, King, I need you to join me in Memphis  
2634 with this garbage workers strike, King was there like that.  
2635  
2636 EM: Yeah, I, you know, I’ll stop talking after this, but it is interesting how history, if I  
2637 can use that term, kind of strips away the international, his work on Vietnam, his really  
2638 close association with labor union organizations, and makes him into this very likeable  
2639 and acceptable, palatable, you might use that term—  
2640  
2641 PN: That’s a great term.  
2642  
2643 EM: And an image—  
2644  
2645 PN: It’s a McDonalidzation of King, it’s an ultimate McDonalidzation to make King just  
2646 be something that you just, Teflon, that is—  
2647  
2648 EM: Not complicated.  
2649  
2650 PN: Not complicated. Easy for Americans, it doesn’t call into question basic structures  
2651 of injustice and exploitation.  
2652  
2653 EM: Well, let’s change direction just a little bit and bring it back to your experience and  
2654 moving into the nineties and we, we talked about your work in Labor Organization in the  
2655 eighties, and thought maybe you could start by, maybe finish that up, or maybe about  
2656 your work with France Parker?  
2657  
2658 PN: Let me just say a couple of things about the work that I did with labor unions in the  
2659 United States, because I think it’s so, it was such an important moment, an important part  
2660 of the anti-apartheid movement that doesn’t get discussed enough. I haven’t seen really  
2661 good material that goes into, in depth enough of how pivotal it was to have labor get

2662 involved in this country. For example, I was very close to two labor struggles, two labor  
2663 moments of solidarity. One would have been the solidarity that came out of the  
2664 Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, and that was mostly when they were  
2665 involved in organizing on the East coast, around North Carolina. And they then got very  
2666 much engaged with similar groups of labor people in South Africa, and that was textile  
2667 workers in South Africa, which was a key set of unions for the events and actions that  
2668 would take place in '83, '84, '85, in the eighties which is the real boiling pot moments of  
2669 the developing struggle inside the country. So that when the textile workers in this  
2670 country, their unions began to get involved with the South African textile workers, it lead  
2671 to a lot of very concrete things that were very, very important. I think, for example, the  
2672 passage of the Comprehensive Sanctions Bill in 1986 could not have possibly been done  
2673 if labor had not been mobilized. Labor's contribution to the Campaign to End Bank  
2674 Loans to South Africa, the trade unionist that I mentioned earlier, Cleve Robinson, I'll  
2675 never forget going to a meeting with him to talk to Chase Manhattan Bank, talking to  
2676 their Presidents and Vice Presidents, because Cleve had already notified that he was, he  
2677 was a Secretary Treasurer, was going to withdraw the two million dollars account that his  
2678 union had with Chase because of their loans with banks in South Africa, and companies  
2679 in South Africa, their participation in loans. I remember that one of the Chase Vice  
2680 Presidents started off on a whole lot of blahblahblah about trying to justify what they're  
2681 doing and blahblah. Cleve Robinson cut him off and he said look mister, I can't  
2682 remember his name, I may be blind but I can see your banks support and bolster the  
2683 apartheid regime, we don't want anything to do with. We'll stop, so let's not waste our  
2684 time. That was the kind of specificity and direction that came out of labor that I think  
2685 was very important. The other seminal moment with labor was of course when the  
2686 International Longshore and Warehouse Union closed down the docks on the entire West  
2687 Coast, saying we won't touch any ships that contain South African goods on them, even  
2688 if they're going to South Africa, coming from, they instituted this boycott from, on every  
2689 port, from Vancouver, British Columbia Canada all the way down to San Diego. It was  
2690 just done and that was it, fully stopped.

2691  
2692 EM: When was that?

2693  
2694 PN: This would have been in about 1984, 1985. There's a wonderful man that should  
2695 be, there should be songs written about him in South Africa by the name of Leo  
2696 Robinson, who was really the moving force of, behind that effort. So I think that's what  
2697 we have out of labor, these trumpet calls that if the rest of us were doing the orchestra,  
2698 the violins, the bass, then you have the trumpet comes in with these moves by labor.

2699  
2700 EM: They don't seem to get the credit in the annals of history that—

2701  
2702 PN: Never, never. That's part of, of course, why labor is in the kind of crisis that it is  
2703 today. You must have experienced as I have, you go into your class, we go into our  
2704 classes and ask, what's a union? And they have no idea.

2705  
2706 EM: Or, they think they're bad.

2707

2708 PN: Or they think they're bad. They think, you know, I have had students actually hold  
2709 out their hands and pretend they're a gun when you mention the word union. So it's the,  
2710 it's been a very conscientious and corporate directed, campaign to delegitimize unions.

2711

2712 EM: How, how did you in your organizing deal with, because I would think that the  
2713 popular image of, well, skilled, unskilled laborers, they don't know enough about this or  
2714 they're not smart enough, or they're not interested in these kind of issues, when the  
2715 reality that you experience is that they're very interested and willing to act on, but they're  
2716 literally willing to put their paycheck where their mouth is, and put on—

2717

2718 PN: I think that they, it, our experience, and I think this is something that everybody who  
2719 was active in the anti-apartheid movement, particularly in the grassroots level, were in  
2720 the level of the communities that were not just in D.C., our experience is that you gave  
2721 people information and they ran with that information. Now we were much helped by  
2722 particularly the period, let's say, '82 to about '86 when there was so much visibility of  
2723 the South African issue on the media in this country. You know, when people like Ted  
2724 Koppel were running stories every night or every other night on "Nightline," when you  
2725 had all kinds of documentaries being shown, people were hearing the words of Bishop  
2726 Tutu, and hearing about figures like Nelson Mandela, that all made it also easier. But, I  
2727 think the most important thing was the fact that unionized people take it as a principled  
2728 question to be involved with other union struggles, that is, the kind of slope an injured  
2729 one is an injured all. It meant that they had a real starting point, to want to be involved  
2730 with what happened, and concerned about what happened to other workers all over the  
2731 world. And the other thing that happened that was very important was there were a lot of  
2732 visits that took place, less, the American union people going to South Africa, more union  
2733 people coming from South Africa who came and who came with us and went places all  
2734 over this country speaking to American audiences. There was here in Chicago, a man for  
2735 many, many months, he was here off and on who spoke again and again, and later his  
2736 brother came. His name slips me right now, but it was, he was an amazingly important  
2737 person who talked to union audiences here.

2738

2739 EM: How were those talks arranged?

2740

2741 PN: A lot of it was done by the tremendous work of the Labor Network, the Labor  
2742 Solidarity Network I think is another measure of this tremendous work done by a woman  
2743 named Kathy Devine, and later a man named Mike Eliot. And Kathy was supported by  
2744 the unions to do this work. She was literally paid by unions here in Chicago to do this  
2745 work in solidarity, educational work, putting out publications, being in touch with unions  
2746 in South Africa, and part of what she facilitated were these visits back and forth.

2747

2748 EM: Could those speakers return to South Africa, or—

2749

2750 PN: They were risking, they were risking. Remember, for example, for anybody to  
2751 advocate that you withdraw monies from companies involved in South Africa is a  
2752 violation of what is called the Terrorism Act in South Africa. People did it, people did it  
2753 anyway. They said, people, it was not unusual to hear them say my brothers and sisters

2754 are risking bullets, and you think I'm not going to talk about that here in this country?  
2755 And they, they were just wonderful people. I remember traveling all through Kansas  
2756 with this woman named Nomonde Ngubo. Nomonde was financed by the Amalgamated  
2757 Clothing and Textile Workers Union, and she and I made a tour of maybe forty, fifty  
2758 different schools and churches in Kansas in an effort to pressure, in an effort to grow  
2759 pressure on Senator Nancy Kassebaum, whose vote was very pivotal around the passage  
2760 of the Comprehensive Sanctions Act. And we traveled all over Kansas, and you know  
2761 what really people got most excited about, when they knew that she was coming? It  
2762 wasn't my speaking, it wasn't her speaking, it was her singing. People would be, they'd  
2763 flood places to come and hear her sing, God, she would sing, she could sing. People  
2764 would get to the question and answer period and we knew, we knew that as soon as the  
2765 question and answer period started early on, people would say, Are you going to sing for  
2766 us? It was a very, very important part.

2767  
2768 EM: That's come up before the role, in a different context, the role of songs. I think  
2769 about the, my students had asked you what songs come to mind when you think about  
2770 your work and about the end of the apartheid. First like, what, what kind of question that,  
2771 and then you—

2772  
2773 PN: Well I, I mentioned Nomonde and I just get sad. She died of AIDS in South Africa.  
2774 I got to see her in South Africa working for a union in South Africa. She was working  
2775 for the Police Union, the union for, that grew out of black policeman in South Africa. It's  
2776 very sad.

2777  
2778 EM: When you were traveling with her throughout Kansas, where would you stay? How  
2779 did you get from place to place? What was that like?

2780  
2781 PN: It was a tour that was financed by the American Committee on Africa, and the  
2782 Africa Fund out of New York that recognized how pivotal Kansas was for the passage. It  
2783 wasn't just, that wasn't the only organization that recognized the importance of that.  
2784 TransAfrica did as well, but the Africa Fund paid for our trip. I drove everywhere and  
2785 we stayed in hotels, and we stayed on cots, and we stayed on couches, and we ate meals,  
2786 gratis that people gave us. It was barn storming, it was organizing in its most wonderful  
2787 moments in the sense, because you're so tied with people then.

2788  
2789 EM: Are there, any other memorable kind of tours or circuits that you did with other  
2790 individuals that come to mind?

2791  
2792 PN: Well, I think one of the other ones that comes to mind immediately was a tour I did  
2793 in Wisconsin and Minnesota with a woman who had been working with Allan Boesak  
2794 and I can't remember what her name was, but it, it will come to me, she, whereas  
2795 Nomonde was an African South African, this tour was with a white South African  
2796 woman who had been brought out of the country quite literally because her life was, very  
2797 often, the churches and others would, when they felt somebody could possibly be killed,  
2798 which was not unusual, they then got them out of the country for a period of time. In this  
2799 case, this particular individual was sent out of the country. She had been working with

2800 the South African Council of Churches, which was very much on the Apartheid  
2801 Government's Enemies List. She and I traveled all over Wisconsin, and I think it was  
2802 one of the things that I learned out of this was how racially oriented the media of this  
2803 country is. This colleague of mine could say things and it would suddenly be the truth,  
2804 whereas I would've said the same thing a few minutes earlier and nobody would have  
2805 paid any attention. So we learned to play that, we learned to turn that into our advantage  
2806 and to utilize it in a way that we would take advantage of this predisposition towards the  
2807 truth only being truth if it came out of white lips as opposed to black lips. There were  
2808 others I traveled with through the course of the years. There was a wonderful man named  
2809 Chris Nteta, who was very involved in Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement in the  
2810 early seventies. Chris was a South African, a black South African minister, who was just  
2811 wonderful, wonderful speaker, and I think that one of the great, besides my personal  
2812 gains that came out of learning so much about the situation in South Africa being with  
2813 them, learning so much how to comport myself, I think the other great advantage to doing  
2814 this is that you, you learn a lot about working with people and doing work  
2815 collaboratively, and I think that that's the greatest way to learn. We taught each other so  
2816 much by being, working together, and doing talks and, and it's also much less lonely.

2817  
2818 EM: That you're not the only one out there beating the drum.

2819  
2820 PN: You're not the only one. You say to your colleague later, did you, did we really  
2821 hear that person say that? I mean, for instance, just walking out of places, it's not at all  
2822 unusual to have someone come up to you after you've done this impassioned discussion  
2823 about, let's say the hit squads that operated out of South Africa and killed people in the  
2824 late eighties and the late seventies and eighties, like Dolores September, who was the  
2825 African National Congress Representative in Paris and Switzerland, and she was  
2826 assassinated as she went into her office in Paris. You would talk about a subject like that  
2827 in an American small town audience, and you would have people just riveted. You  
2828 would have someone come up to you afterwards and say, Thank you. That was a great  
2829 talk you gave about Africa over there, about that situation in Africa. You've been sitting  
2830 there talking about the very specific situation of South Africa, but you had not penetrated  
2831 this curtain that's there that makes for them unable to see that in the kind of framework  
2832 that you've presented it, maybe not just that it's unable, it was just too hard to see it that  
2833 way.

2834  
2835 EM: That's a great analogy though, the curtain. It really is, and it continues.

2836  
2837 PN: It continues, I mean, we were doing things like for instance, relating what was  
2838 happening in South Africa to the activities that Jesse Helms did in North Carolina, which  
2839 was one of the most racist legislators in the history of this country. But Jesse Helms  
2840 frequent and regular visitor to the South African apartheid regime. He got briefings from  
2841 the South African government. He got money from the South African government. He  
2842 was a regular apologist for the South African regime. That's the kind of thing that  
2843 Americans have very great difficulty incorporating a perspective into their knowledge of  
2844 these things, that lets them then understand we are involved in this.

2845

2846 EM: With Helms too, and the contradictions that were discovered in his personal life  
2847 that, anyway did—  
2848  
2849 PN: With Helms, with also this other one from South Carolina, these contradictions  
2850 around, for example, their race and their relationships and the mixed children that they  
2851 illegitimately fathered—  
2852  
2853 EM: They then didn't recognize—  
2854  
2855 PN: They wouldn't recognize, but would finance, these—  
2856  
2857 EM: And that's the story of this country.  
2858  
2859 PN: That's the story of this country, too. It fits then, hand and glove, with the story in  
2860 South Africa.  
2861  
2862 EM: Interesting. So, well, tell us what brought you to Francis Parker then.  
2863  
2864 PN: It's a very interesting story. My father and mother were both teachers. They were  
2865 teachers in an era and in a period when teachers didn't make money (laughs). My father,  
2866 for example, did everything during the summers in order to supplement the pathetic  
2867 salaries they got. He drove a CTA bus. I remember one night my mother and my sister  
2868 and I getting all dressed up and we went to get on my father's bus going down Kedzie as  
2869 he was driving, my mother organized this. My father worked as a janitor for the CHA.  
2870 He worked in the Addams, Jane Addams housing projects over on Taylor Street, which  
2871 recently were torn down and now there's a museum being created out of that public  
2872 housing project. These, these activities were activities that helped my sister and I  
2873 appreciate very much our parents. Well, it was my father walking into the Chicago  
2874 Public School, Pope School on 19<sup>th</sup> and California, 19<sup>th</sup> and Albany on Chicago's West  
2875 Side and finding me teaching the reading class, that led to us going to Francis Parker. He  
2876 said to me, or so he later told me, he said, Prexy, why are you teaching the reading class?  
2877 I said, I always teach the reading class. The teacher goes and gets some coffee while I  
2878 teach the reading class. Well that, my father was not one to bite his tongue on anything,  
2879 went right from the classroom down to the Principal's office, and laced her out, entirely.  
2880 That night he came home, said to my mother, what's the name of that school that you've  
2881 been talking about up on the North Side? Put him in it. That was it. And my sister and I  
2882 then started commuting up to the Francis Parker School. It was then, not just a school  
2883 that cost \$22,000.00 a year. It was expensive. My mother's sisters, who had no children,  
2884 helped finance us going there. We got some scholarships, but not enough. And the cost  
2885 in those years was only about \$2000.00 a year, but \$2000.00 in 1950 was very different.  
2886 And what we found at Parker, and I don't know if that's still the case there, what we  
2887 found was a faculty that were very progressive people. Some of them, for example, that  
2888 were our teachers were active in the unionization of teachers all over the Midwest. We  
2889 were taught music as an integral part of the curriculum, and part of that we learned the  
2890 music of Paul Robeson. We learned the songs of Earl Robinson, who did this incredible  
2891 opera called "Ballad for Americans," and another one called "Sandhog," which was a



2892 story of Irish workers building that tunnels in New York City, like the Hudson Tunnel,  
2893 was it Hudson? It goes under Hudson, Lincoln Town, the whole construction, the story  
2894 of Danny Boy, that's his story. It was a general part of the curriculum that moved us to  
2895 identify with working people and to see that you had responsibilities to be engaged. Our  
2896 eighth grade teacher, a woman named Sarah Greenebaum, was this, one of the women  
2897 who founded the *Monthly Review* magazine, which you know, is an independent socialist  
2898 magazine. We read *Robinson Crusoe* teaching us about "the accumulation of capital."  
2899 We read Leo Braverman's *Monopoly Capital*. And so, when people have asked me,  
2900 Where does your analysis come from? Where does your perspective come from? I say, I  
2901 would say it's three sources: my family, Africa, and Francis Parker School. I'm not sure  
2902 that this is what Francis Parker likes to be known for today, but in any event that was  
2903 very much a part of the reality then and because of that, I then went back and served, my  
2904 mother was the first African American woman I think to ever be on the Board of Francis  
2905 Parker. I had another aunt who taught there. All and all, my mother always approached  
2906 all these things bringing a gang, a cohort, so she brought a group, groups of people.

2907  
2908 EM: Give us your mother's name again.

2909  
2910 PN: Sadie Nesbitt, Sadie Crain Nesbitt.

2911  
2912 EM: And she was on the Board, did she also teach there?

2913  
2914 PN: She was on the Board only.

2915  
2916 EM: Okay.

2917  
2918 PN: My aunt, Peggy Nesbitt, was on the Board, or taught there.

2919  
2920 EM: What did she teach?

2921  
2922 PN: She taught kindergarten, and she was, for example, I think she was a teacher of the  
2923 current principal who is there, Dan Frank.

2924  
2925 EM: Really?

2926  
2927 PN: That's right. So Nesbitt was, became kind of a, there were series of family names.  
2928 The Lewis family, the Holabird family, and the Nesbitt family was a third major name,  
2929 and it's ironic that I have a second cousin who is at five, now joining Francis Parker  
2930 School as a kindergartener.

2931  
2932 EM: So when you went there, when you returned in the nineties, what were the  
2933 circumstances and what did you do? What was your role?

2934  
2935 PN: I came back to kind of help stabilize Parker. It had become a bit known as sort of a  
2936 Wild West school. It was very free and free swinging curriculum. An educator named  
2937 Don Monroe wanted to bring it back to some of the kind of original philosophical,

2938 pedagogical roots that it had, and to help get it more involved with community and help  
2939 get it more honestly pursuing the kind of Dewey principles that Parker was founded on in  
2940 the first instance. You know, a school should be a model home, a complete community,  
2941 and embryonic democracy, those were the ideas, and also to bring much more diversity.  
2942 So I brought, was brought in to help create that plan and to help, also to bring a more  
2943 diverse community into the school as well as get the school more involved in the  
2944 community beyond Lincoln Park. There are still endeavors that are trying to do that. A  
2945 wonderful woman up there named Shanti Elliot is very, is a fulltime person who tries to  
2946 keep the school engaged in the city, and not just, and there is a real kind of effort to put  
2947 forward the idea that you have a responsibility to be involved. Now I think in the years  
2948 that I was there it was taken a step further, to say you have a responsibility to make  
2949 change, not just to be involved. So it was a natural bridge for me to go from Francis  
2950 Parker and then to Antioch College, alright. Then at Antioch College the mandate there  
2951 was that you go, you “be ashamed to die” unless you scored some great victory for  
2952 humanity, and Antioch is quite, impressive, as small as it was, it produced three or four  
2953 Nobel Prize winners, had more MacArthur Genius recipients than any, I never got one, I  
2954 wanted one, but I never got one (laughs). It went to becoming, and I think we paid the  
2955 price for that, it was on the FBI’s list as one of the most infiltrated schools, and we had to  
2956 deal with those kind of realities. But I think that the general principles was one that, and  
2957 in fact, we saw it playing itself out in these recent elections of Obama, and that was the  
2958 notion that you, you could make change.

2959  
2960 EM: And so, can you tell us about any, like an example of an initiative when you  
2961 returned to Parker at the invitation of Don Monroe, or—

2962  
2963 PN: At the invitation of Don Monroe.

2964  
2965 EM: Okay, and what was your interaction with the students or, you know, what did you  
2966 focus on, or what did you want to bring back to Parker?

2967  
2968 PN: Well I focused on brining, first diversity, more diversity to Parker. There certainly  
2969 is a number of students of color, all kinds, who would be prepared to testify that Mr.  
2970 Nesbitt was my dean, and my teacher, he kept my head going to the grindstone (laughter).

2971  
2972 EM: So you were a dean, and you were a teacher?

2973  
2974 PN: I was a dean, I was a teacher.

2975  
2976 EM: And what did you teach?

2977  
2978 PN: I taught history, I taught African history, I taught Third World History. I taught a  
2979 course called *Twenty-One Shots*, which was a course about the criminal, I call it the  
2980 course on the criminal *injustice* system. Since such a large percentage of Parker  
2981 graduates ultimately end up in law school, what I wanted to do was to expose them very  
2982 early to the injustices around the so called correctional system in the city of Chicago. So  
2983 we did this course around that. It was continued for many years after I left Parker. I left

2984 to go and work and now, I'm not quite sure of this whether I started out in MacArthur  
2985 Foundation or and went to Parker, or left Parker and went to the MacArthur Foundation.  
2986 I think it's the former, that I started at MacArthur Foundation and went to Parker.

2987  
2988 EM: Oh we didn't talk about that. Okay, so why don't we—

2989  
2990 PN: Let me just talk a little bit.

2991  
2992 EM: Absolutely.

2993  
2994 PN: There's a complete segue between Parker and the MacArthur Foundation.

2995  
2996 EM: Okay.

2997  
2998 PN: Here's one reason, was that the President of the MacArthur Foundation, when I  
2999 worked there, was Adele Simmons. Adele, herself, at some stage in her life had attended  
3000 Francis Parker, and had very strong family links to Parker. In fact, some of her children  
3001 were at Parker and I was the Dean for one of her children while that child was there at  
3002 Parker School. So, there was, there's a very strong linkage between Parker and, and, and  
3003 the MacArthur Foundation. I think that, if I look back and recall correctly, there were a  
3004 number of projects that I was involved in that utilized Parker's philosophical commitment  
3005 to being involved with issues. One of them that is the one that I'm probably most proud  
3006 of about my accomplishments at the MacArthur Foundation, was my decision to support  
3007 a woman and her project, which was an effort to ban landmines from the world, to get  
3008 landmines as a weapon banned in the world. Well I knew a bit about landmines because I  
3009 had worked in Mozambique, and I had seen the results of landmines and what they could  
3010 do, particularly to children. And so, this woman came to me looking for funding. I think  
3011 that MacArthur Foundation was either the first or the second major foundation to fund  
3012 this campaign to ban landmines. Ultimately, the campaign and the woman who initiated  
3013 this, Jody Williams, both received Nobel Peace Prizes. So, there was some pride that I  
3014 can have that I fought for this. I was the Program Officer, I was the one who worked it  
3015 through, I was the one who talked different people in the foundation into supporting this  
3016 initiative.

3017  
3018 EM: That's pretty significant.

3019  
3020 PN: It is pretty significant. It is pretty significant. And it was pretty nice, it was  
3021 something to be very proud of. I remember a wonderful note that Adele Simmons wrote  
3022 me. I think I had left the Foundation by then and must have been at Parker, but I got a  
3023 note from Adele when Jody Williams was given the Nobel Peace Prize. she said, See,  
3024 see what your work did?

3025  
3026 EM: Pat yourself (laughter). So you were, as a Program Officer, part of that was  
3027 identifying who would be the recipients and kind of championing individuals that you  
3028 thought would be worthy of the, recipients of—

3029

3030 PN: The Genius Grants?  
3031  
3032 EM: Yeah.  
3033  
3034 PN: No, that was a special division, but the funding for other projects.  
3035  
3036 EM: Yeah, 'cause MacArthur gives—  
3037  
3038 PN: It has a whole slate of other grants that it makes. When I was there, and I was in the  
3039 program on international, on peace and international cooperation, which was led by a  
3040 woman named Kennette Benedict, I was there for five years I think, or four I can't  
3041 remember. We did a lot of very important grant making.  
3042  
3043 EM: And how did you, what was your entry into the MacArthur Foundation?  
3044  
3045 PN: Well, I think that one of the things that people might be intrigued to know a little bit  
3046 about me was that the work I had done at the World Council of Churches of course, was  
3047 at a specific program called the Programme to Combat Racism. And that work, that work  
3048 involved grant making. It involved us giving grants to liberation movements, so I had  
3049 had previous experience in being a grant staff for programs that made grants to people.  
3050 And so that, I think, was very attractive to the MacArthur Foundation. Now the other  
3051 piece, as it turned out, wasn't that significant, but I had hoped it would be, was that I had  
3052 had this experience and knew Africa so well. But in fact, MacArthur didn't have the  
3053 involvement with Africa that I would, like say, the Ford Foundation did, or Kellogg  
3054 Foundation, or Mott Foundation, simply didn't, to this day it hasn't had the same levels  
3055 and profiles of grant making in Africa and around African issues. But then I stepped into  
3056 another hat, which was to simply then also get very involved as I have been with grant  
3057 making going to change situations in this country. And to general peace issues, too, you  
3058 know, to the old issue, for example of disarmament, to the issue of truth and justice  
3059 commissions, so that I was very involved with a woman named Priscilla Hayner who did  
3060 tremendous work comparing Truth Commissions all over the world. Of course, South  
3061 Africa had had a Truth Commission. And I was very, I had been involved in that  
3062 initiative as well because the Minister of Justice who conceived of the Truth  
3063 Commission, Dullah Omar, who has since passed on, had actually had a series of  
3064 meetings with me and had wanted me to be employed to raise money in the United States  
3065 for reparations to help right the wrongs that had been done to people. That was to be a  
3066 part of the Truth Commission Process in South Africa. That was never to be, that didn't  
3067 happen.  
3068  
3069 EM: And you said, I think you said that this work continues, that you continue to work  
3070 on this to this point, or—  
3071  
3072 PN: The work with MacArthur?  
3073  
3074 EM: Not with MacArthur, but with funding and grants on these different issues, or—  
3075

3076 PN: Well I'm not with an entity that does that anymore. I mean, occasionally I get called  
3077 in to testify and to help people. Certainly I know quite well how to advise people, for  
3078 obvious reasons.

3079  
3080 EM: And do these organizations, are they thriving, or has that kind of dwindled?

3081  
3082 PN: Some of them are thriving, some are still existing. The Campaign to Ban  
3083 Landmines got the support of every country in the world except China, Soviet Union, and  
3084 the United States. So, there is still work that one might do, you know, we sell more arms  
3085 than any other country in the world, we being the United States. But I think that, I think  
3086 that there were achievements despite the big failings. There were achievements that were  
3087 made in all of this.

3088  
3089 EM: Okay, I want to ask you about Mandela's release, but before that let's, let's get  
3090 through just some, a little bit of the things we talked about that we want again, on the  
3091 record. The liberation movements that you supported in South Africa, can you name  
3092 those?

3093  
3094 PN: Yes, there were, there are essentially six liberation movements that from years of  
3095 involvement with Southern Africa, and from systematically studying these questions, I  
3096 became very involved with and decided that I would put my energies into helping support  
3097 them. The African National Congress of South Africa [ANC], the Mozambique  
3098 Liberation Front [FRELIMO] in Mozambique, the Popular Movement for the Liberation  
3099 of Angola [MPLA] in Angola, the Zimbabwe African People's Union [ZAPU], and then  
3100 later, the Zimbabwe African national Union [ZANU] as well in Zimbabwe, the Southwest  
3101 African People's Organization [SWAPO], and then in Guinea Bissau, the African Party  
3102 for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde [PAIGC]. Now I never really became as  
3103 involved with the struggle in Guinea Bissau, which was located in West Africa, as I did  
3104 in those other, earlier five. I never visited Guinea Bissau, and I was very close and  
3105 deeply influenced by its leader, Amilcar Cabral, who was assassinated in '73, in January  
3106 of '73. The reason that I decided to support these liberation movements was because in  
3107 my view they had a perspective and a set of objectives that were consistent with the  
3108 creating of a world in which race would no longer be the dominant force that it is even  
3109 today, though there's so much assertion that we're in this post-racial period in the United  
3110 States, and the world. The vision of those liberation movements that I supported was one  
3111 that I could believe in, and that was about creating just and equitable participatory  
3112 societies. It was about changing the status of women. It was about never seeing as the  
3113 enemy people based on race, it was seeing systems as the enemy. These were values, that  
3114 in my belief, were values that I could really adhere to and believe in. Many people, I'm  
3115 not quite in that group, are very discouraged with what has developed in these years in  
3116 some of those countries. Many are discouraged with practices that some of those  
3117 liberation movements did. I think that, I think that I'd have to be less, I would not have, I  
3118 think that the experiences that I've had in other related areas of work have made me more  
3119 able to keep the values and the aspirations and the perspective of the achievable and the  
3120 unachievable, to give me a perspective too that said many of these goals that these  
3121 liberation movements wanted to achieve couldn't be achieved because the dominant,

3122 world super power has to change. Years and years ago Cabral said to both of us, he said,  
3123 this is this wonderful man who was assassinated from Guinea Bissau, he said, this was in  
3124 a meeting in Harlem with him, he said, The highest form of solidarity you can give us is  
3125 to change the conditions and circumstances of the United States. And I think it's truer  
3126 now than it's ever been before. That is to say, that the United States sets the pace, sets  
3127 the framework, shapes the framework, for so much of world affairs and of human  
3128 interactions that it's only going to be when there is real change that is happening in the  
3129 United States, that there is possibilities for change in other parts of the world. I watched,  
3130 for example, as systematically, really systematically the United States helped to destroy  
3131 the dreams that were being shaped in Mozambique. Now, Mozambique made mistakes.  
3132 The leadership of Mozambique made many mistakes. But the other thing they were up  
3133 against was a global framework that the United States didn't want to see, the kind of  
3134 values that a Mozambique was talking about. Many people would cast this as  
3135 Communist versus Capitalist, but it was much deeper than that. It's much, much deeper  
3136 than that. It has much more to do with human activities, not just words and labels and  
3137 terms and beliefs and ideologies, it has to do with human activities. For example, in all  
3138 those Southern African countries today, there's an atmosphere of greater receptivity and  
3139 warmth and hospitalities in Mozambique than there is in most of those other countries,  
3140 despite the linguistic barrier, that most people speak Portuguese, despite that, and I think  
3141 it's not accidentally, it's rooted in the historical experiences that the Mozambican people  
3142 are going through. It's rooted in the kinds of values that FRELIMO tried to instill with  
3143 people, and, and that's something I can still very much believe in. And that's what led to  
3144 me deciding that these were the liberation movements that I wanted to support. You  
3145 know, as I've said before in this, I was prepared to go and fight, physically, to end  
3146 Portuguese Colonialism. It was not an intellectual engagement for me, it was something I  
3147 believed in very, very deeply. And it was something that I think is very important to this  
3148 day in this country, is the fight to create and move beyond race.

3149  
3150 EM: I'm going to take a moment to switch tapes at that point. I want to make sure that  
3151 you might not have another thought.

3152  
3153 *pause in recording*

3154  
3155 PN: Of course, what is his name?

3156  
3157 EM: If you said it I would recognize it, but I can't remember.

3158  
3159 PN: He's done another doc, that was a good one too. He's kind of on a role.

3160  
3161 EM: Wow, that's cool.

3162  
3163 PN: Yeah, he's a cool guy.

3164  
3165 EM: That's good, I mean, it was interesting, and it seems, one of the things that was  
3166 brought up in the interview that the movie, or the documentary includes things that don't  
3167 necessarily show Rev Michael Pflieger in the most flattering of lights, but tries to give the

3168 complexity and broader picture, which was interesting, and apparently Pflieger said, I  
3169 think said he had seen it and said, you know, it is what it is, and wasn't upset about the  
3170 inclusion of lots of different material in other words.

3171  
3172 PN: I got to see it.

3173  
3174 EM: Yeah, yeah. So now I want to ask you about, oh, before that, anything, or what  
3175 comes to mind when I ask about conflicts or tensions amongst the pretty specifically the  
3176 anti-apartheid activist, we'll focus on that, 'cause I'm sure you know, that your  
3177 experience—

3178  
3179 PN: (laughter) Conflict of interest all over! Amongst the anti-apartheid activist, we're  
3180 rolling now?

3181  
3182 EM: We're rolling, yes.

3183  
3184 PN: I think that probably, I mean, let me, let me put this simply clear. In the period from  
3185 1971 or '72 until about 1994, '95, with the final kind of dissolution, dissolving of the last  
3186 anti-apartheid movement, one of the biggest challenges in the anti-apartheid had was to  
3187 get beyond race.

3188  
3189 EM: Within itself?

3190  
3191 PN: In itself, within itself. There was a period from '72 to about '80, well maybe even  
3192 '85 when there were two anti-apartheid movements here in Chicago. There was the  
3193 Chicago Committee for the Liberation of Angola, Mozambique, New Guinea, which than  
3194 also in '83 becomes CIDsA, the Coalition for Illinois Divestment from South Africa and  
3195 coinciding with the Chicago Committee for the Liberation of Mozambique, New Guinea  
3196 was the African American Solidarity Committee, which was a South Side, more Left,  
3197 political formation, that I belonged to both. I was the only one who belonged to both.

3198  
3199 EM: Interesting.

3200  
3201 PN: The Chicago Committee for the Liberation of Angola, Mozambique, New Guinea  
3202 was North Side based. The African Liberation Solidarity Committee which was founded  
3203 incidentally, by Lisa Brock's husband, was predominantly black and on the South side. I  
3204 can remember instance after instance of bringing South African visitors to both meetings,  
3205 you know. We would have one meeting on a Friday evening, at Northwestern let's say,  
3206 it'd be sponsored by the North Side group.

3207  
3208 EM: And they were largely white, or mixed, or—

3209  
3210 PN: The one on the North Side was predominately white.

3211  
3212 EM: Okay.

3213

3214 PN: I was at, certainly in the beginning years, I was the only black person in it. Later, I  
3215 think there were other, one or two other black people who were in it. The one on the  
3216 South Side had no white people. It had, they had about the same number of members,  
3217 both were small. And I used to say this is so stupid, because they could have been more  
3218 of a combined force, but arguing against this was people who said, but we have to have,  
3219 to work with the realities that we live in, and the reality of the segregation of the city of  
3220 Chicago means that we cannot function as a multiracial organization.

3221

3222 EM: Because, you could make the argument as well if we're working on the realities of  
3223 the situation we live in that we got to work with the white guys? (laughter)

3224

3225 PN: Absolutely.

3226

3227 EM: It's interesting that that could be argued both—

3228

3229 PN: I think that through time the group that ultimately prevails is a multiracial formation,  
3230 and that is the Chicago Committee, CIDsA, the Chicago Coalition for Illinois Divestment  
3231 from South Africa, which then becomes CCISSA, the Chicago Committee in Solidarity in  
3232 South Africa, C-C-I-S-S-A. And both those formations, CIDsA and CCISSA are  
3233 multiracial, but with black leadership. The stipulation was that there would have to be  
3234 black leadership, and although there were times that probably the majority of the  
3235 membership, anywhere from fifteen to twenty, twenty to twenty-five was white, the  
3236 leadership was all black, and at least two of the leaders are affiliated, three of the leaders  
3237 now are affiliated with Columbia today. Cheryl Johnson Odim—

3238

3239 EM: Okay, the former Dean of LAS, Liberal Arts and Sciences—

3240

3241 PN: Chair of LAS.

3242

3243 EM: Who is now Provost at Dominican?

3244

3245 PN: Dominican University. Myself, I was the founder of both of these things, and then  
3246 Basil Clunie, who's coming to teach here, became chair of these organizations after me.

3247

3248 EM: Oh.

3249

3250 PN: He was the last person to be the Chair of the Coalition for Illinois Divestment from  
3251 South Africa.

3252

3253 EM: Okay.

3254

3255 PN: And the other interesting thing is that both, two of the three people are not  
3256 Chicagoans, and one at least is a West Indian. And I think one of the things I took out of  
3257 this is, Chicagoans are some provincial folk. (laughter)

3258

3259 EM: They got stuff in common!



3260

3261 PN: They got stuff in common, that's right. The black folk and the white folk from  
3262 Chicago, both have grown up in these flat lands of this city where there are no hills, you  
3263 know, except maybe the Sears Tower, and the visioning and the imagining of, of a  
3264 society without race is a very difficult challenge, and so, all kinds of realities had to  
3265 constantly be played against the race card. The race question, where we met, where we  
3266 had events, we, we had to identify those places in Chicago where you could have black  
3267 and white people come and both groups feel comfortable. And then later when we tried  
3268 to reach also to the Latino community, we had to find places where you also could also  
3269 have, so, I was just reading something the other day, some old document, where in the  
3270 course of one day we had a meeting first in a black community, and then the same  
3271 meeting in the white community. The same exact meeting subject was held in both  
3272 communities on the same day, the speakers—

3273

3274 EM: For what group?

3275

3276 PN: I think that was the Chicago Committee in Solidarity with Southern Africa, I think  
3277 that's what it was for. But it's a very serious and sober question, because I think that in  
3278 reaction to this segregation that we find here in this city, and the polarization, there is a  
3279 defensive posture that black people take that is about not wanting anything to do with  
3280 white folks, and they'll do it if the whites ain't involved. So, one of the things that I  
3281 experienced was the difficulty of being a person who could move between these two  
3282 worlds.

3283

3284 EM: And also thought that that was the better, or stronger way to go, or felt like it was  
3285 the only choice that you had.

3286

3287 PN: I fundamentally didn't believe, I didn't believe in this, but had to do it, because I  
3288 believe, Southern Africans that would come, who were my friends—

3289

3290 EM: What'd they think?

3291

3292 PN: They'd just, they thought it was so sad, so pathetic, but it was so reflective about a  
3293 particular set of realities about America.

3294

3295 EM: Very interesting, very interesting. Alright, well now I want to ask you about  
3296 Nelson Mandela's release, and that chapter.

3297

3298 PN: What a tremendous and joyous moment.

3299

3300 EM: And that's 1994?

3301

3302 PN: Nineteen ninety.

3303

3304 EM: Nineteen ninety, sorry, 1990.

3305

3306 PN: February of 1990. I was invited up to speak, I'll never forget this point, I was  
3307 invited up to speak in Madison, Wisconsin, and I went on WORT, W-O-R-T's station, it's  
3308 a Pacifica Station in Madison, and I was on the show that had been arranged by a woman  
3309 named Gretchen Bauer, who was a PhD candidate, an African Political Science focus on  
3310 Namibia, and she now teaches at the University of Delaware. We were at the radio  
3311 station, and on the air, when somebody phoned in and said Mandela had been released  
3312 (laughter). I was in shock, I was just in shock. I think if I can recall correctly—  
3313  
3314 EM: So you didn't know, you didn't have any idea, you didn't know it was forthcoming?  
3315  
3316 PN: No, I had no idea that he was going to be released. I knew, there was in the air, a  
3317 sort of ramblings, no, not ramblings, talk, loose talk that something big was happening.  
3318 And we were worried that it was going to be bad, bad—  
3319  
3320 EM: Like a crack down, or a backlash, or—  
3321  
3322 PN: Or like somebody had sold out.  
3323  
3324 EM: Oh, okay.  
3325  
3326 PN: But when it happened, it was this incredible moment. I then called people in  
3327 Europe, and called—  
3328  
3329 EM: Who did you call first?  
3330  
3331 PN: I think I called a man named Baldwin Sjollega who worked with the World Council  
3332 of Churches.  
3333  
3334 EM: And why, why—  
3335  
3336 PN: Because I wanted more information.  
3337  
3338 EM: Okay.  
3339  
3340 PN: I knew that he would have that.  
3341  
3342 EM: Okay.  
3343  
3344 PN: And then I called—  
3345  
3346 EM: What did he tell you?  
3347  
3348 PN: He told me that it was true, that the release was going to happen imminently. And  
3349 then I called a friend of mine in Cape Town, because when Mandela was released the  
3350 first place he went was to give an address to people from the Cathedral in downtown  
3351 Cape Town. This friend of mine worked as an Episcopal priest, an Anglican priest, so he

3352 was able to tell me, and he told me some of the inside story of what was happening, what  
3353 they were concerned about, and—

3354

3355 EM: What was some of that information, if you can?

3356

3357 PN: Well, one of them was a concern that people understood that Mandela's release was  
3358 not going to be the end of the process, but the beginning of the process. And so people,  
3359 there was a great desire, to have Madiba speak. Now you got to remember, there is still a  
3360 lot of violence going on. So the other big concern people had was protecting Mandela.  
3361 And then, there was the other big concern of getting the meetings underway to have  
3362 Mandela meet with the rest of the leadership.

3363

3364 EM: Of the—

3365

3366 PN: Of the ANC.

3367

3368 EM: Of the ANC, okay.

3369

3370 PN: Now remember that the ANC, at this point, is still spread out all over. Part of it's in  
3371 London, part of it's in Lusaka Zambia, part of it's in Angola, part of it's in Dar es  
3372 Salaam, and part of it is in South Africa, and part of those in South Africa are also  
3373 underground. They're ANC, but they're underground, so it's not a small beat.

3374

3375 EM: Because it's still, even though he's being released, it's still illegal to be—

3376

3377 PN: No.

3378

3379 EM: No?

3380

3381 PN: They had been unbanned.

3382

3383 EM: Oh they had been.

3384

3385 PN: They had been unbanned. But, there was still the vigilantes who were around, there  
3386 were still these uncontrolled forces of racism and reaction, and not the least of which was  
3387 Gatsha Buthelezi and his Inkatha Freedom Party [IFP]. Later, this would lead to this  
3388 tremendous violence that's unleashed between '90 and his release and '94 and '95, after  
3389 the elections. There were 17,000 people, something like that, that died in that violence.

3390

3391 EM: Between '90 and '94, wow.

3392

3393 PN: I think it's 17,000, that could be checked on, but it's a lot of people, a lot of  
3394 violence.

3395

3396 EM: And blacks?

3397

3398 PN: Most of those are, overwhelmingly, ninety-eight percent are black people who were  
3399 killed.

3400  
3401 EM: Wow.

3402  
3403 PN: Overwhelmingly also, most of them are the people from ANC or ANC sympathetic  
3404 organizations like the United Democratic Front [UDF]. The U.S. press depicts most of  
3405 this as black on black on violence. This is where our colleague Lisa has written a  
3406 brilliant piece that smokes that out and lays out how a lot of it was also the operations of  
3407 paramilitary types and the state itself that sponsored a lot of it, including the DeKlerk ,  
3408 you know, and you have in this period having DeKlerk tell this lie to Mandela in one of  
3409 the most incredible political moments of the twentieth century, Mandela stands up in  
3410 front of the whole negotiating intent to process and said, *You lied to me*. It was just this  
3411 incredible moment. I wasn't there, but I heard it and it's very much available. Then, you  
3412 have all kinds of killings taking place that just are vicious, people being machine gunned  
3413 to death.

3414  
3415 EM: What is happening in the United States? What are you, what is going on with U.S.  
3416 relationships between '90 and '94?

3417  
3418 PN: Several things happened. One is Mandela makes his trip.

3419  
3420 EM: And what year is it?

3421  
3422 PN: That's 1990, late '90. He makes the *Thank You* trip. It's the same trip where he  
3423 first had gone to the front line states, Zambia, Tanzania, Angola, to thank these countries.  
3424 You'll also have Namibia get it's independence that was during that moment. So one of  
3425 the things was that I was invited to Namibia's Independence as a guest, and I remember  
3426 being there. I couldn't find any word to stay, it was just packed out. I couldn't find  
3427 anywhere, so I slept for three nights on a chair in the Kalahari Sands Hotel, Namibia's  
3428 biggest hotel. That was where—

3429  
3430 EM: That was your address.

3431  
3432 PN: That was the only place. There were a lot of people that would just be—

3433  
3434 EM: So they invited you but said we don't have any place for you to stay?

3435  
3436 PN: Nowhere to stay, and I had no money, you know, most of, despite what the South  
3437 African apartheid government believed, most of us who did this work, we had nothing,  
3438 we had no money. They believed that we had these huge bank accounts and bankroll.  
3439 We had nothing most of the time. So I arrived in Windhoek with nothing pretty much,  
3440 and stayed on this chair for three nights, but I was privileged to be at one of the most  
3441 extraordinary moments probably of my whole career, which was the night that the flag  
3442 raised for the Independence of Namibia, and I just, just was teary-eyed, goose bumps all  
3443 over me. The interesting thing of that night, too, was when the President of Namibia, of

3444 Southwest Africa People's Organization [SWAPO], Sam Nujoma, was introduced, the  
3445 crowd in the stadium arose with this incredible bellow of sound. But when Mandela was  
3446 brought up into the stadium a few minutes later, they went bananas, they just went  
3447 berserk. And that was, I think, one of the first indications that I had of the power, the  
3448 power and the appeal, love that existed around this man Mandela. I had seen this with  
3449 other leaders, I'd seen it with Rev. King, or I'd seen it with Samora Machel, I'd seen it  
3450 with meetings in which Samora would be there, people would just go nuts when he  
3451 opened his mouth. He had an ability to, Jesse Jackson had a little of it, but nothing,  
3452 nothing like Samora. And Mandela doesn't have that charisma that Samora had, it's  
3453 more of a—

3454  
3455 EM: Does, in a different context, is there a comparison to say like Muhammad Ali?  
3456

3457 PN: Yes, very, very much.  
3458

3459 EM: Okay. It's amazing when he, of course I've never witnessed it in person, I've seen  
3460 it on film and heard other people.  
3461

3462 PN: I was in Cape Town once, in Cape Town when Muhammad made his first visit to  
3463 Cape Town. This was about 1996, '97, it was before his condition had really gotten bad.  
3464 I was in a part of Cape Town that was very bad, it was notorious for how much violence  
3465 that was there. I was driving and suddenly I noticed all these people running and  
3466 running, people running out of shops, people running down the streets. Everybody was  
3467 running, I stopped and asked the people. Well, Muhammad Ali is here! So I ran with  
3468 them, and we ran and ran. There he was just walking down the streets, excuse me, of  
3469 Cape Town being followed by thousands of people, just thousands of people up and  
3470 down the street, and he was just totally at home in this. He said, My people, is what he  
3471 was interviewed to say. That was, these kinds of leaders are remarkable leaders.  
3472

3473 EM: When Mandela makes his tour of the United States then, where do you go, because  
3474 he doesn't come to Chicago.  
3475

3476 PN: (laughs)  
3477

3478 EM: Where, where, I mean, what's going on with that?  
3479

3480 PN: What a story, talking about tensions and conflict. When Mandela comes to the  
3481 United States there is a committee set up to receive him. The committee was headed, and  
3482 this was pretty much spirited by Randall Robinson, who was the head of TransAfrica,  
3483 black, the largest black, by that time, the largest black lobbying organization on South  
3484 Africa. I got put on the committee, I got put on the committee.  
3485

3486 EM: Wait a second, I'm sorry. I just heard the—  
3487

3488 PN: I heard something.  
3489

3490 EM: Yeah, that's the other recorder so I have to get a new one of that.

3491

3492 *pause in recording*

3493

3494 EM: It's 2009 and the interview, continuing interview with Prexy Nesbitt, we're at  
3495 Columbia College Chicago, and again, Prexy, we left off with Mandela's release, and  
3496 maybe if you could speak to the significance and the impact of that on the movement.

3497

3498 PN: Of course, Mandela's release was preceded by other very prominent releases of  
3499 members of the African National Congress, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmad  
3500 Kathrada, to name just a few. But, probably even more importantly was preceded by the  
3501 unbanning of the African National Congress, the South African Congress party, the Pan  
3502 African Congress, I think SACTU, the South African Congress or Trade Unions, and all  
3503 of these organizations were, were made legal to operate in South Africa. And so  
3504 thousands of people who had been exiled were then able to come back to South Africa.  
3505 What this ushered in was an era of politics that would go on almost to the present day,  
3506 which is around the question of those people who were outside the country and those  
3507 people who were inside the country throughout the years of the struggle. The exile  
3508 community made up largely of people in the African National Congress and the South  
3509 African Communist Party was, that exile community was, many of them had not been as  
3510 in touch with the situation inside the country as organizations like, for example, the  
3511 United Democratic Front. Now, spanning all of these different formations, the exile  
3512 politics, the international community, and those inside the country is the giant footstep of  
3513 Mandela. There are a few other people who had tremendous followings, too, but nobody  
3514 can match Mandela for his capacity to span these movements. In 1990, I think about  
3515 June, maybe May, Mandela made a decision to come and thank people all over the world  
3516 who had helped the struggle of the people of South Africa. In one of the first trips he  
3517 made was to the neighboring countries around Africa: Tanzania, Zambia, Angola. A  
3518 second trip he made was to Scandinavia, to Sweden, which had given tremendous support  
3519 throughout this time. Another trip was to England, and I think as part of the trip to  
3520 England, although I could possibly have been separated, he made a trip to the United  
3521 States, which I'll come back to. But tied to the trip to the United States was another trip  
3522 that he made to Cuba, which was a very, very important trip because it is important that,  
3523 and if I haven't learned anything else from all my years of involvement, I think that the  
3524 critical role played by Cuba is never emphasized enough in this country. Had it not been  
3525 for Cuba's defense of Angola and the battles that raged between the Cuban forces  
3526 working hand in hand with the MPLA, the popular movement of Angola, working with  
3527 the Armed Forces of Angola [FAPLA], and working with them as well were members of  
3528 Umkhonto we Sizwe 'Spear of the Nation' [MK] of South Africa, if those struggles had  
3529 not been as successful as they were in both defending Angola against apartheid  
3530 aggression, and also shattering the myth of the invincibility of the Apartheid Army, if  
3531 those struggles had not gone as they did, the whole unfolding of history would have been  
3532 totally different, totally different. When Mandela therefore came to the United States, he  
3533 knew, he knew that he was also going to make a trip to Cuba. That second trip very  
3534 much impacted his itinerary in the United States. When it was announced, I remember  
3535 being invited immediately by Randall Robinson and some other people on the East Coast

3536 to join a committee that was set up to do two things: one, was to host a visit by Nelson  
3537 Mandela to the United States, and his entourage, because he would come with an  
3538 entourage, including Winnie, his then wife. The second thing was to do, was to raise  
3539 money for the African National Congress, because the ANC needed money for the next  
3540 stage of its struggle, which would include the negotiations leading ultimately to elections.  
3541 It was decided that, this committee was put together representing various people, most of  
3542 them celebrity people or very famous people, Harry Belafonte, for example.

3543

3544 EM: Who, I'm sorry to interrupt, who was Randall Robinson?

3545

3546 PN: He was the head of TransAfrica Forum, and I think he was as much contacted as  
3547 anybody else precisely because of the successfulness and the high visibility of the tactics  
3548 he had used during 1986 that was used toward the passage of the US 1986  
3549 Comprehensive Sanctions Act, the occupation of the South African Embassy, that led  
3550 then in turn to a series of major demonstrations in South African embassies all over the  
3551 United States, which spawned what was called the Free South Africa movement. And the  
3552 Free South African movement was largely a black led movement at the helm of which  
3553 was Randall Robinson and TransAfrica, hence, TransAfrica was asked to host the visit of  
3554 Nelson Mandela. TransAfrica put together, as I mentioned, this broad committee of  
3555 people to host this. So people from the Mayor's office, Dinkin's office in New York,  
3556 there were people from Los Angeles and the Hollywood community, there were people  
3557 from Washington, there were people from Boston, there were people from, I was there  
3558 from Chicago and was there in the initial meetings, but Chicago was not exactly included  
3559 from the beginning because of the fact that many people did not know how the Mayor of  
3560 Chicago would react to doing this. They knew they would get a completely open and  
3561 embracing welcome in all these other cities, but they weren't sure what they would get in  
3562 Chicago. So, in the end—

3563

3564 EM: By Daley?

3565

3566 PN: By Daley. So in the end, there was never a visit to Chicago, and instead what we  
3567 had to do here in Chicago was to organize people to go to Detroit, which we did do. As it  
3568 turned out, really, there were other places they should have been as worried about. One  
3569 of which was Miami, for example. When the word came out to that community that  
3570 Mandela was next after the United States going to go to Cuba, there were just vehement.

3571

3572 EM: That Mandela was going to go to Cuba?

3573

3574 PN: That Mandela was going to go to Cuba. There were vehement demonstrations  
3575 against Mandela.

3576

3577 EM: Because of the Cuban population there that was anti-Castro?

3578

3579 PN: The Cuban population that's so anti-Castro. The other force, and we go back to  
3580 something we've discussed before, that was very much engaged in hosting, probably as  
3581 much as TransAfrica formed, was the AFL-CIO, but particularly a union called

3582 AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and also  
3583 the pan-union black organization of trade unionists, the Coalition of Black Trade  
3584 Unionists [CBTU]. So, for example, with regard to Mandela's visit to Florida, AFSCME  
3585 guaranteed his security. AFSCME put together an extraordinary 2- to 3,000 man force of  
3586 trade unionists.

3587

3588 EM: Why did he want to go to Miami so much?

3589

3590 PN: It was—

3591

3592 EM: Why was that part of the tour?

3593

3594 PN: It was to get a, to speak to those people in Miami who had been part of the  
3595 mobilization of the, against the apartheid.

3596

3597 EM: So the labor—

3598

3599 PN: The labor, so additionally, if I recall correctly, AFSCME was having it's convention  
3600 in Miami at the time, so that was another major reason for the Miami trip. So in the end  
3601 the trip went from Boston, from New York to Boston, Boston to Miami, Miami to Las  
3602 Angeles, Las Angeles to Oakland, and then Oakland to Detroit, and I think Detroit was  
3603 the last stop before he went back to either New York or Boston and then returning to  
3604 South Africa, back to the African continent.

3605

3606 EM: And were you in Detroit?

3607

3608 PN: I was in Detroit.

3609

3610 EM: Okay, spend a little time telling us about organizing the Chicagoans to get to  
3611 Detroit, and what Detroit, what unfolded there.

3612

3613 PN: Okay, I was not, I was in Detroit, I was also in New York, I was also in Oakland.

3614

3615 EM: Okay.

3616

3617 PN: So I had multiple hats that I wore for that, no I didn't make it to Oakland, I was  
3618 supposed to make it. I missed the flight to get to Oakland, but I did definitely get to  
3619 Detroit and to New York. The Chicago group was really, first of all there was, we  
3620 expected, maybe we'd get six or seven buses of people. It ended up being somewhere  
3621 like thirty, forty buses of people going from Chicago to Detroit to hear Mandela at the  
3622 Tiger Stadium in Detroit. It was a very rapid trip, we went, we came right back after  
3623 Mandela. It was a tremendous reception that was there. It was a very mixed group that  
3624 went from Chicago, and it was a good time that was had by all. It was a, it was very  
3625 embracing, and Mandela was very aware that Chicago had come to Detroit, as it were, to  
3626 join the Detroiters in celebrating this man. And I think that's about what I could say. I  
3627 think there are other things about this trip that are very significant. One of the most



3628 significant moments of the whole trip, I think forever, there are two significant ones.  
3629 One, is that in Oakland Mandela was approached by a group of Native Americans who  
3630 asked Mandela to speak to the issue of Native Americans and the situation of Native  
3631 Americans in the United States. And Mandela did that. They wrote him a letter. He  
3632 obviously had read the letter, and despite his aides saying to him he should not really get  
3633 into the domestic politics of the United States, and despite the fact that he didn't talk  
3634 about the situation of African Americans in that trip in general, though he was asked  
3635 repeatedly, he did speak to the issue of Native Americans and it just, it just totally wowed  
3636 that community, some of whom had come from as far away as Oklahoma to join there in  
3637 Oakland, California with Mandela, to welcome Mandela in Oakland. And so when he  
3638 made the statement of solidarity, there was just open crying all over by Native Americans  
3639 in that delegation that he had made that statement. A second statement was his, a second  
3640 moment is I think this incredibly moment on "Nightline", the Ted Koppel show.  
3641 "Nightline" had done a great deal at one period of time, I would say from roughly '84 to  
3642 about '85, did tremendous coverage of the situation in South Africa, including Ted  
3643 Koppel going there and visiting at great length with Winnie Mandela. It, it became, it  
3644 was an important source of making visible—

3645  
3646 EM: Right, because this was prior to Mandela's release.

3647  
3648 PN: That's right. And I think that part of Mandela's appearing in Ted Koppel's show  
3649 was about thanking Ted Koppel for coming. At the same time Ted Koppel was anxious  
3650 in a way that only the American media can be, to display his, I think it's almost like  
3651 responsibility to expose the Communist question about the ANC. And so, Koppel seized  
3652 upon the upcoming visit to Cuba and he asked Mandela, how can you be going to Cuba?  
3653 Why are you going to Cuba? And I think that that was one of the moments that you saw  
3654 Mandela at one of his most elegant and most principled self, when he then began to  
3655 lecture Ted Koppel about friends, and the importance of friends and loyalty to friends.  
3656 He then went through the history of Cuba's involvement with the Southern Africa  
3657 countries and it was just an extraordinary moment where people were shocked all over  
3658 the country because he left Ted Koppel speechless. At one point in this interview even,  
3659 he says to Koppel, You aren't saying anything. Have I offended you Mr. Koppel?  
3660 Koppel just shakes his head because he was, in fact, left speechless by what Mandela had  
3661 said.

3662  
3663 EM: That would be great—

3664  
3665 PN: It would be great to clip that, it's a clip that has to be reshowed.

3666  
3667 EM: How do you deal with, in your classes, the issue of, and we're living it now, you  
3668 know, when governments label organizations, terrorist organizations, and history unfolds  
3669 and as you said then unban the ANC, so, you know, the day before the unbanning they  
3670 were terrorists and banned, and now they are unbanned and legal. I was even noticing in  
3671 the newspaper today that the Prime Minister of England is now supporting the citizens of  
3672 England's right to pursue legal course against the Libyans for supporting the IRA and  
3673 damage or injury, or death that had occurred as a result that, so I think of that as, you

3674 know, there, or even with the founding of this country, with that kind of definition where  
3675 anything that opposes the state as terrorists, and then as history unfolds those former  
3676 terrorists organizations now are recognized politically, or in some manifestation, you  
3677 know, how do you deal with that with students, helping them to understand that, and as I  
3678 said using that example of our founding fathers with current definitions they would have  
3679 been terrorists, and were seen as that by the crown, but, you know, we hold them up as  
3680 heroes and making the right stand, but yet we, I don't know, it's difficult I think when  
3681 you're in the thick of it—

3682  
3683 PN: I think—

3684  
3685 EM: —not to do it like Ted Koppel said, you know, how can you, how can you, you  
3686 know, support or go, go to that place with that dictator who is against us?

3687  
3688 PN: I think that the first thing is to make people aware, knowledgeable about the history.  
3689 If they're not knowledgeable about the history you can't change any attitudes, any  
3690 convictions. When they understand the sequence of events, when they understand the  
3691 reality that people were dealing with in these struggles, for example, the fact that the  
3692 African National Congress from 1912 to 1960 petitioned everywhere in the world trying  
3693 to peacefully change and get rid of the apartheid government. They have to understand  
3694 that, they have to know that. They have to know the extent to which the South African  
3695 government was willing to go to get rid of opposition, to understand that all avenues for  
3696 peaceful change were closed down, to understand the brutality of the apartheid system.  
3697 And then I think to also, you have to defame Communism, because it so frightens  
3698 Americans. But the interesting thing is that with my classes, my experience again and  
3699 again has been that by the end of the class people were asking themselves, well wait,  
3700 what is this really that we've been so scared of? Why is it that we are so scared of these  
3701 words, as opposed to just looking at what the realities are, that are being constructed  
3702 behind the words. For example, the Freedom Charter says to the world, and it still is a  
3703 governing document in the South Africa of today even, it says the doors of learning shall  
3704 be open to all. Well, I don't know a school across the country or a group of students  
3705 anywhere, especially students who have finished school, owing a hundred thousand  
3706 dollars who can't feel some empathy for, and like the notion of being able to go to school  
3707 and not finish owing a hundred thousand dollars. Those are the kinds of real situations  
3708 that you have to uncloth and make, put there naked, for people to examine them  
3709 themselves, and not examine a kind of rhetorical, frightening set of terms that are around  
3710 these realities.

3711  
3712 EM: I think, again, we're dealing in the same—

3713  
3714 PN: We're certainly in that period.

3715  
3716 EM: Right now with healthcare and with Obama's address to school students.

3717  
3718 PN: Absolutely the same thing. I mean, in fact, what is the bottom line of the question of  
3719 healthcare isn't, has nothing to do with those healthcare, I don't think it has anything to

3720 do with healthcare. In fact, what we're seeing is a very vocal minority that is yet upset  
3721 over having a black president in the country. It's all very related to the same uproar  
3722 about whether Michelle has shorts on or not has shorts on. And the, the emptiness, the  
3723 vacuousness of the arguments that they use are just ridiculous. These are, you watch  
3724 some of these people come from out of places where they just had their Medicare  
3725 treatment and come into a hall and start protesting against government run programs. I  
3726 mean, it's just, it's pathetic. But, you have to work with people like that. I think the  
3727 other and ultimate thing is to get in front of Americans, people who come from these  
3728 situations in countries who can tell their life stories, because so much of this is about the  
3729 limited exposure that we have as Americans. For example, when I drop on people the  
3730 fact that the country that probably disproportionately gave of itself to support the African  
3731 National Congress was not Cuba, it was not even the Soviet Union, it was Sweden. It  
3732 was Sweden! And that the record of the Swedish involvement with South Africa's ANC  
3733 with Mozambique FRELIMO, with the NPLA in Angola, one has, can only wonder how  
3734 did this tiny little all blonde Scandinavian country make this decision? And I think that  
3735 the basis on which the Scandinavian countries, not just Sweden, but especially Sweden,  
3736 did what they did was on the basis of the justice that's involved in rendering justice to  
3737 people. That matters a great deal. Fairness, it's what Jesse Jackson always talks about,  
3738 getting an even playing field for everybody. But you have to do so much educating to get  
3739 to that place for Americans in particular to understand these questions. And I think in  
3740 understanding the Southern African questions, they also, Americans particularly begin to  
3741 understand their own history.

3742  
3743 EM: Um-hm. And you can flip it by saying their resistance to understanding it is  
3744 because they don't want to face their own history.

3745  
3746 PN: Their own history, absolutely. It's really deep, it's really deep. I have seen group  
3747 after group that I have taken to Southern Africa. I can almost predict, Erin, the moment  
3748 at which an interracial group of Americans that I bring to Southern Africa are going to  
3749 start to confront themselves and each other and in confronting each other, they're really  
3750 confronting themselves. Black people get upset about the white people, white people get  
3751 upset about the black people being so much, taking on so much once they're in Africa.  
3752 They get feeling guilty, and all of this operates on the group until there comes that  
3753 moment that there has to be a reckoning with all of this. It affords a great teaching  
3754 moment, then, and I have seen some discussions and some movement and some  
3755 transformation of people that has been remarkable. I think that that also reflects  
3756 something that is one of the strengths of the South African situation, is that people do  
3757 open up even when they have really backwards view of things. They talk about things,  
3758 and they wanted to analyze things. Now, in South Africa, there's a huge discussion going  
3759 on on two questions. One is xenophobia, it is that many black South Africans have, have  
3760 taken to attacking out of jealousy and insecurity about their own economic situation, have  
3761 taken to attacking Africans that have come to South Africa from other countries, so  
3762 there's been a wave of xenophobic attacks. A second—

3763  
3764 EM: Like an idea of, that South Africa is only for black South Africans?  
3765

3766 PN: South Africans, not just black, but for South Africans.

3767

3768 EM: Okay, interesting.

3769

3770 PN: Those who were pushing this, for instance, don't push so much the idea that it can  
3771 only be black South Africans, but South Africans, and they reject the Tanzanians, reject  
3772 the Mozambicans, reject the Zambians, reject the Congolese and the Nigerians. Of  
3773 course, with the case with the Tanzanians, the case of the Mozambicans, of the Angolans,  
3774 of the Zambians, they then reject a piece of their own history, because there are so many  
3775 of those people and in those countries in particular who died, who died to help free South  
3776 Africa from the grip of an apartheid, and so that's been one of the things the leadership has  
3777 done. I think it's a function in part, it's a result rather, a product, a lack of enough  
3778 educational programs that tell South Africans of their own history, particularly young  
3779 South Africans. It's been mostly young men who have been most engaged in the attacks  
3780 that have taken place.

3781

3782 EM: And has it been tied to the economy and economic opportunity?

3783

3784 PN: Oh, absolutely. It's these things that spike according to this spiking unemployment,  
3785 you know. In South Africa today the unemployment is fifty-five, fifty-six  
3786 unemployment, actual unemployment figures.

3787

3788 EM: What was the second, you said there were—

3789

3790 PN: The second thing, the second thing is even more sensitive in some ways, is the  
3791 question, it is the question of the Middle East. The other place that the African National  
3792 Congress and the other liberation movements too, probably, but particularly the African  
3793 National Congress very much identified with, was the struggle of the Palestinian people.  
3794 That has raised a very serious question for the very significant Jewish population in South  
3795 Africa of, of do they go with kind of the limitations of identity politics and just identify as  
3796 Jews, or do they identify as people who are fighting with all oppressed people, even if it  
3797 means taking on your own nation's state that is wrong in regard to it's treatment. A very  
3798 significant body in South Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council I think it's  
3799 called, just made a finding, a very scientifically done study finding that the treatment of  
3800 Palestinians is in fact worse than apartheid was for the African majority, and in fact that it  
3801 is a new kind of apartheid that is taking place amongst the Palestinians. This in turn led  
3802 to several, particularly one Jewish South African leader, Ronnie Kasrils, taking a very  
3803 public, very courageous stance saying, that he formed an organization called Not In My  
3804 Name, in saying that, he prefaces talking about the Jewish faith, of the quest for justice,  
3805 and the quest for identifying with the most oppressed and saying that for the, for there not  
3806 to be a response by the Jewish people of South Africa was tantamount betrayal of  
3807 everything that Judaism stands for. It has caused a huge conflict inside of South Africa, a  
3808 huge tension. In the meanwhile, the ANC has its own specific political link to the  
3809 Palestinians. For years the ANC has identified with the PLO in the same way that it had  
3810 a direct alliance with the Irish Republican movement. It had a direct alliance with the  
3811 Cuban people. It had an alliance with African Americans fighting against discrimination.

3812 It identified with people fighting colonialism and racism. Therefore, it has had,  
3813 historically, a direct link. The other bit of irony in all of this is that while the state of  
3814 Israel has done all these apartheid like things, there is in the history, also, a period in  
3815 which Israel helped to build the apartheid regime, and despite the fact that some at the  
3816 time, those leaders of South Africa, a man named Balthazar Vorster, in particular, had  
3817 been interned during World War II for his Nazi sympathies. Despite that, Israel forged  
3818 an alliance with the apartheid government of South Africa. The way in which South  
3819 Africa became a nuclear power is a result of Israel, the United States, and West Germany  
3820 coming to embrace the Apartheid Regime in South Africa. So that, to have that in  
3821 history, and to have then also these apartheid like measures that are being taken against  
3822 the Palestinian people, and the occupation of Palestine, it means that it is a great and  
3823 grave moment for people of the Jewish background in South Africa to take up this  
3824 challenge to be outspokenly opposed to the state of Israel's practices, not to be against  
3825 Jewish people, but to be against the practices of the state of Israel. That is the second  
3826 major, big question that today is being dealt with in South Africa.

3827

3828 EM: What, bringing it back to your personal experience, what have you learned by, from  
3829 your involvement in the anti-apartheid movement that you, you've kept with you since  
3830 it's conclusion?

3831

3832 PN: Since it's inception?

3833

3834 EM: Since your work, but also the conclusion of the apartheid regime.

3835

3836 PN: You know, I came from a very politically aware family. My father was very  
3837 politically aware, my uncles, my father and my uncles were, at least one uncle and my  
3838 father were Union organizers and helped to organize the Unions here in this city for  
3839 baggage porters at the train stations. They had had uncles themselves who were part of  
3840 the Garvey Movement. My mother, learning more and more as I get older and older, that  
3841 it wasn't accidental that she took me to hear the Weavers [the group Pete Seeger was  
3842 with] all the time, and took me to listen to people and watch people dance like Katherine  
3843 Dunham. It was not accidental those were the connections that we had. I remember  
3844 going through a phase of hating white people. My mother came to me one night when I  
3845 was at the apex of this phase—

3846

3847 EM: About what age?

3848

3849 PN: I think I was about, I must have been about eighteen, seventeen, eighteen? And my  
3850 mother came to me and she said, "Are you ready to start cooking every night yourself?"  
3851 And I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "You can't have these attitudes in my house.  
3852 If you want to have your own house, you can do whatever you want, but as long as you're  
3853 under my roof, you can't have these attitudes." Well, with some kind of, I obviously had  
3854 to cool it, chill as people might say today with some of my attitudes. But I don't think it,  
3855 I think it would've been just a political point made by my mother as opposed to it being  
3856 the preface to a introduction to politics that Southern Africa were giving.

3857

3858 EM: That you had to work with people that—

3859

3860 PN: That you had to learn, that I learned out of all of this involvement, that it wasn't  
3861 about skin color. And I think that it was with being with people who paid the highest  
3862 price you can possibly pay for your values, and being taught by people like that, that I  
3863 internalized a much more clear understanding that would be the basis of the organization  
3864 of all my life. Ruth First, for example, was a white Jewish South African woman. She  
3865 was my friend. When I learned of Ruth First being killed I just wept and wept at the idea  
3866 that the apartheid regime had just blown her to smithereens. When Eduardo Mondlane,  
3867 the leader of the Mozambique Liberation Front was similarly killed on the morning I was  
3868 supposed to go see him, there was not a racialized bone in Eduardo's body, and he paid  
3869 the highest price you could pay for his clear vision of building a Mozambique that would  
3870 be not based on color, but would be based on people. And I've seen this in reality in  
3871 Africa. I'm very struck by having been in the United States and in Africa, and having  
3872 been interracially married, had many experiences with white people, traveling with them  
3873 to the United States, traveling with them in Africa. It's amazing to me how much more  
3874 comfortable it is to be part of an interracial group, to be an interracial couple, whatever,  
3875 in South Africa, even in the years of a apartheid, even in the years that it was banned to  
3876 do that you could feel more comfort, more comfortable about it then you could feel, even  
3877 to this day I think in the United States. There's so much judging you based on your color  
3878 in the United States, so much more than what happens in Africa, particularly by African  
3879 people. African people are very clear who they are. They are very certain. They walk  
3880 knowing that their land, their continent is theirs, they are not intimidated, they're not  
3881 upset, they're not worried about the combinations of people that come. In Africa you see  
3882 all kinds of combinations. I think that one of the greatest lessons that all of this has given  
3883 me is this clarity about not, not letting it all just come down to the level who's black,  
3884 who's brown, who's white, who's red, I mean, who are the ones who prepared to die to  
3885 make it better for everybody to live in a better world. That's what it comes down to be  
3886 for me. I draw a very hard line on hypocrisy around that question. For example, I have  
3887 tremendous trouble with Christians who profess, whether they are black or white or  
3888 brown or red, if they profess that everybody is equal and they don't live that way, to me  
3889 they are hypocrites. If they are progressives and they say we are building a world where  
3890 this is not relevant and people don't live that way and you're not judged by your color but  
3891 by the content of your character and all that blahblah, people don't live that way they're  
3892 hypocrites for me. For me, when you're a hypocrite, you're finished. I may work with  
3893 you, but I will never, ever, ever trust people like that, because I have worked with people  
3894 who have given their lives to, to live what they believe. I think the expression, walk the  
3895 walk. They have given their lives. They, there was no equivocation in the way they lived  
3896 their lives. And that's, I think, one of the greatest lessons in all of this has been for me.  
3897 It has been very, very heartfelt lesson for me that involved, I had a sister who very much  
3898 loved this part, though she never got to Africa, my sister met almost all the Africa people  
3899 that I was involved with who came to this country. My sister used to have, she used to  
3900 say to me, Prexy just tell me one thing. I don't want to know all of the finite nuanced  
3901 questions and politics, who loves who on which side? And who are the good people that  
3902 I can identify with? And that's where she said, I'll be. Whoever they are makes no  
3903 difference. How do they live their lives? And that's what I think has been the particular

3904 strength that I have gained, an insight that I have gained out of these years of  
3905 involvement with people from that part of the world.

3906  
3907 EM: What would you do differently?

3908  
3909 PN: What would I do differently? A couple minor things, a couple minor things. I  
3910 might have gone to try to do, get a PhD, finish it, it would've increased my mobility, my  
3911 capacity to impact other people. I think I would've insisted, insisted on joining  
3912 FRELIMO's armed struggle for freedom.

3913  
3914 EM: Because you were told we need you, you're more important elsewhere?

3915  
3916 PN: That's right. But I think that I could've pushed that much harder, and I think it  
3917 would've been a more complete step for me. Instead of taking a five-fifths step, I took a  
3918 four-fifth step. I wish that I had taken a five-fifths step, even if it meant I may not be  
3919 living through it.

3920  
3921 EM: Or killing other people.

3922  
3923 PN: On that question I was very clear, because I think that that's in the nature of the  
3924 liberation war that I came to learn about, the killing of other people was the most  
3925 secondary aspect. The primary aspect was winning the political struggle, and that  
3926 involved making gains that are much bigger than just elimination, physically, of the  
3927 enemy. It was about building a new human being.

3928  
3929 EM: But, could that, because you specifically said the Armed Struggle. Could you do  
3930 that without—

3931  
3932 PN: No, you would have to have, I was already on the edge of learning that stuff, and  
3933 learned a great deal just being on the edge about those kinds of aspects of the struggle.  
3934 But that's all secondary to the most important lessons that came out of that, and that was  
3935 the lessons of building another society, of becoming a combatant to building another  
3936 society. I think that that's the hardest lesson of all. There are many people, even today,  
3937 who are all very ensconced, very wrapped up entirely in the military and Armed Struggle,  
3938 who are around today, but they never did learn the new values, and that's part of the  
3939 corruption that the liberation movements turned into governments, some of those officials  
3940 who were still wrapped up around money and the old things that were the prizes of the  
3941 old way of doing things. There are not a lot of the leaders of those liberation movements  
3942 who have kept the faith with the values that we were talking about. There are some, and  
3943 there are some who were just wonderful with what they have done, and the way they lead  
3944 their lives, and the families they have raised, and what they have passed on there, they are  
3945 just wonderful. I think of a man named Jorge Rebelo, who is the soul of integrity. I think  
3946 of someone like Mozambique's former ambassador to the United States, Valeriano  
3947 Ferrao, these are people who in Mozambique today, where sadly corruption is all over the  
3948 place, it's like Chicago, you know, these are people that can't be bought. They are  
3949 unbuyable. They're like the old untouchables in the Al Capone era. And there are some

3950 like that in South Africa, they are Bonita Bennett who runs the District Six Museum,  
3951 Michael Weeder, a renown Anglican priest, these are people who represented a different  
3952 set of values, who came into the struggle to put forward and create a new person, a new  
3953 people, new men, new women, and they lived that life, and they live those values yet  
3954 today. They don't, they're not about money, they could've been. Now, on the other  
3955 hand, there are many in South Africa today who have forgotten that altogether. You  
3956 wonder what has happened to them. Tokyo Sexwale, this was a man who wept when his  
3957 comrade Chris Hani was shot down in front of him just after the negotiations started, but  
3958 today he's this multibillionaire who... what has happened to his old values?  
3959

3960 EM: They become people who they've, were fighting against.

3961  
3962 PN: This is exactly what the "60 Minutes" interview, another great moment that should  
3963 be looked at is the "60 Minute" interview of Tokyo Sexwale, because that's one of the  
3964 great issues in South Africa today; it is this issue of was the struggle just to have a black  
3965 gravy train, to have black owners of Mercedes and Hummers and everything else, as  
3966 opposed to white owners of Mercedes and Hummers? No, the struggle to create the  
3967 South Africa that, which the doors of learning would be open for everybody, the riches of  
3968 the land would benefit everybody. And that, that's very much in the face of people right  
3969 now.  
3970

3971 EM: And this country certainly struggles with that same—

3972  
3973 PN: Oh, do we ever, do we ever.

3974  
3975 EM: What are you most proud of?

3976  
3977 PN: If I was to identify any one thing, it would be that there are about thirty-five, forty  
3978 places in this world, thirty-five to forty different places in this world where I can go and  
3979 be with people who have been my comrades, and that that relationship is so deep that  
3980 when my sons go and meet these people, they will be embraced. That's much richer than  
3981 any amount of money.  
3982

3983 EM: And that really came through your work.

3984  
3985 PN: I think it has come through my engagement.

3986  
3987 EM: Had you lived a different life that you would—

3988  
3989 PN: It wouldn't be there.

3990  
3991 EM: And when you go to these places, what do you talk about, what do you do with,  
3992 with these people that you, you know, consider your, your comrades and that, that bond is  
3993 unbreakable?  
3994

3995 PN: We talk about how horrible process aging is.



3996

3997 EM: (laughs)

3998

3999 PN: We talk about how poor we are. We talk about our children. We talk about the  
4000 struggle, but I think we also talk a lot about, what will you share, the values we've  
4001 shared, the richness of those shared experiences.

4002

4003 EM: Do you look for—

4004

4005 PN: We talk a lot about the people who are gone. We talk a lot about the people who  
4006 have gone. And I think that's part of the richness of what we have.

4007

4008 EM: I, I was going to ask you if this kind of work is, that you talk about aging, is this a  
4009 young persons, you know, kind of job? Do these movements kind of have to rely on, on  
4010 youth, or—

4011

4012 PN: Absolutely, absolutely. The Mozambicans and Angolans had a wonderful  
4013 expression, "continuadores," those who will continue things. And it's getting harder and  
4014 harder to find those people. I think it's one of the joys that I've had around Columbia  
4015 College from time to time, is I run into students that I know are, they have coursing  
4016 through their blood, their veins, that spirit, 'cause they say it, they say it again and again.  
4017 We took this wonderful group to study history and memory in South Africa this summer,  
4018 and you could just feel in those students from time to time, how much they wanted to  
4019 have the kind of wealth and background that came from some of the people we talked to  
4020 and interviewed, incredible people, like Mac Maharaj who helped engineer, the only  
4021 attempted escape Mandela had, but they never really did, but Mac who was on Robben  
4022 Island with him, was the man who conceived of the plan. He's also the man who pirated  
4023 out the manuscript of this incredible book of *Mandela's Long Walk to Freedom, No Easy*  
4024 *Walk to Freedom*. And Stephanie Kemp is a woman who withstood the worst tortures in  
4025 the world. She spent all this incredible time giving, it's the other characteristic of people  
4026 like this, they give all the time of themselves, that's the way Stephanie is. And the  
4027 students that met these people, they, they picked up on that, and they kept talking about  
4028 wishing that they were in that earlier period, that's what Lisa and I would say, but you're  
4029 in a period where you have to shape that same in you, that same sense, and I think this  
4030 group got it.

4031

4032 EM: Is that how you continue your work through education and through reaching out to  
4033 younger people?

4034

4035 PN: Well, I think the first way that I have to continue the work is to continue the work.  
4036 So, I remain very involved in a lot of issues, not as many as I would like to be, but  
4037 certainly reaching out to younger people is, and passing the baton if you will, on, is  
4038 something that we, many of us feel is very, very critical. A place that I start that,  
4039 although I do it very gently, is with my own sons. But I do that very gently, you know—

4040

4041 EM: Because?

4042  
4043 PN: Well, it's this whole phenomenon of not wanting to push them, and instead just help  
4044 give them exposures, in the same way I was given exposures.  
4045  
4046 EM: Have you taken them to South Africa?  
4047  
4048 PN: Five times.  
4049  
4050 EM: Five times. And what, what do you—  
4051  
4052 PN: Each of them.  
4053  
4054 EM: —always want to do, I don't know, what, what are your priorities when you're with  
4055 them in South Africa?  
4056  
4057 PN: Well, they know that some of the priorities is that there's a group of people that  
4058 they'll see. It happens that in that group of people are some extraordinary people that not  
4059 everybody gets to see, you know. One of my sons came back and talked on his second or  
4060 third trip when he was in second or third grade, he talked to his teacher about where he'd  
4061 been, and he never told her that he met Nelson Mandela (laughs), 'cause, for him, Nelson  
4062 Mandela was something he did, but he talked about the elephants who pooped toward the  
4063 car when we went to see wildlife, but he never mentioned to her that he had dinner with  
4064 Nelson Mandela. Now, he's embarrassed about that. He wouldn't even want to hear me  
4065 tell that story, so I didn't identify which son it was, but they know. But it is about the  
4066 kinds of people that you expose your children to.  
4067  
4068 EM: And so what do you hope for your children?  
4069  
4070 PN: That they're happy, that they live and that they're happy.  
4071  
4072 EM: But what, how would you define happiness?  
4073  
4074 PN: I think that the way you define happiness is how you, how you are in relationship to  
4075 other people, and the way in which other people regard you. I don't think it's about  
4076 money. One of my sons at least might dispute that right away, but it is about the regard  
4077 that people have for you.  
4078  
4079 EM: So, are you happy?  
4080  
4081 PN: I have lived a very, very rich, rich life, on almost every part of life that you can  
4082 imagine. I have been very fortunate. I have an array of friends. I have not done well  
4083 romantically in this world, but I have had wonderful, wonderful people who have loved  
4084 me and that I have loved through the course of it all. Did I do well by the conventional  
4085 measures of marital life and family? No. But did I do better by the other measures of  
4086 friendship and contribution and serving? Then, I am very happy.  
4087

4088 EM: Well, I want to take a moment to thank you for spending this time and sharing your  
4089 experiences, and philosophy and kind of knowledge of the world beyond South Africa.  
4090  
4091 PN: Thank you very much. Thank you for taking all this time to interview me, and to  
4092 push me on some of these subjects. It's very hard, I come from a generation that was  
4093 taught not to talk about ourselves, so, I hope, I must apologize if I've caused you undo  
4094 exertion from time to time.  
4095  
4096 EM: No, it was my pleasure, definitely, my pleasure. And we are at exactly sixty  
4097 minutes.  
4098  
4099 PN: Voila!  
4100  
4101 EM: So here we go.  
4102  
4103 PN: C'est bon ca!  
4104  
4105 EM: (laughs) What does that mean?  
4106  
4107 PN: You speak some French?  
4108  
4109 EM: A little.  
4110  
4111 PN: This is very good. 'That's the victory of that!'  
4112  
4113 EM: Very good.  
4114  
4115 *end of interview*