

Columbia College Chicago

Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago

Chicago Anti-Apartheid Movement

Oral History Interviews

Fall 2009

Interview with Otis Cunningham

Danny Fenster

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cadc_caam_oralhistories



Part of the African American Studies Commons, African History Commons, African Languages and Societies Commons, American Politics Commons, Civic and Community Engagement Commons, Cultural History Commons, Inequality and Stratification Commons, International Relations Commons, Other Political Science Commons, Place and Environment Commons, Political History Commons, Political Theory Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, and the Work, Economy and Organizations Commons



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Fenster, Danny. "Interview with Otis Cunningham" (Fall 2009). Oral Histories, Chicago Anti-Apartheid Collection, College Archives & Special Collections, Columbia College Chicago.
http://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cadc_caam_oralhistories/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Interviews at Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chicago Anti-Apartheid Movement by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago. For more information, please contact drossetti@colum.edu.

Transcription:
Danny Fenster

1. Interviewer: Danny Fenster
2. Interviewee: Otis Cunningham
3. Date: 12/12/09
4. Location: Otis's home in the Beverly neighborhood on Chicago's southwest side.
5. 20 years of activism
6. Activism in Chicago
7. Otis YOB: 1949, Chicago born and raised
8. Father and Mother both born in Chicago
9. Otis Cunningham: . . . Probably sixth grade or so. Fifth grade or so. Because see
10. I was born in '49. So--uh, um, I'm, uh, five years old when Brown versus Board
11. of Education happened. So I'm, I'm in, uh, uh, middle school, through high
12. school basically, at the height of the civil rights movement. Uh, and uh, it was on
13. television. Unlike social movements now that you don't see broadcast on
14. television. The civil rights movement was on television like every day. So when
15. you watched the news you could see the various demonstrations and the like, um,
16. uh, when you were growing up. And I do also remember that um, I went to a
17. rally, uh, that Martin Luther King had at the old Soldier's Field, um, during this
18. period, probably at, it was probably in the early years of high school. And that's
19. my kind of recollection.
20. Danny Fenster: Do you remember sitting around watching the TV with your
par—with your mom?
21. OC: Oh yeah. And I also remember being very conscious of living--not only
22. looking at the civil rights movement relative to the south, but, I remember living
23. in a very segregated city. Certain places you couldn't go. Or certain places were
24. dangerous to go. They had, you know, clear boundaries, in terms of blacks and
25. whites. I remember that, that from a very early age.
26. DF: Uh, where did you go to junior high?
27. OC: Umm, we didn't call it junior high, but I guess that would be Brett Hart (?). I
28. went to the--I was there for the sixth--the seventh and eight grade, so I guess that's
29. junior high.
30. DF: Were you, did you have any political involvement or act, activity, uh, that
31. early?
32. OC: Uhh no.
33. DF: No? [sniff] Um, do you remember the assassination of Malcolm X?
34. OC: Yea.
35. DF: Yea? How old were you then?
36. OC: This happens in what, '64?
37. DF: I think so.
38. OC: '64, so I was uhh, I was a sophomore in high school, something like fifteen
39. years old.
40. DF: Mm hmm. Do you remember hearing about it?
41. OC: Oh yeah.

42. DF: Yeah?
43. OC: Yeah.
44. DF: How'd you hear about it? From TV, a friend?
45. OC: TV. From TV.
46. DF: Where'd you go to high school?
47. OC: Uh Hyde Park High School.
48. DF: Hyde Park?
49. OC: Yeah.
50. DF: Um.
51. OC: But also it's important to know that my stepfather is a major, uh, muralist.
52. DF: Okay.
53. OC: Uh, and one of the kind of founders of the kind of black arts mural
54. movement in the United States. And so—
55. DF: What was his name?
56. OC: His name is Bill Walker. And um, there was a wall that he did on uh 43rd
57. and Langley, on either side of the street, that had figures on that wall like
58. Malcolm X, DuBois and others, um, that uh I participated in. Not as an actual
59. artist in terms of painting or whatever but I helped scrape and prime the wall, you
60. know, as a young teen. So, uh, not only that I'd go to art fairs I actually
61. participated in the production of art, the creation of art and I, I--and his art was
62. very political. And uh, so I learned certain politics through that, through the art.
63. DF: Uh when did your mom and him meet?
64. OC: Um—
65. DF: How old were you?
66. OC: I'm not exactly sure but I was in uh elementary school.
67. DF: Uh-huh. So he raised you from a pretty early age?
68. OC: Right, right.
69. DF: Um, so after high school what formal training did you have?
70. OC: Um, I went to uhh, Loop Junior College for a couple years. Ah, then I
71. transferred to Malcolm X and I went through the respiratory care training program
72. there. This is like the period of '67 through '70, '71.
73. DF: Mm Hmm. And your political involvement is starting to pick up at this
74. point?
75. OC: Yeah. Pretty much uh, around, probably '70, '71, in a formal kind of way.
76. DF: Mm Hmm. Um, wha--how did you react to Martin Luther King's death?
77. OC: Um, I was also in high school, during this time. I remember, I remember—
78. actually remember it more vividly because I was in school at the time. I think the
79. same way with the Kenned assassination. I was in class at the time. Of course
80. when you hear this, umm, you hear this uh announcement of King's death, and of
81. course you had a lot of uh civil disobedience, um, so-called rioting and whatnot.
82. Uh, and my high school was on 63rd and Stoney, uh Hyde Park High School.
83. And that particular area was devastated, in terms of burning and whatnot and
84. still you see a lot of that even today, the, the, the vast tracks of that particular
85. neighborhood was um, Woodlawn, that still there's no houses there. Uh, and you
86. had a lot of that rioting on the south side as well as the west side. I remember that
87. vividly because I remember watching that on TV every night. I remember seeing,

88. uh, not in Hyde Park where I lived but I remember seeing uh, national guard
 89. troops out on the street, at least in Woodlawn. So when I went to school, which
 90. was in Woodlawn--I lived in Hyde Park, uh on 53rd and Hyde Park in fact--but I
 91. went to school in uh, uh Hyde Park at 63rd and Stoney, and I remember seeing
 92. national guard troop tanks and whatnot. Uh, that kind of thing. Then Also I
 93. remember too there was a big, um--I went to the 1960--well, I went to Grant Park
 94. when they had the 1964 Democratic Convention. People got tear-gassed and all
 95. that, and the yippies and Abbie Hoffman and all that kind of thing, so, I was
 96. watching on TV, seemed kinda interesting so I went down there for one night.
 97. DF: Um. So what were the first liberation movements in southern Africa that you
 98. started to become involved in?

99. OC: Well actually, uh, I joined an organization that was called the African-
 100. American Solidarity Committee in about 1971. And uhh, our focus at that
 101. time was, umm, the Portuguese colonies. Guinea Bissau, Mozambique,
 102. and Angola, in particular. And to a lesser degree, uh, South Africa and
 103. Zimbabwe, or Namibia. Uh, but, it broadened out to encompass all that,
 104. but it started out with--and I think partly because those were the most
 105. active sort of areas relative to armed struggle at the time. Uh, South
 106. Africa was largely civil disobedience. Zimbabwe was the same. Um,
 107. because of, kind of--in, in um, Namibia they had an armed struggle that
 108. was retarded because of the geographical difficulties of conducting it.
 109. Um, so--

110. DF: So what exactly is it that drew you to those, those struggles more
 111. than, you know, ss--armed, as opposed to civil disobedience?

112. OC: Well I think, I think when you're young, umm, you may have a
 113. tendenancy to be drawn to uhh, what seems to be a greater flash point. It
 114. seems to be more people involved, which seems to be, uh, winnable. Uh,
 115. and those areas, the Portuguese colonies, seemed to be, the political
 116. assessment, they were more winnable. In fact they won earlier than South
 117. Africa or Zimbabwe or Namibia. Uh, because of certain, certain, um,
 118. geographical and political conditions made it more difficult to win in these
 119. other countries than it did in the Portuguese colonies. So they were more
 120. advanced in, in, in that way. But it wasn't that we thought lesser of them,
 121. that they were less important. Um, but, we thought that, that those
 122. struggles would be mm--uh, more protracted, it would take much, much
 123. longer time.

124. DF: Um, so this is around '71 you start getting involved in that group. Uh,
 125. what other political activities or groups were you involved in at the time?

126. OC: Let me stop for just a second

127. DF: Okay. [Otis gets up and walks out of the room. I turn the recorder off
 128. and Otis leaves, then comes back with a stack of papers--old copies of
 129. African Agenda, a newsletter he helped produce. I turn the recorder back
 130. on as Otis comes back, speaking]

131. OC: From '72 through--it's not, it's not chronological order but it goes
 132. probably for eight years, and you can see some of (rumble on microphone)
 133. the issues there

134. DF: Yeah, yeah. That's cool.
135. OC: Of course this is old school in the sense that you're not talking about
136. doing this on the computer. Your talking about getting type set—
137. DF: Right, right.
138. OC: And then laying it out.
139. DF: You helped put that out?
140. OC: Yeah. I was on the editorial board of that. And that was the journal
141. of the organization, African-American Solidarity Committee.
142. DF: Um, so when did you start learning about, or being more involved in
143. the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa specifically?
144. OC: I think probably that happened, umh, more towards the mid and late
145. '70s. Umm, that we began to, um, pay more attention to South Africa in
146. particular. Um, and the other thing to note is that, um, the liberation
147. movements in the Portuguese colonies as well as South Africa, and
148. Namibia, had representatives at the United Nations, that were like
149. permanent representatives. They weren't representatives of a country but
150. of a movement. So they some, some qualified status in New York at the
151. U.N. and so we would facilitate them traveling to different cities in the
152. United States, umh, to speak at forums, to go on the radio, television, that
153. kind of thing. And so we brought many representatives from, uh, South
154. Africa, from the ANC in particular to Chicago. Uh, to, um, you know, get
155. the word out about the movement. And then also too there were a number
156. of South African students who were in exile in the United States. For
157. example, there was a South African student named, umm, umm, what was
158. her name, shoot. One second. (Hey Lisa, what was a--no, it was Linda)
159. Her name was (?) for example. She was a student at Ohio University. She
160. was a poet, uh, that uh, we befriended. We brought her here, um, on a
161. number of occasions to speak at forums. Linda (?) was just retired from
162. being the ANC ambassador to London, to the United Kingdom. So uh,
163. there's a funny story, when we were--when Lisa was in London a few
164. years ago, she said well you know I'm in Tra, Trafalgar Square, which is
165. where all the embassies are, she says well I should go to the South African
166. embassy. So she went over there and introduced herself to the
167. receptionist and said is Linda (?) in, she said yeah, said well tell her that
168. there's somebody here who she used to sleep on the pull-out bed, right,
169. Lisa Brock. And then they called (??)--and it's true, she was a student at
170. O.U., just a poet in exile, but part of the ANC who we brought to Chicago
171. to speak at some forums and on the radio who slept on our couch. You
172. know, just a graduate student. And then years later, this person is, uh, the
173. ANC ambassador, South Africa's ambassador to uh, to uh, to the United
174. Kingdom. So, um, there many people like that, that I know, umh, who
175. were students here who are now in leadership in various, in various, uh,
176. uh, in various movements. But it's also important to note that at the time
177. that we were doing this, um, it was difficult. Because people were saying
178. well we have so many issues here to deal with, economic disparities and
179. things like that, we don't have the time nor the energy to focus on what's

180. going on in another place. Though we may be sympathetic but we don't
181. have time to deal with it. And thier struggle is different than ours and it's
182. not related and why do you bother? But I always saw that there was a,
183. that there, that, that there was a connection. Uh, there was a connection in
184. the two. And I think that the transition to focusing on South Africa in, in
185. some ways because of, because of apartheid and the specific racial nature
186. of it, there were similarities. Not the same, but similarities. And so when
187. you talk to, uh, people from, uh, South Africa, from the liberation
188. movement in particular, there was a certain kind of cultural residence,
189. resonance. Umm, that, I mean there was a certain kind of understanding,
190. that kinda, you could kinda understand what there situation was as well as
191. they understand where you were coming form 'cause there were
192. similarities in the two. In the two. So.

193. DF: Um, tell me about the group, uh, the African-American Solidarity
194. Committee. What was the umm, what was unique about that group as
195. opposed to other groups that uh attracted you to them?

196. OC: I think that, um, it's sort of left, Marxist orientation was different.
197. Um, and what, our work was a little different. There were a lot of groups
198. that were doing, were part of this movement, but they were doing different
199. things. There were a lot of groups that did a lot of material support, right?
200. They would educate people about the conditions in South Africa, but they
201. were doing a lot of material support, uh, um, kind of thing, and sort of
202. general education. Um, we on the other hand, our focus was that we
203. thought that there was a lot to politically learn from the movements in
204. South Africa, that we felt were more advanced than our own. Um, and it
205. was important to educate people about that. For example, um, if you
206. compare the 1950s in South Africa to the 1950s here, here you had to an
207. unprecedented level the rise of anti-communism in the United States. And
208. as a result of that, as a result of that--well even prior to that, particularly in
209. the 1930s and the 1940s into the early 50s you had, if you're talking about
210. the trade union movement, you're talking about civil society, um, you have
211. a lot of cross fertilization going on, uh, in terms of uh, civil rights leaders,
212. people who would be left radicals in the same movements, uh, across the
213. board. With the rise of anti-communism, uh McCarthyism, there was a
214. demand on the part of the state that the people of the trade union
215. movement who were left, they got to be expelled. People in the civil
216. rights movement, they got to be expelled. Uh, anybody with any kind of
217. red orientation, they gotta be expelled. So, people, some of the most,
218. some of the most active activists in a broad vari--a broad array of
219. movements in the United States are expelled. Alright? Because you know
220. they had the McCarthy hearings, they would bring people before the
221. hearings, say have you ever been, you know—

222. DF: HUAC—

223. OC: HUAC. Have you ever been a member da-da-da-da, you know, and
224. somehow your organization was tainted if they had any people who were
225. radicals, some of those people were removed. In South Africa it was very

226. different. The ANC never broke its alliance with the communist party, or
227. with the trade union movement. There was no demand that, that they, that
228. they ever went along with to exclude from their ranks any of these kind of
229. po--people. Right? So they maintained a different kind of solidarity.
230. Which to us, made their movement stronger. Uh, because they refused to
231. accede to the demands of the state to exclude people who in fact were part
232. of their ranks, who had worked within their movement for the better of the
233. society and the movement in general. So we thought it was important to
234. study what they do. So when we brought members from uh, uh the ANC
235. here we didn't just take them to radio stations and to do forums, we would
236. have discussions with them about the specific work they did, about the
237. specific contradictions in the movement, how they dealt with it, that kind
238. of thing, and why they thought in the US we did, we expelled these people
239. and they, and they, held firm. So that was, that was, um, that was very
240. different about I think kinda like what we did. But also we saw, um, as a
241. precursor to what we did, the Council on African Affairs, of the 1940s and
242. early 50s, that uh, Paul Robeson and Dubois and them were a part of. And
243. there's some writing, some recent writing, a couple books and some
244. articles about the Council on African Affairs. Which also succumbed to
245. the McCarthy period. And uh went out of existence in the early 50s. Um.
246. so we saw that kind of as a model for us to work. So we weren't like, I
247. mean we were doing some things that were new that we kinda probably
248. invented but also we saw that there had been work that had been done, uh,
249. uh, before us. And we were following in the footsteps of, uh, whatever.
250. But also too, that kind of orientation put us at odds with some other
251. groups who thought that, um, our orientation was to leveling. Um, and
252. um, not what we ought to be doing. Uh, that we should be more, you
253. know, material support, that kind of thing. Uh.
254. DF: What, what exactly do you mean when you say material support for
255. the cause?
256. OC: Well they would be raising money. Raising money for, you know,
257. books or all those kind of things. Which is undoubtedly important. It's
258. not that it's not important. So I never thought that what they did, uh, in
259. terms of material support was unimportant. Uh, but I thought, always
260. thought that different groups can kinda do different things and, and the
261. movements that we supported needed all of this. (Thud on microphone.)
262. Needed all of this. Um, but we also thought that even in the long term
263. they needed people to understand what they, what they were doing. And I
264. think as a result of the failure of, um, of movements to do this, most
265. people know very little. Most people may think that the ANC was all
266. black. They don't know about Indian members and stuff like that. Uhh,
267. umm, um, and they don't know about, it seems to me, the ideological and
268. organizational contributions that they made that one can learn from. Uh,
269. um, because either they were completely outside of the movement, totally,
270. and just ordinary citizens who never participated in the, in the, in any
271. anti-apartheid, or if they did they never saw these political questions as

272. important.
273. DF: Right.
274. OC: They weren't important so they didn't focus on them, but that's okay.
275. I mean, so I never felt any antagonism towards—
276. DF: Right, everybody was—
277. OC: No
278. DF: Helping out—
279. OC: Yeah. As long as they were doing something.
280. DF: Mm Hmm. Um, do you remember the first time you met Lisa?
281. OC: Yeah I think I met her at a barbeque.
282. DF: Oh yeah? Okay.
283. OC: Not too far from right down the street. She was a, a student at
284. Northwestern. And she had been, she had been involved politically at
285. Howard. In the anti-apartheid movement. And so when she kinda came
286. here she kinda hooked up with that. Uh, with another group, not with out
287. group, but we cooperated with the other group too. We worked with them,
288. I knew some people in the other group, so, I met her at a barbeque maybe
289. like five minutes from here.
290. DF: Uh huh. Was it, uh, was the barbeque an event specifically through
291. the groups?
292. OC: I don't remember but, but all our barbeques had that kind of flavor.
293. Because even if it was just a regular barbeque, not a fundraiser kind of
294. barbeque, it would become a political barbeque because everybody was
295. involved in something so you'd be talking about what you're doing. So.
296. DF: Um, so, the group that she was involved in, what uh, were they
297. focused on other things? Was that like a material support sort of group?
298. OC: Well actually, as I remember, and I don't remember totally what they
299. did, but one thing they did do, they had a--they were involved heavily with
300. the sports boycott. Because what South Africa was trying to do was to
301. improve its image by having sports teams travel and stuff like that. So
302. they had a rugby team, it was called a (??) or something like that. And
303. they came, they were supposed to play in Chicago and in um, uhh,
304. southern Wisconsin. And so um, there was a big movement, which she
305. was a part of when she was at Northwestern of um, you know boycotting
306. umm, umm, these sports activities and exposing them for what they were.
307. And there was an attempt to break the boycott, because there was an
308. international call for a boycott uh, against uh, either playing South African
309. team because they were, uh, of apartheid policies it was a segregated
310. sport, either, either hosting them here, or teams going there. Um, and so
311. that was a component. That's not what we did, uh, probably some of our
312. membership participated in it, but we were aware of it though, it was
313. important. It got a lot of press. I think someone got arrested at the airport
314. and stuff like that. So.
315. DF: Um, what kind of music were you listening to at this time.
316. OC: R&B and um, Jazz.
317. DF: Mm Hmm. Artists specifically?

318. OC: Uh I remember Nina Simone. Yeah, 'cause a lot of her music was
319. political. And Odetta, um, of course we all listened to John Coltrane, uh
320. and um, a lot of R&B. Um, because a lot of those songs then, especially
321. in the 60s had a political tone to them, some of the Marvin Gaye stuff,
322. some of the O'Jays, um. Um. Then I remember there was a very specific
323. tune by Les McCann and Ed Harris, it's called "Compared to What?" Uh,
324. it's kinda a anti-war, a anti-war song, uh, and uh. In fact it was the theme
325. song for the movie John--Don Cheedle did called, uh--he did a movie
326. about a DJ in Washington, D.C. in the 60s. It's called uh, Petey Greene or
327. something. And a lot of the soundtrack from Petey Greene is from uh Les
328. McCann and Eddie Harris. And the album was Swiss Movement, and the
329. specific song was "Compared to What."
330. DF: What were you reading at the time, do you remember?
331. OC: Of course we were reading Malcolm X's stuff, we were reading um,
332. Franz Fanon, um, then a lot of um stuff from Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, um,
333. Che Guevara, um, we didn't read any Maoist stuff though.
334. DF: What's that?
335. OC: We didn't read any Maoist stuff.
336. DF: No, okay.
337. OC: No, no.
338. DF: Um, what was your role specifically in the AASC?
339. OC: Um, I think I did a lot of the logistics, a lot of the arranging
340. interviews for liberation movement people. Um, physically taking them to
341. radio stations. Um, that kind of thing. And then um, uhh, editing some of
342. the articles in African Agenda and actually sitting there monthly and
343. putting down the, the type.
344. DF: So you were pretty much the editor?
345. OC: No I wasn't the editor, I was on the editorial board. And it was kind
346. of an editorial collective of people.
347. DF: Mm Hmm. What, what media were you working with in Chicago at
348. the time, radio stations that you were bringing people to?
349. OC: WBON (??) mostly. Because they were very receptive to, umm,
350. having people on. now often times the callers completely didn't
351. understand what the people were talking about. And it would get sort of
352. messy sometimes. But, um—
353. DF: How so?
354. OC: Well, I remember (??), whose a former ambassador to Britain, I
355. brought her here once and she was on the radio and she was talking about
356. apartheid and um, you know she was explaining that they were a non-
357. racial movement. Uhh, and by that she meant they welcomed all South
358. African irrespective of their color or ethnicity into the movement, formally
359. or informally. And uh then the caller said well--this is a black caller—
360. called and said well you don't know nothin' about white folks and you
361. can't be trustin' white folks and blah blah blah. And so (??) said 'we know
362. something about white folks, I mean, you know (laughter) you can't deny
363. out experience. You know, uh, so you would get, you know, because part

364. of the issue I think with African Americans uh, often times, not
365. exclusively, but often times think that we know more than other people of
366. color around the world who struggle. We know what you oughta do, how
367. you oughta do it, and our struggle is more advanced than anybody else's.
368. So we can tell you what should be doing and shouldn't be doing, not
369. recognizing that each struggle has its own conditions, uh, and what you
370. are advocating may not apply. And you can learn from other people--you
371. don't know everything. Uh, and I, I would see that on the radio, and I
372. would see that at forums, that people would get up and challenge, um, uh,
373. people from different liberation movements knowing absolutely nothing,
374. you know, absolutely nothing. Um, not to say that they were perfect and
375. couldn't be critiqued but you know, it was a certain kind of arrogance, um,
376. um, that they had nothing to offer, so, you know, uh, they don't know
377. anything. So, that was a, that was a big problem.

378. DF: Um, your group, uh, the AASC, uh--what other groups did they work
379. with on an international level?

380. OC: Well we worked with the ANC, we worked with the PAIGC of
381. Guinea Bissau, um MPLA of Angola, uh, what was called ZAPU (??) in
382. Zimbabwe. Uh, SWAPO (??) in Namibia. And um, in Mozambique
383. FRELIMO. Those were the main, the main groups. But we also worked
384. with trade unions from those different areas too, not--so it wasn't
385. exclusively the umbrella political movement but often civil groups, uh,
386. neighborhood groups. Because in South Africa you had a lot of civic
387. organizations and stuff like that, that, uh, that we worked with in addition
388. to the ANC. But there were political divisions within these countries and
389. you had, you had other groups, so like in South Africa you had the PAC,
390. or black consciousness movement, or different groups, and we didn't work
391. with them. Uh, in a very deliberate way. So we made choices, ideological
392. choices about who we worked with and who we didn't work with. You
393. know, so lets say, the PAC, uh, the PAC would say well we don't want to
394. work with white folks. You know, we don't, we think that's narrow. Uh,
395. um, it's narrow and it's not, it's not gonna be something--that kind of view
396. is not going to be something that's going to advance the movement so we
397. wouldn't--would decidedly say no. But there were people in the city who
398. were working with the PAC. Uh—

399. DF: Yeah, that was, uh, leading to another question about the conflicts and
400. tensions between different groups that had a different outlook on the best
401. way to pursue it.

402. OC: Oh yeah.

403. DF: Tell me a little bit about that.

404. OC: They were pretty uh, pretty uh, the lines were pretty, pretty drawn.
405. For example around South Africa, within the black community. You had
406. lets say our group and some others that were ANC supporters because we
407. agreed with this kind of non-racial view, a view that the movement ought
408. to accept people of all colors within the country who would adhere to their
409. particular view as a way--because South Africa's apartheid strategy was

410. designed to balkanize people along racial lines, right? And they gave
411. different privileges to different ethnic groups as a way to facilitate that,
412. and that creates certain tensions. So a winning strategy it seems to us is to
413. do the opposite of that--one that is broad and that encompasses a lot of
414. people. Recognizing differences. But there were other people in the city,
415. some of them still around, who were PAC supporters, which had a very
416. narrow sort of anti-white view that we don't work with white, that all
417. whites in South Africa are the same, it don't matter, uh, what their political
418. orientation is. So, that was a major, that was a major kind of division and
419. especially that division, um, exploded '73, '74 within the city and the
420. country as a whole because you had an umbrella organization in the
421. country called the African Liberation Support Committee, which was like
422. a coalition of groups around the country. Uh, those groups supported all
423. the groups we supported but then there was a tendency of some of them to
424. support, because it was an umbrella group, to support the PAC, or, or, or
425. ZAMU in um, in um, in Zimbabwe, or FMLA or UNITA in, in Angola.
426. But a couple of things happened to really fracture, uh, that sort of coalition
427. that existed. And that also that organization, the African Liberation
428. Support Committee started in the, probably in the mid 70s, sponsored
429. what they called the African Liberation Day Support--the African
430. Liberation Day every year. In fact, there's an article in here about it, so
431. [points to a copy of African Agenda]. The African Liberation Day every
432. year. This brought together a coalition of groups from around the country
433. that would have this, have an event in their city, so you would have an
434. African Liberation Day event in Chicago, D.C., Detroit, wherever, of
435. different groups. And they didn't necessarily agree, uh, on everything, but
436. it was a coalition. But a couple things happened. One thing happened
437. was they had a Pan-African congress in Dar es Salaam in '73, '74 that
438. brought together--and they had, they had the Pan-African Congress in the
439. 1940s. This was something that Dubois kind of, uh, W.E.B. Dubois sort
440. of launched at the turn of the century, it went from the early 1900s, maybe
441. 1919 to 1945 then they hadn't had one since '45. Uh, since the end of the
442. second world war. So this was the first one, so it was in '73 or '74. That
443. brought together liberation movements throughout the continent and, and
444. movements and individuals in the African diaspora throughout the world
445. there. Then there was a huge clash. Because a lot of movements in the
446. African diaspora were anti-communist. Anti-marxist/anti-communist.
447. Uh, and, the movements in, uh, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, um,
448. in particular, uh, were not anti-communist. They had a sort of left and
449. Marxist orientation. So there was a huge clash. Um, it played itself out in
450. many ways. Well, the American delegation in particular--a lot, some of
451. this is chronicled in Ebony. If one were to look at Ebony in this period
452. they had big articles on it. Uh, you know, there were people in the US
453. delegation saying well Algeria shouldn't be there 'cause they ain't
454. Africans. Kick the Algerians out of the congress. Or there were people
455. there saying well kick out the Cubans out of the congress. Stuff like that.

456. And so you had real ideological clashes between the African liberation
457. movements and a lot of the African American folks from here. That was a
458. major clash. Then also the other sort of breaking point was um, this is
459. around the time you have an, in uh Portugal as I remember it, the armed
460. forces, there was a leadership and the armed forces had overthrew the
461. fascist governemnt in um, in Portugal. Uh, 'cause you know Portugal was
462. fighting three wars, it was a big strain on the economy and people
463. personally. And there was a rise within the ranks of the Portuguese army
464. to a, to a, to overthrow the government. And people, it was a lot of civil
465. disobedience, lot of people on the street. And the army refused to shoot
466. (?) people, they turned on the leadership and overthrew the uh, um, the
467. government. And as a result they released a lot of classified files on the
468. war and intelligence activities. And as it turned out when they released a
469. lot of the files there were organizations which a lot of African American
470. movements and individuals that supported that were tied to the South
471. African government. And had always worked for the South African
472. government against, let's say uhh the MPLA in Angola. Um, which, we
473. had articulated for many years in African Agenda that we had thought this
474. was the case. You know, because, because some of these organizations
475. would say well you know, the MP, the MPLA is bad because they had
476. mulattos in the MPLA or certain MPLA members are married to white
477. women, stuff like that. Ours is an all black movement we have no
478. mulattos no married to white women, da-da-da-da. And, and because,
479. because of racism, some of this kind of stuff resonated, this sort of black
480. nationalist sort views kind of resonated with certain sectors here. And we
481. thought that it was a hustle. And um, um, these people were receiving
482. resources and support from, form areas in which you would find being
483. embarrassed if it ever came out and it did come out that this was the case.
484. So that created, that was another division. And so there were a lot of, the
485. number of organizations that were doing anti-apartheid work in the black
486. community diminished greatly. Because there were many people who no
487. longer wanted to be associated with the ideological thrust of these
488. organizations and left. And so the a, the African Liberation Support
489. Committee dissolved because of the splits within it. Uh, and man, uh,
490. African liberation--I mean, African-American organizations ceased to
491. focus on Africa, period. The African Liberation Day celebration was
492. diminished. They, they weren't as numerous around the country in
493. different cities even though they were organized locally, not nationally.
494. The number of, of these activities diminished each year. Less and less
495. cities, fewer and fewer people. And to the degree that they continued in
496. most cities they focused not on African liberation support but more on
497. domestic stuff. 'Cause they had decided to distance themselves from this
498. one. And, and that's what you saw from the middle '70s on. Uh, you
499. know, up to the current period, basically.

500. DF: Um, let me go back just a tiny bit. Tell me about your uh, sort of
501. courtship with Lisa and um, how intertwined that was with the movement

502. and if that was uh, if that was something that you guys built on or if that
503. was a, uh, if they were very separate.

504. OC: Nah I think it was built on, but I mostly remember her going out of
505. the country a lot and me picking her up at the airport. I became like a
506. chauffeur of sorts. I know don't know quite how that happened, but it
507. happened, that I was a chauffeur of sorts. Um, and uh, but, but, but also
508. too when you have um, a sort of similar or common ideological view, or
509. way of looking at things--not even necessarily having the same
510. conclusions, but a similar way of viewing things, where your political life
511. is central to what you do. That, that, that you're offended when um, when
512. the US organizes an army, a contra-army in Honduras to attack the new
513. Sandinista government in Nicaragua. You say, well, somebody might say,
514. well, what does this have to do with us? Well it's your government that's
515. sponsoring this. And you know the whole notion of an injury to one is an
516. injury to all--we're all one. So, if they came for them now they come for
517. you next, so you need to be concerned about what happens in the world.
518. It's not, like, unimportant. Uh, even if you don't know the people. And
519. part of the reason why the few rule the many is because people are
520. divided. And they say well, they don't see a relationship between what
521. happens over there and what happens over here. Uh, you know, so, you
522. don't see the exploitation of cheap labor in Asia or the Caribbean or South
523. America as important to you, until your factory closes down and they
524. move to Haiti to pay somebody 25-cent and hour. (??) Aw, you know,
525. what's going on? Don't these countries have any patriotic intent? They
526. gonna close down everything, that's why you see in the United States
527. nothin, no clothes are made in the US anymore. Now I don't fault people
528. in the third world. But now we're in a situation where people can't even
529. buy products. Right? Can't buy cars, can't buy whatever because they
530. ain't got no job. Because we don't make nothing. All the manufacturing
531. jobs gone. You from the Detroit area, hey, hey. Gone! Gone. You know,
532. so, w, we share that sort of common philosophy, it's central to who we
533. are. And so um, um, uh that's important. You know, cla--you know, so,
534. so, so, I think, I can't think of, it's James Carville and Mary Mada-
535. something, and one of them a die-hard right-wing republican and one is
536. a--I can't, I can't, I don't know how you do that.

537. DF: Yeah, yeah yeah.

538. OC: Yeah, I mean, some people could. I--we couldn't. So, so what we
539. believe is, is, in terms of political activity is central to who we are. So
540. that, that drew us together. And that kind of thing.

541. DF: Did you guys, uh, you guys were involved in different groups and
542. different, uh, sort of, probably, uh, connected but separate social circles.
543. Did you guys pull each other towards, um, you know bring each other into
544. different groups and sort of expand your activity? Your activism?

545. OC: Yeah, yeah, I met people, I met people who were involved in sort of
546. sports boycott. And um, material aid stuff, through her that I didn't know
547. before. And she met people through me. But then there were people who

548. straddled both worlds that we both knew. Um, um, you know, in that kind
549. of way. And then I also think too that neither one of us were like rigid,
550. rigid ideologically, that we saw that there needed to be a certain breadth.
551. 'Cause there are people within movements who are very rigid and think
552. that their way is the only way. And therefore that limits who they can
553. interact with. Which is not healthy but there are people like that.

554. DF: Um, did you take part, in a personal way, in the divestment from
555. South Africa movement?

556. OC: No I don't recall that. I mean we wrote about it, in African Agenda.
557. But I don't recall--I mean I recall, I recall doing petitions and things, or,
558. um, that kind of thing. Because that primarily was campus focused stuff.
559. Um, you saw that largely, you know, uh, as a campus activity. Even,
560. even Barack was involved in that kind of stuff at Harvard. I remember
561. seeing like a video clip of him being a part of a divestment movement at
562. Harvard, when he was at Harvard. So that was largely um, campus based.
563. So we didn't do much of that.

564. DF: Uh, where were you working for most of this time?

565. OC: Most of the time I was working at Cook County Hospital. And I
566. worked there from basically '71 through '80.

567. DF: Was it hard to balance the two at all, activism and work?

568. OC: No, not really, I don't think so.

569. DF: Um, how important were the various different uh newsletters and
570. magazines? There was a magazine Souther Africa Magazine—

571. OC: Oh yeah, I remember that, I remember that.

572. DF: Yeah? Um, how important were all the different newsletters and
573. things?

574. OC: Very important, very important. Very important. Especially for
575. people who were not in the movement. See people in the movement are
576. aware of the magazine, so they get to read a lot of stuff. So one thing we
577. did for example, they used to have--well, they still have it, I think today.
578. They used to have a black expo every year. Now it's down in
579. McCormick place, I think, but they used to have it at the umm, there was a
580. place on umm, called the amphitheater. It was a place called the
581. amphitheater, on um, I think Halsted and about 43rd Street. Near the area
582. of the old stockyards. Uh, and they used to have uh, um, an annual, uh,
583. black expo. So a couple years what we did, the African-American
584. Solidarity Committee, we got donated a (??), which was a magazine from
585. the African National Congress, uhh, and some other journals in English,
586. South African and others. And we had a petition campaign it was called
587. "one million signatures against apartheid," which I think was something
588. that was launched by the United Nations, we were, we were cooperating
589. with that. So we went down to the black expo and staffed it, you know,
590. seven days, for seven days, and it went on from nine in the morning until
591. ten in the evening, and we gave out free copies of African Agenda, we
592. gave out free copies of (??), we gave out free copies of Souther Africa,
593. and got signatures and engaged people in discussion about what was

594. going on. And to us that was very important because you were able to talk
 595. to ordinary folks about um, uh, things that we, we thought were important
 596. that they knew nothing about. And also to be able to put literature in their
 597. hands that they could read, and of course when you read it then, that
 598. would give you links to other stuff. Uh, so, but you don't know where—
 599. you're not able to quite measure that and to know where it exactly goes.
 600. But you know you've touched some people that uh--and then also too, um,
 601. it's important to be able to articulate to people that're operating
 602. intellectually on different levels what this means. And so, um, um, you
 603. learn that in practice. Um, um, and you also kind of gauge people's
 604. receptivity to what you're saying. Uh, that's important. And you can only
 605. gain that kind of experience through doing it. You know, through doing it.
 606. So, uh, um that was important. And in fact, though I don't have a
 607. photograph of it--I wish I had, it exists somewhere--my mother had made,
 608. we had a booth that was like, you know, backdrop and two sides. Uh, and
 609. my mother made paintings because my mother was a painter, she made
 610. paintings of kind of African liberation kind of scenes that was on this, this
 611. backdrop that we used as I remember. Um, but I don't have any pictures
 612. of that.
613. DF: Mm Hmm. That's what you set up at the expo?
614. OC: Mm Hmm. Mm Hmm, mm hmm.
615. DF: Um, so this (pointing to the copies of African Agenda before us) was
 616. printed, published in Chicago?
617. OC: Right.
618. DF: How aware of, uh, other newsletters throughout the country were
 619. you?
620. OC: We were aware, because a lot ah, uh--some of that, we wrote original
 621. articles and some of that is clipped from other, other journals.
622. DF: Mm hmm, like—
623. OC: We would, yeah, that we would, we would put in there. So all of this
 624. stuff is not ours. So we, uh, read a lot of stuff. And um, um, and uh tried
 625. to keep our fingers on the pulse. And um, put some of it, some of it in
 626. here. 'Cause some of it, some of that stuff in there is uh, um, from Cuban
 627. journals, um, other things, so you know, we were aware.
628. DF: So can you describe that process of--I mean this is, you know,
 629. obviously before the Internet--the, the process of keeping aware of uh,
 630. small newsletters in different places and knowing, you know what the new
 631. writing is.
632. OC: Snail mail. I mean we just, we as a, we as a group subscribed
 633. consciously to a lot of different, a lot of different journals. Uh, and um,
 634. um, some of, some of which were available like in libraries. But it would
 635. be in the university library, I mean you would have to go to Northwestern
 636. or something like that. So we would do that on a regular basis to look at
 637. stuff, and also subscribe to certain journals. Uh, and also we, and so the
 638. liberation movements were aware of us too because, not only did we--our
 639. main distribution was in the US to people in the US who were subscribers,

640. but also we would routinely mail, uh, and this was a monthly, we would
641. routinely mail it out to the ANC office in London, (??), different places
642. like that. So they were aware of um, um, what we were doing. And I
643. think Lind-uh-Lisa, when she first went out of the country when she was
644. working on her dissertation in Mozambique, she went to the ANC office
645. in London, saying that she was from Chicago and uh, did they know
646. anything about the African Agenda. They said oh yea, we subscribe to the
647. African Agenda and we follow it, this that and the other, and so they said
648. well to you know this person, do you know that person, this person, this
649. person, like that. So, uh, um, you know, it had a reach that we couldn't
650. quite, uh, hard to measure. Hard to measure. Right?

651. DF: Mm Hmm. Um, do you remember, uh, when Wisconsin as a state,
652. divested from South Africa?

653. OC: No not specifically. But I would imagine it would be, um, the later
654. '70s probably. 'Cause I know that, like, University of Wisconsin in
655. Madison was a big center of, of activity.

656. DF: Mm Hmm. Yeah, what about the, the universities in Chicago—were
657. some universities known to be more active or to have better resources in
658. terms of libraries and newsletters?

659. OC: Like Northwestern because—

660. DF: Northwestern was the premiere?

661. OC: Yeah, because Northwestern had an African Studies program. One of
662. the first in the country, if not the first.

663. DF: How, what about the University of Chicago? Was there any activity
664. or relation there?

665. OC: Not much 'cause it seemed relatively, as being relatively
666. conservative, politically. And then at Northwestern you had Dennis
667. Brutus there. Dennis Brutus is a famous South African poet who was kind
668. of the leader of the sort of sports boycott. And he was teaching at
669. Northwestern. So many, so many of the students that came to the
670. movement who were either students or tied to Northwestern large--to a
671. large degree they were influenced by Dennis Brutus, and so was Lisa.

672. DF: Um, what uh, what did Reagan's election mean to you?

673. OC: Um, it meant a covert, I mean an overt shift to the right. The whole
674. discourse, uh, um, was a dramatic departure from, from um, what's his
675. name, um, the peanut guy. Umm. Jimmy Carter. You know, uh.
676. Because um--I mean in some ways, in some ways um, you know his
677. foreign policy seemed to be more rash--even though Jimmy Carter seems
678. to be more progressive now than he was when he was president in action,
679. you know a lot of things that he says and does. But um, it was a, it was
680. like a cold wind was blowing. And um, you know it was a, it was a
681. xenophobic, like a really ultra kind of, ultra American nationalist kind of
682. line, which we live in today. Through the Limbaughs' and the Becks' and
683. all of these people that are really, are really regurgitating the same kind of
684. thing but they put they own kind of new spin on it but that's, that's where
685. it uh—

686. DF: Yeah, I mean you saw it—
687. OC: That's, that's where its, its, its most, most recent roots come from that
688. kind of stuff. Come form that period.
689. DF: Mm hmm, yeah. Um, What, huh, how big was the impact on the
690. South African--the anti-apartheid movement when Reagan was elected?
691. Did you see--was that primarily something you thought of immediately?
692. OC: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Oh yeah, oh yeah. Um, yeah, yeah. Because,
693. because, because a lot of your discourse is now anti-American. I mean,
694. openly. It's sort of like the McCarthy period. Open. So you know, the
695. Reagan people, they said that you know, the ANC was a terrorist
696. organization, stuff like that. You know. Uh, so, you know, if you're a
697. terrorist organization you must be pal-ing around with terrorists or
698. something, you know. So um, you know, uh. So, so, it makes your work,
699. it makes your work harder. Um, you know, you're less likely to get a
700. hearing in the media because, in some ways the media is influenced by
701. you know the, the, the general direction of the government. So, uh, it
702. became, uh, you know it became, it became more difficult--but then also
703. there was a uh, a great show that came on PBS for maybe two, three years.
704. It was called South Africa Now. Done by a guy name Danny Schechter,
705. which was great, it used to come on Sundays. Um, and uh, and that was
706. largely footage of different events and boycotts inside the country. So,
707. these were, um, he had correspondents--obviously South African
708. correspondents that were in the townships. And um, it went on for a
709. number of years. And I think a little later (??) came and associated with,
710. with um, with that.
711. DF: Mm Hmm. And this is in the '80s?
712. OC: This is in the '80s, late '80s. Okay, alright--alright this is my son
713. (son enters the room briefly)
714. DF: Hey
715. OC: This is Danny, Columbia College.
716. DF: Um, do you remember, throughout the '80s, when there was like, do
717. you remember any mark, markedly vivid turning points, when things
718. seemed to be--you know, after Reagan's elected things, at least the
719. discourse, is moving towards the right. Do you remember a point when it
720. seemed like things were turning around in South Africa?
721. OC: Um, I think at a certain point, I don't remember exactly when, the
722. strategy in the movement became that um, they're gonna make the country
723. ungovernable. Um, so you had massive sort of resistance, whether it was
724. the non-payment of rent, bus boycotts, um, um, strikes throughout the
725. country. To make the country, it was called, ungovernable. To make it
726. not a good place for investment. Foreign investment. Uh, because the
727. country was economically unstable. And that turned out to be a winning
728. strategy because of a lot of logistical reasons. The ANC was never able to
729. launch a significant important armed response to apartheid. Um, but they
730. made it ungovernable. And, on the outside you had the dis, the divestment
731. movement, um, beginning on college campuses but growing to bigger than

732. that. So it was questioning whether the state government had funds, you
 733. know, or your local city had funds invested in, in South Africa in a direct
 734. or indirect way. You had that going on. Um, then some on the right,
 735. even blacks would say well that's gonna hurt people in the country. And
 736. we would say yeah, but, people in the country are saying, they're willing
 737. to endure this short term sacrifice. So they're not--they're saying to do it.
 738. Even though they know that they may lose jobs if there's no, if there's, if
 739. investment is pulled out, or if new investment doesn't come in, but they're
 740. willing to have, to make short term sacrifices for long term gain to bring
 741. down, uhh, um, uh apartheid. So, at a certain point, when that movement
 742. intensified at a critical juncture where you didn't, you couldn't see it, it uh,
 743. being able to sussain itself, suss, sus, sustain itself, I think that was a
 744. turning point. Uh, when you had massive, massive, uh, massive
 745. resistance. Then another turning was obviously when, you know, when
 746. South Africa invaded Angola. And then in the, that resulted in, uh, Cuba
 747. sending 50,000 troops to Angola, and defeating the, uh, apartheid army at
 748. a battle called (??). I think that's '74 or something. Um, and this was a
 749. combined army of MPLA and SWAPO. And the Cubans. And uh, uh,
 750. South Africa was defeated for the first time in a military way. And Nelson
 751. Mandela says himself that this turned the tide, that this happened and on
 752. the outside the divestment movement is happening where Castro is
 753. threatening to, threatening to go directly to Pretoria militarily. And it was
 754. a launching pad in Angola. And so, the fact that economically it was
 755. ungovernable, that is what forced, uhm, the government to the table to talk
 756. to the ANC. And then also, too, at the same time you have the fall of the
 757. Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. And the reality is that those countries
 758. were a major material support for all of those movements. And when that
 759. fell, then the apartheid government understood that the economic options
 760. that an ANC government would have would be limited. Because their
 761. main pillar of support was gone. So they, the apartheid government said
 762. well they have a radical agenda if you look at the freedom charter and look
 763. at what the ANC says but they ain't gon' be able to do that when they
 764. come to power, because the balance in world forces have changed. Um,
 765. their main pillar of support is gone. So their options are gonna be
 766. narrower than what they want. So, if there's a time to make a deal, this is
 767. the time to make the deal when you look at this confluence of all this
 768. different stuff that's happening at this time, let's make a deal with them
 769. now.
770. DF: Mm hmm, right. Uh, how did you react to the Comprehensive Anti-
 771. Apartheid Act?
772. OC: I thought it was a step forward. I think it happened in the Reagan
 773. period right?
774. DF: Mm Hmm.
775. OC: Yeah, but they were forced to the table. They were forced to the
 776. table. You know, kicking and screaming. But of course they, they,
 777. they're dealing through the back door too at the time, at the time they're

778. kicking and screaming and doing this, but then they're still, you know
779. they're still working with the apartheid government at the same time, but
780. it was an advance. And um, you know, we saw it as an advance--a limited
781. one, but an advance. 'Cause it was a recognition that uh, um, you know
782. what was going on in South Africa with apartheid was not good.
783. DF: How did you react to Mandela's freeing--being freed?
784. OC: Uh it was a tremendous thing. I think I was off from work that day.
785. And I watched it all on television. Uh and it was a, it was something to
786. see. Because it was something that we never--we thought it was possible
787. that it would happen, but it might not happen in our lifetime, 'cause, you
788. know, we, 'cause, um, we saw South Africa as a protracted kind of
789. struggle. And we often thought he probably would die in prison. Uhh,
790. you know.
791. DF: Do you remember that day—
792. OC: Oh yeah.
793. DF: Who you were watching with?
794. OC: Yeah, it was me and Lisa, and I think uh, a guy named Ranell Musten
795. (??)--he's from the west side and um, he was in leadership of another
796. organization called National Anti-Imperialist Movement in Solidarity with
797. African Liberation, which we cooperated with. Uh I think he was there.
798. So I think we had like a, umm, Lisa may have a clearer view of this, but I
799. think we had like a viewing or something, it was a number of us. 'Cause
800. we couldn't--we knew when it was gonna happen, and I think a number of
801. us got together, but that's who I remember was in the room at the time.
802. DF: Um, how did your activism change, um, when Man, Mandela
803. became president? Or when he was freed actually. Let's start with that.
804. OC: Umm, I think it remained, it remained pretty much the same. But I do
805. think once he's elected to be president the issue becomes what do you do
806. then. A lot of people felt, well it's over, there's no more to do. And um,
807. unfortunately I think even the ANC thought that in terms of people they
808. had worked with around the world. Uhh, and, and that notion was bad
809. here and it was bad there too. I think. Um, because people, people can be
810. demobilized because like, just like here. People may say uh, Barack
811. Obama's elected to be president so we don't go to do nothin'. We don't
812. have to work around illiteracy, we don't have to work around the
813. homeless, we don't have to none of this stuff, because he 'gon make
814. everything okay. Same thing happened when Harold Washington became
815. mayor of Chicago, same kind of way, a lot of people became demobilized.
816. Or a lot of people who were part of social movements then gone into the
817. government. Like a Van Jones, you know, he gone and run environmental
818. stuff in the government, you know then, it's funky, he had to get out. But,
819. uh, so, so some people say it's better that Van Jones be out. Because if he
820. works for Barack, and then they gonna, you know hamstringing what he's
821. trying to do when he says stuff like that so it's better to be on the outside.
822. So um, um, but, but for Lisa and myself and some others we felt like you
823. know, you still continue to work because they still need, they still need

824. assistance--not necessarily material assistance, but they need a friendly
825. audience in the United States. Uh, so, when they, um, lobby for certain
826. policies relative to the United States directly to the US or in the United
827. Nations, uh, that, that you have a friendly ear. Uh, of a certain, certain
828. kind of, a certain sector, um, in the US. And some of this is changed now
829. too 'cause I know transAfrica along with the South African embassy is
830. having this big celebration in D.C. around the commemoration, the 40th
831. year of uh, of the uh, kind of anti-apartheid movement stuff. And the only
832. that's unfortunate about that you knowis, just, because it almost kind of
833. suggests that Randall Robertson was really starting this stuff forty years
834. ago but that's not really true. They were participating, they were reacting
835. to what was happening on the ground in the United States, there was work
836. that happened before, there was work that they did that was good work.
837. Because what they brought largely to it that made a difference was they
838. brought a lot of celebrities to it. You know Danny Glover and all these
839. other people, Harry Belafonte, and others. Uh, that, because they were
840. celebrities, it gave it this certain sort of flavor in the same way, you know
841. when um, Stevie Van Zant, you know, uh from the godfather but he don't
842. look like the guy that plays (??), you know when they did those concerts
843. and stuff, that was important. You know. Uh, um, because it gave--it
844. showed--it gave legitimacy and--to, to, to the anti-apartheid movement.
845. And there were people who might like Stevie Van Zant or who like this
846. particular artist or that particular artist who have no sense of South Africa
847. may be drawn to what is this about? Or why are they, you know, why are
848. they a part of this concern about this, stuff like that. So, uh, so that's not
849. to put down what they started, uh, uh, forty years ago. That's important.
850. And it, and it uhh, um, was a tremendous kind of boost, tremendous kind
851. of help, uh to get that sort of celebrity kind of focus. And then, then you
852. had movements too um, 'cause they, South Africa had like one of the
853. Bantustans, they had like um, a Las Vegas kind of place. It was called
854. Sun City. A Las Vegas kind of place. And, um, rich South Africans
855. would go to this Sun City sort of resort, and people around the world
856. would be, err, because South Africa used as a resort to suggest that, you
857. know, apartheid doesn't exist, and it was some kind of, it was more
858. integrated kind of thing. And so what they did is they tried to recruit
859. artists to, to go to Sun City and play. So, uh, I think Stevie Van Zant, they
860. got a song called "We Ain't Gonna Play Sun City," something like that.
861. Uh, that they put out, and they did a video. I think it's called "We Ain't
862. Gonna Play Sun City." Um, and there were different African-American
863. artists, R&B people, who were recruited to go there, and some of them
864. went and some of them didn't, um, to Sun City. But you had this, uh,
865. Harry Belafonte and others, they also had this uh, um, artist boycott. Not
866. only do you have the sports but you had the artist, you know. In other
867. words we ain't gonna, we're not gonna--like Arthur Ash, he wouldn't play
868. in South Africa. So you had, and Arthur Ash was part of this artist
869. boycott. Uh, so you had this going on. So you had this, this group of

870. artists around the country and around the world trying to pressure artists
 871. not to go to South Africa and play in Sun City. So you, so you had a
 872. whole lot of stuff going on, um, in different areas where people focus on
 873. different aspects. But, but you, but uh, you didn't do, didn't do uh, um,
 874. um, I mean didn't do a wide range but focus on something which was less
 875. open. Then also a huge influence on me was Prexy Nesbitt. 'Cause I
 876. know Prexy Nesbitt since I went to high school. Um, and, probably he
 877. was, I don't. I don't quite know why that is, I think probably he was the
 878. first person that I was in contact with in my latter years of high school
 879. who was involved um--even though we might look like we the same age,
 880. he's much older than me. Uh, but, I remember him from, he's been my
 881. friend since the 1960s, um, and we worked a lot together. And um, he
 882. probably, more than any other, any single individual has influenced my
 883. activity around uh souther Africa, so. 'Cause, you know, he's in it for the
 884. long haul. So.

885. DF: Yeah. How, how would you say he influenced you?

886. OC: Well, because he was consistent. I mean, he was steady, he was
 887. consistent, he always had a, it seems to me a healthy respect for the
 888. uniqueness of these movements. And he put me in touch with a lot of
 889. people in the movements and uh a lot of literature that I wasn't familiar
 890. with. 'Cause I'd go to his house and I'd see magazines were everywhere.
 891. Uh, and um, I became aware of a lot of, a lot of that uh, uh, through him.
 892. And then also too, he was particularly convinced of the necessity of, of
 893. pushing the freedom charter, um, the non racial aspect of the movement in
 894. South Africa, and highlighting, um, the role of progressive whites in South
 895. Africa, I think for two reasons. One reason is he feels and I feel too that
 896. white young people in the US have few progressive role models
 897. politically. It's not because they don't exist, it's because they don't know
 898. nothin about them. Whether we talking about the abolition movement,
 899. um, in the US, or the trade union movement in the US. A lot of things.
 900. Because, you know, the powers that be want to limit what role models
 901. people have. So, you know, he would be talking about (??) or Joe Slovo
 902. or a number of these people. And, and you think, that was hard for him to
 903. do, you know. I mean you in a society in which you know, 20 percent of
 904. the people govern 80 percent of the people, and you can have a relatively
 905. good life and to make the choice that they made might disown you from
 906. your family, totally, you know. So it's very difficult, so it's interesting to
 907. look at, um, those folks and what they did. It also suggest to, um, African
 908. Americans who might have felt white folks have no part in the movement,
 909. white folks are all the same. There's no point in attempting to appeal to
 910. them, to work with them, whatever. Look at the sacrifices these people
 911. made. People, I mean a lot of these people died. It was not easy for them
 912. to do. Now they don't represent the majority, but they represent a
 913. significant sector in the community that we know about. Uh, um, and um,
 914. he was always--this point was always central to him. Uh, central to him.
 915. So um, you know that was, that was important. And he work, he worked

916. with African Agenda for a while directly, though he moved around. Prexy
917. was in a lot of different organizations, but yeah.

918. DF: Um, what was your reaction to Mandela coming to the United States?
919. That first tour.

920. OC: Yeah, I saw a lot of that on TV and then um, we went to Detroit to
921. see him. We was sitting so far back I barely could see him, but we went to
922. Detroit. One of the worst flights I ever been on. Southwest Airlines. I
923. thought the plane was gonna crash, you know, it was really scary. But uh
924. we got there, you know, and we went to see him there. And then we got a
925. copy of that video, Mandela, I think it's called Mandela Coming to
926. America, or something like that. And I remember, uh, I remember hearing
927. a report on NPR--we were in New Mexico at the time, and Mandela was
928. in the Bay Area. And uh, NPR did a, kind of, video documentary on what
929. was going on. And they were talking to these Native Americans that in
930. the audience who were crying. Um, um, because they had come to see
931. him, and then he has some special audience with him, um, and he was
932. telling them that a lot of apartheid was modeled on the reservation system,
933. and um, they were aware of that. So, and um, the Bantustans had very
934. much in common with the reservations. And um, they were taken aback
935. by this, and felt that this exhibited a special connection. Uh, uh, uh, with
936. them. So, that was real, that was real uh, that was real moving. And then
937. also here you have this heroic figure that you never seen in real, in real
938. life. And this big iconic figure, but then a very kind of, humanistic kind of
939. person. Very down to earth. Um, and um, I think people were taken
940. aback by that. Then also people were taken aback by how he seemed to
941. know stuff. Because you know, one point in the video, Mandela Coming
942. to America, he goes to some reception and Spike Lee is there, and he, he
943. sees Joe Frazier and he starts (Otis puts up his fist in a mock boxing
944. position) and he's you, know with old Joe Frazier you know, and stuff like
945. that. So uh this is just, somebody who been in jail for the last 20 years or
946. so. And it's striking, it's striking. It's striking. But also there was
947. negative reaction to him too. You know in Miami there was a lot of
948. negative reaction to him because I think he had already been--he had
949. already been to Cuba. Umm, so there was a lot of negative reaction to him
950. too. And so yeah, I remember that. And um, because I remember a, uh,
951. news conference he was at in Miami. And um, some reporters asked him
952. well Fidel Castro, he a monster, he this, he that. So Mandela says well,
953. What I'll say to you is that during our dark days, when nobody knew who
954. we were or wouldn't support us, he supported us. In our dark days. So
955. I'm not prepared to dump my old friends for some folks that just showed
956. up. (Laughter.) And I'll say, you know, I'm your friend. He said, he said
957. what kind of person would do that? What kind of person would do that?
958. You know. And so then they say so where were you back in the dark
959. days (??), you know. So, ah, that uh, that struck me. But also what struck
960. me in a negative way when I was seeing him on the Oprah show. Is that,
961. the interviews with him play down the movement in focus completely on

962. him--even though he'll say, why did you do this, it's because of the ANC
 963. I'm a disciplined member of the ANC I didn't do this all by myself, but it,
 964. it, it plays on the, the, the great person, heroic figure over, over, over the
 965. movement. And that's the way the interviews tended to be, without going
 966. into any kind of depth about the breadth of the movement or the problems
 967. or the contradictions or stuff like that, it's all about his personal, it's all
 968. about his personal sacrifice. You know? Uh, uh like that. So that uh, you
 969. know, that is kind of a negative side, that they got publicity by him
 970. coming here. They hadn't before but still often times people would watch
 971. the media they would, they would not have learned a whole lot. Because
 972. it's all focused centrally on him and not, not uh, and not more than that.
 973. DF: Um, what, what form does your uh, activism take today?
 974. OC: I don't do very much. I may be on sabbatical or semi-retired.
 975. DF: (Laughter) Ha, yeah.
 976. OC: (Luaghter). But it mostly takes the activism on the internet,
 977. circulating stuff I see on the internet that uh, that uh people may not be,
 978. may not be aware of--and also I think uh, talking to folks at work about
 979. health care bill, different stuff like that. 'Cause it's amazing, you know,
 980. like, the hospital I work at. I would say the majority of people there, they
 981. don't support uh, universal health care.
 982. DF: Really?
 983. OC: Yeah. It's just, I don't know, it's bizarre. But it's interesting to hear
 984. them talk. So um, um—
 985. DF: What's their uh, what's their, are they afraid of like, like uh, I don't
 986. know, death panels and like, all that crazy—
 987. OC: I think, see I think that Americans too often are concerned solely with
 988. their own personal family circumstances. And they don't see the broader
 989. picture that you may be without a job next week. Right? So therefore you
 990. need to be concerned about the fact that health care's connected to jobs,
 991. you lose your job, you don't have no health care. And some jobs don't
 992. have it anyway, 'cause they wanna make everybody part-time so they have
 993. no benefits, essentially. So you gotta have a broader sense. And people
 994. say, well I don't want to pay for that. You know, I don't want to pay, you
 995. know. But also too you know, Lisa would argue, the social na--the social
 996. network systems that they have in Italy or France or Great Britain or
 997. Germany, Sweden, places like that, that these systems developed largely
 998. in the 1940s and that pop, populations were more homogenous, and now
 999. that that population is a lot more heterogenous with a lot more immigrants
 1000. in their country from Africa, stuff like that, it might be difficult to invoke
 1001. this. Uh, uh, ha, to develop that kind of thing. Uh, then I think too that a
 1002. lot of people want a multi-tier system. They want people to go to Stroger,
 1003. and they want people to go to Northwestern.
 1004. DF: Right, right.
 1005. OC: And the people that go to Stroger, they don't want them to be at
 1006. Northwestern with them. You know, I mean I think that that's the
 1007. elephant that's in the room. Because a lot of stuff, it just doesn't you

1008. know--because when we were in Europe uh, maybe three years ago,
1009. visiting, uh, her younger brother lives in Sweden, Lisa's brother. He's got
1010. two, uh, kids, they're in their 20s. Middle or late twenties. You know we
1011. were in Sweden talking to them, and all the people were, people in
1012. Sweden, they think people in the United States are crazy. They said, you
1013. know, like they watch FOX News and stuff, and they say, people actually
1014. believe that stuff?
1015. DF: Right.
1016. OC: And we say yeah.
1017. DF: Yeah.
1018. OC: They said boy, uhh uhh. So um, uh, people are just so unaware of
1019. what exists in the world. They think that the US system, health care
1020. system, is the best system, and health care is not rationed. I said why do
1021. we have an army of social workers and case managers in the hospital that
1022. you see here walking around every day going through charts. They try to
1023. kick the people out! And the social workers are telling you what your
1024. options are, what you can't get. But the notion that if you have health
1025. insurance, you can have anything you want. And, and then when you tell
1026. them that, they don't have, they can't come back then, you know.
1027. DF: Right, yeah.
1028. OC: Well like, just to digress for another second, before we go back to
1029. this. This hospital that I worked at recently asked people to reenroll for
1030. the next year for health care. Right? But they have a new stipulation.
1031. You can not have your spouse on your policy like our family was, unless
1032. your spouse is unemployed, or your spouse is self-employed or doesn't
1033. have, have of that, his or her job. So they got to have a separate policy.
1034. Now, what families have done since I can remember, if both were
1035. employed, if both had health care and insurance at their jobs, they look at
1036. both plans, and see which one is the best, and they choose that one, the
1037. family plan, right? This job--that was a non-profit hospital I used to work
1038. at, which was (??) Hospital, but it went out of business and was bought by
1039. for-profit company. And they're making this stipulation in their
1040. insurance. , so people are saying what is this? I ain't never heard of this.
1041. But their trying to reduce their risk. We'll have to pay for you, but we
1042. ain't gonna pay for your husband. (Laughter). You know, uh, uh, um,
1043. um, that kind of thing. So actually, related to this, when we were working
1044. around South Africa, you know, you know, we might umm try to use
1045. certain models, you know. Um, you know, for, um, to argue even for stuff
1046. here. 'Cause part of why people's view here are so narrow of what's
1047. possible is they don't know nothing. And what they watch on TV,
1048. supposedly left and right, ain't really left and right. There's a right, but
1049. there ain't no left, it's the middle. You know, they don't even know, uh,
1050. what's possible, you know. So, um, Michael Moore does SICKO and you
1051. know, it resonates a bit and then PBS does a special and then uh, um,
1052. HBO did a special, piggy-backing on what he did, basically saying the
1053. same thing he said, yea what he said is true. You know, what he said is

1054. true, so. But that's a digression but—
1055. DF: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. We're in a rough spot right now.
1056. OC: Yeah.
1057. DF: Alright, uh, what did you learn from being in the anti-apartheid
1058. movement looking back on it now?
1059. OC: Well I think looking back on it now is that um, it's possible to win
1060. despite the odds. Uh, because when you look at it, when you look at these
1061. countries that freed themselves from the yolk of colonialism and
1062. apartheid, they faced very difficult odds. Uh, uh either because of, of
1063. numbers or power. But they were prepared to sacrifice whatever was
1064. necessary to win. Uh, and to fight for a better life. And what it has to do
1065. with is that, um, you have to believe that, one, you can no longer live this
1066. way, and whatever is necessary to break out of this has to be done despite
1067. the sacrifices. And I'm sure that a lot of things were sacrificed in terms
1068. of people's lives, their health, their mental sanity and a variety of things.
1069. So there is a lot of broken lines in South Africa from these movement
1070. people and their families. Um, but, it's something that you have to do.
1071. And it's winnable. And unfortunately see people think that, you know,
1072. this stuff is not winnable. And, and the government can do whatever they
1073. want, the corporations--they in the minority, the folks, and there's no point
1074. in struggling against them. But these other struggles in fact show you that
1075. it's possible for them, for, for you to be able to win. Despite, despite the
1076. odds. You know, uh. And I think that's important because the example,
1077. just like Cuba is an example, whatever it's contradictions are. Cuba is a
1078. inspiration to the people in the Caribbean, Central America and South
1079. America. That you can win.
1080. (Otis's wife Lisa walks down from upstairs and speaks)
1081. Lisa Brock: Now Otis—
1082. OC: What?
1083. LB: I'm sure he told you it's supposed to be 90 minutes.
1084. OC: Yeah I don't know how long we goin, you can, you can—
1085. DF: Naw we're doing alright (I glance at the timer on the recorder, it's at
1086. about 78 minutes, and I do not realize that the recording began as a
1087. different file, about 8 minutes long.)
1088. OC: He's asking me the last questions
1089. DF: Yeah, we're doing alright. (Lisa laughs in the background.)
1090. OC: You can win. See, see so it's one thing to struggle if you have no
1091. examples of nobody in the world ever winning. That's even more
1092. difficult. But if you have examples of other people winning, that's should
1093. inspire you. That this can be done. Um, so, um, and then also too is says
1094. to me that it's possible to have--not, not that we don't have examples in
1095. US history--it's possible to have a broad anti-racial nonracial movement.
1096. And that's the antidote to the kind oppression that exists in South Africa,
1097. as well as in the United States. But that's what you gotta have, that's gotta
1098. be , however much you have to struggle to develop that kind of vehicle.
1099. That's what you have to do. That's what you have to do. Uh, and um,

1100. you know, I think that's kinda really the last thing that--lesson for me.
1101. DF: Mm Hmm. Um, looking back what are you most proud of?
1102. OC: Everything. Having done what I did.
1103. DF: Yeah? Everything?
1104. OC: 'Cause maybe, maybe when I die they can say it in my eulogy. That
1105. he did something.
1106. DF: You'll live on in the, uh, Columbia library archives.
1107. OC: Yeah, he did something.
1108. DF: So um, how does that, that entire part of your life define who you are
1109. now and how you, how you move forward?
1110. OC: Um, it's central. You know it's central. I mean, um, (Lisa brings me
1111. a new glass of water and I say thank you), it makes you feel, it makes you
1112. feel, its gives you worth. That, that you, it gives you worth that you did
1113. something, you participated in something that was not directly related to
1114. you, it did not effect your day-to-day life. But you thought it was
1115. important to be a part of a broad movement in support of some folks that
1116. for the most part you don't know and you will never see. Um, but that's
1117. part of being a human being, to have that kind of concern, and that, and
1118. that, and that kind of uh, you know, and that kind of commitment. So.
1119. DF: Mm Hmm. Um, what would you have done differently in the
1120. movement?
1121. OC: Ummm,
1122. LB: You should take him to the train, too.
1123. OC: Yeah, yeah I'll do that. I'll do that, I'll do that.
1124. DF: Nah don't worry about it.
1125. OC: Yeah, I'll do that.
1126. LB: If it's the door, I ordered some pizza, I'm hungry.
1127. OC: Okay. I don't know that, I don't know that I would have done
1128. anything differently. Umm—
1129. DF: That's, that's an acceptable answer.
1130. OC: Yeah, right. 'Cause I don't think that uh, I don't think that I made
1131. any um, unnecessary enemies. I mean had I been narrow and not uh, had a
1132. broader view to work with people who, who uh, may have had different
1133. thoughts, um, about the struggle, that I wouldn't-a thought that way. But I
1134. think that I, um, the regret I think I had was that I didn't start at an earlier
1135. age. I started like about 19. I would have liked to, you know start earlier.
1136. DF: Um, what challenges do you see South Africa facing today?
1137. OC: Well they have the challenges of overcoming, overcoming their
1138. economic, political and sort of, um, resource legacies of apartheid. Um,
1139. the education inequalities and--'cause I remember hearing the former
1140. South African minister of justice--was it the minister of justice? Minister
1141. of justice, which would be the equivalent of the attorney general here. He
1142. was being interviewed on NPR. And the interviewer was asking about
1143. crime, high crime rate in South Africa. And he says yeah you know we
1144. have a lot of social leveling going on. So he says what do you mean,
1145. social leveling? He says well, if you have tremendous social inequalities,

1146. economic inequalities in a society, the have-nots are gonna attempt to get
1147. what they ain't got. Now if they cannot get it through legal means--being
1148. employed, and educated and all that, then they gone steal it. So the
1149. answer tot he high crime rate in South Africa is not the cul-de-sac-ing of
1150. communities--the building walls, electric wires, and walling ourself out.
1151. Because, I mean, Lisa talked about South Africa and, South Africa, many
1152. of these cities they're very walled up. And you know, gated communities
1153. and all the rest of this. He said because this will not solve this question in
1154. the long term. And I thought, you would never hear an attorney general in
1155. the United States talk about crime in that kind of way. Right? That's not
1156. to say we don't have some psychopaths and criminals and da-da-da-da.
1157. But never, you would--I ain't never heard an attorney general talk about
1158. the economic basis for criminality in this society.
1159. DF: Right, right.
1160. OC: And it's reproduction. You know, so, uh, that discourse was just
1161. completely different than you would ever hear. You know, that you would
1162. ever hear. Because there's no--it's like, the fault--the criminals at fault.
1163. Every single one of them. They don't have no justification, there's no
1164. reason why they are doing what they are doing.
1165. DF: Mm Hmm. Yeah. This isn't a perfect analogy but it reminds me, I
1166. was just hearing somebody talk about uh, the, you know, what
1167. responsibility we have for the violence in Mexico right now and they were
1168. saying, I mean, like, the demand in America for illicit drugs is so
1169. astronomical, I mean, that's what's fueling the entire thing, that—
1170. OC: Right.
1171. DF: It's right on the border, you know—
1172. OC: Right.
1173. DF: The worst of it. So, you know, and nobody will talk about it in those
1174. terms.
1175. OC: Right right right.
1176. DF: You know, it's not a, a US problem.
1177. OC: Right, right, right, right. Yeah, yeah. Well I was debating a buddy at
1178. work, he was talking about immigration, you know, illegal immigration in
1179. Mexico, and I said, now why would somebody leave their native land—
1180. DF: Family.
1181. OC: Native land, family, uh a country in which the language is their
1182. language, to come to a cold ass place for the most part. Why would they
1183. do that? Why would they do that? So, this whole migration from the
1184. south, basically what it is--all over the world, from the south to the north,
1185. all over the world for economic opportunities and jobs and the like. All
1186. these people leaving, not because they want to, because they been ripped
1187. off, historically, and so they can't make a living and they're moving this
1188. way. And so, no amount of fences you have is gonna prevent that. That's
1189. what's 'gon happen. So if you have more social equality in the country,
1190. that will--in the world, that will lessen this, this, these mass movements of
1191. people from the south to the north, coming to places for, for um, for uh

1192. rich resources. Then Lisa tells another story, when she was in London
1193. there's a place in London called Speaker's corner. And every Sunday
1194. they're, and there're people, you know literally standing on soapboxes
1195. giving different schpiels and uh, inciting the people, radical folks and
1196. others. So, she says she went there one time when she was in London
1197. doing research and it was this--trying to think, it was this--it's this West
1198. Indian guy, whose making all kinds of insults about the British and stuff,
1199. how they look and dress and stuff like that. Then there's an Indian guy,
1200. whose his sidekick, who after he says something says 'smell this.' And
1201. the guy says some more, he says 'taste that!' And somebody says--oh
1202. yeah this guy's from Gha--from Guyana, and this other guys is Pakistani
1203. or something, and so he does on insulting people, and then uh, people,
1204. they're getting mad, they're getting mad. So, somebody says, well why
1205. are you here? Why are you here? You know. So then he starts taling
1206. about all this stuff from the British museum, and how Britain had this
1207. huge empire and got all these resources from all over the world and that's
1208. how they became a major imperial power. He said, we are here to take the
1209. riches back.
1210. DF: Haha.
1211. OC: That's why we're here. Haha! (Laughter) That's why we here. But
1212. they worked, they worked the crowd up into a fit, and the guy would say
1213. 'smell this, taste this' (Laughter). You know, so, uh, um, yeah. Yeah.
1214. DF: Mm kay.
1215. OC: Alright
1216. DF: We're about done.