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Interview with Curtis Black

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JEREMY CAIRNS: Alright, my name is Jeremy Cairns. I will be interviewing—can you please state your name?

CURTIS BLACK: Curtis Black.

JC: Curtis Black. The date of the interview is Thursday, April 22\textsuperscript{nd}. Place of interview is the Columbia College Library. Um, can you tell me what years you were active against apartheid?

CB: I was particularly active probably 1977 or '78. And then—there were sort of two phases of, of activity, at the University of Chicago. The first time I was a student there. That would be in the late seventies. For—really a year I think, in particular. And then the second time was in the 80’s, it was 1985 and uh, I don’t know, ’86. Most, probably about a year then too. And I was a staff member then, I was a clerical worker in-- steward in the-- in the Clerical Workers Union.

JC: Where were you active then?

CB: That was the University of Chicago.

JC: Right. Okay. Uh, what year were you born?

CB: 1957.

JC: And where were you born?


JC: Where were you raised?

CB: Same place.

JC: Same place. Where was your father born?

CB: Butler, Pennsylvania, which is a bit north of Pittsburg.

JC: Where was your mother born?

CB: Um, Rochester, New York.

JC: What is your earliest memory—ever (laughs)?

CB: I—uh—I have a memory of being stung by a bee when I was about two. That’s probably it.

JC: (laughs) Uh, what was your hometown like?

CB: It was a suburb of New York, it was uh—it was uh—you know it was—you could play—it was before there were cars all up and down the street, you could play in the street. It was a nice
place to grow up. It was also um—integrated. I mean there was—whites and blacks and there was uh, rich and poor and uh—

JC: How did you—who did you grow up with? Like the friends that you had or um, the family members you grew up with?

CB: Oh I had a sister. I had a few friends. I—I don’t know how to describe it (laughs).

JC: (laughs) Um, what role did religion play in your childhood?

CB: Um—well, we went to a—when I was a—I moved about when I was about ten to a somewhat older part of the town that was um—that was integrated and we went to a church that was across the street, The United Church of Christ and um—that was very uh, focused on social justice and social action and stuff.

JC: Um—

CB: So, and I got pretty involved in that.

JC: How long did, did you stay involved throughout your, throughout most of your life?

CB: No really through high school I became uh—yeah. Really through, through high school, I guess.

JC: What was your favorite holiday?

CB: Christmas, I guess?

JC: (laughs) Um, what did you do with your family on weekends?

CB: I didn’t—I uh—I—it’s hard for me to remember uh—I don’t remember specific family activities.

JC: Do you remember anything, like did you guys go to the zoo a lot? Or did you ever—was there a park near, near your home that you would go to?

CB: I would play with my friends, I think—is what I remember. And um—I would uh—in the s—oh, uh—I often—or I don’t know how often, but occasionally there’d be projects around the house where I was supposed to help my father, that kind of thing and—yeah I don’t remember really—I don’t—

JC: (laughs)

CB: I don’t specifically remember what we did, or what—like what I did with my sister, we were sort of—ya know, separate.

JC: Right.
CB: Had separate tracks.

JC: Uh, what rules did your parents have?

CB: Um—uh—I don’t, I don’t remember!

JC: (laughs) For instance any that were—

CB: I had to—I had to—they had to know where—I think they had to know where I was, I was usually home at—we had dinner together—I don’t remember them as rules, but ya know I—I uh—I had responsibilities—around uh—particularly around music lessons I took through high school and um—jobs I had. Um--and I don’t remember there being a specific time I was supposed to be home, but I was home every night.

JC: Sure.

CB: Uh—I don’t—I mean I would say they were not—I, I, uh—somewhat strict, but I can’t think of any rules that they had. I mean not—unflexible or unreasonable, but a little bit old school.

JC: Um, who was the disciplinarian of your parents?

CB: Mmm, probably my father, mostly.

JC: Uh, which parent were you closest to?

CB: Uh—I, I don’t know. Either, either. Depends.

JC: Sure. How did you get to school?

CB: Um—there was a—well we walked. And then as the schools were bigger they got farther away and there was a bus but often I walked in high school. All the kids in my neighborhood would—take the bus except me and a friend who later went in the Green Berets and still like gets sent over to uh—Iraq and stuff.

JC: Sure. Wow.

CB: And he and I would walk—it was uh, it was uh—was a kind of long way, some miles.

JC: Sure. Um, who was your best friend in grade school? Was it?

CB: No, uh, it—no, in grade s—I—um, there was a kid who lived down the street from us, he was my best.

JC: Do you remember his name?

CB: David.
JC: David. Um, who was your favorite teacher?

CB: In—um, probably the guy who taught Honors English. The chairman of the English department.

JC: Sure. Did you have, so you took his class? Was that a really powerful class for you then? Did you—

CB: Uh, He was really intimidating and he liked to hold forth and say sort of outrageous things. He was as entertaining as anything. I guess he was kind of challenging he was always challenging students to um, think and that kind of thing.

JC: Uh, what kind of things did you do uh, by yourself when you were younger?

CB: Well, I did, ya know, I played piano and trumpet and—uh, read a lot.

JC: What was your um, favorite genre of books to read?

CB: Probably history.

JC: Um, what did you do uh, in the community? Were there any uh, clubs that you could join or that you did join?

CB: There was little league, there was uh—there was uh—um, ya know music and sometimes you’d start a band with people.

JC: Did you start a band?

CB: Uh, sev—yeah, yeah, well I mean not too—You can—it’s easy to start a band, that doesn’t give you, make, make a band. I mean, yeah. There was, there was times though—I mean there were people in White Plains who were fairly serious musicians. I was in a R&B band for a while and I was, I was a guy who had a big band, had all the charts. And there was uh, yeah so some--and, and, and I did hook up with some friends and make a pretty—several, a couple times make.

JC: What did you want to be when you grew up?

CB: Prob—I, I probably wanted to be a writer and a musician.

JC: Okay um, what do you remember in part—

CB: Oh no, I wanted to be a minister.

JC: A minister (chuckles).

CB: That’s right.

JC: So was your plan to go to um—oh I can’t remember what it’s called.
CB: I didn’t have much of a plan. And I didn’t know—ya know I went to college and that was it for that.

JC: Sure. What do you remember in particular from middle school? Any specific memories or—

CB: The first that comes to mind is—um—is uh—walking out of school for Vietnam Auditorium. I had to walk out of math class, it was like the first class of the day, I felt kinda bad. And it was a young math teacher and I had been—I had like given her a hard time about why—what was the point of studying math, ya know? And she didn’t know quite how to answer it. But, ya know, she tried.

JC: Um, how was high school different from middle school for you?

CB: Ugh—I don’t know. I really don’t know.

JC: What was your favorite class in high school then? Oh was that your, your honors English class?

CB: Yeah, yeah.

JC: Um, what college did you want to go to?

CB: Oh, uh—I do—I think that I, my father had n attraction to this Great Books thing that was still kind of popular uh—ya know—like in the fifties or sixties they’d have adult study groups that got together and ya know—and the schools that did that was the University of Chicago and St. Johnson’s, I visited, St. John’s and I thought that would be cool. But I ended up going to U of C. I don’t know exactly how that happened.

JC: (laughs) Um, so then why did you go to, to UIC is that—

CB: University of Chicago.

JC: Because you—were you cornered into it? Is that why you ended up going?

CB: No, although it was the only school that accepted me and, and in retrospect, I wasn’t—I had such good scores I wonder if I didn’t send them all. I was very resistant to applying to college. For some reason I—ya know I, it was some adolescent thing. It’s a long time ago, Jeremy (laughs).

JC: (laughs) Um, when you got to UIC what did you—

CB: U of C.

JC: U of C? I’m sorry, U of C, what did you major in?
CB: Um, ya know I took all the liberal arts type classes, and I was signed up as a English major but I didn’t uh—succeed with that. I didn’t graduate. I—I started writing for the school paper and other stuff. And um—so I was officially an English major to answer your question.

JC: Sure. Um, where did you work while you were in college?

CB: I worked—mainly I worked in the cafeteria as a dish washer. For the last couple years—or year.

JC: Did you have any other jobs, like outside of the school?

CB: No, I had some other jobs in the school. I—I can’t remember exactly. One was um—sitting in an information—the, the ticket booth at the, at the—at the Mandel Hall. One—there may have been something else, I don’t remember.

JC: What is Mandel Hall? Is that a—

CB: It’s like their performance place.

JC: Oh okay. For like music concerts?

CB: It was like a booth. There would—I guess I sold tickets but it was mainly—I don’t—ya know, it was like an information place.

JC: Sure. Oh okay.

CB: Ya know, mainly uh—ya know people would come and talk to you for a long time (laughs).

JC: (laughs)

CB: It was a place where—for lonely people to go to find someone to bend their ear. That was my experience of the job (laughs).

JC: (laughs) Um, so how did you become aware of apartheid?

CB: Well—I was very aware of the Civil Rights movement. It was—it was, ya know, current. When I was a little kid and it was, to me, ya know the most inspiring and heroic thing these people were doing really courageous things and not only that, but they were—ya know it was a moment—it was an interesting moment. Cause before the Vietnam war and the riots—well they were starting to happen then. But—there was this feeling that America was on the verge of fulfilling it’s potential as a democracy, ya know at least for white liberals might have felt that way. And um—and it all kind of fell apart. Really, fairly quickly. That sense. But uh—so I was aware of uh—and reading about them and following the Civil Rights movement and—somehow or other I became—I don’t know how—but in seventh grade I got uh—gang pressed into doing something after school. Social studies project where I was supposed to pick a subject. And I—so I sent uh—so I picked apartheid. Although I think I was studying Rhodesia.
JC: (laughs)

CB: And um—I don’t—I didn’t do anything with it except send away for information and uh, my social studies teacher didn’t connect me with the liberation movements for some reason. I got all these type, types, scripts, miniograph (??) stuff from Rhodesia. And um—I think I got some stuff from the United Nations. And uh—or didn’t. I’m not sure. And um—I only remember the stuff from Rhodesia which was defending their system. So—I was aware of it at that point—I’m not sure how it came to, ya know?

JC: Right. So how old were you when you became active against apartheid.

CB: Um—I was about twenty. Nineteen or twenty.

JC: So it was when you were at U of C.

CB: Mhmm.

JC: Where were you living when you became active? Did you live in the dorms at U of C, did you—

CB: That’s an interesting question. I think—actually I had just moved out of the dorms into an apartment and um—that uh summer, it was a summer. And uh—there was—it was on a corner building of a block and the three other corner buildings were going condo. And that was 1979. So it’s 1979 so I’m twenty one and um—and uh—me and some roommates and the neighbors—these radical students lived downstairs. Uh—went to a meeting and um they asked for someone to write a paper about it for the Maroon. A volunteer. So I—my roommate volunteered me. So—really that summer I kind of covered that stuff. And then when school started I kind of assigned myself to being the movement reporter. Ya know, and the big progressive movement on campus was divestment so that was sort of what my connection to it was. Really writing for it for the Chicago Maroon really was my main ya know—I mean and then I would also demonstrate.

JC: How long did you um, how long were you writing for the Maroon?

CB: Um—a—ya know I think I wrote for them my last year of college and then another year after that when I wasn’t finishing college.

JC: Uh-huh.

CB: Ya know, and it was fairly common at U of C to have people out of class and people at the Maroon who were working too hard to do their class w—ya know, there was always this—people had funny statuses which I ended up being in. Um—so I think a couple of years pretty much.
JC: Um, what political party did you associate yourself with? When you were first becoming active?

CB: Yeah uh—I would say none—I think I was sympathetic with the Citizen’s Party in 1980. I think I was unenthusiastic about uh—so this would be when Jimmy Carter was president, I think I was unenthusiastic about him. I think uh—I, I—ya know I had been—my first political stuff was working with Eugene McCarthy running for president in sixty-eight when I was about uh, ten. And a few other electoral things after that and then—the Democrats were not so exciting.

JC: (laughs)

CB: I mean, I still followed them and I followed George McGovern but I didn’t work for him and I—there was candidates I liked in seventy-six. I liked, Fred Harris for some—but I, ya know I wasn’t really very active until um, um I got drafted to write this story.

JC: Who—

CB: And then—go ahead.

JC: (laughs) Who was the first person you voted for then.

CB: Well, yeah I don’t—

JC: Ever.

CB: Oh, it was uh—uh, so the first time I registered was 1977 because Harold Washington was running for Mayor. Uh—that was when he didn’t win. Is that right? Seventy-seven—yeah, that sounds right. And then I—because I went to New York for—I dropped out of college and went to New York for a half a year. And missed that election. So the first person I voted for, I have no idea.

JC: (laughs)

CB: So I—I don’t know.

JC: (laughs)

CB: I remember—so 1980 was Reagan and Carter. I have no idea. I—first person I remember voting for was like—Carol Mosey (?) Burn running for State Representative. And that—that would have been eighty—eighty-two—I don’t know though I could, I may have voted before that. And, yeah.

JC: Sure. Why—did you become an activist? Would you call yourself an activist?
CB: I guess so, I’m more of a—journalist who is—who see’s my work as sort of, supporting movements for change. I’ve never been that great at working with people (laughs). I mean I had enough trouble connecting with you to do this interview.

JC: (laughs)

CB: (laughs) So uh—I mean I’ve always more so seen myself as like a movement journalist, I guess. Than—and there have been times when I participated in organizations and I—and uh, uh ya know like, like with the uh—divestment stuff, the first set there—I was not part of the group that was organizing stuff, I was part of the group that would respond, go to their meetings and things when they called me. And the second one, I think I was on their committee. On the committee that plans stuff.

JC: Mhm.

CB: And uh—but the question, why? Uh-uh, it was something to do.

JC: (laughs)

CB: It seemed like really important, it seemed like the most important I—ya know, I think, I think it’s a value from my parents that uh—I think my father had the value that artistic activity was the most important thing you can do. And my mother had the value that political activity was the most important thing you could do.

JC: So your parents were supportive then, of what you were doing.

CB: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, they were. More activists than me ya know, in their way. Mmm.

JC: Um, how did their uh, views conflict with yours? If they did at all?

CB: They didn’t much I mean I remember my father like threatening me if I didn’t vote for the—ya know, friendly way. If I didn’t vote for the Democratic candidate for president and me saying, “Ah, he’s a bum.” I don’t remember which one it was. That’s the only—conflict I can remember (laughs and sniffles).

JC: So where were you employed when you first started being active? Would that be at your, at that newspaper, the Maroon?

CB: Yeah there wasn’t a job—I think that I was working as a dishwasher at the time, mmm—yeah I was. I know I was. In one of the cafeteria’s on campus.

JC: Uh what, what anti-apartheid group did you join then?

CB: Um, it was—uh the Action Committee for Free South for—Action Committee on South Africa? Action committee. Yeah I think that’s right. It was the Action Committee and uh, whether, yeah. That’s right.
JC: What was it like being in that group?

CB: Um, they were uh, it was fun. They were fun. They were bright, young, committed people. Intelligent, interesting they were the most ya know, interesting people. They liked to have fun. They liked to—do all the fun things kids do in college (laughs). So it was fun (laughs).

JC: Can you describe the structure of that organization?

CB: Uh, I, like I said, I wasn’t plugged in to the—I don’t have, I don’t specifically recall how they made plans or they, they negotiated with the administration and all that stuff. I think I was hearing about that rather than being there, there must have been um, some kind of—committee that—was undertaking all of that stuff. And I was uh—going to meetings and doing jobs and putting up fliers and writing about it also. So, um, the year before I started with that they, they had had a really excellent reporter at the Chicago Maroon who had done all of this investigation in to the University’s investments in corporations that did business with South Africa. So—I didn’t pick up on that much at all, I sort of covered their events, ya know. Um—but it was a student organization uh—I don’t know how to describe it, the structure.

JC: How did you participate in divestment, is that what you were talking about?

CB: How did I participate—

JC: Mhmm. Was it mostly through um, um your writing as a journalist or were you—

CB: It was most—it was as I said, it was most, it was probably mostly through that, but I did everything else and was like on Tapta (?), oh I remember when I—I went to one meeting and I got assigned to ask professors for donations to the committee. That was like my first, one of my first meetings and I volunteered to do that for some crazy reason. I’m real—it turns out I’m really bad at that.

JC: (laughs)

CB: I didn’t collect a penny (laughs).

JC: (laughs)

CB: And uh, gosh (laughs). So as, as I said my memory is not—what it should be, so yeah, I went to some—yeah so, I’m just not remembering exactly how much involved I was. Wha—oh what did I, what was the question?

JC: How did you participate in divestment?

CB: Um—the main thing was uh—doin’ these big sort of ‘think’ pieces for the Maroon about how—and the point, the thing that I was learning and trying to pass on was how capitalist investment in south Africa was supposed to be the, the sorta myth about it was that it was
supposed to be bringing, laying the groundwork for a democratic society and it was doing the
exact opposite. It was bulstering a, the repressive society and it was uh—replicating a lot of uh,
inequality and all this kind of stuff. So the main thing I did was write these sort of big ‘think’
pieces um, does that uh, ya know, kind of layed that out. And then covering their events. But,
yeah I did, yeah.

JC: Can you remember any other um, really strong pieces that you wrote that were, to um, to
inform about what was going on?

CB: Well see we had a big forum. We had a big forum and it was the night, it was in February of
1979. They brilliantly, I think the university brilliantly planned it for the primary night, which
was the night that Jane Bermury (?) won the primary so there was no coverage of this event.
Um, but it was sort of the culmination of the work. And uh, so I did uh, one, a couple big pieces
before that and report on that. And um, I think it was that summer I did a book review of a
Steve—a Steve Beeco book. A book of his writings and the transcript of his trial. That was a
big, big piece that I did. Um, I don’t—specifically remember any others, at that point. Later on,
okay like in the eightes I did more. Like uh—one, one kind of important piece I did, to me was
um, just analyzing the university’s position, which was um—luckily I just read it last night.

JC: (laughs)

CB: Which was, um that they invested in companies that acted in accordance with the Sullivan
Principles, you’re familiar with them?

JC: Yes.

CB: Um—

JC: Could you actually just talk about the Sullivan Principles—

CB: It was uh, it was uh—it was a rating system where corporations kind of reported really
minimal information, how much, how many employees and what their race was and things like
that. And they got rated satisfactory, needs more work, that kind of thing. So it was sort of a—it
was a—the a--creation of a minister from the United States, a civil rights activist, at one point
who was kind of un—trying to provide some cover for corporations to justify their involvement
in South Africa as some kind of progressive force for change. So and, and I worked with another
person on this committee and um, Nadine McGann (?) who did this article, which analyzed,
which ya know, went through the portfolio and looked at ya know, there’s this many
corporations they’re invested in, this many are rated as unsatisfactory by the Sullivan, this many
have not given any information to the Sullivan, their signidories (?), but they haven’t given
them any reports. And then they said that they relied on, ya know this uh, investor reporting
system and that they weren’t giving information. And then we broke down ya know, of those
who did report, their workforce was like eighty percent white. In a country which is sixteen
percent white, ya know? So uh, ya know and that kind of thing. We sort of broke, broke down, we sort of did analyze investment portfolio in terms of what their claims were uh, as being a progressive force. Ya know, their specific claims and kind of tried to debunk that. Um—that was in the Grey City Journal which was a supplement of—and then in 1980, we’d, we’d all a bunch of us had started this newspaper, Haymarket. So I did several things for that, the main big thing is this giant, multi-part interview with Prexy Nesbitt in 1985 which was sort of—I don’t remember what the occasion for it was. Ya know, it was our fifteenth anniversary. Uh, uh it came out, I, I don’t recall if it was designed to be handed out at the conference or something, but it was, ya know, my attempt to do a really comprehensive view of uh, of the apartheid, the anti-apartheid movement and the apartheid system and everything at that moment. From—I, I—yeah. Yeah I don’t remember what that specific goal of this was.

JC: Um, what, what events did U of C participate in? Besides, or were there specific uh, events that, that the Action Committee would go to?

CB: Okay there’s the Action Committee in seventy-nine and the—committee in eighty-five was called—had some different name. Um, in, in seventy-nine I do recall us going down, and it was cold. And I recall this probably because there’s a photo of it, of a, and picketing at a bank. Probably First Chicago. These are banks that don’t exist anymore, Continental Illinois, they were both involved. Um, and then there were—there were many events where they’d show a movie or bring a speaker from South Africa. Ya know, it was a, and a—one time I went to, one time—this was off-campus, it was at the uh, some kind of national—uh, on Drexel Boulevard there was a black college of law, of some kind. And uh, I think it was a clothing drive for refugees and I got there way—right on time, way before anyone else. And it was, the uh—the ambassador from the UN from the ANC who was staying there and he said “here just come into his room” and I sat down and he was writing letters.

JC: And did you get to talk to him?

CB: And then we talked for a little while.

JC: What did you guys talk about?

CB: Nothing much.

JC: (laughs)

CB: I don’t remember.

JC: (laughs)

CB: I don’t think it was uh, ya know, uh, I may have asked him a technical question or two (laughs).

JC: What was his name?
CB: Johnny Makitini.

JC: Johnny Makitini.


JC: Was um, was going to that the first protest, or was that the first—

CB: That was later on.

JC: —event that you participated in?

CB: No, that was later on. Uh, whether it was in seventy-nine or 1980. The first—I don’t know, it was probably—the first, I mean I think there were a number of programs um—in the fall of seventy-nine. There was a picket downtown at this bank and that was when it was called. And then in February there was this giant uh, debate where the president of the university had to go up and, with a, someone from the South African Foundation, also supporting investment. Had to go up against someone from the South Africa—South African Trade Union, Congress, or something. And uh s-s—former senator, Dick Clark who headed the—

JC: Oh okay.

CB: —the, the uh African—the Committee on Africa and others. So that was sort of a culmination where this committee forced her to come participate in a forum and defend her position, which she did, ya know, fairly well. And she never changed her position—

JC: Mhmm.

CB: —in all those years. So—what was the question (laughs)?

JC: (laughs)

CB: The first one?

JC: Oh, yes.

CB: Okay, so did I answer it?

JC: Uh, yes I think so.

CB: (laughs)

JC: (laughs) Um, so were you, were you really aware of other events and boycotts and demonstrations that were going on?

CB: Yeah, yeah there was um ya know, there was no—uh, there was some newspapers, particularly the Guardian where you could read about the national—what had been the National
Guard and the U.S. Radical News Weekly, which I later wrote for. Um, where you could read about stuff going on at different colleges.

JC: Mhmm.

CB: Uh, there was not to many places where you would get that, consistently that, and ya know, there was no internet, and that—uh and there would be uh, ya know South Africa. Solidarity groups would put out newsletters or whatever. So, yeah. We were pretty interested in what was going on at other schools. And there would be conferences with other schools too.

JC: Uh-huh.

CB: Ya know.

JC: And was that during seventy-nine?

CB: I remember one in the eighties, specifically. I don’t, I think, which was held at the U of C. I think there may, there may have been one in this earlier time, when uh—at the, at another school in town. But I don’t remember specifically.

JC: Sure. Um, so what year would you say was your most active then?

CB: Well I—I was more uh, essentially involved with the organization in the, in the mid-eighties, ya know, I was on ______ (??) or whatever, I was at the point uh, staff member at the university. Um—so I suppose and ya know I wasn’t writing for the Maroon at that point. And I would kind of sporadically, ya know, I may have written two or three or four things over the years for ______(??). But I was, I guess I was, yeah I would say I was more involved at that point. Eighty—it started in eighty-five. This is November of eighty-five. It started right after Ronald Reagan was re-elected, right after he was re-elected it was almost like, at the point we were like, ‘oh, what can, what—what hope is there?’ and then all of a sudden I—people started the Free South Africa Movement started, these uh, sit-ins at the South African Embassy in, in Washington D.C and there were like daily arrests of really prominent people. Um, it was like, ya know, I mean—it was like uh, almost a—to me it seemed like, oh here’s a direction to go. But it was, I mean it was also a response to Reagan’s constructive engagement with apartheid. And also to a new constitution that had been promulgated (??) in South Africa and the protests that had come out—there was a new wave of protests in South Africa. And both of these um, sort of ways of organizing in the U.S. and around the world responded like in the seventies it was—it was taking up the energy from the Soweto and the township demonstrations. And this also.

JC: Mhmm. So I understand you took a little hiatus for a little bit, did you stay, was it easy to stay informed during your little break?

CB: Yeah. I stayed informed. But there wasn’t really much going on in my neighborhood. Not too much. Um—and there were, the movement seemed to have died down a certain amount. I
think that there were some, particularly some African American students on campus who were
trying to keep it going and I think, yeah. But uh—when did um, when did Danny Davis—well
Harold Washington was elected in 1983. That was a real focus for a lot of people. I was pretty
involved in working on that.

JC: How did you, what did you do for your work for that?

CB: Like precinct work, really.

JC: Sure.

CB: And also writing for the Haymarket.

JC: Mhmm.

CB: But yeah, I did election day. I worked every election day for a long time. Um, then after
that there was attempt to get a ordinance passed—so I was writing. I wrote a few things about
that, I was following that. That seemed to be where the initiative was at that point. There was an
attempt to get divestment legislation passed in the state legislature also. And, so that seemed to
be where the initiative was at that point.

JC: Mhmm.

CB: And then, after Reagan’s reelection there was sort of a popular protest upsurge.

JC: Sure.

CB: That’s the sense that I have of the, of the chronology.

JC: Mhmm. Can you remember what the news and media were covering in South Africa? Do
you remember how it was depicted, if you think it was depicted accurately based on what you
know?

CB: I don’t. I don’t remember. Um, what I remember are, that there would be conservatives, the
thing that is clear in my memory (coughs) is that there would be conservatives defending—Pat
Bucannon (?) for example, I remember columns of his defending Ian Smith’s ‘Rhodesia’ as a
communist ball-work (?). Uh, ya know? Um, and I guess—I don’t remember specifically how
the Tribune or other papers were covering it.

JC: Mhmm. Well how did you feel about that event, what was your reaction to it?

CB: Those kinds of columns?

JC: Yeah, yeah.

CB: Well—at the time I was kind of a student of anti-communism.
CB: I was writing about it a bit. And um, it seemed—it informed my growing understanding of that phenomenon as, it’s always, it had always been, it had always been—it’s most common practitioners had always been racists. And here it was coming around again only it was being deployed in defensive racism. Rather than, ya know, just a casual connection.

JC: Sure. Have you ever been to South Africa?

CB: No.

JC: Um, would you like to go.

CB: Oh yeah, sure.

JC: Um, so now, you are not particularly active. How does that feel to not be—

CB: What do you mean?

JC: Well, because I mean, it’s all over now.

CB: (laughs) Okay.

JC: (laughs) How is it um, how does it feel now that it’s all over?

CB: Um—well, ya know. It was, I was, I’m grateful for it as a learning experience. Ya know, it was such a case study of how systems work and how movements work and all the different cross-currents in the liberation movement and the solidarity movement. And all the complexities of a ruling system and the cross-currents there too. But of course, there’s ya know, it’s not like it’s—I think we suspected—you’re whole world view is different then. You felt sort of the possibility for revolution. And um, you thought for example, when the ANC came to power there would be a really radical transformation and the daily lives of people in South Africa, and I’m not a expert on it, but people I trust seem to think that it hasn’t gone that far and I remember Dennis Brutus just passed away.

JC: Mhmm.

CB: And I remember him when he was at Northwestern he’d show up. He’d always be available to give a speech or just march on the picket line or—and he ended up being a critic of neo-liberalism under the ANC and—

JC: Sure.

CB: So—

JC: So did you know him personally then—
CB: No.

JC: —Dennis Brutus

CB: No. So uh, I guess it’s disillusioning in the sense that we had youthful illusions. I guess it’s a reality check in the sense that change happens—I don’t know how change happens, ya know? In a hundred years we can look back and see how change happens, ya know? But it was a privilege to work with such inspiring and some heroic people.

JC: Can you tell me about some of the other inspiring people you met?

CB: I’m speaking more generally—

JC: Sure.

CB: —about the kids—you’d read about kids and South Africa confronting these military forces. Ya know, that kind of thing. Um, I mean I did meet some fascinating and inspiring people. I mean, Prexxy. There were other local activists. I don’t want to go through their names (laughs).

JC: (laughs)

CB: I’d leave someone out.

JC: (laughs)

CB: No, I, ya know. But more it was the people of South Africa that were inspiring. More so, ya know.

JC: Definitely. Um, do you see yourself becoming active again in the future?

CB: Well I consider myself to be engaged all along. Um, and I don’t, so I don’t understand the question exactly.

JC: (laughs)

CB: You mean with South Africa?

JC: Uh, sure.

CB: Is that what you mean?

JC: Yes.

CB: Should the occasion arise, I would certainly, ya know, be available.

JC: Are there any other—

CB: (laughs)
JC: (laughs) – any other movements that you support or you have considered working towards?

CB: Well, I work. Doing this online news service and it’s—probably my main form of engagement and um, it’s whatever is going on, it’s more locally oriented. Today I am working on something on Walmart and two days ago I was working on something on water privatization (??).

JC: Okay.

CB: So it’s—it’s not active in the sense of being an activist but it’s engaged.

JC: Definitely. What other things have you covered then, in your business, or your—

CB: At Community Media Workshop?

JC: Yeah.

CB: We, I focus on non-profits and community organizations, so uh, ya know, housing, youth, criminal justice, these torture cases for example. I’ve done some, ya know. Other people have done them.

JC: Mhmm.

CB: We need to work on that. I’ll just help with the announcement here or there.

JC: (laughs)

CB: Um food, uh food justice issues were an interest for a long time. And uh labor stuff. I’ve done, ya know a number of things on wage left lately, ya know?

JC: Mhmm.

CB: Immigration, those are the kinds of things I—

JC: Sure. Um, were you afraid of anything while you were writing and being active against apartheid?

CB: No, I don’t think there was, I don’t remember being afraid of, ya know, paying any personal cost for it really, no.

JC: Of confrontation or anything?

CB: Oh, not really, no.

JC: What is your greatest obstacle that you think you faced during the whole course of being active? If any?
CB: Um, I suppose—you probably don’t remember—you remember Charlie Brown and Linus?

JC: Sure.

CB: And one year, all the tee-shirts said uh, ‘I love mankind, it’s people I can’t stand’ or something like that, anyway I love democracy in principle, but I don’t have always the (rips paper) patience for all the, all the, dealing with a lot of different points of view in a meeting. And coming to consensus (laughs).

JC: Mhmm.

CB: Whereas I have the patience to sort through a lot of different points of view and figure out what to say about something, on my own. So, writing’s an interesting activity cause you got a lot of input from a lot of different sources and people. And then you sit down and put it together yourself. And you’re ________(??) too attached to control (laughs).

JC: (laughs)

CB: To control the outcome of something (laughs)

JC: Uh-huh.

CB: (laughs) But it, uh, I often haven’t had the patience to work in a group of people, toward a consensus. That’s probably my biggest obstacle.

JC: Sure. What do you think was your biggest contribution to the movement against apartheid?

CB: Well, I always, whenever I see a student group or something, my suggestion is you should get someone to write for the school newspaper, cause it’s really a great thing, I mean—cause they’re always like, ‘how can we get covered?’ well—(laughs).

JC: (laughs)

CB: Join in (laughs) I mean and it’s hard, it’s different at different schools. Like here, I guess you have to go through the journalism department—

JC: Mhmm.

CB: —and get assigned and stuff. But at U of C there was no journalism department and they just needed stories. And they needed people who could do them. So I thought it was—to me it was a great opportunity to increase the flow of information about activities that students were doing. And just sort of amplify the information that was coming from the people that they were bringing on campus and that kind of stuff cause ya know, you get fifty people to an event and that’s nice. But if you put in the paper, you might even get fifty more people to read about it (laughs).
JC: Sure.

CB: Or ya know, more who knows? Or at least people will see it and be aware of it. So—it’s also great writing for a school paper cause you get so much feedback from people right away. Okay. Next question.

JC: (laughs)

CB: (laughs)

JC: Uh, what was the best part about what you were doing?

CB: Feeling like you’re doing something that matters and feeling that you’re connected with a whole—community’s not the word, world of people, tradition of people who are making a difference and people all over the world, that you’re connected with all of them in a common purpose of making a more just world. And peaceful. Um, yeah.

JC: What was the worst part then?

CB: Um, the worst part was some of the squabbling that went on. And, I still don’t know what to make of some of it, whether it was all just ego, whether there were real political differences. Sometimes it seemed like there were an awful lot of energy going into really un—and this isn’t most of the time, just once in awhile—it would seem like there was an awful lot of energy going into really unproductive, political disputes that were just distractions and perhaps—

JC: Can you remember any specific occurrences like that? That’s particularly impacting you think?

CB: Um, in the eighties when there was sort of an upsurge of interest and this group that I was involved with was, had a—was mostly white students, I think. Although, the clerical workers campus, the clerical workers union plugged into that and faculty too. So that was a committee. And then there was some organizations of black students and at a certain point they called the—we were calling a rally and they made a big thing about—they called it opportunistic and premature. Adventurous. That’s what they called it, adventurous to have a rally (laughs). And I think there point of view was—I was just reading about this last night too—remember more the frusttaion than there were the reality. If I ever figure out what the reality was, but I think that their point of view was that there needed to be more work. And also that they had been working on this issue for a logn time and they should be sort of setting the pace. And they were just kind of cautious and I don’t know if they were put (??) in very broad—in terms of reaching out to a lot of different people. And I think they didn’t understand a couple things which was—but it got very kind of personal and ugly—I think that they didn’t understand a couple things which is that when there’s an upsurge of interest, you just have to sort of go with it, and also that when you’re organizing on a campus, it’s hard to have a long term view. The most, I saw this over years, your most active students are gonna be the ones who are graduating (laughs).
JC: Mhmm.

CB: Ya know?

JC: Sure.

CB: Um, so that’s the thing I remember there was, were walk-outs. It seems like the—like we went together with a couple of rallies. Jessie Jackson spoke on campus once and had some words afterwards with everyone about the need to work together. And I don’t remember how it was resolved, I think it was resolved, and it was sort of resolved in that we had our little season of activities. Once again, it culminated in a debate with the president of the University of Chicago saying the same things again. October twenty-two, 1985. She debated Jennifer Davis at the American Committee on Africa, I think she did also at the 1979.

JC: Mhmm.

CB: She didn’t say anything new—so, um and then once you build up this set of demands you take it to the administration and the administration answers and says no, then I guess your, oh I think someone tried to do a hunger strike or something.

JC: Mhmm

CB: (opens folder) Um, oh I have the ______ (??). But it’s hard to maintain the energy. Or we didn’t find a way, I think that we didn’t find a way to maintain the energy. I think the hunger strike, oh no, as a matter of fact, we did—we did—an interesting thing after that which was we held a protest at IBM downtown. So because there was a major stock in the University of Chicago’s portfolio, it had a major role in propping up the apartheid regime. We just felt that the goal was to influence corporate—one of the goals was to influence corporate behavior. Or make them pay our political cost for what they were doing, so that targeting them directly made a lot of sense, so that’s what we did. Next—and I don’t remember how that dispute ever got resolved.

JC: If you had to pick one person that was the most influential throughout the whole process to you personally, who would that be?

CB: I, I don’t know. I have no idea.

JC: (laughs)

CB: The most influential throughout the whole process—I don’t know (air/breathy noise). I—pass.

JC: What have you learned after being active, what strong lessons have you taken from this?

CB: Well, I think it was first of all, my first opportunity to really examine how capitalism worked and the idea that it’s so tied to freedom. And it kind of made me inveterate skeptic of
that claim. That might be the main thing. Although, there’s also the torturous track, path of social change (laughs), ya know?

JC: Sure. Do you view your life any differently now that the process is over, of conquering apartheid?

CB: No, no I don’t think.

JC: Um—

CB: I went to see Nelson Mandela in Detroit when he came. And I was really kind of disappointed because he was here as a diplomat, really to court the Bush administration, and I wanted someone to come here and teach the American people about making revolution (laughs).

JC: Sure.

CB: And he wasn’t gonna do that (laughs). I mean, guess its better not to have really wild expectations (laughs).

JC: (laughs) Do you remember anything else from Nelson Mandela when you heard him speak?

CB: Well, ya know, it was just amazing to see him and everything and to be in the speak (??). And I also remember Aretha Franklin playing ‘The Impossible Dream’ with Elvis (??), fantastic. Just plain piano and singing.

JC: What challenges do you think South Africa still faces today?

CB: It’s like America. It’s the challenge of fulfilling its potential. And I read articles about it very occasionally so I don’t follow it very closely, I have a few South African friends who I’m only in occasional touch with but—it’s really—moving beyond the neo-liberal approach and having a economy that’s sort of bottom up. I don’t know how much it’s really changed in terms of daily life beyond the legal indignities. There’s more opportunity, I’m sure, for the middle class. So that’s my—I’m not perfectly conversing with the situation—

JC: Sure.

CB: —but that’s my sense of it.

JC: Is there anything that you could suggest that could specifically conquer any problems they may be having?

CB: (laughs)

JC: If that makes sense (laughs)?

CB: Um, well uh, yeah, no. No, I think we all have to find our own way.
CB: If I was a brilliant political philosopher I suppose they could fly me over there and ask me.

JC: (laughs)

CB: But I’m not and they won’t and I don’t have any—there is no easy answers, I don’t think. And I don’t even know specifics of people’s complaints at this point.

JC: Mhmm.

CB: Ya know?

JC: Sure.

CB: So I’m kinda out of touch.

JC: Sure.

CB: So I wouldn’t even be able to fake—

JC: (laughs)

CB: —an answer to that question (laughs).

JC: Is there anything that you would have done differently over the work that you were doing?

CB: Do it better, be more sustained, be more focused, be less flakey. But I did the best I could with what I was doing, I think. Be more patient. Patience.

JC: Sure. Is there anything else that you want to talk about? Anything else you would like to put on the record (laughs)?

CB: Let’s see (opens folder) —South Africa—IBM—no.

JC: Well, then (air/breathy noise) we are done.