


Spring 2009

Interview with Mary Patten

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Recommended Citation

Mishleau, Blair Allen. "Interview with Mary Patten" (Spring 2009). Oral Histories, Chicago Anti-Apartheid Collection, College Archives & Special Collections, Columbia College Chicago. http://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cadc_caam_oralhistories/22

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1 Anti-Apartheid Movement Transcription with Mary Patten

2

3 Blair Allen Mishleau: So I am here with Mary Patten on May 11, 2009 talking about
4 her work with the Anti-Apartheid movement. Could you please spell your first and
5 last name for me?

6

7 Mary Patten: M-A-R-Y P-A-T-T-E-N

8

9 BA: And how many years were you involved with the Apartheid – Anti-Apartheid
10 movement?

11

12 MP: Roughly, about, maybe eight, seven, six years.

13

14 BA: OK, and where did your activism take place?

15

16 MP: In New York City, primarily. Yeah, the East coast.

17

18 BA: OK, and when were you born?

19

20 MP: Nineteen fifty-one.

21

22 BA: OK, where?

23

24 MP: Evanston, Illinois.

25

26 BA: And where were you raised?

27

28 MP: New England mostly, although other places too, because my family moved
29 around a bit.

30

31 BA: Okay, and where was your dad born?

32

33 MP: He was born in Boston. Outside of Boston, Massachusetts

34

35 BA: And your mother?

36

37 MP: She was born in upstate New York.

38

39 BA: What is your earliest memory?

40

41 MP: Um, sitting on a train with my father drinking orange juice.

42

43 BA: How old do you think you were?

44

45 MP: I think it's somewhat of a fiction, but I think I was around six months old.

46

47 BA: Wow. Uh-

48

49 MP: No, probably more like nine months old. Maybe 11 months old. Yeah. It might be
50 a suggested memory is what I'm thinking.

51

52 BA: OK. Interesting. And what was your favorite thing to do with your mother when
53 you were younger?

54

55 MP: Oh, it's hard to say. Many things. Um, have her, when I was a kid, have her read
56 to me, I suppose. Read together with my mother.

57

58 BA: And could you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

59

60 MP: Well, there were many, but they were kind of, um, sort of a post-war suburban,
61 um, older housing. Yeah. Big trees.

62

63 BA: And who was your best friend as a kid?

64

65 MP: I had many.

66

67 BA: OK. Could you describe one or two of them for me?

68

69 MP: Well I had, I usually had best friends who were either like, next-door neighbor,
70 um, kids, usually girls, but because my family moved I kept, I had sort of serial
71 relationships with my best friends. My brother also, three brothers, one was, one is
72 about 13 months younger than I, so when we were really little we were together all
73 the time.

74

75 BA: OK. Why did your family move around so often?

76

77 MP: My father was, um, a working-class guy but he got, he was the first person in his
78 family to get an education and, uh, he was, um, my parents were both depression-
79 era people, and um, he was determined to build a life for his kids where they could
80 get an education and, so he kept working very hard and getting promoted and
81 getting transferred and getting various job offers. He worked with a railroad and so
82 it was mostly, with one exception, mostly moves in relationship to that career path.

83

84 BA: OK. And where was your favorite place to play?

85

86 MP: Cape Cod. The beach. The ocean.

87

88 BA: OK. And what's the most vivid memory you have of your dad?

89

90 MP: Um, I have many, but um, I think when, uh, well there are two vivid memories.
91 One is how stern he was at the dinner table with us all in correcting us about our
92 English usage. And another memory where he wasn't so intimidating was when he

93 took me to hear, um, Arthur Rubinstein play a Rachmaninoff concert in New York. I
94 was maybe six or seven. It was an amazing experience for me.

95

96 BA: And did you go to high school at the same school all four years?

97

98 MP: I did.

99

100 BA: OK, and what was your high school like?

101

102 MP: Don't you want to know the name of it?

103

104 BA: Certainly.

105

106 MP: The name of it is insane. "The School of the Holy Child Jesus."

107

108 BA: OK. And what was it like?

109

110 MP: What was it like? It was a prep school for Catholic girls. It was very competitive
111 to get in. It was small. Um, you know, we, you know, had a lot of challenging
112 curriculum along with the mandatory, um, horror film lectures about abortion at the
113 first, the first day of our sophomore year.

114

115 BA: OK. How did you fit into that –

116

117 MP: An elite Catholic school with all the trappings. How did I fit into it? Not very
118 well. Um, I was a, I was kind of at the top of, not number one, but I was at the top of
119 my class scholastically. Mainly because I was a very hard worker and um, I did a lot
120 of artwork. I was very, kind of, known in the school, as being the artist in the school.
121 And, um, terrible at athletics.

122

123 BA: OK. So, your main interest, did you, were academics. Did you do anything
124 outside of that extracurricular-wise?

125

126 MP: Um, not so much with school. I mean, you know, my closest friends were all at
127 this school. It was a very narrow, little existence. Um, I started to develop a kind of
128 political consciousness in my junior year of high school, but not because of anything
129 that my teachers did and not because of the activities of my peers. Um, this more
130 had to do with, uh, well first of all what was happening in the world. So this was
131 1967 I'm talking about. Nineteen sixty-eight was my graduation year. So by the time
132 that Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were shot I already had a kind of,
133 um, consciousness of the disparity between the conditions of my life and that of
134 most other people, uh, in the world or, at this point I was actually living, the family
135 was living, close to New York. So the school I went to was in Westchester County, my
136 family lived in Stamford, Connecticut, uh, I commuted to this very elite school, um, on
137 occasional weekends with one of my cousins, who was also one of my closest
138 friends, um, we would go into New York, and kind of, go to these kind of beat cafes

139 and, um, do sorts of, the typical things teenagers do. Smoke a lot of cigarettes and I
140 don't think we did any drugs then, but um, there was a kind of consciousness that
141 my cousin and I and other cousins, my brother and I had about the Vietnam War,
142 about the Civil Rights movement, about the urban rebellions, the riots. That was all
143 sort of seeping in, although it was manifested in any of my activities in high school
144 until I was almost graduating and, um, I became a volunteer for Eugene McCarthy in
145 the spring of '68, I guess. It was very short-lived/ I wanted to go to the Chicago
146 Democratic Convention, to protest, uh, with my old, this is a different cousin, a
147 cousin who actually gave me, a year before, had given me the autobiography of, the
148 autobiography of Malcolm X to read. Anyway, my mother put the kibosh on it.
149 Would not let us go to the convention. But I often feel like my history would have
150 been, probably it would have definitely taken the same path, but might have been
151 precipitated had I gone to Chicago in '68. It took another year for me to be involved
152 in an actual kind of, intense, demonstration.

153

154 BA: Now why do you think your mom didn't let you go?

155

156 MP: Oh, she was trying to protect me, and us. She, you know, she thought, she
157 thought I was too young and she thought that, um, she was very, she was very
158 culturally conservative in that way. She was very, uh, very much a liberal, in terms of
159 her politics, but, she thought that we would be up to no good.

160

161 BA: So did your parents help to shape your opinions of the Vietnam War and that
162 kind of stuff?

163

164 MP: Sure, I mean, but sometimes in opposition, right. So my father, I mean I
165 remember my father was always more politically conservative than my mother. My
166 parents are both dead. Um, and, uh, I think that so, I remember my mother being
167 much more, uh, kind of, she seemed much more to have a sense of empathy with
168 black people who were rioting, you know, during this period, '67, '68. Cause there
169 were numerous cities, there were Newark, there was Detroit, and of course there
170 were all the riots that happened after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. But
171 the previous summer there had been, uh, these open, um, rebellions, really, as I
172 later called them. You know, against the kinds of conditions people faced in the
173 North. So there had been all this attention to the south, in the earlier part of the 60s,
174 um, and then I think it became clear to many people that there was a continuity
175 between the kind of conditions that uh, black people in particular in the ghettos of
176 the urban north were suffering. Um, there was a continuity between that and the
177 segregation of the south. So anyway, my, my, to go back to your question, my mother
178 um, my mother and yeah, I had this extended family and my mother had, um, six
179 sisters, um, all but, um, all but two of whom got married and had kids. And so there
180 was this sort of generations of cousins who had, who were very, who, who we had
181 very a homogenized in terms of our shared family origins, but there was a whole
182 spectrum there politically. And, um, that's why I found these like-minded souls, and
183 also mentors, in some of my cousins. Um, but there was a kind of atmosphere,
184 especially during the summers when we would sometimes have shared vacations

185 where there would be, uh, they, the generation of the kids would be privy to the
186 kinds of debates that happened amongst the adults. Um, so that was a huge
187 influence. So, you know, we had everybody from, I had, um, a kind of, one very right
188 wing uncle who was part of the Minute Men. I mean, he didn't do anything, but it's a
189 kind of, sort of, Later Day militia mentality. So right wing. In New England. And then,
190 um, some of my mother's sisters were more to the left than she was, although I
191 wouldn't characterize any of them as leftists. But, um, I think a number of them
192 would fit well within a kind of tradition of the Catholic left. I'm going on too long
193 about this.

194
195 BA: No, you're, it's all right. Um –

196
197 MP: We're on like question five

198
199 BA: No, we're on 20 now.

200
201 MP: Great.

202
203 BA: OK. Um, so how did you choose where you were going to college?

204
205 MP: Um, I wanted to go to a school that was a liberal arts school that had a strong art
206 department. And so my first choice was Tufts University because it had a
207 relationship with the Museum School in Boston, um, the Tufts was a very good
208 school. Probably better than it is now, um, and I was, you know, very familiar
209 with that area, so that, but I was put on a waiting list and then I applied also to two,
210 um, private liberal arts school. Connecticut College and Wheaton College. Not
211 Wheaton in Illinois, Wheaton in Massachusetts, and also to St. Mary's College, which
212 is now the University of Notre Dame. And I got into all of those, and for some really
213 weird reason, I picked St. Mary's College, even though by this time I was a deeply
214 questioning, if not lapsed Catholic. Um, they had a very strong art department. I
215 don't know, it's very paradoxical to me. One of my brothers, one of my older
216 brothers, went to Notre Dame. So, you might think, oh, proximity to a family
217 member, but we were actually, we had a very bad relationship. Weren't quite
218 estranged, but we certainly weren't friends. It's a little bit of a puzzle to me, why I
219 wound up there. I can tell you the first day I was there, there was an orientation in
220 the gym, there was a- the first day I was there I met a, I met who would be my
221 roommate, whose brother also went to Notre Dame, whose brother was a radical
222 hippie. The way we immediately imagined ourselves upon meeting each other. So
223 we went over to the orientation at Notre Dame, and there are all these tables, and
224 um, there was one table with a setup that actually had a TV monitor, which was
225 unheard of in those days, this is '68, remember. People are still using Portapak
226 technology. And what was playing on the monitor was footage of the riots at the
227 Chicago convention. And, of course, the booth was the booth of SDS, Students for a
228 Democratic Society. And who was at the booth but my roommate's brother Sam and
229 so you know, I signed up for SDS and I was elated that at least I had now a televised
230 version of the experience that I wasn't allowed to have. And from then on I, um, I

231 began to cut all sorts of ties, not literally, with my family, but I was free at last from
232 a, kind of, supervising gaze. So, I got involved in SDS but at St. Mary's and Notre
233 Dame the SDS was attracted equally people who were politically radical as, um,
234 heroin addicts, all kinds of ne'er-do-wells. It was a real sort of, it was like this
235 concentration of the hippie counter-culture, along with the political lefties. Um,
236 yeah.

237

238 BA: And what was your actual major title, then?

239

240 MP: It was always, well, I went to St. Mary's for two years and then I transferred to
241 an arts school. Um, it was, um, the major was in art, in painting and printmaking.

242

243 BA: And what caused you to transfer from St. Mary's?

244

245 MP: Um, well, it's interesting. It was a very intense two years, I mean I did go to
246 school, I did complete my class work, but I was involved in, uh, this kind of crazy,
247 frenetic pace of anti-war activities, student organizing, organizing against DOW and
248 CIA recruiting on campus, organizing support for a pornography film festival. You
249 have to remember this is a Catholic university, so that was kind of seen as the most
250 radical event by the police, and so on. Anyway, um, I think that, OK, so by the spring
251 of 1970, um, this was when campuses all over the country were on strike for
252 months, so classes were suspended, the best professors, uh, joined the students in
253 informal classes on the lawn, this was all about the war, we were making posters
254 that looked like Paris '68, none of had ever seen a Paris '68 poster, but somehow we
255 knew about that iconography, of those fists, and so on. Um, so, somehow, within all
256 of this, and this I really don't remember how much my parents played a role in this,
257 but they probably didn't understand the scope of my, um, activist activities on
258 campus, because my grades were still good. But, um, I think that there was a kind of
259 generation of the students I was with who were leaving. There were people who
260 were graduating, there were people who had been kicked out of school, there were
261 people who had left school to organize in factories, everything was changing, and
262 somehow I put it together to apply to, um, Rhode Island School of Design, which was
263 the best art school, um, I mean I was always very academically kind of competitive
264 in that way of having to go to the best school. Somehow I got in, you know, and um,
265 and transferred there and, but it's hard to, but my activism continued there, but it's,
266 I can't really answer that question. It has something to do with a sort of watershed
267 moment. I think that maybe I had also reached the limits of what I could as an artist
268 in that school. But, um, but what fills my consciousness in remembering those years
269 was all the activism, the kind of unscholastic stuff. The fact that I got it together,
270 somehow, though, I mean this was also, this was two years where there was a lot of
271 drinking, a lot of pot, a lot of hash, a lot of psycho-whatever-they-are, LSD, you
272 know, I went from a very protected kind of self-protected background to just, um,
273 there was a lot of sex, even though, you know, it was kind of crazy, and somehow I
274 managed to not flunk out of school, but did well enough that I could transfer. But
275 why I even had it in my head that I needed to keep, um, to keep paying attention to a
276 kind of education program around art making, it's kind of amazing to me.

277

278 BA: Well was –

279 MP: Talking you about it now, I never really though about that, particularly.

280

281 BA: Were those a fun two years, or?

282

283 MP: Oh yeah, of course they were. They were really ridiculous in a way, they were,
284 the ratio of men-to-women was 9:1, which is really crazy. But, um, I think it has to
285 do, everything with Catholic repression. You know, the kind of excess of those years.
286 Those were really, I mean the years henceforth were full of political excess, but as
287 far as, um, as far as, especially around drinking and you know, smoking pot, I don't
288 know, I'm so straight now it seems ridiculous to me.

289

290 BA: OK, and, how did you first hear about apartheid?

291

292 MP: I think this was all, I mean, this was just like one of those things where nobody
293 taught me, it wasn't, it certainly, like these days people learn about apartheid
294 through a good school program, maybe, or through proximity maybe to some
295 activist, but, um, I think that it was everywhere, on everybody's consciousness, just
296 as, I mean, for me, what I really remember, it's possible that high school was the first
297 place, because there were connections. Of course one of my cousins gave me
298 Malcolm X's autobiography. He writes a lot about, I mean his trips to Africa were
299 hugely formative in his own political consciousness and um, so yeah, I think that
300 perhaps when I was in school before I had a critical political consciousness, I might
301 have known the word Bantustan even, before apartheid. But, you know, that
302 somehow things were kind of, there was a little bit of like, that's way over there, but
303 I'm certain that at the point when the civil rights movement and the black power
304 movement in the U.S. was insisting itself on my consciousness that this was
305 inseparable from what was happening in South Africa, because it was huge, the
306 resistance in South Africa was huge, in the mid '60s, late '60s, into the '70s
307 obviously, yeah.

308

309 BA: And what was the catalyst for your anti-apartheid activism?

310

311 MP: I think I, this is, uh, there are many things we don't have time to talk about
312 today, I can see, because of the questions, and it's sort of lucky for you because there
313 are too many stories, but I went from this, uh, college experience of, um, you know,
314 where the primary resistance was around the war, looking at the kind of domestic
315 upheavals, which of course had to do with the student movement, but hugely too
316 about the black movement, um, when I went to Rhode Island School of Design I met
317 a core of women who also had transferred, but from places like Ann Arbor, um, kind
318 of like big, or University of Chicago, very, you know, academically rigorous schools,
319 they had also been part of SDS, they, um, we all were in this art program together,
320 and we all started a women's poster silk-screening, uh, collective together and did
321 posters. Again, mostly about the war, and, um, and to be used in anti-war protests,
322 but the, um, the consciousness was there, the expression around apartheid wasn't,

323 didn't really become overt, until I moved to New York, and got involved with first
324 the New York Women's School and then various political prisoner defense
325 committees and what I was kind of aware of was a series of groups that were related
326 to the Weather Underground Organization. I mean, you know, there weren't, they
327 were all, uh, related to it in terms of, kind of political tendency. So that political
328 tendency was always about, um, the kind of primacy of national liberation struggles,
329 and the primacy of the struggle of colonized people against colonialism and
330 imperialism and the kind of, um, there was a real big emphasis that this political
331 tendency made, about the importance of struggles against what was termed White
332 Settler Colonialism, so the struggle of Palestine, the struggle of black people in South
333 Africa, you know, in Namibia, and so on. Um, I mean what would later become
334 Zimbabwe, and this kind of connection to, uh, the way people saw the black struggle
335 in the U.S. as one for land and self-determination not just for civil rights. So this was
336 much, this was a kind of tendency that, uh, saw class politics always through the
337 prism of anti-colonialism. So this is, yeah, you know, I can't even tell you, you know,
338 demonstrations against apartheid were everywhere. And you know built, of course,
339 over the years through the '70s. Um, but there were different kinds of political
340 collectives, or, you know, they, uh, we were foolish enough to call them mass
341 organizations. But they were never mass in terms of their numbers of membership.
342 They were called mass as opposed to the idea of a cadre organization, like a small
343 communist organization, of which I became part of too, anyway, that's later. But, I
344 was, there were they different groupings, and there were groupings of people who
345 did work expressly in solidarity with South Africa, or, we used the language Azania,
346 cause that's what the Pan-African Congress used, as opposed to the ANC, and we felt
347 that the PAC had a more revolutionary line, anyway, whatever. So there was this
348 group that did a kind of political education and material aide around this struggle in
349 South Africa and Namibia and Zimbabwe, I was not part of that, I was a part of
350 another group that was doing work around political prisoners, and prisoners of war
351 in the U.S., particularly black and Puerto Rican prisoners, there's yet another group
352 focused on Puerto Rican independence, they're all these different kinds of
353 groupings, but because I was in yet another graphics collective called the
354 Madame Binh Graphics Collective (sp?), which, of which I've written about, and I can
355 send you a PDF just for your own use, if you like. It's going to be a little book that
356 comes out this fall. Um, because I was a member of this graphics collective we
357 related to all these committees, and so we did posters, um, we designed posters in
358 communication with, in conversation with the different groups who were doing that
359 work. And some of the posters were to raise money. We called material aide for
360 liberation fighters, or for medical needs, or a women's campaign in Zimbabwe, or
361 whatever, um, and some of them were for publicity, you know just graphically how
362 to represent these different struggles, and then we would wheat paste these posters, I
363 don't mean just my little group, but hundreds would be made. So I was involved in
364 that kind of propaganda work against apartheid for many years, through, because I
365 was an artist, and because I was a part of this graphics collective. Um, I think it wasn't
366 until, I think when my anti-apartheid activism became the most expressly, kind of
367 central, was around the Springbok tour, so this was the latter days of apartheid.
368 Yeah.

369

370 BA: So when were you first, when can you say your first anti-apartheid activism
371 started?

372

373 MP: I just, I have to say I can't really pinpoint it, exactly, but, uh, early, mid-seventies.

374

375 BA: OK.

376

377 MP: I remember doing things like being at a table, you know, outside of a food COOP,
378 collecting signatures. Or, you know, going to events, of course, rallies, indoor,
379 outdoor, educational kinds of things. Hearing speakers, um, I remember, we were
380 very influenced by the black consciousness movement, which was neither PAC or
381 NAC, but was really student movement. Um, and, that emerged in, I think the early-
382 mid '70s in South Africa. But, I might be, it might have been a little bit earlier. Um,
383 but that was hugely influential on, I know on young people in the anti-apartheid
384 movement. But, again, it's sort of like members, you weren't really a member of a
385 movement, you were sort of part of a community of ideas and of activism, and there
386 were certain recognizable groups, there were certain recognizable activities, you
387 know like petitioning, like um, I was never involved in anything like lobbying, there
388 were people who were doing that, um, demonstrating in the streets, doing a lot of
389 educational work, so it's very hard to pinpoint, that's why it's very good to have
390 people doing oral histories, I suppose, but I do remember that, um, I remember
391 being, I was part of various study groups were reading about, um, not just South and
392 Southern Africa, but all of Africa. Post-colonial, what we would now call post-
393 colonial thinkers. About the systematic colonization and so on. Yeah.

394

395 BA: Now was this after you were done with your undergrad, or?

396

397 MP: Oh, yeah yeah yeah.

398

399 BA: OK.

400

401 MP: So, yeah. So, I went to that school, St. Mary's/Notre Dame, two years,
402 transferred to Rhode Island School of Design, dropped out, stayed around
403 Providence for a year, finally finished up at Kansas City Art Institute and so that was
404 1973, there was just really one year interruption, it was just three schools. And in
405 1973, I went to New York, and that's when I got involved with the New York
406 Women's School and I also got involved with this community murals group, which
407 was also a whole other set of people, but, that included very politically conscious
408 people, so it was not, there was never a mural project I worked on that explicitly
409 was about apartheid, but I can't emphasize how strongly the, the pressing urgency of
410 the situation in South Africa was, how much it pressed upon everyone who was
411 politically conscious, which included a lot of people then.

412

413 BA: Now, did you relate at all to those who were impressed in South Africa?

414

415 MP: In, what do you mean by that?

416

417 BA: Like, could you find anything, um, how did you try to, like, assimilate or
418 understand what they were going through?

419

420 MP: Um, I think that there certain, well first of all I think it was very important to
421 hear different speakers who were, um, people who were in exile, but how had an
422 exile relationship to the struggle against apartheid, against colonialism, um, for
423 liberation, all those things, in South Africa. So that was, um, there was obviously
424 connections made there, um, people I remember speakers drawing parallels
425 between the situation of black people in the U.S. and the situation of black people in
426 South Africa. Not to say it was the same in any way, but drawing certain kinds of
427 parallels. That made a huge impression. Another thing that made a huge impression
428 was the black consciousness movement. The student movement. The kind of, um,
429 they were involved with, kind of, you know doing sit-ins and doing takeovers of
430 universities, you know these were, a lot of people in the black consciousness
431 movement were people who were able to have some education in the urban centers.
432 Um, so there was a kind of lateral connection there, like students or recent students.
433 Um, I think there was a kind of consciousness about global student activism in those
434 days. Um, but the first things is very important about the struggle that I know black
435 activists were making with white activists in the U.S. that white activists had to take
436 on very personally, I don't mean it as a personal issue, but very directly had to take
437 on the issue of racism and white supremacy and white privilege and look at our own
438 position in relationship to these movements, our own responsibilities, our own
439 communities. That was also a current that was very strong with the black South
440 Africans who visited and who spoke, and you know, there were students in, at, U.S.
441 universities who were from South Africa. Black students who played a huge role in
442 educating us all. Um, so I think that, I think there were points of identification, and
443 points of solidarity, which are kind of identification but also understanding the
444 differences. Also women, I think it was really important to hear women speaking
445 about women's projects and women's role in these liberation struggles. That was
446 also very important.

447

448 BA: Now after you finished up your undergrad, what did you do?

449

450 MP: Um, I, uh, moved to New York, I got involved with the Women's School. Uh, I
451 came out as a lesbian. I started teaching at this women's school which was a kind of
452 unofficial alternative school, teaching everything from classes in auto mechanics to
453 Marxism to poetry. So, it was a kind of short-lived project but one that attracted
454 people in the community as well as a burgeoning feminist movement, um, in New
455 York. So I got involved there, I mean I did various, what I did for a living never really
456 mattered that much, except I did get a little bit of money working with the murals
457 group and I worked with city arts project for, let's see, from 1973 I started
458 volunteering with them because I was looking for context in which I could make art.
459 I was also a figurative artist, not an abstractionist, sort of clueless to all the very
460 important art world kinds of art revolutions that were happening in New York in

461 those days. I was a figurative artist looking for context to make sense of my political
462 ideas. I didn't want to be divorced from that, and so mural-making, where we would
463 work with groups of young people, from different communities and sort of
464 collectively engender ideas in conversation with communities to represent people's
465 desires and aspirations, that seemed really grand to me, so I did that first as a
466 volunteer and then as a very low-paid, but still paid, I did wind up getting some
467 money for working on different project and I wound up directing two projects, uh,
468 neither of which exist but which are documented in this murals book that just came
469 out last year, called On the Wall, um so I did that, plus different art, different odd
470 jobs. I also taught senior citizens art classes in various public housing project in New
471 York so I had to take buses and trains to all these different neighborhoods in
472 Brooklyn that people think are the most dangerous neighborhoods to this day. So
473 that was a huge education, to be able to work with these seniors and meet people
474 who told me about their days in the Garvey movement. You know Marcus Garvey?
475 Early, early 20th century black nationalist. Um, an odd, interesting figure, but Garvey
476 was a huge mass phenomenon and I had read about it in my studies of, um, black
477 history, which again didn't come from any of the organized education I had been a
478 part of, but these various study groups, which were quite good, actually. But here I
479 am teaching macramé to some seniors, some of whom are sitting in rocking chairs
480 and just kind of talking and visiting, and you know. One of these kinds of jobs where
481 I visited probably five different centers in a week. Um, and meeting people who
482 were actually part of this history that I had read about. That was amazing. And it
483 was, of course, really interesting for me to spend time in these neighborhoods that
484 were, you know, like Bushwick and Brownsville and Greenpoint and so on. And, uh,
485 so I learned to carry myself as a, I never, in all my years in New York City, never got
486 mugged. Except by a crazy woman on the subway, that wasn't really a mugging. It
487 was just I inadvertently wound up sitting in her bedroom, if you know what I mean.
488 And uh, then a young woman tried to grab, when we were on trial later, tried to grab
489 a bag that was holding all of our discovery and our legal documents, but there was
490 no way I was going to let her have that, so I wound up getting kind of kicked down
491 the stairs to the subway. I don't remember having any serious injuries, but she
492 didn't get the papers. So, that's a huge digression. So anyway, what I did was I
493 worked at these odd jobs. I got very politically involved in these various art projects,
494 um, the murals movement, the mural projects, city arts, um, teaching art kinds of
495 related classes at community places like the New York Women's school and then the
496 senior centers. Then I got involved in helping to co-found the
497 Madame Binh Graphics Collective, which was a women's graphics collective that was
498 also part of this group called the May 19th Communists Organization that I was a
499 part of that was a kind of umbrella, but May 19th was kid of an umbrella for all these
500 different solidarity groups. That all didn't happen at the same time, cause May 19th
501 didn't really emerge until, say, '78. But, so I would say I was, I was not, I did still
502 keep up an individual painting practice up until about '77. But, uh, mostly I was
503 looking at other contacts, political contacts, to make art, help others make art.

504
505
506

BA: And how long were you in New York for?

507 MP: I was there until, well, until '83, when I moved to Chicago. And my last address,
508 in New York, was at Rikers Island, because I was given a year sentence for this
509 protest against the Springboks. Um, yeah, so it was about, I guess it was about ten
510 years. Yeah.

511

512 BA: And can you tell me about the events that lead up to, um, your jail sentence?

513

514 MP: Sure. Where are we at in terms of our questions?

515

516 BA: Um, well this is... I can delete...

517

518 MP: You're covering a lot of... yeah.

519

520 BA: That will cover a lot of questions.

521

522 MP: OK. What I'm about to say?

523

524 BA: Mhm.

525

526 MP: I see. OK. So, um, the, um, the Springboks were, and they still are called the
527 Springboks, South Africa's rugby team. Um, and, uh, one of the main kinds of
528 elements of the kind of worldwide struggle against apartheid in the, um, late '70s
529 was the idea that the practice of a culture against South Africa. So, um, what this
530 meant in the case of the rugby team is that, you know, South Africa was seeking to
531 have the Springboks play in different places and saw that sport, I mean this is the
532 rhetoric around the Olympics, too, that sport is a kind of, um, uh, category of human
533 activity that can surpass politics and can build bridges. And so they were actually
534 seeing, um, the Springboks as ways to, um, legitimate their, the regime. And the fact
535 that only New Zealand, the UK and the U.S. agreed to, invited the Springboks in, and
536 set up a series of games, is telling. So none of, no place else in the world could they
537 go on this tour. Now there were probably several tours. The only one that I'm, of
538 which I'm aware, is this one that began, I guess in '80, 1980. I might be, well, there
539 was a whole tour in the UK, in New Zealand and then the U.S., and I'm not sure
540 which was the first leg of the tour. The U.S. was the last leg of the tour. But I do
541 remember that the larger movement of which I was a part and how that gets
542 expressed in all the different ways, we talked about that before, but also through a
543 kind of movement or left press, the coverage of the protests in New Zealand was
544 most significant, because it was characterized by direct action. Very creative
545 direction action, including some very creative sabotage that actually prevented the
546 games from happening. So, I remember things like, um, there were railroad tracks
547 that were disabled, there was a train that was supposed to bring the team and they
548 were very sequestered, um, very protected because there were protests everywhere
549 they went. Um, but the team was to be brought into this one stadium to this town in
550 New Zealand in a train and the train tracks were disabled so they had to figure out
551 some other way to get them there. Um, there was some people, activists, rented a
552 plane and sprinkled, like, confetti, I don't know, all sorts of stuff, on the field, right

553 before the game. Just, it was really, um, important to look at the kind of, it was
554 creative non-violence. I mean, no one got hurt. But, there definitely was a kind of
555 risky level of sabotage, like with the train tracks, and other kinds of tactics. But they
556 were effective. They were effective, they were creative, that engendered a great
557 sense of creativity and excitement among people all over, I remember. Um, but they
558 were effective in actually stopping the games, and you know, the full cycle of games
559 couldn't be completed. I don't remember much about the UK, I kind of think that
560 maybe that was the first leg. But anyway, New Zealand was the most vibrant.
561 Anyway, then the South African rugby team, the Springboks, came to the U.S. and I'm
562 not exactly sure where they played, but they were scheduled to play in Albany, in
563 upstate New York. So I was a part of a whole mass demonstration where there were
564 many many buses that took hundreds of people, there were probably, there were
565 thousands of people there. Um, up to Albany to protest. And, um, we basically, there
566 wasn't really any big plan other than to encircle, completely surround the stadium,
567 and to march and to chant and to have a very strong presence with placards and
568 banners, chanting and so on. And so I remember being a part of that, and I
569 remember chanting, and you know at a certain point there are these, what I later
570 learned are the South African secret service, you know, all this hussar about
571 ushering them in, and you could sort of see the tops of their heads a little bit, but you
572 couldn't really make out anyone but the team was being ushered into the stadium.
573 And we continued chanting, and it felt like one of many symbolic protests. There
574 were thousands of people. Maybe there were, I think there were maybe 3,000
575 people. That was a pretty good showing. It felt kind of massive. Um, and we were
576 there to protest and to register our, uh, strong voices, but we didn't stop anything. I
577 don't think we had any illusions of stopping anything. Um, and I remember being on
578 this bus and by this time it was night and I remember these black South African
579 students coming on the bus and I think they did this with many of the buses before
580 the buses took off and saying, "You all came here to protest the Springboks and to
581 protest apartheid, and you all were chanting 'We're going to stop the tour, can't take
582 it no more. We're going to top the tour, can't take it no more,' and you did nothing.
583 You didn't stop them. What are you doing? We're dying!" It was a very, you know, it
584 was a very impassioned moralistic, angry criticism. Which the people I knew, and
585 myself, took to heart. And so, there were no more games, but the Springboks were
586 scheduled to depart from Kennedy airport, and so we planned this demonstration at
587 Kennedy airport. I mean, this was before all of the kinds of security precautions that
588 were put into place, uh, at airports when things like hijackings became a bigger deal.
589 I guess, they were throughout the world, but they became a bigger threat in the '80s,
590 and of course this is way before September 11. But, um, so the idea of having a
591 protest in an airport, it is possible, it does happen, but it is, um, it was much more
592 permeable space then. Anyway, so we, um, organized a mass protest. It wasn't that
593 mass. I think there were maybe 80 people who came out, and, uh, we were going to
594 give the Springboks an angry send-off. You know, they weren't going to leave the
595 country without, we had sort of failed, we recognized that we had failed to interrupt,
596 um, the game, and had not taken up the example of New Zealand. Um, but, we were
597 going to do something else. So here's this demonstration, this demonstration is
598 organized by one of these solidarity committees I mentioned earlier. It did not come

599 out of a big anti-apartheid coalition. I think that there some, uh, it was rather hastily
600 organized, perhaps. Maybe there were not hundreds of people because, uh, many
601 people felt that the symbolic protest we did in Albany was fine. Um, but there was a
602 small group of us who felt that we had to escalate our tactics. I mean this is a little
603 nuts, because they're leaving. There are no more games. But, a very small group of
604 us planned a secret action within this demonstration that was basically about
605 bringing stink bombs to the airport. And the research and study we did on stink
606 bombs, although we'd never used any, is that they create a horrific smell. They make
607 people throw up. They're pretty awful, but, uh, there's no real, um, they weren't
608 really, it wasn't like an anti-personnel weapon. But we wanted to create havoc, we
609 wanted to create a mess, a really strong statement. And so, we did that through
610 bringing stink bombs. And, um, there were five us involved in this, and, um, we, um, I
611 mean there were other people who knew we were, but there were five of us who
612 volunteered to actually breach the ramp, or to kind of go after them and hurl the
613 stink bombs at the Springbok team. We also knew that this involved running
614 interference with the police who were protecting them, who were highly trained. So,
615 we all expected to be beat up and arrested, so it was a little bit of a sacrificial action.
616 And some might say a classic example of expiating white guilt. I don't know. But
617 anyway, what we learned when we at the airport was that the, as soon as the
618 security team for the Springboks figured out there was a protest at the airport, they
619 changed their flight. Um, but we didn't, we didn't actually know this. We knew that
620 the time was approaching for them to approach the gate and go up to the lounge and
621 wait, and they weren't coming. We knew that they were held up, or that they had
622 been staying at one of the inns or hotels right on the proximity to, this is JFK airport.
623 Um, but they weren't coming, so it seemed as if either they were already there, up in
624 the lounge, or, you know, as we later learned, they changed their flight. So, the five of
625 us are circulating in this demonstration and we decide that the moment is now, and
626 we breach security and threw these mason jars full of the stink bomb ingredients. It
627 was a big mess, and then the police descended upon us. We didn't, some people say,
628 remember, who were at the demonstration, remember seeing identifiable South
629 African agents, you know, through the crowd, earlier, and that's probably when they
630 decided they weren't going to go risk moving the team through. Um, but our main
631 conflict was with the police, who immediately descended upon us and grabbed us.
632 And the stuff was really, created this horrible smell. I don't really, I don't, I
633 remember people talking about it. I do remember seeing a policeman throwing up. It
634 was very slippery, we slipped in it, we were burned by it, because it was very
635 concentrated. We didn't really know what we were doing, uh, in that way. It created
636 all these burns. But were taken up to the lounge and we were beaten, uh, with fire
637 extinguishers, and, you know, questioned by the police, and then we were all
638 bundled off to jail and we were arraigned, I don't know, I think it took, uh, maybe
639 even a day, or two, to be arraigned, so we were held in jail. Yeah, we didn't get out of
640 jail for about, maybe it was even five days. It might have been three days. It's all in
641 that, probably it's all in that article. Um, and then we were, uh, we were bailed out,
642 only to be brought back into court a month later and re-indicted on related charges:
643 felony riot, and another charge, and we were brought back into court really because
644 of our connection with the organization I mentioned before, was implicated in a, um,

645 in a revolutionary action. I'm using scare quotes, of a much higher proportions and
646 scale, and craziness, which was the Brinks robbery on October 20 of 1981, so this is,
647 the demonstration I'm talking about happened on September 16. October 20 there
648 was an armed hold-up of a Brinks truck in New York by members of the Black
649 Liberation Army and the Revolutionary Armed Task Force, the latter were people
650 who were decedents of the Weather Underground who had never surfaced, um, that
651 was an action in which, uh, three people were killed, two police, two policeman of
652 the NAIC, the Rockland County Police Force, and uh, a security guard, a Brinks
653 security guard. And one of my co-defendants had lent her credit card to somebody
654 who rented a car that was used as a getaway car. And so that link, I mean this was a
655 really crazy convoluted story. My co-defendant didn't know what her credit card
656 was being used for, we lived in this very, um, in this very kind of crazy environment
657 where you were asked for things and you just did them because you were a cadre,
658 you were like a little soldier. Um, so anyway, we were re-indicted, uh, after Brinks
659 because of this connection. They were, the state, were trying to, uh, bring in, to
660 arrest, to clamp down, on anybody who had any relationship to this thing that
661 happened in Rockland County. This was a big terrorist, the joint terrorist task force,
662 this was their assignment. And so we were brought back into court because, I don't
663 think they cared that much about the Springboks. I don't think they cared that much
664 for the resisting arrest and the criminal trespass. I mean, that's what we did, at the
665 airport, we breach security, we, you know, threw these stink bombs around, we, um,
666 got hurt. Some policemen claimed to be hurt, they weren't. You know, our trial
667 subsequently proved that, um, there were very, there were scratches that they
668 suffered in the fracas. Um, but, I mean we did do that. We did breach security, so we
669 did trespass, we did resist arrest, when the cops tried to get us we tried, you know,
670 we tried to get away. Um, one of my co-defendants at JFK actually got into, the one
671 guy, got into a tussle with the police and kind of pushed him, kind of threw him
672 through this plate glass window, which sounds really awful, it was just very loud
673 and very dramatic, and there was a lot of broken glass. But, I'm not trying to
674 minimize those things, but we had no, none of us had any relationship to this thing
675 later, although we were part of the same political grouping and, um, would, of
676 course support, you know, we vocalized support of that as a revolutionary action.
677 This kind of expropriation of money to then be, supposedly, distributed to poor
678 communities. Of course that didn't really happen. But because of the, because of that
679 credit card link, um, we were brought back into court, re-indicted, and then we were
680 all, we all went to jail, and we were all in jail for, I think I was in jail for a couple of
681 months. This is a much longer time because the state also, uh, the district attorney
682 required, invokes a statute that is used against organized crime, um, to prevent
683 anyone from posting bail for us unless they went through a bail hearing where they
684 were interrogated about themselves and about the source of their money. So that
685 put a big chill, that had a huge chilling affect. I mean, I didn't want my, my parents
686 were horrified that I had even been arrested in the first place. I had been arrested
687 before but they never knew about it. They never needed to. Um, I had been in jail
688 before, but for a day or two, they never knew about it, they never needed to. But,
689 um, I didn't call them for help but they did wind up getting a call from somebody in
690 the press. So, it was very, I really regret putting them through that, and did make up

691 for all of that in my later years, but, um, they weren't, there was no way I wanted
692 them to know. I wanted to protect them from all of this stuff. I was not going to ask
693 them for bail money. But, if I had, it would have required the, and they were elderly
694 at that point, I mean they were mid-70s I guess, um, that would have required them
695 coming to New York and taking the stand and answering all these question from a
696 hostile district attorney because of this statute that was invoked against us. So I
697 stayed in jail. It was fine. I didn't, jail was actually a really good experience for me.
698 Um, it actually wound up allowing me to create some distance from this political
699 group. I mean, what am I trying to say, or to reclaim my own kind of autonomy of
700 thinking. Which isn't to say I ever, um, really changed some fundamental core of my
701 politics, but I began to realize what a crazy sect we had become. But that really has
702 nothing to do with apartheid. Um, but, I'm trying to describe a situation where I was
703 in this very small grouping that had very extremist politics, um, that had very
704 highfalutin notions of revolution and how we kind of, um, summoned all of our own
705 complicated identities as being white people in a very privileged society, trying to
706 express solidarity with masses of oppressed black people, whether here or in South
707 Africa, and especially because we had been scolded, it was more than scolded, we
708 had really been criticized, reprimanded by the students, the African students, in
709 Albany, that we needed to do something that wasn't symbolic. So, we took that to
710 heart, and we did this action that was way out of scale. Um, it's really hard to know,
711 you can't really even talk about effectiveness in that way, although, the people in the
712 ANC that we knew and the PAC, Pan-African Congress and the ANC, who we knew,
713 were enormously positive that we were people who were willing to kind of create,
714 to stop business as usual, to create a fracas at the airport to call attention to
715 apartheid. So, I mean, that was very, we were never condemned by any of them. The
716 Brinks action was condemned by almost every sector of the left except the small,
717 um, sector we were a part of, a reckless, aventurist (sp?), not adventurist, aventurist,
718 it's a kind of military term, militarist action that just brought all this repression
719 down on anybody doing any kind of political work. And, uh, of course we didn't
720 agree with that then but I do now.

721

722 BA: So you were, how long were you in jail for?

723

724 MP: I was in, we were all in jail for somewhere like three days for the arraignment,
725 then we were re-indicted, uh, with these additional charges, then we were held, it
726 was still, this was still pre-sentencing, I mean pre, pre-trial. Um, but because of all
727 those bail issues we, most of us stayed in jail for another say, six weeks? And then
728 we figured out various creative strategies to put together a defense committee and,
729 you know, someone who could testify. In my case my older brother was, who was a
730 lawyer, came forward and was willing to, you know, because it wouldn't faze him to
731 be interrogated by anybody, as a lawyer, he, you know, and even though I hadn't
732 been in touch with him for maybe four years, he, uh, it was just an amazing thing
733 that he did. So, anyway, we all eventually got out, but were awaiting trial. The trial,
734 we all tried to be tried together, as a group of five. The state would not allow that,
735 and they split us up. Because there would have been, I think there was a, you know,
736 like my co-defendant who threw the cop through the plate glass window, that was

737 all recorded. That doesn't look very good, in terms of his assault charges. So we, I
738 should have been clear about this before. We were all charged with assaulting
739 police, you know, one or two counts, this is the initial one, then the criminal
740 trespassing and the, uh, resisting arrest. The later, you know since they'd charged us
741 with the most serious charges, the assault, the re-indictment was really just to get us
742 back in jail to get us in detention because we were part of this larger political
743 conspiracy in their eyes. So, felony riot, I mean that is, that's not a more serious
744 charge than assault. Even though if it was a Class E felony, and I don't know, maybe
745 there was some other thing. Bust anyway, so on those charges, we were held and
746 then we got out after, say, six weeks, and then we were preparing for our trial, but
747 we were not allowed to be tried, our motion to be tried together was denied, we
748 tried to appeal it, that was denied, we felt like we had a much, we wanted to put on a
749 political trial. We wanted to put the police on trial for defending apartheid. You
750 know, that was our rhetoric. And you know I think our legal case would have been
751 strong if we had been tried together. You're looking at the time. It's okay, you can
752 edit that out. Um, so, uh, mine was the first in the order or indictment, so my trial
753 went first. So my trial was like their test balloon, their test case, in a way. Um, and I
754 was acquitted of all the serious charges and convicted of misdemeanor charges:
755 resisting arrest and criminal trespass, which, in most cases, it's unheard of for
756 somebody like me, you know, a middle-class, white educated person to have first
757 conviction, a misdemeanor conviction, result in a jail sentence. Unheard of. But,
758 because we did try to put on a political case in my trial, everything we wanted to do
759 with the group of five we put into my trial. Um, because we had all this rhetoric
760 about the police in New York as being killer cops, this is not a very good strategy for
761 dealing with assault charges. Although there was no evidence, I mean in my case it
762 was clear, there were television cameras there, or cameras from the Post and the
763 Daily News and there was absolutely nothing to corroborate the police's claim that I
764 had kicked them and hit them about the face and body. And, um, their hospital
765 records made that clear too. In at 6:05 and out at 6:15 kind of thing. Um, but
766 anyway, that trial happened in March, so we were arrested in September 16, 1981,
767 re-indicted after October 20th, somewhere that following week of 1981, I think we
768 were all out of jail by the end of the year, by, um, the end of December, and, probably
769 a little earlier, and, um, and then we were doing pre-trial preparation and March, I
770 can't remember the exact date, March was the start of my trial. The trial lasted for
771 four days, which is kind of long. So, of course we made everything longer and more
772 complicated. The judge hated us. Um, and, uh, the jury was out for, I don't know,
773 about, almost 24 hours? A long time. I may be exaggerating, and memory fails me,
774 but they were out for a very long time. And they were almost split, and there were
775 four people, two of whom were school teachers, three of whom were black, or
776 maybe it was two of them who were black, um, two of whom were women. Four
777 people were holding out for acquittal on everything, because they were, despite our
778 crazy rhetoric, were very sympathetic, maybe thought it was a stupid action but
779 didn't really see the evidence of, even more, I think even though there was evidence
780 of resisting arrest and so on, were sort of willing to suspend that. But they, um, there
781 were people on the jury, because these four people, of these four people, um, two of
782 them talked to our lawyers. You can talk to, the lawyers can talk to jurors after a

783 trial to find out why the verdict was what it was. And, um, so we got a picture of the
784 whole jury. There were jurors who were absolutely adamant that they wanted to
785 convict me of everything even though there was no evidence of assault, which would
786 have resulted in a 15-year sentence. Fifteen to something, maybe. Um, so there was,
787 the way that the jurors who talked to us characterized it is that it was a
788 compromised verdict, because they figured I would get a suspended sentence. But,
789 um, so, this was actually a failure for the district attorney who actually thought he
790 could get a conviction on everything. And because he couldn't, he offered a plea to
791 the rest of the defendants. One of our co-defendants had gone underground at this
792 point, had disappeared. The remaining three people plead to various charges, plead
793 guilty to riot, criminal trespass, resisting arrest. So, they all got jail time, but they did
794 not get the kind of jail time I did. One of the got six months, one of them got nine
795 months, one of the others got nine months too, but one of these three co-defendants
796 was the person who lent her credit card, so she was in a federal prison at this point
797 for refusing to answer questions by a federal grand jury about the Brinks case. So
798 she did her sentence, her time, in there. She was in longer for refusing to talk to that
799 grand jury than we were, who had gotten sentenced. And so, I got the biggest
800 sentence because I was the first, I was the example. He gave, the judge gave me the
801 maximum that he could, which was a year. And then, when we went to court, all of
802 us to get sentenced, we all chanted and tried to bring a banner in, and so he gave us
803 another 30 days for contempt of court. And so, I had a year and 30 days, which
804 meant that I had to do basically three quarters of that. So I went to jail, we were
805 sentenced in May of '83, May of '92 (she means '82), so the trial was in March, our
806 sentencing wasn't until May, so I went to Rikers that day and got out in March of '83.
807 The end.

808

809 BA: And you said that jail was a good experience for you?

810

811 MP: Yeah, it was a very good experience for me. Um, I mean, I'm old now, I don't
812 think I could do it now, but I was only 30, mid-thirties then. Um, it was a good
813 experience because it was an education. Um, you know, the people who were at
814 Rikers Island, the women, because of course it's men and women, but segregated.
815 The women who were in Rikers Island were women who were primarily there for
816 prostitution, petty theft, petty hustling, mostly related to drugs. And, um, and that
817 was, it was an education, living with that population, and learning from those
818 women. Some of whom were really hostile, but most of whom were not. Most of
819 whom couldn't believe that here we were these white girls who had voluntarily put
820 ourselves in a situation that meant we were in jail. That was like the biggest
821 mindfuck to them. Excuse my French. But, um, some of the women I knew were very
822 very political, but were also drug addicts, you know, or, you know, had killed
823 somebody, or, but who had, who knew what we doing, or who knew, in terms of our
824 professed politics. So, it was a huge learning experience. You know also what's really
825 terrible is losing your freedom of movement and also being watched all the time. So
826 you can't put something in front of your, the cells, we had these, of course there's all
827 kinds of prison architecture now, but we actually had long panels that we could look
828 through and we could be looked at. You're counted six times a day, um, some of

829 those, uh, counts, you have to stop, uh, your motion, your movement, or you have to
830 be relocated. Um, there's always a little light on in your cell, even at night, you know.
831 There's never darkness, never quiet, never privacy. That's the stuff that's hardest.
832 The horrible food and the horrible medical care. Actual Rikers is um, cause there's
833 some great, a great team of doctors in New York who made it their mission to help
834 set up good, you know, medical care, within this impossible situation. Um, but you
835 have, you know, to, if you felt ill, you still had to go to three meals a day. Um, you had
836 to be part of this enforced group movement. I think you could opt out of breakfast,
837 actually, but you had to go to lunch and you had to go to dinner. If you were, if you
838 felt really ill, the choice, so the choice was you had to sort of be, drag yourself with
839 the flu or with menstrual cramps or a migraine or whatever it was, to these kinds of
840 activities, to the meals. Um, the alternative was to go to the infirmary which was
841 being locked down further. And that was horrible, so no one wanted to go to the
842 infirmary. So that was bad, that stuff is bad. I'm not saying, I'm not being romantic
843 about, there's nothing romantic about jail, or prison. But Rikers is a jail, so the
844 reason, even though I had a year sentence, I was kept at the same city jail. If I had
845 gotten more than a year I would have been shipped upstate to one of the maximum-
846 security prisons. But, it was an enormous, it was just an enormous education about
847 who we were, what our politics were, how they were received, or interpreted by a
848 different population, who was also a population included in the address of our
849 politics, you know, oppressed black communities and oppressed black women. Um,
850 it was just a huge education about how to deal with, how to become street smart.
851 But also how to become more compassionate, and really educated politically. So it
852 was a good endurance test. Um, it also, uh, provided more perspective, because, you
853 know, I wasn't under this relentless pressure by this organization to do this, and
854 make this poster and write this leaflet and, so, I kind of found myself in that
855 environment of that, of those stringent circumstances. I don't think that's
856 uncommon, I think that people often will turn a difficult experience and come out of
857 it stronger and with more insight. I did a lot of drawing, a lot of, I mean right away
858 people learned I was an artist. Part of why I was protected, I wasn't protected in the
859 sense of a gang, but part of why nobody ever messed with me, or us, well first was
860 that we had this huge reputation about being terrorists, so people were scared of us,
861 and then we weren't scary, but there was still a little bit of that political celebrity,
862 because our, celebrities are very important in jail, it's very important every,
863 anywhere, but we were famous. So we were kind of to be respected in a weird way.
864 Um, and then when people learned that I could draw, then I had hundreds of friends
865 who would ask, who would say, "I'll give you a pack of cigarettes for," because we
866 could, you could still smoke in the yard, then. I don't know if you can now. Um, no
867 smoking's everywhere. But I would do a drawing in exchange for a, you know, I was
868 endlessly.

869
870 BA: Is that how you bided your time?

871
872 MP: I did that, yeah, we read a lot, you know, we still had meetings, we had defense
873 meetings, because we were trying to appeal our conviction. So we were involved in
874 that. A lot of reading. Some of the reading was reading we were doing together, you

875 know, like a study group. But there was a lot of other reading. A lot of letter writing,
876 I was a good correspondent then. Visits, we all got visits.

877

878 BA: Who was there for you when you were behind bars?

879

880 MP: Well my parents came to visit. That was the most amazing kind of thing. And my
881 mother had let her hair go back to its normal color, which was white. So a great
882 psychological cue on her part. For me to walk into the room, the visiting room, and
883 here's my mother with white hair. Oh my God, what have I done to my mother? And
884 she had just stopped dying it, that's all. It's pretty funny. They were a little, there
885 was this one woman who was, it's like a big gym, if you can imagine, this visiting
886 room, it was. Um, this woman, who had just learned she was getting out, and
887 screamed, running, from a visitor I guess, screamed running through the room, "I am
888 getting out of this mother fucker tonight!" And so all the women are like, "Yes! Yes,
889 Loraine!" or whatever her name was, and my parents were like, "Oh my God. Where
890 are we." It was pretty funny. No, but they, I think they, I think it was, they came to
891 visit me and I think that they were enormously reassured that I was in good spirits,
892 strong, smart, able to deal with this environment. I was not falling apart. You know,
893 there are lots of myths about things like jail for people who are, in whose world, that
894 doesn't happen.

895

896 BA: Did you –

897

898 MP: My brother visited me, I had, but I had, all my friends visited me. Of course,
899 most of my friends at this point were part of these various overlapping networks, so
900 it was also their duty to visit political, you know, we were political prisoners. Give
901 me a break.

902

903 BA: Were you, was there ever a point where, you know, were like, "I can't believe
904 this is happening to me?"

905

906 MP: No.

907

908 BA: No?

909

910 MP: No. I mean, it made total sense. I mean, look at what we did. We created this
911 mini-riot at the airport. We expected that we would go to jail. I guess, I expected we
912 would get, that we were going to get much more physically hurt. Although a couple
913 people, a couple of us sustained more injuries. I mostly had this neck thing from this
914 cop twisting my neck around. But, um, we thought we were going to get badly
915 beaten up by the Springboks, that was a bit of our fantasy. But we didn't come close
916 to them.

917

918 BA: So, after all of this you said you moved to Chicago.

919

920 MP: Yes.

921

922 BA: And at this point were you kind of done with apartheid, the anti-apartheid
923 movement?

924

925 MP: No, no. Not at all. No, when I got out of jail I had lost my apartment. I mean, I
926 lived with other people. I don't know. All my stuff was kind of dispersed. I had no
927 job, uh, my girlfriend had disappeared. I didn't know whether she had gone
928 underground or just disappeared. You know, all, there were all sorts, there was no
929 stability in New York, and I was asked by somebody in my even tinier organization
930 then, uh, to go to Chicago, to continue doing political work, so that's why I came to
931 Chicago.

932

933 BA: Um, and did you do anyway, and can you talk briefly about what you did anti-
934 apartheid wise in Chicago?

935

936 MP: Um, mostly just, uh, again, just, um, I mean this is near the end, um, I think
937 mostly just going, you know, going to demonstrations, and that kind of thing. The
938 political work, I got very involved with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago,
939 and set up an art program for them, and, uh, did kind of Puerto Rico solidarity work.
940 I continued to do prison work, um, did try to get a real job and so on. Um, eventually,
941 in the mid-eighties I, uh, helped for Act Up Chicago, the AIDS activist movement. Um,
942 because I had been part of this loose-knit of anti-imperialist leftist queers, but, so, I
943 just remember demonstrations. A more generalized sense. I was not involved in any
944 kind of committee or group about, that dealt with apartheid per se.

945

946 BA: OK. And going back just a little bit, I know that, I know it's going back in time,
947 but how did you react to Reagan's election.

948

949 MP: Oh, we thought it was the worst thing. It was, I think we had a kind of doomsday
950 scenario in our heads about Reagan. I think that we knew the people, and I had,
951 things had, um, I mean, there was a big protest. This is 1980, when this happened.
952 There was a big protest in D.C. at his inauguration, and I was a part of that. And, um,
953 lots of different groups were there. I mean, this was something that the left, there
954 was still a left then, had consensus on that this was so retrograde, what this
955 represented. And people knew about the kind of organizing that groups like the
956 Christian coalition, well, that's not even a group, that's sort of an umbrella, but the
957 ultra-right Christian, um, organizing, fundamentalist Christian organizing that had
958 been going on that was very dangerous. There was a kind of concern about this
959 upsurge of Klan activity, it was, and Neo Nazi activity, um, just, just the kinds of anti-
960 union, repressive, uh, I don't know. We all thought it was, it felt truly horrific. It's
961 really interesting these days to hear people talk about Reagan as a kind of moderate
962 Republican. I mean, it's a really interesting disconnect. I think our perspective was
963 very skewed because this was 19, this was a year before all this stuff happened, that
964 I was describing to you -

965

966 BA: Um, do you think that -

967

968 MP: We had a kind of mentality of, exaggerating repression, say.

969

970 BA: Do you think, uh, his election had any, um, influence on your radical movement
971 with the Springboks?

972

973 MP: Oh, I think so. Yeah, that's a really good question. But I think I just have to say
974 yes. Yeah, I think it was a sort of, uh, confirmation of our worst fears, which
975 necessitated desperate action, I think.

976

977 BA: OK, um, now, moving forward a little bit, where were you the day Mandela was
978 elected?

979

980 MP: I don't remember. Remind me of the day, and I'll try to –

981

982 BA: I don't know the exact day, I know it was '94.

983

984 MP: Yeah, but which month, do you remember? I don't know. I was probably in
985 Chicago or New York. Um, yes, there was great celebrating. That was like the
986 opposite pole from Regan.

987

988 BA: Did you, like, how did you feel about all of your activism at that time? When he
989 was elected?

990

991 MP: Um, well, I don't know if, I think I was, by then, smart enough to know that, it
992 wasn't a matter of all the things I had been involved in being vindicated because we
993 made serious, I made serious, political mistakes of judgment and, very, some of that
994 stuff was very foolish. But, it just, it felt like a kind of closing of an era on a note that,
995 uh, it was hard for any of us to every imagine that this would happen, and with what
996 grace.

997

998 BA: And had you –

999

1000 MP: Like the notion: liberation in our lifetime, that was a slogan, but they seemed to
1001 embody it, and I know people who went to, uh, who have met Mandela and have
1002 gone to South Africa since, and, either as part of more recently global AIDS work or
1003 earlier, kind of prison solidarity work where, because Mandela has expressed
1004 solidarity with different political prisoners in the U.S., Mumia Abu-Jamal, you know.
1005 So, I've heard stories of people who had actual contact, um, that I remember that
1006 being a moment when, it was like this wonderful dream, and, um, a possibility. And
1007 there was something about his character, you know, this person who had been
1008 labeled a terrorist, and now is head of state, and, um, and his wisdom and his kind of
1009 intelligence. You know, South Africa has got a lot of problems now, but Mandela was
1010 a pretty amazing leader, I think, in all these capacities.

1011

1012 BA: Now, at that point, OK.

1013
1014 MP: How many more do you have? (referring to questions left in interview)
1015
1016 BA: Can I give you five more questions?
1017
1018 MP: I just, my students are, I'm really, what's your correct time, 3:15?
1019
1020 BA: A little bit before that, 3:10, 3:11.
1021
1022 MP: OK, yeah. I was supposed to meet them at 3.
1023
1024 BA: OK.
1025
1026 MP: Yeah. Let's just go through them real quick.
1027
1028 BA: Alright, um, uh, what are you most proud of in your movement? Like, I'm sorry,
1029 in your life. Like, looking back at everything.
1030
1031 MP: Um, I don't know. Just determination and persistence, I guess. And trying to tell
1032 the truth now about everything with making apologies.
1033
1034 BA: And what was the most frustrating point for you?
1035
1036 MP: Um, feeling like I was part of a very tiny group where the only possible exit, uh,
1037 out of a very bad situation was, um, just to cut off from all of it.
1038
1039 BA: And if you had to give any advice to activists today like working in, like, the gay
1040 movement, or any other movement, what advice would you give them?
1041
1042 MP: I think it's really important for everybody to study other movements besides
1043 the one either that had propelled them into action out of identification, not
1044 necessarily identity but, um, but to look and pay attention to other movements even
1045 ones that are considered hostile. Like, for example, uh, fundamentalist Islamic or
1046 fundamentalist Christian ones or tea party. It's really important to study, to study
1047 social movements and to study history. It's really important to listen, to read, to not,
1048 not to do all those things as a way to put off taking a stand about something, but it's
1049 really important to take the time to, um, investigate and study how complex politics
1050 and social relations are in our world. So, for somebody who is like coming into gay
1051 activism or queer activism it would be really important to look even before
1052 Stonewall, it would be important to look at the issue of how people in other
1053 countries, other cultures are negotiating issues around gender and sexuality, um, it
1054 would be important to be very thoughtful about alliances, and solidarities. Yeah.
1055
1056 BA: OK.
1057
1058 MP: It's a lot.

1059

1060 BA: Well thank you so much!

1061

1062 MP: Thanks, Blair!