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Interview with Njoki Kamau

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ANTI-APARTHEID MOVEMENT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION WITH NJOKI
KAMAU

1 Christen Tulp: OK, Today's date is November 25th, 2009. This is Christen Tulp C-H-R-I-
2 S-T-E-N T-U-L-P. And my interviewee's is-

3

4 Njoki Kamau: Njoki Kamau N-J-O-K-I is my first name and my last name is K-AM-A-U.

5

6 CT: Alright, um, We are at Northwestern University at the Women's Center where Njoki
7 and umm we are in Chicago, IL and her activism started in 1979 to the fall of Apartheid.

8 Can you please give me your year and place of birth?

9

10 NK: My year of birth is 1948-August 1948 in Kenya

11

12 CT: and where were you raised?

13

14 NK: I was raised in Kenya. I was raised in the central Highlands in a place called Niere
15 which is where the Kikuyu people live. The Kikuyu people are the people that were
16 involved in the struggle against British. All Kenyans were involved but in particular they
17 were the birth of the Mau Mau-those freedom fighters. So I am from, you know, the
18 central region, central highlands, very beautiful part of Kenya, rolling hills. My people
19 my people are agriculture people

20

21 CT: What is your father's name?

22

23 NK: My father's name is Duncan Kamau Gagumbi-spelled G-A-G-U-M-B-I.

24

25 CT: And what is his year and place of birth?

26

27 NK: That really is difficult to know because, uhhhh, at the time when he was born or the
28 times when he was born, you know, they didn't keep like written records, anything like

29 that so basically he died in 1983 and we estimated maybe using, you know, the events of
30 the time in Kenyan history, we estimated that he was 83 years old but there is no written
31 record of when he was born but he was born in the same part of Kenya where I was born
32 which was Niere, which is about 100 miles from Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya.

33

34 CT: What is your mother's name?

35

36 NK: My mother's name is Milker Waungeco(sp?) Kamau

37

38 CT: And what's her year and place of birth?

39

40 NK: again it's the same challenge like my dad that really they did not keep records so we
41 estimated when she died in 1998, which is the year of the—when the bomb blast which
42 hit the American Embassy and killed many Kenyan's as a result, she was ninety—we
43 estimated her to be 93.

44

45 CT: How did you receive your name?

46

47 NK: I received my name—actually I do have another name which is Gladwell. So my full
48 names are Gladwell Njoki Kamau even though I prefer to use Njoki. Now Gladwell is a
49 Christian name that my parents—my mother in particular chose, uh, as a Baptismal
50 name. And, you know, in the Greek Orthodox Church. And, um, it's a name that I
51 generally just leave for the legal records but I prefer to use my African name Njoki. Now
52 Gladwell, when I asked my mother where she got such a name because it's so British—in
53 any case, because of colonization and Christianity and the way that Christianity was
54 brought to Africa, to the other parts of Africa, but also in Kenya, when children were
55 baptized in the church which is really Western Christian Church they were always given,
56 you know, western names. So I'm sure you'll notice that many African's carry the first
57 name—uh western name like John or Mary and then they'll have an African name. That's
58 the name that, you know, that they're called at home or, you know, that's their ethnic
59 name. Now what is interesting is that when I came to the U.S. I found out that, um, a first

60 name is a first name. A first name is the one that you are given when you are born. So
61 really truly we African's that use our Christian names as our first names, that is not
62 correct because our first names are our African names because those are the names that
63 we are given when we are born. The name I was given when I was born was Njoki. So—
64 actually pronounced Njo-ki and the Gladwell is a name that came later. And technically I
65 really should be Njoki Gladwell Kamau. But the way that, because of again colonization,
66 because of imperialism, um when we went to school, because these were missionary
67 schools, we always had to—the names they put down were your Christian name, your
68 first name. And your African name was your middle name, which means that we lost our
69 first names. And you will see many many Africans who live in the country or back in
70 Africa will have a Christian name as their first name and their African name as their
71 middle name but really it should be the other way around. So that's why I have gone back
72 and reclaimed my name as Njoki because when I came here many people kept asking me,
73 “Why do you have such a British sir name?” because actually there is only one person I
74 know in Britian called Gladwel; Malcolm Gladwell, who is an author, a writer—a great
75 writer, but his name is spelled Gladwel with one “L”. And so its really a sir name and so
76 that's why people are asking me, many Americans, “Why do you have a British sir
77 name?” and, you know, “Are you African?” So finally I decided, oh they are giving me a
78 hint. They expect me, because I am from Africa, they expect me to have an African name
79 (laughs). So I started using my African name and after that no one ever asked me why I
80 have such a name because, you know, I'm from Africa, they can see I have this African
81 name, and I have loved it. And now, I thought oh maybe they won't be able to pronounce
82 it or—but no, so I've used it for many years. So yeah...

83

84 CT: Who made the rules in your house when you growing up?

85

86 NK: Who made the rules in my house when I was growing up? Basically given the
87 culture, my father, we didn't grow up in the house, you know, with my dad there because,
88 all the time, maybe in my other early years when I was a little girl, when my parents were
89 together but by the time I was aware, maybe I was four years old or three years old, my
90 father lived in the city, where he worked and my mother lived in the country side where

91 she was working on the land, you know, growing food, etc. She was a peasant woman,
92 um, and um, so she really was the one in the house. Part of the time I stayed with my dad
93 when I was like—I left my mother when I was three years old and I went to live with my
94 dad because it became very unsafe in the country side and my mother, being afraid of, my
95 younger sister who was then sixteen, being raped because girls were being raped by the
96 colonial armies and so on so she sent me and my brother to the city. Girls were fleeing
97 from the country side because of rape, because it was a time of war. And so I went to the
98 city and lived with my dad, my brother, and my sister, the one who was looking out for
99 us. So I guess at that time, my father was calling the shots. And my father was a very
100 traditional man. He was serious. He was a no nonsense man (laughs), you know, etc.
101 So, then in the country side when I left the city, I was then about, um, I think I was
102 about seven years old, when I left, went back with my mother to the village and it was
103 my mother and my two sisters. So then it was really my mother calling the shots.

104

105 CT: What would you get in trouble for when you were growing up?

106

107 NK: When I was growing up what I would get in trouble for would be , uh, you know,
108 the children living in the village, our parents, mostly women, um, worked really hard.
109 They worked hard. They woke up at the crack of dawn to go and fetch water and then
110 they left to go work in the fields. Um, and growing food is really a lot of hard work.
111 You know, the digging, then prepare the ground for, you know, for when the rains
112 come. When the rains come, then planting. And then when you are finishing planting,
113 the crops will germinate, then you will have to weed. Back breaking work, bending all
114 day, and then, you know, when the crops dry, like corn and beans, you harvest them and
115 prepare them for storage. So that's a lot of work that goes on most of the year. So you,
116 as a young person, especially a girl, you are expected to participate in that work. SO
117 even when I would be going to school I would be expected—every time I left—when
118 you come home from school you have a chore. A chore to either go get water, or, you
119 know, during the weekends a chore to go get firewood or accompany your mother, your
120 parent, mother, to, where ever she is going to work for that day, to go help weed,
121 harvest (laughs). I hated that work because it was hard work. So, you know, so I would

122 get in trouble when I would be instructed when I came home from school to go and get
123 water and instead I would play on my way from school with my friends. I'd get home
124 too late to go get water (laughs), yeah.

125

126 CT: Where would you play with your friends?

127

128 NK: We would play on the way, like on the way, like on the road etc. or, you know,
129 during the weekend, Saturdays, um, sometimes we would go to work on the fields, and
130 then I would just be, then I would feel like I'm tired and my mother would just keep
131 working, working, working. And then I would pretend that I was going to the bathroom
132 somewhere and then I would be gone for—(laughs)—for quit awhile and she would just
133 get really mad. She would get mad. Where did I go? You know, etc. etc. So you know,
134 just stuff like that. And also I'd get in trouble, because you are so much incorporated in
135 the household chores. You don't have a choice. You can't complain. Um, so sometimes
136 what you do is, what is passive aggressive. So she sends me to go do something, like
137 "Go and get me that" and "Go and get me that" and "Go"—and then I would just stand
138 there (laughs) and she would really get mad because you know the culture, the African
139 culture, the Kikuyu culture for that matter, young people have no business disobeying
140 their parents so when you do you would get in a lot of trouble and, you know, there was
141 corporal punishment; beating and being whacked. You know, so, yeah.

142

143 CT: What was your favorite food to eat?

144

145 NK: Um, my favorite food to eat was, um, lets see, what would I say was my favorite
146 food to eat? I think it's Eriol (sp?), you know, usually, this was a very common dish,
147 still very common, and it's a dish that is prepared with, um, it's beans, and corn,
148 mashed with green bananas and, you know, vegetables, lush green vegetables. Because
149 I grew up in the country side; we grew all the food we ate. So we always had green
150 vegetables, lots of green vegetables, fresh food. And I thought that this was backwards
151 and the people in the city had it better—that they were better off but now I come to find
152 out that actually I grew up really—I was lucky because the food we ate was very fresh

153 and didn't have any chemicals (laughs). The water we drunk, we got it from, uh, like a
154 spring, sprung from the ground, crystal clear water from the ground. And I thought that
155 the people that live in the city that have tapped water are lucky but actually we were
156 drinking the best water. So I look back now and I think, "Wow" (laughs). You know,
157 now that I live in America and we are Organic and all that stuff and buying water,
158 bottled water, and things like that so I am—and it really has been helpful because eating
159 healthy is not a problem for me because I have a reference. I eat healthy as it is and it's
160 very easy for me because I have a reference point from growing up with fresh food and
161 stuff like that.

162

163 CT: Who made this food for you?

164

165 NK: When I was growing up it was my mother. My mother made most of the food, but
166 also my sisters. My older sisters did more of the work that I couldn't do, you know,
167 like—my mother would not—because she cooked with, some of the time, she cooked
168 with a clay pot. You know, she would put a clay pot—you know this Is dried beans,
169 dried corn, into a clay pot with open fire. You know, three stones and open fire and that
170 takes time to cook. And so when you are ready to mash it, the bananas and the
171 vegetables, and you mash it, you have to know how to do it because you can break it.
172 So I would volunteer to do it and she would say, "NO NO NO you are going to break
173 my pot!" (laughs) How else am I going to learn? But she would let me sisters do it who
174 are older and bigger and me I would just—so I didn't—so a dish like that I didn't cook
175 but for other dishes, like simpler dishes I would cook. Like if something needed to be
176 boiled, if something needed to be sautéed with onions using an aluminum cooking pot,
177 you know, then I could do that stuff. I did that stuff, actually I cooked—for that stuff I
178 was already cooking at eight years old.

179

180 CT: Wow!

181

182 NK: Uh huh

183

184 CT: Um, what was your education expectations in your family?

185

186 NK: In my family, around the village, my family was known as a family that was
187 passionate about education but actually the person that was passionate about education
188 was my mother. It's not my dad. My dad was a very traditional man. He was into
189 Kikuyu traditions and you know, educating girls was not his thing. We were five girls
190 and one brother. And overall education to him was not a big deal but my mother, who
191 was actually in to it, who did not go to school, was passionate, so that meant that we
192 were—the five daughters, all of us went to school. All of us went to school even though
193 because of the times, it was during the liberation struggle and the Mau Mau's—so
194 anybody who embraced western education was a traitor. Missionary education, because
195 uh, missionaries were linked with the colonizers, and you know, they were—they had
196 general strategy and went in that direction. You know, so like, you know, the Catholics,
197 the Presbyterians, those are the three main missionary groupings that were in Kenya and
198 they had school, you know, so anyone who went to school—they were going to a
199 missionary school. So I went to a Presbyterian missionary school. And, um, the
200 Mau Mau's, like, um, you know, like, um, my sister who was in a boarding school—my
201 sister was born in 1931, so she was already in a boarding school but she was moved
202 because there was so much commotion about the Mau Mau's saying, you know, “This
203 is a traitor” whatever and she was—my father married her off to somebody who didn't
204 have as much—who hardly had an education but was very active in the Mau Mau
205 movement and my second sister was very smart but she was pulled out of school
206 because she was the one that went with us to the city—she was sixteen—because of the
207 rape and all that. And then, um, my um, my sister, my one sister who I really—who
208 really inspired me and who was—I credit with really kind of keeping, suggesting that
209 I—actually paying my school fees—it's Ester who the only way, she went to school but
210 the only way to survived was to go—when she went to boarding school she never came
211 home because the Mau Mau's, the freedom fighters, kept demanding from my parents
212 that she should be brought back home and actually my mother—they put my mother on
213 the death list because they said she was a collaborator. She was allowing her daughter to
214 be- you know- to be missionary school and these were part of the colonizers, the

215 oppressors so my mother was put on a death list but the Mau Mau grouping area—one
216 group argued “NO” but some of the other daughters were active in the movement—my
217 older sister, my other sister—and that it was not her fault-- that it was actually my sister
218 who refused to come back home. Actually my mother made a trip all the way to go
219 where my sister was going to school to beg her to come back because she was so afraid
220 she would get killed. Um, but my sister refused. She said I’m not coming back home
221 because clearly she would see she would not go back to school. Also my sister—in
222 order to go to those schools, missionary school—especially the Presbyterian schools,
223 not so the Catholics, you could not be circumcised. If you were circumcised you could
224 not go to Presbyterian schools, you know, missionary schools. So my sister, knew if
225 she came home she would be circumcised. And so she refused—she knew she would
226 not be able to go back to school. So and then, since she was refusing to be circumcised
227 that even put my mother in deeper trouble, because the Mau Mau’s said, “See? She is
228 following the ways of the white man”, you know, the colonizer, the enemy, so you
229 know, its like being caught between a rock and a hard place. Lucky my mother was not
230 put to death but, you know, so.

231

232 CT: So why did you move to Chicago—

233

234 NK: And for me because of my sister—when the time came for me to be circumcised
235 because there were to be doing the circumcising. Just today I was reading, um, The
236 Kenyan Daily—The Daily Nation, on the internet. They say about 300 girls to be
237 circumcised. So even now in Kenya, and other parts of Africa, there are ethnic
238 groupings that are still circumcised girls. Even though now, I think there is a law in
239 Kenya not to circumcise girls, still because of tradition, you know, so, the government
240 officials are saying, you know, “Anybody who is caught circumcising girls will be
241 arrested” but you know, its also like you say it through one side of the mouth but you
242 don’t mean it on the other side because you are also from the same people and you are
243 likely to no go arresting people because you are afraid to insight people because they’ll
244 get mad so you know, even now I was reading it but in my case because of my sister,
245 modeling something totally different, when I came along and my mother said “Ok the

246 time has come for you to decide whether you want to be circumcised or not”—I was
247 ten—I said NO, I don’t want to be circumcised. But because of my sister and my
248 mother—my mother being, really a unique woman in a lot of ways, she listened to what
249 I had to say and that was respected. But I learned later that my dad was furious—that he
250 was furious—that he was mad and that he was not happy that I had refused to be
251 circumcised. It was a long story—that I had to escape from the village—I had to—
252 (laugh) at night and things like that. So.

253

254 CT: WOW! Um, why did you move to Chicago?

255

256 NK: I moved to Chicago because I actually came to school. I got a scholarship—full
257 bred scholarship to come and do graduate studies, um, you know, in business
258 management. My degree in Nairobi was bachelor of business administration but then
259 they called it bachelor of comers but it was business administration—it’s more of a
260 generic name. I worked for a multi-national corporation Unilever(sp?). It’s an
261 anglidesh(sp?) corporation. Um, you know, I worked for about three years with them
262 and then I got a scholarship to come do graduate studies in management. So when I
263 came, I first of all went to Dallas, Texas to Southern Methodist University where I got
264 my MBA. And then I went to the American Graduate School of International
265 Management in Glendale, Arizona which is a suburb of Phoenix, Arizona and I got my
266 masters in International Business—International Management. It was a dual degree
267 program and a full bright. And then I came to Northwestern to do a PHD. Um, actually
268 when I landed in Chicago I didn’t know anybody, in 1978, September, I was across the
269 street in the business school [points across the street from our location]. And I was um, I
270 was actually the first black woman to attempted a PHD at Kellogg’s—meaning the
271 Kellogg’s graduate school of management. So I’m an ABD, which means I am an All
272 But Dissertation. I think I was the first black woman—not I think—I was the first black
273 woman and I was the—there had only been one person that graduated with a PHD—one
274 black person—and then there was another black person, he was from Trinidad—in my
275 class. So we were like the second or the third and you can imagine the amount of racism
276 and the amount of challenges I faced. (laughs) Yeah,

277

278 CT: What were your feelings like when you first moved to Chicago? What were you
going through?

279

280 NK: Uh, when I moved to Chicago I was actually excited because I had been to Dallas,
281 Texas. SMU is a very—it's where George Bush is having his library so you can imagine
282 (laughs)—I don't know whether you're a republican but I hope not but you can imagine
283 in 1978 what kind of a school Southern Methodist University was, in terms of being
284 conservative—it's like Northwest—meaning it was predominantly white. It was, um,
285 you know, affluent for the rich but predominantly white and they almost didn't know
286 what to do with their black students. So they put me—they had a complex on campus—
287 a central place where they housed blacked students. (laughs) They had this
288 undergraduate student—when I came I was on a scholarship because I don't know
289 what's happening, they threw me with those undergraduates because they didn't know
290 what to do with me. So I discovered—well I was very pleased when I looked around
291 that everyone was black like me so I was like, “oh great!” but I began to find out—
292 people then kept asking me “why are you staying here, you are a grad student. You
293 should be staying in the graduate housing.” So I didn't even know there was graduate
294 housing. And come to discover they just—they couldn't put me in the graduate housing.
295 (laughs). So I went to demand to say—because it was very difficult to study with my
296 undergraduate roommate wanted to study with the TV on and here I am a grad student.
297 So I was spending hours and hours in the library but then the library would be closed.
298 So I went to the graduate housing to demand that I be moved. And the woman, Mrs.
299 King, I've never forgotten, looked at me and said, “No, we can't move you, you signed
300 a contract”. I said “Look, I'm a foreign student so I don't understand—didn't
301 understand the dynamics of this. So you put me in with the undergraduate students and
302 my roommate is on the TV all the time. There's no other graduate student in the
303 complex and here there is graduate housing.” “We have no room in the graduate
304 housing.” So I said OK, I said, you know, Look I'm not a very conflictual person, and
305 certainly being a foreign student you can imagine coming to the U.S., you are scared
306 you are—you know, it's a big place, it's intimidating, it's scary. So I said to Mrs. King,

307 “ok you know what? This was an intergovernmental agreement. Full bright is a
308 government to government agreement scholarship. So I need to call my government to
309 say I can’t study, maybe I need to come back home” (coughs) So I said, you know, So I
310 need to call my government and say I need to be either placed in a different institution
311 or sent back home. So I went back to my dorm—to the little place where we were. And
312 the next thing—I went to school—and when I came in the evening, they had found
313 housing for me. But where they put me for housing—they put me in the Theological
314 School because just like that there is um, Garrett, you know, which is the seminary—
315 which is actually the Methodist Church started this school, Northwestern University.
316 Just like the Methodist Church started SMU which is why it is called Southern
317 Methodist University. So there was a seminary attached to the school—separate but
318 attached to the school just like Garrett, separate but attached to the school. So they put
319 me in the packing school of Theology because they couldn’t take me to graduate
320 housing so I said fine. They gave me a little room there and I was ok with it. And then
321 they put me—when she couldn’t find me housing, I also tried to find housing outside
322 campus because I heard that. So I tried to look for housing. So there was this place—I
323 am a very—I am going to sound like a typical case but it is true, because it happened.
324 So I am—I went looking for housing. I saw this apartment described. I called the
325 person. I said I am a graduate student, I am nuh nuh nuh and um, I am looking for an
326 apartment and I said—the person was excited and said yes you can have the apartment
327 and duh duh duh, just, you know, come up and uh pay the deposit. When I went to pay
328 the deposit, they said the apartment was taken between from when I talked to them and
329 when I went to pay the deposit. Now, I didn’t really understand what was going on until
330 I was talking to another grad student—was studying PHD Economics—this Asian
331 student, grad student, who said, “That’s racism!” I said “what?” (laughs) I didn’t really
332 understand because I was very new. I just came from Kenya. I didn’t understand how
333 racism—I just knew that it was odd. He said “That’s racism. That’s—you should report
334 to the Better Business Bureau.” The Better Business Bureau. I said who is that? You see
335 you never forget names—his name was Cahn Luther, I don’t have the energy to do that.
336 All I want is a place to stay and to study, that’s all I want. I didn’t come to this country
337 to take on these—because I now began to get scared. I’m like, “oh know, now,

338 that's"—so anyways so that's when in all that commotion there was that housing for
339 the—in the Garrett—you know. Now to answer your question, when I came to
340 Northwestern, I had already now understood—began to be effected by the trauma of
341 racism. You know, I have began to understand, "Oh my god" So if you are black in the
342 United States, it's not a good thing. So already my innocence had already been
343 tampered with, so when I came to Northwestern, I was, you know, I began to sense a
344 lot of other things. By then I began to understand—I began to understand that being
345 black was something that was not very positive—I mean it did not bring you a lot of—
346 so I had all kinds of challenges at Northwestern at this institution. They have come a
347 long way. I work here. This institution—I had a lot of challenges in the business school
348 because, as you heard, I was the first black woman—I was the second or third black
349 person to attempted a PHD so they didn't know what to do with black folks--they were
350 like—um, and—So I had all kinds of challenges. And I didn't end up finishing the
351 PHD, in fact I am an ABD from Kellogg's. You know, I did the course work and didn't
352 do the research you know, I had many problems and so on. When I—it was funny
353 because I argued the case with the Dean of the graduate school because the way I came
354 to—once I finished my masters—my two masters—my MBA and my master in
355 international business I was then no longer in the hands of full bright. So they I had to
356 find a different type of funding. So my government was willing to carry me and they
357 carried me for one year and then they said they didn't have money. So then I was
358 actually asking for money from the graduate school. And I convinced the Dean of the
359 graduate school Versteeg (sp?) that they needed to fund me but—and he agreed but
360 when I came to the department, to the school of business, the woman who coordinated
361 the graduate school, um—PHD students—when off on me and said, "Why should we
362 fund you? We want to fund people who will make Northwestern famous. Um you
363 know, if your government thought it was important for you to finish your PHD, why
364 didn't they, you know"—I said look it's a poor country that doesn't have a lot of
365 money. So she—she actually blocked—she blocked the decision from—so I was not
366 able to continue with my PHD. And then when I met with the—there were five faculty
367 that wanted to meet with me about, you know—and were giving me a hard time
368 about—why did I want to study? Because actually my plan was to go back and teacher

369 at the University of Nairobi. In fact I was in touch with the University of Nairobi. They
370 had sent a letter to the school to say you know, they have a place for me when I finish.
371 So this five men—white men—uh, the department head—some of them are still there. I
372 see them in the Sports and Aquatic Center. They don't mind me but I know—in fact the
373 other day I was just there on the treadmill just next to one of them and he didn't
374 recognize me but anyways these white five guys, well you know, interviewing me and
375 saying why would u want to study Africa? Africa is a place where they have so many
376 problems. This is true again. They have so many problems. And you know, we hear
377 they have no electricity and all that. So I was like ok, but isn't that what a PHD is
378 about? A PHD is about studying something that will benefit a people. And my people
379 have so many problems and challenges. So I want to go back and play—and help them.
380 So then you know-- they just—I looked at them and thought—you know I couldn't
381 really understand—and then I said to them when I applied to this school—I applied to
382 other schools and I wrote a statement of objective. And when I wrote the statement of
383 objective, you admitted me knowing that that's was what I was going—I said it clearly
384 that that's what I was going to do. You should have let me go to another institution—
385 another university that would have supported the idea. And so now you are telling me
386 midstream, you know, after—I even produced my statement of objective. So, um, you
387 know, um, the head of the department—So I said you know, I as a human—because
388 now I could see that they were just being like a wall, you know, and at that point I
389 understood—at that point I have to say, I understood what racism meant. So you know
390 what I did? I said I am now going to take my power—I said—I looked at all of them
391 and I said—and I pointed [points out] and I said “you know, as an African woman, I
392 have come a long way. I have jumped many hurdles.” That is what I was doing
393 [pointing and shaking finger] “and you can only be but a temporary obstacle”. And they
394 all went red. Remember these are big wigs in my school—in my department, you know,
395 I was in marketing. So they all went red and the head of the department, Levy, said
396 “we're not being racist”. When he said that word, you see, as an African, I didn't refer
397 to myself as black. I used the word African woman. I didn't say as a black woman. So
398 right there in my head, I went BINGO! This is what it is because I realized I didn't say
399 black, I said African. I wasn't even thinking race at that point I was just thinking

400 African. And then he comes back and says, “we are not racist.” First of all, I was
401 thinking where did u get that from? That’s not even what I was thinking right now, I
402 was just letting you know that you can’t stop me. (laughs) So I knew that—I was
403 “ooooooh this is what it is!” So then you know, fast forward, I decided now--I didn’t
404 finish my school. I actually branched off into working with woman. And I ended up
405 being the Director of Shelter for Women but—so now fast forward. At the Women’s
406 Center where I work as the Associate Director I am in charge of a program called
407 Survival Skills. Survival Skills is a program I put together and it’s a program for PHD
408 students—women students—and basically what I do is I look for three faculty—ten
409 year faculty, from Northwestern—women—who come and talk about, how is it—to
410 give tips to women students—how it is—what they need to be in mind in order to be
411 successful in the academy. How do you make sure to finish your PHD, how do you
412 have an advisor, a mentor, how do you—what are the challenges, so you know—and I
413 do that because I know. This is what I needed for someone to tell me—to help me
414 with—so in that program like about five years ago—it was in this living room [points to
415 the couch in the room] and one of the students that came was this black woman who I
416 didn’t know. She was the only black student—So at the end I talk to—I mix around and
417 I talk to the students—I talked to her, Sonja Greya (sp?) and Sonja Greya said—I said
418 what department are you in and she said, “I am in Kellogg’s”. I said oh you are in
419 Kellogg’s and she said ya I am. I said oh, that’s my old school. She looked at me like
420 that [confused face] and said, “old school?” I said yeah I went there but a long time ago.
421 She said when? So she was curious you know? So I explained to her I went to school
422 you know, it late ’78, ya September ’78 is when I enrolled and then she said, “Ooooh,
423 are you the woman they talk about?” I was like—first of all I was like they talk about
424 me? So you know, then part of me wanted not to ask any more questions because I was
425 like I don’t know to know what they said. And then part of me was like I want to know
426 what they said. So I thought if I lose this moment I may always regret it. So I said to
427 Sonja, “What do they say?” She said, “Oh they said they just weren’t ready for you” So
428 here I was. I internalized all this stuff that I wasn’t that good—that it was me—they
429 made me feel like it was me. They put all the heat on. And actually it was that the
430 school was not ready for me. Now Sonja, her PHD—she was in marketing. She did a

431 PHD—something. She went to South Africa. She did her research in South Africa.
432 Now, that's the Africa that they ridiculed when—you know; now Northwestern was not
433 really advanced in terms of the international idea of business or anything like that.
434 Harvard would have been different. You know, any of the east coast schools would
435 have been different but Northwestern was then just—so. So I said to Sonja, “Thank
436 you”. I thought to myself that is totally liberating (laughs). So, so anyway those are my
437 feelings and thoughts and however for being here.

438

439 CT: When did you—Why did u first become an activist?

440

441 NK: Um, I don't know that—It is a question that is hard to answer because I'm like, on
442 the one hand what came up for me—I feel like I have always been an activist but I think
443 the question you asked is more like when I really was, put myself out there as an
activist. So

444 the question is that when?

445

446 CT: Why?

447

448 NK: Why? Because as I said growing up where I grew up in colonialism—brutal
449 colonialism—In fact when I was reading a recent book by Caroline Elkins which is
450 called The Imperial Reckoning: The British Gulag In Kenya. And when I read that book
451 I could only read a few pages at a time because it's such a profound book, because it
452 was actually talking about the time when I grew up. The people—it was talking about
453 my parents. It was talking about my people. It was talking about my time. And I know I
454 grew up in a village that had a mote around it with wooden spikes at the bottom. (not
455 understood) 24/7. Twenty four hours a day. And you know, I know that early in the
456 morning before it was daylight for all the adults in the village, including of course my
457 mother, to go to do communal work. And that everywhere—we were escorted one a
458 week to collect food and um, also like three days a week we were escorted to collect
459 water. So I grew up with a sense of injustice. Um, so the reason is there's just
460 something profoundly disturbing to me about—um, about, um, you know, one group of

461 people oppressing or hurting another group of people and growing up, being on the
462 receiving end I knew what it was like—the pain and the agony and I knew what it felt
463 like to be denied, you know, your rights. And to be owned as a subject, and to be—to
464 have no say so. And to be brutalized, and to be disregarded, and to be devalued, and to be
465 not considered—not treated like a human being with human dignity. You, your parents,
466 you neighbors, you know, um. So I had seen the—you know—I knew what it was like
467 to be in the hands of injustice. And so because of knowing that I just grew up—in fact I
468 remember like in high school, one of the courses I took was on the old testament and
469 part of doing to old testament was reading about the Prophets. And I love the Prophets,
470 because the Prophets—you know—were always fighting, speaking against injustice.
471 Um—and—so there is something profoundly wrong and profoundly disturbing and
472 profoundly unacceptable when one human being seeks to harm another human being.
473 Or when a group of human beings seeks to harm another group of human beings. I don't
474 care on what account; account of race, account of gender, account of sexual orientation,
475 account of class, account of ability or disability, account of—I don't care what the
476 reference point is. There is something profoundly um, disturbing for me.

477

478 CT: How did your parents—

479

480 NK: So that would mean then as a, as a—living in the country, that I would gravitate
481 towards, you know, the Anti Apartheid Movement which was housed on this very
482 campus. Also there was a divestment movement—for divestment going on all over the
483 United States. Going on, on campuses, going on in cities, you know and then of course
484 the heart of Chicago with a class of activists and people that I now got to know and got
485 to be friends with. So that whole thing just ignited me as an activist.

486

487 CT: How did your parent's react to your involvement in the movement?

488

489 NK: My parents were not even really aware that I was involved in the movement. First
490 of all, they lived in Africa, far away. And just because—my mother is a peasant woman
491 in the village so you know, I wouldn't be communicating with her and telling her—not

492 because I think she would disapprove but I wouldn't think to write to her and say, "Oh
493 by the way Mom" It's not like the usual relationship—mom and daughter. Like you
494 know, ok mom let me tell you what I'm doing—because—I'm now involved in the
495 whatever movement. So I wouldn't—that not what I would be telling her. I would
496 probably be telling her "oh I'm fine, I'm working, I'm going to school." But those in
497 between wouldn't be there. (laughs) So in other words the answer there is—you know,
498 uh—there's nothing there I could really talk about in terms of how they would've
499 reacted to my involvement. And my father died in '83. So I'm the last born in the
500 family, so my parents were not young when I was born—being the last one. But my
501 father—with all do respect was very involved in the movement. In the Liberation
502 Movement, in the struggle against the British. He was known to bring, um, famous
503 political figures to my home—to our home in the country side. You know, during those
504 times and then he was also in detention for five years.

505

506 CT: Would you want to go into a little more about that, you father in detention?

507

508 NK: Basically, it's—you know—with the British—the Kikuyu people, the people from
509 the central highlands in the largest ethnic grouping in Kenya. Because they are
510 agricultural people. When the British came and took a lot of their land and carved out
511 what is called the white highlands—white meaning white settlers. Of course the
512 Kikuyu's were left with not much land. And over time there was a lot of, um, you
513 know, anger over that the land was taken and blah blah blah. So, you know, of course
514 the Kikuyu's started organizing and out of that was born the Mau Mau group, the
515 freedom fighters. And then in response the British declared a state of emergency, in the
516 central highlands from 1952 to 1962—a ten year period. And in that ten year period—
517 which is why the book by Caroline Elkins is about, um, the British response to that—
518 meaning that complete dislocation of the Kikuyu people—disorganization, like putting
519 them into (not understood) villages—you know, with like rows and rows of houses with
520 a mote around them as a way to break the backbone of the Mau Mau movement. And
521 taking most men to detention camps. So my father, along with many other men, were
522 taken to these detention camps which was scattered all over Kenya and where thousands

523 and thousands of Kikuyu people died. So my father was one of the many was taken to
524 detention. You know, there were some women that were taken to detention but the
525 women—most women and children were housed—you know—housed in these villages.
526 What they did was—the British—to take people from the ancestral lands and have them
527 build these little huts—round huts, like, you know—rows and rows of them and then a
528 mote around them. So I grew up in a village like that. (laughs) So, yeah, then of course
529 the people in the village—the women and some—the old men—some old old men were
530 not taken to detention camps. But women and children and old men in these villages. So
531 for the women and some of them men—the older men were –did, you know—
532 communal work. Labor which is like five days a week. Had to go dig roads and cut
533 down trees and you were escorted everywhere (laughs). Yeah, you didn't have any
534 freedom.

535

536 CT: Um, explain your participation with the divestment movement here at
Northwestern.

537

538 NK: Uh, at Northwestern there was a professor here called Dennis Brutus. Dennis
539 Brutus, a South African that most people know. I'm sure you've come across his
540 name—was a professor at Northwestern. I think he was in the English department. And
541 obviously, naturally he became the head (laughs)—the head of all the catalyst, shall we
542 say, around who we organized the whole divestment movement. We were trying to get
543 Northwestern to divest from companies that did business in South Africa. Uh—so—um,
544 and Dennis Brutus had escaped from prison and all that and you know, Northwestern
545 was furious—just furious. First of all, remember Northwestern was not—not that any
546 school in the U.S. was out there saying ok great we are going—we are so in to justice—
547 we are going to divest. Thank you so much for pointing this out. So maybe there will be
548 a school—but Northwestern was like completely upset and belligerent and resistant and
549 impossible. And what they really tried to do was really frustrate us and frustrate Dennis
550 Brutus. And I remember for example, one time we were demonstrating on campus. In
551 fact one of the—Daily Northwestern, I am on the front page with my (laughs) [arm
552 up/hand in fist] You know, its me and Dennis—it's our picture. It's amazing! So I have

553 my hand up like this (laughs) and Dennis is next to me. I think there was a conference
554 that was being held on campus. And the conference, supposedly was—Northwestern
555 was holding this conference of, um—to discuss divestment. And invited all kinds of
556 people. People, you know, um, from companies—heading certain companies and stuff
557 like that to discuss the whole idea of—we also knew that Northwestern was also not
558 doing this because they were going to make the decision to divest. They were actually
559 doing this to collect information to argue their case against divestment. So we were
560 demonstrating, you know, against the conference. So—you know—the Daily
561 Northwestern took this up with (laughs). And my mouth was wide so I'm sure I was
562 shouting. Yeah, so we didn't succeed. Northwestern never divested. It was um, just too
563 resistant. It wasn't one of those schools that divested. I remember arguing with one of
564 my professors—a major professor—he's called the Father of Marketing, Phillip Cartla
565 (sp?) and he's written many of the ally texts for marketing were written by him. He was
566 known all over the United States. In fact he was known all over the world as the Father
567 of Marketing. But he was trying to convince me that um, that it is really good—these
568 companies—what do you expect—these companies are doing South Africa a lot of
569 good. Because what they are doing is they are establishing industries on the edges of the
570 Bantu stands. And they are doing that and it means that black people have jobs. So they
571 can come to the Bantu stands. So the industries—a ring—a ring around the Bantu
572 stands. So black people can come from the Bantu stands and work and I was not
573 agreeing with him (laughs), you know. What do u expect a professor of marketing at
574 Northwestern in the United States to get it (laughs). But I was doing my best so yeah,
575 um. So Basically, northwestern didn't—and Dennis Brutus, they really frustrated him. I
576 mean, they wanted him to leave. They even tried to fire him but because he was just
577 creating a lot of—he was a thorn in their flesh. They just didn't know what to do. But he
578 was tenured (sp?) and because he was tenured (sp?) and they tried to fire him but he
579 threatened to take them to court. He said it was a breach of contract and that he was
580 going to take them to court and blah blah, so they backed off. They didn't fire him but
581 eventually I think they just frustrated him and he left. I think he went to the University
582 of Pittsburg and he went and headed the—I think it's the African—something about the
583 department of African something but I don't remember but I'm sure if you Google him

584 you'll find a lot of information about Dennis Brutus

585

586 CT: Describe the structure of the organizations you were a part of.

587

588 NK: Um, so I was part of the, like Northwestern divestment group and we were just an
589 (unclear) group. We weren't like organized through the president or whatever. It was
590 just an (unclear) group of students and some faculty. And then of course from people
591 from around. You see, whenever there was something going on—It was like—we
592 weren't like a separate group—like separate separate, in the sense that we were also
593 supported by the activists in Chicago. Like that conference where we are, you know,
594 demonstrating, there were people from Chicago. So many—like SIDA—South
595 African Divestment—that's the name—it was SIDA—SIDA, I think it was SIDA.
596 South African Divestment something something something. That movement—we were
597 all a part of that movement. And mostly the movement really was you know, really,
598 always showing up to demonstrate against, to keep—sometimes there were meetings.
599 Sometimes there were demonstrations, you know, in front of the South African
600 Embassy. You know, just going where ever. All over the city. I didn't—I didn't—I
601 wasn't an activist that went outside Chicago. All my activism was mostly confined in
602 Chicago. With people like Clooney and Lisa Brock and some of the other people. You
603 know, yeah.

604

605 CT: What was your news source throughout the time that you were an activist?

606

607 NK: News source, what is that?

608

609 CT: Like how did you get your information, um did you watch television and find out
610 things that were going on in South Africa? How did you get information?

611

612 NK: Oh how I got information through—first of all, through each other. Because we are
613 so intimately connected, all of us and we were so—in so many events and some were
614 fundraisers. Some were people coming to speak. You know, other activists coming to

615 speak. South Africans coming to speak, etc. Like Chris Hanani and so on. So
616 information from the movement itself. You know, like—other sources were, you know,
617 reading, reading newspapers. You know, not—not American publications (laughs).
618 Some, you know, like, African magazines. Magazines in Africa like New African. Like
619 all kinds of magazines. Then we really didn't have the internet so you had to, uhh, being
620 at Northwestern one of the advantages—we have the Afrikaner. The Afrikaner library.
621 Have you been there to the Afrikaner Library? It has one of the best collections of
622 African materials, probably known. One of the best—if there would be others—not just
623 in the United States but people come from all over the world to come and do research
624 because it was founded by this guy called the Haskelvets (sp?) Haskelvets, you know,
625 who was an anthropologist and who—we even have a program of African studies that
626 he founded. So the collections there—they have newspapers, sometimes they have
627 underground newspapers. So you know, so going there. I happened to be living in the
628 city where there's the Afrikaner, the Afrikaner Library which was a gift in itself. So
629 right there you had a lot of resource.

630

631 CT: Explain in a little more detail your trips to South Africa

632

633 NK: Um, my trips to South Africa—my trips to South Africa were—they were not—I
634 actually belong to an organization called (unclear) Mission Counseling. And (unclear)
635 Mission Counseling was just a disoriented organization. Again, not surprising that I
636 would still be involved (laughs). And you know, its an organization that is very focused
637 on ending oppression. In fact, we have—one of our primary goals is ending racism.
638 Especially the racism that targets African heritage people because our thinking is that
639 because of the way that racism is, uh—was too crude in this country—the way it was
640 too crude from slavery and it was slavery of African heritage people—black
641 Americans—African Americans. And then there's a way that, the racism—in terms
642 of—the way it has evolved. Even though it includes other people now; Asians, Latinos
643 and Indigenous people—there's a way that—it is most brutal towards African heritage
644 people. But that if you then move it, if—lets say it's a pile of bricks and you move that
645 brick, things would collapse. Obviously, certainly you would want to move the bricks

646 from the top and from the bottom but if you can jiggle that brick everything else will
647 jiggle so that is one of our primary goals of ending racism. And, uh, we were in fact—I
648 went to South Africa—on of my trips to South Africa was to as a delegate with this
649 organization um, because we sent a contingent, a group of people. From (unclear)
650 because we are an international organization—drawn from across the world to
651 participate in the conference. And we were doing quit a number of workshops. I did
652 some workshops. I did two workshops. I did—one workshop I did was—among the
653 other things I did—was how race and gender intersect—sexism and racism and how
654 they intersect. Another workshop I did was healing the hurts of racism, um, for
655 Africans. And basically what I was really zeroing in on is the hurts from colonialism.
656 And what that continues to do to the African people. So the conference was the United
657 Nations Conference against racial discrimination—it was against racial discrimination,
658 xenophobia, and all other forms of intolerance. It was a long long name. I'm sure again
659 if you Google it, it will come up. But it was a conference that was attended by about ten
660 thousand people from across the world. And so they were focusing on discrimination,
661 racism, xenophobia, etc. and other intolerances. So I went as a delegate. And the other
662 times I have gone to South Africa was to attend, um, the regional conference because
663 we have—every four years we have a big conference that happens here in the United
664 States. The headquarters of the organization is in Seattle. We have a big conference
665 where people represent from all over the world come. So that year—just this year—this
666 is the year, yeah—was the year where we had the big global conference. During—
667 starting last year then—mostly earlier on in the year, 2009—we do it every four years.
668 Then we have regional conferences. Like we have Asian, Latin Americans, South
669 America. We have Africa. We have New Zealand and Australia—you know regions.
670 We have Europe. So we have regional conferences. So in July I went to the regional
671 conference. You know, the Africa regional conference for (unclear) communities. So
672 the two other times—because I've been to South Africa three times. The other time I
673 was also gone to a conference for (unclear) revolution? Conference.

674

675 CT: What were the differences between the conferences and the protests that you were a
676 part of in South Africa compared to the things that you were a part of in Chicago?

677

678 NK: Um, well the difference is really in the protests. I think you can't really compare
679 them. I think they have the same goal. The same goal is focusing on dismantling
680 oppression—dismantling Apartheid in this particular case which is an oppression,
681 which was the white racist government that had—that was perpetrating such heinous
682 crimes against African people in South Africa and this had gone on for so long. Um, the
683 conference in South Africa—the United Nations conference. The goal was to end the
684 oppression of racism—or to put a dent, or to put a spotlight because one conference
685 certainly does not end—and in the conference it wasn't demonstrations—there were
686 many workshops in the conference itself—numerous workshops. You know, a number
687 of workshops every day you could go to. You know, if you looked at the conference
688 bulletin. So maybe you saw a group of people marching with a sign but it was a
689 conference that was focused on—the people who went—was to go to all kinds of
690 workshops—to connect. Now the activism we did against Apartheid in Chicago was
691 over time—sustained over time. Yeah we were—we would be engaged in
692 demonstrations. Sometimes we were having just meetings; strategy meetings, you
693 know, etc. etc. etc. Sometimes we were just having fun meetings, you know like food
694 and festive (laughs). You know, so the end goal is the same—is to end an injustice but
695 the method was different. This was a long time—I mean the struggle against Apartheid
696 was not just in Chicago, it was national, it was international. It was global. It had
697 become global. As more and more people got involved in the action. This was such an
698 injustice. And certainly—I remember when I was in Kenya I read—I was in high
699 school—I was in a predominantly white high school in Kenya because before
700 independence you know, people were divided up. Asians—their own schools and their
701 own communities in the city. Asians were only allowed to live in the cities by the
702 British government. Africans who lived in the city live it what was called African
703 locations; the most poorest and the most basic one room types of places. And then
704 Europeans—suburbs. So Africans had their own schools, Asians and Europeans. So
705 when Kenya became independent in 1963, the government—the African government
706 now, not the British said we want all those schools de-segregated. We want de-
707 segregation. So for example, all the schools that were for whites only, we want you to

708 take quarters of Africans and Asians. So I was one of those students then. I was a
709 quarter (laughs) in my own country of Kenya. So Kenya High School, it was called. In
710 Kenya High School we were actually a minority. You know people of color—we
711 weren't called people of color—we were Africans and Asians—we were the minority in
712 Kenya. And in the school there was Ms. Andrews in a class—I think it was a class—a
713 history class—this British teacher called Ms. Andrews was teaching about Apartheid.
714 You know, and I remember like—we the African students in the class were so incest.
715 You know in our youthful age we were so angry that there could be a country where
716 people are held hostage like that. I remember writing a little essay—my little essay that
717 said—something—I was a high school kid—something like this, like the South African
718 struggle, it's like someone baking a cake, and you know, you put it in the oven and you
719 can't see that it is heating up from the bottom. It looks very serene on the outside but
720 it's heating up from the bottom and then one day you just hear an explosion. I said
721 that's exactly what will happen in South Africa. And then when that happens the South
722 African people will be free. So you know, that was like my little high school essay.
723 (laughs) You know, blah blah blah. So then I come to the United States—fast forward.
724 And then Nelson Mandela is working out of prison—I mean the emotion—and also
725 back then reading the book. I just cried a lot reading that book because I just felt so sad.
726 Cry My Beloved Country by Alan Paton. You know, like the whole ANC struggle. And
727 Luthuli—Luthuli?—Luthuli I think—L-U-T-H-U-L-I- was the main character. He was
728 in ANC—I think he was the founder of ANC. You know, and so his struggles. And I
729 think as a young person I was so sad. I felt like so sad about, like, at that time it seemed
730 like nothing would ever free these people. It just looked like the white government was
731 so invincible. It was so immovable. So as Nelson Mandela is walking out of prison—
732 those were the memories that were flooding my mind. I was watching on television.
733 Like where were you when Kennedy was assassinated? (laughs) I can tell you exactly
734 where I was when Nelson Mandela, you know, came out of prison.

735

736 CT: I will actually be asking some question about Mandela—

737

738 NK: OK

739

740 CT: Because I want to know your reaction to all of that. How was your reaction to
741 Ronald Regan's election in 1980?

742

743 NK: Maddening. It was maddening because—first of all I could not believe—by then I
744 had now lived in this country a tiny bit. And at first I thought, “oh no it's not possible.”
745 Americans are too smart. They are not going to like this man. This man is an actor. He's
746 a good actor. He speaks a good line but he doesn't have the kind of intelligence that you
747 need to lead a nation like this. Obviously I was wrong (laughs). American's did elect
748 Ronald Regan and it just felt so desperately hopeless because he was so matched to the
749 right and his policies about the world. And Americans—not all Americans seemed to
750 love him. He just seemed to say things like—in a simplistic way—and actually believed
751 them. (laughs) you know? He just seemed so popular. I could not, for the life of me,
752 understand why did somebody who didn't seem to have much substance be so popular
753 in a country like this where it's supposed to be the most powerful nation on earth, the
754 leader of the world. You know? I think that's when I thought, “OH GOD”. I thought to
755 myself I guess the American public can do just about anything. If we can elect such a
756 man—because some people kept telling me “Oh they are not going to elect him” and I
757 would say, “oh yeah, they are not going to elect him. No they are not!”. And you know I
758 couldn't vote then so I could only be on the sidelines. And they did elect him; not once
759 but twice. And yeah, it just felt like—it was hard to live in this country when—it was
760 difficult.

761

762 CT: And what are your feelings about his policies towards South Africa

763

764 NK: I was furious. I was mad. I was—you know. This philosophy of engagement—
765 (laughs) constructive engagement nonsense justifying the reason why they got to be—
766 have a policy of constructive engagement—a white racist—a government that by then
767 the Europeans had begun, were distancing from—and American just seemed to be the
768 one; To be on their side. And what was also disturbing was that America was so
769 powerful economically and militarily so if it was a little country some where, that's

770 different but this was a country—the leader of the so called “Free World”, the most
771 powerful nation militarily and economically. Being on the side of South Africa—I mean
772 it just felt like such an impossible feat to dislodge from the South African government.
773 And the amount of confidence it had to give South Africa to know that the United States
774 was on its side. So that was a hard time with the struggle against Apartheid, battling
775 feelings of hopelessness and believing that there’s still hope. Hanging on to hope that
776 South Africa can still be free and will one day be free and hanging in there in the
777 struggle against Apartheid—and just hanging in there—and at home feelings like you
778 were like, like you were in the desert. You know, calling for the freeing of Nelson
779 Mandela and the ending of Apartheid. There’s nothing to echo back to you during those
780 years with Regan

781

782 CT: How did you feel when Mandela first came to the United States after his release?

783

784 NK: OH GOD! It’s hard to describe the feelings of euphoria and incredulous and its
785 like, you have to pinch myself to say this is happening. This is real. I mean, I have a lot
786 of pent up emotions because it told me that you know—[Njoki crying]—you should
787 never give up, never. You should never give up, you know, when you’re fighting
788 injustice, just hang in there because no matter how impossible things look, that little
789 [beats on her leg] you there and me there and that person there. That’s what will bring
790 down—no matter how a system—no matter how invincible a system appears. So I just
791 felt like so—uhh—just a good sense of victory and a good sense of appreciation of—
792 obviously he paid a bigger price—the biggest price of most of us. Most of us were
793 sleeping on a bed. I was eating. He was in a cell. But actually injustice can be brought
794 down. That justice—you can win. You may not live to see the victory, you may not be
795 there but you need to know that actually when you fight against oppression and injustice
796 that little by little you’re moving something. Some little thing is moving. And to hang in
797 there even though everything else tells you, “Oh you are wasting your time. What do
798 you think you are doing? Are you crazy? You know, don’t you have better things to do.
799 Oh it’s a lost cause. Oh forget it. Oh you people—you’re dreamers”. Just hang in there
800 and keep on fighting. You know keep up the struggle because one day, one fine day,

801 one fine day—even the mightiest of the Empires have come down (laughs). And
802 actually the so called “Mighty Empire” of South Africa did come down. It did come
803 down--Uhhh--I am so glad I lived to see it, I swear. I thought of my high school days,
804 my college days in Nairobi—in Kenya and the feelings of reading Cry My Beloved
805 Country that made me feel so sad as a young person. I felt, oh my god, feeling like
806 nothing can be done, nothing can bring down this system. But to be alive to see it come
807 down well it’s really definitely—it’s something that is hard to describe. So I lived to see
808 South Africa come down. I lived to see Kenya—you know, the British come down. I
809 lived to see the racist South African government come down. And I lived to see Obama
810 become president. So I feel like, you know, hey, if nothing else, I think my life was well
811 spent (laughs). And I was very active in the Obama campaign. Yeah, I was very active.
812

813 CT: Um, what do you think your biggest contribution to the movement was? With all
814 these big things you were just talking about and the big moments that you remember—
815

816 NK: I think, I think—you say my greatest contribution?

817

818 CT: Uh huh--

819

820 NK: my contribution to the movement? I think it was just being one of those to be
821 counted. I think it’s not so much that I was a big name in the movement; I was more of
822 an ordinary person in the movement who believed—who dared to believe that as
823 ordinary as I was, that I could make a difference. And that it took ordinary people—that
824 ordinary person and that ordinary person—who made ten, who made twenty, who made
825 thirty, who made a hundred, who made a thousand, who made—you know, thousands
826 of people—and hundreds in Chicago but thousands, you know, across the world to
827 continue the sustained pressure to governments, to companies, to South Africa itself to
828 bring down the Apartheid government. That—because often we think the big names are
829 great. Nelson Mandela is great. He was the catalyst and certainly spearheaded and the
830 forefront. And he became a symbol for us to rally around. But bringing down the South
831 African government wouldn’t have been possible with out every single individual, who

832 in their own way, did what they did to make a contribution. So I am one of those people
833 and—because often as an individual we are made to believe that you cant make a
834 difference—that you are just one ordinary person. You hear people say, “Who am I?
835 What do I know? I am just one person”. No you are one person because—if everybody
836 says “What do I know? What can I do? There’s nothing I can do. I’m just one
837 person”—when we all say that nothing moves. When one person says, “You know
838 what, I can make a difference”, then does something. Then another person says, “I can
839 make a difference” and does something and then another person says like that then you
840 have five. You have ten. You have—that’s how we elected Obama. It’s the same way
841 the South African government came down. And it took a lot of work. It took a lot of
842 time. It took blood. It took people dying, loosing their lives. It took people in prisons. It
843 took every single act and every single individual collectively together to bring down the
844 Apartheid government. So for me, I see myself as one of those thousands, doing my
845 little part. My little part was in Chicago being involved with Clooney and Lisa and so
846 many other people. At Northwestern with Dennis Brutus, you know. I don’t know how
847 much of all the, um, all the marching and all that we did—I don’t know what kind of a
848 dent it put but I know it added to the collective energy and effort; our little movement.
849

850 CT: What do you think were some mistakes that were made during the movement?

851

852 NK: Um, what do I think were the mistakes? To tell you the truth, right now, I am not
853 able to think of what the mistakes were. I mean, I will leave that to other people who,
854 I’m sure, have done some major analysis maybe through research. But you know, I
855 can’t really think of what mistakes that we made

856

857 CT: And you mentioned throughout your activism, you look back and you think that
858 several people influenced you?

859

860 NK: Yeah, different people at different times, yeah.

861

862 CT: What are some regrets that you have looking back on your activism?

863

864 NK: Some regrets that I have? (laughs) Um, do I have any regrets? You mean against
865 Apartheid?

866

867 CT: against your involvement—

868

869 NK: against my involvement? Frankly, I don't have any. I think it was pretty risky as a
870 student to be showing up (laughs) in the demonstration and to be on the front page of
871 the school newspaper. (truck horn) But to tell you the truth, I was such a vibrant. I
872 didn't really think about—in the moment I wasn't thinking about the consequences. I
873 wasn't thinking about what my professors will think. I wasn't thinking what will be the
874 repercussions—what would be—I was just really—I was just clear that, you know, this
875 is unacceptable. And so it was pretty risky that I'm a student in this institution and that
876 I'm there [arm up/hand in fist] (laughs) attacking the institution and fighting it and
877 willing to be--to be--you know, to be public whatever. So, I don't have any regrets, in
878 fact if any, that's an honor. Now if they had tried to expel me or something—if for
879 example I had been thrown out, I don't know, maybe I would have regrets. But nobody
880 did anything. Nobody tried to—there seemed no repercussions and me for that. But it's
881 not something that I really sat down and calculated and worried about. I was just, you
882 know, very much in the moment. That Northwestern needs to divest; that this is
883 unacceptable.

884

885 CT: If you got to speak to Nelson Mandela today, what would you say to him?

886

887 NK: Uhhh, oh god, what would I say? You have some tough questions. (laughs) What
888 would I say to him? Uhhh god. I feel like a drop of water in the desert, you know, I'd
889 have to say the thing that was at most in my heart. I think I would, um say to him thank
890 you. I would say to him thank you for putting his life on the line for his people. And it
891 was for his people but really it was for all people everywhere who were oppressed. And
892 I would say to him it cost you a lot. It cost you almost thirty years of your life. Um, and
893 thank you for modeling what—being committed to fighting injustice, to fighting against

894 oppression, to caring about people, um. Thank you for modeling what that looks like.
895 For all of us to see, not just for now, but for generations to come. That you be a living
896 model of what it means to be committed to ending injustice. That when people, young
897 people want—because—a lot of time sometimes young people—you read a book that
898 influences you or you see a movie about a person that inspires you. That when they—
899 when they read about your life—when they hear about you and they watch movies
900 about your life—documentaries— that they will know, this is how you fight. That you
901 don't give up. Even though it may take years that you don't give up. That you just keep
902 fighting. And anything that can bring equality, justice, is worth fighting for. And we
903 humans modeling that—and also I would say to him when you came out of prison I read
904 that book. What is that book? The book is uhh--The Long Night's Journey? There's a
905 book--You know his book—it's an autobiography. It's beautiful. Uh, when I started
906 reading it, I couldn't put it down. You know, its just all the thinking—you know we
907 didn't realize the amount of thinking he was doing and the amount of negotiation he had
908 to do right at the end and—(cough) dealing with the clock, you know, behind the
909 scenes. Even as he was in prison and coming out and not—not signing on to a blood
910 bath. And saying ok. If anybody had the right to say it's time to revenge, it would have
911 been Nelson Mandela. But no, he did not. He took us on a different road. A road not
912 forgetting-naively forgetting and forgiving but more so that—to go forward. And to the
913 South African people to go forward and to build the nation which is a multi-racial
914 society; a nation for all. So to have that kind of heart—for people—for you to say let's
915 go forward and build the nation with the very people who imprisoned you for thirty
916 years and killed thousands and thousands of your people and maimed thousands of your
917 people, it takes a special kind of a person.

918

919 CT: Hmmm

920

921 NK: Yeah

922

923 CT: Well thank you very much for your time and sharing your experiences—

924

925 NK: (laughs)

926

927 CT: They are very interesting. Is there anything else you want to mention or go into
928 detail about or anything else that you would like to mention?

929

930 NK: I think just to say that when I did what I did—you know getting involved in the
931 Anti-Apartheid Movement, to me I just did what seemed so natural to do. That in a
932 situation like that—it just makes so much sense to be involved and to fight for what is
933 right. And to fight for—it's really for the larger idea of ending humans harming
934 humans. That we, as a species,—as a people we have no business hurting each other.
935 There is nothing that can justify as hurting each other the way we do. That our greatness
936 is housed in, when we work together, when we collaborate, when we bring our energy
937 together, our minds together—that when we hurt each other—and that actually,
938 fundamentally we are the same people. Physically we may look green, or yellow, or
939 blue, or black, or white, or red but fundamentally we are the same people. You know,
940 you read about that racism is a construction. That 99% of humans, you know, are the
941 same. Actually 99.99%—there's just .001% is what makes us look different. But at in
942 the end of the day, we actually, you know, we are the same. And we do better when we
943 come together. And our greatness will only come about when we come together and
944 move forward as a people. And it's what Martin Luther King said—Martin Luther King
945 said we are in the same boat—it's not verbatim—you know, we sink—if the boat sinks
946 we sink together. If the boat, you know, rises, we rise together.

947

948 CT: Hmm, wow

949

950 NK: Yeah.

951

952 CT: Very interesting—

953

954 NK: Yeah. And so my commitment will continue to be—you know, its great that the
955 racist South Africa government came down but because the work to end oppression is

956 not over. So the struggle continues. It just continues in many different ways and I have
957 continued in that way—in that—my life is about making this beautiful planet a better
958 place for all of us; for me, for myself and for my fellow human beings and for
959 generations to come.

960

961 CT: wow

962

963 NK: Ok?

964

965 CT: Yeah, thank you!

966

967 NK: (laughs)

968

969 CT: It is currently 3:38. We started at 2:02. Thank you very much!

970

971 NK: You're most welcome!