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Interview with Curtis Black

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

3 CURTIS BLACK: Curtis Black.

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

6 CB: I was particularly active probably 1977 or '78. And then—there were sort of two phases of,
7 of activity, at the University of Chicago. The first time I was a student there. That would be in
8 the late seventies. For—really a year I think, in particular. And then the second time was in the
9 80's, it was 1985 and uh, I don't know, '86. Most, probably about a year then too. And I was a
10 staff member then, I was a clerical worker in-- steward in the-- in the Clerical Workers Union.

11 JC: Where were you active then?

12 CB: That was the University of Chicago.

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

14 CB: 1957.

15 JC: And where were you born?

16 CB: White Plains, New York.

17 JC: Where were you raised?

18 CB: Same place.

19 JC: Same place. Where was your father born?

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

21 JC: Where was your mother born?

22 CB: Um, Rochester, New York.

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

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

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

26 CB: It was a suburb of New York, it was uh—it was uh—you know it was—you could play—it
27 was before there were cars all up and down the street, you could play in the street. It was a nice

28 place to grow up. It was also um—integrated. I mean there was—whites and blacks and there
29 was uh, rich and poor and uh—

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

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

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

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

38 JC: Um—

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

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

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

43 JC: What was your favorite holiday?

44 CB: Christmas, I guess?

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

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

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

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

54 JC: (laughs)

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

57 JC: Right.

58 CB: Had separate tracks.

59 JC: Uh, what rules did your parents have?

60 CB: Um—uh—I don't, I don't remember!

61 JC: (laughs) For instance any that were—

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

67 JC: Sure.

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

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

72 CB: Mmm, probably my father, mostly.

73 JC: Uh, which parent were you closest to?

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

75 JC: Sure. How did you get to school?

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

80 JC: Sure. Wow.

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

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

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

85 JC: Do you remember his name?

86 CB: David.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

98 CB: Probably history.

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

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

103 JC: Did you start a band?

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

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

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

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

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

113 JC: A minister (chuckles).

114 CB: That's right.

115 JC: So was your plan to go to um—oh I can't remember what it's called.

116 CB: I didn't have much of a plan. And I didn't know—ya know I went to college and that was it
117 for that.

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

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

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

125 CB: Ugh—I don't know. I really don't know.

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

128 CB: Yeah, yeah.

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

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

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

136 CB: University of Chicago.

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

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

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

143 CB: U of C.

144 JC: U of C? I'm sorry, U of C, what did you major in?

145 CB: Um, ya know I took all the liberal arts type classes, and I was signed up as a English major
146 but I didn't uh—succeed with that. I didn't graduate. I—I started writing for the school paper
147 and other stuff. And um—so I was officially an English major to answer your question.

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

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

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

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

155 JC: What is Mandel Hall? Is that a—

156 CB: It's like their performance place.

157 JC: Oh okay. For like music concerts?

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

160 JC: Sure. Oh okay.

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

162 JC: (laughs)

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

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

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

177 JC: (laughs)

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

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

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

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

187 CB: Mhmm.

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

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

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

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

204 JC: Uh-huh.

205 CB: Ya know, and it was fairly common at U of C to have people out of class and people at the
206 Maroon who were working too hard to do their class w—ya know, there was always this—
207 people had funny statuses which I ended up being in. Um—so I think a couple of years pretty
208 much.

209 JC: Um, what political party did you associate yourself with? When you were first becoming
210 active?

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

216 JC: (laughs)

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

220 JC: Who—

221 CB: And then—go ahead.

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

223 CB: Well, yeah I don't—

224 JC: Ever.

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

230 JC: (laughs)

231 CB: So I—I don't know.

232 JC: (laughs)

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

237 JC: Sure. Why—did you become an activist? Would you call yourself an activist?

238 CB: I guess so, I'm more of a—journalist who is—who see's my work as sort of, supporting
239 movements for change. I've never been that great at working with people (laughs). I mean I had
240 enough trouble connecting with you to do this interview.

241 JC: (laughs)

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

248 JC: Mhm.

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

250 JC: (laughs)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

267 CB: Um, it was—uh the Action Committee for Free South for—Action Committee on South
268 Africa? Action committee. Yeah I think that's right. It was the Action Committee and uh,
269 whether, yeah. That's right.

270 JC: What was it like being in that group?

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

274 JC: Can you describe the structure of that organization?

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

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

285 CB: How did I participate—

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

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

292 JC: (laughs)

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

294 JC: (laughs)

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

298 JC: How did you participate in divestment?

299 CB: Um—the main thing was uh—doin' these big sort of 'think' pieces for the Maroon about
300 how—and the point, the thing that I was learning and trying to pass on was how capitalist
301 investment in south Africa was supposed to be the, the sorta myth about it was that it was

302 supposed to be bringing, laying the groundwork for a democratic society and it was doing the
303 exact opposite. It was bolstering a, the repressive society and it was uh—replicating a lot of uh,
304 inequality and all this kind of stuff. So the main thing I did was write these sort of big ‘think’
305 pieces um, does that uh, ya know, kind of layed that out. And then covering their events. But,
306 yeah I did, yeah.

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

309 CB: Well see we had a big forum. We had a big forum and it was the night, it was in February of
310 1979. They brilliantly, I think the university brilliantly planned it for the primary night, which
311 was the night that Jane Bermury (??) won the primary so there was no coverage of this event.
312 Um, but it was sort of the culmination of the work. And uh, so I did uh, one, a couple big pieces
313 before that and report on that. And um, I think it was that summer I did a book review of a
314 Steve—a Steve Beeco book. A book of his writings and the transcript of his trial. That was a
315 big, big piece that I did. Um, I don’t—specifically remember any others, at that point. Later on,
316 okay like in the eighties I did more. Like uh—one, one kind of important piece I did, to me was
317 um, just analyzing the university’s position, which was um—luckily I just read it last night.

318 JC: (laughs)

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

321 JC: Yes.

322 CB: Um—

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

324 CB: It was uh, it was uh—it was a rating system where corporations kind of reported really
325 minimal information, how much, how many employees and what their race was and things like
326 that. And they got rated satisfactory, needs more work, that kind of thing. So it was sort of a—it
327 was a—the a--creation of a minister from the United States, a civil rights activist, at one point
328 who was kind of un—trying to provide some cover for corporations to justify their involvement
329 in South Africa as some kind of progressive force for change. So and, and I worked with another
330 person on this committee and um, Nadine McGann (??) who did this article, which analyzed,
331 which ya know, went through the portfolio and looked at ya know, there’s this many
332 corporations they’re invested in, this many are rated as unsatisfactory by the Sullivan, this many
333 have not given any information to the Sullivan, their signidories (??), but they haven’t given
334 them any reports. And then they said that they relied on, ya know this uh, investor reporting
335 system and that they weren’t giving information. And then we broke down ya know, of those
336 who did report, their workforce was like eighty percent white. In a country which is sixteen

337 percent white, ya know? So uh, ya know and that kind of thing. We sort of broke, broke down,
338 we sort of did analyze investment portfolio in terms of what their claims were uh, as being a
339 progressive force. Ya know, their specific claims and kind of tried to debunk that. Um—that
340 was in the Grey City Journal which was a supplement of—and then in 1980, we'd, we'd all a
341 bunch of us had started this newspaper, Haymarket. So I did several things for that, the main big
342 thing is this giant, multi-part interview with Prexy Nesbitt in 1985 which was sort of—I don't
343 remember what the occasion for it was. Ya know, it was our fifteenth anniversary. Uh, uh it
344 came out, I, I don't recall if it was designed to be handed out at the conference or something, but
345 it was, ya know, my attempt to do a really comprehensive view of uh, of the apartheid, the anti-
346 apartheid movement and the apartheid system and everything at that moment. From—I, I—
347 yeah. Yeah I don't remember what that specific goal of this was.

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

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

361 JC: And did you get to talk to him?

362 CB: And then we talked for a little while.

363 JC: What did you guys talk about?

364 CB: Nothing much.

365 JC: (laughs)

366 CB: I don't remember.

367 JC: (laughs)

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

370 JC: What was his name?

371 CB: Johnny Makitini.

372 JC: Johnny Makitini.

373 CB: Yeah. M-A-K-I-T-I-N-I.

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

375 CB: That was later on.

376 JC: —event that you participated in?

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

384 JC: Oh okay.

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

388 JC: Mhmm.

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

390 JC: (laughs)

391 CB: The first one?

392 JC: Oh, yes.

393 CB: Okay, so did I answer it?

394 JC: Uh, yes I think so.

395 CB: (laughs)

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

398 CB: Yeah, yeah there was um ya know, there was no—uh, there was some newspapers,
399 particularly the Guardian where you could read about the national—what had been the National

400 Guard and the U.S. Radical News Weekly, which I later wrote for. Um, where you could read
401 about stuff going on at different colleges.

402 JC: Mhmm.

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

407 JC: Uh-huh.

408 CB: Ya know.

409 JC: And was that during seventy-nine?

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

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

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

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

432 CB: Yeah. I stayed informed. But there wasn't really much going on in my neighborhood. Not
433 too much. Um—and there were, the movement seemed to have died down a certain amount. I

434 think that there were some, particularly some African American students on campus who were
435 trying to keep it going and I think, yeah. But uh—when did um, when did Danny Davis—well
436 Harold Washington was elected in 1983. That was a real focus for a lot of people. I was pretty
437 involved in working on that.

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

439 CB: Like precinct work, really.

440 JC: Sure.

441 CB: And also writing for the Haymarket.

442 JC: Mhmm.

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

448 JC: Mhmm.

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

450 JC: Sure.

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

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

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

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

461 CB: Those kinds of columns?

462 JC: Yeah, yeah.

463 CB: Well—at the time I was kind of a student of anti-communism.

464 JC: (laughs)

465 CB: I was writing about it a bit. And um, it seemed—it informed my growing understanding of
466 that phenomenon as, it's always, it had always been, it had always been—it's most common
467 practitioners had always been racists. And here it was coming around again only it was being
468 deployed in defensive racism. Rather than, ya know, just a casual connection.

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

470 CB: No.

471 JC: Um, would you like to go.

472 CB: Oh yeah, sure.

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

474 CB: What do you mean?

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

476 CB: (laughs) Okay.

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

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

487 JC: Mhmm.

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

491 JC: Sure.

492 CB: So—

493 JC: So did you know him personally then—

494 CB: No.

495 JC: —Dennis Brutus

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

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

501 CB: I'm speaking more generally—

502 JC: Sure.

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

506 JC: (laughs)

507 CB: I'd leave someone out.

508 JC: (laughs)

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

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

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

514 JC: (laughs)

515 CB: You mean with South Africa?

516 JC: Uh, sure.

517 CB: Is that what you mean?

518 JC: Yes.

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

520 JC: Are there any other—

521 CB: (laughs)

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

523 CB: Well, I work. Doing this online news service and it's—probably my main form of
524 engagement and um, it's whatever is going on, it's more locally oriented. Today I am working
525 on something on Walmart and two days ago I was working on something on water privatization
526 (??).

527 JC: Okay.

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

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

530 CB: At Community Media Workshop?

531 JC: Yeah.

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

535 JC: Mhmm.

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

537 JC: (laughs)

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

540 JC: Mhmm.

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

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

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

546 JC: Of confrontation or anything?

547 CB: Oh, not really, no.

548 JC: What is your greatest obstacle that you think you faced during the whole course of being
549 active? If any?

550 CB: Um, I suppose—you probably don't remember—you remember Charlie Brown and Linus?
551 JC: Sure.

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

556 JC: Mhmm.

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

561 JC: (laughs)

562 CB: To control the outcome of something (laughs)

563 JC: Uh-huh.

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

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

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

570 JC: (laughs)

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

573 JC: Mhmm.

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

581 JC: Sure.

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

585 JC: (laughs)

586 CB: (laughs)

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

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

592 JC: What was the worst part then?

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

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

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

616 JC: Mhmm.

617 CB: Ya know?

618 JC: Sure.

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

626 JC: Mhmm.

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

630 JC: Mhmm

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

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

641 CB: I, I don't know. I have no idea.

642 JC: (laughs)

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

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

646 CB: Well, I think it was first of all, my first opportunity to really examine how capitalism
647 worked and the idea that it's so tied to freedom. And it kind of made me inveterate skeptic of

648 that claim. That might be the main thing. Although, there's also the torturous track, path of
649 social change (laughs), ya know?

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

652 CB: No, no I don't think.

653 JC: Um—

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

657 JC: Sure.

658 CB: And he wasn't gonna do that (laughs). I mean, guess it's better not to have really wild
659 expectations (laughs).

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

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

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

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

671 JC: Sure.

672 CB: —but that's my sense of it.

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

675 CB: (laughs)

676 JC: If that makes sense (laughs)?

677 CB: Um, well uh, yeah, no. No, I think we all have to find our own way.

678 JC: Sure.

679 CB: If I—

680 JC: If, if you—

681 CB: If I was a brilliant political philosopher I suppose they could fly me over there and ask me.

682 JC: (laughs)

683 CB: But I'm not and they won't and I don't have any—there is no easy answers, I don't think.

684 And I don't even know specifics of people's complaints at this point.

685 JC: Mhmm.

686 CB: Ya know?

687 JC: Sure.

688 CB: So I'm kinda out of touch.

689 JC: Sure.

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

691 JC: (laughs)

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

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

694 CB: Do it better, be more sustained, be more focused, be less flakey. But I did the best I could

695 with what I was doing, I think. Be more patient. Patience.

696 JC: Sure. Is there anything else that you want to talk about? Anything else you would like to put

697 on the record (laughs)?

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

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