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Interview with Constance Prince

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Columbia College Chicago

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1 BRETT KING: Okay, my name is Brett King. Would you please state your name and
2 then spell it for me?
3
4 CONSTANCE PRINCE: Constance Prince, C-O-N-S-T-A-N-C-E P-R-I-N-C-E.
5
6 BK: And what is today's date?
7
8 CP: Today's date is April seventh, 2010.
9
10 BK: And this interview is being conducted at Columbia College Chicago's library, on
11 the third floor. In what year, or years, were you active in the anti-apartheid
12 movement?
13
14 CP: I believe from 1980 to 1983.
15
16 BK: Okay, and where were your anti-apartheid activities conducted?
17
18 CP: In Chicago.
19
20 BK: Okay. Let's go back a little bit now—as soon as I [double-checking the recorder]—
21 In what year were you born?
22
23 CP: 1948.
24
25 BK: Okay. And where?
26
27 CP: Bangor, Maine.
28
29 BK: Okay. And where were you actually raised?
30
31 CP: In Hollywood, Florida.
32
33 BK: All right. What county was that?
34
35 CP: Broward, B-R-O-W-A-R-D.
36
37 BK: Okay. What was your father's full name?
38
39 CP: Raymond Joseph Richards.
40
41 BK: And do you know in what year he was born?
42
43 CP: I believe it was 1920.
44
45 BK: Okay, and where?
46

47 CP: I think he was born in Quebec, Canada. The specific city I'm not sure of. I still
48 have to investigate that.
49

50 BK: Okay. And what about your mother, what was her full name?
51

52 CP: My—my mother's full name was Jean—J-E-A-N—Marie Kelley—K-E-L-L-E-Y.
53

54 BK: Okay, do you know what year she was born in?
55

56 CP: She was born in 1927.
57

58 BK: And, where?
59

60 CP: In Presque Isle, Maine—P-R-E-S-Q-U-E I-S-L-E.
61

62 BK: Okay, thank you.
63

64 CP: Mm-hmm.
65

66 BK: Looking back, what would you say is your earliest memory?
67

68 CP: My earliest memory is probably in Bangor itself, in my parents' apartment around
69 the time of my second birthday.
70

71 BK: Okay, and what was that—that memory?
72

73 CP: Oh, it was of kind of a dark house, but a lot of happy people and a birthday cake.
74

75 BK: Okay, so it was someone's birthday?
76

77 CP: It was my birthday.
78

79 BK: Oh, your birthday, okay. Would you tell me a little bit about the apartment you
80 grew up in?
81

82 CP: Well, I didn't grow up in an apartment, I grew up in South Florida in a series of
83 houses, lodgings that ran from a motel on Federal Highway when we first arrived
84 there, sleeping on the couch, to a small, one-bedroom house in West Hollywood, to
85 a no-bedroom, one-room house in Miramar, to a three-bedroom, two-bath house in
86 Fort Lauderdale. I didn't consider us even middle class, I thought we were poor,
87 and I think we were. I didn't think we became middle class until my mother
88 married my stepfather after she divorced my father, and we moved to Fort
89 Lauderdale and they bought a new house. That was it, I think.
90 I was raised to see my mother working all the time, and riding bike to school
91 several miles every day—myself—to Catholic school for the first four-five years of
92 my schooling.

93

94 BK: Okay. Who else lived with you when you were going through those different
95 places?

96

97 CP: My little brother, four years younger than I—his name was Jeffrey—and that was it.
98 My mother, my brother and I and—there was a major—there was the before the
99 divorce and there was the after-divorce life that I had in childhood. And before the
100 divorce I was happy, even though we were poor, and after the divorce I was
101 miserable till I went to college.

102

103 BK: Why would you say you were miserable?

104

105 CP: Well, I had a lot of baggage around abandonment issues, and a child's view of
106 abandonment. And a child's view of the unfairness of being put through the
107 domestic abuse my mother suffered at the hands of my stepfather. Violent, on-
108 going corporal punishment of my brother almost daily, with a belt. I ran away three
109 times. When the civil rights movement was hitting, my stepfather was the son of an
110 avid K.K.K. member, and there were actually a couple of table-fights over things
111 that we saw on the news, and so I learned not to convey my liberal, pro-movement
112 sentiments at that time. And I was mostly waiting to leave home.

113

114 BK: Mm-hmm. If we could kind of go a slightly different track, what are some of the
115 favorite activities you did with your mother growing up?

116

117 CP: Vacations (*interviewee beings fanning herself with loose papers on the table*). It's
118 interesting, but we would go on vacations. We—they would take us—I went deep-
119 sea fishing a couple of times. I actually won a pool on the ocean for catching the
120 biggest fish for the group that day. We also went lake fishing. And we went up to
121 the Smokey Mountains, and we went up to Maine to see relatives. So, these were a
122 number of trips that I really enjoyed, got a lot out of, 'cause I got to see a lot of
123 nature and I enjoyed all that.

124

125 When I was a junior in high school my parents moved to Jacksonville,
126 Florida. My father—my stepfather was starting a business up there, and I was away
127 from my home-high school in Hollywood, and I was failing the second semester,
128 being so depressed. I was in a all-white, southern school, lots of—I called them
129 really redneck, backward kids, and I was just very unhappy there.

129

130 I talked my mother into letting me finish my senior year in South Florida, and
131 one of the best things that I did in my childhood was living with my father for that
132 last year of high school. And I got to go off to the west coast with a boyfriend for
133 the day to the Ringling Museum. And I got to study more things, I got to read a lot
134 more. What else did we do? I got to take a three-day bus ride from Hollywood out
135 to Los Angeles to see a friend. And my father trusted me with all of those
136 activities, so it was a wonderful last year in high school. And I got a governor's
137 scholarship for a year at Florida State, which is where I ended up applying and
138 being accepted. So, it was a very good year. And I got—

138

139 BK: So—
140
141 CP: —You know reading was an on-going pleasure for me. I watched a lot of television,
142 I have to say that I was a television baby, I was very much into the cow—the
143 cowboy narratives, and I even—but I loved *The Prisoner*, that was like my favorite
144 show on the planet at the time. (*door slamming elsewhere*)
145
146 BK: What about religion and faith, what role did those play for you?
147
148 CP: Well I was bap—I received all the Sacraments that a person can receive before death
149 with the Catholic Church, I even got married in the church my first marriage. I did
150 go to Catholic school from first through fifth grade, and so I received, you know,
151 confirmation, first communion, regular confession, and, you know, all that stuff.
152 When I was in high school even, I—I capitulated to my father’s urgings for me to
153 go to Catholic Youth Organization classes. And I started to, you know, do a lot of
154 questioning of religious—of so-called matters of faith. And I, in no way, thought of
155 the church as patriarchal, but I did think of it as pretty hide-bound-rule-bound, and
156 that there were just logical inconsistencies about matters of faith that I just couldn’t
157 accept. And that didn’t come out later, until I studied more about feminism, you
158 know, in late—late years of college.
159
160 BK: Mm-hmm.
161
162 CP: So—But I suppose I was understanding the church the way my father did—I
163 believed in a God, believed in praying to that God was helpful. But in terms of
164 being pro-religion I became less-and-less so as I got older.
165
166 BK: And what about values that your parents instilled in you growing up, what were
167 some of those?
168
169 CP: They instilled values in me of hard-work, and the positive consequences of hard-
170 work, and faith that hard-work and following rules leads to positive outcomes for
171 me. Progress, upward mobility perhaps. I believed in—they believed in having a
172 sense of humor. Sometimes—I—I came out of that becoming more existentialist I
173 think, than carrying religion forward with me. Values that they promoted—they
174 didn’t promote any values about financial awareness, they didn’t give me any
175 training at all about using money. And they—my mother, I think, conveyed in me a
176 desire to finish my education. If I want to go to college, I should finish it. She
177 couldn’t do much to help me, but she definitely supported my ambitions in that
178 direction.
179
180 BK: Tell me about some of the kinds of mischief you got into with your friends growing
181 up.
182
183 CP: Let’s see—well, maybe there was a lot of hide-and-seek at night, there was a lot of
184 running around out in the world on bicycles, and swimming in canals in South

185 Florida—there were a couple of canals near our home. We did—we did some
186 skinny-dipping a couple of times, we swung off of ropes from trees, and things like
187 that. Mischief—there wasn't a great deal of being bad or anything. We liked to
188 climb trees—I used to hang out in trees and read and talk with my best friend.
189 Mischief for me—well, there was one time I got in a fight with a boy to stand up for
190 one of my best friends he was picking on, and I gave him a black-eye. I felt like I'd
191 gotten beaten up but all the kids ran to my house and told me that I'd given him a
192 black-eye, so I felt like, okay, I could survive on men's terms sometimes, I'm
193 stronger than I thought. Mischief—just usual sibling fussing, nothing major. I
194 think one time I threatened my brother with telling our parents because he had—he
195 had hooked my blouse with a fishing hook while he was playing with a rod-and-
196 reel. And he hid, and we couldn't find him for hours. My parents called the fire
197 department and police, and everybody was looking all over the neighborhood for
198 him, and finally somebody found him sleeping underneath one of the beds in the
199 house. That was my worst piece of mischief, I think, on my own part—threatening
200 my brother. I suppose maybe—maybe—I can't—I can't call running away
201 mischief, because it was serious for me to get away from the house a couple of
202 times. So there wasn't anything, I don't think, that I was really bad about I can
203 recall.

204

205 BK: And what about diversity in Broward County, how—how do you recall that?

206

207 CP: I was not aware of black people in my life until my mother brought a lady in—her
208 name was Nodie, N-O-D-I-E. She ironed for my mother. Even though I was taught
209 to iron, she would bulk-ironing for my mother, and maybe cleaned. And perhaps it
210 was maybe once a month for maybe a one-year period. And that was my closest
211 connection to anyone black at that time.

212 I came to be interested in the lives of black people after I got to college. My
213 interest in English literature was in studying African American culture and African
214 American literature, and so I became quite well exposed to that then. (*door closing*
215 *elsewhere*) And I realized that there was a whole world out there that I had nev—I
216 had never been aware of. And it helped me to understand that—it helped me to
217 become less wrapped-up in my own, and to understand that perhaps in having
218 something do with bringing justice to their lives, you know, I could in some way
219 not be so caught-up and stuck in the injustices of my own personal life.

220

221 BK: You mentioned earlier going to school at Florida State—

222

223 CP: Right.

224

225 BK: —Where did you go following your time at Florida State?

226

227 CP: Where did I go after Florida State?

228

229 BK: Yeah.

230

231 CP: I got kicked out of Florida State at the end of my sophomore year for a year, and
232 during that year's time I got married and had a baby. Vietnam War was raging, and
233 my ex-husband, my husband at that time, had graduated and made a deal with me
234 that if I worked and helped pay our bills while he finished school his senior year, he
235 would turn around and pay me back and help me get through school the final two
236 years. So there was actually—it actually took me five or six years to finish going to
237 Florida State. It wasn't continuous.

238 And the last two years that I was there I worked out a deal with him—he was
239 stationed in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and he told me that he could stay state-side if I
240 turned over custody of our daughter to him. Now, she was only a year-and-a-half
241 old at the time. I had the pro-bono lawyer who was working on our divorce write a
242 letter to his colonel and say that the custody was given to the father. Under the
243 table the agreement was that as soon as his term was up in the military, his term of
244 service, that I would take her back as soon as I graduated from college. So, about—
245 around 1972 he was finished in Fort Sill, and I was hitchhiking out there at the end
246 of every quarter that I could get there, or trimester—Florida State moved from a
247 quarter system to a trimester system while I was there—to see her. So, I saw her
248 about three times while she was there.

249 And I was going through Florida State, taking out loans and working full-time
250 a couple of jobs—I would work in a private club until four A.M. in Tallahassee—
251 there were a lot of political people from the capital coming in at night, late at
252 night—and I also worked lunches in a bar. So, I was pulling in cash to live on,
253 rooming off-campus. I ended up living with one of my professors the last year I
254 was in school, and he's the one who believed in me and helped me actually apply to
255 graduate school at Northwestern, which is where I ended up.

256 So, as soon as I finished graduating I went to get my daughter. My ex-
257 husband by that point was nowhere to be found. He was not in Chickasha,
258 Oklahoma, and I couldn't find him in Florida. I called his parents and they said he
259 was living in another city in Florida, been back for a month. So, I had to surprise
260 him in order to get her back, I knew—because I knew he was intending to keep her.

261 So, anyway, that was a transition between Florida State and Northwestern,
262 where I ended up in graduate school. It was an MAT program—basically, a break-
263 even program which gives you an entire year's experience within the Chicago
264 schools at three-fifths the starting salary of a teacher. It was like a paid internship.
265 And at the same time you would go to full-time summer classes, bookending across
266 the nine months in the school year. So, the first summer full-time work, and the
267 second summer full-time wrap-up. Perhaps a—I think a—a Master's—whatever
268 they are—thesis—

269

270 BK: Okay.

271

272 CP: —So that's what that was for.

273

274 BK: All right—

275

276 CP: At that time Chicago Public Schools was the second highest paying school system in
277 this—in the—in the country. And I—but I didn't expect to stay, I expected to move
278 back to Florida. But I didn't.
279

280 BK: Tell me about some of the important connections you formed with peers at
281 Northwestern.
282

283 CP: You know, Prexy [Nesbitt]'s—the connection with Prexy was the only one.
284 *(interviewee opens a package of tissue)* You know, there are—I felt I was a bit of
285 an outsider there, I think mostly because I wasn't—*(tissue wrapper rattling)*—I
286 wasn't a typical grad student living in grad housing or any of that stuff, and I was
287 busy working in addition to working—to going to school there and—and teaching.
288 So—
289 I worked for Time Life books, I'd sell books from one to five every afternoon,
290 pick up my daughter at the Evanston Y.W.C.A. daycare center right after that. We
291 were out the door by seven in the morning, I was in the classroom by eight. So, I'd
292 teach from eight to noon, rush up to Evanston, work from one to five, and then I
293 went to classes at night and I took her with me.
294 Prexy's the only person, I think, who really took an interest in what I thought,
295 because I was probably one of the few people in class that had intelligent opinions
296 about some things we were studying together. So—
297

298 BK: Could you tell me—
299

300 CP: —He lived right near me, which was another good reason we stayed friends, you
301 know.
302

303 BK: Would you tell me a little bit more about the—the intelligent things you were just
304 alluding to?
305

306 CP: Well, he and I were quite pro-Marxist in our look at some of the workings of
307 American history. You know, the labor movements, the utopian movements in
308 American history. We had—we took a look at those. I had a kind of feminist look
309 at some of the activities that were undocumented by women through those
310 movements. The abolitionist movement was female-drive for a while, you know.
311 Even though there were men running it, there were women basically in the front
312 lines. So, he and I—I think we talked a good deal about the things that we were
313 studying in the classes, and writing about.
314 And he was starting to share his outside activities in—with the A.N.C. with
315 me. It was a bit of a secret, you know, at the time, because the A.N.C. was still
316 considered by official people in the country a terrorist organization. But he
317 explained to me how much it really wasn't, and what its entire history was. There
318 was no internet in those days, it was all analogue, it was all underground
319 information pretty much. Mainstream media wouldn't touch the African National
320 Congress, you know. There was mostly whatever the official government policy

321 was at that time. I think it was Nixon—Nixon and then Carter, you know, were
322 what people understood if they bothered to know at all.

323 So, what we talked about, I suppose, were—was music, we liked our music.
324 We—he babysat for me a couple of times while I went to class. So we—we
325 chatted. There was a little bit of a spark there, but it really didn't go anywhere.
326 That shouldn't go in the record (*laughing*).

327

328 BK: Wh—

329

330 CP: We compared our backgrounds, pretty much. You know, sort of busy building a
331 friendship.

332

333 BK: What was it like for you being included in on that—that secret, as you called it?

334

335 CP: Well, I thought it was an important—an important part of the American civil rights
336 movement's connection to PanAfricansim. That PanAfricansim—I truly believed
337 in, I truly believed in the black diaspora's political goals. I—I thought that I could
338 be part of something beyond the United States, that did people in the United States
339 a great deal of good politically as well, and culturally. And so, it wasn't just my
340 own teaching, but it was—it was trying to live up to the beliefs that I had about the
341 civil rights movement. I was just given an opportunity by a friend to contribute,
342 you know, to—to another civil rights movement elsewhere. And I extended what I
343 was doing here to that, to the extent that I knew how, which was by writing and
344 researching.

345

346 BK: And so, was it—let me put it this way: Under what circumstances did you first
347 learn of apartheid?

348

349 CP: From Prexy. I probably knew about it, everybody knew about it. But I did not
350 know its history, I did not know its legal history, I didn't know of the details of the
351 pass system, I didn't know to what extent our corporations were involved in helping
352 to create the pass system of South Africa. For instance, I had no idea that I.B.M.
353 was the company that developed the pass system—the first hologram-swiping
354 system that was used. I think to this day people don't know that I.B.M. was
355 instrumental in propping apartheid's pass system, and that to this day it's still
356 instrumental in creating security and surveillance systems in South Africa.

357

358 BK: Interesting.

359

360 CP: Mm-hmm.

361

362 BK: What was your reaction to Reagan's election in 1980?

363

364 CP: Well, I—I was disgusted at the turn to the right that our country had taken. I saw it
365 as a reaction against Carter's socialist leanings in getting more equitable job and
366 income distribution to people. I saw it as a closing of liberalism, and I saw it—I felt

367 that half of my own generation had probably betrayed what I thought was a
368 monolithical(??) set of goals in my generation. It made me realize—it crystallized
369 for me the reality that at least half my generation was selling out to capitalism.
370 So—up until then I had no idea it was happening. Then as soon as he
371 deinstitutionalized the mentally ill, and the disabled, and the sick and all of that,
372 then I realized to what extent it was the big F-you-I-got-mine-capitalism going on.
373

374 BK: How did you feel about how the Reagan administration's policies toward South
375 Africa?

376
377 CP: I honestly didn't know what they were, because the Reagan administration was
378 never transparent about its international policies except for the Cold War stuff—I
379 mean, you know, whatever doctrines were conveyed to the public—this is all pre-
380 internet, don't forget. There's nothing we could do outside of being in libraries all
381 the time, and constantly looking up information from independent sources, which
382 were hard to find in those days. It was hard to know because Reagan administration
383 was not transparent about its policies about apartheid. All we knew was that it's
384 pro-corporate, that it believed in the sovereignty of nations like South Africa which
385 was considered an ally, and so it was not going to meddle in the affairs of the
386 government of South Africa, which I think Reagan believed they would work out
387 on their own. It would be an internal affair, and that we were not officially going to
388 support any anti-government forces in South Africa. That's all I knew.
389

390 BK: And so, how did you stay informed? I mean, did you—did you stay in the libraries,
391 or did you—
392

393 CP: No. I had to teach—I was teaching full-time. I had foster children over a three-year
394 period, I had three—three foster children in two years. And so, that took up a good
395 deal of my time. I was raising a daughter. I was—I was pretty broke—I was
396 chasing rent in those days, and so I really wasn't all that involved in politics except
397 what I saw on television, which was not encouraging. I didn't like anything I saw
398 on television about our government's policies, but I didn't think I was in much of a
399 position to really become activist about it.
400

401 BK: My—I'm smiling because my next question for you is: Why did you become an
402 activist?
403

404 CP: Yeah. Well, actually, I didn't think of myself as an activist. When I did something
405 actively against apartheid it was—it was at the request of an old friend who saw the
406 newspaper that I worked for, *Substance*, as a vehicle for getting information out to
407 the city's teachers about the extent to which their pension fund was invested in
408 companies doing business in South Africa. We sat down, my editor [George
409 Schmidt] and Prexy and I, and looked over the possibilities of this research. Prexy
410 brought in a big box of material that had been squirreled out of South Africa, and I
411 was allowed to mull through it and study the history of all of this, and decide on an
412 outline of what I was writing.

413 When I finished it, I thought it was going to be all one big article, taking up
414 half the paper, and my editor decided it would be a three-part series. And so we—
415 we divvied it up and then I flushed out each part a little more, in more detail. But in
416 the process of doing that we researched—the activist part was really in getting the
417 facts and figures down to fellow teachers about how their money was being
418 invested in apartheid, and that they—you know, bottom line was these teachers
419 were not going to approve of that sort of use of their money, and they had some say,
420 you know, sway over how that would happen. And so we were hoping that this
421 would foment a lot of letters, and a lot of reaction from a big population of people
422 in the city.

423 And so, I was happy to do it because I knew how to write, and these guys
424 couldn't write—they couldn't write a paragraph without me tearing it up. And so, I
425 knocked out this piece over the course of a week, and that was the extent of the
426 act—well, that wasn't—that was the beginning of the activism as far as I realized.
427 So, I think what—I think what happened was, I got a chance to help Prexy with
428 something that I really could help him with. Not just hear his stories, but I could
429 actually make it apply to the context of the work-world that I lived in, and that was
430 important.

431

432 BK: Mm-hmm. So what kind of materials did you use in—in researching those—the
433 connections that you wrote about?

434

435 CP: There were all kinds of pamphlets and tracts written by activists in South Africa who
436 were recording percentages and numbers, and the extent to which the process of
437 apartheid worked between the—originally the Bantustans-turned-quote-homelands
438 and the naming, and the names in the government who were responsible for laws
439 being passed that would, you know, further narrow the rights of these workers, and
440 keep them solely, you know, uneducated and under—under—just under-nourished,
441 you know, desperate, working, you know, labor pools. So, I was reading that—
442 reading the legal history, I was reading the process by which apartheid worked in
443 people's lives day-by-day. I was studying lists, like budget lists from the Board of
444 Education about—and the pension fund—yeah, that's what it was. 'Cause I was a
445 pension representative I was able to get hold of pension fund budget lists, you
446 know—basically the year's summary of the budget and then the details. And so I
447 would get a list of—I was able to get a list of all the companies, you know, that the
448 pension fund mutual fund pools, the Capital Supervisor investors, would invest in.
449 And we—and Prexy and George and I did a list—I think it was taken from the
450 South African embassy and the American embassy—of businesses in South Africa,
451 and we basically, you know, did a cross-referencing of these lists and—and knew,
452 you know, what percentage of our pension portfolio was invested in these
453 companies. So that—that was the hard nuts-and-bolts, and we were doing and
454 crunching the numbers, and all of that stuff. All this was without the internet, there
455 was no help for that. There were some tracts about leaders like Oliver Tambo, and
456 Stephen Biko, and, you know, Mandela himself, and Reverend Tutu and all the—
457 the bishops in the World Council of Churches and their—their work. So, I was
458 reading a lot about that. What I was learning is how non-violent the African

459 National Congress had been up until the time of the Soweto uprising and this—and
460 this—slaughter, you know, of all these children, you know, in the schools in
461 Soweto. And then I realized that their official proclamation of becoming
462 defensively violent, you know, was a pretty important step that in no way defined
463 them as terrorists in any way, but, in simply as defenders of life and limb for their
464 people in the face of, you know, violent law enforcement. So—so I learned a lot
465 about all that: process of the law enforcement, process of the law, you know.

466
467 BK: And—

468
469 CP: Does that help you? Does that answer—

470
471 BK: Yeah, no, it does—

472
473 CP: Okay. Okay.

474
475 BK: Just to—to backtrack just for a second: So, you mentioned *Substance*—

476
477 CP: Yes.

478
479 BK: —Can you tell me a little bit more about the publication itself and what motivated
480 you to join them?

481
482 CP: Yeah, that's a good question. *Substance* was a newspaper I picked up while I was
483 teaching at Julian on 103rd and Halstead. It was—it was a teachers' newspaper that
484 gave a lot of background history about union activities and Board of Ed. politics,
485 and it was written by a guy that I came to admire a great deal. He was a Social
486 Science major at the University of Chicago, so he seemed to understand a bit about
487 statistics and—and the need for, you know, hard numbers and fact-based analysis of
488 things going on at the Board, and that the teachers had a perspective about Board of
489 Ed. activities that the general public didn't have. And if teachers didn't have that
490 perspective, this paper was to enable them to more uniformly across the profession
491 see the Board from a more political standpoint—understand its budgets, understand
492 its excuses, understand its priorities, understand the pension fund. And so they
493 wanted writers—they had always published in their piece a call to people who
494 might be interested in writing for them—so I went in and I tried writing a few
495 pieces, and they liked what I wrote.

496 Mostly what I was learning was to run the typesetter—it's this big
497 Mergenthaler Linotype machine, which was about as big as the room we're sitting
498 in [approximately 10 ft. (l) x 8 ft. (w) x 8 ft. (h)]—half the size of this room, that
499 George had bought from a major publishing company. And I learned how to put in
500 the font tapes that set-up fonts, and I learned how to set controls for all of the
501 layouts and stuff, and so it was very—it was a bit like programming, and I think
502 that was the most fascinating part for me.

503 I felt as if I was helping to create a system of-by-and-for teachers to inform
504 them be—of—about things beyond the classroom that the Board might not want
505 them to know, or didn't care if they knew. And so I wanted to get into that.
506

507 BK: And can you tell me a little bit more about the—the conversation that kind of got
508 the ball rolling on your—your piece?
509

510 CP: I honestly can't remember, except that Prexy's name came up—oh, I mentioned his
511 name to my editor, and George, my editor, said, I know this guy because I've
512 worked with him on such-a-such-a-such-a-such-a-thing and he's supposed to be big
513 in the anti-apartheid movement. And I mentioned to Prexy that I'd talked to George
514 and they knew each other, and they said sure—Prexy said, you know, you might
515 want to take a look at your pension fund and see if they are helping to prop up
516 apartheid, and maybe we can get something written on this. So, I invited Prexy into
517 the office, and he and George and I sat down and worked out basically the good-
518 positive outcomes of this project, and that it would be a project—that we knew it
519 was going to be a proj—we didn't know how far it was gonna go, or how far it
520 would take us, but Prexy was willing to give me all the materials to pull together in
521 some coherent form for a series that could get teachers revved up, you know, about
522 their part in—in being anti-apartheid. And so, my ability to get connected with
523 apartheid, I basically just transferred over to the teaching population-at-large. In
524 other words, here's what I've learned about what it really is, here is how it connects
525 to Chicago, here's what we should do to solve this problem because it is a problem.
526 And so, it resonated, you know, but it was—it was a bit of a slog. But I think those
527 first conversations in the office were—got them both really excited, and I was too
528 stupid to realize how much work I was in for, but I decided to get on with it.

529 And George was always proud of me for that series, he says it was one of the
530 best series they'd ever done in the magazine, so I was happy that we did it. And it
531 was Prexy's ambition and his content, you know—it was something that I
532 rearranged everything, you know, for that audience. But it was what the articles led
533 to that was the real activism, and that was standing in front of the Pension Board
534 itself and talking with them later.
535

536 BK: And I do have a couple questions for you about that but—
537

538 CP: Okay.
539

540 BK: First I would like to know a little bit more about the responsibilities that you had
541 going on at the same time that you're trying to put this together.
542

543 CP: Well, I had to turn in three preps of—of weekly lesson plans every week, I was
544 constantly grading papers from 150 kids—and there's no such thing as two or three
545 assignments each marking period. The minim—the Board required a minimum of
546 ten grades per student, so we're talking, you know, fifteen hundred grades—which
547 meant not quick work—some of it was pacing work, but they had to be ten major
548 grades. But to get those ten grades I'd often have to assign pacing kinds of

549 activities that built up to the major grade. And so, you know, it was constant paper-
550 load, 'cause I'm an English teacher and that's just that department's burden to bear.

551 But also, it was raising a child—I had a daughter in elementary school. I
552 think she was like nine or ten—third or fourth grade I believe, maybe fifth. And so,
553 I was chauffeuring her to her activities, and, you know, we would do our Saturday
554 errands together, and—and entertaining sleepovers with her friends, and all of that.
555 So there was always, you know, not just my professional life, but my life as a
556 mother. And that pretty much took up all my time.

557

558 BK: How did you manage that time?

559

560 CP: Well you only have twenty-four hours in a day like everyone, so I felt—I felt like,
561 you know, the world gets the same amount of time as I do, I just have to learn to use
562 it efficiently. So, I did the week's major cooking on Sundays, and she and I would
563 stay home together and do our work for the, you know—whatever the homework
564 was, and I'd do my planning. And I'd help her with her work, and, you know, we
565 would watch T.V. and collapse together during the week. But—but I had meals
566 prepared, you know, though the week. We'd go out on Fridays to eat.

567 How I managed was I put a lot on her. I had to leave earlier than she did
568 every day, and so I made sure that there was something for her for her lunch—she
569 had to take her—make her lunch—sometimes I made her lunch, sometimes she
570 made her own. She got herself out the door, locked the door, and got herself to
571 school every day. Sometimes I'd be home before she got home from school, so that
572 I was there two-three days a week, but there were often times when she'd go over to
573 a friend's house after school because I was working late. She would be down with
574 me at *Substance*, at the office, sometimes when I was working and typing and doing
575 her work. I—she—she doesn't remember about a lot about her childhood, but when
576 you think about it that can mean a lot of things. It doesn't mean it was unhappy, but
577 it doesn't mean that it was memorable. But I think as she gets older she'll
578 remember more-and-more things. But, yeah, she spent a lot of time in my
579 professional territory I have to say. She took a summer school class in my high
580 school while I was teaching a summer school class, for instance. So, you know, we
581 would be near each other. Summers she spent with her father in Colorado, and she
582 was with me ten months of the year.

583 How I did it, I don't know—I was probably young and full of energy. I was
584 running—I'd knock out an hour or two a day, you know, of running, and that
585 helped keep my energy up. It was good.

586

587 BK: And how did the rest of your family respond to what you were doing?

588

589 CP: They didn't know about it. They didn't know. They knew I was, maybe, writing for
590 some newspaper, but—it would not have meant much to them if I'd told them in
591 detail what I was doing. So, they didn't know, you know.

592

593 BK: Okay, now could you kind of break down the—the piece for me a little bit? You've
594 talked about how it was going to be split into three—

595

596 CP: Right. Well the first piece, part one, was about the history of South Africa and
597 apartheid: the Boer wars, the set-up of the minority government, and the sequence
598 of laws passed to further-and-further segregate the tribes—basically the peoples of
599 South Africa into Bantustans, the laws that got passed to create the pass system for
600 their very limited movement outside their homeland areas, and the law enforcement
601 involved. So all of that was part one.

602 Part two was the beginnings of the resistance by—in 1913, by the African
603 National Congress. Their founding, all the names associated with the resistance:
604 Stephen Biko, Mandela, the whole group of lawyers that were involved in—in
605 setting up the African National Congress’ charter for an integrated South Africa.
606 The charter itself I highlighted, I didn’t lay out the whole thing. But there were
607 major, major highlights that I printed up—it was like bulleted or something. And
608 then there was the involvement by Israel coming in—there could have been either
609 weapons—I think there was—I think there was weapon shipments and a number of
610 other things that I brought in. And the trade that South Africa began with western
611 countries, and what its major economic base was. And how major companies went
612 down there to work in extraction of resources, you know—it wasn’t just the
613 diamonds and all of that stuff, but it was a bunch of other stuff.

614 So, I was laying the groundwork for both resistance and the third section,
615 which is to lay out all the—the five—the five pillars of apartheid. I laid out—by
616 the end of the second section I’d laid out the five pillars of apartheid, and by the
617 third section I explained how those five pillars worked and what our—and I laid out
618 the list of companies in our pension fund that did business in South Africa, and
619 what amount of money we actually had tied up from our pension fund in that, and
620 that—I made the case that we needed to divest so that—that it was actually doable,
621 that there were actually portfolios out there that investors could still retain a profit
622 for the fund in, that there would not be a major sacrifice or implosion, you know, of
623 pension profit or anything as a result. And that teachers needed to get behind this,
624 you know, to their pension reps and make it clear that the union should not engage
625 in, you know, acting like accomplices to slaveholders elsewhere after its employing
626 the children of slaves, you know, here. And so, there was—I made some reference
627 to, you know, our job to be teachers of the public, you know, about our—our role in
628 civil rights across the world if we can, whenever we see a chance. And that’s pretty
629 much where it ended.

630 I brought up, I think, in a few paragraphs, the need for the Board itself to
631 reexamine—I mean the Pension Board, I’m sorry, not the Chicago Board of Ed., but
632 the pension fund itself within the union—to reexamine, you know, these companies
633 and its own investments, and to make a decision on behalf of the integrity of the
634 profession, the opinion of teachers, you know, in promoting civil rights within our
635 own city, you know, and to—to actually take—examine these and—and reinvest in
636 other kinds of corporations.

637 Now, we got phone calls about this, and we wrote a letter or two to the
638 Pension Board about it, and they all got copies of *Substance*. And we got a lot of
639 letters back from teachers in subsequent issues as a result of that series. So, it
640 was—I could tell it was popular. It really hit home. In fact, I got an award for it

641 about three-four years later from the Board of Ed. for—for writing, it was a writing
642 award given by some human resources person at the Board.

643
644 BK: And so, what was the—the next step after it was published?

645
646 CP: We waited to see. We didn't know what was going to happen. Prexy waited about a
647 few months, and he and George were gauging, you know, what was going on. We
648 didn't really know if we were going to do anything about it, but Prexy got his father
649 in on this. His father was retired—Rozell Nesbitt was a retired teacher, and he
650 knew people on the Pension Board as well. And he and his father decided that they
651 wanted to stand before the Board and make an appeal. And they asked me to go
652 with them because it was—this article that I'd—series that I'd written that
653 precipitated this whole thing. And so the three of us went before the Board. And
654 Prexy and his father, Rozell, made a case to Capital Supervisors' representatives in
655 front of the Pension Board people about how they might do this investment. And it
656 was about—I would say it was an hour-long meeting. And all the pension fund
657 people were quite interested in pressuring their Capital Supervisors fund managers
658 to do this. So we—that was what happened. Even though we—it wasn't anything
659 that I had planned, you know, as a result of the writing, and it wasn't anything that
660 my editor had planned, but we were more than happy to help if Prexy wanted to try
661 to take the next step himself using the article.

662
663 BK: How did you feel going into that meeting?

664
665 CP: Very nervous—we were very nervous. And mostly it was because we really didn't
666 know who we were up against. We did not know that world—I—Prexy knew the
667 world—that world a little better than I did. I was just a classroom teacher, and I had
668 written these articles and researched them, and made teachers aware of these
669 articles.

670 And so, when they asked me questions about the information I got and where,
671 you know, where I got it from, I said, you know, it's from your own published
672 budgets, you know, to teachers—it's your own pension reports to your members
673 that I got all these numbers myself. Now, obviously I'm not an accountant and you
674 can find, maybe, accounting errors, but I'm not off by more than a million or two
675 here or there. So, we're talking seven-to-twelve million dollars, which in the early
676 eighties was a lot of money, you know. It could have been, maybe, closer to—no, it
677 was—it was more—it was—yeah, it was between ten and twenty million. It was
678 somewhere in that range, and I can't remember. It depends on what they were
679 willing to divest from.

680
681 BK: And when you walked away from the meeting how did you feel?

682
683 CP: We felt good. Prexy thought there was a very good chance that they were actually
684 going to do something. George interrogated us about that meeting. He wanted to
685 know every little detail because what he wanted to find out was whether or not he
686 could investigate any further actions by the Pension Board, because he intended to

687 do a follow-up article about whether or not they had actually, you know—he wrote
688 the report on the meeting, and he intended to do a follow-up report on whether they
689 were going to divest or not.

690 Then a pension newsletter came out in the next six months—within the next
691 three-to-six months that said they were divesting in companies doing business—and
692 so he did an article on that to report that to the teachers.

693 So, we hadn't—we didn't know who we were up against. They seemed like
694 really well meaning people, and Capital Supervisors at the time were, you know,
695 not—they were—they tried to present that, you know, this would mean a terrible
696 loss to teachers, and I—and we said, well, you know what, we're pretty sure that
697 this is a sacrifice teachers are pretty willing to make. You know, most of them.
698 And that it's recoverable before their—their retirements, most of them. So, it—you
699 might consider this fund, and that fund, and this other fund that are socially
700 conscious investing funds, you know. And you can be sure that this—that your
701 fund—the Pension Board's funds are not the only area of the United States where
702 this is going on, where this discussion is going on, and that you could actually be at
703 the vanguard, you know, of promoting anti-apartheid investment, in boycotting, you
704 know—being part of history here in boycotting the economic system, you know, of
705 apartheid. That appealed to them.

706 So as soon as we made them look like the good guys, you know, on the right
707 side of history with this thing, we walked away feeling pretty good that they might
708 actually take us up on that.

709

710 BK: And so, you—you mentioned the newsletter that came out later on—

711

712 CP: Right. It's probably—you could probably find it in the Chicago teachers' pension
713 fund archives, I believe. It's probably in there.

714

715 BK: What was your reaction when you saw that?

716

717 CP: Oh, we were—we were jumping-up-and-down-happy. We were very happy.

718

719 BK: Did you find out first?

720

721 CP: No, George knew—George knew—George knew everything first. I was just busy
722 living, you know, and trying to be a mother and a good teacher, so I was not really
723 paying much attention to that. In fact, after all of that was over, I didn't hear from
724 Prexy again. I think we ran—well, no, we ran into each other maybe about six-to-
725 eight years later, when I was at Kenwood, and there were some kids who knew him
726 downtown. I can—I think he was teaching with the city colleges, and he was
727 running some seminars on raising awareness about the Mozambique revolution.
728 And I came to one of his forums that he had.

729

730 BK: What about any downsides to your—to the publication of your—your piece?

731

732 CP: Downside is that we didn't keep copies. I didn't keep a copy of it. I didn't
733 understand its worth. And even today I might just put it in the context of a larger
734 movement, just another piece of a puzzle, you know, a puzzle of how to boycott this
735 country, and, you know, make this government listen to the world, you know, about
736 its internal policies. So, I—I don't—but I moved, like, twelve times in—ten times
737 in twelve years, and I think in the process of doing that—and you know how
738 newspapers deteriorate just by themselves, and how easily wrinkled and rumped
739 they get. Who knows what happened to it?
740

741 BK: I—I do know that there is a copy in—in an archive somewhere in Wisconsin, which
742 is why I couldn't get a copy of it myself, 'cause it's in that archive.
743

744 CP: Oh. Okay.
745

746 BK: How do you feel knowing that?
747

748 CP: I—I'm shocked. I'm glad to know it exists somewhere.
749

750 BK: Yeah.
751

752 CP: It's good to know.
753

754 BK: What were the ramifications as far as your ability to travel to South Africa?
755

756 CP: It was funny that the—the day that we had the meeting at the Pension Board Prexy
757 and his father congratulated me outside the building and said, yes, congratulations,
758 you've now joined the club of people who will never be able to go to South Africa.
759 And they said, you would—if you flew today to Johannesburg you would be
760 detained at the airport, put on another plane, and sent back, you know, you would
761 not be allowed to enter the country. Well, I—okay, thanks for that badge of honor,
762 you know. And so, that was—that was one ramification. But then I didn't think
763 much of it.

764 I saw in the early nineties, when apartheid came apart, and Mandela—I was
765 just crying in front of the television, 'cause I was thinking about Prexy. (*sighs*)
766 Anyway, it was just so great. So, I thought about him the whole time, and I
767 thought, oh, I hope he's there, you know, I hope he's doing something. And then, I
768 think it was a year or two ago during the election, I thought, oh crap, this is such a
769 great civil rights situation, you know. I wonder if I can hook up with him, or what
770 he's doing, or if he's even here, you know. I'd heard that he'd gone to Africa for a
771 while and was living there, and I thought maybe he's in Africa—I'll—I'll type up
772 his name on Facebook, and sure enough he popped up on Facebook. I couldn't
773 believe it—with that silly skullcap picture of his. So I said, what have you done,
774 turned Islamic on me or something, you know. And so we chatted and—and we
775 had a—a nice chat, and he said—he said, come on, we gotta do lunch sometime. So
776 I met him out in Oak Park, and I said, you know, I've traveled here, I've traveled
777 there, but I—I—I just—I'm kind of waiting around to see what the next big thing

778 will be like in my life. I don't know if there'll ever be one. He said, well look,
779 while you're waiting, why don't you come with us to Africa? I've got a trip
780 going—go down to South Africa. And I thought, heck yeah, I need to do this. I
781 said, I'm there! So, I wrote him the check the next day on the deposit, and I told
782 my husband I gotta do this, you know—
783

784 BK: Yeah. I'm sorry, I'm gonna interrupt you for one second—
785

786 CP: That's okay—
787

788 BK: Only because—
789

790 CP: That's a ramification—
791

792 BK: That's a whole—that's a whole story I want to talk to you about also
793

794 CP: Oh, okay. Okay.
795

796 BK: But I also—I'm curious: I noticed you did get kind of emotional, and I'm just kind
797 of curious what's at the root of that?
798

799 CP: I don't know. You know, I was crying my eyes out when Obama got inaugurated.
800 It's just—if you—if you lived during a period where everybody you believed in as a
801 leader got killed. And you—you realize that half of your generation just decided,
802 fuck it, I'm selling out, you know, like Jerry Rubin did—became a friggin' Wall
803 Street capitalist. And Abbie Hoffman went underground—Abbie Hoffman was my
804 hero, so he was like the hippie-political side of our generation that was happening.
805 When you see something great come out of any efforts whatsoever to promote civil
806 rights somewhere, you know—it's just very emotional—for me.

807 I mean, my father knocked my mother off her chair onto the floor one night
808 over an argument over, you know, watching black people get hosed down and
809 chased by dogs and stuff, and he's—he called me a dirty nigger-lover, and that I'd
810 be lynched if I were in Alabama or Georgia, and so I better keep my mouth—I
811 mean, when you have experiences like that in your past—the death of leaders, the
812 family split-ups over, you know, who's worthy to be part of civil rights in this
813 country, and then you see this stuff happen—it was great.

814 It was like, even though I was going to become a teacher—I never said to
815 anybody I want to do this for African-Americans. I never said that. It was just—
816 it's such an arrogant thing to do. You just—you just pour yourself into your job
817 and you do the best job you can.

818 Then, if something like that comes along, I don't know why it touches me, but
819 it's—it's sort of an evolutionary landmark for us, you know, as an empathic
820 species, you know, that we do these libratory things that become enshrined as part
821 of a government, you know. And so, I didn't even think it would happen in my
822 lifetime, I honestly didn't. I never thought you would see a black president. You
823 know, when this guy—I—my son used to rib me so bad because I was for Hilary

824 [Clinton] for about five minutes and he said, look, you're an idiot to think that this
825 woman is ever, ever going to be able to climb out of whatever P.R. wreck her
826 husband made, you know, of his Admini—blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I said I
827 don't care, she's a woman, you know, and—is that it, is that all there is, Mom?
828 She's just a woman, she's got a vagina? Big deal, you know. He said, what about
829 the best person for the job? So I did more research and I realized that, okay,
830 Obama's the better—until New Hampshire I was for her, and after that whole—
831 after she turned on him in the election her campaign turned dirty. I realized I can't
832 back this person, and so I stuck with him. And I think when I realized that his
833 campaign meant a great deal to me in terms of continuing civil rights in this
834 country, was when he made that race speech and he began to instruct this country in
835 both civics and in unifying values. And I thought, this is what the old hippies
836 want—this is what we wanted. This might happen in my lifetime. And so, I guess I
837 got emotional because I didn't think it would, you know. I didn't think—I was—I
838 thought Mandela might but I never thought we would have an African-American
839 president. And I don't want one just to have one, I wanted one who was—he had to
840 be the best person for the job. Just to be able to get as far as he got he had to be.
841 And of course, in this country, things had to be rock-bottom-horrible for a black
842 man to even be given a chance that he had. He could've beaten anyone at any point
843 in our historical context, but the rest of the country wasn't ready for him until we'd
844 hit, just, solid rock-bottom with Bush before they'd even consider taking
845 seriously—I laugh because I went through my files and I saw a letter that I had
846 written to him when he was running for the senate here in Illinois, and I happily
847 showed that letter to my son to show my son that I was for Obama before you were
848 for Obama. For the record.

849

850 BK: Well, as long as we're talking about politics, if I can backtrack for just a minute,
851 although I hate to do that, was there—talk to me a little bit, if you would, about the
852 Harold Washington election.

853

854 CP: Yeah, the Harold Washington election was exciting, and I—I had just—I had just
855 finished signing a petition for a young lady named Toni Preckwinkle in our ward to
856 be my alderman—to run to be my alderman.

857 And I had also, later, after Washington, voted for Bobby Rush over this
858 upstart, arrogant kid named Obama who ran against Rush. And I thought, (*makes*
859 *dismissive sound with her lips*) Rush has always voted the way I want. I don't
860 know this unknown Obama guy, so I voted for Rush and Rush beat him in that
861 election. I don't know if you remember that, but he's lost an election and he lost it
862 to Bobby Rush, the Black Panther rep. of our district.

863 The Harold Washington election was exciting but I didn't have a lot to do
864 with it. And I knew that Prexy worked for him. He was—I was at Kenwood at the
865 time, and he was, like, working for his human resources department or something. I
866 was pregnant with my son Nick. I was also sponsor of the graduation. I needed a
867 speaker—one of the kids at our school had a connection with Harold Washington's
868 office, and so she was able to help us get Harold Washington to speak at our
869 graduation. I set it up at the auditorium on Congress there, and we must have had

870 four-or five-thousand people there, plus people off the street came in. And, Harold
871 was notoriously late for everything all the time, and then—so I had Prexy set up as
872 the first speaker. Prexy was the first speaker and he gave a nice, good graduation
873 speech, and then suddenly Harold Washington's limo pulls up and he gets—you
874 know, we didn't know until, like, that day. I had already had these fliers to stick
875 inside the—the programs just in case he was going to show up, 'cause we thought
876 he wasn't. And so, Prexy's graduation speech turned into an intro to the mayor, and
877 the mayor came in and the house went down. And so I had Nick a month later,
878 after that—but that was the year that he died, a month later, like right around the
879 time Nick—I think he died in July. And so, I was very happy to have a picture of
880 him on the stage there, you know, with everybody at the time—our interim
881 principal—and that we got a chance—I got a chance to meet up with Prexy again,
882 and get Harold Washington there. That was it.

883 I knew Harold's politics were dynamite throughout the city council, but that's
884 because the city council was old-school-[Edward] Vrdolyak, you know, back-room
885 politics, and Harold wanted fairer, you know, more inclusionary contracting—you
886 know, city business stuff. And so there was a lot of problems with that. But
887 everyone was happier, the city was happier. It wasn't visibly run worse, it stayed
888 the same. I think the expansion of—what's that summer thing we do in Chicago?
889 This—the—

890

891 BK: Taste of Chicago?

892

893 CP: Taste of Chicago, he expanded that. Got, you know—he started doing that. That
894 was good P.R. So, I can't say that Washington's term as mayor did anything to
895 change me. It gave me a little bit of hope for Democrats, you know, and I was
896 happy to be in a democratic state 'cause living in the south when I was younger was
897 horrible, it was hard—I felt like I was hiding in plain sight all the time. I can't say
898 that Washington's mayorship was important to me personally, but it set a political
899 context that I was happier in. I could work with my students better.

900 When—when he died, and all that drama came out in the city council, I
901 realized that there was a huge amount of dirt in this city that people were fighting to
902 cover up, and keep, you know, their turf. And—and to that extent I didn't want to
903 get into the local politics. It was—it can suck you dry. I'd rather have gotten on
904 with larger causes. So—

905

906 BK: And as far as other causes, what other movements did you participate in?

907

908 CP: Well, I joined the N.A.A.C.P. I was a member of the A.C.L.U. I joined National
909 Organization of Women—League of Women Voters. I contributed to—gosh, what
910 was it? Amnesty International, and things like that.

911 But I was mostly just grinding out my professional work. I was doing some
912 summer courses at the University of Chicago in computers, and I was a Mellon
913 Fellow for a few years where we—we just got—we were—we were asked to do
914 projects in return for some inspiration from the high—high-power guns that they'd
915 pull out, you know, from the University of Chicago to come in and do some

916 seminars with us. I studied one summer writing with Wayne Booth, who's a great
917 rhetorician in my view. So I was really just doing that stuff.

918

919 BK: Mm-hmm.

920

921 CP: And I was busy being married and having a new family. I'd had empty nest
922 syndrome with my daughter. She was like—be a junior in high school, and—and
923 that year I met my—my current husband and got married, and we had a child right
924 away, and—so, it was just—I was just busy getting on with another new life.

925

926 BK: All right. [Interviewer sifting through papers] Sorry. How long did you eventually
927 stay with Chicago Public Schools?

928

929 CP: Thirty-four years.

930

931 BK: And, you kind of alluded to this earlier, but how did you feel when you eventually
932 learned of the collapse of apartheid?

933

934 CP: Well, it was a full year in happening, it wasn't simply a one-time event. But, I
935 mean, the big events like Mandela's speech after he was left out of prison, you
936 know, the slow dismantling by agreements, gradual agreements over time. I mean,
937 I was—I kept up with that but I wasn't—I wasn't making it a point everyday to—to
938 learn about it. I think I got the paper—I mean, I got weekly magazines, and I—you
939 know, I kept up with it through weekly—like *Newsweek* or *Harper's*, but—I mean,
940 I was very happy about it, and I—I was—the whole time it was happening I'm
941 thinking, it's about damn time, you know.

942

943 BK: How did you react to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report?

944

945 CP: I had real mixed feelings about that, not because I believe in vengeance but I really
946 did think that there was insufficient compensation made to victims of apartheid
947 through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I thought it was much more a
948 whitewash than a justice process, and that's just how I—I thought about it. I might
949 not have known—we—we didn't have access to the internet, I think, at the time it
950 was happening. And I could look up more about it now to find out if I was right or
951 not, but at the time I was hearing about it and reading about it I—I didn't like what
952 was happening. I thought it was an attempt by whites to just simply justify their
953 gathering up their marbles and divvying them out to the new—newly governing
954 majority as they felt that majority deserved their help.

955

956 BK: Mm-hmm.

957

958 CP: You know, earned it. And I—I do think since then that how Zimbabwe turned over
959 its agricultural controls from a skilled minority to an unskilled majority was stupid.
960 And maybe that would've happened in South Africa, maybe not. But the—I don't
961 think the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did enough to set up a—an

962 adjudication process at all kinds of local levels. Maybe there were a few major city
963 processes, but—I've been to Johannesburg now, and it's still a prison. White
964 people have imprisoned themselves behind barbed wire everywhere. Everywhere.
965 Every single street here, in this city, if you can picture it with barbed wire on it
966 that's how Johannesburg looks. Can you picture that?
967

968 BK: I can't.
969

970 CP: It's horrible. And if that's what Truth and Reconciliation Commission produced, I
971 say there was something terribly flawed with that somehow. I don't know if it's
972 going to be a generational problem, but I have a feeling that cultures on either side
973 of that barbed wire harden rather than—there is some socializing, but it's very
974 slight. It doesn't seem to have a—an assimilating impact. And that's why I think
975 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission didn't do enough to create that
976 assimilating momentum.
977

978 BK: And so, you were able to see these things firsthand, in a manner of speaking, when
979 you went to South Africa in November of 2009—
980

981 CP: Yeah. Yeah.
982

983 BK: Can you tell me about that trip now?
984

985 CP: It's hard to describe because I had—I had wanted so much to enjoy the country as a
986 tourist. The—the structure of the trip was for it to be a memorial trip in memory of
987 a colleague of Prexy's and—and another colleague in California whose husband
988 always wanted to go to South Africa, who'd contributed to the movement also
989 against apartheid, the boycott.

990 So, that—there was a political premise to the trip, and so a number of places
991 that we visited involved, for instance, the Apartheid Museum, the big memorial
992 park in Pretoria for all the fallen—it's sort of like the Vietnam Memorial except it's
993 acres bigger, and it's hundreds of—it's millions more. I mean, there are walls that
994 make the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. look like just a little tiny strip,
995 you know. This is a park full of millions of names. They're from Cuba, they're
996 from places in South—you know, South America, Namibia, other countries, you
997 know, of the fallen. And—and there are the enemies, you know, of—that also—
998 whose names were also on the walls. There were these meetings with people who
999 were part of the post-apartheid government, where they—they had described their
1000 experiences of—of urban removal in District Six—District Six? What's the movie
1001 name? *District Nine*?
1002

1003 BK: *District Nine*.
1004

1005 CP: Yeah, we went to the District Six Museum. And the *District Nine* film by what's—I
1006 forget his name, but he did—he did the—Peter Jackson. Peter Jackson's the

1007 producer of *District Nine*, and it's based very much on the experience of apartheid,
1008 you know, in Johannesburg. You ever seen that movie?

1009

1010 BK: No, I haven't.

1011

1012 CP: You need to see that movie.

1013

1014 BK: I will see it. I didn't know the connection.

1015

1016 CP: Yeah, yeah. So, in District Six we—I learned about this forced removal of this huge
1017 entire neighborhoods of people when the apartheid government wanted to use this
1018 particular section of Johannesburg.

1019 What I saw in Johannesburg was astounding physically. We would ride along
1020 six-to-eight lane highways, freeways, and we would think we're looking at
1021 mountains. Now, I think when you—when you go south of Chicago you see the big
1022 landfills that are very high up near Calumet Expressway, and those are high but
1023 those are not anywhere near—they may be one-tenth the height of the—what we—I
1024 thought were foothills to—to mountains. Those are actually gold slags from the
1025 mines—we're talking, literally, foothills not—not waste dumps. Foothill ranges off
1026 in the distance, as far as you can see, everywhere around you. They look like small
1027 mountains—it looks like—it feels like you're going through the Smokies only
1028 they're gold, you know. They're gold, clay mountains. And this is all from the
1029 mines of South Africa, you know. It boggles the mind when you see these things to
1030 think how much human misery went into, you know, the mining of gold out of that
1031 country.

1032 And then when I look at the current state of wealth that I saw in the city itself,
1033 every single street—on Fifty-Fifth Street I have a tall building on one side of my
1034 townhouses and then there are my townhouses. On each side of the street would be
1035 a wall—on all the streets of Chicago would be a wall, with spikes going up for
1036 electricity that run along—you know, electrical wires that run along those spikes.
1037 And then, on top of that, barbed wire curled throughout. Everywhere. It was like a
1038 prison, and yet, the people of Johannesburg—black people I met, white people
1039 quite, quite formal, the black people were quite agreeable and pleasant.

1040 The problem is that we were in a highly controlled environment. Prexy did
1041 not let us out on our own. He thought we would not be safe in daylight on our own.
1042 The ramifications of all this, to me, were—he had a political angle to this trip that
1043 we saw, that gave us a quite on-the—you know, a very real, physical feel for the
1044 suffering that we had tried, you know—we had done a lot to help end. On the other
1045 hand, the psychological apartheid was all around us, you know. That the—that
1046 the—the refusal to share that the—the hiding of wealth, the hoarding of wealth
1047 behind barbed wire and electrical fences, you know, was still keeping the majority
1048 of South Africans very poor. And they would be let into the wealth of industry and
1049 the economy in a very limited way. Schooling is opened up, that's good. Access to
1050 all kinds of consumer goods is opened up. Freedom to move is opened up, you
1051 know. All of that's good, I saw that, but the fact that whites don't feel safe is partly
1052 a psychic jail of their own making from what I could see. And—and that if black

1053 people accommodated them, and lived up to this awful stereotype it was because
1054 they were almost resigned to not being allowed any other way to be, except with
1055 each other.

1056 We were at the airport and I was very sick. I had had a series of shots I was
1057 given, and I think I was finally having a reaction to all this—all these shots I'd
1058 gotten in the last couple days, and I was running a fever. And they detected in my
1059 eyes that I had a fever. They were trying to screen people for avian bird flu, and so
1060 they stopped me—the whole rest of Prexy's group got to go to customs but they
1061 took me over to the other side of the airport, and I said I'll see you guys later, and
1062 they said well we'll meet you blah-blah-blah-somewhere. They took me to an
1063 infirmary area and the nurse there said (*affecting a South African accent*) what
1064 brings you to our country here—(*resumes speaking for herself*) you know, I can't
1065 remember—imitate her voice very well, but she says (*resumes affected South*
1066 *African accent*) why do you come here to see us? (*resumes speaking for herself*)
1067 And I told her the story of the articles way back in the eighties. (*gasping sound*)
1068 She's taking my temperature and looking. (*resumes affected South African accent*)
1069 Yes, you do have a temperature—(*gasps again*) you did all this? You helped to
1070 bring down the walls? You are a hero! (*resumes speaking for herself*) And she
1071 came up and she hugged me—oh my God, I thought I was going to cry. She said
1072 (*resumes affected South African accent*) come on, I help you go, you're all right,
1073 you'll make it. (*resumes speaking for herself*) So she takes me through the shortcut.
1074 (*resumes affected South African accent*) Here's the express line in customs, there's
1075 your people over there. Come on, let's get you through. Stamp her thing, (*resumes*
1076 *normal voice*) she told the lady behind the thing, and the lady said, oh we are so
1077 sorry for the weather, and I said don't worry, you know, I'm just glad to be here.
1078 So Prexy said what happened, and I told him the story and he smiled, you know—I
1079 don't even think I told him the story about—the story that I told her. But I had to
1080 tell—I said I had to come back. I had to come here now that I get a chance to be
1081 here and see how it's changed since then. (*resumes affected South African accent*)
1082 Oh, I hope your stay is so wonderful. You are—you are an angel. You helped us.
1083 We owe you, thank you so much! (*resumes speaking for herself*) And, I mean, oh
1084 my God, I thought, you know, it was like getting my—a spiritual mother to hug
1085 me. She was so sweet. So one of the ramifications of that trip was that somebody
1086 in South Africa heard what I did, was happy that I did it. Even if it was only one
1087 person, I was happy that they knew.

1088 And the other thing was that it was so funny to me that Prexy wanted us to
1089 love Africa, but the difficulty of loving Africa is loving—is not being able to be a
1090 tourist if he wants this—this trip to be politically themed. And so there was some
1091 resistance on mine and my roommate's part to do some touristy things, not just the
1092 political things Prexy wanted to do. So we fought hard—I fought hard to go over to
1093 the Indian Ocean. I'm drawn to water, I'm just—I'm from, you know, the east coast
1094 of Florida, I just am, and I—an ocean's an ocean, but I had to see it. And I
1095 complained to a couple people and it got back to Prexy, and Prexy got mad at me
1096 and he said, you know, you are really tearing at the fabric of this trip, blah blah
1097 blah blah. And I said, Prexy I'm not. I'm not. I told you before the trip and during
1098 the trip I wanted to go see the Indian Ocean. You had me thinking I was going to

1099 get beheaded out on the beach the other night if I went out there, across the road
1100 from our restaurant. I said you're really creating a lot of fear in this group about
1101 their security just because you see your liability very seriously. That doesn't mean
1102 that we should all be afraid of everything, which kind of goes against your idea of
1103 making us love this country, you know. And I said I have a driver coming to get
1104 me. He's late, and he might not show up, but I want to see this ocean. And I said,
1105 maybe I won't get to see it, it's just another ocean. But I said I don't appreciate you
1106 giving me a hard time and accusing me of undermining your trip. You know,
1107 you're not the only one on this trip whose trip this is. So the—the driver showed
1108 up. He said, I'm sorry I'm late, I'm sorry I'm late, but, he said, just go, go. So, I
1109 went—I went over to the ocean for a while.

1110 And that was part of the problem with the trip, was that, you know, to enjoy
1111 the beauty of the country, but to have that overlaid with this political thing where
1112 we met with the head of the resistance in Mozambique, you know, and we met
1113 Mandela's wife, you know, and all these wonderful, wonderful things, you know.
1114 At the same time I wanted to be able to do some touristy things, and so of—my
1115 roommate and I did squeeze in some things. We went to the top of Table Mountain
1116 in Cape Town, which is an amazing—you know, I saw the Indian Ocean here and
1117 the Atlantic over there, and—it was just (*sighs*)—it was great. It was—it was like
1118 being on top of the world at the other end of it, you know, the bottom. So, it's hard
1119 to put into words the ramifications of taking that trip because it was the trip of a
1120 lifetime. And I've been to Australia three times, so, I mean, I've been on great
1121 trips, you know, but this was great in a whole bunch of other levels for me.
1122

1123 BK: You were talking a little bit earlier about some of the challenges you see with South
1124 Africa. Do you want to expand on that at all, or are you—
1125

1126 CP: Well, you can have all of the A.N.C. charter ensconced as constitutional law that
1127 you want, but if the A.N.C. is itself patriarchal you have excluded from access and
1128 justice half of that population. So, while on the one hand the men of the revolution
1129 of the minority, you know, now who are the ruling party—on the one hand, while
1130 they are trying to run a country, they are also diminishing their own energies and
1131 success in that regard by continuing to neglect the very women who could be—who
1132 could support that—that end, and who are doing nothing but cleaning up their
1133 personal and collective messes on the family front. And they—the A.N.C. charter
1134 must translate itself into a much more activist set of judicial activities on behalf of
1135 families in small communities. It's not enough that they try to—to control trade,
1136 and the banking system, and international policies, and all of that. They must
1137 internally work on all kinds of other things to redistribute the wealth, you know.
1138 There is a system of welfare for women and children, but it's starvation rations. It's
1139 not—and it's not meant to motivate them to get good jobs because the employment
1140 system in the country's bad even for men. And so, you know, there has got to be
1141 much more work done at the local level—at district and, you know province levels
1142 in getting the economy to be—get higher job participation out of South Africans—
1143 black South Africans, especially women, who are left, you know—there's a huge,
1144 massive die-off because of A.I.D.S. in that country, and there's a huge population

1145 of grandmothers now taking care of their grandchildren over this. And these
1146 women are wise and need a great deal of representation in the parliament. They
1147 have a higher participation of women in their parliament, but their women are
1148 excluded from a great number of big—big decision processes, and so they're
1149 working on that. But I'm not happy with what I saw in terms of women actually
1150 being equal in a revolutionary win. They weren't—they aren't.

1151

1152 BK: How has being active in the movement changed your life?

1153

1154 CP: You know, that's so hard to say. It's so hard to say. I can only—I can only say that
1155 it has helped me to see that the downside of the Enlightenment's principles of
1156 elitism, and maybe economic dominance, are keeping the West from, I think,
1157 becoming a welcome and assimilatable part of the world, which is, you know, going
1158 to surpass the west. I mean, China and India are going to surpass Western
1159 economies. And if the West doesn't learn anything about these colonial changes,
1160 these—these post-colonial changes and its own part in resisting egalitarian drives,
1161 you know, on the planet then a lot of us who worked hard might see our work as
1162 being very short-lived on the human—in the course of human history, you know.
1163 But, I guess how I see myself in the end is that I just did my part, I did—I found
1164 something—a cause greater than my own that I could help with, or do something
1165 about, both in my profession and maybe, you know, with a friend like Prexy, and I
1166 did something about it. I didn't simply, you know, retreat into a bubble of hurt and
1167 victimization over the loss of liberal values, but I tried to do what I think this
1168 younger generation does, which is to subvert, you know, when possible. So, I'll
1169 always be for that.

1170

1171 BK: This may sound slightly redundant, and I apologize for that, but what would you say
1172 was your biggest contribution to the movement?

1173

1174 CP: Oh, I would say informing thousands of teachers. I would say my biggest
1175 contribution is to influence the divestment of millions of dollars of our money in an
1176 unjust system, in another part of the world.

1177

1178 BK: What would you have done differently?

1179

1180 CP: Oh, I would have—I would have brought a—a financial advisor from the private
1181 sector in, and I would have pushed for an official statement from Capital
1182 Supervisors to the teachers' union about its exact divestment. You know, some
1183 kind of certificate of authenticity in its divestment.

1184

1185 BK: What kind of impact do you think your activism has had on your children?

1186

1187 CP: Honestly, I'm not sure, because I don't think they're aware of it, because I just think
1188 children aren't all that aware of what their parents do to begin with. And it's not
1189 because there's something wrong with children, it's just in the—it's structurally
1190 within—it's a structural problem between parent and child roles that kids just not

1191 know this stuff. And even if they're told it they forget it because their capacities are
1192 limited in understanding it. So, it might not be until they're older that they would
1193 appreciate this—there are many children of famous people who have no idea that
1194 their parents are famous, or even if they are they have no idea what that means.
1195 And I would consider my children pretty normal, you know, in that respect.
1196

1197 BK: In what ways do you think the anti-apartheid movement has influenced U.S. race
1198 relations today?
1199

1200 CP: Well, I think it's—I think it's made me feel the validity of liberal values. The
1201 validity of liberal—it actually has made me realize that liberal values are more
1202 reality-based than are values of the right, than are conservative values. Conserving
1203 is just that: maintaining status quo values. And that might be at the expense of all
1204 kinds of new information, and liberality is, you know, at core about free and
1205 openness to new information, and therefore living freely. And so, it's helped me
1206 stay optimistic about, you know, human progress, I think.
1207

1208 BK: And what do you hope future generations will learn from the efforts of those who
1209 fought to end apartheid?
1210

1211 CP: Well, the Truth and Reconciliation needs—needs tougher standards. And that there
1212 need to be real consequences for people who, even if they say they're sorry, must
1213 make amends. That there must be some giving-back of wealth stolen, land stolen.
1214 There's got to be training of those that they have oppressed to upgrade their
1215 leadership skills, their, you know, real life skills. There's gotta be—there's gotta be
1216 a commitment to the truth. There's gotta be a commitment to something besides
1217 wealth on the planet, and that if one worries about the betterment of all people that
1218 all people will be wealthy. And that—I hope what future generations learn is that
1219 there aren't some who are more deserving than others.
1220

1221 BK: How does it make you feel to know that the story of your efforts in the anti-
1222 apartheid movement will be preserved through this interview process?
1223

1224 CP: Happy and content, but I would have been even if it weren't. I would have felt that
1225 the reality of it is what was more important than the recording of it, but if it's
1226 recorded I'm happy for that. I'll feel like I have done a small part—done my part.
1227

1228 BK: And finally, what would you like to say that we haven't covered, but you feel is
1229 essential to understanding the anti-apartheid movement?
1230

1231 CP: I think what's essential to understand is that most people want to give religion a pass
1232 as a driving force in these attitudes and values, or the devaluing of other human
1233 beings, based on some presumed knowledge of the state of their spiritual status—of
1234 their—of their goodness or worthiness to be part of the human race. And for people
1235 to continually deny that religion is a driving force in politics, and in economics, you
1236 know, is, I think, the biggest hurdle, you know, that people have to take from this.

1237 It is not simply that the Dutch or the English in the apartheid era were doing—were
1238 oppressing other people simply because of some pseudo-scientific view, but that
1239 they—they thought it was their—their Christian duty, you know, to keep these
1240 people in their place until they were more suitable to join, you know, the Christian
1241 West. And, this goes on with male-dominated religions—all religions are—are
1242 patriarchal religions—with women, and that’s half the population of the planet.
1243 The things to extrapolate out of the apartheid era is that oppressions driven by
1244 religious belief about, you know, the spiritual class of human being has got to be
1245 addressed. It’s got to be. And the only people who will continue to address it are
1246 women who resist the patriarchal oppressions of religions. There is a lot of
1247 Stockholm Syndrome going on with women all over the world, but that doesn’t
1248 make them any less oppressed because they don’t think it, you know. It doesn’t
1249 mean that others know what’s good for them, but it does mean that we come to
1250 understand that they will, like hostages, fight for their captives as much. That
1251 doesn’t make what they think liberating for them, it simply makes them feel safe
1252 than good, you know. And that happened a lot in our own—in America’s own
1253 reconstruction period, and it also happened in apartheid, you know. And it’s going
1254 to continue to happen wherever male constructs of dominance, you know, refuse to
1255 accept equality. Period. Of other human beings. In the evolutionary tide of things,
1256 I come to comfort myself with the idea that you could take these lessons away from
1257 apartheid, but until men see that adaptation trumps dominance in the laws of
1258 evolution of the planet women are going to come out okay anyway. Does that make
1259 sense?

1260
1261 BK: I totally agree.

1262
1263 CP: Okay.

1264
1265 BK: All right, well, if there’s nothing else you’d like to say, and if you do feel the
1266 need—

1267
1268 CP: I think I’ve said it all, but I had to get my thing in about, you know, the institutional
1269 support of religions in—behind apartheid, and how that also applies in other—I had
1270 to say that. Thank you.

1271
1272 BK: Well, I’m glad you did.

1273
1274 CP: Okay.

1275
1276 BK: And thank you very much for sitting down to talk with me, I really appreciate it.

1277
1278 CP: Thank you.

1279
1280 BK: It’s been a pleasure doing this process—

1281
1282 CP: It’s been such an honor to have you even consider me. Thank you.

1283

1284 BK: All right, well thank you very much. [End of recording]