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Spring 2010

### Interview with Josephine Wyatt

Suzanne Miller

*Columbia College Chicago*

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#### Recommended Citation

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1 Josephine Wyatt: This, uh, new technology is difficult for all of us—  
2  
3 Suzanne (Suzie) Miller: I know.  
4  
5 JW: More difficult for my generation than for yours.  
6  
7 SM: (Laughs) Okay, so, here we are in the Columbia College Library, on the third  
8 floor, today is April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010. My name is Suzanne Miller and I am here with  
9 Josephine Wyatt. So, can you please tell me again what the years of your anti-  
10 apartheid activism were.  
11  
12 JW: In the middle 80's.  
13  
14 SM: Mid 80's?  
15  
16 JW: Yes.  
17  
18 SM: And the location was Chicago?  
19  
20 JW: Yes.  
21  
22 SM: So, you were born in 1981 corr—, or 1921, correct?  
23  
24 JW: Right.  
25  
26 SM: You were born in McDonough, Georgia?  
27  
28 JW: Yes.  
29  
30 SM: You were raised in Ellenwood, Georgia?  
31  
32 JW: Yes.  
33  
34 SM: And the place and year of birth of— for your father.  
35  
36 JW: 1897 in McDonough, Georgia  
37  
38 SM: Kay, mother, place and birth as well.  
39  
40 JW: 1899, McDonough, Georgia  
41  
42 SM: Thank you. Okay, so can you tell me about your earliest memory?  
43  
44 JW: (Laughing) Oh. My earliest memories, uh, are those of life on the farm. My  
45 father was a tenure farmer and we lived on the farm (Door shuts), where we grew

46 all our fruits and vegetables and animals and chickens and everything. We had fresh  
47 eggs and chicken, like, which, was very different from the taste of chicken today—  
48

49 SM: (Laughs)  
50

51 JW: (Laughing) and we had the cows, you know, with the milk and all the fruits and  
52 vegetables. And in our yard we had a big, fig tree and it was so big until we could fit  
53 as kids, we could hide in that fig tree. And we also had a black walnut tree in the  
54 yard too and of course we used to collect the walnuts, you know at the end of the  
55 year, and uh— so, there was, you know, a lot of things we used to do on the farm.  
56

57 SM: Yeah.  
58

59 JW: Right. And we used to go roaming through the woods, you know, and collect, uh,  
60 grapes of different kinds, you know. And things like that.  
61

62 SM: What did you do with the grapes that you would collect?  
63

64 JW: Well my, (coughs) my father, in addition to being a tenure famer, he had a, he  
65 used to go to the city twice a week and sell the fruits and vegetables—  
66

67 SM: Oh, okay.  
68

69 JW: So, uh, we collected them and he went to the city and sold them. He had a  
70 regular route in the city.  
71

72 SM: Okay. So, did he have, like, a stand, or—  
73

74 JW: No, he had a route.  
75

76 SM: Oh, okay.  
77

78 JW: You know, where he would drive.  
79

80 SM: Okay. Um, how would you describe the weather in Georgia, while you were  
81 growing up?  
82

83 JW: Very, very hot. Hot. It was terribly hot. To the point where you could not rest  
84 at night, until it was almost morning and then it would cool off a bit, so you could  
85 finally fall asleep. But, you got very little sleep because it was time to get up. So, we  
86 got very little sleep during those summer months.  
87

88 SM: And what would you do to stay cool during the day?  
89

90 JW: Well, we just drank lots of water and uh, lemonade. We made lots of lemonade  
91 and we used to make a lot of homemade ice cream too. And we fanned with

92 newspapers or whatever you could get, you know, and that's, those were the only  
93 methods that we had for cooling ourselves. We had no air conditioning, no fans.  
94 None of that was available to us at the time.  
95  
96 SM: So, you told me earlier that church was a big part of your life.  
97  
98 JW: Yes.  
99  
100 SM: Um, can you tell me anyth— like about those experiences?  
101  
102 JW: Yes. We went to church every single Sunday. As a matter of fact, my father was  
103 a Sunday school superintendent. You know. And the kids had, uh, we had classes,  
104 you know, that were according to the age, you know. They—the very younger kids  
105 were in a class and you know when you got like ten or twelve you were in what they  
106 call an intermediate class. And there was a senior class with the older, you know,  
107 teenagers. So, and, we had lots of other activities like Christmas parties, you know.  
108 When we would have a Christmas tree and everybody—you brought a present for  
109 somebody else and somebody else brought a present for you. So, everybody, all the  
110 kids got presents at the Christmas party. Then, we had picnics, that were held, uh,  
111 you know in the grounds. That was during the summertime. You know, and, uh,  
112 they used to have these big pots where they would cook fish. You know, we would  
113 have these fish sandwiches and this ice cream cones. (Laughs). It was a lot of fun  
114 for us kids.  
115  
116 SM: Oh, I bet.  
117  
118 JW: Yeah. (Unintelligible)—  
119  
120 SM: What was your favorite activity?  
121  
122 JW: Um, church activity?  
123  
124 SM: Yeah.  
125  
126 JW: My favorite activities were the picnics and the Christmas parties. Not so much  
127 the scripture. (Laughs)  
128  
129 SM: (Laughs.) What kind of games did you play, as a child, at home?  
130  
131 JW: We used to play Old Maid (Laughs) and uh, let's see. Dominoes. Those are the  
132 two that I remember the most.  
133  
134 SM: Okay. What was your favorite thing to do with your mother or your father?  
135  
136 JW: Favorite thing with my father I think was going with him on his vegetable, on  
137 his route when he went to the city to sell the fruits and the vegetables. Uh, and with

138 my mother, well, I liked all kind of activities with my mother because she was such a  
139 fun type person. She used to dance with us and she would tell us stories. My  
140 mother grew up as an orphan from the time she was four years old. Her father died  
141 when she was two—before she was born. Two months prior to her birth. And her  
142 mother died when she was four years old. So, I used to love listening to her stories  
143 about her growing up years. And, uh, who she lived with, and you know her, her  
144 experiences with these different people that she lived with.

145  
146 SM: Right.

147  
148 JW: So, I used to like listening to her.

149  
150 SM: How did her stories make you feel?

151  
152 JW: Well, they just made me feel so fortunate to have a mother (laughs).

153  
154 SM: Yeah.

155  
156 JW: Right.

157  
158 SM: And what was it about the vegetable route with your father that you liked so  
159 much.

160  
161 JW: I just liked working with him, you know and helping him. You know, uh, he  
162 would give us, uh, I mean when I went with him on his route there were customers  
163 that I would take certain, uh, certain things to and he would maybe work the people  
164 next door. You know, so, it made me feel real grown-up.

165  
166 SM: Yeah.

167  
168 JW: Right.

169  
170 SM: (Papers shuffle) Alright, what was your neighborhood like?

171  
172 JW: The neighborhood was farmland and our neighbors were all farmers and they  
173 were people that we went to school with and to church, you know, they were, uh,  
174 church members. You know the kids, we would went to school with the kids. The  
175 neighbor's kids. But, it was farmland.

176  
177 SM: Who was your best friend?

178  
179 JW: Would you believe a girl named Suzie?

180  
181 SM: Really? (Laughs)

182  
183 JW: (Laughs) who turned out to be my oldest sister's, sister-in-law.

184  
185 SM: Oh, okay. What were your favorite things to do together?  
186  
187 JW: Well, we used to go to church together and to school together. And, uh, we  
188 would play games together.  
189  
190 SM: Mhm. What was your favorite subject in school?  
191  
192 JW: My favorite subject was history.  
193  
194 SM: Really? What was it about history that you liked so much?  
195  
196 JW: I just liked learning about other people and other places. Which was really  
197 fascinating to me because it was so different from my own life.  
198  
199 SM: What was your favorite part of, um, United States history?  
200  
201 JW: Uh, I guess it was about the, the founding of America, which is a myth really.  
202 (Laughs)  
203  
204 SM: (Laughs)  
205  
206 JW: You know, and the Indians. The Europeans. And, uh, you know, what happened  
207 around the first Thanksgiving—  
208  
209 SM: Mhm.  
210  
211 JW: That was, that was interesting about United States history.  
212  
213 SM: What was it about that subject that you liked so much, about the, like the  
214 founding of America?  
215  
216 JW: I just liked the way, you know, the uh, Indians welcomed the Europeans. And  
217 you know how, their treatment of them. Which turned out to be wrong. (Laughs)  
218  
219 SM: (Laughs) How did you get to school?  
220  
221 JW: Now we're talking about elementary school?  
222  
223 SM: Right, right.  
224  
225 JW: Well, we walked and in the winter it was bitter cold and I got frostbite.  
226  
227 SM: (Gasps)  
228

229 JW: You know, to uh, you know, I can't stand a lot to this day. I still suffer from that  
230 frostbite because with my toes and my fingers. And, uh, with the—when it's cold, I  
231 really—my fingers and my toes really hurt.  
232  
233 SM: How old were you when you got that frostbite?  
234  
235 JW: Maybe eight or ten.  
236  
237 SM: What did you—what did you have to do to, uh remedy that?  
238  
239 JW: We didn't know anything to do except to take your shoes off and warm your  
240 feet.  
241  
242 SM: Oh, okay.  
243  
244 JW: You know, and your hands. But even in later years, I remember when I was still  
245 working at Chicago Child Care, where I retired from. On very cold days if I had to  
246 travel by public transportation by the time I got to, to the agency I was crying  
247 because my hands were so—it was—they were—you know, it was so painful. And  
248 my toes, and, uh, you know, I am sure it was a result of those frostbites I had as a  
249 child.  
250  
251 SM: Mhm. So, in high school who was your favorite teacher?  
252  
253 JW: My favorite teacher I think was, uh a woman named Ms. Love. Well, I have to  
254 tell you about my high school. Uh, I grew up in DeKalb County, Georgia—  
255  
256 SM: Mhm.  
257  
258 JW: That's where Ellenwood is located in DeKalb County. There was no high school  
259 for black kids. No high school for black kids.  
260  
261 SM: How did that make you feel?  
262  
263 JW: Oh, terrible! So, what I did was, I went away and lived with relatives in Fulton  
264 County, which was Atlanta. And on the forms which I had to fill out, I had to lie  
265 about where my parents lived. So, after a few years, I skipped a grade. I never—I  
266 was never in the ninth grade. I was skipped from eighth grade to tenth grade. So,  
267 I—I was lying and living in Atlanta and going to—there was only one high school for  
268 black kids in Fulton county, which was Atlanta. There was one, uh, junior high  
269 school, David T. Howard, and the—and the only senior high school was Booker T.  
270 Washington. It was built for 300, we had 3,000 kids. 3,000.  
271  
272 SM: Wow.  
273

274 JW: We had Home A, Home B, Home C, and uh, all kinds of portables to  
275 accommodate, you know, the, uh student body. So, anyway, after—after lying for  
276 three years about where my parents lived, you know, they finally caught up with me.  
277 I don't know how they did it, but they did. And, uh, my parents were not able to pay  
278 the fees for those previous years, so I got kicked out of school.  
279  
280 SM: What did you do after that?  
281  
282 JW: Well, I—I did, you know, went to work as a, you know, a domestic. You know,  
283 as a—taking care of some white people's kids. And I went to evening school.  
284  
285 SM: So, you were able to graduate?  
286  
287 JW: Yes. Right.  
288  
289 SM: Good. How did Chicago become your home in 1950?  
290  
291 JW: I was married by that time and my husband had been a **Pullman Porter**???  
292 During the—World War II, transporting, uh, soldiers, you know back and forth  
293 across the country. So after the war ended, he had very little work and it was  
294 getting less and less, to the point where he wasn't—we weren't able to survive on  
295 his salary. And we had to, uh, relocate because the jobs were—were not to be—the  
296 job market was very scare here in Atlanta. So, uh, we went to Chicago where he had  
297 relatives and where job opportunities were greater. So that's how I got to Chicago.  
298  
299 SM: Now, did you attend college in Chicago?  
300  
301 JW: I took some courses at, uh, some of the, uh, the colleges there.  
302  
303 SM: Which colleges?  
304  
305 JW: Well, uh, it was called the Loop College, uh, which is now Harold Washington  
306 College. And, uh, then I went to speedwriting. Oh, I went to a business college in  
307 Atlanta too.  
308  
309 SM: Oh, okay.  
310  
311 JW: Yeah, which was Reed Business College and that's where I took a secretarial  
312 course—which was business, English, and uh, shorthand, and typing.  
313  
314 SM: So—so you—you graduated high school and then you went to the business  
315 school in Atlanta—  
316  
317 JW: But, I didn't go right away.  
318  
319 SM: Okay.



320

321 JW: It was a few years later.

322

323 SM: Okay, and where—when did you meet your husband during all of this?

324

325 JW: I met him during, uh, the time that I was at Reed Business College.

326

327 SM: Okay.

328

329 JW: Right.

330

331 SM: And what year did you guys get married?

332

333 JW: 1949.

334

335 SM: Okay. How did you become an employee at Chicago Child Care Society?

336

337 JW: I had, uh, broken up with my husband and I was leaving in a building, uh, where  
338 the person who referred me to Chicago Child Care lived. At that time I had—I had  
339 never lived alone, I had never eaten alone. I was having problems eating alone, so I  
340 this women and I invited her to come to eat with me (laughs). So, um, she was  
341 working at Chicago Child Care and upon learning that, uh, they were—they needed  
342 a, uh, clerical person there, she referred me. And, uh, she told me that the director  
343 said, well what are her skills, what—you know, what does she do and she said I  
344 don't know about her skills, but she makes good chicken.

345

346 SM: (Laughs)

347

348 JW: (Laughs) So, anyway, that's how I got to Chicago Child Care Society.

349

350 SM: So, what did you do while you were working there?

351

352 JW: I worked one year as the adoptions secretary, that's the secretary for the  
353 adoption department. At Child Care we did foster care, adoptions, and, uh, day care.  
354 Day care, adoptions, and foster care. So, I was the secretary for the adoption  
355 department for one year. And then, there was a vacancy because the previous, uh,  
356 office manager has passed away. Well, she died on the job, so I—I became the office  
357 manager. And that's the capacity in which I worked for the next nineteen years. I  
358 worked there for twenty years.

359

360 SM: Wow. Um, do you remember when you first learned about apartheid?

361

362 JW: I—I remember, but I don't—how exactly—I don't remember the specifics on  
363 how I learned.

364

365 SM: What were your reactions when you learned about it?

366 JW: My reaction was, the way I reacted to racism when they kicked me out of  
367 school. I—there was a strong identity on my part with the people living under  
368 apartheid in South Africa and the racism that I had experienced. You know growing  
369 up in Georgia—where we drank colored water and you know, we went to colored  
370 washrooms and everything was segregated and separated. And believe me it was  
371 not separate, but equal. (Chuckles) No way.  
372  
373 SM: Yeah.  
374  
375 JW: And, uh, so I understood what they must have been experiencing and I could  
376 identify with them.  
377  
378 SM: Mhm. So, what influenced you the most to become an anti-apartheid activist?  
379  
380 JW: Well, prior to learning about the apartheid, uh, situation in South Africa I had  
381 become—I had become involved with some left wing politics, some political groups.  
382 You know and I met these shortly after moving to Chicago, where we lived in a, a  
383 neighbor—neighborhood that was in transition. And, uh, so I could see how the—  
384 the whites who had lived there prior to the blacks moving in—how things were very  
385 different. The city, uh, services were different. They, uh, didn't sweep the streets  
386 the same, you know, on a regular basis the way they did when the whites lived—  
387 they certainly didn't pick up the garbage the same way. And we were—the elected  
388 officials were—they were not very nice to us. So, it was through these left wing, or  
389 left wing politics that I first became aware of the apartheid movement in South  
390 Africa. The way I learned about, you know, other oppressive regimes in other parts  
391 of the world.  
392  
393 SM: So, what was it that those politicians did that was, um, that wasn't right?  
394  
395 JW: Uh, well, they came around and, you know, you know how politicians—well  
396 they don't do that so much today, but they used to come around and get acquainted  
397 with whoever the new people were in their ward. And, uh, they would even call the  
398 black children, little pickaninnies. You know, things like that.  
399  
400 SM: Uh! How did that—  
401  
402 JW: And uh,  
403  
404 SM: Go ahead, I'm sorry.  
405  
406 JW: And uh, so we just didn't get the services, you know, and the recognition that  
407 the previous residents had gotten.  
408  
409 SM: And how did that make you feel?  
410

JW: Well, you know it can create a lot of negative feelings. I don't want to say anti-white, but a lot of negative feelings. And of course, you know, it's blatant racism. It's not subtle. It's blatant. So, uh, you feel oppressed. You feel, uh, devalued.

SM: Did you guys—what did you do in these political organizations?

JW: This is how I, I first met some of these radical left wing people. Many of them were white people who lived in the neighborhood because there was a movement, you know, well not a movement, but, um, they were organized to resist and to, to fight some of this. And, uh, so of course, when I became acquainted with some of these people, through someone else who lived in the neighborhood. He worked in the shop where my husband worked. This was a contact—he was a link to these radicals that I met. So, uh, we organized. You know, and we used to have meetings with the alderman and the ward committeemen. And, we had delegations to the stores because the neighborhood was becoming more and more black, but they weren't, uh, their personnel. And the stores didn't represent the neighborhood. So, we had protest meetings, which were frankly, you know with the owners of these stores and we insisted they hire some more black people.

SM: What was the result of that?

JW: Well, we did—we were successful. And we ran the first black person who ever—whoever ran for alderman of the 24<sup>th</sup> ward. That's where we lived, in Lawndale, in the 24<sup>th</sup> ward. Which was the strongest democratic stronghold in the country at that time.

SM: Um, did you join a particular anti-apartheid group?

JW: Yes.

SM: What group was it?

JW: Well, the organization which I am now still apart of—it's called the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression.

SM: Can you describe the structure of the organization?

JW: Well, when we were first organized in 1973, we were—we had branches in many of the major cities in the country. And, uh, we had a national executive director. The main office was in New York, but as I said we had branches in other parts of the city—(Pen clicks) other parts of the country, other cities throughout the country. We had a national executive director, national executive secretary and of course they had other staffs of people, you know in the national office.

SM: What was your role in the organization?

457 JW: Well, I was a chair of the Chicago chapter for thirteen years.  
458  
459 SM: How—  
460  
461 JW: But, it wasn't—that didn't happen right away. Uh, initially I was just a member.  
462  
463 SM: Okay, so how did you become the chair?  
464  
465 JW: Well, uh, I was elected.  
466  
467 SM: Was there a campaign involved?  
468  
469 JW: No.  
470  
471 SM: No? How did your family and friends feel when you became an activist?  
472  
473 JW: Well, I didn't talk to my family very much about it. (Laughs) You know  
474 because—during that time, it was during the McCarthy era and I didn't want to  
475 frighten them, knowing they probably would not understand. So, I didn't talk very  
476 much about my—of course some of my feelings and thoughts came out you know in  
477 conversation. But, I didn't tell them I was a member of an organization because as I  
478 said. And, with my friends, my main friends were members of the same group, you  
479 know same organization or a similar organization. In other words, uh, who's  
480 programs of action was similar or the same. And those were my best friends and  
481 still are. Uh, there's still people that may like me, but don't like my politics if you  
482 know what I mean. They don't like making waves. You know, you just go along to  
483 get along. And those are some of the people—I don't really call them friends, I call  
484 them neighbors. (Laughs)  
485  
486 SM: (Laughs)  
487  
488 JW: But—(Glass tea bottle moves across table)  
489  
490 SM: Um, what was the first anti-apartheid activist event you attended?  
491  
492 JW: I don't know if I really remember which was the first one. I'm sure it was a  
493 meeting. You know, where, uh, all the information, you know, was, uh, about the  
494 apartheid regime in South Africa was discussed. You know and I'm sure some form  
495 of some, action plan came out of that meeting. I can't tell you where or when it took  
496 place, but I'm sure that's how I must have first learned about it.  
497  
498 SM: Okay, um, how did you hear about events protesting apartheid.  
499  
500 JW: Through the organization. We used to walk the picket line every week. I think  
501 it was on a Thursday, I think the picket lines were on Thursday, and we would walk  
502 the picket line every Thursday. It went all day until, uh—in front of the South

African Consulate, which was right here on Michigan Avenue. I think it was in the 300 block—it was, 300—three something. I don't remember the exact address, but it was on the 300 block on South Michigan. And, uh, we would—it was a weekly protest every, I believe it was Thursday. It was either Thursday or Friday. I think it was Thursday.

SM: And what were the goals of those protests?

JW: You know to just, to uh, make them aware that there was a movement—an anti-apartheid movement. But the goal was to boycott the, the corporations that were participating in apartheid in South Africa. To this day I don't buy Shell gasoline. And it all started back then.

SM: Mhm.

JW: You know?

SM: (Paper moves and pen clicks) So, what other ways did you participate in divestment?

JW: By, uh, as I said boycotting certain companies that were invested in—who had divestments in South Africa. Not divestments, but investments in South Africa. And participating in the—in the rallies and the picket lines and that's—that's how I participated.

SM: What other movements did you participate in?

JW: And, of course we used to circulate petitions. You know, uh, to get signatures of people who were opposed to the anti-apartheid movement. And we would present those to the South African Consulate. I'm sorry what was your question?

SM: Oh, no. What other movements did you participate in?

JW: At that time?

SM: Yeah.

JW: During the anti-apartheid years... Well, uh, with the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, there were (Pen clicks again) movements to free political prisoners. You know, and, uh, support the black elected officials. And, I guess police—police brutality. Those were some of the movements and uh, activities within the organization.

SM: What specifically did you do to um, to protest political prisoners?

JW: What we used to—what we did was—there was always a fact sheet. You know, giving the background and how the person became a political prisoner. And we would circulate that, you know. Like, we would stand on street corners and pass out leaflets. And there were times when we would get signatures, you know, that were presented to the uh, to the courts or to the uh, elected officials or whomever, you know—around those particular cases. And of course there was always meeting and rallies, you know. You know, where the details, specifics around the particular cases were discussed—

SM: How often—

JW: To—to get support for the person.

SM: How often did you guys have meetings in—like in a week?

JW: Hmm, maybe twice a month—

SM: Oh, okay.

JW: Not every week.

SM: What was your reaction to Regan's election in 1980?

JW: Hmm. (Paper rustles). Well, it certainly wasn't a positive one, (Paper continues to rustle) because we saw—I saw him as a very reactionary person, who would not promote democracy. And, I felt that it was, uh, it was, uh—he was uh, he would just take us back instead of taking us forward.

SM: How did you feel about the Regan administration's policies toward South Africa?

JW: I just thought they were terrible, you know. Because as I said he was certainly not a democratic president. And, uh, his policies toward South Africa were not only politically backward, but uh, insensitive and you know uncaring about people living under apartheid.

SM: How did you feel about the election of Harold Washington in 1984?

JW: Oh, we—I never had so much pride as I felt. I was involved in the, uh, you know activities around his election. You know, like distribution of leaflets and going in neighborhoods, you know. And, you know, to do whatever we could. You know, as far as distribution of literature to get support for Harold—which was very easy, especially in the black community. And, you know, in some, uh, other communities too that were liberal communities. And it was uh, It was just a wonderful feeling of pride.

594 SM: How did you—or how did you encourage other people to be activists for—  
595 against apartheid.

596  
597 JW: Well, I encouraged them by saying that you know, we all linked together, you  
598 know. Because you know, what happens to people in South Africa—the same  
599 people—the same forces that were oppressing the people in South Africa were also  
600 oppressing us here. It's all one big struggle. So, uh, in order to be free we have to  
601 support uh, the freedom of people in South Africa. Because we have the same  
602 oppressor.

603  
604 SM: Were you successful in encouraging others to be activists?

605  
606 JW: Yeah, yeah, in most cases. In most cases. I guess I was preaching to the choir.  
607 (Laughs)

608  
609 SM: (Laughs)

610  
611 JW: But, I certainly didn't meet with any—with any real opposition.

612  
613 SM: We talked about political pri—prisoners um, already, but how did you feel  
614 about South Africa holding political prisoners?

615  
616 JW: Well, it was just—I—it was just the most inhumane thing that I had ever  
617 witnessed in my whole life, you know, to hold political pri—these were people  
618 fighting for their freedom. And to jail them for fighting for there freedom—it was  
619 just terrible. So, it was—there's just no way you could—the only reaction that one  
620 who, who feels that people—there should be freedom and democracy for people,  
621 there's no other way except to react to this in a very negative—it's a very negative  
622 thing. But—even aside from the fact that they jailed people and made political  
623 prisoners of them, you know, to have to show—what was it—the pass card that they  
624 had. That's so—it's dehumanizing. And having come from the South, where we had  
625 some—some similar laws for black people, I could certainly identify with their  
626 struggle.

627  
628 SM: In 1990, where were when you heard Nelson Mandela had been released from  
629 prison?

630  
631 JW: Well, I was here in Chicago.

632  
633 SM: And how did you feel about it?

634  
635 JW: Oh, it was just a great day. It was a great day. After twenty-seven years of being  
636 in prison. I couldn't—at first I couldn't believe it. It was so—it was just the greatest  
637 news I had ever heard—I really couldn't believe it.

638  
639 SM: What did the election in South Africa, in 1994, make you feel?

640

641 JW: Well, it made me feel that now the people who have been oppressed for so long  
642 will finally have some degree of freedom. I didn't think they would probably be  
643 entirely free because I know that some of the forces—the anti-apartheid—the, the  
644 apartheid forces—many of them were still in power. So, I didn't think they'd be  
645 completely free, but you know, and have the—their basic needs met. But, I thought  
646 it would be better and in many sense I'm sure it has been better in many ways.

647

648 SM: Mhm.

649

650 JW: At least they have water in some of those, uh, townships, where they didn't have  
651 water before.

652

653 SM: Mhm. What did you expect to experience when you went to South Africa in  
654 1995?

655

656 JW: I suppose I expected just what I did experience. And that was to have some  
657 conversation with some of the people who were involved in the anti-apartheid  
658 struggle. And that is what happened.

659

660 SM: How did you get to South Africa?

661

662 JW: I think I organized the uh, (laughs) the trip to South Africa. I'm sure I did. You  
663 know, just by asking certain people that I knew had been involved in the anti-  
664 apartheid movement if they would like to go. And, many of them were from uh, the  
665 organization, the National Alliance. So, that's how I got to South Africa. I worked  
666 with a, uh, travel agency.

667

668 SM: About how many of you went?

669

670 JW: I think there were maybe ten of us.

671

672 SM: Where did you guys stay?

673

674 JW: We stayed in a hotel in, uh—what's the main city in South Africa—  
675 Johannesburg.

676

677 SM: Johannesburg.

678

679 JW: Johannesburg. We stayed at a hotel. I don't remember the name of the hotel.

680

681 SM: How were you guys treated while you were there?

682

683 JW: Oh, we were treated very well, you know. We, uh, they treated us well at the  
684 hotel and then we had meetings with some of the people, you know, as I said, they  
685 were involved in the anti-apartheid movement. And uh, it was—it was a really very



686 good trip. Very good. We were treated quite well. And of course they told us all  
687 about the—the pros and the cons of what we should be aware of (glass bottle hits  
688 table) you know, while we there. What to do, what not to do.  
689  
690 SM: After you got there and you started talking to people, what were those people  
691 telling you?  
692  
693 JW: Well, they were—they were telling us really what it was like under apartheid.  
694  
695 SM: Can you tell me more about that?  
696  
697 JW: Well—I know we had a meeting one day with uh—they were men, there were  
698 no woman involved—who were members of the communist party. Of course it was  
699 a rehash of things—events that had happened under apartheid. And, uh, how they  
700 were able to organize these different events. Then, we went to Soweto and uh, they  
701 told us what it was—what it was like under apartheid. It was mainly what it was  
702 like before the election and how difficult life was for them.  
703  
704 SM: Were there any stories that stuck—stuck with you?  
705  
706 JW: No, no.  
707  
708 SM: Okay. Did you have other experiences in South Africa?  
709  
710 JW: Well, when we went to Cape Town. We went to Cape Town and uh, I was  
711 surprise, um, to see so few blacks in Cape Town. And, that's where we went to a  
712 church and we—where uh, Desmond Tutu was preaching that day. And, uh, we took  
713 pictures with him and uh, we went on. Wherever that mountain is, uh, you know  
714 where you take the cable car and you—that was quite an experience. But, that was  
715 (bottle hits table again) Cape Town is very different from Soweto, you know and, uh,  
716 Johannesburg.  
717  
718 SM: How so?  
719  
720 JW: Well, as I said there were so few blacks there. And, uh, it was, uh—Cape Town  
721 was more like a tourist, uh, you know—a place for tourists rather than a—it's a  
722 tourist attraction. That's what I'm trying to say. It's been such a long time, you  
723 know and so I'm sure I am forgetting some of the details—you know some of the  
724 things that took place there. I'm not recalling every single thing. All I can say is it's  
725 been a long time. I think it was '95 when I was there.  
726  
727 SM: Mhm. Is there anything else that sticks out in your mind from South Africa?  
728  
729 JW: Yes, when we went—when I was in Johannesburg. You know what, half the  
730 town—half the business places were vacant. The business people had abandoned  
731 these places. There was, um, almost—there was very little activity in that city. After

732 Nelson Mandela was released from prison and they had the election, I—I guess what  
733 happened there is what happened in so many of our cities. It was just white flight.  
734 But, uh, there was—I was surprised to see so few businesses still in operation. I  
735 didn't realize they had had that kind of flight.

736  
737 SM: Mhm. So, how did that make you feel?

738  
739 JW: Well, I just felt that—well these are people who you know, were apartheid  
740 people and they just couldn't deal with the change. So, they just left.

741  
742 SM: Mhm. How did you react to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

743  
744 JW: Oh, I thought it was a—my initial reaction, not today, but my initial reaction  
745 was these people must be crazy!

746  
747 SM: (Laughs)

748  
749 JW: Is this the way they treat those criminals? They should all be in jail! (Laughs) I  
750 thought it was terrible. You know, to—all you have to do is admit your guilt and  
751 then there's reconciliation. And there's no punishment for the crime. I said what is  
752 this? This is stupid? Whereas my feelings today are somewhat different. I don't  
753 know how they could have dealt with it otherwise. It would have been a civil war, I  
754 think, if they had tried to punish all those people for all their crimes. I think the  
755 other community—the community would have been up in arms. That's what I think  
756 today.

757  
758 SM: Um, when I sent you the Bio Data Form I asked you about who were the most  
759 influential people in your life.

760  
761 JW: Yeah.

762  
763 SM: And you named, um, a few people.

764  
765 JW: Who did I name?

766  
767 SM: Uh—

768  
769 JW: I remember some of them.

770  
771 SM: Father Reed.

772  
773 JW: Yeah, that was my priest.

774  
775 SM: Can you tell me why these people are influential to you?

776

JW: Well, with Father Reed, I worked with Father Reed when I was at Child Care. He was a social worker—a clinical social worker there. And, of course, he didn't impact my life at that point. But then when I retired, and he had gone on to the seminary and he was pasturing at St. Martin's—which is my church now, Saint Martin Episcopal Church. Well anyway, he learned that I had retired and he needed a church secretary. He called me and asked me if I would be interested in the position. So, I applied and he hired me. And that way he has impacted my life, he is responsible for my coming back to church. Because during the anti-apartheid period and prior to that, I had not—I had been un-churched for more than forty years. Because I didn't think the church per say was doing anything for social justice and I didn't want any part of them. So, uh, you know, I felt that the, uh, the people that I meant in the left politics and in the movements were the real people and they were doing something about making the world a better world. I didn't feel that way about church people. I still feel somewhat that way (laughs). But, anyway, Father Reed was responsible for my coming back to church and the reason is that the mission at Saint Martin's says that they link social, uh—they link spirituality with social transformation. That's what got—that's what resonated with me and so, uh—and Father Reed is a very progressive person and working in that office with him for fifteen years we had many, many conversations. And, uh, so, we are—we are on the same page when it comes to social justice. And I admire him because most ministers are not that way.

SM: Mhm.

JW: And he's an openly gay minister.

SM: Oh! You also named Norman Roth.

JW: Now, he's the first communist that I ever met.

SM: Oh.

JW: He's the first one. And he lived in Lawndale, where we lived. And he also worked in the plant where my husband worked. And my husband used to come home and tell me about this white guy—he's Jewish—and how he would—you know, he was always out front and fighting for the rights of black workers. I said I gotta meet this guy (laughs), I've never met a white person like this in my life. So, when I first met Norman I started to have conversations with him. And he used to bring me literature to read, you know. And then he would take me to meetings. And, uh, he—I think Norman impacted my life probably more than any other single person. And I used to tell him that white people knew when they were racist and he said no Jo, they don't know. (Laughs) So, we used to have—and, uh—we were friends for over fifty years. He has dementia now. He's out in California. I feel so bad for him because he was such a smart person, you know, so bright. And for a person like that to get into dementia, you know, Alzheimer's or whatever. Well, I suppose they aren't feeling any pain, so they don't know.

823

824 SM: Yeah.

825

826 JW: But, uh, anyway. Then, I mentioned Sam and Mollie Gold.

827

828 SM: Mhm.

829

830 JW: They were some of the first people I met in Lawndale and they were in these  
831 organizations—that organization when we ran that black guy for alderman of the  
832 24<sup>th</sup> ward. And they were part of the organization—we used to have these protests,  
833 uh, meetings with the merchants in the neighborhood to get them to—persuade  
834 them to hire black people. It's—they were a Jewish couple, they're deceased now.

835

836 SM: (Paper shuffles) I also have Claude Lightfoot.

837

838 JW: Oh, yeah, Claude Lightfoot was an African American who was also a member of  
839 the communist party. And he wrote a couple of books; you know, on the—on the  
840 black question, racism in America. And, uh, I knew him and his wife—they also lived  
841 in the neighborhood. So, I used to listen to a lot of his speeches and I read his book.  
842 So, he impacted my life too.

843

844 SM: Now, he was indicted, correct, under the Smith—

845

846 JW: The Smith Act.

847

848 SM: Yeah.

849

850 JW: Yes, but he never went to prison though.

851

852 SM: How did you feel about the indictment?

853

854 JW: The people—Oh. Well, I knew it was a witch-hunt. You know, this was about  
855 intimidation and punishment for people who were trying to bring about a change.  
856 Not only for black people, but for other people as well.

857

858 SM: Mhm. Okay, um, we'll move onto Reflection questions now. So, what did you  
859 learn from being an activist?

860

861 JW: I learned as Fredrick Douglas said power concedes nothing without a struggle.  
862 It never has and it never will. So if you want things to change, you have to work for  
863 change.

864

865 SM: So how has being an activist changed your life?

866

867 JW: I see the world through a different lens. And, uh, and I—I realize, which I didn't  
868 realize before, that there are forces in the world that oppress—who have power to  
869 oppress other forces in the world.

870  
871 SM: What are you most proud of during your time as an activist.

872  
873 JW: Of what I've learned about the world. (Laughs)

874  
875 SM: What would you say that you've learned?

876  
877 JW: Uh—oh, I've learned so many things—I don't know where to start.

878  
879 SM: (Laughs)

880  
881 JW: But, I guess the major thing that I learned was that, uh, there are the haves and  
882 the have-nots. And the haves, in order to maintain their position, it is necessary for  
883 them to exploit and oppress the have-nots.

884  
885 SM: Do you have any regrets from your time as an activist?

886  
887 JW: None, none.

888  
889 SM: That's good. What would you have done differently? Anything?

890  
891 JW: I would not have done anything differently. I'm just—sometimes I think about  
892 how did I—how did I become involved. Or, how did I learn—you know, how I did I  
893 met these people who were so influential—and had such an impact on my life. Was  
894 it a plan? You know. Or was it an accident? I don't—I don't know. But, I'm just so  
895 happy that it happened. You know and I'm around so many people who have not  
896 had the experiences that I've had. And they just see the world so differently and  
897 they are so naive about things. And I am just so happy I—that I met the people I  
898 met and had the experiences that I had. Because what it has done—it has convinced  
899 me that my role in life is to do whatever I can, in whatever small way that I can to  
900 make the world a better world.

901  
902 SM: What was your biggest contribution to the movement?

903  
904 JW: The biggest contribution? I guess it was my time and effort that I put into, you  
905 know, different struggles.

906  
907 SM: What event was the most influential in your experience as an activist?

908  
909 JW: Most influential? Um, we're talking about a single event, right?

910  
911 SM: Yeah.

912

913 JW: It may have been when I went to Detroit to hear Nelson Mandela.  
914  
915 SM: Can you tell me more about that?  
916  
917 JW: Well, to just sit and—and hear this man talk about his experience, his geo (??)  
918 experience, you know. And his life—for twenty-seven years in jail and uh, what got  
919 him there was his struggle for freedom. That may have been the most influent—but  
920 then I'm thinking about another event too. When Angela [Davis] came out of jail.  
921 And in two days we filled the uh—the uh, the stadium in Chicago. In two days time.  
922 And, uh, I don't know there's just been so many things. I can't say which is the most  
923 influential. There's just been many, many events. But, I think those two are what—  
924 and then there was the march on Washington, the '63 march on Washington. All of  
925 these were the most influential—is that the phrase you used?  
926  
927 SM: Yeah.  
928  
929 JW: Right. All of these—  
930  
931 SM: Were you at the March on Washington?  
932  
933 JW: Yes, yes, yes, yes, right.  
934  
935 SM: Wow. What did you learn from your trip to South Africa?  
936  
937 JW: I learned that—I was convinced more then ever that to struggle against  
938 oppression is the right thing to do. In spite of all the sacrifices—or uh, the problem  
939 that people may face in the struggle. It is the—it is the thing to do.  
940  
941 SM: What were some sacrifices you made?  
942  
943 JW: Some of the sacrifices I made was uh, I didn't apply for certain jobs during the  
944 McCarthy era. You know, I would probably—no doubt have a better pension then I  
945 have now (laughs).  
946  
947 SM: (Laughs)  
948  
949 JW: My pension is pennies now. You know, if I had been able to uh, if I had been  
950 able to be employed in, say, uh, the school system. You know during that period—  
951 you know when you had to sign the loyalty oath. Well, I wasn't about to do that.  
952 And, uh, then, I don't know if I would have been hired anyway. Because, you know,  
953 they check your background, and who your friends are, and what organizations you  
954 are involved in and that kind of thing. Where I—the sacrifice I made to answer the  
955 question is, I took—because of my political activity there were certain jobs, which  
956 were better paying, better benefits, that I did not apply for because I was sure I  
957 would not have been hired.  
958

959 SM: What challenges do you feel South Africa faces today?  
960  
961 JW: Oh, apartheid—I don't think it's dead. I don't think it's gone. away They still  
962 have to fight the remnants of apartheid. Those are the challenges that South Africa  
963 faces today. You see, South Africa did not, uh—there was not a revolution. So, uh,  
964 the remnants are still there.  
965  
966 SM: Is there anything else that you would like to discuss or say?  
967  
968 JW: I don't think so.  
969  
970 SM: Okay. Well, that's the end.  
971  
972 JW: Oh, is that the end?  
973  
974 SM: That's the end.  
975  
976 JW: Oh, okay. Well, I guess I gave you an ear full, huh?  
977  
978 SM: It was incredibly interesting. I'm gonna turn—  
979  
980 JW: You think so?  
981  
982 SM: Oh, yeah!