Interview with Josephine Wyatt

Suzanne Miller
Columbia College - Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cadc_caam_oralhistories

Part of the Political Theory Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons, and the Work, Economy and Organizations Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
Josephine Wyatt: This, uh, new technology is difficult for all of us—

Suzanne (Suzie) Miller: I know.

JW: More difficult for my generation then for yours.

SM: (Laughs) Okay, so, here we are in the Columbia College Library, on the third floor, today is April 1st, 2010. My name is Suzanne Miller and I am here with Josephine Wyatt. So, can you please tell me again what the years of your anti-apartheid activism were.

JW: In the middle 80’s.

SM: Mid 80’s?

JW: Yes.

SM: And the location was Chicago?

JW: Yes.

SM: So, you were born in 1981 corr—, or 1921, correct?

JW: Right.

SM: You were born in McDonough, Georgia?

JW: Yes.

SM: You were raised in Ellenwood, Georgia?

JW: Yes.

SM: And the place and year of birth of— for your father.

JW: 1897 in McDonough, Georgia

SM: Kay, mother, place and birth as well.

JW: 1899, McDonough, Georgia

SM: Thank you. Okay, so can you tell me about your earliest memory?

JW: (Laughing) Oh. My earliest memories, uh, are those of life on the farm. My father was a tenure farmer and we lived on the farm (Door shuts), where we grew
all our fruits and vegetables and animals and chickens and everything. We had fresh eggs and chicken, like, which, was very different from the taste of chicken today—

SM: (Laughs)

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

SM: Yeah.

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

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

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

SM: Oh, okay.

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

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

JW: No, he had a route.

SM: Oh, okay.

JW: You know, where he would drive.

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

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

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

JW: Well, we just drank lots of water and uh, lemonade. We made lots of lemonade and we used to make a lot of homemade ice cream too. And we fanned with
newspapers or whatever you could get, you know, and that's, those were the only methods that we had for cooling ourselves. We had no air conditioning, no fans. None of that was available to us at the time.

SM: So, you told me earlier that church was a big part of your life.

JW: Yes.

SM: Um, can you tell me anyth— like about those experiences?

JW: Yes. We went to church every single Sunday. As a matter of fact, my father was a Sunday school superintendent. You know. And the kids had, uh, we had classes, you know, that were according to the age, you know. They—the very younger kids were in a class and you know when you got like ten or twelve you were in what they call an intermediate class. And there was a senior class with the older, you know, teenagers. So, and, we had lots of other activities like Christmas parties, you know. When we would have a Christmas tree and everybody—you brought a present for somebody else and somebody else brought a present for you. So, everybody, all the kids got presents at the Christmas party. Then, we had picnics, that were held, uh, you know in the grounds. That was during the summertime. You know, and, uh, they used to have these big pots where they would cook fish. You know, we would have these fish sandwiches and this ice cream cones. (Laughs). It was a lot of fun for us kids.

SM: Oh, I bet.

JW: Yeah. (Unintelligible)—

SM: What was your favorite activity?

JW: Um, church activity?

SM: Yeah.

JW: My favorite activities were the picnics and the Christmas parties. Not so much the scripture. (Laughs)

SM: (Laughs.) What kind of games did you play, as a child, at home?

JW: We used to play Old Maid (Laughs) and uh, let's see. Dominoes. Those are the two that I remember the most.

SM: Okay. What was your favorite thing to do with your mother or your father?

JW: Favorite thing with my father I think was going with him on his vegetable, on his route when he went to the city to sell the fruits and the vegetables. Uh, and with
my mother, well, I liked all kind of activities with my mother because she was such a fun type person. She used to dance with us and she would tell us stories. My mother grew up as an orphan from the time she was four years old. Her father died when she was two—before she was born. Two months prior to her birth. And her mother died when she was four years old. So, I used to love listening to her stories about her growing up years. And, uh, who she lived with, and you know her, her experiences with these different people that she lived with.

SM: Right.

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

SM: How did her stories make you feel?

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

SM: Yeah.

JW: Right.

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

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

SM: Yeah.

JW: Right.

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

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

SM: Who was your best friend?

JW: Would you believe a girl named Suzie?

SM: Really? (Laughs)

JW: (Laughs) who turned out to be my oldest sister’s, sister-in-law.
SM: Oh, okay. What were your favorite things to do together?

JW: Well, we used to go to church together and to school together. And, uh, we would play games together.

SM: Mhm. What was your favorite subject in school?

JW: My favorite subject was history.

SM: Really? What was it about history that you liked so much?

JW: I just liked learning about other people and other places. Which was really fascinating to me because it was so different from my own life.

SM: What was your favorite part of, um, United States history?

JW: Uh, I guess it was about the, the founding of America, which is a myth really.

(SM: (Laughs)

JW: (Laughs)

JW: You know, and the Indians. The Europeans. And, uh, you know, what happened around the first Thanksgiving—

SM: Mhm.

JW: That was, that was interesting about United States history.

SM: What was it about that subject that you liked so much, about the, like the founding of America?

JW: I just liked the way, you know, the uh, Indians welcomed the Europeans. And you know how, their treatment of them. Which turned out to be wrong. (Laughs)

SM: (Laughs) How did you get to school?

JW: Now we’re talking about elementary school?

SM: Right, right.

JW: Well, we walked and in the winter it was bitter cold and I got frostbite.

SM: (Gasps)
JW: You know, to uh, you know, I can’t stand a lot to this day. I still suffer from that frostbite because with my toes and my fingers. And, uh, with the—when it’s cold, I really—my fingers and my toes really hurt.

SM: How old were you when you got that frostbite?

JW: Maybe eight or ten.

SM: What did you—what did you have to do to, uh remedy that?

JW: We didn’t know anything to do except to take your shoes off and warm your feet.

SM: Oh, okay.

JW: You know, and your hands. But even in later years, I remember when I was still working at Chicago Child Care, where I retired from. On very cold days if I had to travel by public transportation by the time I got to, to the agency I was crying because my hands were so—it was—they were—you know, it was so painful. And my toes, and, uh, you know, I am sure it was a result of those frostbites I had as a child.

SM: Mhm. So, in high school who was your favorite teacher?

JW: My favorite teacher I think was, uh a woman named Ms. Love. Well, I have to tell you about my high school. Uh, I grew up in DeKalb County, Georgia—

SM: Mhm.

JW: That’s where Ellenwood is located in DeKalb County. There was no high school for black kids. No high school for black kids.

SM: How did that make you feel?

JW: Oh, terrible! So, what I did was, I went away and lived with relatives in Fulton County, which was Atlanta. And on the forms which I had to fill out, I had to lie about where my parents lived. So, after a few years, I skipped a grade. I never—I was never in the ninth grade. I was skipped from eighth grade to tenth grade. So, I—I was lying and living in Atlanta and going to—there was only one high school for black kids in Fulton county, which was Atlanta. There was one, uh, junior high school, David T. Howard, and the—and the only senior high school was Booker T. Washington. It was built for 300, we had 3,000 kids. 3,000.

SM: Wow.
JW: We had Home A, Home B, Home C, and uh, all kinds of portables to accommodate, you know, the, uh student body. So, anyway, after—after lying for three years about where my parents lived, you know, they finally caught up with me. I don’t know how they did it, but they did. And, uh, my parents were not able to pay the fees for those previous years, so I got kicked out of school.

SM: What did you do after that?

JW: Well, I—-I did, you know, went to work as a, you know, a domestic. You know, as a—taking care of some white people’s kids. And I went to evening school.

SM: So, you were able to graduate?

JW: Yes. Right.

SM: Good. How did Chicago become your home in 1950?

JW: I was married by that time and my husband had been a Pullman Porter?? During the—World War II, transporting, uh, soldiers, you know back and forth across the country. So after the war ended, he had very little work and it was getting less and less, to the point where he wasn’t—we weren’t able to survive on his salary. And we had to, uh, relocate because the jobs were—were not to be—the job market was very scare here in Atlanta. So, uh, we went to Chicago where he had relatives and where job opportunities were greater. So that’s how I got to Chicago.

SM: Now, did you attend college in Chicago?

JW: I took some courses at, uh, some of the, uh, the colleges there.

SM: Which colleges?

JW: Well, uh, it was called the Loop College, uh, which is now Harold Washington College. And, uh, then I went to speedwriting. Oh, I went to a business college in Atlanta too.

SM: Oh, okay.

JW: Yeah, which was Reed Business College and that’s where I took a secretarial course—which was business, English, and uh, shorthand, and typing.

SM: So—so you—you graduated high school and then you went to the business school in Atlanta—

JW: But, I didn’t go right away.

SM: Okay.
JW: It was a few years later.

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

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

SM: Okay.

JW: Right.

SM: And what year did you guys get married?


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

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

SM: (Laughs)

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

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

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

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

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

SM: What were your reactions when you learned about it?
JW: My reaction was, the way I reacted to racism when they kicked me out of school. I—there was a strong identity on my part with the people living under apartheid in South Africa and the racism that I had experienced. You know growing up in Georgia—where we drank colored water and you know, we went to colored washrooms and everything was segregated and separated. And believe me it was not separate, but equal. (Chuckles) No way.

SM: Yeah.

JW: And, uh, so I understood what they must have been experiencing and I could identify with them.

SM: Mhm. So, what influenced you the most to become an anti-apartheid activist?

JW: Well, prior to learning about the apartheid, uh, situation in South Africa I had become—I had become involved with some left wing politics, some political groups. You know and I met these shortly after moving to Chicago, where we lived in a, a neighbor—neighborhood that was in transition. And, uh, so I could see how the— the whites who had lived there prior to the blacks moving in—how things were very different. The city, uh, services were different. They, uh, didn’t sweep the streets the same, you know, on a regular basis the way they did when the whites lived— they certainly didn’t pick up the garbage the same way. And we were—the elected officials were—they were not very nice to us. So, it was through these left wing, or left wing politics that I first became aware of the apartheid movement in South Africa. The way I learned about, you know, other oppressive regimes in other parts of the world.

SM: So, what was it that those politicians did that was, um, that wasn’t right?

JW: Uh, well, they came around and, you know, you know how politicians—well they don’t do that so much today, but they used to come around and get acquainted with whoever the new people were in their ward. And, uh, they would even call the black children, little pickaninnies. You know, things like that.

SM: Uh! How did that—

JW: And uh,

SM: Go ahead, I’m sorry.

JW: And uh, so we just didn’t get the services, you know, and the recognition that the previous residents had gotten.

SM: And how did that make you feel?
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 24th ward. That’s where we lived, in Lawndale, in the 24th 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?
JW: Well, I was a chair of the Chicago chapter for thirteen years.

SM: How—

JW: But, it wasn’t—that didn’t happen right away. Uh, initially I was just a member.

SM: Okay, so how did you become the chair?

JW: Well, uh, I was elected.

SM: Was there a campaign involved?

JW: No.

SM: No? How did your family and friends feel when you became an activist?

JW: Well, I didn’t talk to my family very much about it. (Laughs) You know because—during that time, it was during the McCarthy era and I didn’t want to frighten them, knowing they probably would not understand. So, I didn’t talk very much about my—of course some of my feelings and thoughts came out you know in conversation. But, I didn’t tell them I was a member of an organization because as I said. And, with my friends, my main friends were members of the same group, you know same organization or a similar organization. In other words, uh, who’s programs of action was similar or the same. And those were my best friends and still are. Uh, there’s still people that may like me, but don’t like my politics if you know what I mean. They don’t like making waves. You know, you just go along to get along. And those are some of the people—I don’t really call them friends, I call them neighbors. (Laughs)

SM: (Laughs)

JW: But—(Glass tea bottle moves across table)

SM: Um, what was the first anti-apartheid activist event you attended?

JW: I don’t know if I really remember which was the first one. I’m sure it was a meeting. You know, where, uh, all the information, you know, was, uh, about the apartheid regime in South Africa was discussed. You know and I’m sure some form of some, action plan came out of that meeting. I can’t tell you where or when it took place, but I’m sure that’s how I must have first learned about it.

SM: Okay, um, how did you hear about events protesting apartheid.

JW: Through the organization. We used to walk the picket line every week. I think it was on a Thursday, I think the picket lines were on Thursday, and we would walk 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 503
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.
507
SM: And what were the goals of those protests?
508
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.
SM: How did you—or how did you encourage other people to be activists for—against apartheid.

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

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

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

SM: (Laughs)

JW: But, I certainly didn’t meet with any—with any real opposition.

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

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

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

JW: Well, I was here in Chicago.

SM: And how did you feel about it?

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

SM: What did the election in South Africa, in 1994, make you feel?
JW: Well, it made me feel that now the people who have been oppressed for so long will finally have some degree of freedom. I didn’t think they would probably be entirely free because I know that some of the forces—the anti-apartheid—the, the apartheid forces—many of them were still in power. So, I didn’t think they’d be completely free, but you know, and have the—their basic needs met. But, I thought it would be better and in many sense I’m sure it has been better in many ways.

SM: Mhm.

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

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

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

SM: How did you get to South Africa?

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

SM: About how many of you went?

JW: I think there were maybe ten of us.

SM: Where did you guys stay?

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

SM: Johannesburg.

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

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

JW: Oh, we were treated very well, you know. We, uh, they treated us well at the hotel and then we had meetings with some of the people, you know, as I said, they were involved in the anti-apartheid movement. And uh, it was—it was a really very
good trip. Very good. We were treated quite well. And of course they told us all
about the—the pros and the cons of what we should be aware of (glass bottle hits
table) you know, while we there. What to do, what not to do.

SM: After you got there and you started talking to people, what were those people
telling you?

JW: Well, they were—they were telling us really what it was like under apartheid.

SM: Can you tell me more about that?

JW: Well—I know we had a meeting one day with uh—they were men, there were
no woman involved—who were members of the communist party. Of course it was
a rehash of things—events that had happened under apartheid. And, uh, how they
were able to organize these different events. Then, we went to Soweto and uh, they
told us what it was—what it was like under apartheid. It was mainly what it was
like before the election and how difficult life was for them.

SM: Were there any stories that stuck—stuck with you?

JW: No, no.

SM: Okay. Did you have other experiences in South Africa?

JW: Well, when we went to Cape Town. We went to Cape Town and uh, I was
surprise, um, to see so few blacks in Cape Town. And, that's where we went to a
church and we—where uh, Desmond Tutu was preaching that day. And, uh, we took
pictures with him and uh, we went on. Wherever that mountain is, uh, you know
where you take the cable car and you—that was quite an experience. But, that was
(bottle hits table again) Cape Town is very different from Soweto, you know and, uh,
Johannesburg.

SM: How so?

JW: Well, as I said there were so few blacks there. And, uh, it was, uh—Cape Town
was more like a tourist, uh, you know—a place for tourists rather then a—it's a
tourist attraction. That's what I'm trying to say. It's been such a long time, you
know and so I'm sure I am forgetting some of the details—you know some of the
things that took place there. I'm not recalling every single thing. All I can say is it's
been a long time. I think it was '95 when I was there.

SM: Mhm. Is there anything else that sticks out in your mind from South Africa?

JW: Yes, when we went—when I was in Johannesburg. You know what, half the
town—half the business places were vacant. The business people had abandoned
these places. There was, um, almost—there was very little activity in that city. After
Nelson Mandela was released from prison and they had the election, I—I guess what happened there is what happened in so many of our cities. It was just white flight. But, uh, there was—I was surprised to see so few businesses still in operation. I didn’t realize they had had that kind of flight.

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

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

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

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

SM: (Laughs)

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

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

JW: Yeah.

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

JW: Who did I name?

SM: Uh—

JW: I remember some of them.

SM: Father Reed.

JW: Yeah, that was my priest.

SM: Can you tell me why these people are influential to you?
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 then 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 then 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.
SM: Yeah.

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

SM: Mhm.

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

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

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

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


SM: Yeah.

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

SM: How did you feel about the indictment?

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

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

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

SM: So how has being an activist changed your life?
JW: I see the world through a different lens. And, uh, and I—I realize, which I didn’t realize before, that there are forces in the world that oppress—who have power to oppress other forces in the world.

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

JW: Of what I’ve learned about the world. (Laughs)

SM: What would you say you’ve learned?

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

SM: (Laughs)

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

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

JW: None, none.

SM: That’s good. What would you have done differently? Anything?

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

SM: What was your biggest contribution to the movement?

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

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

JW: Most influential? Um, we’re talking about a single event, right?

SM: Yeah.
JW: It may have been when I went to Detroit to hear Nelson Mandela.

SM: Can you tell me more about that?

JW: Well, to just sit and—and hear this man talk about his experience, his geo [??] experience, you know. And his life—for twenty-seven years in jail and uh, what got him there was his struggle for freedom. That may have been the most influent—but then I’m thinking about another event too. When Angela [Davis] came out of jail. And in two days we filled the uh—the uh, the stadium in Chicago. In two days time. And, uh, I don’t know there’s just been so many things. I can’t say which is the most influential. There’s just been many, many events. But, I think those two are what—and then there was the march on Washington, the ’63 march on Washington. All of these were the most influential—is that the phrase you used?

SM: Yeah.

JW: Right. All of these—

SM: Were you at the March on Washington?

JW: Yes, yes, yes, yes, right.

SM: Wow. What did you learn from your trip to South Africa?

JW: I learned that—I was convinced more then ever that to struggle against oppression is the right thing to do. In spite of all the sacrifices—or uh, the problem that people may face in the struggle. It is the—it is the thing to do.

SM: What were some sacrifices you made?

JW: Some of the sacrifices I made was uh, I didn’t apply for certain jobs during the McCarthy era. You know, I would probably—no doubt have a better pension then I have now (laughs).

SM: (Laughs)

JW: My pension is pennies now. You know, if I had been able to uh, if I had been able to be employed in, say, uh, the school system. You know during that period—you know when you had to sign the loyalty oath. Well, I wasn’t about to do that. And, uh, then, I don’t know if I would have been hired anyway. Because, you know, they check your background, and who your friends are, and what organizations you are involved in and that kind of thing. Where I—the sacrifice I made to answer the question is, I took—because of my political activity there were certain jobs, which were better paying, better benefits, that I did not apply for because I was sure I would not have been hired.
SM: What challenges do you feel South Africa faces today?

JW: Oh, apartheid—I don’t think it’s dead. I don’t think it’s gone away. They still have to fight the remnants of apartheid. Those are the challenges that South Africa faces today. You see, South Africa did not, uh—there was not a revolution. So, uh, the remnants are still there.

SM: Is there anything else that you would like to discuss or say?

JW: I don’t think so.

SM: Okay. Well, that’s the end.

JW: Oh, is that the end?

SM: That’s the end.

JW: Oh, okay. Well, I guess I gave you an ear full, huh?

SM: It was incredibly interesting. I’m gonna turn—

JW: You think so?

SM: Oh, yeah!