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Interview with Mary Patten

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Anti-Apartheid Movement Transcription with Mary Patten

Blair Allen Mishleau: So I am here with Mary Patten on May 11, 2009 talking about her work with the Anti-Apartheid movement. Could you please spell your first and last name for me?

Mary Patten: M-A-R-Y P-A-T-T-E-N

BA: And how many years were you involved with the Apartheid – Anti-Apartheid movement?

MP: Roughly, about, maybe eight, seven, six years.

BA: OK, and where did your activism take place?

MP: In New York City, primarily. Yeah, the East coast.

BA: OK, and when were you born?

MP: Nineteen fifty-one.

BA: OK, where?

MP: Evanston, Illinois.

BA: And where were you raised?

MP: New England mostly, although other places too, because my family moved around a bit.

BA: Okay, and where was your dad born?

MP: He was born in Boston. Outside of Boston, Massachusetts.

BA: And your mother?

MP: She was born in upstate New York.

BA: What is your earliest memory?

MP: Um, sitting on a train with my father drinking orange juice.

BA: How old do you think you were?

MP: I think it’s somewhat of a fiction, but I think I was around six months old.
BA: Wow. Uh-

MP: No, probably more like nine months old. Maybe 11 months old. Yeah. It might be a suggested memory is what I’m thinking.

BA: OK. Interesting. And what was your favorite thing to do with your mother when you were younger?

MP: Oh, it’s hard to say. Many things. Um, have her, when I was a kid, have her read to me, I suppose. Read together with my mother.

BA: And could you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

MP: Well, there were many, but they were kind of, um, sort of a post-war suburban, um, older housing. Yeah. Big trees.

BA: And who was your best friend as a kid?

MP: I had many.

BA: OK. Could you describe one or two of them for me?

MP: Well I had, I usually had best friends who were either like, next-door neighbor, um, kids, usually girls, but because my family moved I kept, I had sort of serial relationships with my best friends. My brother also, three brothers, one was, one is about 13 months younger than I, so when we were really little we were together all the time.

BA: OK. Why did your family move around so often?

MP: My father was, um, a working-class guy but he got, he was the first person in his family to get an education and, uh, he was, um, my parents were both depression-era people, and um, he was determined to build a life for his kids where they could get an education and, so he kept working very hard and getting promoted and getting transferred and getting various job offers. He worked with a railroad and so it was mostly, with one exception, mostly moves in relationship to that career path.

BA: OK. And where was your favorite place to play?

MP: Cape Cod. The beach. The ocean.

BA: OK. And what’s the most vivid memory you have of your dad?

MP: Um, I have many, but um, I think when, uh, well there are two vivid memories. One is how stern he was at the dinner table with us all in correcting us about our English usage. And another memory where he wasn’t so intimidating was when he
took me to hear, um, Arthur Rubinstein play a Rachmaninoff concert in New York. I was maybe six or seven. It was an amazing experience for me.

BA: And did you go to high school at the same school all four years?

MP: I did.

BA: OK, and what was your high school like?

MP: Don't you want to know the name of it?

BA: Certainly.

MP: The name of it is insane. “The School of the Holy Child Jesus.”

BA: OK. And what was it like?

MP: What was it like? It was a prep school for Catholic girls. It was very competitive to get in. It was small. Um, you know, we, you know, had a lot of challenging curriculum along with the mandatory, um, horror film lectures about abortion at the first, the first day of our sophomore year.

BA: OK. How did you fit into that –

MP: An elite Catholic school with all the trappings. How did I fit into it? Not very well. Um, I was a, I was kind of at the top of, not number one, but I was at the top of my class scholastically. Mainly because I was a very hard worker and um, I did a lot of artwork. I was very, kind of, known in the school, as being the artist in the school. And, um, terrible at athletics.

BA: OK. So, your main interest, did you, were academics. Did you do anything outside of that extracurricular-wise?

MP: Um, not so much with school. I mean, you know, my closest friends were all at this school. It was a very narrow, little existence. Um, I started to develop a kind of political consciousness in my junior year of high school, but not because of anything that my teachers did and not because of the activities of my peers. Um, this more had to do with, uh, well first of all what was happening in the world. So this was 1967 I’m talking about. Nineteen sixty-eight was my graduation year. So by the time that Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were shot I already had a kind of, um, consciousness of the disparity between the conditions of my life and that of most other people, uh, in the world or, at this point I was actually living, the family was living, close to New York. So the school I went to was in Westchester County, my family lived in Stanford, Connecticut, uh, I commuted to this very elite school, um, on occasional weekends with one of my cousins, who was also one of my closest friends, um, we would go into New York, and kind of, go to these kind of beat cafes
and, um, do sorts of, the typical things teenagers do. Smoke a lot of cigarettes and I
don’t think we did any drugs then, but um, there was a kind of consciousness that
my cousin and I and other cousins, my brother and I had about the Vietnam War,
about the Civil Rights movement, about the urban rebellions, the riots. That was all
sort of seeping in, although it was manifested in any of my activities in high school
until I was almost graduating and, um, I became a volunteer for Eugene McCarthy in
the spring of ’68, I guess. It was very short-lived/ I wanted to go to the Chicago
Democratic Convention, to protest, uh, with my old, this is a different cousin, a
cousin who actually gave me, a year before, had given me the autobiography of, the
autobiography of Malcolm X to read. Anyway, my mother put the kibosh on it.
Would not let us go to the convention. But I often feel like my history would have
been, probably it would have definitely taken the same path, but might have been
precipitated had I gone to Chicago in ’68. It took another year for me to be involved
in an actual kind of, intense, demonstration.

BA: Now why do you think your mom didn’t let you go?

MP: Oh, she was trying to protect me, and us. She, you know, she thought, she
thought I was too young and she thought that, um, she was very, she was very
culturally conservative in that way. She was very, uh, very much a liberal, in terms of
her politics, but, she thought that we would be up to no good.

BA: So did your parents help to shape your opinions of the Vietnam War and that
type of stuff?

MP: Sure, I mean, but sometimes in opposition, right. So my father, I mean I
remember my father was always more politically conservative than my mother. My
parents are both dead. Um, and, uh, I think that so, I remember my mother being
much more, uh, kind of, she seemed much more to have a sense of empathy with
black people who were rioting, you know, during this period, ’67, ’68. Cause there
were numerous cities, there were Newark, there was Detroit, and of course there
were all the riots that happened after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. But
the previous summer there had been, uh, these open, um, rebellions, really, as I
later called them. You know, against the kinds of conditions people faced in the
North. So there had been all this attention to the south, in the earlier part of the 60s,
um, and then I think it became clear to many people that there was a continuity
between the kind of conditions that uh, black people in particular in the ghettos of
the urban north were suffering. Um, there was a continuity between that and the
segregation of the south. So anyway, my, my, to go back to your question, my mother
um, my mother and yeah, I had this extended family and my mother had, um, six
sisters, um, all but, um, all but two of whom got married and had kids. And so there
was this sort of generations of cousins who had, who were very, who, who we had
very a homogenized in terms of our shared family origins, but there was a whole
spectrum there politically. And, um, that's why I found these like-minded souls, and
also mentors, in some of my cousins. Um, but there was a kind of atmosphere,
especially during the summers when we would sometimes have shared vacations
where there would be, uh, they, the generation of the kids would be privy to the
kinds of debates that happened amongst the adults. Um, so that was a huge
influence. So, you know, we had everybody from, I had, um, a kind of, one very right
wing uncle who was part of the Minute Men. I mean, he didn’t do anything, but it’s a
kind of, sort of, Later Day militia mentality. So right wing. In New England. And then,
um, some of my mother’s sisters were more to the left than she was, although I
wouldn’t characterize any of them as leftists. But, um, I think a number of them
would fit well within a kind of tradition of the Catholic left. I’m going on too long
about this.

BA: No, you’re, it’s all right. Um –

MP: We’re on like question five

BA: No, we’re on 20 now.

MP: Great.

BA: OK. Um, so how did you choose where you were going to college?

MP: Um, I wanted to go to a school that was a liberal arts school that had a strong art
department. And so my first choice was Tufts University because it had a
relationship with the Museum School in Boston, um, the Tufts was a very good
school. Probably better then than it is now, um, and I was, you know, very familiar
with that area, so that, but I was put on a waiting list and then I applied also to two,
um, private liberal arts school. Connecticut College and Wheaton College. Not
Wheaton in Illinois, Wheaton in Massachusetts, and also to St. Mary’s College, which
is now the University of Notre Dame. And I got into all of those, and for some really
weird reason, I picked St. Mary’s College, even though by this time I was a deeply
questioning, if not lapsed Catholic. Um, they had a very strong art department. I
don’t know, it’s very paradoxical to me. One of my brothers, one of my older
brothers, went to Notre Dame. So, you might think, oh, proximity to a family
member, but we were actually, we had a very bad relationship. Weren’t quite
estranged, but we certainly weren’t friends. It’s a little bit of a puzzle to me, why I
wound up there. I can tell you the first day I was there, there was an orientation in
the gym, there was a - the first day I was there I met a, I met who would be my
roommate, whose brother also went to Notre Dame, whose brother was a radical
hippie. The way we immediately imagined ourselves upon meeting each other. So
we went over to the orientation at Notre Dame, and there are all these tables, and
um, there was one table with a setup that actually had a TV monitor, which was
unheard of in those days, this is ’68, remember. People are still using Portapak
technology. And what was playing on the monitor was footage of the riots at the
Chicago convention. And, of course, the booth was the booth of SDS, Students for a
Democratic Society. And who was at the booth but my roommate’s brother Sam and
so you know, I signed up for SDS and I was elated that at least I had now a televised
version of the experience that I wasn’t allowed to have. And from then on I, um, I
began to cut all sorts of ties, not literally, with my family, but I was free at last from a, kind of, supervising gaze. So, I got involved in SDS but at St. Mary’s and Notre Dame the SDS was attracted equally people who were politically radical as, um, heroin addicts, all kinds of ne’er-do-wells. It was a real sort of, it was like this concentration of the hippie counter-culture, along with the political lefties. Um, yeah.

BA: And what was your actual major title, then?

MP: It was always, well, I went to St. Mary’s for two years and then I transferred to an arts school. Um, it was, um, the major was in art, in painting and printmaking.

BA: And what caused you to transfer from St. Mary’s?

MP: Um, well, it’s interesting. It was a very intense two years, I mean I did go to school, I did complete my class work, but I was involved in, uh, this kind of crazy, frenetic pace of anti-war activities, student organizing, organizing against DOW and CIA recruiting on campus, organizing support for a pornography film festival. You have to remember this is a Catholic university, so that was kind of seen as the most radical event by the police, and so on. Anyway, um, I think that, OK, so by the spring of 1970, um, this was when campuses all over the country were on strike for months, so classes were suspended, the best professors, uh, joined the students in informal classes on the lawn, this was all about the war, we were making posters that looked like Paris ’68, none of had ever seen a Paris ’68 poster, but somehow we knew about that iconography, of those fists, and so on. Um, so, somehow, within all of this, and this I really don’t remember how much my parents played a role in this, but they probably didn’t understand the scope of my, um, activist activities on campus, because my grades were still good. But, um, I think that there was a kind of generation of the students I was with who were leaving. There were people who were graduating, there were people who had been kicked out of school, there were people who had left school to organize in factories, everything was changing, and somehow I put it together to apply to, um, Rhode Island School of Design, which was the best art school, um, I mean I was always very academically kind of competitive in that way of having to go to the best school. Somehow I got in, you know, and um, and transferred there and, but it’s hard to, but my activism continued there, but it’s, I can’t really answer that question. It has something to do with a sort of watershed moment. I think that maybe I had also reached the limits of what I could as an artist in that school. But, um, but what fills my consciousness in remembering those years was all the activism, the kind of unscholastic stuff. The fact that I got it together, somehow, though, I mean this was also, this was two years where there was a lot of drinking, a lot of pot, a lot of hash, a lot of psycho-whatever-they-are, LSD, you know, I went from a very protected kind of self-protected background to just, um, there was a lot of sex, even though, you know, it was kind of crazy, and somehow I managed to not flunk out of school, but did well enough that I could transfer. But why I even had it in my head that I needed to keep, um, to keep paying attention to a kind of education program around art making, it’s kind of amazing to me.
BA: Well was –

MP: Talking you about it now, I never really though about that, particularly.

BA: Were those a fun two years, or?

MP: Oh yeah, of course they were. They were really ridiculous in a way, they were, the ratio of men-to-women was 9:1, which is really crazy. But, um, I think it has to do, everything with Catholic repression. You know, the kind of excess of those years. Those were really, I mean the years henceforth were full of political excess, but as far as, um, as far as, especially around drinking and you know, smoking pot, I don’t know, I’m so straight now it seems ridiculous to me.

BA: OK, and, how did you first hear about apartheid?

MP: I think this was all, I mean, this was just like one of those things where nobody taught me, it wasn’t, it certainly, like these days people learn about apartheid through a good school program, maybe, or through proximity maybe to some activist, but, um, I think that it was everywhere, on everybody’s consciousness, just as, I mean, for me, what I really remember, it’s possible that high school was the first place, because there were connections. Of course one of my cousins gave me Malcolm X’s autobiography. He writes a lot about, I mean his trips to Africa were hugely formative in his own political consciousness and um, so yeah, I think that perhaps when I was in school before I had a critical political consciousness, I might have known the word Bantustan even, before apartheid. But, you know, that somehow things were kind of, there was a little bit of like, that’s way over there, but I’m certain that at the point when the civil rights movement and the black power movement in the U.S. was insisting itself on my consciousness that this was inseparable from what was happening in South Africa, because it was huge, the resistance in South Africa was huge, in the mid ’60s, late ’60s, into the ’70s obviously, yeah.

BA: And what was the catalyst for your anti-apartheid activism?

MP: I think I, this is, uh, there are many things we don’t have time to talk about today, I can see, because of the questions, and it’s sort of lucky for you because there are too many stories, but I went from this, uh, college experience of, um, you know, where the primary resistance was around the war, looking at the kind of domestic upheavals, which of course had to do with the student movement, but hugely too about the black movement, um, when I went to Rhode Island School of Design I met a core of women who also had transferred, but from places like Ann Arbor, um, kind of like big, or University of Chicago, very, you know, academically rigorous schools, they had also been part of SDS, they, um, we all were in this art program together, and we all started a women’s poster silk-screening, uh, collective together and did posters. Again, mostly about the war, and, um, and to be used in anti-war protests, but the, um, the consciousness was there, the expression around apartheid wasn’t,
Yeah.

central, was around the Springbok tour, so this was the latter days of apartheid. until, I think when my anti-apartheid activism became the most expressly, kind of central, was around the Springbok tour, so this was the latter days of apartheid. I don't mean just my little group, but hundreds would be made. So I was involved in that kind of propaganda work against apartheid for many years, through, because I was an artist, and because I was a part of this graphics collective. Um, I think it wasn't until, I think when my anti-apartheid activism became the most expressly, kind of central, was around the Springbok tour, so this was the latter days of apartheid. I mean, you know, there weren't, they were all, uh, related to it in terms of, kind of political tendency. So that political tendency was always about, um, the kind of primacy of national liberation struggles, and the primacy of the struggle of colonized people again colonialism and imperialism and the kind of, um, there was a real big emphasis that this political tendency made, about the importance of struggles against what was termed White Settler Colonialism, so the struggle of Palestine, the struggle of black people in South Africa, you know, in Namibia, and so on. Um, I mean what would later become Zimbabwe, and this kind of connection to, uh, the way people saw the black struggle in the U.S. as one for land and self-determination not just for civil rights. So this was much, this was a kind of tendency that, uh, saw class politics always through the prism of anti-colonialism. So this is, yeah, you know, I can't even tell you, you know, demonstrations against apartheid were everywhere. And you know built, of course, over the years through the '70s. Um, but there were different kinds of political collectives, or, you know, they, uh, we were foolish enough to call them mass organizations. But they were never mass in terms of their numbers of membership. They were called mass as opposed to the idea of a cadre organization, like a small communist organization, of which I became part of too, anyway, that's later. But, I was, there were they different groupings, and there were groupings of people who did work expressly in solidarity with South Africa, or, we used the language Azania, cause that's what the Pan-African Congress used, as opposed to the ANC, and we felt that the PAC had a more revolutionary line, anyway, whatever. So there was this group that did a kind of political education and material aide around this struggle in South Africa and Namibia and Zimbabwe, I was not part of that, I was a part of another group that was doing work around political prisoners, and prisoners of war in the U.S., particularly black and Puerto Rican prisoners, there's yet another group focused on Puerto Rican independence, they're all these different kinds of groupings, but because I was in yet another graphics collective called the Madame Binh Graphics Collective (sp?), which, of which I've written about, and I can send you a PDF just for your own use, if you like. It's going to be a little book that comes out this fall. Um, because I was a member of this graphics collective we related to all these committees, and so we did posters, um, we designed posers in communication with, in conversation with the different groups who were doing that work. And some of the posters were to raise money. We called material aide for liberation fighters, or for medical needs, or a women's campaign in Zimbabwe, or whatever, um, and some of them were for publicity, you know just graphically how to represent these different struggles, and then we would wheat paste this posters, I don't mean just my little group, but hundreds would be made. So I was involved in that kind of propaganda work against apartheid for many years, through, because I was an artist, and because I was a part of this graphics collective. Um, I think it wasn't until, I think when my anti-apartheid activism became the most expressly, kind of
BA: So when were you first, when can you say your first anti-apartheid activism started?

MP: I just, I have to say I can’t really pinpoint it, exactly, but, uh, early, mid-seventies.

BA: OK.

MP: I remember doing things like being at a table, you know, outside of a food COOP, collecting signatures. Or, you know, going to events, of course, rallies, indoor, outdoor, educational kinds of things. Hearing speakers, um, I remember, we were very influenced by the black consciousness movement, which was neither PAC or NAC, but was really student movement. Um, and, that emerged in, I think the early-mid ‘70s in South Africa. But, I might be, it might have been a little bit earlier. Um, but that was hugely influential on, I know on young people in the anti-apartheid movement. But, again, it’s sort of like members, you weren’t really a member of a movement, you were sort of part of a community of ideas and of activism, and there were certain recognizable groups, there were certain recognizable activities, you know like petitioning, like um, I was never involved in anything like lobbying, there were people who were doing that, um, demonstrating in the streets, doing a lot of educational work, so it’s very hard to pinpoint, that’s why it’s very good to have people doing oral histories, I suppose, but I do remember that, um, I remember being, I was part of various study groups were reading about, um, not just South and Southern Africa, but all of Africa. Post-colonial, what we would now call post-colonial thinkers. About the systematic colonization and so on. Yeah.

BA: Now was this after you were done with your undergrad, or?

MP: Oh, yeah yeah yeah.

BA: OK.

MP: So, yeah. So, I went to that school, St. Mary’s/Notre Dame, two years, transferred to Rhode Island School of Design, dropped out, stayed around Providence for a year, finally finished up at Kansas City Art Institute and so that was 1973, there was just really one year interruption, it was just three schools. And in 1973, I went to New York, and that’s when I got involved with the New York Women’s School and I also got involved with this community murals group, which was also a whole other set of people, but, that included very politically conscious people, so it was not, there was never a mural project I worked on that explicitly was about apartheid, but I can’t emphasis how strongly the, the pressing urgency of the situation in South Africa was, how much it pressed upon everyone who was politically conscious, which included a lot of people then.

BA: Now, did you relate at all to those who were impressed in South Africa?
MP: In, what do you mean by that?

BA: Like, could you find anything, um, how did you try to, like, assimilate or understand what they were going through?

MP: Um, I think that there certain, well first of all I think it was very important to hear different speakers who were, um, people who were in exile, but how had an exile relationship to the struggle against apartheid, against colonialism, um, for liberation, all those things, in South Africa. So that was, um, there was obviously connections made there, um, people I remember speakers drawing parallels between the situation of black people in the U.S. and the situation of black people in South Africa. Not to say it was the same in any way, but drawing certain kinds of parallels. That made a huge impression. Another thing that made a huge impression was the black consciousness movement. The student movement. The kind of, um, they were involved with, kind of, you know doing sit-ins and doing takeovers of universities, you know these were, a lot of people in the black consciousness movement were people who were able to have some education in the urban centers. Um, so there was a kind of lateral connection there, like students or recent students. Um, I think there was a kind of consciousness about global student activism in those days. Um, but the first things is very important about the struggle that I know black activists were making with white activists in the U.S. that white activists had to take on very personally, I don’t mean it as a personal issue, but very directly had to take on the issue of racism and white supremacy and white privilege and look at our own position in relationship to these movements, our own responsibilities, our own communities. That was also a current that was very strong with the black South Africans who visited and who spoke, and you know, there were students in, at, U.S. universities who were from South Africa. Black students who played a huge role in educating us all. Um, so I think that, I think there were points of identification, and points of solidarity, which are kind of identification but also understanding the differences. Also women, I think it was really important to hear women speaking about women’s projects and women’s role in these liberation struggles. That was also very important.

BA: Now after you finished up your undergrad, what did you do?

MP: Um, I, uh, moved to New York, I got involved with the Women’s School. Uh, I came out as a lesbian. I started teaching at this women’s school which was a kind of unofficial alternative school, teaching everything from classes in auto mechanics to Marxism to poetry. So, it was a kind of short-lived project but one that attracted people in the community as well as a burgeoning feminist movement, um, in New York. So I got involved there, I mean I did various, what I did for a living never really mattered that much, except I did get a little bit of money working with the murals group and I worked with city arts project for, let’s see, from 1973 I started volunteering with them because I was looking for context in which I could make art. I was also a figurative artist, not an abstractionist, sort of clueless to all the very important art world kinds of art revolutions that were happening in New York in
those days. I was a figurative artist looking for context to make sense of my political ideas. I didn't want to be divorced from that, and so mural-making, where we would work with groups of young people, from different communities and sort of collectively engender ideas in conversation with communities to represent people's desires and aspirations, that seemed really grand to me, so I did that first as a volunteer and then as a very low-paid, but still paid, I did wind up getting some money for working on different project and I wound up directing two projects, uh, neither of which exist but which are documented in this murals book that just came out last year, called On the Wall, um so I did that, plus different art, different odd jobs. I also taught senior citizens art classes in various public housing project in New York so I had to take buses and trains to all these different neighborhoods in Brooklyn that people think are the most dangerous neighborhoods to this day. So that was a huge education, to be able to work with these seniors and meet people who told me about their days in the Garvey movement. You know Marcus Garvey? Early, early 20th century black nationalist. Um, an odd, interesting figure, but Garvey was a huge mass phenomenon and I had read about it in my studies of, um, black history, which again didn't come from any of the organized education I had been a part of, but these various study groups, which were quite good, actually. But here I am teaching macramé to some seniors, some of whom are sitting in rocking chairs and just kind of talking and visiting, and you know. One of these kinds of jobs where I visited probably five different centers in a week. Um, and meeting people who were actually part of this history that I had read about. That was amazing. And it was, of course, really interesting for me to spend time in these neighborhoods that were, you know, like Bushwick and Brownsville and Greenpoint and so on. And, uh, so I learned to carry myself as a, I never, in all my years in New York City, never got mugged. Accept by a crazy woman on the subway, that wasn't really a mugging. It was just I inadvertently wound up sitting in her bedroom, if you know what I mean. And, uh, then a young woman tried to grab, when we were on trial later, tried to grab a bag that was holding all of our discovery and our legal documents, but there was no way I was going to let her have that, so I wound up getting kind of kicked down the stairs to the subway. I don't remember having any serious injuries, but she didn't get the papers. So, that's a huge digression. So anyway, what I did was I worked at these odd jobs. I got very politically involved in these various art projects, um, the murals movement, the mural projects, city arts, um, teaching art kinds of related classes at community places like the New York Women's school and then the senior centers. Then I got involved in helping to co-found the Madame Binh Graphics Collective, which was a women's graphics collective that was also part of this group called the May 19th Communists Organization that I was a part of that was a kind of umbrella, but May 19th was kid of an umbrella for all these different solidarity groups. That all didn't happen at the same time, cause May 19th didn't really emerge until, say, '78. But, so I would say I was, I was not, I did still keep up an individual painting practice up until about '77. But, uh, mostly I was looking at other contacts, political contacts, to make art, help others make art.

BA: And how long were you in New York for?
MP: I was there until, well, until ’83, when I moved to Chicago. And my last address, in New York, was at Rikers Island, because I was given a year sentence for this protest against the Springboks. Um, yeah, so it was about, I guess it was about ten years. Yeah.

BA: And can you tell me about the events that lead up to, um, your jail sentence?

MP: Sure. Where are we at in terms of our questions?

BA: Um, well this is... I can delete...

MP: You're covering a lot of... yeah.

BA: That will cover a lot of questions.

MP: OK. What I'm about to say?

BA: Mhm.

MP: I see. OK. So, um, the, um, the Springboks were, and they still are called the Springboks, South Africa’s rugby team. Um, and, uh, one of the main kinds of elements of the kind of worldwide struggle against apartheid in the, um, late ’70s was the idea that the practice of a culture against South Africa. So, um, what this meant in the case of the rugby team is that, you know, South Africa was seeking to have the Springboks play in different places and saw that sport, I mean this is the rhetoric around the Olympics, too, that sport is a kind of, um, uh, category of human activity that can surpass politics and can build bridges. And so they were actually seeing, um, the Springboks as ways to, um, legitimate their, the regime. And the fact that only New Zealand, the UK and the U.S. agreed to, invited the Springboks in, and set up a series of games, is telling. So none of, no place else in the world could they go on this tour. Now there were probably several tours. The only one that I’m, of which I’m aware, is this one that began, I guess in ’80, 1980. I might be, well, there was a whole tour in the UK, in New Zealand and then the U.S., and I’m not sure which was the first leg of the tour. The U.S. was the last leg of the tour. But I do remember that the larger movement of which I was a part and how that gets expressed in all the different ways, we talked about that before, but also through a kind of movement or left press, the coverage of the protests in New Zealand was most significant, because it was characterized by direct action. Very creative direction action, including some very creative sabotage that actually prevented the games from happening. So, I remember things like, um, there were railroad tracks that were disabled, there was a train that was supposed to bring the team and they were very sequestered, um, very protected because there were protests everywhere they went. Um, but the team was to be brought into this one stadium to this town in New Zealand in a train and the train tracks were disabled so they had to figure out some other way to get them there. Um, there was some people, activists, rented a plane and sprinkled, like, confetti, I don’t know, all sorts of stuff, on the field, right
before the game. Just, it was really, um, important to look at the kind of, it was
creative non-violence. I mean, no one got hurt. But, there definitely was a kind of
risky level of sabotage, like with the train tracks, and other kinds of tactics. But they
were effective. They were effective, they were creative, that engendered a great
sense of creativity and excitement among people all over, I remember. Um, but they
were effective in actually stopping the games, and you know, the full cycle of games
couldn’t be completed. I don’t remember much about the UK, I kind of think that
maybe that was the first leg. But anyway, New Zealand was the most vibrant.
Anyway, then the South African ruby team, the Springboks, came to the U.S. and I’m
not exactly sure where they played, but they were scheduled to play in Albany, in
upstate New York. So I was a part of a whole mass demonstration where there were
many many buses that took hundreds of people, there were probably, there were
thousands of people there. Um, up to Albany to protest. And, um, we basically, there
wasn’t really any big plan other than to encircle, completely surround the stadium,
and to march and to chant and to have a very strong presence with placards and
banners, chanting and so on. And so I remember being a part of that, and I
remember chanting, and you know at a certain point there are these, what I later
learned are the South African secret service, you know, all this hussar about
ushering them in, and you could sort of see the tops of their heads a little bit, but you
couldn’t really make out anyone but the team was being ushered into the stadium.
And we continued chanting, and it felt like one of many symbolic protests. There
were thousands of people. Maybe there were, I think there were maybe 3,000
people. That was a pretty good showing. It felt kind of massive. Um, and we were
there to protest and to register our, uh, strong voices, but we didn’t stop anything. I
don’t think we had any illusions of stopping anything. Um, and I remember being on
this bus and by this time it was night and I remember these black South African
students coming on the bus and I think they did this with many of the buses before
the buses took off and saying, “You all came here to protest the Springboks and to
protest apartheid, and you all were chanting ’We’re going to stop the tour, can’t take
it no more. We’re going to top the tour, can’t take it no more,’ and you did nothing.
You didn’t stop them. What are you doing? We’re dying!” It was a very, you know, it
was a very impassioned moralistic, angry criticism. Which the people I knew, and
myself, took to heart. And so, there were no more games, but the Springboks were
scheduled to depart from Kennedy airport, and so we planned this demonstration at
Kennedy airport. I mean, this was before all of the kinds of security precautions that
were put into place, uh, at airports when things like hijackings became a bigger deal.
I guess, they were throughout the world, but they became a bigger threat in the ’80s,
and of course this is way before September 11. But, um, so the idea of having a
protest in an airport, it is possible, it does happen, but it is, um, it was much more
permeable space then. Anyway, so we, um, organized a mass protest. It wasn’t that
mass. I think there were maybe 80 people who came out, and, uh, we were going to
give the Springboks an angry send-off. You know, they weren’t going to leave the
country without, we had sort of failed, we recognized that we had failed to interrupt,
um, the game, and had not taken up the example of New Zealand. Um, but, we were
going to do something else. So here’s this demonstration, this demonstration is
organized by one of these solidarity committees I mentioned earlier. It did not come
of a big anti-apartheid coalition. I think that there some, uh, it was rather hastily
organized, perhaps. Maybe there were not hundreds of people because, uh, many
people felt that the symbolic protest we did in Albany was fine. Um, but there was a
small group of us who felt that we had to escalate our tactics. I mean this is a little
nuts, because they’re leaving. There are no more games. But, a very small group of
us planned a secret action within this demonstration that was basically about
bringing stink bombs to the airport. And the research and study we did on stink
bombs, although we’d never used any, is that they create a horrific smell. They make
people throw up. They’re pretty awful, but, uh, there’s no real, um, they weren’t
really, it wasn’t like an anti-personnel weapon. But we wanted to create havoc, we
wanted to create a mess, a really strong statement. And so, we did that through
bringing stink bombs. And, um, there were five us involved in this, and, um, we, um, I
mean there were other people who knew we were, but there were five of us who
volunteered to actually breach the ramp, or to kind of go after them and hurl the
stink bombs at the Springbok team. We also knew that this involved running
interference with the police who were protecting them, who were highly trained. So,
we all expected to be beat up and arrested, so it was a little bit of a sacrificial action.
And some might say a classic example of expiating white guilt. I don’t know. But
anyway, what we learned when we at the airport was that the, as soon as the
security team for the Springboks figured out there was a protest at the airport, they
changed their flight. Um, but we didn’t, we didn’t actually know this. We knew that
the time was approaching for them to approach the gate and go up to the lounge and
wait, and they weren’t coming. We knew that they were held up, or that they had
been staying at one of the inns or hotels right on the proximity to, this is JFK airport.
Um, but they weren’t coming, so it seemed as if either they were already there, up in
the lounge, or, you know, as we later learned, they changed their flight. So, the five of
us are circulating in this demonstration and we decide that the moment is now, and
we breach security and threw these mason jars full of the stink bomb ingredients. It
was a big mess, and then the police descended upon us. We didn’t, some people say,
remember, who were at the demonstration, remember seeing identifiable South
African agents, you know, through the crowd, earlier, and that’s probably when they
decided they weren’t going to go risk moving the team through. Um, but our main
conflict was with the police, who immediately descended upon us and grabbed us.
And the stuff was really, created this horrible smell. I don’t really, I don’t, I
remember people talking about it. I do remember seeing a policeman throwing up. It
was very slippery, we slipped in it, we were burned by it, because it was very
concentrated. We didn’t really know what we were doing, uh, in that way. It created
all these burns. But were taken up to the lounge and we were beaten, uh, with fire
extinguishers, and, you know, questioned by the police, and then we were all
bundled off to jail and we were arraigned, I don’t know, I think it took, uh, maybe
even a day, or two, to be arraigned, so we were held in jail. Yeah, we didn’t get out of
jail for about, maybe it was even five days. It might have been three days. It’s all in
that, probably it’s all in that article. Um, and then we were, uh, we were bailed out,
only to be brought back into court a month later and re-indicted on related charges:
felony riot, and another charge, and we were brought back into court really because
of our connection with the organization I mentioned before, was implicated in a, um,
in a revolutionary action. I’m using scare quotes, of a much higher proportions and
scale, and craziness, which was the Brinks robbery on October 20 of 1981, so this is,
the demonstration I’m talking about happened on September 16. October 20 there
was an armed hold-up of a Brinks truck in New York by members of the Black
Liberation Army and the Revolutionary Armed Task Force, the latter were people
who were decedents of the Weather Underground who had never surfaced, um, that
was an action in which, uh, three people were killed, two police, two policeman of
the NAIC, the Rockland County Police Force, and uh, a security guard, a Brinks
security guard. And one of my co-defendants had lent her credit card to somebody
who rented a car that was used as a getaway car. And so that link, I mean this was a
really crazy convoluted story. My co-defendant didn’t know what her credit card
was being used for, we lived in this very, um, in this very kind of crazy environment
where you were asked for things and you just did them because you were a cadre,
you were like a little soldier. Um, so anyway, we were re-indicted, uh, after Brinks
because of this connection. They were, the state, were trying to, uh, bring in, to
arrest, to clamp down, on anybody who had any relationship to this thing that
happened in Rockland County. This was a big terrorist, the joint terrorist task force,
this was their assignment. And so we were brought back into court because, I don’t
think they cared that much about the Springboks. I don’t think they cared that much
for the resisting arrest and the criminal trespass. I mean, that’s what we did, at the
airport, we breach security, we, you know, threw these stink bombs around, we, um,
got hurt. Some policemen claimed to be hurt, they weren’t. You know, our trial
subsequently proved that, um, there were very, there were scratches that they
suffered in the fracas. Um, but, I mean we did do that. We did breach security, so we
did trespass, we did resist arrest, when the cops tried to get us we tried, you know,
we tried to get away. Um, one of my co-defendants at JFK actually got into, the one
guy, got into a tussle with the police and kind of pushed him, kind of threw him
through this plate glass window, which sounds really awful, it was just very loud
and very dramatic, and there was a lot of broken glass. But, I’m not trying to
minimize those things, but we had no, none of us had any relationship to this thing
later, although we were part of the same political grouping and, um, would, of
course support, you know, we vocalized support of that as a revolutionary action.
This kind of expropriation of money to then be, supposedly, distributed to poor
communities. Of course that didn’t really happen. But because of the, because of that
credit card link, um, we were brought back into court, re-indicted, and then we were
all, we all went to jail, and we were all in jail for, I think I was in jail for a couple of
months. This is a much longer time because the state also, uh, the district attorney
required, invokes a statute that is used against organized crime, um, to prevent
anyone from posting bail for us unless they went through a bail hearing where they
were interrogated about themselves and about the source of their money. So that
put a big chill, that had a huge chilling affect. I mean, I didn’t want my, my parents
were horrified that I had even been arrested in the first place. I had been arrested
before but they never knew about it. They never needed to. Um, I had been in jail
before, but for a day or two, they never knew about it, they never needed to. But,

um, I didn’t call them for help but they did wind up getting a call from somebody in
the press. So, it was very, I really regret putting them through that, and did make up
for all of that in my later years, but, um, they weren’t, there was no way I wanted them to know. I wanted to protect them from all of this stuff. I was not going to ask them for bail money. But, if I had, it would have required the, and they were elderly at that point, I mean they were mid-70s I guess, um, that would have required them coming to New York and taking the stand and answering all these question from a hostile district attorney because of this statute that was invoked against us. So I stayed in jail. It was fine. I didn’t, jail was actually a really good experience for me.

Um, it actually wound up allowing me to create some distance from this political group. I mean, what am I trying to say, or to reclaim my own kind of autonomy of thinking. Which isn’t to say I ever, um, really changed some fundamental core of my politics, but I began to realize what a crazy sect we had become. But that really has nothing to do with apartheid. Um, but, I’m trying to describe a situation where I was in this very small grouping that had very extremist politics, um, that had very highfalutin notions of revolution and how we kind of, um, summoned all of our own complicated identities as being white people in a very privileged society, trying to express solidarity with masses of oppressed black people, whether here or in South Africa, and especially because we had been scolded, it was more than scolded, we had really been criticized, reprimanded by the students, the African students, in Albany, that we needed to do something that wasn’t symbolic. So, we took that to heart, and we did this action that was way out of scale. Um, it’s really hard to know, you can’t really even talk about effectiveness in that way, although, the people in the ANC that we knew and the PAC, Pan-African Congress and the ANC, who we knew, were enormously positive that we were people who were willing to kind of create, to stop business as usual, to create a fracas at the airport to call attention to apartheid. So, I mean, that was very, we were never condemned by any of them. The Brinks action was condemned by almost every sector of the left except the small, um, sector we were a part of, a reckless, aventurist (sp?), not adventurist, aventurist, it’s a kind of military term, militarist action that just brought all this repression down on anybody doing any kind of political work. And, uh, of course we didn’t agree with that then but I do now.

BA: So you were, how long were you in jail for?

MP: I was in, we were all in jail for somewhere like three days for the arraignment, then we were re-indicted, uh, with these additional charges, then we were held, it was still, this was still pre-sentencing, I mean pre, pre-trial. Um, but because of all those bail issues we, most of us stayed in jail for another say, six weeks? And then we figured out various creative strategies to put together a defense committee and, you know, someone who could testify. In my case my older brother was, who was a lawyer, came forward and was willing to, you know, because it wouldn’t faze him to be interrogated by anybody, as a lawyer, he, you know, and even though I hadn’t been in touch with him for maybe four years, he, uh, it was just an amazing thing that he did. So, anyway, we all eventually got out, but were awaiting trial. The trial, we all tried to be tried together, as a group of five. The state would not allow that, and they split us up. Because there would have been, I think there was a, you know, like my co-defendant who threw the cop through the plate glass window, that was
all recorded. That doesn’t look very good, in terms of his assault charges. So we, I
should have been clear about this before. We were all charged with assaulting
police, you know, one or two counts, this is the initial one, then the criminal
trespassing and the, uh, resisting arrest. The later, you know since they’d charged us
with the most serious charges, the assault, the re-indictment was really just to get us
back in jail to get us in detention because we were part of this larger political
conspiracy in their eyes. So, felony riot, I mean that is, that’s not a more serious
charge than assault. Even though if it was a Class E felony, and I don’t know, maybe
there was some other thing. But anyway, so on those charges, we were held and
then we got out after, say, six weeks, and then we were preparing for our trial, but
we were not allowed to be tried, our motion to be tried together was denied, we
tried to appeal it, that was denied, we felt like we had a much, we wanted to put on a
political trial. We wanted to put the police on trial for defending apartheid. You
know, that was our rhetoric. And you know I think our legal case would have been
strong if we had been tried together. You’re looking at the time. It’s okay, you can
edit that out. Um, so, uh, mine was the first in the order or indictment, so my trial
went first. So my trial was like their test balloon, their test case, in a way. Um, and I
was acquitted of all the serious charges and convicted of misdemeanor charges:
resisting arrest and criminal trespass, which, in most cases, it’s unheard of for
somebody like me, you know, a middle-class, white educated person to have first
conviction, a misdemeanor conviction, result in a jail sentence. Unheard of. But,
because we did try to put on a political case in my trial, everything we wanted to do
with the group of five we put into my trial. Um, because we had all this rhetoric
about the police in New York as being killer cops, this is not a very good strategy for
dealing with assault charges. Although there was no evidence, I mean in my case it
was clear, there were television cameras there, or cameras from the Post and the
Daily News and there was absolutely nothing to corroborate the police’s claim that I
had kicked them and hit them about the face and body. And, um, their hospital
records made that clear too. In at 6:05 and out at 6:15 kind of thing. Um, but
anyway, that trial happened in March, so we were arrested in September 16, 1981,
re-indicted after October 20th, somewhere that following week of 1981, I think we
were all out of jail by the end of the year, by, um, the end of December, and, probably
a little earlier, and, um, and then we were doing pre-trial preparation and March, I
can’t remember the exact date, March was the start of my trial. The trial lasted for
days, which is kind of long. So, of course we made everything longer and more
complicated. The judge hated us. Um, and, uh, the jury was out for, I don’t know,
about, almost 24 hours? A long time. I may be exaggerating, and memory fails me,
but they were out for a very long time. And they were almost split, and there were
four people, two of whom were school teachers, three of whom were black, or
maybe it was two of them who were black, um, two of whom were women. Four
people were holding out for acquittal on everything, because they were, despite our
crazy rhetoric, were very sympathetic, maybe thought it was a stupid action but
didn’t really see the evidence of, even more, I think even though there was evidence
of resisting arrest and so on, were sort of willing to suspend that. But they, um, there
were people on the jury, because these four people, of these four people, um, two of
them talked to our lawyers. You can talk to, the lawyers can talk to jurors after a
trial to find out why the verdict was what it was. And, um, so we got a picture of the
whole jury. There were jurors who were absolutely adamant that they wanted to
convict me of everything even though there was no evidence of assault, which would
have resulted in a 15-year sentence. Fifteen to something, maybe. Um, so there was,
the way that the jurors who talked to us characterized it is that it was a
compromised verdict, because they figured I would get a suspended sentence. But,
um, so, this was actually a failure for the district attorney who actually thought he
could get a conviction on everything. And because he couldn’t, he offered a plea to
the rest of the defendants. One of our co-defendants had gone underground at this
point, had disappeared. The remaining three people plead to various charges, plead
guilty to riot, criminal trespass, resisting arrest. So, they all got jail time, but they did
not get the kind of jail time I did. One of the got six months, one of them got nine
months, one of the others got nine months too, but one of these three co-defendants
was the person who lent her credit card, so she was in a federal prison at this point
for refusing to answer questions by a federal grand jury about the Brinks case. So
she did her sentence, her time, in there. She was in longer for refusing to talk to that
grand jury than we were, who had gotten sentenced. And so, I got the biggest
sentence because I was the first, I was the example. He gave, the judge gave me the
maximum that he could, which was a year. And then, when we went to court, all of
us to get sentenced, we all chanted and tried to bring a banner in, and so he gave us
another 30 days for contempt of court. And so, I had a year and 30 days, which
meant that I had to do basically three quarters of that. So I went to jail, we were
sentenced in May of ’83, May of ’92 (she means ’82), so the trial was in March, our
sentencing wasn’t until May, so I went to Rikers that day and got out in March of ’83.
The end.

BA: And you said that jail was a good experience for you?

MP: Yeah, it was a very good experience for me. Um, I mean, I’m old now, I don’t
think I could do it now, but I was only 30, mid-thirties then. Um, it was a good
experience because it was an education. Um, you know, the people who were at
Rikers Island, the women, because of course it’s men and women, but segregated.
The women who were in Rikers Island were women who were primarily there for
prostitution, petty theft, petty hustling, mostly related to drugs. And, um, and that
was, it was an education, living with that population, and learning form those
women. Some of whom were really hostile, but most of whom were not. Most of
whom couldn’t’ believe that here we were these white girls who had voluntarily put
ourselves in a situation that meant we were in jail. That was like the biggest
mindfuck to them. Excuse my French. But, um, some of the women I knew were very
very political, but were also drug addicts, you know, or, you know, had killed
somebody, or, but who had, who knew what we doing, or who knew, in terms of our
professed politics. So, it was a huge learning experience. You know also what’s really
terrible is losing your freedom of movement and also being watched all the time. So
you can’t put something in front of your, the cells, we had these, of course there’s all
kinds of prison architecture now, but we actually had long panels that we could look
through and we could be looked at. You’re counted six times a day, um, some of
those, uh, counts, you have to stop, uh, your motion, your movement, or you have to be relocated. Um, there’s always a little light on in your cell, even at night, you know. There’s never darkness, never quiet, never privacy. That’s the stuff that’s hardest. The horrible food and the horrible medical care. Actual Rikers is um, cause there’s some great, a great team of doctors in New York who made it their mission to help set up good, you know, medical care, within this impossible situation. Um, but you have, you know, to, if you felt ill, you still had to go to three meals a day. Um, you had to be part of this enforced group movement. I think you could opt out of breakfast, actually, but you had to go to lunch and you had to go to dinner. If you were, if you felt really ill, the choice, so the choice was you had to sort of be, drag yourself with the flu or with menstrual cramps or a migraine or whatever it was, to these kinds of activities, to the meals. Um, the alternative was to go to the infirmary which was being locked down further. And that was horrible, so no one wanted to go to the infirmary. So that was bad, that stuff is bad. I’m not saying, I’m not being romantic about, there’s nothing romantic about jai, or prison. But Richers is a jail, so the reason, even though I had a year sentence, I was kept at the same city jail. If I had gotten more than a year I would have been shipped upstate to one of the maximum-security prisons. But, it was an enormous, it was just an enormous education about who we were, what our politics were, how they were received, or interpreted by a different population, who was also a population included in the address of our politics, you know, oppressed black communities and oppressed black women. Um, it was just a huge education about how to deal with, how to become street smart. But also how to become more compassionate, and really educated politically. So it was a good endurance test. Um, it also, uh, provided more perspective, because, you know, I wasn’t under this relentless pressure by this organization to do this, and make this poster and write this leaflet and, so, I kind of found myself in that environment of that, of those stringent circumstances. I don’t think that’s uncommon, I think that people often will turn a difficult experience and come out of it stronger and with more insight. I did a lot of drawing, a lot of, I mean right away people learned I was an artist. Part of why I was protected, I wasn’t protected in the sense of a gang, but part of why nobody ever messed with me, or us, well first was that we had this huge reputation about being terrorists, so people were scared of us, and then we weren’t scary, but there was still a little bit of that political celebrity, because our, celebrities are very important in jail, it’s very important every, anywhere, but we were famous. So we were kind of to be respected in a weird way. Um, and then when people learned that I could draw, then I had hundreds of friends who would ask, who would say, “I’ll give you a pack of cigarettes for,” because we could, you could still smoke in the yard, then. I don’t’ know if you can now. Um, no smoking’s everywhere. But I would do a drawing in exchange for a, you know, I was endlessly.

BA: Is that how you bided your time?

MP: I did that, yeah, we read a lot, you know, we still had meetings, we had defense meetings, because we were trying to appeal our conviction. So we were involved in that. A lot of reading. Some of the reading was reading we were doing together, you
know, like a study group. But there was a lot of other reading. A lot of letter writing, I was a good correspondent then. Visits, we all got visits.

BA: Who was there for you when you were behind bars?

MP: Well my parents came to visit. That was the most amazing kind of thing. And my mother had let her hair go back to its normal color, which was white. So a great psychological cue on her part. For me to walk into the room, the visiting room, and here’s my mother with white hair. Oh my God, what have I done to my mother? And she had just stopped dying it, that’s all. It’s pretty funny. They were a little, there was this one woman who was, it’s like a big gym, if you can imagine, this visiting room, it was. Um, this woman, who had just learned she was getting out, and screamed, running, from a visitor I guess, screamed running through the room, “I am getting out of this mother fucker tonight!” And so all the women are like, “Yes! Yes, Loraine!” or whatever her name was, and my parents were like, “Oh my God. Where are we.” It was pretty funny. No, but they, I think they, I think it was, they came to visit me and I think that they were enormously reassured that I was in good spirits, strong, smart, able to deal with this environment. I was not falling apart. You know, there are lots of myths about things like jail for people who are, in whose world, that doesn’t happen.

BA: Did you –

MP: My brother visited me, I had, but I had, all my friends visited me. Of course, most of my friends at this point were part of these various overlapping networks, so it was also their duty to visit political, you know, we were political prisoners. Give me a break.

BA: Were you, was there ever a point where, you know, were like, “I can’t believe this is happening to me?”

MP: No.

BA: No?

MP: No. I mean, it made total sense. I mean, look at what we did. We created this mini-riot at the airport. We expected that we would go to jail. I guess, I expected we would get, that we were going to get much more physically hurt. Although a couple people, a couple of us sustained more injuries. I mostly had this neck thing from this cop twisting my neck around. But, um, we thought we were going to get badly beaten up by the Springboks, that was a bit of our fantasy. But we didn’t come close to them.

BA: So, after all of this you said you moved to Chicago.

MP: Yes.
BA: And at this point were you kind of done with apartheid, the anti-apartheid movement?

MP: No, no. Not at all. No, when I got out of jail I had lost my apartment. I mean, I lived with other people. I don’t know. All my stuff was kind of dispersed. I had no job, uh, my girlfriend had disappeared. I didn’t know whether she had gone underground or just disappeared. You know, all, there were all sorts, there was no stability in New York, and I was asked by somebody in my even tinier organization then, uh, to go to Chicago, to continue doing political work, so that’s why I came to Chicago.

BA: Um, and did you do anyway, and can you talk briefly about what you did anti-apartheid wise in Chicago?

MP: Um, mostly just, uh, again, just, um, I mean this is near the end, um, I think mostly just going, you know, going to demonstrations, and that kind of thing. The political work, I got very involved with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago, and set up an art program for them, and, uh, did kind of Puerto Rico solidarity work. I continued to do prison work, um, did try to get a real job and so on. Um, eventually, in the mid-eighties I, uh, helped for Act Up Chicago, the AIDS activist movement. Um, because I had been part of this loose-knit of anti-imperialist leftist queers, but, so, I just remember demonstrations. A more generalized sense. I was not involved in any kind of committee or group about, that dealt with apartheid per se.

BA: OK. And going back just a little bit, I know that, I know it’s going back in time, but how did you react to Reagan’s election?

MP: Oh, we thought it was the worst thing. It was, I think we had a kind of doomsday scenario in our heads about Reagan. I think that we knew the people, and I had, things had, um, I mean, there was a big protest. This is 1980, when this happened. There was a big protest in D.C. at his inauguration, and I was a part of that. And, um, lots of different groups were there. I mean, this was something that the left, there was still a left then, had consensus on that this was so retrograde, what this represented. And people knew about the kind of organizing that groups like the Christian coalition, well, that’s not even a group, that’s sort of an umbrella, but the ultra-right Christian, um, organizing, fundamentalist Christian organizing that had been going on that was very dangerous. There was a kind of concern about this upsurge of Klan activity, it was, and Neo Nazi activity, um, just, just the kinds of anti-union, repressive, uh, I don’t know. We all thought it was, it felt truly horrific. It’s really interesting these days to hear people talk about Reagan as a kind of moderate Republican. I mean, it’s a really interesting disconnect. I think our perspective was very skewed because this was 19, this was a year before all this stuff happened, that I was describing to you –

BA: Um, do you think that –
MP: We had a kind of mentality of, exaggerating repression, say.

BA: Do you think, uh, his election had any, um, influence on your radical movement with the Springboks?

MP: Oh, I think so. Yeah, that’s a really good question. But I think I just have to say yes. Yeah, I think it was a sort of, uh, confirmation of our worst fears, which necessitated desperate action, I think.

BA: OK, um, now, moving forward a little bit, where were you the day Mandela was elected?

MP: I don’t remember. Remind me of the day, and I’ll try to –

BA: I don’t know the exact day, I know it was ‘94.

MP: Yeah, but which month, do you remember? I don’t know. I was probably in Chicago or New York. Um, yes, there was great celebrating. That was like the opposite pole from Regan.

BA: Did you, like, how did you feel about all of your activism at that time? When he was elected?

MP: Um, well, I don’t know if, I think I was, by then, smart enough to know that, it wasn’t a matter of all the things I had been involved in being vindicated because we made serious, I made serious, political mistakes of judgment and, very, some of that stuff was very foolish. But, it just, it felt like a kind of closing of an era on a note that, uh, it was hard for any of us to every imagine that this would happen, and with what grace.

BA: And had you –

MP: Like the notion: libration in our lifetime, that was a slogan, but they seemed to embody it, and I know people who went to, uh, who have met Mandela and have gone to South Africa since, and, either as part of more recently global AIDS work or earlier, kind of prison solidarity work where, because Mandela has expressed solidarity with different political prisoners in the U.S., Mumia Abu-Jamal, you know. So, I’ve heard stories of people who had actual contact, um, that I remember that being a moment when, it was like this wonderful dream, and, um, a possibility. And there was something about his character, you know, this person who had been labeled a terrorist, and now is head of state, and, um, and his wisdom and his kind of intelligence. You know, South Africa has got a lot of problems now, but Mandela was a pretty amazing leader, I think, in all these capacities.

BA: Now, at that point, OK.
MP: How many more do you have? (referring to questions left in interview)

BA: Can I give you five more questions?

MP: I just, my students are, I’m really, what’s your correct time, 3:15?

BA: A little bit before that, 3:10, 3:11.

MP: OK, yeah. I was supposed to meet them at 3.

BA: OK.

MP: Yeah. Let’s just go through them real quick.

BA: Alright, um, uh, what are you most proud of in your movement? Like, I’m sorry, in your life. Like, looking back at everything.

MP: Um, I don’t know. Just determination and persistence, I guess. And trying to tell the truth now about everything with making apologies.

BA: And what was the most frustrating point for you?

MP: Um, feeling like I was part of a very tiny group where the only possible exit, uh, out of a very bad situation was, um, just to cut off from all of it.

BA: And if you had to give any advice to activists today like working in, like, the gay movement, or any other movement, what advice would you give them?

MP: I think it’s really important for everybody to study other movements besides the one either that had propelled them into action out of identification, not necessarily identity but, um, but to look and pay attention to other movements even ones that are considered hostile. Like, for example, uh, fundamentalist Islamic or fundamentalist Christian ones or tea party. It’s really important to study, to study social movements and to study history. It’s really important to listen, to read, to not, not to do all those things as a way to put off taking a stand about something, but it’s really important to take the time to, um, investigate and study how complex politics and social relations are in our world. So, for somebody who is like coming into gay activism or queer activism it would be really important to look even before Stonewall, it would be important to look at the issue of how people in other countries, other cultures are negotiating issues around gender and sexuality, um, it would be important to be very thoughtful about alliances, and solidarities. Yeah.

BA: OK.

MP: It’s a lot.
BA: Well thank you so much!

MP: Thanks, Blair!