Fall 2009

Interview with Njoki Kamau

Christian Tulp
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

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral Histories at Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chicago Anti-Apartheid Movement by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago.
ANTHROPOLOGY INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION WITH NJOKI KAMAU

1 Christen Tulp: OK, Today’s date is November 25th, 2009. This is Christen Tulp C-H-R-I-
2 S-T-E-N T-U-L-P. And my interviewee’s is-
3
4 Njoki Kamau: Njoki Kamau N-J-O-K-I is my first name and my last name is K-AM-A-U.
5
6 CT: Alright, um, We are are Northwestern University at the Women’s Center where Njoki
7 and umm we are in Chicago, IL and her activism started in 1979 to the fall of Apartheid.
8 Can you please give me your year and place of birth?
9
10 NK: My year of birth is 1948-August 1948 in Kenya
11
12 CT: and where were you raised?
13
14 NK: I was raised in Kenya. I was raised in the central Highlands in a place called Niere
15 which is where the Kikuyu people live. The Kikuyu people are the people that were
16 involved in the struggle against British. All Kenyans were involved but in particular they
17 were the birth of the Mau Mau-those freedom fighters. So I am from, you know, the
18 central region, central highlands, very beautiful part of Kenya, rolling hills. My people
19 my people are agriculture people
20
21 CT: What is your father’s name?
22
23 NK: My father’s name is Duncan Kamau Gagumbi-spelled G-A-G-U-M-B-I.
24
25 CT: And what is his year and place of birth?
26
27 NK: That really is difficult to know because, uhhhh, at the time when he was born or the
28 times when he was born, you know, they didn’t keep like written records, anything like
that so basically he died in 1983 and we estimated maybe using, you know, the events of the time in Kenyan history, we estimated that he was 83 years old but there is no written record of when he was born but he was born in the same part of Kenya where I was born which was Niere, which is about 100 miles from Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya.

CT: What is your mother’s name?

NK: My mother’s name is Milker Waungeco(sp?) Kamau

CT: And what’s her year and place of birth?

NK: again it’s the same challenge like my dad that really they did not keep records so we estimated when she died in 1998, which is the year of the—when the bomb blast which hit the American Embassy and killed many Kenyan’s as a result, she was ninety—we estimated her to be 93.

CT: How did you receive your name?

NK: I received my name—actually I do have another name which is Gladwell. So my full names are Gladwell Njoki Kamau even though I prefer to use Njoki. Now Gladwell is a Christian name that my parents—my mother in particular chose, uh, as a Baptismal name. And, you know, in the Greek Orthodox Church. And, um, it’s a name that I generally just leave for the legal records but I prefer to use my African name Njoki. Now Gladwell, when I asked my mother where she got such a name because it’s so British—in any case, because of colonization and Christianity and the way that Christianity was brought to Africa, to the other parts of Africa, but also in Kenya, when children were baptized in the church which is really Western Christian Church they were always given, you know, western names. So I’m sure you’ll notice that many African’s carry the first name—uh western name like John or Mary and then they’ll have an African name. That’s the name that, you know, that they’re called at home or, you know, that’s their ethnic name. Now what is interesting is that when I came to the U.S. I found out that, um, a first
name is a first name. A first name is the one that you are given when you are born. So really truly we African’s that use our Christian names as our first names, that is not correct because our first names are our African names because those are the names that we are given when we are born. The name I was given when I was born was Njoki. So—actually pronounced Njo-ki and the Gladwell is a name that came later. And technically I really should be Njoki Gladwell Kamau. But the way that, because of again colonization, because of imperialism, um when we went to school, because these were missionary schools, we always had to—the names they put down were your Christian name, your first name. And your African name was your middle name, which means that we lost our first names. And you will see many many Africans who live in the country or back in Africa will have a Christian name as their first name and their African name as their middle name but really it should be the other way around. So that’s why I have gone back and reclaimed my name as Njoki because when I came here many people kept asking me, “Why do you have such a British sir name?” because actually there is only one person I know in Britian called Gladwel; Malcolm Gladwell, who is an author, a writer—a great writer, but his name is spelled Gladwel with one “L”. And so its really a sir name and so that’s why people are asking me, many Americans, “Why do you have a British sir name?” and, you know, “Are you African?” So finally I decided, oh they are giving me a hint. They expect me, because I am from Africa, they expect me to have an African name (laughs). So I started using my African name and after that no one ever asked me why I have such a name because, you know, I’m from Africa, they can see I have this African name, and I have loved it. And now, I thought oh maybe they won’t be able to pronounce it or—but no, so I’ve used it for many years. So yeah…

CT: Who made the rules in your house when you growing up?

NK: Who made the rules in my house when I was growing up? Basically given the culture, my father, we didn’t grow up in the house, you know, with my dad there because, all the time, maybe in my other early years when I was a little girl, when my parents were together but by the time I was aware, maybe I was four years old or three years old, my father lived in the city, where he worked and my mother lived in the country side where
she was working on the land, you know, growing food, etc. She was a peasant woman, um, and um, so she really was the one in the house. Part of the time I stayed with my dad when I was like—I left my mother when I was three years old and I went to live with my dad because it became very unsafe in the country side and my mother, being afraid of, my younger sister who was then sixteen, being raped because girls were being raped by the colonial armies and so on so she sent me and my brother to the city. Girls were fleeing from the country side because of rape, because it was a time of war. And so I went to the city and lived with my dad, my brother, and my sister, the one who was looking out for us. So I guess at that time, my father was calling the shots. And my father was a very traditional man. He was serious. He was a no nonsense man (laughs), you know, etc. So, then in the country side when I left the city, I was then about, um, I think I was about seven years old, when I left, went back with my mother to the village and it was my mother and my two sisters. So then it was really my mother calling the shots.

CT: What would you get in trouble for when you were growing up?

NK: When I was growing up what I would get in trouble for would be, uh, you know, the children living in the village, our parents, mostly women, um, worked really hard. They worked hard. They woke up at the crack of dawn to go and fetch water and then they left to go work in the fields. Um, and growing food is really a lot of hard work. You know, the digging, then prepare the ground for, you know, for when the rains come. When the rains come, then planting. And then when you are finishing planting, the crops will germinate, then you will have to weed. Back breaking work, bending all day, and then, you know, when the crops dry, like corn and beans, you harvest them and prepare them for storage. So that’s a lot of work that goes on most of the year. So you, as a young person, especially a girl, you are expected to participate in that work. So even when I would be going to school I would be expected—every time I left—when you come home from school you have a chore. A chore to either go get water, or, you know, during the weekends a chore to go get firewood or accompany your mother, your parent, mother, to, where ever she is going to work for that day, to go help weed, harvest (laughs). I hated that work because it was hard work. So, you know, so I would
get in trouble when I would be instructed when I came home from school to go and get water and instead I would play on my way from school with my friends. I’d get home too late to go get water (laughs), yeah.

CT: Where would you play with your friends?

NK: We would play on the way, like on the way, like on the road etc. or, you know, during the weekend, Saturdays, um, sometimes we would go to work on the fields, and then I would just be, then I would feel like I’m tired and my mother would just keep working, working, working. And then I would pretend that I was going to the bathroom somewhere and then I would be gone for—(laughs)—for quit awhile and she would just get really mad. She would get mad. Where did I go? You know, etc. etc. So you know, just stuff like that. And also I’d get in trouble, because you are so much incorporated in the household chores. You don’t have a choice. You can’t complain. Um, so sometimes what you do is, what is passive aggressive. So she sends me to go do something, like “Go and get me that” and “Go and get me that” and “Go”—and then I would just stand there (laughs) and she would really get mad because you know the culture, the African culture, the Kikuyu culture for that matter, young people have no business disobeying their parents so when you do you would get in a lot of trouble and, you know, there was corporal punishment; beating and being whacked. You know, so, yeah.

CT: What was your favorite food to eat?

NK: Um, my favorite food to eat was, um, lets see, what would I say was my favorite food to eat? I think it’s Eriol (sp?), you know, usually, this was a very common dish, still very common, and it’s a dish that is prepared with, um, it’s beans, and corn, mashed with green bananas and, you know, vegetables, lush green vegetables. Because I grew up in the country side; we grew all the food we ate. So we always had green vegetables, lots of green vegetables, fresh food. And I thought that this was backwards and the people in the city had it better—that they were better off but now I come to find out that actually I grew up really—I was lucky because the food we ate was very fresh
and didn’t have any chemicals (laughs). The water we drank, we got it from, uh, like a spring, sprung from the ground, crystal clear water from the ground. And I thought that the people that live in the city that have tapped water are lucky but actually we were drinking the best water. So I look back now and I think, “Wow” (laughs). You know, now that I live in America and we are Organic and all that stuff and buying water, bottled water, and things like that so I am—and it really has been helpful because eating healthy is not a problem for me because I have a reference. I eat healthy as it is and it’s very easy for me because I have a reference point from growing up with fresh food and stuff like that.

CT: Who made this food for you?

NK: When I was growing up it was my mother. My mother made most of the food, but also my sisters. My older sisters did more of the work that I couldn’t do, you know, like—my mother would not—because she cooked with, some of the time, she cooked with a clay pot. You know, she would put a clay pot—you know this Is dried beans, dried corn, into a clay pot with open fire. You know, three stones and open fire and that takes time to cook. And so when you are ready to mash it, the bananas and the vegetables, and you mash it, you have to know how to do it because you can break it. So I would volunteer to do it and she would say, “NO NO NO you are going to break my pot!” (laughs) How else am I going to learn? But she would let me sisters do it who are older and bigger and me I would just—so I didn’t—so a dish like that I didn’t cook but for other dishes, like simpler dishes I would cook. Like if something needed to be boiled, if something needed to be sautéed with onions using an aluminum cooking pot, you know, then I could do that stuff. I did that stuff, actually I cooked—for that stuff I was already cooking at eight years old.

CT: Wow!

NK: Uh huh
CT: Um, what was your education expectations in your family?

NK: In my family, around the village, my family was known as a family that was passionate about education but actually the person that was passionate about education was my mother. It’s not my dad. My dad was a very traditional man. He was into Kikuyu traditions and you know, educating girls was not his thing. We were five girls and one brother. And overall education to him was not a big deal but my mother, who was actually in to it, who did not go to school, was passionate, so that meant that we were—the five daughters, all of us went to school. All of us went to school even though because of the times, it was during the liberation struggle and the Mau Mau’s—so anybody who embraced western education was a traitor. Missionary education, because uh, missionaries were linked with the colonizers, and you know, they were—they had general strategy and went in that direction. You know, so like, you know, the Catholics, the Presbyterians, those are the three main missionary groupings that were in Kenya and they had school, you know, so anyone who went to school—they were going to a missionary school. So I went to a Presbyterian missionary school. And, um, the Mau Mau’s, like, um, you know, like, um, my sister who was in a boarding school—my sister was born in 1931, so she was already in a boarding school but she was moved because there was so much commotion about the Mau Mau’s saying, you know, “This is a traitor” whatever and she was—my father married her off to somebody who didn’t have as much—who hardly had an education but was very active in the Mau Mau movement and my second sister was very smart but she was pulled out of school because she was the one that went with us to the city—she was sixteen—because of the rape and all that. And then, um, my um, my sister, my one sister who I really—who really inspired me and who was—I credit with really kind of keeping, suggesting that I—actually paying my school fees—it’s Ester who the only way, she went to school but the only way to survived was to go—when she went to boarding school she never came home because the Mau Mau’s, the freedom fighters, kept demanding from my parents that she should be brought back home and actually my mother—they put my mother on the death list because they said she was a collaborator. She was allowing her daughter to be, you know— to be missionary school and those were part of the colonizers, the
oppressors so my mother was put on a death list but the Mau Mau grouping area—one group argued “NO” but some of the other daughters were active in the movement—my older sister, my other sister—and that it was not her fault-- that it was actually my sister who refused to come back home. Actually my mother made a trip all the way to go where my sister was going to school to beg her to come back because she was so afraid she would get killed. Um, but my sister refused. She said I’m not coming back home because clearly she would see she would not go back to school. Also my sister—in order to go to those schools, missionary school—especially the Presbyterian schools, not so the Catholics, you could not be circumcised. If you were circumcised you could not go to Presbyterian schools, you know, missionary schools. So my sister, knew if she came home she would be circumcised. And so she refused—she knew she would not be able to go back to school. So and then, since she was refusing to be circumcised that even put my mother in deeper trouble, because the Mau Mau’s said, “See? She is following the ways of the white man”, you know, the colonizer, the enemy, so you know, its like being caught between a rock and a hard place. Lucky my mother was not put to death but, you know, so.

CT: So why did you move to Chicago—

NK: And for me because of my sister—when the time came for me to be circumcised because there were to be doing the circumcising. Just today I was reading, um, The Kenyan Daily—The Daily Nation, on the internet. They say about 300 girls to be circumcised. So even now in Kenya, and other parts of Africa, there are ethnic groupings that are still circumcised girls. Even though now, I think there is a law in Kenya not to circumcise girls, still because of tradition, you know, so, the government officials are saying, you know, “Anybody who is caught circumcising girls will be arrested” but you know, its also like you say it through one side of the mouth but you don’t mean it on the other side because you are also from the same people and you are likely to no go arresting people because you are afraid to insight people because they’ll get mad so you know, even now I was reading it but in my case because of my sister, modeling something totally different, when I came along and my mother said “Ok the
time has come for you to decide whether you want to be circumcised or not”—I was ten—I said NO, I don’t want to be circumcised. But because of my sister and my mother—my mother being, really a unique woman in a lot of ways, she listened to what I had to say and that was respected. But I learned later that my dad was furious—that he was furious—that he was mad and that he was not happy that I had refused to be circumcised. It was a long story—that I had to escape from the village—I had to—(laugh) at night and things like that. So.

CT: WOW! Um, why did you move to Chicago?

NK: I moved to Chicago because I actually came to school. I got a scholarship—full bred scholarship to come and do graduate studies, um, you know, in business management. My degree in Nairobi was bachelor of business administration but then they called it bachelor of comers but it was business administration—it’s more of a generic name. I worked for a multi-national corporation Unilever(sp?). It’s an anglidesh(sp?) corporation. Um, you know, I worked for about three years with them and then I got a scholarship to come do graduate studies in management. So when I came, I first of all went to Dallas, Texas to Southern Methodist University where I got my MBA. And then I went to the American Graduate School of International Management in Glendale, Arizona which is a suburb of Phoenix, Arizona and I got my masters in International Business—International Management. It was a duel degree program and a full bright. And then I came to Northwestern to do a PHD. Um, actually when I landed in Chicago I didn’t know anybody, in 1978, September, I was across the street in the business school [points across the street from our location]. And I was um, I was actually the first black woman to attempted a PHD at Kellogg’s—meaning the Kellogg’s graduate school of management. So I’m an ABD, which means I am an All But Dissertation. I think I was the first black woman—not I think—I was the first black woman and I was the—there had only been one person that graduated with a PHD—one black person—and then there was another black person, he was from Trinidad—in my class. So we were like the second or the third and you can imagine the amount of racism and the amount of challenges I faced. (laughs) Yeah,
CT: What were your feelings like when you first moved to Chicago? What were you going through?

NK: Uh, when I moved to Chicago I was actually excited because I had been to Dallas, Texas. SMU is a very—it’s where George Bush is having his library so you can imagine (laughs)—I don’t know whether you’re a republican but I hope not but you can imagine in 1978 what kind of a school Southern Methodist University was, in terms of being conservative—its like Northwest—meaning it was predominantly white. It was, um, you know, affluent for the rich but predominantly white and they almost didn’t know what to do with their black students. So they put me—they had a complex on campus—a central place where they housed blacked students. (laughs) They had this undergraduate student—when I came I was on a scholarship because I don’t know what’s happening, they threw me with those undergraduates because they didn’t know what to do with me. So I discovered—well I was very pleased when I looked around that everyone was black like me so I was like, “oh great!” but I began to find out—people then kept asking me “why are you staying here, you are a grad student. You should be staying in the graduate housing.” So I didn’t even know there was graduate housing. And come to discover they just—they couldn’t put me in the graduate housing. (laughs). So I went to demand to say—because it was very difficult to study with my undergraduate roommate wanted to study with the TV on and here I am a grad student. So I was spending hours and hours in the library but then the library would be closed. So I went to the graduate housing to demand that I be moved. And the woman, Mrs. King, I’ve never forgotten, looked at me and said, “No, we can’t move you, you signed a contract”. I said “Look, I’m a foreign student so I don’t understand—didn’t understand the dynamics of this. So you put me in with the undergraduate students and my roommate is on the TV all the time. There’s no other graduate student in the complex and here there is graduate housing.” “We have no room in the graduate housing.” So I said OK, I said, you know, Look I’m not a very conflictual person, and certainly being a foreign student you can imagine coming to the U.S., you are scared you are—you know, it’s a big place, it’s intimidating, it’s scary. So I said to Mrs. King,
“ok you know what? This was an intergovernmental agreement. Full bright is a
government to government agreement scholarship. So I need to call my government to
say I can’t study, maybe I need to come back home” (coughs) So I said, you know, So I
need to call my government and say I need to be either placed in a different institution
or sent back home. So I went back to my dorm—to the little place where we were. And
the next thing—I went to school—and when I came in the evening, they had found
housing for me. But where they put me for housing—they put me in the Theological
School because just like that there is um, Garrett, you know, which is the seminary—
which is actually the Methodist Church started this school, Northwestern University.
Just like the Methodist Church started SMU which is why it is called Southern
Methodist University. So there was a seminary attached to the school—separate but
attached to the school just like Garrett, separate but attached to the school. So they put
me in the packing school of Theology because they couldn’t take me to graduate
housing so I said fine. They gave me a little room there and I was ok with it. And then
they put me—when she couldn’t find me housing, I also tried to find housing outside
campus because I heard that. So I tried to look for housing. So there was this place—I
am a very—I am going to sound like a typical case but it is true, because it happened.
So I am—I went looking for housing. I saw this apartment described. I called the
person. I said I am a graduate student, I am nuh nuh nuh and um, I am looking for an
apartment and I said—the person was excited and said yes you can have the apartment
and duh duh duh, just, you know, come up and uh pay the deposit. When I went to pay
the deposit, they said the apartment was taken between from when I talked to them and
when I went to pay the deposit. Now, I didn’t really understand what was going on until
I was talking to another grad student—was studying PHD Economics—this Asian
student, grad student, who said, “That’s racism!” I said “what?” (laughs) I didn’t really
understand because I was very new. I just came from Kenya. I didn’t understand how
racism—I just knew that it was odd. He said “That’s racism. That’s—you should report
to the Better Business Bureau.” The Better Business Bureau. I said who is that? You see
you never forget names—his name was Cahn Luther, I don’t have the energy to do that.
All I want is a place to stay and to study, that’s all I want. I didn’t come to this country
to take on these—because I now began to get scared. I’m like, “oh know, now,
that’s”—so anyways so that’s when in all that commotion there was that housing for
the—in the Garrett—you know. Now to answer your question, when I came to
Northwestern, I had already now understood—began to be effected by the trauma of
racism. You know, I have began to understand, “Oh my god” So if you are black in the
United States, it’s not a good thing. So already my innocence had already been
tampered with, so when I came to Northwestern, I was, you know, I began to sense a
lot of other things. By then I began to understand—I began to understand that being
black was something that was not very positive—I mean it did not bring you a lot of—
so I had all kinds of challenges at Northwestern at this institution. They have come a
long way. I work here. This institution—I had a lot of challenges in the business school
because, as you heard, I was the first black woman—I was the second or third black
person to attempted a PHD so they didn’t know what to do with black folks—they were
like—um, and—So I had all kinds of challenges. And I didn’t end up finishing the
PHD, in fact I am an ABD from Kellogg’s. You know, I did the course work and didn’t
do the research you know, I had many problems and so on. When I—it was funny
because I argued the case with the Dean of the graduate school because the way I came
to—once I finished my masters—my two masters—my MBA and my master in
international business I was then no longer in the hands of full bright. So they I had to
find a different type of funding. So my government was willing to carry me and they
carried me for one year and then they said they didn’t have money. So then I was
actually asking for money from the graduate school. And I convinced the Dean of the
graduate school Versteeg (sp?) that they needed to fund me but—and he agreed but
when I came to the department, to the school of business, the woman who coordinated
the graduate school, um—PHD students—when off on me and said, “Why should we
fund you? We want to fund people who will make Northwestern famous. Um you
know, if your government thought it was important for you to finish your PHD, why
didn’t they, you know”—I said look it’s a poor country that doesn’t have a lot of
money. So she—she actually blocked—she blocked the decision from—so I was not
able to continue with my PHD. And then when I met with the—there were five faculty
that wanted to meet with me about, you know—and were giving me a hard time
about—why did I want to study? Because actually my plan was to go back and teacher
at the University of Nairobi. In fact I was in touch with the University of Nairobi. They
had sent a letter to the school to say you know, they have a place for me when I finish.
So this five men—white men—uh, the department head—some of them are still there. I
see them in the Sports and Aquatic Center. They don’t mind me but I know—in fact the
other day I was just there on the treadmill just next to one of them and he didn’t
recognize me but anyways these white five guys, well you know, interviewing me and
saying why would u want to study Africa? Africa is a place where they have so many
problems. This is true again. They have so many problems. And you know, we hear
they have no electricity and all that. So I was like ok, but isn’t that what a PHD is
about? A PHD is about studying something that will benefit a people. And my people
have so many problems and challenges. So I want to go back and play—and help them.
So then you know— they just—I looked at them and thought—you know I couldn’t
really understand—and then I said to them when I applied to this school—I applied to
other schools and I wrote a statement of objective. And when I wrote the statement of
objective, you admitted me knowing that that’s was what I was going—I said it clearly
that that’s what I was going to do. You should have let me go to another institution—
another university that would have supported the idea. And so now you are telling me
midstream, you know, after—I even produced my statement of objective. So, um, you
know, um, the head of the department—So I said you know, I as a human—because
now I could see that they were just being like a wall, you know, and at that point I
understood—at that point I have to say, I understood what racism meant. So you know
what I did? I said I am now going to take my power—I said—I looked at all of them
and I said—and I pointed [points out] and I said “you know, as an African woman, I
have come a long way. I have jumped many hurdles.” That is what I was doing
[pointing and shaking finger] “and you can only be but a temporary obstacle”. And they
all went red. Remember these are big wigs in my school—in my department, you know,
I was in marketing. So they all went red and the head of the department, Levy, said
“we’re not being racist”. When he said that word, you see, as an African, I didn’t refer
to myself as black. I used the word African woman. I didn’t say as a black woman. So
right there in my head, I went BINGO! This is what it is because I realized I didn’t say
black, I said African. I wasn’t even thinking race at that point I was just thinking
African. And then he comes back and says, “we are not racist.” First of all, I was thinking where did u get that from? That’s not even what I was thinking right now, I was just letting you know that you can’t stop me. (laughs) So I knew that—I was “oooooh this is what it is!” So then you know, fast forward, I decided now--I didn’t finish my school. I actually branched off into working with woman. And I ended up being the Director of Shelter for Women but—so now fast forward. At the Women’s Center where I work as the Associate Director I am in charge of a program called Survival Skills. Survival Skills is a program I put together and it’s a program for PHD students—women students—and basically what I do is I look for three faculty—ten year faculty, from Northwestern—women—who come and talk about, how is it—to give tips to women students—how it is—what they need to be in mind in order to be successful in the academy. How do you make sure to finish your PHD, how do you have an advisor, a mentor, how do you—what are the challenges, so you know—and I do that because I know. This is what I needed for someone to tell me—to help me with—so in that program like about five years ago—it was in this living room [points to the couch in the room] and one of the students that came was this black woman who I didn’t know. She was the only black student—So at the end I talk to—I mix around and I talk to the students—I talked to her, Sonja Greya (sp?) and Sonja Greya said—I said what department are you in and she said, “I am in Kellogg’s”. I said oh you are in Kellogg’s and she said ya I am. I said oh, that’s my old school. She looked at me like that [confused face] and said, “old school?” I said yeah I went there but a long time ago. She said when? So she was curious you know? So I explained to her I went to school you know, it late ’78, ya September ’78 is when I enrolled and then she said, “Oooooh, are you the woman they talk about?” I was like—first of all I was like they talk about me? So you know, then part of me wanted not to ask any more questions because I was like I don’t know to know what they said. And then part of me was like I want to know what they said. So I thought if I lose this moment I may always regret it. So I said to Sonja, “What do they say?” She said, “Oh they said they just weren’t ready for you” So here I was. I internalized all this stuff that I wasn’t that good—that it was me—they made me feel like it was me. They put all the heat on. And actually it was that the school was not ready for me. Now Sonja, her PHD—she was in marketing. She did a
PHD—something. She went to South Africa. She did her research in South Africa.

Now, that’s the Africa that they ridiculed when—you know; now Northwestern was not really advanced in terms of the international idea of business or anything like that. Harvard would have been different. You know, any of the east coast schools would have been different but Northwestern was then just—so. So I said to Sonja, “Thank you”. I thought to myself that is totally liberating (laughs). So, so anyway those are my feelings and thoughts and however for being here.

CT: When did you—Why did u first become an activist?

NK: Um, I don’t know that—it is a question that is hard to answer because I’m like, on the one hand what came up for me—I feel like I have always been an activist but I think the question you asked is more like when I really was, put myself out there as an activist. So the question is that when?

CT: Why?

NK: Why? Because as I said growing up where I grew up in colonialism—brutal colonialism—In fact when I was reading a recent book by Caroline Elkins which is called The Imperial Reckoning: The British Gulag In Kenya. And when I read that book I could only read a few pages at a time because it’s such a profound book, because it was actually talking about the time when I grew up. The people—it was talking about my parents. It was talking about my people. It was talking about my time. And I know I grew up in a village that had a mote around it with wooden spikes at the bottom. (not understood) 24/7. Twenty four hours a day. And you know, I know that early in the morning before it was daylight for all the adults in the village, including of course my mother, to go to do communal work. And that everywhere—we were escorted one a week to collect food and um, also like three days a week we were escorted to collect water. So I grew up with a sense of injustice. Um, so the reason is there’s just something profoundly disturbing to me about—um, about, um, you know, one group of
people oppressing or hurting another group of people and growing up, being on the
receiving end I knew what it was like—the pain and the agony and I knew what it felt
like to be denied, you know, your rights. And to be owned as a subject, and to be—to
have no say so. And to be brutalize, and to be disregarded, and to be devalued, and to be
not considered—not treated like a human being with human dignity. You, your parents,
you neighbors, you know, um. So I had seen the—you know—I knew what it was like
to be in the hands of injustice. And so because of knowing that I just grew up—in fact I
remember like in high school, one of the courses I took was on the old testament and
part of doing to old testament was reading about the Prophets. And I love the Prophets,
because the Prophets—you know—were always fighting, speaking against injustice.
Um—and—so there is something profoundly wrong and profoundly disturbing and
profoundly unacceptable when one human being seeks to harm another human being.
Or when a group of human beings seeks to harm another group of human beings. I don’t
care on what account; account of race, account of gender, account of sexual orientation,
account of class, account of ability or disability, account of—I don’t care what the
reference point is. There is something profoundly um, disturbing for me.

CT: How did your parents—

NK: So that would mean then as a, as a—living in the country, that I would gravitate
towards, you know, the Anti Apartheid Movement which was housed on this very
campus. Also there was a divestment movement—for divestment going on all over the
United States. Going on, on campuses, going on in cities, you know and then of course
the heart of Chicago with a class of activists and people that I now got to know and got
to be friends with. So that whole thing just ignited me as an activist.

CT: How did your parent’s react to your involvement in the movement?

NK: My parents were not even really aware that I was involved in the movement. First
of all, they lived in Africa, far away. And just because—my mother is a peasant woman
in the village so you know, I wouldn’t be communicating with her and telling her—not
because I think she would disapprove but I wouldn’t think to write to her and say, “Oh by the way Mom” It’s not like the usual relationship—mom and daughter. Like you know, ok mom let me tell you what I’m doing—because—I’m now involved in the whatever movement. So I wouldn’t—that not what I would be telling her. I would probably be telling her “oh I’m fine, I’m working, I’m going to school.” But those in betweens wouldn’t be there. (laughs) So in other words the answer there is—you know, uh—there’s nothing there I could really talk about in terms of how they would’ve reacted to my involvement. And my father died in ’83. So I’m the last born in the family, so my parents were not young when I was born—being the last one. But my father—with all do respect was very involved in the movement. In the Liberation Movement, in the struggle against the British. He was known to bring, um, famous political figures to my home—to our home in the country side. You know, during those times and then he was also in detention for five years.

CT: Would you want to go into a little more about that, you father in detention?

NK: Basically, it’s—you know—with the British—the Kikuyu people, the people from the central highlands in the largest ethnic grouping in Kenya. Because they are agricultural people. When the British came and took a lot of their land and carved out what is called the white highlands—white meaning white settlers. Of course the Kikuyu’s were left with not much land. And over time there was a lot of, um, you know, anger over that the land was taken and blah blah blah. So, you know, of course the Kikuyu’s started organizing and out of that was born the Mau Mau group, the freedom fighters. And then in response the British declared a state of emergency, in the central highlands from 1952 to 1962—a ten year period. And in that ten year period—which is why the book by Caroline Elkins is about, um, the British response to that—meaning that complete dislocation of the Kikuyu people—disorganization, like putting them into (not understood) villages—you know, with like rows and rows of houses with a mote around them as a way to break the backbone of the Mau Mau movement. And taking most men to detention camps. So my father, along with many other men, were taken to these detention camps which was scattered all over Kenya and where thousands
and thousands of Kikuyu people died. So my father was one of the many was taken to detention. You know, there were some women that were taken to detention but the
women—most women and children were housed—you know—housed in these villages. What they did was—the British—to take people from the ancestral lands and have them build these little huts—round huts, like, you know—rows and rows of them and then a mote around them. So I grew up in a village like that. (laughs) So, yeah, then of course the people in the village—the women and some—the old men—some old old men were not taken to detention camps. But women and children and old men in these villages. So for the women and some of them men—the older men were—did, you know—communal work. Labor which is like five days a week. Had to go dig roads and cut down trees and you were escorted everywhere (laughs). Yeah, you didn’t have any freedom.

CT: Um, explain your participation with the divestment movement here at Northwestern.

NK: Uh, at Northwestern there was a professor here called Dennis Brutus. Dennis Brutus, a South African that most people know. I’m sure you’ve come across his name—was a professor at Northwestern. I think he was in the English department. And obviously, naturally he became the head (laughs)—the head of all the catalyst, shall we say, around who we organized the whole divestment movement. We were trying to get Northwestern to divest from companies that did business in South Africa. Uh—so—um, and Dennis Brutus had escaped from prison and all that and you know, Northwestern was furious—just furious. First of all, remember Northwestern was not—not that any school in the U.S. was out there saying ok great we are going—we are so in to justice—we are going to divest. Thank you so much for pointing this out. So maybe there will be a school—but Northwestern was like completely upset and belligerent and resistant and impossible. And what they really tried to do was really frustrate us and frustrate Dennis Brutus. And I remember for example, one time we were demonstrating on campus. In fact one of the—Daily Northwestern, I am on the front page with my (laughs) [arm up/hand in fist] You know, its me and Dennis—it’s our picture. It’s amazing! So I have
my hand up like this (laughs) and Dennis is next to me. I think there was a conference that was being held on campus. And the conference, supposedly was—Northwestern was holding this conference of, um—to discuss divestment. And invited all kinds of people. People, you know, um, from companies—heading certain companies and stuff like that to discuss the whole idea of—we also knew that Northwestern was also not doing this because they were going to make the decision to divest. They were actually doing this to collect information to argue their case against divestment. So we were demonstrating, you know, against the conference. So—you know—the Daily Northwestern took this up with (laughs). And my mouth was wide so I’m sure I was shouting. Yeah, so we didn’t succeed. Northwestern never divested. It was um, just too resistant. It wasn’t one of those schools that divested. I remember arguing with one of my professors—a major professor—he’s called the Father of Marketing, Phillip Cartla (sp?) and he’s written many of the ally texts for marketing were written by him. He was known all over the United States. In fact he was known all over the world as the Father of Marketing. But he was trying to convince me that um, that it is really good—these companies—what do you expect—these companies are doing South Africa a lot of good. Because what they are doing is they are establishing industries on the edges of the Bantu stands. And they are doing that and it means that black people have jobs. So they can come to the Bantu stands. So the industries—a ring—a ring around the Bantu stands. So black people can come from the Bantu stands and work and I was not agreeing with him (laughs), you know. What do u expect a professor of marketing at Northwestern in the United States to get it (laughs). But I was doing my best so yeah, um. So Basically, northwestern didn’t—and Dennis Brutus, they really frustrated him. I mean, they wanted him to leave. They even tried to fire him but because he was just creating a lot of—he was a thorn in their flesh. They just didn’t know what to do. But he was tenured (sp?) and because he was tenured (sp?) and they tried to fire him but he threatened to take them to court. He said it was a breach of contract and that he was going to take them to court and blah blah, so they backed off. They didn’t fire him but eventually I think they just frustrated him and he left. I think he went to the University of Pittsburg and he went and headed the—I think it’s the African—something about the department of African something but I don’t remember but I’m sure if you Google him
you’ll find a lot of information about Dennis Brutus

CT: Describe the structure of the organizations you were a part of.

NK: Um, so I was part of the, like Northwestern divestment group and we were just an (unclear) group. We weren’t like organized through the president or whatever. It was just an (unclear) group of students and some faculty. And then of course from people from around. You see, whenever there was something going on—It was like—we weren’t like a separate group—like separate separate, in the sense that we were also supported by the activists in Chicago. Like that conference where we are, you know, demonstrating, there were people from Chicago. So many—like SIDSA—South African Divestment—that’s the name—it was SIDSA—SIDSA, I think it was SIDSA. South African Divestment something something something. That movement—we were all a part of that movement. And mostly the movement really was you know, really, always showing up to demonstrate against, to keep—sometimes there were meetings. Sometimes there were demonstrations, you know, in front of the South African Embassy. You know, just going where ever. All over the city. I didn’t—I didn’t—I wasn’t an activist that went outside Chicago. All my activism was mostly confined in Chicago. With people like Clooney and Lisa Brock and some of the other people. You know, yeah.

CT: What was your news source throughout the time that you were an activist?

NK: News source, what is that?

CT: Like how did you get your information, um did you watch television and find out things that were going on in South Africa? How did you get information?

NK: Oh how I got information through—first of all, through each other. Because we are so intimately connected, all of us and we were so—in so many events and some were fundraisers. Some were people coming to speak. You know, other activists coming to
speak. South Africans coming to speak, etc. Like Chris Hani and so on. So
information from the movement itself. You know, like—other sources were, you know,
reading, reading newspapers. You know, not—not American publications (laughs).
all kinds of magazines. Then we really didn’t have the internet so you had to, uhh, being
at Northwestern one of the advantages—we have the Afrikaner. The Afrikaner library.
Have you been there to the Afrikaner Library? It has one of the best collections of
African materials, probably known. One of the best—if there would be others—not just
in the United States but people come from all over the world to come and do research
because it was founded by this guy called the Haskelvets (sp?) Haskelvets, you know,
who was an anthropologist and who—we even have a program of African studies that
he founded. So the collections there—they have newspapers, sometimes they have
underground newspapers. So you know, so going there. I happened to be living in the
city where there’s the Afrikaner, the Afrikaner Library which was a gift in itself. So
right there you had a lot of resource.
CT: Explain in a little more detail your trips to South Africa
Um, my trips to South Africa—my trips to South Africa were—they were not—I
actually belong to an organization called (unclear) Mission Counseling. And (unclear)
Mission Counseling was just a disoriented organization. Again, not surprising that I
would still be involved (laughs). And you know, its an organization that is very focused
on ending oppression. In fact, we have—one of our primary goals is ending racism.
Especially the racism that targets African heritage people because our thinking is that
because of the way that racism is, uh—was too crude in this country—the way it was
too crude from slavery and it was slavery of African heritage people—black
African Americans—African Americans. And then there’s a way that, the racism—in terms
of—the way it has evolved. Even though it includes other people now; Asians, Latinos
and Indigenous people—there’s a way that—it is most brutal towards African heritage
people. But that if you then move it, if—lets say it’s a pile of bricks and you move that
brick, things would collapse. Obviously, certainly you would want to move the bricks
from the top and from the bottom but if you can jiggle that brick everything else will jiggle so that is one of our primary goals of ending racism. And, uh, we were in fact—I went to South Africa—on of my trips to South Africa was to as a delegate with this organization um, because we sent a contingent, a group of people. From (unclear) because we are an international organization—drawn from across the world to participate in the conference. And we were doing quit a number of workshops. I did some workshops. I did two workshops. I did—one workshop I did was—among the other things I did—was how race and gender intersect—sexism and racism and how they intersect. Another workshop I did was healing the hurts of racism, um, for Africans. And basically what I was really zeroing in on is the hurts from colonialism. And what that continues to do to the African people. So the conference was the United Nations Conference against racial discrimination—it was against racial discrimination, xenophobia, and all other forms of intolerance. It was a long long name. I’m sure again if you Google it, it will come up. But it was a conference that was attended by about ten thousand people from across the world. And so they were focusing on discrimination, racism, xenophobia, etc. and other intolerances. So I went as a delegate. And the other times I have gone to South Africa was to attend, um, the regional conference because we have—every four years we have a big conference that happens here in the United States. The headquarters of the organization is in Seattle. We have a big conference where people represent from all over the world come. So that year—just this year—this is the year, yeah—was the year where we had the big global conference. During—starting last year then—mostly earlier on in the year, 2009—we do it every four years. Then we have regional conferences. Like we have Asian, Latin Americans, South America. We have Africa. We have New Zealand and Australia—you know regions. We have Europe. So we have regional conferences. So in July I went to the regional conference. You know, the Africa regional conference for (unclear) communities. So the two other times—because I’ve been to South Africa three times. The other time I was also gone to a conference for (unclear) revolution? Conference.

CT: What were the differences between the conferences and the protests that you were a part of in South Africa compared to the things that you were a apart of in Chicago?
NK: Um, well the difference is really in the protests. I think you can’t really compare
them. I think they have the same goal. The same goal is focusing on dismantling
oppression—dismantling Apartheid in this particular case which is an oppression,
which was the white racist government that had—that was perpetrating such heinous
crimes against African people in South Africa and this had gone on for so long. Um, the
conference in South Africa—the United Nations conference. The goal was to end the
oppression of racism—or to put a dent, or to put a spotlight because one conference
certainly does not end—and in the conference it wasn’t demonstrations—there were
many workshops in the conference itself—numerous workshops. You know, a number
of workshops every day you could go to. You know, if you looked at the conference
bulletin. So maybe you saw a group of people marching with a sign but it was a
conference that was focused on—the people who went—was to go to all kinds of
workshops—to connect. Now the activism we did against Apartheid in Chicago was
over time—sustained over time. Yeah we were—we would be engaged in
demonstrations. Sometimes we were having just meetings; strategy meetings, you
know, etc. etc. etc. Sometimes we were just having fun meetings, you know like food
and festive (laughs). You know, so the end goal is the same—is to end an injustice but
the method was different. This was a long time—I mean the struggle against Apartheid
was not just in Chicago, it was national, it was international. It was global. It had
become global. As more and more people got involved in the action. This was such an
injustice. And certainly—I remember when I was in Kenya I read—I was in high
school—I was in a predominantly white high school in Kenya because before
independence you know, people were divided up. Asians—their own schools and their
own communities in the city. Asians were only allowed to live in the cities by the
British government. Africans who lived in the city live it what was called African
locations; the most poorest and the most basic one room types of places. And then
Europeans—suburbs. So Africans had their own schools, Asians and Europeans. So
when Kenya became independent in 1963, the government—the African government
now, not the British said we want all those schools de-segregated. We want de-
segregation. So for example, all the schools that were for whites only, we want you to
take quarters of Africans and Asians. So I was one of those students then. I was a
quarter (laughs) in my own country of Kenya. So Kenya High School, it was called. In
Kenya High School we were actually a minority. You know people of color—we
weren’t called people of color—we were Africans and Asians—we were the minority in
Kenya. And in the school there was Ms. Andrews in a class—I think it was a class—a
history class—this British teacher called Ms. Andrews was teaching about Apartheid.
You know, and I remember like—we the African students in the class were so incest.
You know in our youthful age we were so angry that there could be a country where
people are held hostage like that. I remember writing a little essay—my little essay that
said—something—I was a high school kid—something like this, like the South African
struggle, it’s like someone baking a cake, and you know, you put it in the oven and you
can’t see that it is heating up from the bottom. It looks very serene on the outside but
it’s heating up from the bottom and then one day you just hear an explosion. I said
that’s exactly what will happen in South Africa. And then when that happens the South
African people will be free. So you know, that was like my little high school essay.
(laughs) You know, blah blah blah. So then I come to the United States—fast forward.
And then Nelson Mandela is working out of prison—I mean the emotion—and also
back then reading the book. I just cried a lot reading that book because I just felt so sad.
_Cry My Beloved Country_ by Alan Paton. You know, like the whole ANC struggle. And
Luthuli—Luthuli?—Luthuli I think—L-U-T-H-U-L-I- was the main character. He was
in ANC—I think he was the founder of ANC. You know, and so his struggles. And I
think as a young person I was so sad. I felt like so sad about, like, at that time it seemed
like nothing would ever free these people. It just looked like the white government was
so invincible. It was so immovable. So as Nelson Mandela is walking out of prison—
those were the memories that were flooding my mind. I was watching on television.
Like where were you when Kennedy was assassinated? (laughs) I can tell you exactly
where I was when Nelson Mandela, you know, came out of prison.

CT: I will actually be asking some question about Mandela—

NK: OK
CT: Because I want to know your reaction to all of that. How was your reaction to Ronald Regan’s election in 1980?

NK: Maddening. It was maddening because—first of all I could not believe—by then I had now lived in this country a tiny bit. And at first I thought, “oh no it’s not possible.” Americans are too smart. They are not going to like this man. This man is an actor. He’s a good actor. He speaks a good line but he doesn’t have the kind of intelligence that you need to lead a nation like this. Obviously I was wrong (laughs). American’s did elect Ronald Regan and it just felt so desperately hopeless because he was so matched to the right and his policies about the world. And Americans—not all Americans seemed to love him. He just seemed to say things like—in a simplistic way—and actually believed them. (laughs) you know? He just seemed so popular. I could not, for the life of me, understand why did somebody who didn’t seem to have much substance be so popular in a country like this where it’s supposed to be the most powerful nation on earth, the leader of the world. You know? I think that’s when I thought, “OH GOD”. I thought to myself I guess the American public can do just about anything. If we can elect such a man—because some people kept telling me “Oh they are not going to elect him” and I would say, “oh yeah, they are not going to elect him. No they are not!”. And you know I couldn’t vote then so I could only be on the sidelines. And they did elect him; not once but twice. And yeah, it just felt like—it was hard to live in this country when—it was difficult.

CT: And what are your feelings about his policies towards South Africa

NK: I was furious. I was mad. I was—you know. This philosophy of engagement—(laughs) constructive engagement nonsense justifying the reason why they got to be—have a policy of constructive engagement—a white racist—a government that by then the Europeans had begun, were distancing from—and American just seemed to be the one; To be on their side. And what was also disturbing was that America was so powerful economically and militarily so if it was a little country some where, that’s
different but this was a country—the leader of the so called “Free World”, the most powerful nation militarily and economically. Being on the side of South Africa—I mean it just felt like such an impossible feat to dislodge from the South African government. And the amount of confidence it had to give South Africa to know that the United States was on its side. So that was a hard time with the struggle against Apartheid, battling feelings of hopelessness and believing that there’s still hope. Hanging on to hope that South Africa can still be free and will one day be free and hanging in there in the struggle against Apartheid—and just hanging in there—and at home feelings like you were like, like you were in the desert. You know, calling for the freeing of Nelson Mandela and the ending of Apartheid. There’s nothing to echo back to you during those years with Regan

CT: How did you feel when Mandela first came to the United States after his release?

NK: OH GOD! It’s hard to describe the feelings of euphoria and incredulous and its like, you have to pinch myself to say this is happening. This is real. I mean, I have a lot of pent up emotions because it told me that you know—[ Njoki crying ]—you should never give up, never. You should never give up, you know, when you’re fighting injustice, just hang in there because no matter how impossible things look, that little [beats on her leg] you there and me there and that person there. That’s what will bring down—no matter how a system—no matter how invincible a system appears. So I just felt like so—uhh—just a good sense of victory and a good sense of appreciation of—obviously he paid a bigger price—the biggest price of most of us. Most of us were sleeping on a bed. I was eating. He was in a cell. But actually injustice can be brought down. That justice—you can win. You may not live to see the victory, you may not be there but you need to know that actually when you fight against oppression and injustice that little by little you’re moving something. Some little thing is moving. And to hang in there even though everything else tells you, “Oh you are wasting your time. What do you think you are doing? Are you crazy? You know, don’t you have better things to do. Oh it’s a lost cause. Oh forget it. Oh you people—you’re dreamers”. Just hang in there and keep on fighting. You know keep up the struggle because one day, one fine day,
one fine day—even the mightiest of the Empires have come down (laughs). And actually the so called “Mighty Empire” of South Africa did come down. It did come down--Uhhh--I am so glad I lived to see it, I swear. I thought of my high school days, my college days in Nairobi—in Kenya and the feelings of reading Cry My Beloved Country that made me feel so sad as a young person. I felt, oh my god, feeling like nothing can be done, nothing can bring down this system. But to be alive to see it come down well it’s really definitely—it’s something that is hard to describe. So I lived to see South Africa come down. I lived to see Kenya—you know, the British come down. I lived to see the racist South African government come down. And I lived to see Obama become president. So I feel like, you know, hey, if nothing else, I think my life was well spent (laughs). And I was very active in the Obama campaign. Yeah, I was very active.

CT: Um, what do you think your biggest contribution to the movement was? With all these big things you were just talking about and the big moments that you remember—

NK: I think, I think—you say my greatest contribution?

CT: Uh huh--

NK: my contribution to the movement? I think it was just being one of those to be counted. I think it’s not so much that I was a big name in the movement; I was more of an ordinary person in the movement who believed—who dared to believe that as ordinary as I was, that I could make a difference. And that it took ordinary people—that ordinary person and that ordinary person—who made ten, who made twenty, who made thirty, who made a hundred, who made a thousand, who made—you know, thousands of people—and hundreds in Chicago but thousands, you know, across the world to continue the sustained pressure to governments, to companies, to South Africa itself to bring down the Apartheid government. That—because often we think the big names are great. Nelson Mandela is great. He was the catalyst and certainly spearheaded and the forefront. And he became a symbol for us to rally around. But bringing down the South African government wouldn’t have been possible with out every single individual, who
in their own way, did what they did to make a contribution. So I am one of those people and—because often as an individual we are made to believe that you can’t make a difference—that you are just one ordinary person. You hear people say, “Who am I? What do I know? I am just one person”. No you are one person because—if everybody says “What do I know? What can I do? There’s nothing I can do. I’m just one person”—when we all say that nothing moves. When one person says, “You know what, I can make a difference”, then does something. Then another person says, “I can make a difference” and does something and then another person says like that then you have five. You have ten. You have—that’s how we elected Obama. It’s the same way the South African government came down. And it took a lot of work. It took a lot of time. It took blood. It took people dying, loosing their lives. It took people in prisons. It took every single act and every single individual collectively together to bring down the Apartheid government. So for me, I see myself as one of those thousands, doing my little part. My little part was in Chicago being involved with Clooney and Lisa and so many other people. At Northwestern with Dennis Brutus, you know. I don’t know how much of all the, um, all the marching and all that we did—I don’t know what kind of a dent it put but I know it added to the collective energy and effort; our little movement.

CT: What do you think were some mistakes that were made during the movement?

NK: Um, what do I think were the mistakes? To tell you the truth, right now, I am not able to think of what the mistakes were. I mean, I will leave that to other people who, I’m sure, have done some major analysis maybe through research. But you know, I can’t really think of what mistakes that we made

CT: And you mentioned throughout your activism, you look back and you think that several people influenced you?

NK: Yeah, different people at different times, yeah.

CT: What are some regrets that you have looking back on your activism?
NK: Some regrets that I have? (laughs) Um, do I have any regrets? You mean against Apartheid?

CT: against your involvement—

NK: against my involvement? Frankly, I don’t have any. I think it was pretty risky as a student to be showing up (laughs) in the demonstration and to be on the front page of the school newspaper. (truck horn) But to tell you the truth, I was such a vibrant. I didn’t really think about—in the moment I wasn’t thinking about the consequences. I wasn’t thinking about what my professors will think. I wasn’t thinking what will be the repercussions—what would be—I was just really—I was just clear that, you know, this is unacceptable. And so it was pretty risky that I’m a student in this institution and that I’m there [arm up/hand in fist] (laughs) attacking the institution and fighting it and willing to be—to be—you know, to be public whatever. So, I don’t have any regrets, in fact if any, that’s an honor. Now if they had tried to expel me or something—if for example I had been thrown out, I don’t know, maybe I would have regrets. But nobody did anything. Nobody tried to—there seemed no repercussions and me for that. But it’s not something that I really sat down and calculated and worried about. I was just, you know, very much in the moment. That Northwestern needs to divest; that this is unacceptable.

CT: If you got to speak to Nelson Mandela today, what would you say to him?

NK: Uhhh, oh god, what would I say? You have some tough questions. (laughs) What would I say to him? Uhhh god. I feel like a drop of water in the desert, you know, I’d have to say the thing that was at most in my heart. I think I would, um say to him thank you. I would say to him thank you for putting his life on the line for his people. And it was for his people but really it was for all people everywhere who were oppressed. And I would say to him it cost you a lot. It cost you almost thirty years of your life. Um, and thank you for modeling what—being committed to fighting injustice, to fighting against
oppression, to caring about people, um. Thank you for modeling what that looks like. For all of us to see, not just for now, but for generations to come. That you be a living model of what it means to be committed to ending injustice. That when people, young people want—because—a lot of time sometimes young people—you read a book that influences you or you see a movie about a person that inspires you. That when they—when they read about your life—when they hear about you and they watch movies about your life—documentaries—that they will know, this is how you fight. That you don’t give up. Even though it may take years that you don’t give up. That you just keep fighting. And anything that can bring equality, justice, is worth fighting for. And we humans modeling that—and also I would say to him when you came out of prison I read that book. What is that book? The book is uhh—The Long Night’s Journey? There’s a book—You know his book—it’s an autobiography. It’s beautiful. Uh, when I started reading it, I couldn’t put it down. You know, its just all the thinking—you know we didn’t realize the amount of thinking he was doing and the amount of negotiation he had to do right at the end and—(cough) dealing with the clock, you know, behind the scenes. Even as he was in prison and coming out and not—not signing on to a blood bath. And saying ok. If anybody had the right to say it’s time to revenge, it would have been Nelson Mandela. But no, he did not. He took us on a different road. A road not forgetting-naively forgetting and forgiving but more so that—to go forward. And to the South African people to go forward and to build the nation which is a multi-racial society; a nation for all. So to have that kind of heart—for people—for you to say let’s go forward and build the nation with the very people who imprisoned you for thirty years and killed thousands and thousands of your people and maimed thousands of your people, it takes a special kind of a person.

CT: Hmmm

NK: Yeah

CT: Well thank you very much for your time and sharing your experiences—
NK: (laughs)

CT: They are very interesting. Is there anything else you want to mention or go into detail about or anything else that you would like to mention?

NK: I think just to say that when I did what I did—you know getting involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, to me I just did what seemed so natural to do. That in a situation like that—it just makes so much sense to be involved and to fight for what is right. And to fight for—it’s really for the larger idea of ending humans harming humans. That we, as a species, as a people we have no business hurting each other. There is nothing that can justify as hurting each other the way we do. That our greatness is housed in, when we work together, when we collaborate, when we bring our energy together, our minds together—that when we hurt each other—and that actually, fundamentally we are the same people. Physically we may look green, or yellow, or blue, or black, or white, or red but fundamentally we are the same people. You know, you read about that racism is a construction. That 99% of humans, you know, are the same. Actually 99.99%—there’s just .001% is what makes us look different. But at in the end of the day, we actually, you know, we are the same. And we do better when we come together. And our greatness will only come about when we come together and move forward as a people. And it’s what Martin Luther King said—Martin Luther King said we are in the same boat—it’s not verbatim—you know, we sink—if the boat sinks we sink together. If the boat, you know, rises, we rise together.

CT: Hmm, wow

NK: Yeah.

CT: Very interesting—

NK: Yeah. And so my commitment will continue to be—you know, its great that the racist South Africa government came down but because the work to end oppression is
not over. So the struggle continues. It just continues in many different ways and I have continued in that way—in that—my life is about making this beautiful planet a better place for all of us; for me, for myself and for my fellow human beings and for generations to come.

CT: wow

NK: Ok?

CT: Yeah, thank you!

NK: (laughs)

CT: It is currently 3:38. We started at 2:02. Thank you very much!

NK: You’re most welcome!