

**U.18 Long Civil Rights Movement:
Heirs to a Fighting Tradition**

**Interview U-0562
Ajamu Dillahunt
December 16, 2008**

**Field Notes – 2
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FIELD NOTES- Ajamu Dillahunt

Interviewee: Ajamu Dillahunt

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview Date: December 16, 2008

Locations: Ajamu's home, Raleigh, NC

HEIRS TO A FIGHTING TRADITION: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists” is a multi-phased oral history project which explores the stories and traditions of social justice activism in North Carolina through in-depth interviews with fourteen highly respected activists and organizers. Selected for the integrity and high level of skill in their work dedicated to social justice, the interviewees represent a diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity. These narratives capture the richness of a set of activists with powerful perspectives on social justice and similar visions of the common good. These are stories of transition and transformation, tales of sea change and burnout, organizing successes and heart wrenching defeats. These are the stories of the Movement.

All of the oral histories will be archived in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and will be a valuable addition to the modest amount of literature about contemporary social justice activism in the South.

THE INTERVIEWEE: Ajamu Dillahunt joined the Justice Center in April of 2004 as the Outreach Coordinator for the Budget and Tax Center. Ajamu has been a tireless advocate for working families in North Carolina for over twenty-five years. For the 18 years, Ajamu served as President of the Raleigh Area Local of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). He was Director of Research and Education for the North Carolina Council of the APWU during that period. Ajamu was a Labor Educator and Arbitration Advocate as well. He has done community organizing and training in various communities in N.C. He has a Masters Degree in African Studies and maintains an active interest in the African Diaspora, particularly in the Caribbean and Latin America.

THE INTERVIEWER: Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and

methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master's degree in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace Action's state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund's executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training, facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project "Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists." The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: December 16, 2008, It was warm and foggy on the way there at 10 am this morning and then cold and rainy on the way out the door 2 hours later. Crazy weather. We recorded in the basement this time, but Pepper still made his presence known. Kathryn Stein, the Heirs Project's newest creative coordinator sat in on the conversation today and took some photos. She brought us bagels. We had a good interview. Sound quality was good. Used the internal mic. Nothing out of the ordinary to report. We'll definitely need a third and probably a fourth interview.

TRANSCRIPT: AJAMU DILLAHUNT

Interviewee: Ajamu Dillahunt

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: December 16, 2008

Location: Home of Ajamu Dillahunt, Raleigh, NC

Length: 1 disc, approximately 109 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: That be might--.

BRIDGETTE BURGE: Sit in the rocking chair.

AD: More highlandish. [Referring to the Highlander Center for Research and Education in Tennessee, known for its images of community organizers sitting in rocking chairs in a circle while working together.]

BB: More highlanderish. [Laughter]

AD: [Laughter]

BB: Good. All right, I'm recording a little bit just to get some sound while we get settled.

AD: Yeah, so we're just talking here to get a sound check.

BB: Yep.

AD: And of course, I'm further away from the mic than I'll be when we actually start, but you'll get an idea.

AD: Of the sound. And is the background okay on this with me sitting over here? I

mean I don't know how much your--.

KATHRYN STEIN: Yeah, I'm probably going to have to take more pictures another time anyway, so--.

AD: Okay.

BB: Okay, here, Ajamu. Here's a thank you present.

AD: For what?

BB: For doing this and sharing your life story. Go ahead and open it. I'm going to move this over here. And I'll be able to check the levels.

AD: Yeah, we were successful, the live streaming.

BB: Did it work?

AD: We had like thirteen, fourteen people on different times. I've got like, I forgot how many hits since then of people. So it's on there.

BB: All right. I need to figure out where to go to check it out.

AD: Yeah, It's UStream TV.

BB: Okay, UStream TV, I saw that.

AD: And it's as the program. Thank you.

BB: Yeah, that is handmade in Brazil. It's by some artisans there. A friend of mine's husband goes down because his family's from there and he brought it back. And she was passing out these gifts. And I said, "Oh, that's a good thank you gift for Ajamu." [Laughter]

AD: Yes, it's very nice.

BB: I don't know what the--. She didn't know what the beads are or anything, but a little gift.

AD: Yeah, and I'll make up some story.

BB: There you go. [Laughter]

AD: So when I'm wearing it and people ask me--.

BB: A revolutionary in Brazil made it especially for me.

AD: Yeah, I've got some brown stuff that will match it, too, also be color coordinated.

[Laughter] Thank you. I appreciate it.

BB: Thank you. All right, so now I'm going to get like thirty seconds of just quiet so we can get the, as people edit in little quiet spots when they can. And Kat, can you stay the whole time, for a couple hours, or do you need to--?

KS: I can stay.

BB: Okay.

AD: In terms of the whole time, it's 10:30. I've got to be at a meeting at one. And I need a little prep to download some stuff before I go.

BB: Okay, 12:15?

AD: Yeah, that should do it.

BB: 12:30 tops?

AD: Yeah, yeah, okay.

BB: All right, so. [Laughter] Curled up on your lap. All right, so I'm going to get about thirty seconds of quiet. Some good sound, I can hear him licking his chops. [Laughter]

AD: Oh, okay, yeah? Very good sound.

BB: You bet.

AD: What a microphone.

BB: I know, the internal one, no less. Okay, so today is December 16, 2008, right?

AD: Yes.

BB: And this is the second interview in a series with Ajamu Dillahunt. And this is part of the project Heirs to a Fighting Tradition, oral histories of social justice activists in North Carolina. Bridgette Burge is the interviewer and Kathryn Stein is here today, who's the newly minted creative coordinator of Heirs to a Fighting Tradition, taking photographs and collecting our radical folk stuff, art stuff. So thanks again, Ajamu. And one thing before we start off is this weekend was the Southern Human Rights Organizers' Conference in RTP at the Radisson hotel, which was fabulous. And you mentioned that there were a couple things you wanted to clarify before we dive in, from our last interview. Do you remember what you wanted to--?

AD: Yeah, not related to the conference, of course, the interview. Well, the one thing that I do remember, I had mentioned my grandfather's, my maternal grandfather's heritage and said that it was Irish, but in fact it's Italian. And it's funny because I had thought for many, many years, I told you I never met him, and I had thought that it was Irish and I was making assumptions of the last name Harris. But I'd learned through my cousin's son, who did a family history for a high school paper, that in fact, he was Italian and I asked and said, "Oh, yeah, yeah, that was his heritage." So I shared with you old information that I just haven't really reconciled in my head, but yeah, that's his heritage. That's the only thing that I can remember, in terms of, well there was something else, but I can't recall what it is now. So maybe before the interview is over or maybe in the next week or two, it'll come back to me and I'll share it with you.

BB: Okay, all right, thanks. So, last time we were talking about some political awakenings for you, toward the end of the interview. And you were talking about some great stuff, but in high school were there any particularly influential teachers that you remember that shaped you politically?

AD: Well, I don't know about a shaping that was political, but maybe more general, as

they used to say “character-wise” or whatever, inspirational. But there was an African American woman, Mrs. Watson, who was a history teacher and she was one of those no nonsense folks who pushed real hard. She lived, not in my neighborhood, but she lived in the neighborhood of folks that attended the school. So people knew her, and so there was always that set of eyes that knew your mom and your daddy. And that’s something, that was a phenomenon I always hear about in the South, because of the segregated schools and segregated neighborhoods and you always had that, that the teacher and the principal lived in the community and knew your families. That’s less so a phenomenon in a large urban area, particularly like New York City, but in this particular case, Mrs. Watson did live in the community that was nearby to ours. And so just her enthusiasm about history and kind of giving the sense of how important it was, I think kind of sunk in and I became very interested in history, a junkie so to speak. And then there were a couple of other teachers. We were talking about this at a reunion not too long ago, some high school friends of mine. And there were a couple of teachers who were very young, probably in their early twenties, recent graduates from college, high school teachers, and so we were able to relate to them a good deal. And there was one who, I guess his name was Godfrey Burns, was an English teacher. He never taught me directly, but he was one of those hip young teachers. His sister was one of our contemporaries. She actually was in our graduating class. But we saw him to be very hip. He also was serious and you couldn’t b.s. him on stuff, and very impressive in that he left, I guess actually before we graduated, to go back to medical school. So that was an important image, model to see with him. And then I guess there are probably a number of others, as I think about it.

Mr. Morris, this wasn’t in high school. This was junior high school, did live in the neighborhood, taught English, was a specialist in Shakespearian and classical literature and kind of felt like young Black kids in the neighborhood got to learn this stuff. And made you wear a tie to

his class and if you came without a tie, he would kick you out. He'd give you one shot with a replacement tie that he'd bring with him and then after that--. And he, again like some of the others, you'd see him in the neighborhood. He rode a bike. He and his wife had a tandem bike, right. This is really deep. I mean I lived in a kind of lower middle-class, upper working-class neighborhood, kind of suburban New York. Jamaica, Queens. And here's this Black dude riding a tandem bicycle with his wife. Mr. Morris had a handlebar mustache, a very thick handlebar moustache. He was really serious. He was hard, but he loved the kids. And he insisted on excellence. And so that was good that he--. The Ancient Mariner was also one of the things he pushed on us, and Moby Dick, and I remember iambic pentameter. That was his. [Laughter] He loved to teach that, not that I really grasped it that much at that time, but those were influences. And there was a track coach, Milton Black, who was an English teacher and as it turned out, you know, very much a part of the athletic scene in New York City, produced championship track teams for maybe thirty or forty years, probably. Initially the school was mainly white. He started his coaching in those years and then as the school became integrated, most of the track stars and track team members were African Americans. He was also a counselor or an academic advisor. So if you ran, he was going to make sure you went to college. And he had contacts like all over the country, and so he was very helpful in that respect. And he was a serious, serious man, and I think that was helpful in terms of developing some discipline that connected the academic and athletic pieces of your life. I mean the rules were such that you had to be academically eligible to run. And of course, I think you really just had to maintain a C average, so that wasn't too much of a challenge. But his exhortation was, "If you want to go to school, you've got to have a higher grade point average and you need to do well," and so on. So that was also a kind of influence, in terms of teachers.

BB: What was the name of your high school?

AD: Andrew Jackson High School. And I think of it, we were called the Old Hickories. It's just the team, you know, nickname for the team. And I guess, I know I studied Andrew Jackson in American history, but it's in latter years that it just occurred to me how much of a reactionary he was, in terms of his wars against Native Americans and damage that he did. You know, it was genocidal, and that we weren't in a period where we, one, grasped that, at that time in high school, where we grasped it. And two, where we might even want to challenge the name of the school, as people have done in subsequent years. Like if it was a racist after which the school was named, people would fight to have the name changed. And of course, the movement to just bring positive heroes and sheroes into the namings of buildings. But it's an afterthought, that Jackson--. But yeah, it was a high school in Cambria Heights, Queens.

BB: And were you athletic? Were you on the track team?

AD: Yeah, well, I was on the track team. I ran track for the three years that I was in high school and it was an important part of my development. Clearly, the discipline that it takes to run track has helped to make me whatever I am today, whatever that is, but in terms of some discipline, regular practice, pushing yourself physically and mentally, because at the end of the day, that kind of athletic competition requires mental concentration and the ability to kind of push beyond, particularly when you're running the longer distances. I was a quarter-miler. I was decent, got some medals, won a couple of championship relay races with other folks, not an individual star, but it was important. And then I played basketball a little bit, not on the team, but in community teams and inter-mural teams as well.

BB: Do you have any best friends or closest friends that stand out for you in those high school years?

AD: Well yeah, but let me just say, let me bring back the track piece, because three months ago, here at UNC, they were having a kind of a celebration of 1968, in fact, at the Sonya Haynes Cultural Center. Dr. Jordan over there's been doing this kind of retrospective. Three years ago it was a conference on Black Power and the developments around that movement. And then a second conference was on Black and Brown. It was a project that brought together activists and artwork, film, and paintings on the Black Panther and Young Lords collaboration. And then this fall, he did a thing on the 1968 Olympics and the protests there and had Tommie Smith come to do a lecture. So that was like a really important event for me.

BB: Say who Tommie Smith is.

AD: Yeah, Tommie Smith was one of the athletes who's known now around the world for the protests on the victory stand at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. He along with John Carlos and Henry, oh I'm trying to think of the Australian's name. This is really bad because he's a John Brown-type figure in many ways. [Peter Norman] I'll think of his name, but when they won after the 200-meter sprint, on the victory stand they're the ones that gave the Black Power salute with black gloves on their fists, one on each fist. They had one pair of gloves. I don't remember who wore which glove, but one on the left fist and one on the right fist. And so that was important. I mean that's a photograph you see on t-shirts and posters now. And there's a surge in it every, I don't know, five or ten years you see it. I know during the '90s it was really popular again, and here lately I've seen a lot of it. So he was here and I got a chance to meet him, to talk to him and tell him two things. Just the fact that this protest was important in bringing political consciousness and awareness onto the playing field was an important kind of thing. But also as a track athlete who--. You know when I first started running, of course you felt like, "Well, yeah. I might make the Olympics." And of course that became increasingly clear that that was not going to happen,

but you still feel a part of it.

And one of our teammates actually was not on his team, but was on the Olympic team, Vinnie Matthews. Vinnie Matthews was a--. Let's see. I guess when we graduated, in our senior year, Vinnie was probably a freshman, but he was just outstanding. And as I said to Tommie in the question and answer period, I graduated just in time before he took my spot because it was clear, I mean he was so good, he was going to run many people off the team. And he actually made the Olympic 400-meter relay team, graduated from Jackson and came south actually to Johnson C. Smith here in Charlotte. I mean we haven't, I haven't seen Vinnie since then, actually. I think maybe one or two other people that I know who we talked to recently might have seen him, but anyway there's that connection. Vinnie's team, so there's four people on the stand. And I often feel like they get short shrift in the attention because they wore berets on the victory stand. I don't know, there may have been some gloves, but they wore black berets. And at that time, a black beret was identified with Black Power and the Black Panthers. And so it was also a protest as well.

But the 200-meter protest with John Carlos and Tommie Smith came ahead of theirs and got most of the attention. And of course, they were expelled from the village and had to go home. And both of them, they suffered pretty severe repercussions in their professional lives afterwards and led to personal problems and family issues and all of that, but they both really have come through it, so it's really been important. So I had to say to them just how important they were, in terms of young Black people seeing this and knowing the risk that they took. I mean this was a great risk, and really standing up in that way was important. So that was a great experience to be able to do that. And the next week, I went to this reunion with some of my friends who were on the track team. So to be able to convey this story was like hot stuff. [Laughter] It was really good. So you asked about friends. Yeah, well, I mean I think about that a lot because living in

an area that I didn't grow up in and then having a lot of friends who didn't become engaged in the social justice movement, at least to the extent that I have, has created a kind of vacuum, in terms of the maintenance of long-term friends. So I mean in terms of growing up, I was very close to a cousin who lived across the street.

BB: What's your cousin's name?

AD: Tony Kidney.

BB: Kidney.

AD: Yeah, and not across the street. He lived around the corner, but he's my mother's sister's son. And so we, we're about the same age, and so we had pretty parallel experiences growing up and hung out a lot. We were in the Scouts together and went to the same church. We were in the same social club, which was a jazz club, which I'll tell you about. I thought was pretty unique for us. And so he was a good friend. Another friend, Carl Martin, he did live around the corner. We were on the track team together. And Carl and I ended up, both of us transferring to West Virginia State in our sophomore years, and we were roommates on campus, and then later on became housemates. I ended up having the privilege of being the best man in his wedding. And then for a good time, we were fortunate. When I lived in New Paltz, he worked in Albany. In fact, he had worked in New Paltz before I got there, but had moved on up to SUNY-Albany. And so we had an opportunity to exchange visits frequently, Albany being about an hour and a half away from New Paltz. So we stayed in touch. And then when I moved south, the contact declined a little bit, but over the last few years, we've really, we've been in touch, and we've been doing these annual reunions with friends. But then there's a whole circle beyond that of friends. Kenny Clay, a friend of ours who died recently, we went to high school together. We had--.

[INTERRUPTION DUE TO DOG BARKING]

AD: We had part-time jobs together. Pepper stop, Pepper. You're going to go to your house. We had part-time jobs together. We were messengers for a bank in Manhattan. That was a really big fun--. You know as high school students, we had a little extra money and we had a chance to go to Manhattan and buy music and clothes in shops in Manhattan. That was all good. He ended up, he went to West Virginia State College with us as well. We were really close, into the music, into the same social club.

BB: How'd he pass away?

AD: Basically complications from diabetes. He had a kidney transplant, high blood pressure, all that. And he passed, I guess it will be, it was in 2005. And he's actually been the catalyst, his death, for bringing our friends, our circle of friends back together. We came together at the funeral and said, "It's been too long and we need to stay in touch." And so we've had these three years of gathering as a result of his--. And this thing, I don't have it. Maybe I'll share it with the photos, but a friend of mine, David [Royall] did a beautiful Photoshop piece. Maybe it wasn't Photoshop. I don't know what it was, but he used some program. So we took a picture in a friend's house. We went to visit a friend after the funeral, and I think it was four or five of us. We took a picture there standing together. And then David took Kenny's picture from the obituary and put it in the background. Well, the whole background was the New York City skyline, like where we grew up, right, in New York. And then looking over us is Kenny, so yeah, it's deep. It was deep. And David did that. David's another friend who we grew up with. And David went off to the Air Force. He didn't go to college with us, but we stayed in touch with him and over the years we've been very close to him. And Kenny, Harold Clay, Omowale Clay, another friend of mine. He's the one who's a political activist. Of our circle, he was the only other person who changed his name to an African name way back many years ago.

BB: What'd he change it to?

AD: Omowale.

BB: Omowale.

AD: Yeah, Omowale, same name that Malcolm X had been given. That was Malcolm's African name, Omowale. And so he and I, we stay in touch and we've been active, we were active many years ago in political projects together. And so we've stayed close. And so that's another friend. Maurice [Johnson] who lives in South Carolina now, we stay in touch. There are a number of others. And then another good friend from college who ended up being my best man, Darnley Osbourne.

BB: Donny Osmond?

AD: Darnley. D-A-R-N-L-E-Y. Darnley Osbourne, with an "s." Pepper, Pepper come here, come here.

[INTERRUPTION DUE TO DOG BARKING]

BB: I should've ignored him, but I've got a friend. [Laughter] He's okay.

AD: Come on, come on, come on. You want to go upstairs? Want to go to your house? Come on. Now, you've got to see the run.

BB: [Laughter]

AD: Once he gets started, he just--.

BB: So this is the dog that almost died. No, I don't believe it.

AD: Yeah, couldn't walk Saturday night.

BB: Pepper, you're crazy, you're crazy.

AD: Pepper, go upstairs please, go upstairs, come on, go.

BB: Heck, all the action's down here. I'm not going upstairs. [Laughter]

KS: When he came up here, started.

BB: He's playing with my hair, scratching, felt kind of good. So I got the attention.

AD: I may pay for that later with--. He may pee on something. [Laughter]

BB: That's right, leave a little gift for you upstairs, a little f.u. for making him--. Okay, what's Maurice's last name?

AD: Johnson.

BB: Johnson, okay.

AD: Friends.

BB: Yeah, friends. Anything more about friends that you want to say?

AD: I mean now--. I mean they were, growing up, those were the friends. Those were the friends.

BB: I wonder how you--. Have you had any interest in conversations about...being engaged politically is such a huge part of your life. What's that like to have conversations with friends who aren't activists? Have you had any interesting ones?

AD: Well, yeah. I mean they only really happen, they've happened at these reunions, because we spent like hours just hanging out. In fact the last one, the weather was bad. We were in Charleston. All three have been in Charleston, but the weather was--.

BB: South Carolina?

AD: Yeah. It was raining and we just sat in the hotel room and told lies. [Laughter] For the whole, for the whole time. I mean we went out to eat and that's all that we--. And of course we drank, but not as much as we used to. We each year have commented on how much wine and beer and booze gets left, like we buy it, like your eyes are bigger than your stomach. And we're thinking like the past, the old days, and then we just don't drink that much because

we're older and wiser, I guess, but mainly older. [Laughter] Just can't drink as much. But we've had discussions. And the two that, well probably three different ones stand out for me. Going back to the first reunion, we talked about neighborhoods and how neighborhoods have shifted and social conditions, a kind of deterioration of the cohesion of those communities. I mean these are Black communities that we lived in, but that the kind of relationships that people had with one another, like I mentioned before, again, this notion in the South that the community's families watched out for each other. And there was more interaction with folks. In that particular community, we had very similar kinds of things. And the feeling was it doesn't happen now and so the questions were around people taking responsibility and are parents doing enough. And did our families resist enough? And what's the lack of government attention to the communities and fighting back to them? And even this whole question, because I mean if we look across the whole cohort of folks, we have people who came from working-class backgrounds whose parents had not been to college at all. We were first generation, but then a couple of others, their parents had been college graduates and had kind of fairly stable middle-class lives. As we reviewed where we came from, but this is the kind of stuff we didn't necessarily talk about as young people, which is kind of amazing, like almost all of us came from the South, our families. Most of us or some of us were born in Brooklyn or Queens or Harlem or whatever, but our parents had roots in North Carolina and South Carolina and Georgia. And some people knew that about others, but others were like, "Oh, I didn't know that." And then we had a good grouping of people from the Caribbean, from Jamaica and Trinidad and Barbados and Panama, Puerto Rico. But the kind of identity issues hadn't really gelled at that time. This is the '50s and '60s, and so we weren't thinking of each other in that kind of way. We weren't relating to each other.

BB: And so in the context of the migration, that's what you mean. You weren't thinking

about it in an historical context or just the Southern roots?

AD: Yeah, or even you might say, like my friend Cornelius, yeah he's a country boy because he just moved from Winston-Salem, had gone to elementary school there, joined us in elementary school, later on in elementary school, but he hadn't grown up in Queens or Brooklyn. So he's a country boy. So I mean that kind of sense and whatnot. Or Julian's parents are from Jamaica, because you hear that heavy Jamaican accent or Julian's always telling jokes about his family that related to their origins in Jamaica. So you had those kinds of things, but people not making anything of it, I mean there's never like, "Oh, we can't hang out because he's from Jamaica or he's from Puerto Rico," or, "We're from the city and he's a country boy." You just didn't have those kinds of things. I'm sure the dynamics might have showed up in some kind of ways in terms of how families thought about themselves, the parents and the aspirations they had for their children, but that whole group, I mean the whole idea for that generation, our parents, was to do better, their own version of the American dream, to move from Harlem, to move from Brooklyn, some from the Bronx, to Queens, to a suburban neighborhood. That was the whole thing. Many of us, we moved from the projects in Brooklyn to Queens. My friend Kenny—was it Kenny or Harold? They were cousins. They had lived in Harlem. One of them, his father hit the number and that's how he bought his house, he made the down payment for his house. He worked for the city. He ended up being a motorman in transit, the New York City Transit Authority, but that's how he got the money. Another friend, Maurice, his dad had a drycleaners. He hit the number and bought the dry cleaning business and that's how they ended up out there.

But I mean the whole thing was to get a house, to get out of the city, to get away from crime, from gangs, from drugs. Although when they first moved there in the early '50s, the drug plague was not very predominant at that time, but just the whole idea of living in your own home

and being in the suburbs and maybe there's better schools and all that. We were part of that. And then to go to college. So the conversations we've had is about a lot of people who abandoned those communities, those who grew up there, but went off to school and were able to get good jobs and to buy homes elsewhere, or they had careers that took them elsewhere, that they didn't fight for the community. And so that's been one political discussion. And then some people with more conservative views in the group have said, "There's just no responsibility. My mother and father made me do this. Right now, these parents don't make their children do these things," and all that. So we've had that.

Then we had a discussion about Zimbabwe, which was interesting and the full range of ideas on Zimbabwe were there, from Mugabe's [Robert Mugabe is the second and current president of Zimbabwe] a butcher and needs to go, to Mugabe's got some issues and whatnot, but one of the problems is how the, the peace deal between Great Britain and Zimbabwe, and the U.S. as kind of a silent third partner, how that evolved and the kind of situation that that put the ruling party in and has created some of the issues that we have today, all the way up through, "The Zanu PF is right. They're trying to re-colonize Africa again and we have to support them." And so, give and take along those lines.

BB: Where do you land on all that?

AD: I'm pretty much in the middle of that, not that I'm particularly a Centrist on anything, but I think it's a little bit of both. And particularly at that time, I think even that Mugabe probably waited too long for some of the reforms on land questions. And when he tried to do it in earnest, it was done pretty recklessly and created a lot of different problems. So I think that he bears some of the burden, at least at that point in time, but clearly the U.S. didn't like him. And so you've got all these other British and U.S. interests that would like to see them fail, certainly didn't

want to see it happen this way, but this is the way it's gone down, and it's really a sad situation. Some people talk about Zimbabwe being the breadbasket of Africa, but for us it was a jewel, in terms of liberation politics and self-determination, that a government that had evolved out of an armed struggle against another version of apartheid, against the Rhodesian colonists, had risen to power and was really doing so well leading Africa, in terms of development. And so to see that being reversed is a kind of sad thing for people. And that's the way I felt about that. So that was that discussion. And then of course, the third discussion—and I'm thinking, the first two, maybe was it the first reunion? I don't know about the second. I can't—but to be sure, the third reunion was totally consumed by the Obama campaign. That was the main political discussion.

BB: And when was this? What was the date?

AD: October second and third, so we were well into it. And one person in particular, Richard Nelson who lives in Atlanta, who's a retired air traffic controller and not involved in anything political that I knew of over the years, but had decided to—he said he would give some hours to volunteer. And he ended up like doing it full-time. He was wide open with it. He was in charge of sixty or seventy, no, maybe a couple of hundred other volunteers. And he was involved in the registration piece of the campaign, you know, getting voters registered. So he was a part of that. And then others, just as they went about their daily lives and talked to their friends and sent out emails, all the Obama stuff.

And then Obowale and myself, who were more engaged politically, were involved in various community and organizational kinds of expressions of support for the campaign. And so we talked about it, and what it would really mean, and was it going to be a real change, and what's the symbolism behind it, and what that meant, how our folks thought about it. I'm the only—let's see, my dad's alive and David, his mother and father are still alive, but the rest of our friends who

were, all their parents are gone now, so just wondering what they would've thought about this was really moving and interesting kinds of conversation. David, who does a blog, not a political blog, it's a kind of personal one, but all of his posts for like two or three months were like a post about Obama's kind of stuff. We graduated from high school in '63, basically, some in '62, some in '64. And so we come out of that era. So even if we didn't go on to become fully engaged in politics, particularly social justice politics, I mean people were shaped by that era. So you pay attention to this stuff.

And a couple people, one person's a lawyer, retired principal, another a teacher, some retail workers, yeah, some other civil servants, that's the thing. And the interesting thing, when I say "civil servants," I just want to kind of digress to this, going back to that community that we grew up in, and our parents and others, and particularly my family, civil service was like a very important kind of thing, in terms of, "Will you get good employment? Will you get steady or protected employment?" Because even prior to some of the federal civil rights legislation, there were some guarantees there that you could get some jobs. So that's why you had Black folks in the postal service, because it was an exam based totally on objective, well almost totally on objective criteria. You take an exam. You get a score. When they look to hire people, they go to the list and take people on the basis on their scores, and that's how you get in. So it doesn't have anything to do with who you know, I mean basic requirements in terms of education and those kinds of things, but that was a kind of protected way for Black people to gain employment, not just on the federal level, but certainly in terms of cities and states and the New York City civil service thing.

Most of my folks worked for agencies. Well, we took the civil service exams. That's what they did. The paper that used to come out, The Chief, that had listings of all the exams, and

that was where, “Hey, they’re giving the elevator operator’s exam next week,” or, “The motorman’s exam is coming up,” or those kinds of things. So that was important in terms of people finding employment. And a lot of the parents, not just of my friends, but in that whole neighborhood, that whole cluster, were people that were part of that strata of working-class folks. As a result, they belonged to unions, because the unions had organized public employees in New York. And so they had that kind of experience. And then the benefits that went along with that, in terms of decent health care and dental. Kids, children of civil service workers in New York, their teeth were always good. [Laughter] They didn’t have dental problems because of excellent care in that way. And then also benefits for college scholarships and at least even being able to maybe accumulate a little bit of money to send people to school. So that was important. So I mean that’s kind of like a long-winded discussion of the political discussions that we had at the reunions, but that’s a kind of background for it.

BB: So what are some of your thoughts and feelings about President-Elect Barack Hussein Obama?

AD: Yeah, well, I think I mentioned to you last week that our conversation this month and last month and this month is quite different than it might’ve been if we did it when we scheduled it, just given the--.

BB: Scheduled the recording of your oral history?

AD: The earlier, the earlier one that we had to postpone.

BB: Right.

AD: But that we’ve had this phenomena. So I mean I think it’s a good thing, without a doubt, without a doubt. And I think you have to look at it on a number of different planes. And I think, you know, you heard this weekend, Bridgette, Julianne Malveaux, president of Bennett

College, talk about it, gave a very frank talk, as she's wont to do with anything, which is to her credit. But she kind of said, "Symbolism, all the symbolism, like you hear people cried, and you've got to get past the symbolism." Well, symbolism is important, though. And I think, in terms of understanding both psychology and how that impacts on people's social engagement and political engagement, I think that's really important.

[INTERRUPTION DUE TO DOG BARKING]

BB: Just hold up. Hold up for a second for Pepper to greet somebody walking by.

AD: Yeah. Pop's out of ear.

BB: Do you need to check on your dad?

AD: No.

BB: Okay, so in terms of psychology and it's--.

AD: Yeah, I mean the whole idea that grown people cried. And to me, the tears shed by, actually, the older people, like my dad and others, is probably symbolically profound. They get to see something happen that they never thought would happen before, something that affirms them as human beings, is an important kind of thing. It may not mean anything else. And particularly for his generation, this is not going to result in some kind of huge engagement politically. It's just that you go to your grave having had this wonderful experience of seeing something happen. A lot of people don't talk about this, but it's not unlike Jackie Robinson breaking into the major leagues in 1946, and in many ways like Jesse Owens and Joe Louis, the athletes and whatnot. And I think--. It's funny. I've been reading Dave Zirin's book on the people's history of sports, right around this time, and he certainly deals with these issues. But the response of the Black community to these things, given the political context of their time, was important, that this is striking a blow against racism, to see Jesse Owens win all of those medals and to piss off Hitler, the

fascist who's preaching Aryan superiority, is a wonderful kind of thing. To see Joe Louis beat Max Schmeling is a blow of the whole race striking a blow against White racism. And my father was telling me, you know, we've have an opportunity over this last four weeks to just get these random stories. Some of them I initiate by asking him a question, and others, he just comes with them. Some of them are repeats. [Laughter] When you get to eighty-nine, you repeat stuff.

BB: You've earned the privilege to repeat shit, though. [Laughter]

AD: But some of them are new, new kinds of things. And so he was talking about the Joe Louis fight, the first time when Schmeling beat him. And he said that he was living in New Bern at the time, small town, and he said it was like a funeral. Everybody was just all sad, you know, just all beat-up. And then the next fight when he beats him, he said it was like a party. People were celebrating and getting drunk and hanging out and partying and whatnot, because this was seen as a victory for their race, in a way that addressed all of these negative kinds of experiences that people were living on a daily basis. So, in many ways it replicates--. I mean so many have happened since then that are more profound than a sports contest, for sure. And I think anybody that reduces it to, "It's just sports," or "It's just symbolism," misses the context in which these things happened and what it means to people, in terms of their self-esteem and whatnot. So, the argument that now Black kids can see they can be anything they want, well, I think that goes a little too far, because you, in fact, can't be anything you want to be. And that goes beyond just Black youth. That goes to everybody. You can aspire and there are possibilities and there's preparation that you can do to become certain things, but the way that society is structured, it's difficult to be exactly what you want to be. And then when you take it to the level of being president of a huge country like this, that's just not, it's not good. It's not reality. But the context in which people lay that out is okay, to say to people, "Yes, see you can do

things. If you go to school, if you work hard, you can achieve.” And so that message is a good message and I think it’s really important.

And I think the other thing it’s done, it’s gotten a whole generation of folks engaged. And the folks, the revolutionaries of the earlier periods who are, I guess, in my generation, a lot of them are still cynical, but they need to be reminded where they came from, because most of them weren’t, well a number of them weren’t just poor folks out of the fields or factories who became politically conscious and active, but they went through a process. A lot of it was as university students. And if they weren’t university students, they were connected to a social movement that was developing, an anti-war movement, a Black Power movement. So whether it was somebody throwing bricks at racist police officers in an inner-city neighborhood, or somebody who was on a campus and part of a building takeover against a racist administration or in opposition to the war or to get a Black Studies program, there are these material conditions that bring them forward. And so here we have what we have, and conditions that haven’t existed in a good while, to actually get people engaged. And so I think it’s good in that respect. Now, where that energy goes, the kind of analysis that people develop is a whole other question. And I think it really requires us as activists to really engage the people so that they can understand this, which then goes to other question of what can we expect of Obama and all of that. And that’s a whole other discussion. I mean we can have that now or, if you’re interested in hearing about that now. Yeah, but this chair--.

BB: Scoot it up just a little bit because it’s tapping on--.

AD: Is that what it is?

BB: Is that Angela Davis back there? Who is that?

AD: Where?

BB: In that picture.

AD: No, Assata Shakur.

BB: Ah, Assata Shakur, ah, I see. Okay.

AD: Is that what it is? Yeah.

BB: That's what it was. I think it was just tapping against the thing. Okay, now I've got to write down Assata's name. Well, I guess a question--.

AD: So that's the symbolism, but the politics are what we can expect. The other critique of the Left was that the activists that supported it, the campaign, had drunk the Kool-Aid, making the reference to Jim Jones and Jonestown, which is really not--. It's really a bad analysis, because I think any of the seasoned activists who ended up supporting the campaign understood--.

[INTERRUPTION DUE TO NOISE]

BB: Oh, sorry.

AD: Understand what to expect from his candidacy and his presidency, if that would've become a factor. But you could reduce it, and I wrote about this in one of my blog posts, is basically if you look at them in comparison, no matter how limited Barack Obama's vision of a progressive agenda is, it's better or it was better than McCain's [John McCain ran against Obama in the 2008 presidential election]. And so in a couple of areas, and one of them—even if it's just the Supreme Court appointments, then that was important. On the Employee Free Choice Act, which we anticipate that he'll support, and given the developments in the last two or three months, that may be more and more difficult. I don't know, but nonetheless the possibility would be no presidential support from a McCain administration for that, wherein his support might be at least minimal. And so that's an important area. And then you can go down the line of different kinds of issues. People are—so our understanding of that was pretty clear. His position on the war,

while it was very much anti-war in the early parts of the primaries, has morphed into what you would expect the president of an imperialist country to say. So I mean that's the other thing. He's not a revolutionary. He's not a progressive. He's a liberal, centrist politician. And so his intensification of activity in Afghanistan, or at least the planned intensification, is not a surprise. It's understood. His failure or, well, his not removing troops from Iraq immediately, I mean he said that all along. Yeah, he said it was wrong to go in the war, but I'm not pulling the troops out immediately. We understood that. And so that's something that you're not happy about, but again, he is the president of an imperialist country, not a social-democratic country, not a socialist country, not a revolutionary country, so, people's expectations...

And then I think the other thing that if we help the masses to engage in this campaign and their aspirations got to be too high, their expectations were too great, that this would lead to disillusionment. And so, on the one hand, I think it really doesn't give people enough credit for understanding how these things work, but even if we didn't, I mean the reality is that the majority of the population of the United States does not have a critique of the problems of capitalism and the need for social transformation. So there's this tendency to think because we see things this way, that other people should, or that they do, and that by not offering them a revolutionary alternative at this moment keeps them from moving in that direction. And yeah, you may have an alternative out there, but that alternative is arrived at, I think, in terms of people personally moving, and not just as individuals, but as part of a movement based on conditions, based on engagement, to a point where they conclude that this is the problem, the structure of the society needs to change and I want to engage in that change. And that'll happen.

I mean actually the perfect storm had hit, as people have indicated, you know, over the weekend at least, in a lot of those discussions, but we've talked about it since the election. This

financial crisis has come at a time where you really get a chance to talk about the failures of the system and how it's structurally inadequate and why it's impossible to bring justice and economic development for all people, and why there are class tensions and divisions, and who has power. All of those things were possible. Somebody said it this weekend. I guess it might have been Ajamu Baraka. And then when we get to the election, then people stop having those conversations. Well, I think, not that they've stopped, but it's not at the same level, but I think we can re-engage them. And as we talk about the bailout, we get a chance to talk about that a little bit more.

In the coming months, some of the other forecasts for crises that are coming down, the scandal in Illinois over Barack Obama's seat and the fact that people even talk about money as a way to actually get to that seat, many people knew that, understood that, but you get to see that goes beyond just bad Illinois or Chicago politics, but that's the corrupt nature of the capitalist political system. All of these are opportunities, I think, to move people forward. And so electing Barack is not a problem. I think that objective conditions are going to allow us to actually do this.

BB: What are some groups that you think are doing it well, to kind of really seize on these moments and connect with people who are non-activists around these conversations? And what are their methods?

AD: Yeah, I don't know. I don't know. I don't even want to venture to say that there are groups that are doing this particularly well. We're just trying to--. I'm trying to figure out what the landscape is around the country. I mean I know what we've tried to do locally.

BB: Who's we?

AD: The Black Workers for Justice, is to, again, encourage the movement for change and to elect Obama, to elect other progressive politicians, but to understand that we need organization

in order to push them. And we need organization to address some of the problems that we have on a local level that an Obama administration cannot deal with, at least in the immediate sense they can't deal with it, and that we need organizations in communities and in regions to really push for an agenda. So that's what we've been doing. We did that with the campaign. At sometimes it was better than other times, but that was our sense to try to do that, and hopefully to be able to harness the energy that was developed around the Obama campaign into something that's long-term and progressive and takes the shape of a consistent progressive voice. So we've tried to develop the People's Assemblies as a vehicle for actually doing that and bringing together different groups, different activists, organizations, church groups, unions, to develop an agenda that goes beyond just the campaign.

And then there are other groups around the country. We're just trying to study them. I really like what the Miami Worker's Center did during the campaign, in terms of getting out the vote and registering people and meeting folks, identifying what their issues were, getting them into their network of people who are interested in being engaged in social change, and then now being able to move to the next step after the election to deal with the issues of gentrification that they're dealing with. A lot of their work is around housing struggles there and whatnot, and racial profiling and those kinds of things. So people made a really good connection with the election and the social problems and political problems in their communities and bringing them together, and not giving people the sense of, we just elect a new president and then that things will change. So that's a model that we've looked from afar and talked to people about and studied and whatnot. And so, you know, where people are going to go. I mean we're still early on. It's just December and so we've got to see how people actually engage now, to really take advantage of the victory, but I like, and I mentioned this Saturday, I like the way the folks at the Smithfield Campaign took

the election and framed their own struggle in terms of the election, and that was, “We change the White House, we can change the hog house.” And that was what they ran with in terms of the election.

So the change theme is very, very important. And it’s clearly what everybody wants, wanted a change, and so here we have to define what that change is, what it really is, because oftentimes in the campaign, it was very abstract, wasn’t well defined. So we can do that now. What kind of change do we want in the way we get health care, in the way our schools operate, and the way we get paid, and all of those kinds of things. That’s all about change and then as you define it, then you begin to talk about what’s required to get that change beyond electing a president.

BB: So, Howie Machtinger was helping me think about questions to ask, and he said this about you. He said that, not a quote, but something like, “Ajamu, as best as anyone I’ve ever seen, knows his audience every time he’s talking.” He’s probably heard you give twenty or more speeches. “And can push them just as far to the Left as they’re ready to go, with a little bit of push and then stop where he’d lose them, where he’s not just up on a pedestal.” So he suggested asking you, what have you learned about talking to non-activists specifically in a way that moves them politically? What are some of the things that you’ve learned about how to do that, that you do so artfully?

AD: Well, I appreciate Howie thinking that. [Laughter] Actually, I do think about that and I just think about all the encounters I’ve had over the years with people who lay out political concepts in terms that I might not know about. I mean this is going back many years ago. That’s not to say that there are conversations I hear these days that I wouldn’t understand either.

[Laughter] But really recalling that, and also just having this understanding of people’s political

development in this country.

Again, just referring back to the weekend, since you and I had an opportunity to be in the same room and hear a lot of the same people, Ajamu Baraka's story about the peasant community he met in rural Colombia and they asked about Mumia's [Abu-Jamal] trial, and something to do with globalization, I think was the question. I found that, too, in my travels to Latin America and to Africa, that people, it appears, on a larger scale, are more politically conscious about what's going on around them and what are the social and political forces that have shaped their lives in the immediate sense, whether it's in Mexico City, for somebody who lives in Oaxaca or in Washington, for the same people that live in Oaxaca, understanding the dynamics of both, the relationship actually of their government in Mexico City and the government in Washington. People just have gotten that on a broader basis, but here we don't have that.

So you want to talk to people on the basis, you want to engage them where they are, so that they can relate to what you're saying and be open enough to listen to a little bit more and consider where you take that. I mean one way, popular ed [education], and I don't think, Howie's not talking about workshops and facilitation, because it's a whole different set of circumstances where you can really draw on people's experiences and hear from them, but when you're giving a talk or a speech or something, you don't have that opportunity. So you want to at least relate to the people, where you think they are. You hope you know you have some sense of who the audience is and you want to use references that are known to them, that they feel comfortable about, and then use those references to take them to a slightly different place that maybe challenges the status quo. You know that, again, people are not happy with conditions and they want to see some change, but where you want to take them--.

I've done this many times, but the two times I remember very vividly giving a talk or being

in part of a process where we came up with what would be a revolutionary program, actually with folks, based on their own discussions. One time in Rocky Mount at the Worker's Center, there was a meeting. This might have been in the eighties. And I just asked people what they wanted in terms of law enforcement, in terms of policing and the sheriff, and health care and political power. And it was like a revolutionary program, the things that people were saying. But you're just asking the questions.

And then another time, we were on a bus ride, not too long ago. Well, probably around 2002. It was an anti-war demonstration in Washington. We were on a bus ride with some youth, some from North Carolina State and St. Aug [Augustine] and I can't remember where else, but we just said, "Look, if you--. If we had a government and we were setting it up and you were choosing to lay out what the program would be in these areas, in health care and law enforcement, prisons, and work and wages, and education, what would it be?" And you listen to the people and then come up with these things, which would be considered a very radical agenda. And these are not people who were considered to—in terms of the bus, these were people who had enough motivation and opposition to the war to be on that bus, but they weren't like fully developed, conscious radicals or anything. So, you can bring these ideas to people and it's just trying to do it in a way that respects their experiences, respects their intellect, respects their religious and spiritual views, but also gives them an opportunity to really consider some different and challenging ideas.

BB: What do you think it takes to be a fully developed, conscious radical?

AD: Well, exposure, I mean experience. That's the main thing, exposure to it. So that would say then that people who want to create conscious and committed radical activists have a big chore ahead of them, have always had, actually, to give people exposure. There's exposure

and there's exposure. I mean there's over-exposure, too. [Laughter] If you want to use the photographic references and whatnot, although that doesn't happen anymore with digital photography, but you can just blow people away. You can turn them off with rhetoric and ideas that aren't appropriate for that moment, in a tactical way. And so you have to be very careful of that. But as people get a chance to consider new ideas and then have activities.

You know you've got to be involved in stuff. And so whether it's pickets and rallies or study groups or meetings or lobbying, anything that engages people, but simultaneously is linked to some study and conversation. And when I say study, I don't necessarily mean in the formal sense. I mean we come out of a movement where study had more formal implications than the study group thing. You get together and you read and you discuss. So there are many variations of that today in these times. And you know, with popular education and all of that, it makes it easier to do that. But a friend, I mentioned before the conference at UNC on the Black Power movement, and a friend of ours there, Michael Simanga, who is a poet and he was a Black activist who always--. He's kind of like me, always walking around with a book in his pocket and reading. People say, "Why you always got a book?" And he says, "Because I'm always needing to read. I always want to read." And his thing is, "I refuse to believe that we can't get people to read." I mean there's this whole thing about reading skills or that people are more now drawn to images through video and audio and then certainly, of course, the internet and all of that. But his thing is like, "People have to read, and our obligation is not to relent, but to continue to push and find ways to get people to do that." And I really believe that, too. Back twenty, thirty years ago, the question—and I think you go to [Paulo] Freire in a lot of ways—so it wasn't just the methods of doing popular education, but this all came in the context of literacy. Let's develop literacy in whatever the language that we have to deal with. And I mean I know in certain circumstances

there are questions about what language should that be. Should it be the colonial language or should it be an indigenous language? Or whatever. Those are issues that have to be tackled, but the question of literacy and communication is one that people really need to deal with. So I think even dealing with some of the younger revolutionaries who are not inclined to the reading or to folks who have been the product of pretty bad school systems and not really developed those skills yet, we've got to find ways to actually deal with that. But the idea is this information has got to be discussed. We've got to make it available to folks. And so that, along with the engagement, I think actually deals with that. And then I think there's--.

You look at models and people become heroes and sheroes, I find that a lot of people today, young people are raising this question about balance and healing and all of this, and so that maybe a lot of people from our generation don't present good models to them, in terms of those things. They may like the way we organize and they may like our analysis, how we might give a speech or how we might organize the meeting or write a paper, all of those kinds of things that go into organizing, but may be very wary of the lifestyle that doesn't appear to give this balance or attention to self-development and inner healing and all of those kinds of things. And so trying to figure that out is important. I really believe there's a balance and try to see that in my own work and life, even at this stage, but try to convey to younger people that they need to find a balance and that sometimes seeking this healing and time for yourself may be inopportune in terms of what it is you're doing in the movement, or what the movement may need at that time. And so maybe you can't just break away at that time. Hold on a minute.

BB: Okay, sure.

AD: That sounds like a dropped cane. Pop?

BB: [Addressing Kathryn Stein] You doing okay? He's great.

KS: I like that point he was just making.

BB: I'm going to dig around that a little bit more. He's talked about in much less gentle terms before. "I'm not sure about all this balance, time for yourself, spiritual...." [Laughter] It's like, you know--.

KS: Yeah, he didn't say it like that this time.

BB: No, but he's also...I mean, there, talking about how that's come to impact him and he's reflected on it some, too. And I'll ask a few more questions around that.

KS: Do you think I can take that blanket and--?

BB: Yeah, absolutely. You're cold. You've got to get some more meat on your bones. [Laughter]

KS: [Laughter] I guess so. I try. I eat a lot.

BB: Yeah, I like how even their room reflects what they care about.

KS: Exactly.

BB: With all the statues.

KS: That's what I was thinking about when I was at Cynthia's house the other day.

BB: Cynthia Brown's, yeah. [Brown is one of the Heirs interviewed for this project.] There are awards everywhere and collections of African art and Latin American art.

KS: And African-American.

BB: The tapestries, it's beautiful. What time is it?

KS: I don't know. My phone's off.

BB: Oh, okay, 11:45. So we've got about thirty minutes.

[SOUND OF AN INSTRUMENT]

KS: Is it a maraca?

BB: It's maraca-ish. This looks like, yeah, the handle's a gourd. Wow.

KS: I sort of feel like if I went to someplace and I lived there for a month, like maybe Malawi and did just a short project over there with the people, do you have any ideas of what I could--?

BB: If you went to Malawi? [Laughter] I can't even think about--.

KS: Yeah, I know, and plus you've got all this on your mind.

BB: Yeah, the culture of Malawi. But let's talk about it more, yeah...

KS: Yeah, that'd be good.

BB: ...hear about more what's the purpose, and why Malawi, and what do you hope for.

KS: Right, we'll talk about it.

BB: Okay. I'm going to go ahead and pause this while we're waiting.

[RECORDER IS TURNED OFF AND BACK ON]

BB: All right, record. I pushed the right button. So you were talking about young people and kind of a newer movement toward inner work and self-care and spirituality and balance and healing and all that, and how sometimes the movement calls, so you're feeling a little, what's the--. Is it a critique? Is it a "not sure how you feel about it?"

AD: Well, that's a critique. I mean that's just a critique. And I mean I'm not—but it's a critique that I can't offer you a specific circumstance where, in this project or this coalition, we were working and we were at this critical moment and at that time, these folks who kind of pay attention to those things more than I think they should jetted on us. [Laughter] And things fell through the cracks. I can't offer that, but the thing's out there. So that's something I like people to cope with, to kind of figure out how you're doing it in a way, looking out for yourself on an ongoing way so that you can integrate it with fulfilling responsibilities that you've taken on during

times, so that you don't have to withdraw or take a leave.

And that happens. I mean all kinds of things happen in our personal lives, sickness, both physical and emotional, family responsibilities, children, elders, all of that kind of stuff. So I'm not speaking about those things, but just the, "I'm burnt out," all of this. So the more healthy integration of stuff, like I guess the better eating, the regular exercise, whatever spiritual needs that you have, that you integrate it into your life so that you can do that at the same time you're giving the ruling class hell. You know what I mean? And all of that, what that means, giving the ruling class hell, in terms of whatever particular work you may be doing. I mean I could be doing a database or doing a training or organizing a picket or whatever, so finding that balance. At the same time, I feel like really good about the young people that are around. Some of my best friends, you get a lot of encouragement from them. It's just like they're wonderful. And the group of people I'm talking about now are not the people who've come forward around the Obama campaign. [Laughter]

BB: So who are you talking about?

AD: It's good for them. So I'm talking about people who are part of your cohort in a lot of ways. But Bryan [Proffitt] and Manju [Rajendran] and Rishi [Awatramani], now, Malcolm [Goff] and Afiya [Carter], Shirlette [Ammons], Yolanda [Carrington], and I'm taking a risk here naming names because I don't want to leave anybody out. And in fact, there are many. There are others. I'll think of more. Erin, Angaza, Samora [Laughinghouse], other people, he's a little newer to the scene and whatnot and maybe doesn't have as much experience as some of these other people, but just to see them out there, their kind of energy that they have, the analysis, the skills, all of it is good. And I think that, I mean the one thing I see that I admire is that people, in a sense, take care of one another. I mean like they're friends and there's a lot of social interaction and it's

good stuff. And that might have been lacking in earlier generations, maybe not, but I mean I think that's good. I take heart to that. That's really helps me to keep going. A lot of times, we're not engaged in the exact same political work with younger folks, in terms of our work in the Black Workers for Justice and the work in the Labor Movement.

[INTERRUPTION DUE TO DOG BARKING]

BB: Hold up, because this is, sorry. All right.

AD: Took us a few beats to think about that. [Laughter]

BB: Sorry. [Laughter] You were in a good sentence and I didn't want to sort of--. All right.

AD: But yeah, I mean that we're not always engaged in the same stuff. I mean I think we've had like common work around anti-war stuff in a lot of cases, and work against sexual assault and violence. I've worked with young people on that. That's really been good. I wish, though, that the analysis of the importance of labor and the working class was something that people would pay a little more attention to.

BB: Young people?

AD: Young people. And then that goes, ranges from, of course, just--.

[INTERRUPTION DUE TO DOG BARKING]

BB: Better hold up again, sorry. Pepper's got stuff to say. Dog's got opinions, Ajamu.

AD: I don't think that's Pop. I think that's somebody passing. Sorry.

BB: That's okay. [Laughter] He's hot. That dog's crazy. Is it a Chihuahua?

AD: Well, no. Here's the deal. We've been saying that, big Chihuahua. And other people have been saying Rat Terrier, Jack Russell, all this kind of stuff. The mother is a little Chihuahua, at least who we think is the mother. I mean the woman we know that raised her, at the

hospital the other night the doctor said, “Rat Terrier.”

BB: [Laughter] So you’ve got all kinds of new information coming to you.

AD: That he’s just too big to be a Chihuahua. That’s what she felt. So I don’t know.

BB: All right, so analysis around, a little more analysis around labor among these folks.

AD: Yeah, yeah, I mean from just labor support, for example the Smithfield Campaign, the Moncure Strike right now, FLOC [Farm Labor Organizing Committee]. I mean there’s a small group that’s connected to that, but that’s mainly because that’s their paid work, you know, SAF [Student Action with Farmworkers], for example. That’s a good example, and that’s probably the main example of being attuned to that kind of stuff. But that others generally that, for example, that are doing sexual assault work or I don’t know, youth work, are not connected to that in ways that I think would be helpful to both the labor movement and the labor support movement, but also their own work with youth and around sexual assault. That would be good. So that’s one end. That’s like the minimum, but even in a more demanding way, in terms of individual’s commitment and work to be involved in the labor movement like taking jobs in the places where they could become part of the labor movement, not just—organizers is one thing, to become an organizer, like for example Libby [Manly] has done or maybe Yolanda [Carrington] and a few others.

But there are also the examples of the previous generation of people actually going into working-class jobs, whether they were in factories or in the public sector, and in that capacity both to earn a living, but also to engage in organizing workers to help them to challenge the conditions on their job, but to be part of a broader movement of the working class that’s challenging for power in this country. And that analysis is not quite there yet, I think, amongst of a lot of people. And so trying to get to that point is important, I think to kind of integrate the work into various sectors

that we all work in. To see a little bit more of that would really be good.

BB: You did that.

AD: Yeah, I did, and a number of other people, many other people, did that. So, I mean there's no regrets about that. I think that that's important work to actually do it. And a lot of people, if you look around now, I mean some people came and left, spent a little bit of time in a factory here and there and went off and did other things. But a number of people stayed and become important folks in the local labor movements or on a national level. And we just would encourage that. In this period, it's kind of difficult. Here we're talking about a shrinking economy and jobs overall, but even the period from the time we went in until now, in terms of what industries, it's just—young activists in the '60s and '70s were going to the auto plants. Well, that's not an option anymore, electrical plants and other places like that, because manufacturing has declined in a lot of ways.

BB: But there's still teachers and nurses and--.

AD: Yeah, well, the public sector, that's the thing. The public sector's important. And in terms of actually its relationship to the economy and the state and the ability of the system to function and the needs of citizens, looking at both sides of it, those are good places to be, where being a part of an organized group is critical, but also to be delivering services or to be able to help people in their personal and life development as a teacher or caring after people who are sick as a Physician's Assistant or a nurse or a P.A., whatever, all those things are important. So people ought to look at that. And I don't think that the young folks that I see are aiming for corporate jobs and those kinds of things. That's not it, but that they haven't kind of looked specifically at that, that a lot are still enthralled with this non-profit sector and doing those kind of jobs. We'll see what this means in this coming period, whether those jobs will even be available or not.

I mean people always find ways, as people look at solutions to get out of the financial crisis and stimulus packages and all of these kinds of things, folks are really studying the example of the Roosevelt Administration and the different public works programs and the Civilian Conservation Corps. I might have mentioned in my father's interview that he was part of it, where particularly rural youth, but I guess even city youth, did conservation projects and whatnot. And today that would probably translate into the kind of green jobs stuff that we've talked about in different situations, and developing, working on infrastructure stuff, maybe even some farming kinds of things could be the target of a similar kind of program. But then there were other kinds of things. I mean the writer's program. They had projects for writers. I think on NPR the other day there was a story about that. Somebody had put forward, like we need something like that again, but not full-time, maybe just as consultants, somebody was really weak and backed out on pushing it all the way, but some of the projects that the Smithsonian did on the slave narratives, people who had been born in slavery. They are collecting those stories, some of the folk music stories that were catalogued by the Folkways label.

BB: People's Theater stuff?

AD: Yeah, all of that stuff came as projects. So maybe activists may engage that way, because I think that's where a lot of people during that era who were conscious found work that was really socially redeeming and important kind of work. And maybe that'll happen again in this coming period, but that's the challenge for us, for people to figure out where they're going to be, where to best situate themselves, how to advance the movement, at the same time, get personal fulfillment out of it and feel like they're making a really important contribution, feel like they're using their skills, those kinds of things. And that's a balance that you have to find, and the question of sacrificing and how much do you have to pursue your own muse and what needs to be

done to really make our society a different kind of way.

BB: So we've got about fifteen more minutes, right?

AD: Yeah, yeah, that would be good.

BB: Okay, fifteen minutes.

AD: Fifteen, twenty. I've think we've got--. I don't know, maybe another one, you think?

BB: Yeah, oh yeah.

AD: You think so?

BB: Yeah, because I want to ask about college and different organizations and work experience and all that stuff. So tell me about—well now, I'm turning thirty-five and all of a sudden I'm supposed to get annual mammograms and stuff; there's this transition here at thirty-five, so I'm in the in-between of the younger and the not-so-young activists anymore. But one of the things when I was a younger activist was seeing folks who had been in the movement a long time who'd had a series of broken relationships, were struggling with addiction, who were lonely, whose kids were estranged from them because they gave their heart and soul to movement work, and their kids felt like they were left by the side. So those sorts of things is the pushback to find more balance and to go about it a little bit of a different way so I'm curious about your relationship with your kids, because you've been in the thick of it for a long, long time. Did you ever have struggles like that with them, or how did you manage to—how do your kids feel about your movement work over the years? What's that been like?

AD: Oh, I don't think they've ever had any serious problems with it that they've expressed to us. I think they've admired it. I mean they made jokes about it, too, about our--.

[Laughter] Because my grandson, he sings in the shower.

BB: What's his name?

AD: Ajamu. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, when my father was here, he was in the shower singing and kind of preaching, and saying, "My grandfather and grandmother go to meetings all the time," and, "Black Workers for Justice is what we need," and so, I mean even he's kind of done that. All of our girls have been active at one time or another.

Mainly, there was a youth group called the Black Belt Youth Brigade that formed in 19... believe '90, as a result of a boycott of the Crabtree Valley Mall. And the management there was trying to find a way to keep kids from southeast Raleigh from coming to Crabtree, because they hung out, and so on. And so they had a proposal to cut off bus service from Southeast Raleigh on the weekends, so that if you didn't have transportation, you couldn't get there. Maybe if you had a car, "Okay, we'd deal with that," but that might reduce the number of people who could come. And so the word got out, the memo got out, and the youth really responded to it. We had a boycott and pickets. I remember that year, I believe it was 1990, a ring around Crabtree Valley Mall at Thanksgiving time. We took it all the way through to the Christmas season. I mean I don't think we could say that we put a hurt on the mall business in a significant way, but it had some impact. It caused them to try to enter into negotiations with us through the city and come up with some ordinances and we had some demands about what we wanted to see, in terms of access. We also had a jobs component. The kind of folks who were interested in business development were talking about entrepreneurial stuff to allow for more Black businesses to be there, or whether the kiosks and vendors could have you them—and we were talking about a youth training program with living wage jobs and those kinds of things. But it was a pretty vigorous struggle that the whole community rallied around. And out of that, some of the more conscious youth who were being affected by the resurgence of interest in Malcolm X at that time. Public Enemy as a group,

I'm trying to think of some of the other groups that were important at that time. They're escaping me now. Well, KRS-One and others, at least those two for sure were kind of pushing youth to come out and be active again. And they had been reading about the Panthers and all that. We went to a conference in New York on Malcolm X, which was a really wonderful conference. In fact, I would—it's been well archived at, I think, Brothermalcolm.org, has many of the transcripts, audio, and some videotapes of that conference. And it brought a lot of people from around the country.

BB: What year?

AD: You know just thinking about years is really. I believe it was 1990, '91, because it was followed by a conference in D.C. on the Columbus, the anniversary of the invasion by Columbus, at Howard University. And both of these—Brother Abdul Alkalimat, who is now at the University of Illinois-Champaign, he helped to organize these. But the youth came back fired up, and we took up, I don't know, two, three vans, and on the way back they formulated their organization, the Black Belt Youth Brigade, with an understanding of the South as an oppressed area of the country and the Black Belt being the area of heavy Black concentration and youth brigade. And they did some important work, probably for about two years, college students, some, at least two of my daughters, and my youngest daughter, probably in the twelfth grade. So we had teenagers and some older, young adults. They were very much involved in the opposition to the first Gulf War and did actions in D.C. with other folks and did some local actions here and were very much involved.

So they were engaged. I mean, yeah, we forced them to go to meetings, and not just as like, "Well, you've got to come to the meeting because we're going to be there and nobody's there to watch you," but it was like, "You've got to come this meeting because you need to be at a

meeting.” And so they performed poems and stuff. I think two of my daughters sung a little bit with the Fruit of Labor for a while, not very long. I guess they weren’t that interested in it, but they tried. We didn’t ask them to. They asked her to be part of it. I think Kemba and Safiya both. And so that’s it, but we never really forced anything on them. I mean they were what might have been called in the ‘50s “red diaper babies,” but I think we had learned from other people that you don’t force this stuff on folks. You don’t constantly lay it on them, but they’d come with us to distribute flyers. They’d go do flyers. They loved it.

I remember Kemba, the middle daughter, she must have been—we were going to a rally in D.C., I think around affirmative action. That was the Bakke case or something, I don’t know. [In 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling about the parameters for making college admission decisions based on race. Allan Bakke, a White man, claimed that he had been discriminated against on the basis of race and denied entry to the University of California Davis Medical School.] So it probably would’ve been ’76, ’75, but anyway, she just was so happy to be able to chant, “Carter, you liar. We’ll set your ass on fire.” That was, she just loved to be able to do that kind of chant; that she could curse without a reprimand. And so, I mean why not be part of this where you could get the chance to curse like that? But they’ve always mimicked us about meetings, like our friends and our comrades, that they imitate them in their own little play sessions and imitate folks and make jokes and laugh. So that’s been good. And then they also had the contact with Saladin [Muhammed] and Naemma’s children, although they lived in Rocky Mount, there were periodic, there were times where they would get together and they established pretty deep friendships. In fact, Dara, when she went to graduate school in Philadelphia, lived with Okenewa and Neferteeti for a while. So they still remain pretty good friends. So they had a set of children that they could relate to who were strange like them, who were always involved in

these political meetings and all that, or who didn't go to church all the time, on a regular basis, or whatever. I think it's been good.

And then even though none of them are engaged in organizational work at this point, I mean I think they've got a really strong sense of social justice and they speak out or they have an analysis or they know when they meet people who are having difficulties or they see stuff, they make recommendations to them of who they might talk to or what they might do to try to change the situation. So they really developed that, even though they may not be on the picket line every day, they've got, it's been a part of their development and I think they're, the two that have children are passing it on to their children as well. But that's it on—and I mean they may have another take. They may say something different, but I think it certainly did not cause any alienation.

We do, we get asked by young couples, though, "How did we do it?" And the one thing that is easy to say is, "I don't know." That's like my first reaction. I don't know how we did it. We had three children and a fourth that was staying with us for a good while, and we both had full-time jobs. And we had organizations we belonged to, and responsibilities, and a bookstore that we were dealing with. We were going to conferences. We were traveling, but we were having fun and kids were getting educated. And everything seemed to work. There's just always like a high level of energy in the house and a lot of what other people might think was confusion that was going on, but we were able to adapt to it. I mean our house was the center for, not only political stuff, but then just kids and people, their friends didn't have a place to stay or whatever, and people hung out here and whatnot, so always a lot going on.

I think we like the energy. It may have something to do with the fact that Rukiya's an only child and she—I mean she had cousins who lived next door who she was close to, but and I'm

from—it's just my brother and I, so the two siblings. And we actually both were interested in having a large family. We talked about it very early on. I mean we literally said, "Let's have six children." In retrospect, it seems crazy that we were even talking about that, but my father's family and my mother's family both had like six or seven children. And I always liked what I saw about their relationships, just in terms of their social gatherings and support from one another. And of course, Rukiya felt like, "Well, why don't we have--? I didn't have any sisters or brothers, so I don't want to do that. I want to have a lot of children." And we kind of started out and then we kind of got lost in life, in terms of thinking about stuff. And we veered away from it. We had two and there's six years between Kemba and Safiya. And in those six years, we weren't even thinking about children or anything. I mean our whole plan was not consciously put on hold. It was just like, it was on hold. [Laughter] And then she--. We had Safiya, and clearly decided that that was it. But we were interested in a larger family and so I think that was part of it. And we just tried to make things work, in terms of getting meals and getting people to school and doing homework and all of those things, we just cooperated. We had, for a long time, different schedules, because I worked at night for a long time when I worked at Shrader, I worked four to twelve. That was only a year, but that was a night job. And then for the post office, for my twenty-four years, it seems like maybe eighteen of those were at night, I guess, something close to four to twelve, 5:45 to--. I had one shift 5:45 to 2:30, I think, in the morning, or 3:45. I can't remember. And then others were like 2:30 to 11 or whatever. So it was always at night, so I wasn't here in the evening when people were home having dinner. So Rukiya was trying to juggle all of that. It was difficult. She worked hard. The whole thing, we never led ourselves to be pushed into, "She's going to do all that and I'm going to do something else." I mean we cooperated. She insisted on being active politically. It was just never a question about that.

We've been able to work it out. I mean with cooking, that's shifted back and forth. We share that as much as we can. Sometimes it's more convenient for her to cook, for me to cook, but you know, making sure we get the meals. Again, sometimes I think back, I don't know how we did it. [Laughter] I'm not sure. You know, cook on the weekends, those kinds of things. Who's washing clothes? "You ought to wash the clothes because I don't know how to do this very well, and you've seen my work and so--. [Laughter] Maybe you should do it." "Yeah, you're right. I'll wash the clothes. You do something else."

So it's a struggle, but again, young couples ask, "How did you do it?" And I just say, "We identified what needed to be done and we just would push on it." Granted, there are times where, "Well, I can't do this," or, "We can't come," or, "We both can't come," or I might have to give up a meeting or something because Rukiya had a meeting or one of the kids was sick and that kind of thing. So we always did that. My work was no more important than hers, hers no more important than mine, and so we shared with that, those kinds of responsibilities. So I don't know, and then we had another question that goes beyond the politics, but is just something that, earlier in our marriage, not early, before we got married, we had a counselor, a minister who married us who raised this question of finances and budget. Did I talk about this?

BB: Yeah, you said that, you talked about that one last time.

AD: Yeah, so I mean that carries, that helps when you're going through this thing of trying to figure out what to do, day-to-day, month-to-month, year-to-year in terms of paying bills and buying new stuff and helping with education and all that, to be able to have that balance. And we've been lucky. There's only—I think I was laid off during this whole time for maybe two, three months, or something like that. So we've been fortunate in that respect not to face any severe financial difficulties.

BB: Okay. Is that a good stopping point?

AD: Yeah, it makes sense, I think. Plus it's twenty after.

BB: All right, great, thank you, Ajamu. Let's stop here.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Madeleine Baran, February 7, 2009.