

Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project

Detroit Equity Action Lab

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

Wayne State University Law School

Detroit, MI

Wayne Curtis

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND CURTIS RENEE

June 15, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Wayne Curtis was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. He graduated from Northern High School in 1967 and briefly attended Ferris State University. He was drafted into the Army during the Vietnam War. After returning from Vietnam, he joined the Black Panther party chapter in Detroit, where he worked as the circulation manager of the party's newspaper. After his time in the Black Panther Party, he was involved with the Nsoroma Institute, a public school academy in Detroit. Today, Wayne Curtis is a board member at the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership and is the co-founder of Freedom Freedom Growers, a community garden organization in Detroit, with his wife Myrtle Thompson-Curtis. He is also an artist who runs art classes such as the Emory Douglas Youth and Family Art Program.

Interviewer

Peter Blackmer is a Research Fellow at the Detroit Equity Action Lab, an initiative of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School.

Curtis Renee is an aspiring healer and chef, a reiki practitioner, and a lifelong Nonviolence (positive peace) activist from Detroit, Michigan. Curtis' Social Justice passions encompass Black liberation, Black & Palestinian solidarity, feminism, and queer activism. Curtis has over 15 years experience in developing, creating, and implementing programs in line with the larger vision of profit and nonprofit organizations (Leaps & Bounds Family Services, Urban Leadership Specialist, Freedom Freedom Growers, and Detroit Area Restorative Justice Center). She also regularly works as a Legal Observer and is a founding member of The Detroit Safety Team. Wayne Curtis is her father.

Abstract

Wayne Curtis discusses his life after leaving the Black Panther Party in the 1970s. Topics include how neoliberalism, privatization, and job loss changed the city of Detroit in the 1970s; changes in the Cass Corridor, and his own jobs during this period. He discusses the culture shock of leaving the Black Panther Party and the addiction and homelessness that followed, how working as a teacher's aide for art classes at the Nsoroma Institute changed his life, and why African-centered

education matters. He talks about how he met his wife, Myrtle Thompson, and how they started Freedom Freedom. He recounts anecdotes about the early years of the organization, its youth mentorship and art programs, how it has changed the neighborhood, its relationship with other urban farms in Detroit, what it has taught him, and how projects like food gardens offer an alternative to hyper-policing and mass incarceration. He also discusses how the foreclosure crisis, bankruptcy, and emergency managers created the vacant land for urban farming, and his own role in helping to fight foreclosures in his neighborhood. He also speaks about his involvement with the Boggs Center and how they create leadership, lessons for younger activists, his vision for the future of Detroit and urban gardens, why art helps to build a new culture and how it is related to creativity in politics and communities, and the evolution of his own artwork over the decades.

Keywords

African-centered education; Art; Black Panther party; Cass Corridor; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Emergency management; Emory Douglas Youth and Family Art Program; Foreclosure crisis; Freedom Freedom; Homelessness; James and Grace Lee Boggs Center; Malik Yakini; Myrtle Thompson-Curtis; Neoliberalism; Nsoroma Institute; Privatization; Urban gardening

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Transcript of interview conducted June 15, 2019 with:

Wayne Curtis [WC]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB] and Curtis Renee [CR]

WC: I used to come back here on a hot day, like 95. It was like a air conditioner 'cause there was trees all over there. They were all hovered over. It was really thick, and it kept the sun from coming in. And the breeze--'cause it was like a tunnel--a breeze would go through there. I loved to come down here. [laughs]

[0:00:26]

PB: So yesterday, we left off with your leaving the Detroit [Michigan] branch of the Black Panther party. So, if you could tell us a little bit about what you got into afterwards?

WC: A little bit of everything. It was like a cultural shock because, as I said earlier, we had created an environment that was very sustainable with our own hands, our own creativity, our own conversation and dialogue. We created that space, which started including more and more people. When I left, it was...I saw...I saw... [clears throat] I saw the reason why we did that. You know, I mean, I understood it more. I got a chance to revisit the capitalist culture again. First time I did that, when I came home from Vietnam, that was another cultural shock. And here I am leaving the Black Panther party, and then there's another cultural shock. Eating habits, sports, television. We didn't look at TV. We were too busy building our environment, our community or apparatus. We were too busy doing that type of

work instead of working for the [air quotes] “corporate community,” or as we used to say [air quotes] “the man,” “the pig.”

But...and then with that came the self-medication again, the drinking, the getting high to deal with the inconsistencies that this culture brought, and I had to face without a hedge around me, without protection, without an advocate. The Black Panther party was the people’s advocate, and we were our own advocate. It was very well-structured and organized, and probably that’s why the...Edgar J. Hoover [J. Edgar Hoover] said that the Black Panther party was the number one threat to national security. Well, he was right, you know. I mean, what is their national security? What I came home to when I left the Black Panther party, to maintain my obedience [sic] and my servitude was...is that what the Black Panther party was threatening to overthrow or to diminish or to dissolve or displace? Was that it? It was. So...but the way they said that, it’s just like now, they say, “Well, we’re going to war to protect the United States’ interests.” What interest is that, you know? Somebody else’s belongings, you know, that they stole. Kleptocrats, spelled with a C like kleptomaniacs. This is what they’re protecting. This is what they’re talking about. But, I started getting into the daily routine, which is quiet and very oppressive within itself.

[0:04:35. Jump cut]

PB: Can you tell us a little bit about the context of that time? Like, late [19]70s Detroit and what the city was looking like.

WC: Neoliberalism had just... The content of the city in the [19]70s is when the neoliberal privatization job loss first started happening. It was almost unnoticeable. I don’t even think that we noticed the poverty, but...I don’t think we understood the reasons why. We hadn’t heard--or at least I hadn’t, maybe the central committee did--but I hadn’t heard of the words like corporatocracy or...or global corporatocracy, global neoliberalism. The closest that we got to it was from Huey [Newton] and the parties coining the concept of revolutionary and reactionary intercommunalism, but the details I didn’t understand until a couple of years ago when I started noticing or heard someone say the attack on the demos, both by Wendy Brown, Professor Wendy Brown. [coughs] And then I

started connecting the...the two points of, well, what is exactly revolutionary intercommunalism. But in fact, what is this...this corporatist reactionary intercommunalism? I mean, how does it function? What's this history of it? What are its objectives? Why are they doing this?

And I came up with...I'm building a conclusion that they're responding to us. They're responding to the revolutionary work of transformation and us depending upon ourselves in order to exist according to how we define our own needs. So, we're responsible for this neoliberalism because the decolonization wars that were happening. They started losing more and more property, so to speak. But, what we and the people who gained their independence didn't realize is that while they were decolonizing [coughs] the corporate community were de-nationalizing at...at the very same time. It's just like when we had Coleman Young as mayor. It was very little that he could do because the institutions that could survive under a nation-state were no longer in operation anymore. They were being dismantled, which changed...started changing our strategy and tactics, and that's why the Black Panther party disembodied the ideology of black nationalism.

[0:08:36. Jump cut.]

Because these are the things that we were combatting and trying to find participatory solutions for. I guess in a way, yeah. When I left the party, it...it...it could've been, like, a come-down in culture, a way of life. So, I guess, yeah. It's almost like going down a notch, losing some of your freedom and some of your creativity, some of your institutions that help sustain you. So, I guess it was stepping below, becoming part of an oppressive situation without any tools to fight back with.

PB: What were you doing for work after you left?

WC: [laughs] Work? Little odds-and-ends jobs and stuff like that. Started working for the Detroit Branch Li...Library, which drove me absolutely bonkers. I ended up staying... [coughs] I ended up staying there for...for 15 years and...and-- [takes

drink from bottle] This isn't moonshine. [laughs] But I ended up staying there for 15 years, and then I left. I quit [laughs] in a severe state of depression. I...I was about to go crazy. My manager had a butcher knife for me, which we found when he got a [air quotes] "promotion," and my friend--we were cleaning out his office 'cause he was gonna take his place, and we found this long machete butcher knife type of thing, and he picked it up. He said, "Yeah, Curtis, this was for you." [laughs] But, that's how bad it was. I was my own advocate.

[0:11:23. Jump cut.]

PB: In those 15 years, you more or less had a front-row seat to some rapid changes going on in the Cass Corridor.

WC: Oh yeah. When I first came home, the Cass Corridor, it was all the way live. I had a friend. His name was Witch Doctor, and he was involved in all sorts of [air quotes] "work" to help him survive, but they started cracking down because this is the neoliberal part of...of the corporate system replacing itself because we were winning. The Cass Corridor is probably an example of that 'cause there weren't nothing that they could do about it, or at least they act like it. But, they started cracking down, throwing people in jail, three strikes you're out type...type...type of deal. All...all these things came up. It's almost like the Palestinian struggle, only our...our deaths were with bullets. Absolutely, there were bullets involved, murders involved, executions by...by the corporate police department. Our...our o...oppression and antagonisms was the loss of jobs, the cutting back on a welfare system, which caught the people who were expendable without jobs. And so, they started cutting all of that out, which made drugs more prevalent, which made other forms of survival which really tore the...the neighborhoods down. Like, we're building a house down the street for community and neighborhood activities and someone liberated the front door, and...and took the house alarm with...with the door, which I thought was hilarious. [laughs] But, that's the type of atmosphere...We could find solutions to this other than jail and police brutality, but we have to fight for that, and in a way, we have to liberate our space so that we can find those solutions and implement 'em ourselves on a consistent basis. Yeah.

[0:14:52]

PB: Since we're here in this...since we're on this topic, what...what would you posit is some of the...those possible solutions right now, the alternatives to hyper-policing and mass incarceration in this particular moment in Detroit?

WC: Examples of us controlling our destiny starts now, just like we're growing our own food. This wouldn't be possible if a collective entity wasn't included in...in...in that, so it's a new culture. It's a new way of growing food. We get information from neighborhood institutions: what GMOs [genetically modified organisms] are, how to grow food without using pesticides, without using products from the assassins of Monsanto, who are assassinating life all over the planet. We start with that and, surprisingly enough, that brings a sort of serenity to the neighborhood because the people can trust what we're doing. People speak...we speak to one another. Like, when we first started, we were growing food for the first time, [coughs] and some...some neighborhood people came into the garden and started picking the lettuce. We weren't home, but a neighbor came into the garden and told her this was a community garden, and when I got there, I told her the same thing. And she said, "Well, that's what the signs say. I'm part of the community." So, here's a chance to educate what is a real community that can sustain, not just human life, but life of the cosmos and life of the ecology system, and we explained it to her, and she had pulled up some lettuce which was about that tall [holds hands perhaps 18 inches apart], so it wasn't any good. It was starting to seed, and that's nature taking care of itself, and so she got upset and threw the lettuce down, and she said, "Shit, all this for some lettuce? Fuck it," and she walked on. I didn't want her to do that, but that's what happened. So, these are the things that...that go on.

It...it causes a chain reaction, and while we're planting food we have other pro...other programs like the youth mentorships, almost like the survival programs of Black Panther Party. The youth mentorship...Freedom Freedom's youth mentorship teenagers from 11 to 15 or 16. They engage in conversations. They do work in the garden. They've learned how food grows. They learn about vegetarian, vegan. They...they learn about meat, not...not necessarily in a negative content, but they find out what good food is and...and how to eat good food. Then, they have...we have political discussions. We had a discussion about

marginalize...marginalization, and I guess they enjoyed it because they conducted a neighborhood roundtable discussion about marginalization and how that affects the members of their neighborhood.

[0:19:41]

PB: How Freedom Freedom came about.

WC: [laughs]

PB: So, could you kind of walk us through your thought process, the decision to start the community garden and what, you know, your intentions were there?

WC: When me and Myrtle [Thompson] first got together, we had really no idea that we were gonna start a garden or a farm, and we found out about Growing in Detroit [Keep Growing Detroit?] and the classes that they conduct for people who are just starting out, and it cost 20 dollars to join, and they had classes on making composting and stuff like that, how to till, anything, how to deal...deal with pests, anything about growing food. And I suggested...well, we both talked about it, and we decided together that perhaps we could have a little garden. My mind was racing off to a much larger garden 'cause I thought about the free food program of the Black Panther Party. We didn't have the cans or the chicken, but we had... [coughs] we had fresh food and could make that available along with political education as to why we need this type of food to eat, other than MacDonald's or Burger King. Yeah, I'm naming 'em. Ballpark Heart...Hot...Hotdogs and stuff like that.

So, it leads to...one program leads to another, and another pro...pro...program to get young... [takes drink] Now, I said, this isn't moonshine. [laughs] One program leads to another pro...program, and so Myrtle suggested that start an art program, which I had never thought of 'cause sometimes I don't consider myself an [air quotes] "artist," especially a teacher. So, we started the Art in the Garden. And by the way, when we [laughs] went to pick up seeds for the garden, Myrtle told me

later on that she expected to get a couple of packs of seeds, and we left out...we left out of there with two shopping bags full of seeds 'cause I had other...other intentions of having a much bigger garden. But as time went, we had the other programs, and we started the art program, along with the youth mentors, the fresh cook program, which kids--which the students--learn how to make fresh peanut butter. They would go in the garden. They had...we had...we invited different chefs, and they would go in the...in...in the garden, and they would name all the vegetables and all the plants, and they'd choose the ones to make a salad, and they would make a salad. And Mama Jendayi [Iyi], who's...who's made her transition, she was a fresh food chef, and so she had prepared--she's the one that taught us how to make peanut butter--taught us, 'cause I didn't know either.

So, this program is...is for all of us, but we're trying to implement and find the...the structure to make this happen, try to find and put together the ideology and tactics and strategy. I keep coming back to that because it's...it's so important to understand, have a concrete analysis of what's really goin...going on so that we can respond to it in a way to dismantle it.

[0:24:51]

PB: Can you tell us about the work that went into getting Freedom Freedom off the ground, like from day one?

WC: Getting Freedom Freedom off the ground, it was a lot of fun--at first 'cause we didn't realize the work that we was...that went into growing plants and growing food. We didn't know anything about getting rid of pests, about tilling soil, how far the...to plant plants, how deep to put seeds, how to germinate crops. We didn't know any of that. We didn't know about...we didn't know nothing, but we ventured out, and we made our first bid. I was more knowledgeable about how to create the garden, to create a political situation of out...out...outreach and talking with people in the neighborhood. I did more of that than successfully growing food. [clears throat]

PB: Tell us a little bit about that outreach, like some of those conversations you were having with people.

WC: I would just say hi and spoke to everybody that came past while we were working, cracked jokes to the young sisters that would walk past 'cause they had their toes all polished and their hands polished, and I would go out in the street and hand 'em a shovel, and they'd give me that look. [laughs; coughs] But, that helped build a relationship with the people in the neighborhood. It got so good while we were building the beds, we were waiting on wood, and it didn't come until way late. So, we saw this brother with a cart full of bricks, and we had the bright idea that we could build our beds with bricks. So he said, "Yeah, I got plenty of bricks." Little did we know, there was a house a few houses down. He was tearing up the house [laughs] and taking the bricks off the house, and he was selling 'em to us.

And we made our...our first three beds, and we planted our tomatoes and our watermelon and a couple of other crops in one bed. The corn was too close. There was about an inch apart from--not the corn, the tomatoes. They were an inch apart, and they're supposed to be at least a foot and a half. We had watermelon in there, had no idea how watermelon grows, and so one day we're out there and we're patting ourselves on...on...on the back, looking at the plants grow [clears throat], and we started noticing all these tall things start coming up. We had no idea what it was, and they were tomatoes. And then, this snake-looking thing start wrapping around the tomatoes and going out into the yard. Had no idea that was the watermelon vine. Older brother came by 'cause he saw us working, and that was the community outreach. He said, "Boy, you got enough tomatoes to cover this whole garden." I say, "Yeah, right." He say, "Okay, let me show you." I had enough tomatoes to cover the whole garden, and I'm still planting 'em too close.

But, that's the type of atmosphere that it creates. We had built a real good rapport with the neighborhood. Brothers in the underground economy respected us. They respected us so well, they moved next door to us, and I asked 'em to leave [laughs], and then Mama Myrtle asked 'em to leave, but she was like how a mother fusses at her children, and it sounded like they were cracking jokes. But, you know, "Boy, if you don't get out of here, I'm gonna grow you a new ass," or something like that, "when I finish with the old one," and stuff like that is funny.

So she was talking to them like that, and they were laughing and said, "Okay, Miss Curtis, we'll move." So they moved, but they wouldn't have if we hadn't built that relationship with them. They trusted us. Yeah, stuff like that helps build neighborhood. A young brother told us...I said something to him, and he said, "Man, you don't know the rep you got around here. Everyone knows about Freedom Freedom. Everybody respects you. Even if you don't know the people, they know you," and that made me feel good.

[0:30:58]

PB: Can you tell us about what this land looked like when...before you started, and what the neighborhood was like when you started?

WC: The neighborhood and the land, they looked like brother and sister. It was wild. [laughs] This alley that we're in, it had at least 'bout that much [holds hands about six inches apart] dirt in it, at least six inches of dirt. There were trees everywhere. The alley as far as you can see, it just had a little pathway because of the growth 'cause there was growth on both sides. It was so much growth and vines. The vines were about that [holds up fingers in a circle about two inches in diameter] thick. When the city started cut...cutting back--and this is how corporatism or corporatocracy affects the...the neighborhood, the working-class neighborhood--they shut down all the alleys, and we had to start putting our garbage out in the front. And when they shut down the alleys, they stopped cleaning 'em, and the neighborhood being transient, people tried to keep the alley clean, but it's no way that they could have done that. So, the alleys became vegetated with overgrowth, trees, abandoned cars, everything you can think of was...was dumped in the alley, and we had to clean all that up. [clears throat]

We chopped down trees, pulled up vines. It was hard work. [laughs] It was really hard work. But the thing is, working with the soil, I don't know, it does...it does something. It does something to you. You feel relaxed. You enjoy the work. You're tired, but the work is really good. It's real...it's real work that...that benefits you. You don't have to give it away to somebody. There's the surplus. You decide what to do with the surplus.

[0:33:42]

PB: How have you grown as a...a person, as a thinker, as a partner, as a father, any of these things? How have you grown over these last 10 years alongside the farm?

WC: The farm has been in existence for around 10 years, and I thought that there was nothing... [clears throat] I thought that there was nothing else I could learn or realize, but the more I read, the more... [clears throat] the more I became attached to the soil and the land and...and the farm, the more I started realizing... Like, we were having a compost class at Growing Detroit, Keep...Keep Growing Detroit, and they were talking about the compost, and I'm sitting there all bored and stuff 'cause to me, soil ain't nothing but some dirt, you know, and I'm ready to get out of there and go home. And then he said, "The same ingredients that's in soil is in you. And the same ingredients that's in you is in soil." That woke me up 'cause I could see myself in... [laughs] I could see myself in Sunday school and...and the preacher says, "From dust to dust and soil to soil. You return back to the earth from which you came. Amen." And I said, "Hell, no. I'm back in church again?" [laughs] But it was true, and we have a keen relationship.

And then, I started realizing that humankind is not the center of everything. We're a part of nature and nature is part of us, and capitalism is destroying nature and destroying us to the point that mankind is causing changes in nature. Rather than nature, growing or displacing parts that it no longer needs. It...it recycles these things, and we've stopped that...that...that process and that...and that relationship. These are some of the things that I learned, and I started studying--what's the word?--anthropocentric, meaning that humankind is not the center of...of life, and that made me realize that the so-called transformation of human society can't be done without transforming and stopping the destruction of the planet that provides life for us. And if the planet is unable to provide life for us [clears throat], we die, but the planet will provide life to another form of life that can live in this state, but the planet will still be here.

[0:37:41]

PB: It's making me think that...it's a form for us to talk about why it is that there's now available land in this neighborhood to farm on. So, can you talk a little bit about the...the factors that influenced, like, nature retaking this neighborhood or so many other parts of the city, like when it comes to economic oppression and housing foreclosures, whether that's for mortgages or tax foreclosures, and really the context about why this land is vacant?

WC: We have lots of vacant land. I mean, a lot of it, acres and acres of vacant land where there used to be factories and homes and cars, people going back and forth to work 'cause that's all the cars were for and the roads and the sidewalks to get back and forth to work, to then go to the store and buy your food so you can go to work the next day. And when the jobs left because labor--amongst other reasons--labor cost...labors cost too much, they started shutting down plants 'cause instead of paying 50 dollars an hour they can go to a...a island someplace or a underdeveloped country and...and pay three cents an hour. So, that created a catastrophe in our neighborhood because the tax base was gone, the schools shut down, the hou..people lost their homes. It was a catastrophe. We were fighting back before it became that extreme, and then it got worse. The counterintelligence program pick...picked up--because they were losing the war--and they picked up their violence upon the people and the people's organizations that...that represented 'em like the Black Panther Party, the Muslims, Elijah Muhammad, Minister Honorable [Louis] Farrakhan, the Republic of New Africa, the Young Lords, the Indian...American Indian Movement. I mean, there were--the Young Patriots--there were a host of...of organizations that they stopped dead in their tracks. They attacked the community and the neighborhoods first and...and took away the support, the same thing that they claim they did to the Mafia. They attacked their community, their support base, and the same thing with us.

[0:41:31]

PB: What role did emergency management and bankruptcy in Detroit play in expediting that process?

WC: It...it claimed--which it does all over the world--it claimed that we weren't efficiently running the city, so therefore it was bankrupt, and they pointed to the poverty, they pointed to the police brutality, they pointed to the vacant houses and blame that on us. When in fact, that was a real smooth process of the corporate community taking over a city, take...taking over a city's governmentality so that it had no democracy any longer. It..it had no...the people had no voice anymore because we didn't deserve it, according to them, and this kept on and kept on, which caused even more problems. They did the same thing in the Philippines. They did the same thing in Nicaragua, El Salvador. This is what they do, the World Bank, the IMF [International Monetary Fund], they loan, give...give these giant loans and people can't pay them back, and then that's when they come and they take over, just like what they're doing here in Detroit.

PB: Can you tell us a little bit about--and this is getting, like, more specific within this broader context--but can you tell us about the fight that you all waged to save Lela Whitfield's place, keep her in her home?

WC: Denise [Lela Whitfield] in...in our neighborhood was losing her home just like hundreds of other people were losing their homes because of the city manager, because of neoliberalism, because of crooks stealing money, stealing land, stealing taxes, making millions of dollars. Denise lost--was on the verge of losing--her home, and because of Freedom Freedom's connection with other organizations and other people, Detroit Defense League [Detroit Eviction Defense] saved her from losing her home, and so she's still living in there now, but hundreds of people weren't as for...weren't...wasn't as fortunate as she was. So somehow, we have to...somehow we have to get the water turned on. Somehow, we have to find solutions so the availability of water, people can have access to it again, shelter, the same things that the Black Panther Party was talking about in its Ten-Point Platform program. We want land, food, housing, bread, full employment. It's still the same things, so we have to create these things ourselves 'cause they'd never give them these things, and if they give 'em to you, then that means they're gonna take 'em back. So, we have to give these things to ourselves. We have to liberate peace. We have to liberate the end of police brutality. We have to do our own liberation and...and control our own destinies.

PB: Didn't you all build a fence around that home to prevent her from being evicted?

WC: Yes. The fence...we...we built a fence around Denise's home because they were saying that when the trucks came to evict 'em, they would just go into her house, and these big trucks would pull these big dumpsters next to the house, and on the side of the house, and just throwing stuff out, her belongings, no matter what it was. No matter how long something had been in the family [coughs], they would throw it in the dumpster. And the...the Detroit Defense League [Detroit Eviction Defense?], they had been so...they had dealt with so many cases, they knew exactly what to do. So to keep them from going on the side of the house, they built a fence. To keep the trucks from coming down the street, they had cars on both sides. And the fence...the fence is all around the house, so I decided to say, "Well, at least we can paint 'em." And then, I decided, "Well, at least we can draw a picture on it or something," and those pictures are world-wide now. They took pictures of it, about the plight of people losing their homes, and the necessary steps that had been taken to save homes. It put Detroit Defense League on the...on the map, which they shoulda been. It put the people on the map as far as their resilience of...of fighting these untruths and these lies and this thievery.

PB: What kind of impacts does that kind of victory in a neighborhood have for, I guess, sustaining and advancing organizing work?

WC: It's good for everybody. It was good for me. It was good for Denise. Because we all had our doubts, and when...when we had that...when we had that victory, I mean, it was...it was celebration time. I mean, we beat Fannie Mae, kicked 'em in their ass. That brings more enthusiasm to the people that we can resolve, perhaps find solutions to, the most harshest problems in this governmental system.

[0:49:00]

CR: What did...what influences did your experience with the Black Panther Party have on your organizing work and art since, with Freedom Freedom Growers and with Emory Douglas Family Youth and Art program [Emory Douglas Youth and Family Art Program]?

WC: The programs in Freedom Freedom, we try to reflect the building of a new way of life, the building of a new culture. Art plays a...a huge role in that. Film is art, literature is art, playwright is art, and visual art is art. It reflects and educates people, the reflection of the things that we're doing under the circumstances of rebuilding our...our lives and our environment. It points out contradictions. One of my favorite artists that was...that...that was doing that was a brother in the Black Panther Party, Minister of Info...Minister of...of Inf...of Culture, Emory Douglas. His art reflect one of the problems of police brutality, and so I figured that this would be a good art program, and I... [laughs] I didn't figure that on my own. Myrtle said, "You ought to...you should do another art program, other than the Art in the Garden."

So, I chose the name of the Emory Douglas Youth and Family Art Program, and I got a chance to feed children and their families, and we tried to reflect things going on in the neighborhood. We tried to reflect things going on in the system the best...the best that I could. They were five and six, seven, eight, nine years old, so I'd give this lengthy instruction and syllabus to the class, and they just did what they wanted to do anyway. We would show books of earth and volcanoes and stuff like that. But the thing that I noticed, the fear of creation was so prevalent in those art classes. They would draw something, and they'd want to throw it away, or they'd draw something that didn't look like a photograph, and they would start crying. So, I realized that creativity is something that has to be encouraged. Mistakes have to be learned, that they're the mother of knowledge, and that's basically what the Emory Douglas Youth and Family Art program was all about--is all about. We're bringing it back.

[0:53:03. Jump cut.]

WC: To bring people's awareness about the type of art in contradiction to corporate art for a fundraiser, we brought Emory Douglas of the Black Panther

Party here himself. With him came posters, with him came knowledge of the history of the art in the Black Panther Party. Also, Kathleen Cleaver came with him. Her husband [Eldridge Cleaver] was Minister of Defense, and all of them were on the committee of the Black Panther Party. It was a hell of an experience seeing him. It was...I mean, I list...I learned just as well as everyone else was...was learning, and that's what the program is for. I mean, it's for all of us to learn. I'm not the teacher, and the student is always not the student. We reverse roles all of the time. There's no hierarchy on how information and knowledge is made and exchanged. So, we all learned from Emory being here.

And by the way, the...the youth...Emory Douglas Youth and Family Art program, we served a hot meal at the end of each class, so that helped org...that helped organize other businesses in the community. It helped organize caterers to...to participate. With the money that we raised, we paid them a salary. So, the children are sustained with information. They're sustained with a good hot meal at...at the end of each day, and the people who donate their time 'cause we can't pay 'em exactly what they're worth, and so, the chain reaction behind that--and remember, the purpose is to build community. Community is ran by a collective body and formulates its own leadership to conduct the affairs of...of a community and the different apparatuses that it has.

[0:56:08]

PB: One thing that struck me in what you were just talking was how students were afraid...or how young people are afraid to create for lack of, you know, failing--or, for like, they're afraid to create because of the failure and not being able to be perfect in their creations, and I'm wondering how you see that as it applies to, like, collective imagination or more radical imagination about organizing, about what society can look like. Do you see parallels there between this, like, fear of creation and imagination and art and in, like, politics more generally?

WC: There's a fear of creation that stems from this capitalist system. Without creation, everything remains stagnant, contradictions can't be resolved 'cause in order for a contradiction or a problem to be resolved, there's...there's...there's discourse about the problem and then there's implementation of subjective

analysis of that problem until it becomes ob...objective, until it becomes truth. We're not allowed to make mistakes. You go to prison for making mistakes. You're beaten for making mistakes. So, over the course of 400 years, people are afraid to create. People are afraid to make mistakes, and we implement that amongst ourselves on a regular basis. Our political organizing, the whole objective is to create...is to create a new environment. We don't know what that environment is gonna be until we analyze, until we implement a creative thought or idea that comes from a collective discourse of...of members of the neighborhood. It's...it's just not allowed. You do what you're told, you're obedient, so there's no room for analyzation. They leave no room--what I mean by 'they,' this corporate culture--leaves no room to analyze, to sit down and have conversations about transforming any type of inconsistency, particularly if it interferes with the profit of...of a corporation. They want it to stay the same. They want to cash crop until the land is gone, until they've made as much money as they possibly can.

We, on the other hand, since we have this farm, we understand that cash cropping kills the soil, so we rotate our...we rotate our crops. We realize that these 10,000 acres of farmland is...they're...they're...they're not productive at all, so we can create a disperse of...of farms in the neighborhood to take the hardship off the land that they've stolen. These are creative ideas, creative ideas to so-called [air quotes] "crime" amongst us. I call them just incorrect ideas of...of how to exist within this monstrosity, political monstrosity. We have the creation of community and participatory action from the people, where they can talk about all of their ideas, somewhat like what... [clears throat] somewhat like what the Zapatistas are doing in Chiapas [Mexico], sorta like what Oakland [California] continues on doing in...in California. It's being practiced everywhere 'cause we have no choice. If we're not creative, we become so stagnant, we die.

PB: So how do you make space for that kinda, like, radical imagination in the programs that Freedom Freedom runs?

WC: You just do it. You just...the way that you make that environment, it starts with one person or it starts with two, and then these few people have this...this conversation because we're tired of the water bill or we're tired of not having food, we're tired of people breaking into our homes, we're tired of the government and the corporate community committing the crimes of theft

amongst us. So, we discuss solutions and we put 'em into practice, just like anybody else would, just like they do in the underground economy. We will do...we get that creation and we do it ourselves also.

[1:02:47]

PB: What kind of relationships do you have with Malik Yakini and D-Town Farms and other folks who are active in the farming scene here?

WC: Our relationship with D-Town Farm is off the charts. [laughs] Malik and his community that he belongs to, they saved my life. I became a...a student teacher at a school that he was principal of, Nsoroma [Institute]. I had been homeless and everything, and so he got me inside Nsoroma, you know, to do work. I helped. I was a student...not student...I was a teacher's aide for an art class. I learned so much from the students. I learned so much from Baba Malik and all the mamas that were there and all the papas...babas that were there. It saved my life. My understanding of...of old contradictions between factions disappeared. Because of the honesty of Baba Malik, I was able to understand what autonomy actually is in its existence and the different ideas of the approach of what autonomy is. We have to be allowed to experience that.

The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], the counter...who made up the countering program...the counterintelligence program made that task of creativity and different ideas violent. They created an atmosphere of death and murder to...to keep us separate, and I learned from Baba Malik that there's a thin line between what the two parties were talking about. Both parties were talking about autonomy and sovereignty.

[1:05:29]

PB: Can you talk about...a little bit about the importance of schools like App...of African-centered schools like Nsoroma in the city of Detroit and in providing

students who might not otherwise have the opportunity, the knowledge of...the chance to learn knowledge of self?

WC: The school Nsoroma and the schools that were like Nsoroma were bedded in African-centered education. They were bedded in African-centered education because it's left out. It's left out of history, so is it really history? No, it's...it's not history. It's not real. It's like talking about an apple without talking about its seeds, or talking about the soil and the rain and the tree where...where it came from. You just see an apple, and so you can make up anything. African-centered education talks about the tree, the seed, the soil, the people who planted it, the insects, the sun, the air, everything, and how things are interrelated and...[coughs] and interconnected. African-centered education doesn't mean you just talk about Africa. It means you talk about the whole phenomena of the...of how that apple got here.

[1:07:15]

PB: I'm wondering if you'd be willing to talk about that period of homelessness before we go on to Nsoroma?

WC: [laughs] I had a lot of realizations. It wasn't African-centered education. It was about being homeless. I learned a lot about myself. The homelessness was right before Nsoroma, and I think afterwards too. So, it...it was pretty hard leaving the Black Panther Party and not being very successful in the capitalist system. I wouldn't say I failed, but it wasn't failure, it was the lack of being organized, the lack of me being organized, the...the lack of me paying attention, and so I suffered for those mistakes, and I was homeless for a long time.

PB: You said you learned a lot about yourself during that time.

WC: Yeah, the things that I learned about being homeless... [laughs] One day, I was sitting on the curb waiting on the bus in this all-white community where a family member used to live and she lost her house, but the electricity was still on

and the house was still hers. They hadn't foreclosed it yet. So, it was the wintertime, and I lived in the house, [coughs] and creativity...I used my creativity to stay warm. Since the electricity was on, I got an iron and plugged it in and put it in the closet while I washed up with a bunch of candles to warm up the bathroom. When I finished washing up in cold water, I went into the closet, which was warm now because of the iron, and I hurried up and went to sleep, so when it got cold, I'd be asleep. There were some covers and stuff there, so I just made--it wasn't a lot, so I just made a bed. I didn't have nothing to cover myself except for my clothes. I left there. I did that for a while, and someone finally called the police on me.

I was sitting on the curb, waiting on the bus, and I noticed...a realization came to me as I was watching people come out of the stores with a thousand shopping bags that they had spent their money on, and what they spent their money on to me was the key. I realized that you only have this money only if you're needed by the corporate community to do the work. If you're no longer needed, you have no right to live because you have no money. You have no right to medical attention. You don't even have a right to sit on the curb looking abandoned because the police drove right up right after that, right after that realization, and asked me what was I doing, and he said that he received a call about me coming out of an abandoned house, and I said, "That's my cousin's house." He said, "Can you prove it?" I said, "Well, you can talk to her," you know. So he said, "Okay," and he talked to her and it was--I don't want to say her name, but she practically cussed him out and said, "Yeah, that's still my home. It hasn't been foreclosed yet." Da da da da da. And I guess his face turned red, and he gave me the phone back, and he said, "Okay." He said...it was just like a scene from the movie Rambo. He said, "I also stopped you because of the way you look," you know, and that just proved that without the job, you become suspicious, you become an outcast, you become homeless. People abandon you because you have to figure out a whole new lifestyle.

Like, I was talking with this brother who was... While I was homeless, I visited this young man who was in the underground economy. His home had nothing in it, but he was under a street light during the winter selling his goods, and he said... [laughs] he said--and we laughed about it--he said that--what do you call?--he said that, "I got a payment plan on top of another payment plan and a payment plan on top of that pay...payment plan that I fucked up, so now I got around five

payment plans that I owe money to.” [coughs] He said, “Now, I’m on another payment plan, but I still got to pay all that money back, so that’s why I’m out here at four o’clock in the morning selling goods,” and it made me realize, you know, we have a lot of work to do.

[1:13:37]

PB: You learned a lot about yourself in that time. What is that also teaching you--maybe you already, you know, knew this--but what...what analysis about society and power structures and capitalism did you come out of that experience with?

WC: They’re kleptomaniacs. They don’t care. They’re the masters of disinformation. They’re the masters of discultural information about history, about who we are, about what we could be, about what we should be, about our participatory actions in this governance. They lie about themselves and what they’re doing, and we fall for it until...sometimes until you don’t have anything, but we shouldn’t have to wait for realization when we don’t have anything--until we don’t have anything. We should listen [laughs] to anthropological cultural transformationists. We should listen to what they have to say and look at what they’re doing and see if truth coincides with their practice, the truth that they speak coincides with their practice. If it does, then here’s your chance to wait--not wait until you don’t have anything before you start saving yourself and your family and your neighborhood.

PB: So, how were you able to transition out of that experience of being homeless?

WC: I got a pizza job, got an apartment. I think that’s what happened, got an apartment and worked. I think I worked for this job a couple of years and started selling oils and incense and stuff like that, still getting high.

[1:16:11]

PB: Now, at what point do you meet Mama Myrtle?

WC: [laughs] While I was living in the apartment. I knew that question was coming up.

PB: You had to know it was coming up.

WC: [laughs] It was a joyful experience. It was really funny because I had been knowing her a long, long time prior, before she came over to see me, and we were sitting around talking. I said, "Oh! She came over 'cause she like me. [laughs] I didn't realize that. That's why you here." She said, "Shit, I might as well go ahead and go home. Bye, Curtis." [laughs]

PB: So, what was your next move to re-engage?

WC: [laughs] Okay, it's getting rough now. We courted for a while. I noticed she was doing things that sisters do to get my attention, and I thought it was kind of funny, but it made me feel good. And after that, it's history. [laughs]

PB: I know it got personal, but this is part of your story.

WC: [laughs] Yeah.

CR: How were our families connected before?

WC: [clears throat] Our families were affected. We were all having a hard time, and me and her children got really close, started looking out for one another.

[1:18:04]

PB: How long were you all courting or doing your thing before...

WC: [snorts]

PB: [laughs] --to use your language--before the idea for Freedom Freedom?

WC: At least a year. We were courting, and I was always thinking... [exhales loudly] I was always thinking, "How can I get back into cultural transformation, since I'm feeling good?" And somehow, the farming came up. I...I can't remember when or how. Myrtle has that story down pretty pat, of course. But from there, I remembered the survival programs. I never stopped reading, even when I was homeless. In fact, I had more time to read, and I grew a lot, and I continued on growing, and Myrtle grew along with me. But her perspective is different than mine because her experiences are different from mine in real life, although they may be similar, but because she's a woman she has a woman's perspective. I don't know how the garden came up, but I...I took the ball and ran with it, kind of to her surprise 'cause she was expecting a couple of tomatoes and a plant here, some plants on the porch, you know. I wanted to cut down trees and give food away, have these big food give-aways of raw food. That's how impractical I was.

[1:20:26]

PB: So, do you credit your relationship with Mama Myrtle to, like, re-engaging in organizing work?

WC: Yes, definitely. I mean, I can credit Mama Myrtle to me getting back involved in participatory organizing instead of just reading, like I had been doing, and having conversations, not being able to prove what I'm talking about. I felt good enough with enough confidence to say, "Well, let's create this. Let's take control of our environment." And now, she and her daughter, her son--these are our kids

together--and Curtis run the farm, and I'm doing other things now. I'm getting back to my drawing, [clears throat] getting back to re-introducing the Emory Douglas Youth and Family Art Program, getting back into actually being creative about what are the tools necessary--the real tools necessary--to liberate our environment and the space where we live, to the point where it sustains us, not just with food or not just with clothing or medicine or hospitalization, but against the government, against the corporate community, against their police. We need sustainability from all those things. So what...how do you liberate, what do we do to subjectively start liberating our...ourselves from these atrocities?

[1:23:01]

PB: Can you talk a little bit, too, about your involvement with the [James and Grace Lee] Boggs Center [to Nurture Community Leadership], like what your role is there and what you see as the importance of institutions like the Boggs Center?

WC: I found out--what little I've read--that a lot of their philosophy and ideology is somewhat the same as the Black Panther Party. They...they were very supportive of Freedom Freedom. They understood farming. They understood community building. So I became more and more involved, and eventually, I was chosen to be on the board. They're a very significant organization. They implement and see that developing leadership is very tricky, but necessary--but necessary--to do. How do you develop leadership where it can develop on its own organically without you telling it what to do, you know? I think that's very important, and that's what they believe in. They've encouraged me in my leadership. They have faith in me more than I had in myself, which prompt me to do even more reading and more participatory action as far as liberation is concerned.

PB: Since we're on the topic of developing--excuse me--developing leadership, what's it like for you, like, having built Freedom Freedom to then, like, witness your offspring, like with Curtis also working on the farm and active in so many other organizing spheres in the city, like, what's that...what does that...what does that feel like, and how do you, like, when you reflect on this angle, like what your legacy is through your children?

WC: I reflect our collective building of Freedom Freedom. I couldn't have done it by myself. It woulda been impossible to do it by myself. In fact, it probably wouldn't have gotten done, but because it was a collective effort, collective conversation, it got done. I mean, I made my contributions. Everybody made their contributions. That's what leadership is all about, creative leadership. With my children, they've developed themselves to the point where they can provide their leadership, and I go to them for answers now. Now that they're old as dust, they... [laughs] they can explain things with much more authority, and I better listen, or I'm in trouble. That's how much they've grown, the whole family of young people.

[1:27:17]

PB: I guess that raises another question for me 'cause these are conversations I have with elders a lot is, like, what's the importance of having that kind of intergenerational dialogue in terms of learning from past struggles for liberation and passing on lessons to advance current and future struggle?

WC: I mean, where does knowledge, revolutionary knowledge, come from? It comes from everywhere. It comes from perspectives of young and perspectives of old, and you put them together because the perspectives of someone different...because of that spirituality, we can walk down this road and see something different and get something different from it. I would have the... [coughs] I would have the history of cleaning out the road... [coughs] of cleaning up everything, chopping down trees, and stuff like that. The younger would have a different perspective of, just recently, planting the garden, walking down the clean alley, seeing butterflies and things of that sort, and we combine that type of understanding and perspective together, and then we come up with a united perspective that's total, like I was saying about the apple and the tree and the seed. I may have history of tilling the soil to put the seed in, and they may have a history of watching the tree grow and picking the apple, and then we put all that together of where did the apple come from. You know, they...they know it come from the tree, but what...what else is--it's like African-centered education. You had to put all these perspectives together to get a total picture.

[1:29:51]

PB: From your decades of organizing work and study and participation in freedom struggles, what are some of the big lessons that you would share with younger organizers and activists?

WC: The thing that I always try to tell or explain or mention to other organizers is that I hope they see me listening to them. It's not a spoken word, but I hope they see me listening, and then we get into some type of conversation, and I try not to discourage what they're thinking or their perspective because I know that, eventually, they may come across the same truths that I did, but maybe that's impossible because the environment will have changed so much. So, I guess, being patient with yourself that you will get it if...if you dedicate yourself as a cultural transformationist.

PB: What do you want to see, if we're like dr...dreaming here, what do you want to see come out of Freedom Freedom?

WC: That it grows enough where it's no longer needed anymore.

PB: My follow-up question to that would be: in that...in this future society where it's no longer needed, what's that society look like? So, like, in other words, like, what's your vision for the future of Detroit that's guiding your work?

WC: The future that I see, or the...the work that I'm doing--that I'm contributing to, I think we can see, or want, the opportunity to--I guess it's so simple--to control our own destiny 'cause we get with our--after we get rid of one problem, there's always another one there that cause a different plan of action, different practices. So, it's...it's hard to predict what...what we want in particular, but we know we want freedom. We know we want land, bread, housing. We know we want to control our own destiny. We know these things. So, we have to go with the contradictions at hand to...to achieve just that. After we achieve just that, perhaps the little ones now, if they can grow up in the environment that we have

created, then they can carry on and maintain it or transform it into something else because they will face different contradictions than what we face. So, I guess what I want is to secure the space where it's actually giving growth or being a hedge surrounding and giving safety and peace so that we can learn and do what's necessary to keep that liberation and freedom, the space providing the tools, the knowledge of how to do that.

[1:34:08]

PB: Is there anything that we didn't touch on?

WC: No, you 'bout covered everything. [laughs]

PB: We can get more into the nitty-gritty of personal life, if you want. [all laugh]

CR: I did want to...there was one question on there that I feel like didn't...you were talking and didn't loop back around, and I was gone for a little while, so if this is something you already talked about, just let me know. How has your artwork evolved from helping with the yearbook at Northern to, when I was younger, it was a lot of pencil drawing, and then I remember you starting to work with colored pencil and some ink and some watercolor, and then on canvas, and now it's, like, mixed with collage, and the story of your work is so much fuller and almost, like, impossible to digest just seeing it just once. Like, can you talk about, like, as an artist, like, going to, like, those different spaces and to, like, where you are now?

WC: As an artist, so-called revolutionary artist--which some may say I'm not [laughs]--but me trying to be a revolutionary artist to convey new thoughts and the truth. The environment changes because of the work that we do, and as an artist, my technique of how do I express what's around us that's good and bad, how do we reflect our...the culture that we're building, how do we reflect the culture that we're building against the culture that's causing us to build what we have to have in order to exist. That causes--that phenomenon causes--change and

development. So, just like you can't use old words to define new phenomena, you can't use old art to define new phenomena either. So, your technique changes.

Collage is--I like the true pictures and the art and using the different medias of ink and pastel, acrylics to try to cap... [coughs] to try to capture what I feel is necessary as an individual revolutionary or cultural transformationist.

CR: One of my favorite pieces from when I was younger is Family, and I own it.

WC: [laughs]

CR: It's hanging up in the house. Can you talk about the creation of that piece?

WC: I... There's a piece called Family that my daughter has, and when I first started doing that, I hadn't drawn anything in such a long time. [clears throat] I did that in 1981, and at first, I just can't do art for art's sake. It has to be a political tone to it. So, I drew it with using members of the family. Kezia's mom, Kezia herself--Curtis herself. She was Kezia at...at the time. She's Curtis now. [clears throat] So, I named it Family. It was the first picture that I had drawn in ten years or something like that, and she has the original, and I proceeded in painting several more after that. I drew one of Simore (??) Michelle (??). I did some ink drawings. Yeah.

PB: Could you take a picture of that and send it to us?

CR: Yes.

PB: I think it'd be really nice to be able to see it.

CR: Yeah. You also...I live one block over, so if you want to stop over...

PB: Oh, cool.

CR: ...and look at it, it's fine.

WC: [clears throat]

PB: So that's...

CR: Oh yeah, it's raining now.

PB: So, if you don't have any questions...

CR: Yeah. [cross-talk]