

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2011

Interviewee: Mr. Evans D. Hopkins
Interview Date: July 7, 2011
Location: Living room of his home, Richmond, Virginia
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 1:58:21

Joe Mosnier: I believe I am.

John Bishop: Okay, we're rolling.

JM: Today is Thursday, the seventh of July 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with videographer John Bishop, and we are in Richmond, Virginia, to do an oral history interview with Mr. Evans Darryl Hopkins. Mr. Hopkins, it's a delight and pleasure to be with you. Thank you for –

Evans Hopkins: It's a pleasure to be with you. Thank you.

JM: Welcoming us. Yeah, the interview is being, uh, conducted for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress.

Um, Mr. Hopkins, I thought we might start today with a description of, um, your family and childhood, uh, in your early years in Danville, Virginia.

EH: Well, I was born on June 23, 1954, in Winslow Hospital, which was a one-floor hospital, uh, that was reserved for the colored citizenry of Danville, Virginia, so to speak. Um, my sister had been born a year before in Washington [DC]. She had been, uh – my mother went up to Washington in order to give birth to her, uh, because of the segregation of the facilities. And, uh, I wasn't quite so lucky, I guess, but I came through all right. I had one sister, um, my mother, Marguerite Hopkins, Marguerite Swanson Hopkins from the Swanson family, uh, and my father's name was Daniel Hopkins.

JM: Tell me a little bit about, um, about your parents and your sister.

EH: Well, my mother and father met at a, during, in a typing class, uh, that was given by Dan River Mills [Corporation] back in, during the day when many corporations, uh, sought to help out their workers with, uh, various self-help programs. Uh, my father worked for Dan River Mills. My mother didn't, but she was in the typing class along with, uh, her mother, as a matter of fact. And, um, they met and wed. It was – they were in their thirties at the time.

And, uh, my father began a landscaping business in addition to working for the mill. Uh, he used to say that he was a “black first.” He was the, uh, first supervisor for Dan, black supervisor for Dan River Mills. Uh, he was the supervisor of the mail room and the janitorial crew, but, uh, a first nonetheless, which shows you just how backwards, uh, Dan River Mills and segregated it was, keeping all of the, uh, or reserving all of the, uh, upper positions for the whites. In any case, this was in the '50s, in the late '50s. And he decided that he would bring the tractor from his family farm and begin a landscaping business in the city of Danville,

becoming, uh, one of the larger, uh, landscapers, which was not entirely very large, for Danville, but, um, nonetheless, one of the very few black businesses, uh, in the town at one point.

JM: Um-hmm. Tell me a little bit about, um, about your sister, uh, because, of course, she'll be important in the process by which you yourself will become involved in, um, greater attention to civil rights issues and the [Black] Panthers and so forth.

EH: Uh, my sister sort of led the way, uh, and influenced me to join the, uh, the Black Panther Party. Um, and, uh, you know, there were just the two of us. Um, I would say that probably my being involved in, uh, the church, uh, helped lead me toward a more strident involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. The, uh, High Street Baptist Church was the center of activity in 1963 for, uh, demonstrations that took place in Danville, Virginia, which, um, to some extent are fairly well known.

But I'd like to read, uh, a section of my book on that [5:00], uh, which might succinctly, um, tell about what was going on in 1963 when I was nine and what I entitle in the section of my book, uh, *Life After Life: A Story of Rage and Redemption*, and the first section is entitled, uh, "The Roots of Rage." [Pause] And the book begins with me as a, uh, young child, maybe six or seven. [Sneezes] Excuse me.

JM: Bless you.

EH: The book begins with me [clears throat] –

JB: Let me record back.

EH: [Clears throat] Yes. [Clears throat] Excuse me. The book begins with me, uh, shopping with my mother at the A&P [grocery store], uh, which was one of the few stores that actually allowed or welcomed, uh, trade from the, uh, black people of the town. And it's hard

for people nowadays to think that stores were so segregated that even the grocery stores – there was only one grocery store that most of the black people used to go and, uh, shop at.

[Begins reading] “The A&P parking lot was beside the old city jail, and I would spend minutes that seemed like hours with my face close to the windshield, looking up at the hundred-year-old building’s faded grayish-white façade. I would see the men inside with their arms sticking out through rusted iron bars, watch them waving or screaming or flinging notes to girlfriends or family members standing at the fence along the edge of the lot.

“The jail took on a more frightening aura when I turned nine. It was then that police locked away hundreds of demonstrators during the civil rights marches of 1963, when firemen opened up on the crowds with water hoses, when deputized garbage men attacked them with clubs, and dogs were set upon those who came to the courts building to protest the mass jailings. My family was embroiled in this struggle, and the image of the jail became embedded in my young mind, a fearsome symbol of the consequences of social change.

“But, as imaginative a child as I was, I could never have foreseen that one day I would be looking out at that A&P parking lot from the inside of that old jail.”

JM: Hmm. Yeah. We’ll come to that theme maybe later in the interview. I want to ask, um, I want to ask – you’ve written in your book about the theme of inevitable confusion for a young person coming up in a world that has all these arbitrary rules related to race. And I just wanted to ask you a little bit about that to, um, expand on that issue of how, as a young person, a child in that year – in ’63 you’re just nine years old – how you began to try to think your way through the question of race and racism and what you were observing.

EH: Well, it was particularly hard during this era because of the thought that, you know [sighs] – let me put it this way. Everything around you tried to make you feel like you were

inferior. Okay? It made you want to feel like there was an innate inferiority along with being black. And not only that, that white society, white culture, the white race, the white mind was superior. So, therefore, this was so deep that it even went as far as in my own family, because my mother was lighter than my father, my father was of a darker complexion, because I was darker than my sister, it sewed the thought that could it be possible that one's, uh, mother might be superior to one's father or one's sister superior to oneself? You know, that's just how deep it was.

And, in figuring it all out, sometimes I say, "Well, one of the things that inspired me to, uh, develop my mind more, study the encyclopedia and all of that, was I didn't want my sister to be smarter than I was." [10:00] She was a year older, so naturally, she was more advanced in some ways. But I wanted to prove that 1) the times were relatively sexist, as well, so I couldn't let a girl outdo me as a boy, but also, at the same time, I just wanted to prove that I was as good as my sister. And, uh, when integration came, I had to strive to prove, constantly prove, that I was as good as the white students. [Someone coughs]

JM: We'll reach that integration question in just a minute. I want to, I want to ask a little bit more about, um, about how your family was – given who your parents were and their histories – how your family was situated in relation to the white or black community in Danville.

EH: Well, my mother's, uh, father was probably the most prominent African American in the city. Uh, the story is told of how, uh, he built the houses on, uh, two streets in Danville called Brucetown and in many other areas of Danville, along with his sons, who worked as his construction crew. And this was in the, uh, around the turn of the century, early 1900s.

And, uh, around 19--, um, in the 1920s, he wanted to buy a big brick house, but all of the larger brick houses were up on – just one street up on the white street, the West Main Street of

town. So, he went up there, he bought a house, and then moved the house, brick by brick, tore the house down in sections, or brick by brick, and reassembled the house one block away in Brucetown. So, we grew up sort of, uh – until the age of when I was six, we grew up in the Big House. You know, um, all of the other houses were a lot smaller.

And, uh, and so, it gave me a sense of privilege, but, at the same time, we couldn't walk to the white street, you know, without worrying about – we had to go up there to catch the bus, which we seldom did because we didn't, our parents didn't want us subjected to having to sit in the back of the bus. And then, one other street over, um, behind our house was another white street. And, to a child, you were told, you know, you go there and, you know, the white folks will get you, and, uh, or you might get into a fight, or you might not come back. So, it was sort of like being imprisoned in one's own city, to a certain extent.

JM: Um-hmm. You, as a nine-year-old – the major demonstrations in Danville – and, of course, Danville had a – well, let me put it this way. Danville's history through the civil rights era is often described and written about by historians as being very rugged. I mean, even in the landscape, the national landscape of a lot of difficult places, that Danville was a pretty hard place through this era. And I'm wondering if that's your recollected sense and also, um, you know, how you might have come to whatever opinion you have of that, through observation and such.

EH: Okay. Well, perhaps I could read, um, another section of the book, which –

JM: Sure.

EH: Uh, puts it better than [laughs] –

JM: Thank you.

EH: As I might now. [Begins reading] “In 1963, when I was nine, there were mass demonstrations in Danville, protests against the segregation of the bus lines, of the department

stores, and perhaps most pointedly of the city library. It was then that my social consciousness began to develop, with the firsthand accounts I heard of boycotts and marches, of the swinging police clubs and attacking dogs, of folk being knocked down by the force of fire hoses in the streets of my town, all melded with the terrible photos and television accounts of similar turmoil throughout the South. [Pause]

“I remember seeing bloody men and women come staggering into High Street Church for first aid. The black hospital was filled with wounded protestors that night. And when those arrested went to court, they were tried before Judge A.M. Aiken, who would take a pistol from beneath his robe before each session and place it on the bench in an effort to intimidate any who would defy the racist laws.

“But all of this [15:00] only solidified my resolve and the resolve of those involved in the Movement. And city leaders would eventually have to give in to our demands, but only after dictates from the courts. While the buses and stores had been forced into integration, the library remained the last bastion of white supremacy in Danville. When the courts finally mandated that the library integrate, I was overjoyed. I remember arranging a ride into town with a teacher after school and rushing to the main library to delve into the books that had been denied to me.

“But once inside the library, I discovered that all of the tables and chairs had been removed in a final attempt to maintain segregation. City officials had decided that, while blacks would have to be allowed into the library, they would not be permitted to sit and study alongside whites. When I recall the shock of seeing the spitefulness of whites evidenced by the bare floors of that library, I began to understand how anger turns into rage.”

JB: Can we pause for a second here?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: We're back after a short break. Uh, thank you for that reading. It's just beautiful. Mr. Hopkins, let me ask: Can you trace the, those several years between '63 and I think it's the fall of '68 when you and some others, including your sister, are the first students to integrate the newly desegregated, uh, high school?

EH: Okay, uh –

JM: Am I right with the –?

EH: [Clears throat] Excuse me, could you cut for a moment?

JM: Sure.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: You pronounced the high school –?

EH: Tunstall [High School].

JM: Exactly.

EH: Um-hmm.

JM: We're back on after a short break. Um, I wanted to ask about those several years, '63 to the fall of '69, I think, when you would enter the recently desegregated, um, Tunstall High School in Danville, and talk about the choice, um, how your family resolved on the choice to send its children into the newly desegregated high school. There were only a small number of families at that – kind of on that front edge of that effort.

EH: Well, the – it was either going there or to go into the [doorbell rings] into the city schools. And, uh –

JM: Should we break for just a moment? I'm sorry.

JB: Is that your phone?

JM: No, it's the doorbell.

EH: Um.

JM: Let's pause for a minute.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're rolling again.

JM: We had a brief interruption for a neighbor who had come to the front door.

EH: All right.

JM: Mr. Hopkins, we were talking about, um, '63 to '69 when you'll enter the high school.

EH: Right. Well, my parents felt that – during this period, everyone felt like they had to do their part and to make some sacrifices to a certain extent. And it was obvious the closest county high school was about thirty-five miles away. Uh, it was actually the school – at one time I had thought that it was the reason that my father hadn't gone to high school was because there were no buses going to that high school thirty-five miles away. Uh, interestingly enough, I found out later on that that high school wasn't founded until, um, I think the late '40s or early 1950s, so when he was in school, there weren't any high schools for black, um, kids.

But, in any case, this high school was so far away, and there were no buses to take us there, so it was actually integrate the county school or not go to high – well, let me take that back. There were buses going thirty-five miles away, so it was either – by the time we went to school. So, we felt that, uh, in order to get a *better* education, we had to integrate the school, but we also wanted to be part of, uh, the effort to integrate the schools.

JM: Talk about, uh –

EH: I didn't like it very much, but – you know.

JM: Right. I'm very interested to know how – the experience you had and, and, uh, how you think and reflect on that experience today.

EH: Well, you know, I was – recently, I was watching all of these things about bullying and what bullying does to kids. And I had never thought of myself as being bullied, you know, but then I – because, you know, it was a racial thing. [20:00] I felt I had been harassed and intimidated and attacked physically. Um, you know, I was attacked once and received a black eye and – you know, for getting into a fight, but I was, you know, attacked from behind. I was pushed, I was jostled, I was cursed, you know, and called, you know, all manner of things. But it wasn't as bad as many, uh, kids went through during that time, so – you know. But, uh, in my imagination, the young writer's imagination, you know, it was just horrific.

But in thinking about how that, uh, being bullied, helped fuel my rage later on, you know, um, helped me to feel like I needed to be more of a man, you know, to, to resist this sort of oppression. But as – so, when kids go through it nowadays, I can identify with that, but I had never really realized that that bullying was probably one of the most, uh, important aspects of my young life as far as turning me later toward the rage that led to, uh, um – I won't necessarily say the rage led me into the Movement, but the need to resist led into the Movement, and later on, anger and rage found its way into, uh, my subsequent turn toward criminality.

JM: Yeah. Um, I remember it was the summer of '70 when your family made a trip up to Washington DC.

EH: Um-hmm.

JM: And you first, uh, kind of in a direct way, encountered the message of the Black Panther Party through newspapers and some relatives.

EH: Uh, yes, I had a cousin who was selling, um, Black Panther Party newspapers, and, um, and we saw the first paper. And by that time we had already been involved in an organization, uh – it was part of the cultural nationalist movement. You know, we were wearing dashikis, Afros; suddenly Black became beautiful. And, uh, [coughs] – excuse me. During this time, um – you know, one thinks back upon this period, because it seems like now there is, again, a lack of a certain amount of cultural identity and pride. And, uh, and, you know, I was not – well, at that time, I guess I was a cultural nationalist to a certain extent.

But when I encountered the Black Panther Party, they had a message of, uh, not only racial solidarity but class solidarity. They put things into economic terms. But also the Black Panther Party was, um, a seed of a growing movement toward pride in being black, but also pride in resistance. And during this time, there was a strain of fear. You have to remember that those who resisted were often met with, um, with the most terrible brutality. And, um, you know, they were jailed. Um, I have to clear my throat again.

JM: Sure.

EH: Excuse me. [Clears throat] Um, excuse me. Of the most terrible brutality and, um, [clears throat] they were, um – there's no way to take that out of the tape. [Laughter] Um, the most terrible brutality, and so there was a fear. The fear was inordinately large compared to the actual, actuality. The terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan – I remember, growing up, we always closed our drapes. You know, I see people now with their windows open and sometimes I think now, you know, we leave our windows open. But back during that time we said, "Better close those windows, you know. White folks will drive through and just shoot through your window just for meanness and spite!"

And, um, so during that time, there was an inordinate fear, you know. Um, the quote/unquote “white man” was all-powerful. [25:00] He could do anything to you if you just acted like you were, uh, you were an uppity Negro or anything like that, or you tried to move above your station or get out of your place. You know, you don’t hear these terms or anything but, you know, it’s “uppity Negro,” um, “above your station,” um, “out of place,” you know. These were – this was all throughout the South, but also throughout the North, but particularly throughout the South.

JM: Tell me a little bit more about, um, about that, in that year, um, fall of ’70, the ’70-’71 school year. It will culminate in the spring with, um, an effort by yourself and a friend to, uh, lead a student walkout, which has an unusual sort of resolution in the moment when you arrive there at the school.

EH: Right. Well, we had, uh, planned the walkout, because the schools had integrated. And one school was called John M. Langston after, um, one of the first, um, I think it was members of, um, of the House of Representatives, uh, first black, one of the first black representatives during the Reconstruction era. And the high school was named George Washington. So, Langston was more or less, um – it wasn’t abolished. It was turned into, actually, a middle school. And so, Langston *High School* was abolished, and it had this storied history dating back like years and years.

So, the students felt like their identity had been taken, so we wanted a new school. We wanted to get rid of the name of George Washington. We felt George Washington was a slave owner. And, uh, and we just wanted – we wanted African American Studies classes, or Black Studies classes. So, we just wanted a sense of identity of our own.

And so, we decided to stage a walkout so that, uh, we could have, um, these things that we wanted. And the walkout was supposed to have been for a Thursday. We planned it on a Tuesday. We had a student group that, uh, used to sell Black Panther Party newspapers, so I was the titular head of this little group of community workers. We used to go to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where there was a Black Panther Party chapter, and, uh, and get the newspapers and come back. And so, we planned this walkout, and, uh, and, uh, and someone leaked word that we were going to walk out on Thursday. They leaked word on Wednesday.

So, when I got to school, everybody was already out on the hill, who were, you know, people who were going to walk out, about a hundred or a hundred and fifty students, including some white students. Because working with the Black Panther Party, we were told to educate the whites as well, that they weren't getting their proper history, uh, as well, as far as the class struggle that was going on.

And, um, two things that, um, you know, I'd like to come back to as far as dealing with the Black Panther Party, or, um, two things in particular, and that's idealism and ideology, because a lot of people don't understand. They think of the Black Panther Party as being kind of like a quote/unquote "Black Klan," but it wasn't anything of the sort. It was an internationalist, um, philosophy organization, uh, basically – I would say Marxist-Leninist, except that, uh, we were taught that, uh, Marx would not have called himself a Marxist, so it was more or less socialism philosophy.

So, we – I got to the school, and everybody was already out there. But we didn't get half the kids that we had planned to get. And so, we ended up – I had to negotiate with the principle and I got kicked out of school for three days, along with the organizers, uh, four or five of us.

And, uh, so it sort of started my career as a, uh, as a revolutionary off on a – [laughs] a rather comical footing.

But it also – the police did not attack us, and this was in the era of just before, um, I think it was the spring of [30:00] Kent State, um, as a matter of fact. So, we were fairly daring. Uh, I think it was – it might have been just after the Kent State uprising. And, uh, we were a bit incensed by that, as well, so some of the turmoil that was going on on the college campuses around the Vietnam War was spilling over into the high school campuses. So, uh, if we had not had the white kids with us, I, um, you know, dread to think what might have happened.

JM: Yeah. Tell me a little bit more about, um, this simultaneous process that's happening across that last year, your last year in Danville as a high school student, where you're making these periodic visits down to, down to Winston-Salem and really becoming more substantially engaged with the Black Panther, uh, chapter there. Could you describe your impressions of the group and how you began to understand that there would be roles and opportunities available for you in that context?

EH: Well, I guess to a certain extent I felt that – maybe I had an inordinate idea of my ability to be a leader, but, um, I was advanced, in a sense, philosophically. Uh, I loved studying the philosophy of the Panther Party. I loved studying dialectical materialism, which was, uh, sort of like our textbook, the, um, philosophy of the socialist, uh, Marxist-Leninist groups. Um, I loved the fact that, um, the idea of searching for truth and the fact that the Panthers felt like, um, they had a kernel of real truth of what was going on in the world. And I felt that I would be able to, because of what they called my quote/unquote “bourgeois” education, that I would be able to, uh, lend my services and my abilities to the Movement.

So, I – by this time, I had read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, um, some of H. Rap Brown, some of Eldridge Cleaver. So, now I realized that this was the budding writer in me. Uh, I had read the, uh, *Prison Letters of George Jackson* [*Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*], and I, uh, I knew that I wanted to write. I had had, um, a couple of the teachers in high school – white teachers, as a matter of fact, and one black teacher – when I went to school in the city, uh, who told me that I wrote rather well. And, um, and I liked hearing that. I liked being able to communicate, uh, on paper. I was a rather shy young man, so I didn't do a lot of talking. I wasn't able to, like many of the Panthers, uh, “blow” on people. That was the term that was used, you know; you got to “blow” on the masses and get them to, uh, understand where you're coming from. And, uh, and, to a certain extent, I was mesmerized by the fervor of their speech.

And, uh, and I was taken also by their culture. You know, this was, to a sense, authentic African American culture to me. You know, uh, they were cool; they were – you know, many of them were suave. But also they were very dedicated. They weren't the pictures that we'd seen of the Panthers in regalia marching with berets, you know. Uh, many of them were relatively impoverished. Um, when I went there, you know, they were sleeping on mattresses. They were living in, uh, what we call shotgun apartments. I didn't even know what a shotgun apartment was during that time, that you could, uh – the joke was if you fire a shotgun from the front door, uh, it would go through the three rooms, which were only the front room, the middle room, bedroom, and the kitchen, and out the backdoor. So, you know, it was a time of, um, of me understanding more about my culture, having been sheltered in the country and in a small Southern town.

And, uh, so I was just taken with the dedication. They would, you know, work sixteen, seventeen hours a day, go out selling papers, uh, [35:00] we ran a free breakfast program. This was after I joined, because as soon as I turned seventeen and became of age, I, uh, I left Danville and went to Winston-Salem and lived with the Party.

JM: Yeah. Tell me, tell me more about that experience of [clears throat] the year in, uh, the year in Winston-Salem and becoming more directly and substantially engaged, including, um, before that year is up, you will be formally made a member of the Party, which was not a, was not an automatic thing by any stretch.

EH: Right. Um, during that time – the Party began, the Black Panther Party began in 1966, was founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. And, uh, Bobby Seale, um, later told me, um, that his conception of the organization was sort of as a civil rights organization. They wrote up the platform program, the Ten-Point Platform Program, in the office of an antipoverty program where Bobby Seale worked. And – but the idea was to have these various programs that would help develop the black community, uh, not just be a, uh, antipoverty program, but, uh, a program that, uh, would help economically develop, uh, the black community. But, first and foremost, they felt the black community had to be defended against the police – excuse me – the police forces of the time, who were, um, you know just rampant in the brutality that was going on in the communities. Most of the police forces were all white, and, uh, and the brutality that, uh, the community endured was legend at that time.

So, it sort of had morphed for a while, particularly during the period when Huey Newton, uh, he went to prison in 1967. Bobby Seale, uh, was in jail for the march on the Sacramento [California] capitol, the armed march. So, the Party was leaderless, but it expanded so quickly and rapidly. There were chapters, um, just coming up everywhere, but they weren't really

affiliated with the national organization. So, membership was shut down after, um, after Huey Newton's return, uh, and David Hilliard was in charge. So, membership was shut down, and you could only become a community worker for the Panther Party until you were, uh, a quote/unquote "Panther-in-training" for a while, and then you would become a full-fledged member.

JM: Yeah.

EH: So, I was a community worker in Winston-Salem. And looking back, this was probably one of the, uh, happiest years of my life before I went out to Oakland, and, uh, and a lot of turmoil resulted from, uh, from that trip. Uh, but I graduated from high school, worked in the community, worked in the free breakfast program. I can still feel, uh, you know, how hot those grits were on those thin paper plates and serving the kids. And it really helped to formulate my concept of community service.

JM: Yeah. I'm [coughs] – excuse me. Let's take a break. [Coughs] Excuse me.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: We're back after a short break. Um, I want to ask a little bit more about the, about the Winston-Salem year, in particular around the following question, because this is such a central part, I think it's fully fair to say, about the context in which the Panthers emerged and did their work. Um, you've mentioned police brutality and all of its manifestations in every local context pretty much where the Movement unfolded. Um, but in the late '60s, uh, [FBI Director J. Edgar] Hoover, the FBI, COINTELPRO [FBI counter-intelligence program targeting critics and dissidents] really came down hard on the Panthers. And even by the time – 1970-71, or '71-72 – you're in Winston-Salem, I think nearly thirty members of the Panthers had been killed.

Um, and while you're in Winston-Salem, George Jackson dies in, uh, at [40:00] San Quentin.

And I'm interested – I ask all that because I'm interested to have you reflect on the question of the nature of struggle, the inclusion of self-defense, the inclusion of the prospect of armed resistance in that kind of context. You're a young man finding your way forward, and how those things – how you thought about that question in that year.

EH: Well, luckily, I joined the Panther Party in the year of 1971. This was, um, after Huey Newton had, uh, returned, uh, from prison. And there was a break, in which Eldridge Cleaver had, um, what we called “defected,” or tried to split the party. Actually, it's hard to say it was a split, because it was really just the New York chapter, or primarily the New York chapter, and the international group around Eldridge Cleaver. However, um, it was also a split in philosophy, because Eldridge Cleaver at the time was espousing taking the struggle to a quote/unquote “higher level” of armed struggle, which would include, uh, in his mind and the minds of many of those around him, attacks upon, uh, the police and attacks upon, um, other armed forces, in order to quote/unquote “heighten the contradiction” with the oppressive forces.

Uh, Huey, in a series of pieces, wrote about the necessity to get away from the Party's mode of being what he would call a “cultist” type of organization, not a cult, but, um, there was a cultural aspect around resistance, which had glorified the gun. So, he said that it was necessary to put away the gun and to only utilize or keep the gun for self-defense, because the gun had also become a symbol of aggression against the power structure in a way that, uh, it was seen at that time that it would not work.

Now, having joined at that time, I still romanticized about the ideal of armed struggle, which, uh, is not talked about a lot, but that ideal was still sort of in the background. And we had these various survival programs – free grocery program, free busing to prisons program, free

medical clinics – and all of these were to serve the community, to help the community see us as being on their side, but we also called them “survival programs” – it was called “survival till revolution.” So, the idea that a revolutionary time would come again, uh, was still very much, uh, in our minds.

It began to recede in the years of '72, '73, and '74, because we also had decided that we would work within the system, to change the system from within, and Bobby Seale ran for mayor of Oakland [California], which, um, ended up with, uh, most of the Party chapters actually being dismantled. And it was said that they were going to be dismantled temporarily, but instead they were, um, more or less, um, dismantled for good and most of the membership, uh, brought out to Oakland, California, as was I. Uh, I went out, uh, to become the revolutionary war correspondent that I'd always dreamed of being – ever since I had read about Clark Kent, I guess, uh, being a reporter. And I'm not sure where it came from, but the ideal of, uh, writing about, uh – being a war correspondent à la Hemingway, that sort of thing appealed to me.

JM: Well, you know, I want to say, when we think about this history from this distance today, sometimes, you know, we smile, [45:00] as you just have. But it also strikes me as altogether straightforward and understandable that you would have felt the way that you did in that context, that you would have been sincerely motivated around these questions and, um, and truly committed to what you considered a program of prospective social change that clearly was fully justified and motivated by the circumstances of the life that you could see for African Americans everywhere around you.

So, um, I'm interested in the question of how you *felt* about these prospects and how – as you were still a very young man, young adult – how you found a role for yourself. You've mentioned war correspondent. Obviously, you would emerge effectively as a journalist inside,

and a historian and reporter inside the Party. So, I'm interested in how you came into your full young self in those years in these new roles, doing these new tasks for – for the Party.

EH: Well, I was fortunate in that, um, as soon as I got to Oakland – I think this was the, um, August of '72. Um, soon after, maybe within two or three months, um – well, I became a part of the newspaper cadre, as it was called, or the editorial cadre, uh, which was about five or six who worked, who wrote on the paper. We had about five or six layout people led by Emory Douglas, the renowned artist. And, um, and then we had, um, you know, typesetting people, and then we had central distribution, which sold the paper and sent it out nationwide.

But, uh, for the editorial cadre, uh, those who wrote for the paper, uh, David [Graham] Du Bois came and became the editor-in-chief of the paper. And David G. Du Bois was the son of W.E.B. Du Bois and Shirley Graham Du Bois, the stepson of W.E.B., and he had edited the English-speaking daily in Cairo, Egypt, for the previous twelve years. And, uh, he became, uh, my mentor and a good friend. And, um, sadly, he passed away just before the publication of my book, but he did get a chance to review it and to write a blurb for it, to which I am thankful. And, um, so if any researchers – I wasn't able to get hold of his papers and I still want to try to find his papers, because he was working on a book on the Party. So, if any researchers [laughs] are watching this at some time, please contact me.

But in any case, David basically taught me how to write, you know. He taught me the, uh – I think I took a couple of, one or two, I had a weekend at the college, which didn't turn out as I planned, but, uh, because I felt like I was learning more just working and writing for the Party and, uh – but, you know, the fundamentals of journalism and, um, and basically the sensibilities of the literary artist, as well, because David was working on a novel. And I said, "Well, why would a revolutionary writer ever write fiction?" And he said, "Well, sometimes you can get at

greater truths with fiction than with nonfiction.” He was working on a novel, which was later published, called *And Bid Him Sing* [1975], in which he had a young artist over in Cairo, uh, meeting, uh, Malcolm X during Malcolm X’s Hajj [Muslim pilgrimage]. And, uh, I’m not sure it’s still in print but, uh, it comes to mind now.

So, during this period, um, you know, this was a period in which my horizons, uh, grew politically, because as soon as I got there I was covering during 1972-73 the, um [50:00] – I was covering the campaign by Bobby Seale for mayor of Oakland. And Elaine Brown was running for City Council during that time. And so, I, by being – I was the writer and the soundman, so my job was to catch all of their words on this, uh, Uher-brand, uh, reel-to-reel, uh, tape recorder.

So, I’m actually in, uh, in a few shots. I even have a newspaper, which, uh, maybe you might like to get a shot of, uh, in which Bobby Seale is running for mayor, and he’s speaking, and, uh, and I’m there with a microphone. You can sort of barely make me out. But, um, and then there’s a shot in a book by Stephen Shames, which might be included, um, I don’t know, in a future exhibit. But he has a book out, which I’ll show you a copy of, which also has a picture of me with, uh, at eighteen years old with, uh, Bobby Seale on the bus. It was in, uh, a photo that was in *JET* magazine.

So, this also helped me to realize the ideal of, um, of being well known. I’m around people who are famous, you know. The ideal of, uh – maybe it helped me in terms of feeling like maybe I can speak to and reach the masses. I’m writing in a paper that’s being read by thousands of people, going all over the country and all over the world. So, um, it helped to formulate my sensibility as an artist. I met people like, uh, uh, Abby Lincoln, for instance, who was a good friend of, uh, of David Du Bois.

JM: Um-hmm. Let me ask about, um, [someone clears throat] in a more day-to-day sense, what it *felt* like. You were doing, you were in the middle of very, very interesting circumstances. You covered the trial of the San Quentin Six. You were thickly in the campaign mix for the Bobby Seale mayoral race. Um, I'm wondering what it all – if you can describe a little bit of that, the context, the feeling, the urgency.

EH: It – you know, I work with young people now, uh, and have done some – a lot of, uh, some research and activities as it relates to, um, the formulation of one's heroes. So, during this particular time, I was able to formulate my ideal of the heroic male and the heroic female, because we had some very strong, uh, women leaders in the Party, as well. Um, on the other hand, it led to a certain amount of disillusionment when the Party began to fall apart, and I found out that, uh, that the feet of many of these heroes were made of clay.

But at that time, I was, um – you know, and part of researching about what goes on in the minds of youth, and subsequently when I sort of veered off the path of, um, of political struggle, I have done some reading and there's been a lot of research on how the young mind develops. And the mind at twenty years old – uh, my mind at eighteen, nineteen, and twenty, I realize, was still developing at that time. My brain was still developing. So, there was, to an extent, a sense of, uh, of unreality, you know. There was a sense that we could change the world. We really believed that we could change the world. But the world was changing so quickly, you know, that it was sort of easy to believe.

You know, there were developments in music, in jazz, [55:00] in film. The first black films were coming out. Some very progressive, uh, uh, uh, mainstream and independent filmmaking was being done. So, I felt like, um – I remember during the trial, I mean, during the campaign of Bobby Seale, Bert Schneider actually came and was shooting a documentary on the

campaign. He was a good friend of, uh, of Huey Newton's. And so, I remember meeting Bert Schneider. Somebody said, "That's Bert Schneider!" I said, "Who's Bert Schneider?" "He made *Easy Rider*!" I'm like [laughing], "What's *Easy Rider*?" You know? Uh, so, uh, uh, but, uh, the guy, uh – the guy who was doing the shooting for the documentary, and this is just an aside, was actually the guy who invented the Steadicam.

And, uh, so, you know, things were happening at this particular time. And I'm, you know, I'm learning about radio mics, film, and all of this, so it – but there was a sense of unreality to a certain extent. Uh, I won't say of surreality; it wasn't quite surreal. But, um, the moments were very alive. Um, I'd just begun smoking marijuana, so out in California, to a certain extent – I've often thought about it in listening to the song, uh, "Hotel California," you know, "you can check out anytime you want, but you can never leave."

JM: Um-hmm. Did you think – did you have a feeling that Seale would win the race?

EH: You know, often when I watch political campaigns now and I wonder when people lose fairly badly – and I'm wondering, "How could they have thought they were going to win?" But we actually thought we were going to win. We thought we were going to win, uh, and it's often, when I also think about illusion, there's such a thing as positive illusion, certain things you can't do unless you actually believe you can do them, no matter how farfetched they may seem. Like, right now, I'm writing a movie and I'm going to get this movie made. But, you know, I've never made a film before, you know, or written a film. But it's going to get made. But it would never have gotten written, uh, had it not been for the fact that I could imagine, you know, actually getting it made.

So, uh, we thought he was going to win, and then when he barely eked into a runoff, it was sort of like we knew that really the only chance we had is if we were to win the main

election, because the vote was split. But there was another black candidate, which split the black vote. So, when we forced the runoff, the main candidate, which was the incumbent mayor, was so far ahead we sort of could see that, uh, we weren't going to win the runoff. But up until that point, we believed we were going to take over, uh, Oakland.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Tell me a little –

JB: Would have been nice. [Laughter]

JM: Tell me a little bit more [laughs] – tell me a little bit more about, um, uh, David Du Bois and your relationship with him.

EH: David was, um, a very learned man. He spoke with a British accent. Uh, he talked about his father a great deal, which also helped me to develop a sense of wanting to be a, uh, a social scientist in many ways. Um, he – you know, and Du Bois inspires me to this day. And just the sense of knowing someone who gave an international flavor, who had studied and lived in China, who had studied and lived and worked in Cairo, uh, it helped widen my horizons to understand that, uh, that I could reach a wider world. Um, and it was also just good to have someone who understood and loved the English language [1:00:00] the way he did. And so, having him to edit my words, he drew, um – he drew the best out of me, you know. He helped me to develop an early sense of style and an early sense of, uh, color and to be able to see detail.

JM: Um-hmm.

EH: And to see the humanity in, uh, in the details of, uh, of what I was covering, and it helped me to develop a cinematic eye. And to a certain extent, I guess, uh, you'll be talking in this series to a lot of activists. Perhaps I should speak to the role of the artist and culture in the development of the Civil Rights Movement.

And, to a certain extent, I became an artist because of my involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and the desire to communicate with others. But, to an extent, my sensibility as an artist – I was not an artist in the Movement, but my sensibility began to develop from that: uh, my ability to see, to see the humanity; to understand, uh, my own theory of, uh, of moral understanding; to develop a moral compass that would later, after I strayed away from it, uh – as is sort of detailed in my book – but to help me to rejoin, um, the world of man, so to speak, and to be able to utilize my words in a poetic sense.

And so, when you look at the music of the Movement, you look at, uh, the words; you look at, uh, the preaching – um, a lot of people – and I seldom have heard people talk about the, um, the use of story, allegory, color, and, uh, and poetic phrasing in the rhetoric of preaching and in the rhetoric of the Movement. But if you listen to, for instance, Martin Luther King, you will hear, you know, it's almost like a Shakespearean-type of, uh, of use of rhetoric.

JM: Yeah. Let me ask, um, [clears throat] about two aspects of the [EH clears throat] – spring of, April of '63 – excuse me, April of '73 was the end of the campaign, the final election cycle. And fairly shortly thereafter, things really start to crumble apart inside the Party. And I want to – [EH clears throat] I'm interested in your perspective on that. It would draw you into very, um, kind of – you write about it very vividly in your book – very unusual disciplinary context inside the Party. Um, and, uh, you're also at the time struggling with extremely limited resources, and that would have forced certain choices upon you. So, would you talk first on that first theme about, um, about the tensions and, uh, disaggregation of the coherence of the Party in Oakland after the '73 campaign loss?

EH: Well, sometimes, um, I've heard people say it was kind of like the Berlin Wall coming down. You know, what do you do next? And, to a certain extent, um, you know, a lot of

people – everything had been put into trying to get Bobby elected. So, you know, some people wanted to go back to their home chapters. Um, it was hard for the Party to maintain discipline. Um, at the same time, the leadership, particularly, um, Huey Newton, and the, um, and those around him, the inner core, particularly his security, uh, detail, uh, they were sort of, um, trying to maintain their power.

Um, but a lot of the problems came from money. Um, there wasn't [1:05:00] enough money to run the organization without some of the political donations. Um, we needed money to run the programs. And, um, and so, the day-to-day operations of the Party, without that idealistic notion of attaining power politically, um, the cohesiveness began to die away, and it led to a certain amount of dissension. Um, when there were – you know, and a lot of problems came from the use of, um, of physical methods of corrections, as they were called, uh, which could include, uh, flogging of, uh, Party members – and, um, and not just the members who were, uh, abused. Um, you know, there was an attitude of fear, which I guess could be related to, um, other totalitarian regimes, so to speak. Um, and, um, you know, many members whose ideals were related to freedom just weren't able to deal with that. And, um, and so, the fabric, uh, the thread of the Party began to unravel.

JM: Can you say a little bit more about, if you'd like – um, as I say, you write very vividly about this in the book – about, um, about the occasion of *your* encountering this physical, um, violence inside the Party and how it would be one of the episodes in quick sequence that lead you to leave.

EH: Well, to a certain extent, um, I was afraid when I wrote quite candidly about, um, about, uh, what happened with me – to a certain extent, you know, I was afraid that it would be dwelled upon, you know, the irony of, uh, of, uh, an African American whose ancestors were

whipped, uh, encountering the same sort of thing. But, you know, I did it in the context of – basically, this was after I had stolen a car and I was planning a robbery, you know.

Now, granted in my young adolescent mind I was – I had hooked up with some people outside of the Party and I had told them that I needed money, because my idea was to bring out my pregnant fiancé from Winston-Salem out to California, and I never had really thought about committing, uh, a criminal act until then. And so, I fell in with this guy who was an armed robber, and he said, “Well, I know where we can get some payroll.” So, I had stolen a car in order to, um, to, uh, foment that scheme.

And, uh, so, that was one of the problems that, I guess, the Party leadership felt they had to deal with, which is, uh, “We don’t want to turn someone over to the police.” I had been busted, you know, so I was faced with, uh, going to jail, but, um, I ended up not having to. But, you know, so how do you discipline, you know? Sometimes, some of the other sanctions were quarters restriction, uh, uh, marijuana restriction, [laughs] you know, uh, various other sanctions. So, this is one of the things that, um, you know, that I dealt with in the book.

I didn’t want that irony to be a central part, but I guess, to a certain extent, it points out that, uh, the problems and the autocratic nature, uh, of what the organization was going through, and how many of the – you know, you had a strong Central Committee, but the authority of the Central Committee was being usurped. You know, you had a Central Committee made up of leaders of the various chapters [1:10:00] who were out in Oakland at the time and, uh, and you had some factions to develop from that.

But, uh, it all sort of led to the period in which I left. Uh, you had a sort of a mass exodus of, uh, maybe, uh – I don’t know, maybe, uh, I won’t say scores, but it might have been scores of Party members in that one period. And this was the period, also, when Huey Newton had gone

off the rails, when later on it came out that he was doing, uh, great amounts of cocaine, drinking a great deal of cognac. Uh, he got charges for pistol-whipping, uh, his tailor and then, uh, he shot a woman, who later died, and he ended up fleeing to Cuba. And it was during this period that, uh, you had a mass migration from the Party, and it turned out that I happened to leave during the same, uh, same weekend.

JM: Yeah. Let me ask –

EH: When he left.

JM: I'm sorry.

EH: During the same weekend that he went to Cuba.

JM: Yeah.

JB: Let's pause.

JM: Let's pause for a moment.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We're back on after a short break. Um, Mr. Hopkins, I wanted to ask about – you mentioned earlier that there were obviously some very strong women in the Movement, in the Party. And, um, I'm interested in your perspective on, um, kind of evolving notions of gender, women, their leadership, their – uh, their place in the culture of that struggle maybe.

EH: Well, luckily, the Party had the philosophical ideal that, uh, women were equal to men, that, um, that gender and equality was part and parcel of the white, uh, patriarchal system. And, uh, so sisters were encouraged, and they sort of banded together and said things like, you know, "Sisterhood is powerful," you know. This was also during the, uh, Feminist Movement. Uh, so, and many – there were quite a few women in leadership positions. Um, it was said at one

time that women made up maybe forty-eight percent of the Party. I'm not particularly sure, but I know out in Oakland that was, uh, largely the case. Uh, the men still maintained most of the positions of authority. Um, except during one period, and then there was this group on the Central Committee, which actually might have been, um, after I left, uh, might have had a, actually a predominance. But, uh, by and large, women had positions of authority. I learned to work with them – um, could you cut just a moment?

JM: Sure.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

EH: [Clears throat] Okay.

JM: We're back after a short break.

EH: All right. Uh, women, uh – you know, I learned to work with them and under them. I also learned, to a certain extent, that many of them have a certain amount of, uh, baggage, and, uh, some of this has come since then. And they, um – sometimes women, I think, carry a little resentment, and I think that this was the case with some of the, uh, sisters that I worked with in the Party. But, by and large, uh, women in the Civil Rights Movement [note: he means women in the Black Panther Party], in total, probably, um, had a larger role than even women in larger society in social struggle, uh, probably even greater than the Civil Rights Movement, simply because – there are several reasons.

One is that, um, black women were generally better educated and, uh, were able to, uh, withstand certain of the, uh, vicissitudes of the educational system, um, that would tend – [1:15:00] and I think a lot of this is going on now with young black males. Uh, many of the young females are able to deal with the structure of the system and don't get the anti, uh, black masculine bias that many teachers in the educational system have. So, to a certain extent, you

find, uh, within the Civil Rights Movement, uh, within, uh, you know, the post-Civil Rights Movement – but one has to position the Black Panther Party as part of the Civil Rights Movement, the latter part, um, much as SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] was.

Uh, but women were more involved because women had been able to attain a lot educationally and also, uh, women had learned a lot [someone coughs] from the larger culture from, um, positions of employment. Whereas men may have been in factories, women, uh, by virtue of working in, uh, in white households, to a certain extent, had gotten a certain amount of cultural enrichment and education. Uh, some of this might be able to be seen, um, all of this is being viewed in the movie, uh, *The Help* [novel by Kathryn Stockett, released summer 2011 as a motion picture]. But, um – it may be; it may not be.

But, in any sense, uh, one would think that this is something that, uh, helped in terms of fueling the Movement as a whole. You had women who were able to get a certain amount of cultural development and educational enrichment in the homes. They were able to bring it home to their kids. Um, they were able to help in terms of developing, um, the men in their families, um, just as, for instance, my mother. My father was unable to get a, uh, even a secondary school education, but my mother had a college degree and was a teacher. So, these are things that were able to help in terms of, uh, having an equality of the sexes in the Movement.

JM: Yeah. Um, I want to ask before we move on to some other things just for a final, um – you haven't, um – I haven't asked and I'd be very interested in your description –

EH: Oh, one – excuse me.

JM: Yes, please.

EH: One other point on that: um, also working with white women, who weren't as enmeshed in the ideals of white patriarchy, um, I think that also helped, uh, black women to be able to develop a more enlightened view on things. Uh, and that dates back to slavery times and Harriett Beecher Stowe even.

JM: Let me ask you, um, for your perspective on, uh, Bobby Seale.

EH: Bobby, uh, was the highest-ranking leader that I had the ability to work with directly. Um, I was in his entourage. He was, uh, very sharp, uh, and is to this day. I've been at a couple of speaking engagements with him, and, you know, we've had some conversation in person and by phone. And he is, even at, uh – I think he's maybe eighty now, eighty-one? But he's still, you know, light on his feet. Bobby was a standup comedian. He was also a jazz drummer, you know. Um, so he was – he was the working man type of, um, the Jack-of-all-trades. He was a sheet metal mechanic. He was in the military. So, he brought the organizational skills to the Panther Party. He brought the energy, a lot of the drive.

Um, Newton was more of the philosophical force within the Party, the chief theoretician. But [1:20:00] – and people just loved him because of his brilliance and because of his, uh, as some people have noted, because of, uh, physical beauty. And, uh – but Bobby, he, uh, is able to keep his mind sharp, uh, and, uh, you know, it was a pleasure working with him.

JM: Yeah. Let's pause here just for a second, if we could.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We've just taken a short break, um, and we're back. Mr. Hopkins, I thought, I thought I'd ask, um, about, uh, the perhaps related question, say, of – think about the state's response to groups like the Panthers and other, uh, assertive social justice and social change

groups. Uh, I think about COINTELPRO and all. And I'm wondering if, um, you have, you might have more to say about your experiences with that kind of reaction from the state or the police apparatus, on the one hand, and also if, um, if you have reflections on another practice of the state in the current, the most recent generation, which is this vast expansion of the penal system and incarceration of especially African American men.

EH: Yes. Um, the – on a personal level, and I'm not necess – you know, I'm not sure how this related to my later turn toward, um, criminality. Um, you know, I guess if people, researchers, or those who view this tape don't necessarily know, uh, after returning from Oakland – and, in dealing with the chronology of my development, I left Oakland so disillusioned. And I still felt, uh, to a certain extent that I had a responsibility of, uh, of taking care of my family and then I married shortly after my return. But at the same time, I was so anti, um, – I was so anti-everything, as a matter of fact. I wanted to live the life of an outlaw, to a certain extent, and I decided to, uh, to rob a bank, for which I was, uh, arrested and sentenced to ten years in prison. And, upon my return afterwards, I would say then I was probably more of a, um, alienated artist than anything else. And after two years, I found myself back in prison, uh, with a life sentence, ironically from an all-white jury in Danville for a robbery in which no one was physically injured.

So, in drawing together – um, you know, they say, and one of the mottos in the Party was “repression breeds resistance.” Now, this attitude and the attitude of having been repressed, because when I joined the Party in Winston-Salem, we were under attack by both the police forces and, uh – or the Party had been under attack just prior to my joining, uh, by police forces and, uh, and by white, uh, racial supremacists. Um, the previous headquarters had been firebombed. They didn't have a headquarters at the time that I joined. And, uh, and there had

been, uh, shootouts the previous, uh, uh, couple of years, uh, there in Winston-Salem, shootouts with the police, or the police shooting in, in one case, and then in High Point there was an actual shootout, because, uh, Party members were told to defend their headquarters, uh, whenever they were surrounded, and, uh, not to allow entry by the police forces, which led to, uh, shootouts across the nation and the killings of, uh, of dozens of Panthers and, uh, and a few police officers.

So, this attitude – um, I used to stand watch with a shotgun at night. We all – all Panthers had to stand [1:25:00] guard duty. So, I'm not necessarily sure what that had to do with my later bend, uh, toward, uh, criminality, as I said. I seldom put it on my political upbringing, but at the same time, the rage that I developed, developed against the system in the Party, uh, possibly had something to do with it.

Now, during this particular time, one of the platform, one of the tenets of the platform program of the Party was that no black man has had an adequate and fair jury trial by a jury of his peers. And therefore, all black men in prison should be freed, because they are, in effect, all political prisoners. Well, I don't quite go along with that, and I'm not sure that we totally went along with it then. But, uh, if one were to study the, uh, writings of Joyce Jackson, Joyce Jackson said that there was an inverse ratio, uh, proportionate, between the numbers of millionaires in the world and the numbers of prisoners in the world, or in the United States. Uh, looking at the rise of incarceration in the country, one has to see, 1) that, you know, there are many causes and factors. Some of them are cultural. Some of them *are* due to repression by police forces. Some are racial in nature. But most have to do with the drug war and the way the drug war has been, has been, uh, waged against, uh, people of color, but all people.

Now, uh, there's also a cultural factor in that the motto of resistance in the black community has also led, among our youth, to an attitude of cultural rejection and a lifting up of

the culture of the streets. And a lot of criminologists and a lot of people don't necessarily want to talk about this. And then a lot have talked about it and then have just given up and said that, "Oh, well, you're just – you know, you're just deriding, uh, rap music and, uh, you know, and this gangsta rap, and no one has ever yet proven, uh, that there's a connection. And what can you do about it? Ya-da-ya-da-ya-da."

Well, there is definitely a connection. And one of the things that I tried to show in my book, as far as my personal development, and others have tried to show, have shown this, or have tried to show this, is that in the absence of a Black Panther Party – I think one, um, one commentator or filmmaker made a film called, *The Bastards of the Party*, saying that in the absence of the Panther Party, this attitude of resistance went into sort of a fratricidal type of gang versus gang, Blood versus Crips type of activity.

Uh, to a certain extent, if one does not have a philosophy and an understanding of one's history, in terms of understanding human progress, you know, as far as our reason for being here in the first place, then our young people almost naturally turn toward hedonism and an atavistic, uh, movement toward, uh, that which is, uh, regressive and, uh, and tribal in nature. So, one of the things that, that, uh, in working with young people in developing a hero, I mean, uh, an ideal of hero development or hero ideation, as I call it, uh, one sees that the attitude of resistance that [1:30:00] was part of our survival in the black community is now sort of utilized by young people who have *no* understanding of who they are and what they're about. It's saying, well, that – I've had young people to tell me, "Well, you were a Panther; you had guns," you know, and with no understanding of what the guns were for.

JM: Yeah. Um, I want also to ask about, um –

EH: That was a long, uh [laughs] –

JM: No. Thank you.

EH: Answer – and somewhat convoluted, but, uh –

JM: Oh, no. Thank you. Tell me, uh, tell me about your sense of the Party in some sense as an extension of Malcolm X.

EH: Okay, but I'm sorry, the second part – I don't think I finished the second part of your question.

JM: Yeah, okay. Sure.

EH: Now, the incarceration craze –

JM: Yes.

EH: Was, um – this is something that the Party – we dealt with, um, the imprisonment of black men and women to a large extent, but we had no idea that it would come to what it has come to now. So, to a certain extent, you have the degeneration of a certain strata in the black community that leads to a need for a certain amount of incarceration, but not of the nature that it is now. At the same time, you have a force within the larger community, which says, “We need to lock them up and throw away the key.” You have a greater emphasis towards fear, um, and the fear of criminality. And, uh, I was watching a thing with Elliot Spitzer [former New York governor and cable TV host] last night, and he was saying, “We don't think of the greatest criminals among us as being, uh, white collar criminals, but they steal, uh, more than, you know, than the common everyday hoodlum ever can or ever could or would.”

But, so, the – to deal with the incarceration, [sighs] looking at – some say it's the new civil rights issue of the day. Some say it's education, which is one of the issues that we dealt with in the Party and in the Civil Rights Movement. And also, some say that it's, um, it's incarceration, in that incarceration is the new Jim Crow. Uh, there's some truth to both of those.

In situating the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and the fact that the Black Nationalist Movement and the Black Liberation Movement and, uh, and the Black Panther Party, how they sit within the framework of all of these, the fact that people don't know what the Black Panther Party was about, people don't know what SNCC was about, you know, people don't necessarily know what, uh, Kwame Ture and Stokely Carmichael, other than – you know, they think it was just a “hate whitey” type of thing. Uh, for that matter, people don't know what the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] was really about, you know. Our young people – it's not just African Americans who need to understand their history. Young whites need to understand their history of the progressive movements in this country, you know. Uh, because of this, and not understanding our heritage, then the world actually would tend toward hedonism and just, you know, getting what we can. So, uh, so in prison–

JM: Excuse us. I beg your pardon. I think we're at the end of a card. So, we'll take a break and –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We're back on after a short break. John, anything to note, or are we good to go?

JB: Um, just note that we're not recording onto EX cards.

JM: Okay. Um, Mr. Hopkins, when we stopped for the, to switch out the camera card, you were talking about how young people today know so little of this history.

EH: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah. And relating, I think, that consideration to some of the, [1:35:00] the problems that folks have in –

EH: Uh, yes. You know, it – you know, kids nowadays – a lot of it has to do with, uh, understanding story and I think also understanding, uh, the difference between an idol and a hero. Uh, a lot of times nowadays, you know, because our history has been whitewashed, we don't necessarily understand, uh, for instance, who were the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement, other than Martin Luther King. You know, it's one of the things that this whole project is about, some of the lesser known heroes, some of the people who, um – for instance, I didn't know that a Virginia native had helped to put, uh, SNCC together [referring to Ella Baker], and, uh, still can't, uh, remember her name and, you know, she's one of my heroes. Do you know of whom I'm speaking?

JM: I'm not sure to whom you're referring.

EH: Uh, the woman who helped, uh, found SNCC, but she wasn't a member. Uh, I think she was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention, as well, at the first Fisk University meeting?

JM: Diane Nash?

EH: Yeah, I think so – no.

JM: No?

EH: She was a member.

JM: She was a member, yes.

EH: This was the mentor of that whole group. But, in any case, um, you know, she became one of the Virginia heroes. But the young people, they don't necessarily see a connection, because they don't understand what progress is, because the powers that be don't necessarily want them to think progressively, you know. They want them to really think in terms of, um, of a, uh – I don't know what they want the kids to think. They want them to be cogs in a

machine. They want – when they talk, for instance, they’re having a youth program here and they say, “Well, we want to prepare these youths, these young people for jobs, you know. We want to do job training,” instead of educating these kids how to live. You know what I mean? How to keep a job, you know, not just work on a job.

JM: Yeah.

EH: So, I think that, uh, heritage enrichment, uh, what the, uh – I think it’s all part of not just, uh, understanding the truth, but it’s also an understanding and developing a sense of cultural justice, you know, if you just have justice in terms of black and white, you obey the law, this, that, and the other. But there’s also a cultural, as well as an economic justice involved, you know, the haves and the have-nots, but also a cultural justice, you know, you have – of which the, um, robbing of the culture and the identity of African people was just the most egregious.

You know, you look at what happened with – um, people don’t understand what happened with the Irish or with the, um, or let’s say the, um, Mexican Americans, they don’t understand how, uh, what happened with the African influence in Mexico, uh, the Dominican Republic, the Chinese and their contributions to this country, you know, the French, or the Germans, you know, how the Germanic influence – it’s like all of a sudden, because the Germans got a bad name because of Hitler, so they don’t understand, you know, the effects of German philosophy, uh, in terms of culture of, uh, of the Germans, of, uh, of Russian, uh, literature. You know, we don’t think of each other as part of the harmony of interests. You know, Barack Obama, President Obama, he talks about “winning the future,” as if it’s a space race, as if it’s a race against China, instead of, uh, an effort to cooperate with China [1:40:00], you know.

JM: Yeah, yeah, sure.

EH: Um, these are the philosophical underpinnings that the history and the culture that you are bringing out and that the museum is bringing out – it relates to, uh, cultural justice and, uh, and trying to achieve a higher state of man, you know, and to educate the emotions. But, in educating the emotions, the problem is, is that the stories that are told, they aren't trying to educate the emotions but to titillate the emotions.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

EH: You know?

JM: Sure.

EH: To –

JM: Let me – excuse me.

EH: Yeah. And in order to – and part of this is – and lately, I've been going back to the philosophy that I learned while I was in the Party, and part of this is because we have, uh, our kids believing in the metaphysical. Uh, you know, we have them, uh, believing in, uh, whatever we see on television and on film can be real. We have them, uh, believing in Harry Potter-ism, to a certain extent, in the supernatural. And, you know, and to a certain extent, the brain evolved so that it can believe what it sees. And believing controls much of what we do. So, if a child is seeing stuff on the TV screen, on the video screen, they believe that magic can be real, instead of that magic is simply what it is, illusory.

JM: Sure. Let me take you back to, uh, this additional point that I know you wanted to discuss, and I'm very interested in your thoughts, the – how you saw the Party as an extension of Malcolm, in some respects.

EH: Well, yes. The Party, um, was founded just after the assassination of Malcolm X. And, at one time, I think, uh, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton even thought about calling it the

Sons of Malcolm. But they felt like they wanted to go even further in the development of their philosophy, which, you know, Malcolm X was assassinated while he was still developing, uh, a fairly ecumenical, uh, more worldly view of political struggle. And he talked about things like running for office or working within the system, as was seen in the, in the very, uh, beautiful and wonderful work by Manning Marable, um, that he, uh, you know, inspired me with finishing and the fact that he was, uh, he was going around with an oxygen tank while still doing interviews. So, uh, the Black Panther Party should be seen, or might be seen – well, actually, *should* be seen, in my view – as an extension of the Malcolm X philosophy, maybe even more so than what, uh, what Stokely Carmichael, uh, did, in terms of, uh, because Stokely sort of went towards a more Pan-Africanist philosophy, and, uh, and the Black Panther Party took what we called an international philosophy or what Huey Newton called an inter-communal philosophy, saying that the world was, uh, was more a group of communities than of nations anymore.

JM: Exactly. Um, you've been so tremendously generous with your time and all this effort. Are there any final thoughts that you have?

EH: Well, one of the things that, um, that I talked about was, um, the absence of a lot of pride, you know. The legacy of the Panther Party, I think, is a political legacy, but it's also a legacy of pride and of courage in the face of, um, the idea that we [1:45:00] were inferior. Um, you know, we debunked that notion by showing that power could be attained. Uh, as we were taught, uh, power is the ability to define a phenomenon and make it act in a desired fashion. So, that is one of the reasons we were always studious. We had political education classes. And, you know, so it was the ability to utilize the mind – and we were taught that the mind itself was the highest form of organized matter known to man – and then, to have the courage to make it act in a desired fashion. So, in a sense, it was a continuation of, of the Malcolm X philosophy, or

combining Malcolm with Martin, if you will. So, the legacy lies in how we get our young people to understand that sense of activism, which I think came out during the election of, uh, Barack Obama to the presidency. And, to a certain extent, that legacy has been seen in Egypt and around the world.

JM: Yeah.

EH: Uh, also, I'd like to talk about the power of love. There was a cohesiveness with the Party. There was also a lot of what we used to call self-hate, uh, within the, uh, black community, you know, where "You ain't nothing; you never will be nothing," that sort of thing. So, but within the Party and what inspired me was the love that we had for one another, and the love and the ideal of service to the community, which is one of the things that I'm also trying to teach and exemplify in working with various programs, that, you know, we need to learn to, uh, have an ideal of service to humanity, to something larger than ourselves. And I think this is part of the, um, of the legacy of the Party.

Uh, the, uh, the idea of progress is something I think that we've sort of lost, you know. I think the idea of progress has gone toward, uh, technological progress, rather than philosophical or human progress. And I think that understanding our heritage and the heroes of our past can help toward that ideal of progress.

And, um, and the ideal of, uh, not just cultural justice, but economic justice – this is one of the things that, you know, sometimes people talk about economic, uh, justice in terms of having contracts for minority suppliers or having women integrated into the workplace. But when you look at what's happening with the Union Movement, and how it's attacked at every turn, how service workers are being attacked at every turn, you know, it shows that we have gotten away from understanding the, uh, hard-fought gains of the Labor Movement, uh, and how

that was related to not only the ideal of progress that we had as a people, but that many employers had, um, you know, for a while, for their employees, that many of the upper class had in terms of giving – well, some of them still have it now, in terms of, um, of the Philanthropic Movement.

And, uh, so, you know, we – in the Party, we used to talk about the redistribution of the wealth. Um, it was by whatever means necessary but – no one's talking about that now. But when you look at the ideological divide in the country and the fact that, uh, the Republicans and many in the country have it so the Tea Partiers [note: members of the so-called Tea Party movement in United States politics in 2011] that – people vote against their own interests. You know, [1:50:00] instead of voting for their interests, they vote to have tax cuts for the rich. So, really, it's sort of like an idolatrous, uh, relationship with the rich. And much of this, uh – people don't talk about it, but much of this is related to race, you know. Many working class whites still see blacks and Hispanics as being, um, a threat, and they see the Republican Party as helping to stem that threat. They see the Democratic Party as, uh, as, uh, being a party that loves black people a little too much, you know. So, all of these things – by having this disconnect from history, our young people don't really understand, you know.

And I'll sort of close with this anecdote. But I was – there was student who goes to this high school called the Maggie Walker Governor's School [regional public magnet high school in Richmond, Virginia]. They have a school here named after Maggie Walker. Uh, I'm writing a play and probably a film and maybe even a novel about Maggie Walker and have been for years. I mention it in my book. But Maggie Walker was a turn-of-the-century black woman who, uh, founded a bank, and it was the oldest surviving black bank until a few years ago when it was bought out. But she, uh, she had a, um – well, they called it a secret society, but it was a, uh, the

Independent order of Saint Luke, which was a burial society, and it had over a hundred thousand members from New York to North Carolina at one point.

But anyway, this school – they took a school, a Governor’s School, and moved it into the Maggie Walker School, which was at one time the segregated black high school, so now it’s predominantly white. And they had a, uh, a girl who was in the, uh, Young Republicans Club who was on TV. And she was, you know, looked like the, uh – she was a, you know, European American, and, uh, she looked like a “debutante,” quote/unquote, and she was talking about being a Young Republican. Well, of course, Maggie Walker was a Republican at that time, you know, but I just thought about the irony of this school and, you know, and – you know, because I’ve had people who, um, had kids in Maggie Walker School, and they hadn’t the foggiest – or at least the parents didn’t – of who Maggie Walker was.

JM: Well, we hope somehow that –

JB: Joe, can I ask one quick question?

EH: Sure.

JB: You and Joe refer to COINTEL. What was that?

JM: Counter Intelligence –

JB: No, I want him to tell it.

EH: Okay. The COINTEL program was a counter intelligence program by the FBI, begun, uh, in large measure, uh, to combat the rise of a quote/unquote “new black Messiah.” Uh, it was used, um – I think it was – it actually was formulated, uh, before Martin Luther King’s death. Uh, some people have credited the use of various dirty tricks against Martin Luther King that helped lead to his demise. But it was also used to lead to the demise of the Black Panther Party, to foment, uh, disunion among the Party. There were, uh, poison pen letters sent from

one, uh, one Party member to other Party members, talking about Huey [Newton]. It was used to foment the split between Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale. It was used to imprison Geronimo Pratt, uh, or Geronimo ji-Jaga, as he preferred to be called. And, uh, and it was used to, uh, to attack various other institutions on the Left.

And, uh, you know, it – sometimes I wonder what my life might have been like, because I was going [1:55:00] to stay in Winston-Salem and go to Winston-Salem State University and organize. But, uh, someone from COINTELPRO, uh, went to Winston-Salem State. They were about to offer me – I was up for their scholarship. And they said that, uh, “No, he’s a Panther. The Panthers from Winston-Salem went to Virginia and got the most intelligent, uh, high school senior they could find and brought him back here just to infiltrate Winston-Salem State.” And, to a certain extent, when I found out about this, it made me angry and, uh, led to me making the decision to go out to Oakland, California, and to forego, uh, university studies. So, uh, so, you know, it worked in rather insidious ways.

JM: Have you ever filed a Freedom of Information Act request for your file?

EH: Uh, no. I looked up what was online. And I found that they had followed me from, uh, Danville to Winston-Salem and, uh, and noted my arrival in Winston-Salem. And when I was researching my book, I started to, but, um, I felt it would fuel too much anger to find out, uh, just how deeply they may have, um – you know, it was also like, it was almost like we never had a chance, you know. We weren’t given a chance with what we were doing.

At the same time, you know, uh, George Jackson used to say, “Revolution is against the law, so what do you expect?” You know? And, uh, and Huey Newton criticized the fact that we almost invited some of the repression against us. And sometimes when I think about that and I look at what’s going on over in the Middle East now and in Africa – they call Libya the Middle

East, as if it weren't, or Egypt, as if they weren't in Africa. But you look at what's going on in Libya, in particular, and I said, "Well, you know, what would the United States be doing if, uh, armed insurrection were breaking out here? And look what it did do, uh, when there were just peaceful, uh, protests," um, not necessarily comparing the United States to Libya, but, um, there are some comparisons that can be made.

JM: Yeah.

JB: Yeah. That's a great statement. I don't know if [unintelligible few words] good sound bite.

EH: Huh? It's a good what – sound –?

JB: Sound bite.

EH: Yeah, yeah.

JB: You know, you just – you, a couple of points you just hammered home.

EH: [Laughs] Thank you.

JM: Ella Baker was the woman you were –

EH: Ella Baker, yes.

JM: We really want to thank you for such a very, very generous session.

[Recording ends at 1:58:21]

END OF INTERVIEW