

CORE Chapter 6

ANONYMOUS BLACK MALE

[Herman Carter?]

Interview

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side 1
Baton Rouge

Negro; male
Member of SSOC and possibly SNCC,
but working this summer for CORE

Q: Uh, how old are you?

A: Twenty-one.

Q: Where are you from?

A: Hampton, Virginia.

Q: Have you lived there all your life?

A: No, I lived--I graduated from high school in Virginia but off and on I live in New York, down in the Bowery and Brooklyn and other places.

Q: And you're going to college right now, right?

A: Yes, at Southern University in (?)

Q: Have you...did you start college there?

A: Yes.

Q: Uh, what's your major there?

A: History.

Q: What year are you?

A: I'm a senior.

Q: Does your family live in Hampton?

A: Yes, they do.

Q: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

A: Three sisters and one brother.

Q: Are any of them older?

A: Well, I have two sisters older than me and a brother older than I am.

Q: Are they involved at all in civil rights?

A: No.

Q: How about your parents?

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A: As far as contributions, they're indirectly involved. They have attended several meetings in response to the NAACP, and (chuckle) a community organization...I forget the name of it.

Q: Are they registered voters?

A: Yes.

Q: Are they democrats?

A: Uh, at this time, yes.

Q: What religion are they?

A: Episcopal...episcopalian.

Q: Are you also episcopalian?

A: I'm not a Christian.

Q: Do you have a religion?

A: No, I don't.

Q: Uh, are you a registered democrat?

A: At this time, yes.

Q: Do you plan to change this?

A: Uh, well, I really don't have too much faith in politics and governments and institutions of this sort, and I feel that politically one party in this is another, but you have a saying which I call "power structure", and rather than becoming involved or associating or allying myself with a political organization or party permanently, uh, I'll just work outside the boundaries of what I call a corrupt society.

Q: Why do you call it a corrupt society?

A: Well, just look at some states like Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, big cities like New York, Detroit, Chicago, you have so much corruptness, uh, with the racial problem; you have mass exploitation in all phases of American society, and I've seen politicians sell people down the drain, and I'm tired to seeing this as a resident and like I said, to associate myself with institutions and the United States government. There is a possibility of my alienating myself. Not that I'm...

Q: What do you mean by that? Not voting or...

A: Well, as far as voting is concerned, I do hope to continue

on voting, you know, if I make this my home, but I have plans of maybe like going to Africa, not to live permanently--I don't know yet, but if I find some of the things that I'm looking for that are not present in this country, I'll probably stay there, and I'm not running away from the situation. Uh, for instance, one might think that in trying to not involve myself any further in the civil rights struggle, but I look at as an association in this country what maybe countries in Africa trying to gain its independence, and also maybe the imperialistic countries.

Q: Uh, how long have you been working with the Civil Rights Movement?

A: I've been working with CORE off and on for three years. And in the demonstrations in Hampton--Hampton, Virginia,-- I had participated in the Movement. I had participated in the Movement on Southern University's campus in 1961 also. Uh, and I've been associated also with the Southern Student Organizing Committee, which is a relatively new organization, and I plan to ally myself maybe with that body after I leave this country...if I ever decide to go.

Q: What was the name of it again?

A: Southern Student Organizing Committee, better known as SSOC.

Q: What is the objective?

A: Well, there are several wide-range goals for the organization of SSOC, and I can only give you a general breakdown of ...(inaudible)... of one of our proposals, and it is something like "every man's inhumanity to man," and also in making this society a better place, you know, for all people, and SSOC isn't structured as most civil rights organizations, and they have a chance to work with other organizations in organizing communities and helping in any way possible to poverty-stricken people in this country, especially in the South. SSOC is composed of southern college students; no northerners are allowed in the organization, and the organization sprung when there were a lot of kids in Nashville decided that there were a lot of white students in the South who had not and still had not involved themselves in the civil rights struggle or any other struggle or movement in this country, and so a few of the people in Nashville went around trying to get kids involved in movements, such as, well, the Civil Rights Movement.

Q: You said that there are a lot of students who aren't involved in any movements such as this; why do you think it's the youth that should be involved instead of some of these others?

A: Well, first of all, the South was founded on an all-

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white basis and it's only the past year and maybe a half, well, Negroes decided to...well, focus the attention on Negro causes.

Q: I meant originally. Why did you become involved instead of the rest of your family, for instance?

A: In the Civil Rights Movement?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, Hampton...Hampton is...let me think...Hampton is an unusual city in the sense that you have a college, a Negro college like Hampton Institute (?), which is one of the richest Negro colleges in the country, and due to the petit bourgeois people there, they kind of work along with the power structure in trying to, you know, solve their problems. You know, my parents--I guess they spend most of their time concentrating on the economic situation rather than to more or less participate in the Civil Rights Movement, because there are a lot of people in Hampton that are unemployed, and like I said, my parents, you know, sort of focus their attention on getting the necessities of life, you know, food, shelter, government, water.

Q: Are your parents employed?

A: Are they employed? Uh, my father's retired. My mother's still working. She...she's a formen on Hampton's campus in the maintenance department.

Q: She is?

A: Yes, she is.

Q: What did your father do before he retired?

A: Well, my father was, I guess you'd call it maitre d' at the officers' club at Laney (?) Air Force Base in Virginia. That's where he retired from. My father got injured in World War I; his hip got shattered. Therefore, he had to more or less lean to this type of work, you know, rather than something real strenuous.

Q: I guess I interrupted you, but I wasn't quite sure why you in particular joined the Movement.

A: Oh yeah, it seems like I keep you waiting there. I joined the Movement, I guess, purely on an emotional basis, you know, also on the basis of being tired of the corruption and atrocities of the situation in this country. Um, I'm... I'm easily moved and...uh, I guess like other people in the Movement, conditions kind of just drew me in.

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Q: Well, at the time that you first joined, were you primarily interested in civil rights or in a basic change in society?

A: Uh, basically a change in society and not civil rights as...you know, as a mode of... I had my doubts on the present movement, the Civil Rights Movement. I think in many cases some organizations aren't as effective as they could be because they're working outside of the power structure and that, for instance, some organizations are structured, and there might be something that they would like to focus their attention on, but due to the organizations being financed by maybe a so-called liberal or moderate or whatever you want to say, they're more or less manipulated, and therefore, many of the programs that could be beneficial to the communities are not initiated due to the fact of a fear of initiating this program due to this possibility of losing money or finances. And...no organization can work without money.

Q: Yeah...uh, what kind of planning would you like to see?

A: That's a...that's a broad question.

Q: Yeah.

A: Uh, but anything is better than the situation that is in this country. Uh, I don't emphasize the integration, you know, but more or less equal relations of human beings, which is impossible due to the structure, and due to...like I say, corruption in this society is too vast to really be moved, you know. And I'm kind of pessimistic, you know, when you look at maybe society now and what kind of changes, you know, and I feel, you know...like I say, this is a broad question. It would be very hard for me to answer it right now. I don't believe in utopianism. I think if you'll just turn--I know in the thirties it was used quite often and in the latter fifties and early sixties, uh, in fact I kind of shiver everytime I hear the word utopianism because no one really knows what utopianism is, and it's an abstract term that people should use only as a way of depicting, maybe, what they call a good society.

Q: Well, going back to your involvement. What was the first thing you did?

A: Sit-ins. Sitting in.

Q: Sitting in?

A: Yes.

Q: For what?

A: Uh, contesting public accommodations.

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Q: What year was that?

A: 1960. Yes, I was a senior in high school, and I got involved with the Movement on Hampton's campus since these were the people who were really testing public accommodations. But even then, my mind wouldn't focus on just civil rights but more on the bettering of society, and in a way I think these two terms, or these two phrases, are interlocking, you know, in that I think you're kind of, you know alienating one from another, but I think that, like I said, these are interlocking and that without one we won't have the other.

Q: Are you active in any other political or social type organizations?

A: No, I'm not. I've worked...I've done some free-lance work in New York as far as rehabilitating people in the slums. I did this purely on my own with no salary or anything and no means of support except maybe getting an odd job here and there and, you know, getting a cheap room down in the Bowery, like I said, and I mean, operating like that for a couple of years...during the summer mostly.

Q: Well, how about things like picketing against the war in Vietnam...?

A: Well, I wanted to take part in the demonstration in Washington this past spring, but due to an excessive amount of cuts in my classes at Southern, I was unable to participate in it, plus we had a project going up in Jonesboro, and we helped to rebuild two churches that were burned, and I was more or less involved in this.

Q: Well, um, I'm trying to do this on kind of a chronological basis--after these sit-ins at Hampton you went to Southern.

A: Yes. Yeah, I started Southern in September of 1961.

Q: And you were in a protest there?

A: Yes, in testing public accommodations, and maybe selective buying (?) campaigns and also working for equal employment in the city of Baton Rouge. And like I say, I worked off and on...I'd been working off and on for three or four years with CORE and...that's in...that's in chronological manner.

Q: You've been doing the same kind of thing since then?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Would you mind telling me what you're doing this summer?

A: Well, this summer, first of all I'm working with CORE,

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and...we have a program committee, and there are three members on this committee, and I'm one of the members. Uh, we get out...we do research on sort of programs and...such as Headstart and ASCS elections. Uh, but I'm kind of tired of doing research, so that's why I went into the field, and I started...I saw that the people in Jonesboro needed some help, and since then I've been working there off and on since January, since the churches were burned. I picked Jonesboro as the place to go. And in Jonesboro they've been rallying around certain grievances, like no mail delivery to the Negro community or open sewages within and without the city limits, um, equal employment, better roads, etcetera.

Q: Well, how do you go about attempting to solve these problems?

A: Um, I can only answer this on a personal basis. I feel that...that one should work with a community more or less as a person outside looking in and listening to the dialogue between the people in the community, and then as a CORE worker, actually I would more or less say it was...a person voicing an opinion. And why I feel this way, I've sort of enslaved myself--I try to enslave myself to the community, and I go along with what they decide to do. For instance, if a majority of the people in a community like march, well, you know, I give them my right hand, you know, and march with them in protesting against maybe their grievances.

Q: What do you think of the idea of having volunteers who come for maybe one summer and then they leave?

A: Well, I see it...that's a question that I would have to answer like this. I've seen volunteers coming in from the North, and I've seen them coming in with maybe superiority complexes and information from a lot of sociology and psychology books, and a lot of them, you know, really feel that they're superior to the community. I mean, this isn't everybody, but a lot of kids do. I'm kind of against maybe a lot of college students coming in, you know, to the South during the summer because in many cases they've come to certain communities and absolutely let the community die right down to being more confused than they were before. I think that...that, you know...that the quality coming from the North so far has not fit up to what I would call a good worker, you know, or good workers. But, uh, mostly I find that the majority of the people that come down are good workers, maybe I would, you know, go along with them coming down, but as of now, I have a lot of resentment against kids coming down and...especially the whites...

Q: What problems in particular do you feel that they cause or run into?

A: Well, first of all, many kids come down saying that

they're from New York and their best friends are Negro and that they really try to work a southern community like they--even if they were involved in the North, they try to work a southern community like they would a northern community. Uh, I feel that's bad, because in a lot of cases you cannot use tactics that are used in the North in the South, and I think that there's this issue of...I guess, of who should give orders and who should take orders and... I just see that there's a lot of confusion. And a lot of kids who come down are rebelling against society and they have their own personal hang-ups, and they bring these hang-ups with them to the South, which is just a means of creating more problems.

Q: Do you think that's more true or less true for kids who come, instead of just for the summer, come down intending to spend, let's say, a year?

A: Well, I think this is...well, at first, you know, I think that this...you know, both of these--even if one decides to stay for a year and one decides to stay for a summer, I think that the person who does decide to stay for a year...I mean, he has the same problem as the kids who just stay for a summer. But I feel that...you know, since he's spending more time, or planning to spend more time, he's more or less integrated into a society or community better than those for the summer, you know.

Q: What are your plans for a career...if you have any right now?

A: Now it's indefinite, but as I mentioned before, I do plan on going to Africa and working over there...working with what I don't know. I'll probably just pick up a job, any type of job, and if I feel that maybe it will help a community or maybe a certain area, I'll work along with the people there. And I wouldn't go over with an attitude--you know, as an American Negro helping his brothers. I'd go over as a person wanting to learn the customs and attitudes and conditions of a city or country in Africa. I'm very much concerned with the conditions in South Africa, but, uh, I don't think I could be too effective there until they get the mass of black people together and really fight the power structure violently. That's the only way that I can see the power structure in South Africa being broken. And then too, it's kind of hard to break it violently when you have no arms or things that are necessary, but they... there have been underground revolutions, or you know, revolutions springing from underground movements, and...I don't hold this idea as impossible for the country of South Africa.

Q: What about here in the state of Louisiana? Do you think that this would be necessary?

A: Well, I feel that...that in all revolutions...that if you call something a revolution, I think that...that previous history has shown us that there's a lot of bloodshed and, you know, revolutions. And I don't think that the Movement in this country could be really successful on a purely non...non-violence basis. I think that there will be a time that more people will be thinking of bringing in a violent revolution, you know, because in a lot of cases I don't see anything concrete coming out of the Movement in the South, and especially as even denting the, you know, the power structure, which I provide for the conditions in Louisiana.

Q: Uh, are you in any way a believer in non-violence?

A: No, I'm not. No. But since I'm working with CORE, I signed a pledge saying that I will be non-violent, and once you sign a piece of paper, it's like saying, you know, that you'll hurt the organization if you do something against what the contract that you signed says. But truthfully, I'm not a non-violent person.

Q: Is there an organization here that you'd rather be working with rather than CORE?

A: Yes, I would. You have an organization called the Deacons, and I was thinking about working with them this summer, but since I'd made a previous commitment to work with CORE, I decided to work with CORE....and not with the Deacons.

Q: Okay, go ahead with anything that you want to say.

A: (chuckle) Leroy Jones...black poet, playwright, scientist, essayist, novelist. Um, I think that Leroy Jones is one of the best poets in this country, and...he's also a great essayist, and I think he's saying a lot to the movements in this country. I think, for instance, The Slave, his play The Slave, is a perfect example of what's to become of the future. As I said, I don't believe that the Movement or any movement that stays completely non-violent and that...in Leroy Jones's plays--like I said, The Slave on the Toilet--that these plays are saying a whole lot. Now I think that Leroy Jones's ideas on the dying out of western civilization is certainly true. I think that, especially this country, if you don't straighten out what matters, you know, like giving each individual, you know, each being in this country his freedom, I think that there will be a turmoil in...within this country. And I think that...in fact I'm sure that this turmoil will center around the racial situation, and...also Leroy Jones's book moves people--one of the best books, you know, that I've ever read concerning the growth of blues and jazz, and I think that also Leroy Jones is a good critic as far as jazz is concerned.

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I think that he is a rather dedicated man. I think that Leroy Jones is one of the only few real poets in this country, uh, as far as, uh, being prolific and also being creative.

Q: (inaudible) Talking about giving each individual person his freedom, do you have a handy-dandy definition of freedom?

A: Well, freedom is an abstract term, and it's very flexible, and I would hate to just sit up here and stumble through, you know, a definition of freedom. But I should say that freedom...I feel that freedom and...the suppression of people are...you know...are, well...two opposite things, are two opposite terms, are two opposite theories, or words or whatever you want to call it, and I would rather look at freedom as maybe an opposite to suppression of an individual by institutions than as a...if you want something. That might be kind of vague, but like I said, I would hate to sit in front of a group and have to say what freedom is.

Q: Yeah.

A: But to be frank, if you look at this society now, you can tell that each individual or each group, ethnic group, et cetera...uh, there's always somebody being peed on, you know. I still look at this country as being imperialistic and capitalistic with a strict class system, and you have your entrepreneurs and your peons, I think.

Q: Well, do you think that the people on top are free?

A: Uh, when you say the people on the top, do you mean like maybe millionaires and the people in office?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, if you really analyze it, uh, freedom is abstract, you know, and people define freedom in many ways. I've been suppressed all my life, and I see these people, you know, running around and living happy with food to eat and, you know, enough money to do some of the things that they would like to enjoy, and I feel that these people are free. Now whether they have a guilty conscience or not, you know, I'm not concerned with that, and that's all I have to say on that, I mean, unless you want to expound, you know, you ask questions on it or something.

Q: You criticized the country as being capitalistic.

A: Yes.

Q: ...but what system of economics would you replace capital-

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ism with?

A: Well, socialism...not communism, but socialism. If socialism could, you know, really be an active and, you know, the theory of socialism... I look at...capitalism and communism as being too estranged, you know, and socialism in the center. Uh, although I think that there might be some extreme tactics used in arriving at socialism, I think that socialism is a way out. But like I said, I really don't have that much faith in governments structures. For instance, I feel that...that I'm going to have to hit at western civilization and more or less their theories, like...Rousseau. Rousseau is oftentimes called the father of modern democracy, but if you read Rousseau, you find that Rousseau was not the father of modern democracy because he set up a system, you know, for direct democracy, and this would never work in a country where you have as many people as you have today. True, Rousseau preached democracy, but he also set up something like a tribunal which had power over both the people and the government, and this tribunal had...had rigid rules, you know. Western civilization is just contradictory, and I hadn't read into enough other civilizations, you know, that I could criticize or couldn't criticize, but I'm only talking from the standpoint of something that's been thrown at me and thrown at me all my lifetime through reading, you know. Uh, people in the western world feel that they're really contradictory, and I feel that this thing is making promises and then letting people down.

END OF TAPE