

Black Power Chronicles: Topper Carew

Topper Carew, a multifaceted figure in the Black Power Movement, recounts his journey from Roxbury, Boston, to becoming an architect and activist. He describes his early experiences with racism, his transformation through SNCC, and his pivotal role in community architecture and advocacy. Carew emphasizes the importance of cultural audacity and bodacity in his work, which aimed to empower Black communities. He reflects on the resurgence of white supremacy and the need for persistent optimism and constructive disruption to fortify democratic institutions. Carew's story highlights the interconnectedness of cultural identity, political activism, and artistic expression in the Black Power Movement.

Kwame Holman: I'm Kwame Holman for The Black Power Chronicles. With us today is Topper Carew—filmmaker, television producer, musician, organizer, activist, and architect. You have always said that architecture was the through line of your remarkable career, that continues to now.

Topper, like many of the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] veterans we talked to, you were in Mississippi. You took a Trailways bus to Mississippi.¹ But I'd like to start earlier than that. I'd like to start with something we've been talking to the narrators about—the awareness of being Black and what that meant in society. You were a pioneer in the schools you attended. When did you become aware you are Black and what that meant?

Topper Carew: I grew up in the Roxbury section of Boston, which was a Black community that, at the time, had three Black pharmacies, Black dentists, Black doctors, restaurants that people from all over Boston came to, parades, a Masonic temple, churches, and nightclubs where you could go and see great acts.

When it was time to go to the fourth grade, my grandmother from Virginia decided that I should go to a school outside of the Black community. That particular school was in a neighborhood where my paternal grandparents lived, so I could use their address. It was a white working-class elementary school called the [David G.] Farragut [Elementary School].

I subconsciously became aware of the difference in the fourth grade by taking a jar of Dixie Peach pomade—or whatever they called it—and putting it all over my hair trying to straighten it.

¹ Taking a Trailways bus to Mississippi was a common experience for civil rights activists traveling to the South during the 1960s, particularly for those involved in SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and Freedom Summer (1964). Trailways was one of the major intercity bus lines at the time, and activists often relied on public transportation to reach movement hubs, despite the dangers of traveling through the segregated South.

What it really did was [leave] clumps of Dixie Peach all over my hair. I realized that my fourth-grade teacher, Miss Kelleher, was greatly amused by this. But I didn't realize. I think that was at the subconscious level.

Kwame Holman: Did you know why you were doing that? Did you tell yourself why?

Topper Carew: No. It was subconscious. In the fifth grade, I was standing on the playground, and this kid named Jimmy Crosby walked up to me with a smile on his face and punched me in the eye—then laughed. I tried to figure out why he did that. The same thing happened in the sixth grade. In the interim, my grandfather taught me how to box. But there was something in my constitution—I didn't cry. I stood there. I took the punch. I didn't fall down. I didn't run. Post-reflectively, I began to understand that was an aspect of racism.

The thing that really triggered it for me was when I was a distance from home, walking on a street, and a group of white boys yelled, "Nigger, let's get him!" I remember running for my life. This was in that same neighborhood. Another turning point came in sixth-grade geography class. It's not the beginning to [me seeing] there's something different about me because my two cousins and myself had integrated this school. In that class, the teacher asked everyone to stand up and say where they were from, where their families were from.

My father, being West Indian, I remembered the occasions on that side of the family—the peas and rice, the music, the good times, and the stories of Trinidad and Tobago. So when my turn came, after kids had said Ireland, Italian, Polish, Armenian, Albanian, I had a flash thought and said, "West Indian." After school that day, a crowd of kids was waiting for me. I'm going, "Oh shit, I'm about to get taken down." Instead, they said, "You're West Indian?" I said, "Yes." They asked, "What tribe are you—Cherokee? Apache?" I said, "No, I'm Blackfoot. Big Blackfoot."

From that day on, the toughest kid in the school adopted me. He became my best friend because he now had this Indian friend. We went to school all the way through high school together. We were in the same exact homeroom from sixth grade through high school graduation.

In twelfth grade, a friend asked me, "What's your favorite music?" I said, "R&B." He said his favorite music was John Lee Hooker. I didn't know who John Lee Hooker was, and that bothered me for a long time.² I went to a test high school, all boys, about 250 graduates.³ There were about six or seven Black young men in that class. I had been homeschooled pretty much by my grandfather, so I was learning a lot more at home than I was in school.

School was never very interesting to me, even though this was a test high school. In my junior and senior years, I would consistently hook school and go to the movies. I should have known

² John Lee Hooker was an American blues musician, known for his distinctive boogie-woogie guitar style and raw vocals.

³ A test high school refers to a selective high school that admits students based on academic performance or entrance exams.

then that I would be in communications, but I didn't. I had figured out how to outsmart the truant officer, the school, and my parents.

In my junior year, I got a job as a busboy at a society house at Harvard. I watched these young men throw mashed potatoes up on the wall, get drunk and throw up, throw roast beef on the walls. They would ask me, at 16 years old, for dating advice. This was my first inside exposure to a college experience, and I said, "What? If this is college, I can do this."

When the guidance counselor, Mr. O'Brien—Irish, 65 years old—called me into his office and asked, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to go to college." He asked, "Where do you want to go?" I said, "I want to go to Harvard." He said to me, "Well, I think you'd be better off going to the Navy Yard and being a sheet metal worker."

My grandfather, when I was in the fourth grade, had made me memorize the poem *If* by Rudyard Kipling. Kipling's not a great guy, but it's a great poem, and it has stuck with me to this day. I sat there, and I looked at [Mr. O'Brien], and thought, "If you can be yourself when all men doubt you..." I was laughing inside at this guy.

Then, as God would have it, a few weeks or months later, a Black guidance counselor named John O'Bryant came into the school. He asked me the same question, and I gave the same answer: "I want to go to college. I want to go to Harvard." He smiled and said, "Well, something interesting about you—you don't have the grades, but you test in the top 1% of this school. You're a curiosity to me."

I told him, "I don't like it. No one's speaking to me, no one's motivating me, no one's pushing me, no one's speaking to my cultural space, right?" He said, "I'll tell you what—if you work hard this year, I'll get you into another school that begins with 'H'." That school was Howard, and it changed my life. He got me into Howard.

John went on to become the first Black elected chairman of the Boston School Committee. And it happened because of all the young people he helped. So, I gave him his first fundraiser in Boston, because in my life, I've always wanted to honor and speak to everyone who has been an aspect of my experience and helped me along the way.

Freshman year at Howard, I went to a football game at Virginia State [University]. I was still wearing this race thing, but now I was kind of cool about having gone into a classroom sitting with my Black peers, and then a Black professor walks in and teaches the class. I'd had only one Black teacher in my entire public school life, other than my nursery school teachers.

So we're at this football game at Virginia State, and we're going to the after-party. Someone runs into the back of the car. Rather than stopping, they back up. They pull around us and take off. So we give chase. Next thing, the police are chasing us, chasing the two cars.

They run up into Fort Lee [now Fort Gregg-Adams], an Army base—three cars stop. Police come to our car, question Kenny, our driver. Then they go to the other car, the one that was clearly in the wrong, question them, let them go, and took Kenny to jail. I'm going, what?

Now, I've been through the Boston thing and everybody I grew up with in Boston had one or two runs from white boys. In Boston, you didn't go into South Boston, East Boston, you didn't go into Jamaica Plain, you didn't go into Hyde Park, you didn't go into Roslindale. It was just understood. I had never experienced blatant injustice right before my very eyes. And I'm in the South for the first time, really. So now I'm stuck in Virginia—myself and Hilliard, a friend from Boston. No money, no ride back. Called Grandma, she sends money to Western Union in Richmond [VA]. We get to Richmond, we're going to get the money for the bus tickets.

We're now hungry. We try to go into a hamburger place, and there's a wait—nothing happens. Then an elderly Black man, sweeping with an apron on, comes out. He says, "Can I help you boys?" And I say, "Well, we're hungry. We want to get a hamburger." He says, "I'm sorry, we can't serve you here." So those two incidents caused me to join NAG, the Nonviolent Action Group, which was the SNCC chapter at Howard. That's how I got there. And I then went to Mississippi, and there were some campaigns along the way.

Architectural school—I was good at mechanical drawing, so I had no particular proclivity toward architecture. But it wasn't until I took that Trailways bus—I wanted to go by myself because I wanted to experience this in a deep way by myself.

I remember sitting on those buses, and you could feel the change when you hit Danville [VA], and you finally got to Atlanta. And then out of Atlanta, there were white people who would stand in the aisle rather than sit next to me for hundreds of miles. I'm going, "Damn."

So when I went to Mississippi, that was a paradigmatic experience for a city boy from Roxbury to suddenly be in the Deep South—the red clay dirt roads, living on a sharecropper's farm that was a half-mile from where they dumped Emmett Till, a quarter-mile from where a shack had been shot to the ground. Rather than take the Black man alive who had fired on a deputy, they got 30 boys, and they just shot into this place for four hours until it fell over.

We were there about two days. I was with Freddie Mangum, who had picked me up—he was a Howard mate—and Ed Brown was with us. I remember, it was a one-way road coming up to our house. We used to keep a lookout at the base of the road, hidden in a barn.

And we got the radio saying people were on the way up the road—[there were] three truckloads of gunmen there. And I'm like, "We're hiding in the grass, man." And I'm going, "This is real, man." They had rifles and shotguns and all. They were looking for us.

So we'd figured out how to booby-trap the road with wire trips. At night, the road would light up, and since it was a one-way road, once they realized that, they didn't come up there too much anymore. But I remember when I got drafted, I had been sending letters from the time I was 18 to the draft board, saying that I wasn't interested in fighting in Vietnam. I remember one of my last letters saying, "Draft me for Mississippi."

My draft board head was a woman named Louise Day Hicks, a noted racist in Boston. So, I used to write to her personally. And eventually, they just said, "We don't want you, man."

And because of Mississippi, my attitude toward architecture changed. I said, "Oh, what? This could be a power tool. I can use this in the interest of equity and justice." It changed my opinion about architecture. I came back from Mississippi, and my hair started to grow. I started to read different books—, the NAG reading list.

I was still curious about architecture, but the thing that interested me the most was that it taught me how to think in a computational way, in an elliptical way, rather than a non-linear way. It taught me how to solve complex problems with multi-tiered solutions. It's very much like filmmaking, and that began to interest me. Then, when you start to think about that and the way it can serve justice and equity, it became more interesting, more curious. And I knew I wasn't the same person anymore. Then, when the word "Black" started to unfold as a cultural thing—we're not Negroes, we're Black. I got to tell you, there were people in the Howard architectural school that would want to fight you if you referenced them as "Black man."

So my original idea of architecture, in terms of role play, was okay—tweed sport coat, roll of drawings under the arm, pipe, Austin-Healey sports car, right? And that's what all the Howard dudes were fronting like, man. Everybody had a pipe and tweeds and saddle shoes. And so I was kind of there. Then all of a sudden that started to change. I started with dashikis and African garb and my hair got long. One of the professors—

Kwame Holman: Why did you do that? Why did you make that change? Why the dashiki over the tweed?

Topper Carew: Because intellectually, I responded more to the notion of the historical value and the lineage of the Black experience. And also the notion that...I felt more comfortable. I felt much more comfortable being Black. It just made more sense to me, after you listen to Malcolm [X], you listen to [James] Baldwin, you read Richard Wright [books] and you're in this group of students at Howard who seemed to make much more sense than the students who simply wanted to imitate the architect in the Ayn Rand [*The Fountainhead*] book.⁴

⁴ This contrasted with peers who aspired to the individualistic, Eurocentric ideals represented by Howard Roark, the protagonist in Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, a novel that champions self-interest and architectural genius devoid of social responsibility.

The people who wanted to be us rather than replications of them. And the beauty and the power in us rather than the powerlessness in mirroring Eurocentric architecture and Eurocentric life. It just felt more authentic and more real. You began to understand the basis of jazz, the basis of swag, the basis of our food, the basis of our expression, and Howard was a great place for that. The artists and the theater people were on board with that very quickly because that's where a lot of the messages and a lot of the symbols were birthed. I just didn't feel a kinship with the bourgeois experience. I just didn't feel comfortable with that.

I've always had a rebellious tendency. I got expelled from nursery school because I took on a bully. And he was bigger than me and he was bullying everybody in the nursery school. When it came my turn, I'd already thought about how I was going to take him down. So I took him down and my mother had to come to the nursery school. They said, "Your boy's a little disruptive, we're going to have to have him sit on the bench for a while. He can come back in two weeks if he behaves." But I will tell you that during my lifetime, every time that bully saw me in the neighborhood—as big as he was—he would cross the street. And so I was like a hero when I came back to nursery school, man. Everybody was giving me their graham crackers, man. I was the dude. And it was not intentional—it's just that I was not going to let that go down with me.

I think it was my junior year—it was the year immediately after Mississippi—one of the professors had a firm in Georgetown [Washington, DC], Leon Brown and Thomas Wright. They had a project to redesign a public housing project in Southeast. By that time, I'm thinking there's only one way to do this, and that is, I have to go and be there. I have to be a part of that experience. I have to immerse myself in that community and talk to people about what they see.

At the time, there was an architectural critic named Wolf Von Eckardt, who was at *The Washington Post*. He was fascinated by this, so he wrote about it. That didn't help my student life at Howard because professors had never been in the newspaper or interviewed by Wolf Von Eckardt, so that created a little bit of tension. And when the senior project at the school came to be a residence for the Vice President of the United States, I said, I'm not doing that. I don't think that's appropriate at this Black university. That's not what we should be doing. We should be designing a house for the President of Ghana. So I'm in that space and so I left.

There was a place called the Institute for Policy Studies that heard about what I was doing, and they invited me, with some support. And I basically opened up a storefront on—I think it was—1812 Florida Avenue. It was a little storefront. The floor was sagging. But I'm the community architect. I'm now a community architect.

I'm wearing coveralls, I've got long hair, and kids are peeking in, man, like, "Who is this man?" Somehow—I don't know if it was me, man, or some kind of divine intervention—but something said, you should start thinking about these kids.

So I made this very small space highly convertible so they could come in, and they could paint, and they could draw, and they could play with words. And that was the beginning of The New Thing [Art and Architecture Center].

In the meantime, a number of things happened. The American Institute of Architects was not liking me. And I would get these very threatening and menacing letters because they said, "You are not a registered architect, and you are subject to penalty, to prosecution," all these kinds of things, all these crazy things. I just said, "Fine, do what you got to do... but I'm going to continue with my work."

My first meaningful project—and it's probably one of the most meaningful projects of my life—was when the downtown school committee, with the cooperation of the municipal government, decided to take the homes of a number of elderly Black families through eminent domain.⁵ Somehow, the number 49 sticks in my head. There's an article in the archive somewhere—was it *The Evening Star*? There's an article there that can give you all the details.

So I became their architect. And the issue was whether a used car lot should be saved and the homes should be taken. Well, that's a justice issue. That's a justice issue. When will these families ever be able to buy homes again? They're invested.

So we took on the issue. I got some architectural friends of mine, and we marched downtown—photographs, site plans, the whole thing—and presented. And we won. Because it was so logical. And the used car lot was gone a year later. The homes would have been gone, and the used car lot would have been gone, and people would have been out of their homes.

I continued doing that kind of work and two years later, the American Institute of Architects invites me to be on a national panel to talk about my advocacy work. This is after they've been trying to bust me up, man. And what's so interesting is, there was a person from Yale there who asked me to come up to speak. I had forgotten about it. There used to be a club that Charlie Byrd hung out at, at 18th and Columbia Road. I can't remember the name of it. But I was sitting there one night, listening to Archie Shepp. This was a folk singer, not the horn player. So he was playing there, and I said, "Oh man, I'm supposed to be at Yale in the morning to talk." I said, "Listen, you feel like driving up to New Haven with me?"

I said, I'll tell you what—I'm going to show my slides and talk, and you're going to play. So I went to Yale that morning, and I did my thing. It was nine o'clock in the morning. I'm showing slides and talking about architecture, he's playing, and they say to me, "Would you like to go to lunch?"

⁵ Eminent domain is the government's legal power to seize private property for public use, typically with compensation to the owners, under the justification of urban development or infrastructure projects. Historically, Black communities have disproportionately suffered from eminent domain abuse, often losing homes and generational wealth to projects like highways, schools, and urban renewal, frequently without fair compensation or adequate relocation support.

I said, "Sure – Archie, should we get a free meal?" And he says, "Yes." So they offered me to come there to teach. I was 24. And they said, "Would you come and teach architecture?" And I did. But I said, I gotta tell you something—I'm busy in DC, so I'll come up one day a week.

And they said, "Well, if you come and lecture, we'll even work out a degree program for you." That's why I now have two degrees from Yale—because I did my degree work, I commuted. I'd jump on a plane on Thursday night, lecture on Friday, spend the whole day with students, then go to New York, catch some music, see some friends, come back to DC, and run The New Thing.

So there were many other very interesting political asides to the architectural thing, because it really started as an architectural place. One was—I actually put together the team that designed Resurrection City for [Martin Luther] King [Jr].⁶

The other one was the beginning of the mural movement. I put a mural up at 18th [Street] and Florida [Avenue], and all of a sudden, I'm getting these notices that this is against the law. So the police chief shows up, and I'm going, "It's art." No, they're going, "It's advertising." I'm going, "No, it's art." Suddenly, there was a court case, and this was a great court case. I had to bring in museum directors and curators to testify on my behalf that it was art. And if I was wrong, I think they were going to give me 30 days and a fine for having it. And it was political. But I won. So that helped to secure the position of murals in DC.

The other thing that emanated out of the architectural experience was we became the architectural advocacy team for Bishop Marie Reed, who was the chair of the Morgan School. And the Morgan School, by now, was community-controlled. They got to design their curriculum, they got to hire their teachers, they got to hire their principals. So we became her advisors as they were beginning to contemplate the design of a new school.

Then the other thing that happened on the architectural side...we helped to foster the community advocacy movement. After I left Howard, suddenly all of my peers and all of my colleagues were now moving into the community advocacy space. And then a year later, all of my colleagues were at Yale in the master's degree programs. So inadvertently, there was a great deal of influence that unfolded.

In the artistic space, the kids were very important to me. I don't know why, but suddenly, you see at your door a group of young, sparkling, dreamy kids you can't—they're curious about you. And you have something to give. You don't know what it is, but you do it.

⁶ Resurrection City was a temporary encampment built on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1968 as part of the Poor People's Campaign, a movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to demand economic justice for poor Americans. Constructed as a symbolic protest against poverty, Resurrection City housed thousands of demonstrators in plywood and tarp structures, serving as an architectural statement of resistance and solidarity until it was dismantled after six weeks.

I think I got the equity bug when I took a peek at the DC Commission on the Arts [and Humanities]. It was all white. Now, they claimed they had a couple of people on there—there's an article about that too—but the executive director was white.

And so I went on the assault, and I said, this is not right. Because at that time, the city was 85% Black. And you [say] where's [our space]? That got crazy because I got read into the Congressional Record. Somehow, HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] got up in it. And all I'm saying is, "where's our space?" And they went nuts.

I think at the time, George Stevens was the chair. He and I became friends, as did I become friends with his mother-in-law. But it was kind of gnarly when you think about that.

And then there was another occasion when—with the kind of intensity that I could bring I could fill a room. I went after the National Endowment for the Arts [NEA]. I went directly at Nancy Hanks. And there was another person there—I can't remember his last name—Michael somebody. And I kept going after them on the equity piece. And so finally, they relented, because I was so wonderfully annoying and persistent and tenacious, that they created something called the Expansion Arts Division. And they actually offered me that job.

But I was not interested. I was far more in love with community work. And I knew at a fairly early age that I wasn't really employable. I went to work at the post office during that first Christmas break at Howard. I lasted three days. And I just knew I was not a good employee. So I've always had to be fairly independent. Because in my life, I've tried to find that dance between equity and excellence. I have not given up my creative ambition. But I feel a sense of responsibility in terms of the equity piece. And so much of that is due to my exposure and my engagement with SNCC. And I credit them just about anywhere I go to speak because that changed me, and made me more powerful, and gave me greater intention.

It allowed me to be—I have a term that I use—it allowed me to be culturally audacious. Cultural audacity is being willing to intentionally express yourself in the creative space with an understanding of the aesthetic platforms that preceded you, and allow that cultural resonance to feed your intention. Our struggle against injustice and colonialism and all those other things—when you become historically informed—begins to feed your DNA in such a way that that becomes a part of who you are. In the creative space, I always look to disrupt. I'm not interested in making art like Picasso. He informs me, but I also understand that he was informed by Africa. So I believe in cultural audacity.

I also believe in creative bodacity. Bodacity is a word I made up. And I always explain it like this: Once you decide that you are going to resonate with your cultural experience and your history, you become like Jimi Hendrix. Jimi Hendrix used to sleep with his guitar when he learned that he loved the guitar.

But he did something that was even more profound—he played on the left side, upside down, and backwards, and dared to use feedback, and subsequently revolutionized—in a very interesting way—disrupted, in a very interesting way, what had preceded him in rock and roll guitar. They hated him in England, okay? But he had also allowed himself to be informed by the blues. If you look at the Hendrix interviews, he'll tell you that the basis of everything that he did was the blues. That's cultural bodacity. It's where you dare to take an instrument that sells at the Guitar Center, you take it home, and instead of doing this, you do *this*. That's bodacity.

If you look at our audacity and our bodacity, and you decide to embrace that—we have impacted the world. The New Thing, in an interesting way, was a place, it was a doorway for young people—in filmmaking, photography, dance, African percussion. Melvin Deal, you know, a whole range of artistic experiences. We had a door open, and then we provided tools. And then we gave the code. The code is the skills. The experience. The ability to create, innovate, invent, make mistakes, try it again.

And if you look at how we impact the world, when we embrace our culture and we allow it to resonate with ourselves and then with the end users—our community, it's no wonder that Jay-Z goes platinum. They ain't all Black people buying them records.

One of the most interesting stories for me is N.W.A. [Niggaz Wit Attitudes].⁷ N.W.A. was informed. They got the code from listening to their parents' records. They got the cultural infusion, the resonance, from listening to their parents' records.

And then one day, they got the means of production. They got the means of production—an affordable little box that you could put on the coffee table in the dining room or on the dining room table. And you could begin to make music. You could sample other aspects of our cultural experience. You could make these things, and you learned the code.

What was the code? You read the manual. So now you have the means of production, you have the cultural [resonance] and you are creating and actuating things that have affected the world forever. Fashion, food, speech, you name it. It has all come as a result of a belief in our cultural experience. Now that's powerful, because that's where the messages, the rhetoric, the symbols—all of these things evolved from that experience.

The New Thing was basically a place where you could get the code, you could get the access, you could get the skill set, and you could make the product. I use that formula in all of my work. If you were to look at my work from then until now, it's the same exact formula. It's code, access, tools, and cultural resonance. Our culture.

⁷ N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes), the pioneering gangsta rap group from Compton, California, was deeply influenced by the music and cultural history of their parents' generation. Their sound and message were shaped by the rhythms, narratives, and resistance embedded in soul, funk, and blues records, which often addressed racial injustice, systemic oppression, and everyday struggles—themes that N.W.A. modernized through hip-hop.

While this is under the auspices of Black Power Chronicles, I was in the Black art space—equity and excellence—because we should never sacrifice excellence. Excellence is John Coltrane. Listen to that horn and you’ll hear Africa. Listen to that horn—you’ll hear Harlem. Listen to that horn—you’ll also hear Russian folk music.

It’s no wonder that every jazz saxophone program in every institution practically in the world today bases their whole curriculum on John Coltrane’s horn.

But it was that culture that informed him. You can hear the rage, you can hear the beauty, you can hear the excellence. It’s just a very, very...

Kwame Holman: I was going to ask, listening to your story—the kindergarten kid who fought back, the adult who fought back against the architecture establishment, the activist who saved people’s homes—you were exercising power. You were using your consciousness and using your power to make things happen.

Was that Black Power? Or is Black Power just a political thesis? How did it exist when you first heard the phrase back in the [19]60s, in your mind? And isn’t everything you’ve just talked about Black Power? Or were Stokely Carmichael, Marion Barry—were they talking about something different, an actual implementation of some applied political strength?

Topper Carew: I think Black Power validated my intention. And my intention was to make Black people more powerful in their own ownership, identification with the Black cultural experience. Because I do think that the larger group—the intelligentsia—certainly understood the magnificence of our art. But I was trying to popularize that and at The New Thing, trying to get young people to identify with their culture. So I was more in the Black Arts Movement, but the Black Power Movement pretty much validated me. I felt like I had an ally in that journey. And I felt like we could feed that movement and support that movement through the kinds of films, the kind of art, the kind of dance that we made.

The African Heritage dancers and drummers were in residence at The New Thing, and that was the spirit of The New Thing. You come on 18th Street, you hear those drums. Melvin consistently reminded us of our identification with the African, the diasporic experience.

For me, Black Power was an affirmation and it was affirming my identity. It was making me more solidly identify with my identity, and want to advocate that that identity be propagated for as many people as possible. We used to do these concerts at St. Margaret’s Church on Connecticut Avenue. And the intention of those concerts was to validate jazz, to validate other aspects of Black music. We had a radio show on WAMU for years, and it was called *The Root Music Show*. It was talking about the rootedness of our music—going all the way back and coming as far forward as very, very progressive jazz.

Black Power was a validation. I was cultural. It was political, but it was cultural and it was validating, and it was affirming. And I felt that it gave me a certain kind of energy, a certain kind of strength, a certain kind of resonance, a certain kind of intention. But it also fed the notion of actuation.⁸ I didn't like the idea of Eurocentric cultural dependency, or Eurocentric values defining who I was, when in fact, I'd come to see that we were much more than that. It doesn't mean that a Black singer should not be in one of the great operas. It doesn't mean that at all.

But what I would always listen for in Leontyne Price's voice was that little tweak. I would go to see her because I was looking for that little tweak. I would go to see a Black classical pianist so I could hear that little tweak. And I was just looking for that little peek inside...did they do it?

It doesn't dismiss Eurocentric excellence and our participation in that. But historically, our experience had been excluded in a mainstream, big kind of way. And I felt that that was an equity issue. I was just thinking about something. This is a sidebar. But because I sometimes—at this stage of life, you often become very self-reflective. When I was 13, I wanted to be a priest. And it was—it's kid stuff. You're an altar boy, you're in the pageant every Sunday, sometimes twice on Sunday, right? You can't help but get swept up in that. That was my first passion. That was the first thing I wanted to be.

And then classic: girls. That just sort of wiped that right off. And I said, my faith obviously isn't strong enough. And I'm 13—I'm way too young to understand how you commit to the intensity of faith. I did not come from an Irish Catholic family where, if you got five sons, it's known that one of them is going to go into the priesthood.

I got to DC, and I'm doing my work. And I've always been a faith person. That has always kept me afloat. Even coming here—prayers, man. And I'm not afraid to admit that publicly, because that's part of my experience.

When I was here in DC, I had a chance to go again. John Walker invited me into the faith. And what I was asked to do was to conduct four seminars as testimony to my faith.

And my faith wasn't strong enough. Because I was somehow convinced that in the fourth seminar, I was going to get struck by lightning—because I was not strong enough. And if I were to do that, it would have been—I would not—I could not have been honest. It would have been a con job. And so I wasn't ready.

But I made a decision and that decision has fueled and fired me for the longest time. While I give a lot of credit to SNCC, I also give a lot of credit to faith. And I've decided in my life that my work is my ministry. That's what it is. There's no two ways about that.

⁸ Actuation in this context refers to the process of turning ideas, beliefs, or cultural awareness into concrete action, emphasizing how Black Power not only provided validation and strength but also motivated individuals to actively engage in political, social, and cultural change.

When I left Boston and went to L.A. and had a rich career—a struggling career, a tough career—it wasn't luck. It was hard work and tenacity and spiritual veracity. I had success. I had the kind of success that many people dream of. It was not without sacrifice. It was tough for my family, but we survived. But it was faith that kept me afloat. So when I finally got back to Boston, where my great mentors in life reside, I had two options.

One option was the MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] Media Lab, where I am now. The other was the Episcopal Divinity School. So I went to both and interviewed, and when I realized the endurance requirement of the Episcopal Divinity School at my age, I decided that if I wanted to continue to be effective through work—because I'm not going to retire, I'm going to go out with my boots on—that I could probably accomplish much more through the Media Lab if I see my work as my ministry.

So it's that interesting combination of "SNCC fire" and "faith fire," and that dance and that balance. Because in life, I have had rascally tendencies on occasion, but faith pulls me back. And in life, I've had the possibility for great compromise.

I've been offered some sensational jobs over my lifetime. But SNCC has pulled me back because I realized that I would never be a great bureaucrat. I would never be a great employee. I just have to kind of pedal through life with this artistic temperament that has great political inclination, that had a bar set for him by SNCC and a bar set for him by faith.

Kwame Holman: It sounds like, in your lifetime as a Black Arts proponent, Black Power, as you say, validated you. And it seems Black Power was validated by the kinds of things the Black Arts Movement did.

Did it not feed back the other way—the validation—when the political side of Black Power would observe the things Topper Carew was doing, the things that many other people in the Black Arts Movement were doing? Were they one and the same? Were they a symbiotic circle, or what?

Topper Carew: Yes and no. A person who I have great love for and great respect for—and we became very dear friends in the early days of The New Thing—was a wonderful adversary, Gaston Neal.

He was easily more bodacious and more audacious than I was. He was easily more pure in his intent. So I had detractors, but I also had incredible supporters, because I was sort of in this hammock situation.

If you make films, you want to submit them to film festivals, and you want to win. But I never sacrificed my personal, historical, cultural, or political integrity in anything that I did. I was

always very interested in the masses, in reaching as many people as I possibly could. I got in that habit by producing concerts. But I had detractors.

But I must say that Gaston fed me, because he set a very, very wonderful standard of excellence and creative and cultural exploration. So I paid attention to everything that he did—everything that he did. There was a group like that that was easily more intense than myself. But there was no disconnect. There was more connect[ion] than not.

I miss him and I'm so glad—he and I were glad—that we had bonded and that we had figured out who we were. He was an awesome individual, and he was probably the standard-bearer in Washington during his time. You got to keep another thing in mind—I'm doing architecture. I wasn't doing villages in Kenya. And I'm doing [work with] kids, and I'm trying to get them into the artistic space with skills and excellence. So a lot of my work was a little bit different than the sort of propagation that he advanced.

Kwame Holman: But Gaston Neal, with his perhaps stricter adherence to the marriage of the Black Arts Movement with the Black Power political movement—nonetheless, I'm sure he approved of Topper Carew.

Topper Carew: Oh, yeah. We ended up being great friends and I found ways to support him. When I was on the DC Arts Commission, I was probably his strongest advocate in terms of sending grant money his way. Because at that time, the Commission was still tied to institutional politics. To be inside and to be able to argue on an advocacy basis for the kind of work that he did—I was there for him.

Kwame Holman: I have to ask you one last thing, Topper, because we are here in August of 2017, when in the news there is a great deal of attention going to reactions from some in the country to the taking down of Confederate memorabilia around the country.⁹ And violent acts that, for many, are indistinguishable from the men you saw riding on those flatbed trucks back in Mississippi. How do you reflect on where the country is, coming from someone who has experienced the halls of the highest levels of the art and architecture world, of the broadcasting and entertainment world? How should people look at the return, if you will, of those images in 2017 compared to 1967?

Topper Carew: Personally, I'm appalled. And personally, there's a bit of disappointment when I think about the enormous investment that I've made and the enormous investment that others have made in the interest of justice and equity in this country.

I do think that those statues and those symbols must be eliminated forever. And the fact that they have existed for this long and that there has been a toleration for such...has finally come to light.

⁹ In August 2017, the debate over Confederate monuments and memorabilia intensified following the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where white supremacist groups protested the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue.

I must say that I was probably dismissive in that space because I didn't think about them. I didn't think about them because I felt like we, through legislation and the rest, had gotten past that. I think there will be an enormous challenge to the Black community, and I want to speak to that first. Because a lot of that challenge in the front is triggered by us—our being in presence.

I think there is—and here's what I see as the danger. There was an algorithmic research project at Carnegie Mellon that talked about how the Tea Party came into existence, and basically, what it said was they only needed 10% of the population saying the same thing all the time to impact the other 90%. Very important. Because if you look at the history of the Civil Rights Movement and you recognize that it was a very small group of people saying the same thing consistently, over and over again, until we impacted the other 95% of the population—see?

That's a very important thing. Because now, you have this white supremacist organization that has captured the message, and they're saying the same thing over and over and over again, and it's having [an] impact. That's where the danger is.

So we have to allow things like The Black Power Chronicles to inform us. We have to let the history of the Civil Rights Movement inform us, so that our young people do not think that King's birthday is a shopping holiday. I think we have to stand firmly behind nonviolence. It's hard. It's hard—those people own the majority of the guns in this country.

I think we have to ignite something that I refer to as progressive patriotism. We cannot be afraid to be patriotic in the name of fortifying those democratic institutions that have been the basis for our ascendancy. Even though they have not been totally pure, although they have been manipulated, although there is a lot of undue influence on them. We have to take a very, very, very firm standard.

We have to realize that it's not going to be—nor is it ever—a situation where 100% of the population is going to be on board with what it is.

I think that we got to get busy—because they don't like us. And I've always believed, by the way, this: if someone consistently exhibits irrational behavior—and I think racism is an irrational idea. It was a construct created by the English to justify slavery. It has no ethical basis. It has no moral basis. It has no Christian basis. It has no Buddhist basis. It has no basis. It's a flimsy idea that, like the Tea Party, has taken hold.

And anytime you know somebody—friend, family, anybody—who consistently exhibits irrational behavior, they're referred to therapy. Because it's a mental disease. See, I think racism has never been properly treated. The last time we had any mass therapy around the notion of racism was the Civil Rights Movement.

We're now at a very interesting place where that mental illness is surfacing. It's an illness that allows a 20-year-old man to get in a car and plow into a crowd of people.¹⁰ And it's a mental illness that—a guy in Oklahoma, I don't know if you heard that one—where he was ready to set off another Timothy McVeigh bomb, and they caught him just in the nick of time.

That's illness. That's an illness. And we need to understand how deeply rooted that experience is, and how, like cultural audacity and our resistance to those things have become a part of who we are, we have to recognize that that illness has become a part of who a lot of those people are.

They're like—off the charts, man. The Nazi thing, the Klan thing—man, it's insane. I was looking at a piece last night and it was talking about how the elections in 1920 and 1924 were impacted by the Ku Klux Klan...how they had control over that election.

I'm very interested, in some form or fashion, to figure out how I can make a contribution to what I call persistent optimism and constructive disruption, in the interest of fortifying the intention of democracy. Because I think this issue is, right now, bigger than us. But we have always been very instrumental and very much a part of the marches toward justice in this country.

This [project] is beautiful because it's going to inform young people. It's going to give people courage. It's going to let people know that we've been in dark places before. This may be the toughest one. And I'm kind of feeling that. I don't know if it's because I got a historical view due to my lineage, but I feel like this is one of the—analytically, I feel like this is one of the darkest periods in history. And it's very, very difficult. I know people who are in states of grief because of this, trying to figure their way out of this.

So I go: we need culture, we need a code—which is strategy—and we need actuation. We have to recognize that the opposition is mountainous. But Nelson Mandela recognized that. A. Philip Randolph recognized that. King, he realized that.

So I will maintain optimism. That's where I'm at.

Kwame Holman: Topper Carew, thank you very much.

Topper Carew: Excellent. Good to see you.

Kwame Holman: Fantastic, fantastic.

¹⁰ This statement refers to the Charlottesville car attack on August 12, 2017, when a white supremacist, drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters during the Unite the Right rally, killing Heather Heyer and injuring dozens.