

1 Carlos Russell, interviewed by Carol Quirke in Brooklyn, New York on May 23, 2012.

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3 Quirke: My name is Carol Quirke, it's May 23rd 2012. I have the pleasure of interviewing
4 Dr. Carlos Russell. Dr. Carlos Russell was a former professor at SUNY Old Westbury and
5 he was the Chair of the Field Studies department in Old Westbury's early days.

6 Russell: Thank you. The pleasure is mine.

7 Quirke: I want to start by asking you about your early life, where you're from and maybe
8 a little bit about your family, and what brought you to your commitments to social
9 justice?

10 Russell: I was born in the Republic of Panama. My mother and father are people of
11 Caribbean decent. I left Panama in 1955. I left because in Panama, as you may know, the
12 social, economic, and cultural reality was totally different. I had no, what you call in
13 Spanish *espacio politico*, no political space. Racism was rampant both in Panama and the
14 former Canal Zone. I don't know if you're aware, but in the former Canal Zone they had
15 gold and silver; gold was for white people, silver for Panamanian black. Because most of
16 the workers that built the Canal and the railroad were the laborers, were from the
17 Caribbean Islands: Jamaica, Barbados, Grenada and what have you. Panama was a
18 melting pot in a sense for many of the people that built the Canal. In truth, racism was
19 rampant. For example, a black policeman could not arrest a white person. The blacks on
20 the Canal Zone lived in what was called, Silver Quarters. In fact, Velma Newton has a
21 book called *The Silver People* [*The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama*,

22 1850- 1914, 1984], that describes that; and I think McCullough in his book *The Path*
23 *Between the Seas* [David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the*
24 *Panama Canal, 1870- 1914, 1977*], does the same description. And perhaps the more
25 later one by Julia Greene called, *The Builders of the Panama Canal* [Julie Greene, *The Canal*
26 *Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal, 2009*], something like that,
27 where you can get that kind of background on what Panama was.

28 Panama itself was also a racist society. In fact, the first president of Panama, his
29 name was Carlos A. Mendoza and he was a mulatto, they would call him, at that time.
30 Neither the United States or the Panamanian elite wanted him to remain in power,
31 because he got into power when the President [José Domingo de] Obaldía died and he
32 was the first designate—first or second designate to be president. What then happened,
33 they went—looked into the trunk and brought all of the racist realities and denied him
34 the totality of becoming president of Panama.

35 That kind of, how can I put it, that kind of thought persisted. In fact yesterday, or
36 Monday, this is 2012, blacks in Panama had to have what they call the “Day of the Braids”
37 because the Minister of Education had decided that black children shouldn’t go to school
38 wearing braids. 2012, can you imagine? So that is still rampant.

39 In 1955 I left Panama on a student visa. In fact, that happened accidentally. Since
40 I graduated from the National Institute in Panama, which was the I could call it the nest of
41 what we would call today the radical students. The National Institute produced some of
42 the better, most intellectual student body. In fact, in 1964 when the difficulty between
43 the United States and Panama over the flying of the flag, the National Institute, the “nest

44 of eagles” as it was called *el nido de águila* were the ones who went to Balboa, the Canal
45 Zone, because you just had to cross the street. They’re the ones that clashed with the U.S.
46 military and a number of Panamanian students were killed. But, I’m digressing slightly;
47 I’m just giving you a picture of what it was.

48 Being in Panama, I graduated from high school, I had no job. My father never
49 wanted me to work for the Canal Zone. The disparity in pays...today we are talking about
50 income inequality, well that was in those days it was not only income inequality because
51 the caveat between the Americans and the Panamanians, whether black or Latin per se
52 were like the Michigan lake, that wide. So I came. A friend of mine told my mother that
53 he could help me to get a visa, a student visa, and I went to De Paul University, that is how
54 I came to the country. At De Paul, in 1955, I think I said, that is where I began to get
55 active politically because I saw, while I was there the body of Emmet Till in the coffin and
56 that turned me on. Turned me off, and turned me on. Of course, a year or two before the
57 civil rights struggle had begun.

58 However, the irony of it all—for me at least and for many of those from Panama,
59 black folks that is—here we’re leaving the country because there is racism in Panama and
60 the Canal Zone to come to the mother load of racism at that time. But there’s something
61 psychologically that happens, the United States at that time and even today has always
62 been able to project and promote a value system that goes across the oceans and you still
63 believe, in spite of what you’re feeling that you’re going into a nest of justice, equality, and
64 democracy. So you rush to come. In fact, when in Panama I knew more about American
65 baseball and sports, why? Because they had the Armed Forces radio station and we

66 would listen every day. I had no real reason to come to the United States but I wasn't
67 working and when they said, "Okay you can get the visa," I came.

68 I came to De Paul. I went to school there. I worked and lived on the South Side of
69 Chicago. I worked at the Mary McDowell Settlement House. Chicago was my home. I will
70 say this—I became a man really on the teeming streets of Chicago and New York. I came
71 to New York in about, I think the year was 1961. The first job that I had was with the
72 Albany Community Center in the Albany Projects as a youth worker. At that time the New
73 York City Youth Board worked with the gangs—the emerging gangs. I worked with—
74 what was called—the Chaplains. In Brooklyn, for example—and the reason I came to
75 Brooklyn, because Brooklyn was where most Panamanians lived and one tends to travel
76 for the security of your landmen, and people that you know.

77 While here, in those early days, I got involved politically. How did that happen?
78 By working with the youth board. I was a Contract B worker. I remember the director—
79 Executive Director of the Albany House, his name was William K. Wolfe. He was also with
80 Urban League—later he became Director of the Urban League. Here, I would get involved
81 with the Mobilization for Youth. It was the Great Society at the time. The War on Poverty
82 was very much in vogue; I worked there. I worked for Youth in Action, later. That was
83 another of the poverty programs that was on the lower West side. Mobilization for Youth
84 was a program that was designed to find work for young people. It was really—the irony
85 and the sadness is that in those days there were tremendous ideas for social
86 transformation. Sadly, they never materialized because those who did not want social
87 transformation viewed it as a false expenditure of money that the society—quote end

88 quote—could not afford. Which was not true, because they spent more money later in
89 wars, Vietnam, etc, etc. It was a total nonsense.

90 I became the Executive Director of the Fort Greene Community Progress Center.
91 Fort Greene Community Progress Center was one of the many projects that was formed
92 by the Great Society but by New York City. There is an irony when I think about it now.
93 The churches—the Catholic Church and other churches—because in Brooklyn at that
94 time, there was no congressperson. Where the project was—if my memory is correct—
95 the congressperson was John Rooney. Contiguous to him was Edna Kelly. I'm sure that's
96 it. They wanted, they meaning the people that live in the area, because Fort Green,
97 Clinton Hill is contiguous to the Navy Yard, the U.S. Navy Yard. At that time it was
98 considered a decaying community. It was a community where they had single room
99 occupancies. You could buy a brownstone for approximately \$9,000. All across, along
100 Fulton Street, the sailors and the soldiers and the houses of prostitution. Whatever, you
101 know.

102 This is the irony I'm saying. The churches wanted to bring Saul Alinsky to
103 organize. Jim Greenwich, who was Chairman of the Board, because the board was
104 elected—he and I decided, "Naah, why do we need Saul Alinsky to come?" And we won,
105 and we began to organize. What we did was try to make the people who lived in the area,
106 who were block workers, tenant workers, whatever, to give them jobs, but at the same
107 time to try, I use the term, social transformation. In the long run, I guess I stepped on too
108 many toes, so I was forced to resign. I think it is about 1966-67. Forced to resign.

109 In Chicago—back to Chicago. There was a conference, called the Conference for
110 New Politics. At that conference they were attempting to run Dr. Benjamin Spock for
111 President of the United States, and Dr. Martin Luther King for Vice President. The
112 concept was peace and freedom. I did not have a job. I was forced to resign as I told you.
113 I wanted to go to the conference. There was a man who had worked with me before at
114 Youth In Action; his name was Leon Modeste; who happened to be, at that time, the head
115 of the Episcopal Churches General Convention Special Program. They were giving money
116 to develop independent schools; they were giving money to help people. So, I told Leon,
117 “Listen, you pay my way, I’ll write a story.”

118 Because during those years I had also become a member of the Harlem Writers
119 Guild, where I knew John Henry Clark, John Oliver Killens. I wrote for the *Liberator*
120 magazine, which was then one of the radical black magazines during that time. There
121 were two, *Freedom Waves* and the *Liberator*. In fact, I remember writing for the *Liberator*
122 I met a number of the people on the board. Daniel Watts, Daniel H. Watts was the editor
123 and founder of the *Liberator*; and Pete Beverage was the editor—I was an associate editor
124 of the magazine.

125 So Leon decided that he would pay my way. When I went to Chicago there were
126 about 2,700 people there. Blacks had separated themselves into a Black Caucus; there
127 were about 700 of them. And the blacks in the Black Caucus were from across the
128 country, of every political stripe that you could think of. There were Communist Party,
129 there were Black Panthers, there were Dr. King’s SCLC, Mississippi Freedom Party, there
130 were the Freedom Riders. I mean, you name it, they were all there. I always laugh when I

131 remember this. When I went into the room it was in chaos. They had a chairperson,
132 people knocked him down, they had a chairperson, and they knocked him down. I walked
133 in, and I don't know, I gave a speech. And a little old lady from Mississippi said, "You be
134 the chairmen!" A guy from California, I remember his name, he was Elijah Turner, he
135 said, "You be the chairmen, yes!" And I became the chairmen. For four days I kept them
136 together. The next day however, the *New York Times* writes "New National Black Leader."
137 I went there without a program, with whatever—I walked in and that's how I became. I
138 have told people that many of the things that happened to me in life have happened
139 accidentally—I don't plan them, they're there. The only difference is I am prepared when
140 it comes.

141 While I was there in the, as Chairperson, there were two things that happened.
142 Prior to that there had been the Black Power Conference in Newark, and they had a
143 number of points. One of the points that they had was saying that Zionism was equivalent
144 to racism. Those of us in the caucus and some folks pushed it because it was well—things
145 happen by what we call "African consensus." Which meant that there were consensus,
146 not really voting numbers, or whatever, consensus. We created thirteen points; one of
147 them was that. I'll come back to that.

148 The other thing that happened, was, I remember being there. Someone from the
149 West Side, they were called the "Westies" they came over and said, "Carlos, why don't we
150 ask for 50% of the power?" I said, "You crazy! Why would these white folks give us 50%
151 of the power?" They said, "Ask!" I said, "Naah." Anyway in the Palmer House I went into
152 the basement and I talked. I said, "What do you think if we ask for 50%?" And my

153 argument was this. I said, "You have 2,000 and we've got 700. We say we want to build a
154 new society. Now if we go vote one for one and anything, we lose because you have 2,000
155 and I got 700 so it don't make any sense. Let's make 50-50, a bi-cameral thing and we'll
156 have a third body. And that third body, when there is a division or thing, we can make it
157 work." They voted yes. But before they voted yes I went back upstairs and I told the guy
158 and the folks, I said, "Hey listen, I believe they can go for it. This is what I ask you to do.
159 Don't come to the ballroom for the vote. Go shop in Chicago, go to Marshall Fields, do
160 whatever you, but please don't come." And guess what, they didn't come to the thing, and
161 the vote passed.

162 That vote, and the "Zionism is equivalent to racism," put a splinter in the body
163 because most—at that time I don't know if it is today, most of the organizations at that
164 time were funded by organized Jewry and that was perceived as anti-Semitic. But in
165 truth, we did not see it as anti-Semitic. Why? Because we said, "How can you have a
166 society, that you say is a Jewish state and the Palestinians who were there will have no
167 power? That's contradictory." So if you push that on that, that is equivalent to racism.
168 Much later Jimmy Carter said similar, a couple of years ago, and [unclear] later said
169 something similar. But at that time, I paid the price for that. In fact, I think I still have the
170 label of being anti-Semitic. I have to laugh, because it is a big contradiction. Many of the
171 people that helped me personally were Jewish. So how can I turn against people that
172 literally feed me? The idea politically, they were unable—those who were so entrenched
173 with the concept were unwilling to give the other person the possibility of not being—of
174 seeing what the person meant. Now I can understand it from an emotional point, nobody
175 who loses six million people or more, can act in every instance rationally. Emotion often

176 times trumps reason. My sense, while I understand it, it did have a negative impact on me
177 personally.

178 I remember once, this fellow wrote for the *Village Voice*, during those times. After
179 that I became very active in the movement. In fact, he wrote a piece that was called, "The
180 Instant Honesty of Introspective Militant." I still remember the title, sixty years almost.
181 Later when I tried to work with him again, he wouldn't, he said, "You're anti-Semitic I
182 can't work with you." What can I tell you?

183 In any event, when I came back from Chicago, I did not have a job still. Now, the
184 *New York Post* at the time, the year was 1967, not this piece of trash they have today. The
185 old *New York Post* had Murray Kempton, James Wexler, Langston Hughes as writers.
186 People forget that. I'm trying to remember the name of the woman that was the
187 publisher of it. The woman, yes she was. In fact, in the old *Post* every Friday I think it
188 was—you would see an article by Langston Hughes, "Semple" James Wexler wrote,
189 Murray Kempton as I said. Well, Jerry Tallmer wrote for the *Post* Somehow he got to me.
190 He said, "Carlos there's a college in Long Island that is looking for a speaker, would you
191 want to speak?" I ain't got no money, I said, "Sure, I will go." I think they paid me \$1,500.
192 I went, and when I finished speaking, getting ready to come back, Harris Wofford who
193 was then president said, "How would you like to stay and be head of my Field Studies
194 Department? Now, I had never before been a teacher. I did not have a Ph.D.; I did not
195 have masters. I'd been to the School of Social Work, but I was asked to leave in my second
196 year after completing all of the academic works. I think I will share this anecdote because
197 I think this is interesting. I was placed in social work.

198 Quirke: Was this at De Paul or where did you get your social work degree?

199 Russell: Hunter College, right here in New York. In fact, I was trying to remember the
200 name of the Dean. It will come back, the head of the school, Lilliane Lambkin was my
201 group work person—Dean Shriver was his name, anyway. I was placed at Dobbs Ferry at
202 the St. Christopher School for Boys. Muhammad Ali was World Champ at that time and he
203 had just changed his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali. What had happened was
204 that he had beaten Floyd Patterson who never wanted to call him Muhammad Ali. In the
205 fight anytime he hit Floyd Patterson: “What’s my name? What’s my name?” And then, he
206 knocked him out.

207 Quirke: You were laying out your chronology of how you came to be active in social
208 movements, but you described coming to the United States as an opportunity and leaving
209 a place that was deeply driven by racism. I was just wondering if you could offer us an
210 example or two of an experience that made you want to leave, or nurtured your sense of
211 injustice?

212 Russell: That’s easy. You want me to do it right now? Okay, I’ll do it right now. Is it on?
213 I’m sorry.

214 Quirke: We’re on. [Laughter]

215 Russell: One of the things that happened while I was in Panama. I was—as I told you—a
216 student at the National Institute. In Panama, if you were a West Indian from the
217 Caribbean Islands or Addison Street everyone was called a *Jaimaiquino*. You’re not
218 expected to speak Spanish well. Well, I remember I’ve always liked to write; as I told you,

219 earlier, I showed you one of my last books. I wrote a short story in Spanish. I gave it to
220 my fourth year professor. She was—I'm not going to mention her name. She was one of
221 Panama's luminaries, because we had the best teachers. She read it and she told me I
222 could not have written that story because I was black. I was a West Indian, so how could I
223 write Spanish that well. Well, that traumatized me. I never wrote in Spanish, for quite a
224 long while.

225 There were a number of things like that, that happened. My mother worked in the
226 segregated commissary which is a supermarket. She sold shoes, but black folks couldn't
227 go there. That was only for white people. The clubhouse was the same. When a white
228 person retired they got pension. When a black person retired they got twenty-five dollars
229 a month as a gift. So the disparity between blacks and whites on the Canal Zone and in
230 Panama was great.

231 In fact, there was a young boy by the name of Lester Graves, and Lester Graves had
232 this white-American girlfriend. All of us who lived on the outside knew that they were
233 lovers, but apparently she never told her family. When the family found out, they came,
234 they arrested him for rape, sentenced him to fifty years in jail in Gamboa, which was the
235 penitentiary on the Canal Zone and she left. In fact, there is a famous book in Panama
236 written called *Gamboa Road Gang* [by Joaquín Beleño, 1959]. I'm blocking his name it
237 will come back, of the author. That's the kind of thing that happened.

238 My stepfather worked for the Army, the military.

239 Quite: U.S? Or the Panamanian?

240 Russell: No, I'm talking about Panama. There was no Panamanian military per se. They
241 did not, West Indians were left out because we were called *chumbos*, which is equivalent
242 to niggers. That's why I said, this question about *chumbo* is something as I learned later
243 in life. There was that very vicious racist term in Panama. We had to walk with
244 identification cards when you get to twenty-one and sometimes the police would come to
245 see in our neighborhoods, the quote unquote "ghettos" but they never went to the rich
246 folk's kids to do it. You had to get away from the oppressive sense that one felt.

247 But still, as in everything else, I could say that even in the slave plantation there
248 were moments that people were happy and enjoyed it, even then we did because you had
249 the churches. The Episcopal Church, primarily, that served as the place where many
250 people from the Caribbean came. Why? Because the Episcopal Church spoke in English
251 while the Catholic Church was primarily Spanish. Language played an extremely
252 important role in that development. Even today, even today one of the things that we see
253 is that many of the people of West Indian origin today they say they don't speak English, it
254 is totally—they speak Spanish. The leaders of the country speak English. They came
255 here to Notre Dame. [Ernesto] Balladares came and went to Notre Dame, a whole lot of
256 things a lot of anecdotes, we only have an hour I can tell you more stories about the
257 contradictions that happened.

258 In fact, there were many black young men who lived on the Canal Zone, who in
259 order to get away from the racism joined the US military, which they should not have
260 been because they were not American, to go to Korea. So here you are, in order to get
261 away from racism, join the military, risk your life to get killed. And some got killed, some

262 came here. Those are the contradictions. People talk, but the question of living life is a
263 totally different reality.

264 My stepfather for example, I give him a lot of credit because in Panama I read, in
265 his home he had all of these at that time they were called the Great Books and he had the
266 complete works of Guy De Maupassant, the complete works of Nathaniel Hawthorne,
267 Victor Hugo, you name them. He would read stories to us. I would absorb it without
268 knowing that I was absorbing it. And the only time it began to flourish was when I was in
269 school at De Paul and the teachers are talking about Guy De Maupassant, whatever, and I
270 was telling them. "Where did you learn that?" and I said, "I don't know, my grandfather."
271 That's what again, why in education I learned that if the family nurtures the youngsters
272 with reading and so forth it is very helpful. That helped me also at Westbury when I got
273 the job. Let me tell you...

274 Quirke: Tell us a little bit about. I was hoping you could tell me more...

275 Russell: About Muhammad Ali or what? Tell me?

276 Quirke: You were telling us about working and going to Hunter College and being placed
277 in the St. Christopher School for boys and Muhammad Ali.

278 Russell: So one of the things that we did at Westbury is we'd have lunch and everyone
279 would be in a big room. These ladies would say, "Well wasn't that a sad thing that that
280 Muhammad Ali did to poor Floyd Patterson?" I've always been very irrepressible, I don't
281 hold back. I said, "What do you mean by that?" He was saying he was going to bring back

282 the championship to America as if Ali was not an American. We got into it. Well I was
283 sent to see my advisor and from that advisor I was sent to see the dean.

284 Now the dean used to teach a course in social policy and things like that. I used to
285 challenge him, because at that time , now this was in the beginning days of social work. It
286 had not yet acquired, I mean as a profession for most of that time the social worker ,
287 many of them wanted to just, to hang their names and become pseudo-psychiatrists or
288 pseudo-psychologists. In the South, the civil rights movement was there, but we never
289 dealt with that, we were only dealing with the struggle that was happening in New York.
290 I said, "Wait a minute, why don't you do that?" I would keep arguing. Anyway, I would
291 get a very good grade with Shriver so when he saw me he said, "Carlos, why are you here
292 again? What's the trouble this time?" I knew that all I needed to finish was the fieldwork,
293 so I said, "No, nothing is wrong." He said, "Do you have any ideological thing that is
294 different to social work?" I played, I said, "No I don't have any. Why do you say that?" I
295 said, "Are you asking me if I'm a communist?" He said, "No, not that. No, are you a Black
296 Muslim?" I said, "Dr. Shriver, if I were a Black Muslim I would not be talking to you right
297 here." And I got up and I never went back. Then we began to move.

298 Anyway, Jerry Tallmer had asked me —as I said— if I wanted to speak.

299 Quirke: I just want to clarify.

300 Russell: Jerry Tallmer was a reporter for the *New York Post*.

301 Quirke: And this was in 1968?

302 Russell: Seven, 67-68.

303 Quirke: And you were in your mid thirties at this point? How old were you at this point?

304 Russell: Twenty-seven, twenty-eight.

305 Quirke: So you come to speak at Old Westbury. What did you speak about?

306 Russell: I don't remember. What you have to realize was that, that was a period of
307 upheaval in the United States. That was a period where the struggle against the war in
308 Vietnam—there was a split between blacks and whites, because whites were saying
309 peace and freedom, peace first; and blacks were saying freedom first, peace second. So
310 that was part of the split.

311 Anyway, when I went to Westbury, I gave the speech and Harris hired me as
312 Chairmen of the Field Studies Department. Plus I would teach a course with him, which is
313 called the Common Humanity course. Now Harris is a very unusual and special person.
314 He was a Quaker. He had been the Head or second in command—he and Sergeant Shriver
315 were good friends and they had served in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia. He also loved to
316 read, and we would use the Great Books from Chicago University. Remember I spoke to
317 you about me reading a lot. So when we would teach courses, some of that came back.
318 As a member of the Harlem Writer's Guild I read a lot, also. When we taught the courses I
319 would, Fanon, you name them, those are the courses, those are the books that we did. So
320 it was dual teaching, at the same time.

321 Harris believed in what you call creative tension. He would, in building Westbury,
322 the College was supposed to pull different people together, hoping that by the clash of
323 ideas, by the ongoing interaction outside of the city where you have urban blacks, Indians,

324 whites from all fours, in that mixture the idea was from the creative tension something
325 new would come out, a new vision would come out. What we have to remember is that
326 Westbury, the experiment was taking place amidst eruption outside, all over. I remember
327 when I went the Students for a Democratic Society was functioning, you had the
328 Weathermen, Weatherpeople there were people that were placing bombs and so forth,
329 black and white. In fact, I remember Bernadette Dohrn—I think was her name I don't
330 remember—who on 14th Street here blew up the house. They were rich folk. They were
331 not the poor.

332 Sometimes I think we ought to look back and understand fully what was
333 happening. Because they were real, they believed in a sense—this is my view now,
334 people will think I'm crazy—I think they believed that society should be a just and
335 egalitarian society. But I am on the streets, and I am working with blacks from the lower
336 echelon, who did not trust the white liberals. Why? I think you may like this. I remember
337 once there was a seminar or a conference at one of the theaters. On the stage was, I think
338 it was, David Susskind, James Wexler, Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin, you know, exchange
339 of ideas. The blacks were, for the first time at that time, were arguing, saying, "Blah-blah."
340 And James Baldwin said something and, I'm not sure whether if it was, Wexler or David
341 Susskind who said, "I do not want to be a water boy in a battle I once led." And that's
342 almost....What had happened was, that for the whites at that time, they needed to lead.
343 It's almost like you can't give up power. To give up power meant a loss of self, a loss of
344 self. So that created, continued the tension between that.

345 Quirke: How did that play out at Old Westbury?

346 Russell: Well, when I went to Westbury, I would say to the blacks, “I don’t want you...” In
347 fact, at the reunion, Frank Miata, who was a member of SDS at that time, said to, walked
348 into me—I didn’t know he remembered. He said, “Carlos, I remembered when you told
349 the black folks here, we called it the Non-White Caucus. It was called the Non-White
350 Caucus because it included not only African-Americans but Latinos. He said, “I remember
351 when you told them, don’t get co-opted by the white liberals.” Now I had not
352 remembered I said that, but he did, which meant it made an impression. There was that
353 tension between blacks and whites on the campus. The tragedy was that they were all
354 making things up as they went along; they did not know what it was all about. It was like
355 playing games. What do I mean? Aside from the whites who were on the fringe of the
356 activities outside, those on campus, by the virtue of coming to school were not as active in
357 the external movement.

358 One of the things that I did, because again at that time, there was the teacher
359 strike. The union and all of that developed around the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community
360 control. Again, the question of power, community control. I asked and as head of the
361 Field Studies I placed the students, those who wanted, to teach, when the teachers were
362 not there, in East New York and what have you. I remember Hope, Pablo, Pablo was Paul
363 then, and he was named Paul Guzman, Mickey Melendez, Denise Oliver, most of them and
364 Bunkely, Bob Bunkely they were students who went to teach, giving them a new
365 experience of what it was. That’s why I say Harris was unusual. Because Harris
366 permitted it. He was not, he didn’t say, “No, you can’t do it.”

367 In fact, Harris, I don't know if many people realize it, but Harris is credited with
368 persuading JFK to call Daddy King when Martin King was in jail, and that is what helped
369 the Southern ministers to vote for JFK. Because Daddy King said, "Hey, this is a good guy,
370 because look what he did." And that broke the Baptist antagonism towards Papists. In
371 fact, his book of Kings— *Of Kennedys and Kings* is an extraordinary relation, and he was
372 all that. In fact, he would sit...I developed a respect for him.

373 If I ever write an autobiography or something like that I think I will call it *On the*
374 *Periphery* because I think I've been on the periphery of a lot of movements. Once at
375 Harris' home, we are speaking, it is about 11 or 12 o'clock at night. The phone rings. He
376 picks it up, and he said, "Hey Sarge, what's happening?" He's talking to Sargeant Shriver.
377 Shriver calls him and tells him, "They've offered me—They've told me they want me to
378 run for Vice President, should I?" I'm sitting in the room, and this guy is asking his friend
379 if he should run for Vice President of the country. What am I doing here? Harris said,
380 "Carlos, what do you think?" I said, "You know, Harris, tell him to do it! Why not? He
381 represents a different perspective on what is happening outside." In truth, again, I can't
382 say what I said made him do it, but apparently Harris agreed, and perhaps he had been
383 there before, so he did.

384 Quirke: He was Humphrey's running mate?

385 Russell: All I did was support his view.

386 Quirke: Why do you think people have such a personal animus against Harris Wofford?

387 Russell: Oh because...

388 Quirke: Because I have to say as an historian it was clear that it was an explosive time.

389 Russell: My sense is, aside from that, I would call it the tragedy of the young. They want

390 immediate gratification. What he was trying to do and some of us who understood.

391 Remember I am into freedom and peace, not peace and freedom but I respected what he

392 was trying to do. In fact, let me tell you, let me give you a precise example they were so

393 out of it that one of the things that we had was called independent studies. Well part LSD,

394 and what you call hallucinogenics, were rampant and blacks were into pot more than

395 LSD. There is an incident in which—I shouldn't say, well he has spoken about it— He

396 nearly died, Ghebre, the Ethiopian, they gave him some LSD and he nearly died. If it

397 wasn't for Marguerite DeAbreu who was also there and others who —he would've

398 tripped out. What I'm saying is, that split that you escape, the independent study, they

399 would say, "Suppose we want to stay in the lawn and look at the sun all day, can we do

400 that as an independent study?" They used to call it a GGS degree, "Groovin' in the Grass"

401 degree. I would argue against it, I would say in expletive deleted, "What the hell are you

402 talking about? You could go to go blind. That's nonsense." What can I say? Many of the

403 professors at that time from my perspective, this is me now, did not really believe in the

404 concept. It was a job.

405 Quirke: The concept of experimental education?

406 Russell: No, the creative tension, creative tension. They saw Harris perhaps as weak;

407 perhaps in march at that time with the legalization of marijuana, all of the external

408 accoutrements —I guess that's the right word— or the sea in which the college was

409 surrounded. There were a lot of internal contradictions. Again, Paul, his name was Paul

410 Guzman, he couldn't speak Spanish. Harris was in touch with CIDOC [Centro Intercultural
411 de Documentación], in Mexico, I don't remember the name, totally what it meant. It was
412 called CIDOC, the head of the institution was called Ivan Illich and what happened was he
413 gave permission for them, Pablo and a few others to go to Cuernavaca to study Spanish
414 and get immersed in the culture. When Paul came back, he came back as Pablo Yoruba
415 Guzman. Transformation, epiphany.

416 From there then, again as I keep saying Westbury is in the center of everything
417 that's happening outside. It's not just a school. Students there then, the black students,
418 the non-white students I worked with them. I remember when in the Bronx they wanted
419 to form the Young Lords: Mickey, Denise, and all of them. I used to drive from Westbury
420 to the Bronx. Here is a big contradiction. When I went to Westbury I did not have a car. I
421 lived in Brooklyn; I did not have a car. There was a professor by the name of Resnick—I
422 think his name was—who had a—was selling a 19-something Mercedes, stick shift. I
423 bought it from him, but I couldn't drive. Paulette—I'm blocking her last name—used to
424 drive the car for us; she died later, she had a small MG.

425 Quirke: Was she a student?

426 Russell: Yes, a student, a student. She was an older student but she was a student. You
427 see, the thing about Westbury at that time you had a cross section of ages, races...

428 Quirke: It was very diverse. I know people were angry because it wasn't diverse enough.
429 For that time period, it was extraordinarily diverse.

430 Russell: They are not being honest. You could not have wanted a more diverse student
431 body, because it was small. Most of the classes ultimately were taught in Planting Fields
432 at the geodesic domes, at the Teddy Roosevelt Estate. There were so many different
433 things that happened but the students were exposed to ideas and thoughts. For instance,
434 when you have an Alan Wolfe and a Novak, two different views, one extremely
435 conservative, one extremely liberal or whatever, at that time. And the students are
436 exposed to that; hopefully, they can get a synthesis from both of them. If they're open.
437 The problem was, many of them were prepared to that, because that was not the kind of
438 education they were accustomed to. They were accustomed to memorizing and saying
439 the response, you know like in a church, a call and response and you see how quickly you
440 can remember, not analyzing.

441 Had they been able to do that—there was a number of people there. For example
442 I disagreed with Novak a lot, I could not—here's this ex-priest I think he was, or a
443 religious person. So conservative and not dealing with the war in Vietnam in a sense, not
444 dealing with the racism in the society. It is easy to extricate yourself from the world,
445 because if you lock yourself in, that's fine. But no, we are of the world, and if you want to
446 change the world you have to be part of it. You can't sit down and say, "Okay, it's against
447 them, it's this and just." No. What I thought, because I used some of that later when I
448 went to Brooklyn College to create a concept I'd like to call "the scholar activist". Meaning
449 that you have to create in students a notion of wanting to know what's happening around,
450 to be active, not be passive; not just simply sit back and say, "Well I know and I'm going to
451 teach you." Now, if you believe something badly enough and you think you're right you
452 have to move to implement that thought. That never really, really happened. I am sorry

453 that it never... What occurred in a sense, it imploded. That's where some of the, to your
454 question, some of the anger against Harris came up. I think it's misdirected, I think the
455 anger should be at ourselves, that we did not comprehend at that time.

456 Looking back, I would say that we were ahead of our times. In fact, if I want to be,
457 I don't know the word I'm looking for, I could equate that, what was happening then, with
458 Occupy Wall Street. There is a...people know that there's some fundamental
459 contradictions that exist within a society that rightfully express the quest for justice, for
460 democracy, equality. It's there, but it happens so rarely and whenever one tries to say
461 that, one is accused of being anti-American. I don't think so, I think one is more American
462 when you say that because you are trying to make the society live up to what it says it
463 believes in. And I think that is what is happening right now. I would suggest strongly
464 that what we are seeing perhaps between Obama and Romney is the same thing. Because
465 it is really a clash of the kind of idea of the world we want.

466 As I speak with you, a thought comes back which goes to the question that you
467 asked earlier. I think that what happened then was that we at Westbury knew something
468 was wrong. We knew something needed to be changed, but we didn't know what that
469 should become.

470 Quirke: And how to do it, because those are hard questions to answer

471 Russell: You know something, in other words you know something is wrong with you but
472 you don't know how to cure it. It took Dr. King—I was never a Kingian, I favored
473 Malcolm because that was more within my personality, if you hit me I'm going to hit you
474 back. But it took me years to realize that King was better in that aspect than I was. He

475 spoke about *agape*, the kind of love that you share without wanting anything in return.
476 For him, that is the love that one should strive for and he called it the beloved community.
477 We knew nothing about that. That brings me back to Harris, because Harris, as a Quaker,
478 as a Kingian, because he believes in Dr. King and King's quest for the beloved community,
479 was entrenched perhaps unconsciously in him. It never came out within the curriculum
480 that was developed because folks there did not share that view, that value.

481 Quirke: Well it was eroding in the movement more generally as well.

482 Russell: Exactly, of course this is called Monday morning quarterbacking. It takes me
483 time; it took me years to realize that. Which is true. In fact, there's an old notion that you
484 stand where you sit. Most of the people that were interacting on the stage at Westbury
485 were standing where they sat. Meaning, that they were explaining and taking position
486 from their own experiences. So if you bring your own experiences and you close your
487 door, the windows, nothing enters. I don't know why this comes to mind, it's like
488 [unclear] is no—nothing can come in when its closed. So all of that in that big part of
489 Westbury could do nothing else but implode and the anger that many folks—as you
490 suggested—around Harris, I think they have to look inside and ask, what role did they
491 play? Were they helping the students? Many of them really, I would, in retrospect, accuse
492 many of the faculty members to have indulged the student in their fantasy of escape and
493 join them with their flight of fancy, rather than challenge them to think. By doing so, they
494 helped to give the external society a sense that Westbury was nothing more than a den of
495 iniquity. But the possibility was there, we just did not take advantage of it.

496 Quirke: I have a very quick question, and then a longer question... This is the quick
497 question and then I have a longer one. When you talked about the Groovin' in the Grass
498 degree which many people have brought up and typically they bring it up somewhat
499 derisively right, they're— it's a silly thing that people thought they could do this. Who was
500 arguing for it?

501 Russell: Pardon me?

502 Quirke: Who was arguing for it, if anyone?

503 Russell: The people that were arguing for that were those who were—this is my
504 recollection now—were many students who did not really see studying... Groovin' in the
505 Grass would be an easy way of getting a credit; you didn't have to read any books, you
506 could do whatever you want to. Those were people who said, "If you say, if the school
507 says that as an independent study, part of my independence is to be able to do what I
508 want. So if I want to groove in the grass and look at the sun, that's' right. If you deny me
509 that then you are not really dealing with my quest for freedom and liberty." I'm putting in
510 those kinds of words the idea, but seriously I still remember people sitting in the grass
511 and doing nothing more. That, to use Corey Booker's term, that nauseated me. In
512 essence, I believe and I'm not giving it as a conclusion, I believe, that many students there
513 had left their homes for the first time. More so white students than black students,
514 because even when the black students leave their homes they're still in the communities,
515 the streets and so forth. So there is, was, at least I see it, a greater anchor into the real
516 world; but when these left from their homes, their middle-class homes, they were free, "I
517 can do anything I want to do, no mother to look at me, no father to look at me." So what

518 then happens is that they go wherever, wherever the river takes them. That was again,
519 part of the difficulty. So when you try to harness it and bring it back in, there's a clash.

520 Quirke: Do you think that was a large segment of the student body or a small segment of
521 the student body?

522 Russell: I can't, I would say, that it was a prevailing, I can't say, a prevailing sentiment.
523 But that is also understood because the times outside of Westbury were the same thing.
524 It was not just within the "prison"—quote unquote—it was outside the walls of the
525 prison.

526 Quirke: I sometimes wonder if the school was started in '67 and not '68 if it would have
527 been different. Were there any faculty who supported these students?

528 Russell: I don't—If I did that, I would be kidding, yes. The answer is yes.

529 Quirke: Many?

530 Russell: Don't try to put that in my mouth. I don't see them so it doesn't matter, yes, there
531 were.

532 Quirke: Okay. So now I want to ask you a totally different question. You were the chair
533 of the Field Studies Department and you referenced that some of the students—who are
534 actually pretty well-known names today—Pablo Guzman, Mickey Melendez, Denise
535 Oliver—worked in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike. What other field placements did
536 students have and how did they bring that knowledge back to campus?

537 Russell: You have to remember, I didn't stay very long at Westbury. When we came
538 back—in fact, I wasn't even there when for the first—I think I was there for a year and a
539 half maybe; I don't remember exactly how it went. So I can't answer that question
540 accurately as I would like to, because from there I got a call from Brooklyn College. I had
541 been to the ['68] Hemispheric Conference in Montreal to End the War in Vietnam.

542 Quirke: What was the name of the conference, I'm sorry?

543 Russell: The Eighth Conference to End—Hemispheric Conference to End the War in
544 Vietnam. In fact, while I'm at Westbury I'm still functioning outside of Westbury within
545 the black community primarily. In fact, I organized the campaign for Albert Vann who
546 was head of the African -American teachers when he ran for the Assembly, and we won.
547 Matter of fact, he's still there, he's retiring this year. When I was at Westbury some of the
548 students at Brooklyn College were also in Canada. At that time, the Black Panther Party
549 was still very active. The Black Panther Party had an office at Nostrand Avenue near St.
550 Johns, so I knew many of them. How do I put this? There are those who just see people
551 who are seen in the newspaper, but they never really know what's behind the people. In
552 Montreal, Salvador Allende [former Chilean President, who died during a right-wing
553 military coup; the U.S. government provided covert support] was there for example, the
554 question was to get Bobby Seale, so we brought Bobby Seale, but—in my judgment—he
555 added nothing to the conference, it was a waste of time. He was talking, with Staggerlee,
556 to me it didn't mean anything.

557 Quirke: He was talking about what?

558 Russell: Staggerlee—there was—Staggarlee is a song and the things like that, I don't
559 know. Staggarlee—I can't... (Carlos Russell sings a few notes.) [Stagger Lee, (also
560 Stagolee, Stagger Lee) is an African- American folk hero bad man. The figure was made
561 into a hit song by Lloyd Price in the late 1950s, and remade by Huey Lewis—but earlier
562 by Cab Calloway, Woodie Guthrie, and Ma Rainey as “Stack O’Lee Blues.” Seale took this
563 name, which is the title of a San Francisco Newsreel filmed interview of him while he was
564 jailed.]

565 Quirke: Sorry, I never heard of the song.

566 Russell: When we came back there were students at Brooklyn College who said—in the
567 SEEK Program, who said “Carlos, why are you going out there for? We need you over
568 here.” Now remember, I had to drive every morning from Brooklyn to Oyster Bay—Yeah,
569 to Oyster Bay—and come back, because I didn't stay over there. Then I felt, “What am I
570 doing over there, in that wilderness when here in Brooklyn I can do something?” I came
571 to Brooklyn and I became Chairman of the Department of Educational Services and
572 Director of SEEK.

573 Later—I told you about the anti-Semitic—well for me to get to Brooklyn College
574 was one hell of a thing. Because the president John Kneller was not Jewish, for some
575 reason, like Harris, our spirits meshed but they were saying, “No, no, no!” Because
576 Brooklyn College in those days, one could say was a bastion of organized Jewry, and I
577 don't mean that disparagingly, but that's what it was. They didn't want me. But the
578 students, the counselors, and everybody did; I mean, everybody meaning the non-white,
579 the minority community. I give John Kneller credit, because at two o'clock in the

580 morning, a.m., we were having a meeting at my house on Willoughby Avenue and John
581 Kneller came and said, "Carlos, you got the job." We remained friends until he died a
582 couple of years ago.

583 Then we had the School of Contemporary Studies again that anti-Semitic thing was
584 still, like an albatross. I've learned to live with it because I know who I am and that
585 doesn't bother me. The truth is I believe that in a Palestinian state, the truth is I believe
586 that they have to make that—they have to resolve that. Because death— you can't come
587 back from death —unless you believe in the next world—but right now when you're
588 dead, you're done. Too many killings, life is sacrosanct.

589 So the answer to your question, I don't know what happened. I hadn't seen Mickey
590 for many, many, many years until he sent me a book that he wrote. I had not seen him. I
591 would not have gone to the reunion if it had not been for Mickey. Denise, Mickey...
592 Quirke: Denise was there? I didn't know who she was at that point.

593 Russell: She wasn't at the reunion. She was not at the reunion. I wish she was, I would
594 have liked to have seen her. There was a guy by the name of Bob Vasquez, but he had
595 problems because he was one of those who was overcoming addiction. He would fall
596 back every now and again. It was an experiment that we did not have or know all of the
597 ingredients.

598 As I said, I took part, when I became the Dean of the School of Contemporary
599 Studies trying to implement the notion of the scholar activist. I used independent study
600 but more focused, not that, I used field studies. We placed students everywhere, in

601 courts, we placed them, that was [in]my control, I had that, placed them in schools,
602 daycares, teaching, whatever, television, radios, we did that. But there were folks who
603 attacked, because at that time I still didn't have the Ph.D. and they said, "How can you
604 be?" In fact when I became the Dean, in order for me to give the sense that I could be an
605 academic dean, I had to hire someone who had a Ph.D., I guess to support me. I didn't
606 really need it but within I did. Then, later I went and I got the Ph.D., and I got it from the
607 Union for Experimenting Colleges, because I'm never going to go back and do that, no, not
608 that way.

609 Here are some of the contradictions. When I look at the society, when I look at
610 Obama, when I look at what is happening, I say, "There are so many things that we still
611 need to do." I remember that, I would say this as part of the School of Contemporary
612 Studies, to rub it in to where we are, as I see it. I remember there was one of the young
613 men, he was more or less my age, or a little younger, who was very active in the anti-
614 Vietnam movement and so forth. That year when I became dean I went to Harvard, they
615 were offering a diploma, a certificate at the Institute of Educational Management. So he
616 came for me to interview him. I did. I knew him from the streets, so, I liked him. I hired
617 him. When, one of the things that happened, I don't know if it still is, but in those days the
618 union had a number of hours that teachers can teach, anything over that is a problem. I
619 said, "Look if it's to teach student who are in difficulty and you say you want to change the
620 society, you have to be willing to extend yourself. You can't lock yourself within the
621 framework of what the union said." I'm not being anti-union; I'm saying I want to help
622 the youngsters. Everyone said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah!" When we hired them, they started to
623 fight, because they wanted to go along with the unions because it meant they did not have

624 to work as much. He was one, and they fought. In fact, there's a special thing I will always
625 remember, he once sent me a note saying, "Carlos, don't let the revolution destroy the
626 person that founded the revolution." He was anti-me because they wanted to become
627 part of that.

628 Where we are today, people are saying we live in a post-racial society. I don't
629 believe that. Obama is president and people expect him to change over night. They are
630 saying, "Why can't he do this, he promised this?" means that they do not—never have
631 understood—again, similar to the folks in Westbury—what the American political reality
632 is all about. I hear some brilliant pundits say, "Well, JFK could speak with this person and
633 that other person when he became president." People forget that Obama is no JFK, he
634 doesn't have the roots, JFK's father knew everybody. Here is the son of a Kenyan and a—
635 the first time. He didn't go to the same social clubs, golf clubs, so he doesn't have those
636 connections. He simply...

637 Quirke: Well, the political environment is totally different as well.

638 Russell: He can't. Kennedy was a political family. And racism is still there, it comes back
639 again. What it means is, I will end with this, I believe, Frederick Douglas said, "Power
640 concedes nothing without demand, it never has and it never will." I believe that; I still do.
641 For anyone to give up power, white males in particular for centuries of control the reins
642 of power in this society, they will not give it up easily to a black man, or to a woman,
643 period. Because that affects their psyche and their sense of self. For them, that would be
644 becoming almost a eunuch. And I would say, that's stupid, because if you talk about
645 justice and equality, and the people in that society, and this is your goal, then you're

646 supposed to be prepared to share, to rearrange, to restructure so again to use what we
647 want a fair society; and here when we talk about if you talk about raising taxes for this to
648 pay this then that become class warfare. It's not; it's an attempt to find a balance in the
649 society.

650 People —when you say that there are more blacks in jail, why? Is it because we
651 are born with some defect that leads us to—? No. That is the result of an economic
652 condition that leads into that. Because in a racist society, the system—the so called legal
653 system, does not defend and support blacks because in their head they see blacks as
654 crooks, poor, lazy, all of those things. Now of course that is not everybody but it is the
655 prevailing thought, when you scratch deep enough and you see it. So people are asking,
656 “Why doesn't he do this?” He can't. I wrote a piece once and I said, “I don't envy Barack
657 Obama.” I tell people, “If Malcolm X was president of the United States he couldn't do it.”
658 The black folks would tell me, “Nonsense.” But he can't do it, because you have to find a
659 way to find an accommodation to make the society what it is that you want it to be. I
660 hope I finished.

661 Quirke: Can I still ask you questions? Are you okay with me asking a few more questions?

662 Russell: Listen, I think you told me at the beginning you said, that people get bored with
663 an hour. So I'm keeping my head to an hour.

664 Quirke: You had talked about driving folks from Old Westbury to the Bronx. I'm
665 wondering if you could talk a little bit more about the Young Lords and anything that you
666 remember about Old Westbury students, or Old Westbury faculty and the Young Lords'
667 activity.

668 Russell: Okay, if you recall I said that Westbury was located or found in a sea of activity,
669 dynamism, and so forth. During those times, the Bronx for example, was really negative.
670 It was a ghetto. The life that the Puerto Ricans lived, in fact, it's funny. When one talked
671 about Hispanics you were talking, in those days, primarily about Puerto Ricans. The
672 Dominicans came later, but in those days they were the Puerto Ricans. They were found
673 in the Lower East Side, and in the Bronx. This is memory now, I can't, it's not a
674 demographic study. But, the students at Westbury and I think that Mickey's parents were
675 from Cuba, not Puerto Rico. Some of the others were from Puerto Rico. At that time we
676 were beginning to talk about Nuyorican. Those were Puerto Ricans born in New York.

677 You also had a strong independence movement. If you remember in those years,
678 the third world was exploding. You had the Bandung Conference [in Bandung, Indonesia,
679 in 1955] around the same time. What was called developing, they weren't called
680 developing countries, the emerging countries were all seeking independence in Africa,
681 Latin America. Puerto Rico was aspiring for the same thing. If you remember, from the
682 fifties, late fifties, I think it was, early sixties, was the Washington, Pedro Albizu Campos'
683 and the others, bombing of D.C. and so forth, [shooting at the U.S. Capitol Building, by four
684 Puerto Rican nationalists, in 1954]. Again, there was excitement.

685 In literature, you had Nuyorican poets, people writing about the experience of the
686 Puerto Rican. Pedro Pietri, you also had Piri Thomas who wrote *Down These Mean*
687 *Streets*. Who I knew, because as large as New York was—I told you earlier that I was a
688 member of the Harlem Writer's Guild, I wrote for the *Liberator* magazine that placed me
689 in contact with many of the writers and actors. Robert Hooks, Lonnie Elder, Douglas

690 Turner Ward, who wrote “A Day of Absence”. “A Day of Absence,” I don’t know if you ever
691 heard of the play. It’s a play in which all the blacks disappear from a Southern town, and
692 the town crumbled because there was no labor.

693 I used that concept to create what I call, Black Solidarity Day. I founded Black
694 Solidarity Day in 1969 in which I asked all black people in New York City not to go to
695 work, to stay at home, don’t shop, do whatever, and to do it the day before elections;
696 because this country has been saying that the Tuesday in November is the day when
697 democracy, well this shows that it is not so, because if it was that way, we wouldn’t have
698 to do this. Well, for five years I did it, I must say, the first five years were very successful.
699 Almost all of the — Charlie Rangel, Farrakhan, you name them, everybody was there.

700 Quirke: Calvin Butts was there, no?

701 Russell: Any of the progressives. Really, at first, the Urban League and the NAACP were
702 against it because they saw it as challenging America. But we said, “Yes, that’s what we’re
703 doing.” After a while it died when I stopped, modestly—

704 Quirke: It’s been resurrected. When I looked online it seems the SUNY Colleges have had
705 them.

706 Russell: A lot of students that keep it, but it’s not the same animal, the same strength.
707 Anyway, what I’m saying is that Mickey and the others always had to go back to the
708 Bronx. They would see garbage, they would see this—and they wanted to—also with the
709 notion of getting independence for Puerto Rico. The fight between independence and
710 commonwealth has always been there. There was a strong Socialist Party here with Juan

711 Mari Brás I think was his name. They were young, the same—I don't want to call it
712 naiveté, the same idealism, is a better word, was prevalent. The notion of being active
713 was there. They were willing to do things. In fact, he tells me it but I don't really believe
714 him, that I was his mentor; I am the one that was the ideological founder of the Young
715 Lords. I think he was just stroking me, but that's what he said. But it is true, and this was
716 true, I tried to help them to understand what independence meant, I tried to help them
717 understand what liberation meant; all within their context. They made some serious
718 mistakes after they went to Puerto Rico carrying their New York viewpoint, but they
719 couldn't work in Puerto Rico. There were a whole lot of contradictions that happened.

720 I believe and I believe this very, very, very seriously. There are times when one
721 has a notion and one has to try to carry on even, even if one is almost sure that you are
722 not going to work. Why? Because it pushes the—it pushes the ball one step further down
723 the goal line. They did that. But unfortunately, or fortunately, I don't know, the society is
724 stronger and has been able to absorb the discontents by offering them accommodation
725 within the house. And since it appears that human beings tend to seek self-gratification,
726 or gratification, they fall for that. They give up the quest for change, because they are
727 given a medal— a medal whether it be money, or position, or whatever within the
728 society. I can't say that's true for the Young Lords because many of them have not
729 acquired much. They're still on the fringe, still striving, still doing in their own right but
730 they were before their time. What has happened is that the society has regained control
731 of the reins of power. They never lost it, they slackened it but now they pulled it back.

732 In fact, if my memory is correct, in Puerto Rico, statehood, the question of
733 statehood and power are more advanced than the question of commonwealth,
734 independence is third. All those ideas and concepts that we talked about—I wrote a piece
735 for *The Black Commentator* a few months ago, called “A Nation of Sheep.” I began by
736 saying in the sixties we used to say, “What time it is?” “It’s nation time!” Which was true.
737 You’d get up and say: “What time it is? It’s Nation time!” I said, “What happened, where
738 is the spirit?” In those days, when they talked about nation time, they talked about at
739 least three things. One was the need for a chocolate colored necklace. Let’s call it Harlem,
740 Central Brooklyn, DC, in the South. That would be an independent nation for black people
741 within the nation. That was one of the concepts. The other concept was to ask for Black
742 men — Elijah Muhhamad, since white people were saying they couldn’t live with black
743 people, as Elijah said, then let us separate. All of that could not really happen. It was
744 idealistic I guess, but it was what people were really saying.

745 Today, it’s totally different. You hear this Congressmen West from Florida [Alan
746 West, XX] for example, said that he happened accidentally to been born black, but he’s
747 white at heart. You hear him and you say, where the hell is he going? But that’s what he
748 is. You see, when these people talk about the post-blackness era, that’s not true either. If
749 it were, the majority of whites over forty would not be all inclined to vote for Romney.
750 The split would be different, but it’s not so, and it’s easily understood. I don’t know if I’m
751 answering your question. Until the Voting Rights Act, blacks and whites lived in different
752 worlds. The Voting Rights Act opened it up; now you had young blacks and young whites
753 inter-mingling in ball fields, schools, making love, doing whatever. The young are not
754 consciously afraid of blacks. Now blacks view whites as an anathema, so they can talk

755 and think about some of the things that their grandparents can't. That's why Obama was
756 able to do that. Also, he does not come across as a bomb-throwing revolutionary. Which
757 he's not.

758 Quirke: You can say he carries his blackness lightly.

759 Russell: Yeah. That's why the split. But the existence of racism is still there. We are not
760 in a post-blackness era. It's the same way when they used to talk about the need for black
761 culture in the schools. Those that controlled the schools said "Wait a minute, let's make it
762 multi-cultural," which then further takes away that. Because if one subscribes or pushes
763 the notions of Black Studies for example, then it creates a dichotomy and it challenges the
764 power base. The truth is the power base has to be challenged; because if you don't
765 challenge the power base then it remains the same.

766 Reverend Sharpton, there's an advertisement of him on MSNBC and he says,
767 "There were a lot of things that were acceptable, and they remained acceptable until we
768 challenged them." Sitting in the back of the bus and all that, which is true. For change to
769 take place you have to stop accepting what you accepted. The point I'm making here, is
770 that not much has really changed. The form has changed but the book essentially remains
771 the same. I'd be an idiot if I were to say, "It is the same." One of the things that one learns
772 is that in order to keep control you have to know when to give a little bit here, and when
773 to give a little bit there. When you do that the person feels satisfied so they don't come
774 after you as much. So it's the manipulation of the scene that permits you to remain in
775 power, and the attempt is to remain in power. Am I answering you?

776 Quirke: You are. I'm going to go backwards in time a little bit and I'm curious you said
777 that Mickey Melendez said that you inspired him, sort of your vision and your politics I'm
778 assuming, both, inspired him. When you were at Old Westbury were there other faculty..

779 Russell: There was only one other black person at that time

780 Quirke: Well I'm curious, both about the racial mix of the faculty, but then also were
781 there any faculty who politically provoked the students.

782 Russell: Well, I could be wrong. There were two others. I think that I was the only active
783 activist. I think I was the only one who at that time could have said that in '68 I went to
784 Cuba and cut cane and met Angela Davis, I think I can be the only one who said that I was
785 there when the Peace and Freedom Party, I worked on the Freedom and Peace. Not many
786 of the other faculty, they were academicians.

787 Quirke: Traditionalists?

788 Russell: I, on the other hand was an activist, I guess, playing the role of an academic. I
789 don't know if that's true, but anyway that's what it was.

790 Quirke: Who were the African-American faculty?

791 Russell: I can see them. One is a sociologist, he's in California now, Ellis, Russell Ellis.
792 [William Russell Ellis, a sociologist of architecture, moved to University of California at
793 Berkeley]. The other one was a heavy-set black guy. I don't remember his name.

794 Quirke: What did he teach?

795 Russell: I don't remember. But who was there later, before I left was another black guy,
796 Count...

797 Quirke: Count Taylor.

798 Russell: Count Taylor, that's the other one. Count Taylor, how would I put it? He was
799 brilliant, but I think he did not engage.

800 Quirke: He was an anthropologist.

801 Russell: He did not, for me, for me, he was brilliant but I never found him as engaging. He
802 was more like a scholar, the patrician, that's a better word.

803 Quirke: Did he come from a middle-class black background?

804 Russell: I don't know where he came from but he looked, I think he was essentially
805 biracial.

806 Quirke: I was wondering if he was a member of the Talented Tenth.

807 Russell: I don't know much about him. I just saw him and our exchanges were not much.
808 They were reluctant to be with me also. Because they thought, "Who was he?" Because
809 they all taught at different universities and had a long list of academic accomplishments.
810 I didn't have that, that was my first foot on a college campus.

811 Quirke: Were there any other activists among the professors?

812 Russell: Among the black ones?

813 Quirke: Among any of them; White, Black, there weren't any Latino...

814 Russell: The only one that I would say I think was would have been Alan Wolfe. I think
815 so, but none of the rest. I don't think so, and the word is "think."

816 Quirke: You described doing—well you described some of the conflict over the curricula,
817 the sort of independent study, Groovin' in the Grass. It clearly was a time of great conflict.
818 Can you describe some of the other conflicts that you remember?

819 Russell: I think most of the conflicts revolved ultimately—I think I know what happened
820 too. There was an attempt, to have a coup against Harris. And the coup would be by
821 those people who felt that he was not where they would have liked him to go. That coup,
822 that attempted coup, is what I think placed the nail in the coffin of the experiment that
823 forced Harris to resign. Not thinking, the revolutionaries, not thinking further than their
824 nose, had no way to come up, say he resigned, "So what?" Also from my mindset, none of
825 them would want to take the heat of that spot, because once you take that now it's
826 different to campaign than it is to govern. Once they take that they would have to take
827 the deal say "no," "yes" to the same students and faculty that supported them. I think in
828 their realm that jealousy, greed come about, and they splintered.

829 That's why I said, had they been smart, they would have found a way, from their
830 perspective, to keep Harris—strategically I'm talking about. But they weren't. This is my
831 view, and this is years later. I can be wrong. I believe that Harris did the right thing
832 because it would have been too difficult for him to try to keep those wild horses together.
833 Some would say that he should not have resigned and fight it out. But you can't fight
834 when you don't have troops behind you. The students are easily malleable at that point.
835 If someone comes about and talks, "Yeah, yeah, yeah" and he's in charge, there's no

836 troops, you'll get killed. You say, "Hey, you know what, let me say goodbye. I leave hurt,
837 angry, and depressed because the vision I had never became a reality. But at least I leave
838 with my head up." I think that's what he did.

839 There were no real major fights except around the quest for power. Curriculum
840 was an expression in a sense of how someone viewed the quest for power. Because I
841 would say this, I think that, now that I mentioned the name, I think that Novak [Michael
842 Novak, philosopher and journalist, former scholar at the conservative think tank, the
843 American Enterprise Institute], for example had a more conservative—wanted a more
844 conservative curriculum and he saw all these other things like a waste of time. That you
845 have—my view—the notion was to try—again, social transformation. If you are
846 transforming the society you are also transforming the individual. The individual
847 becomes an instrument for social transformation. Many years ago I had a teacher that
848 talked about one of the things we have to do was to know how to consciously use
849 yourself. We are instruments for change, and if we are instruments for change then we
850 have to know the instruments. And if we know the instrument you have to know how to
851 apply it to bring about the change. More importantly, you have to have at least an inkling
852 of what the change is you want. If you don't know the change you want, you can't get
853 there. Like the old African adage says, " If you don't know where you're going, any river
854 will take you there."

855 Quirke: Can you tell me a little bit about going to Oyster Bay? We haven't asked many
856 people about the actual space of the college, so can you talk about it? I know when we
857 spoke on the phone you told me a little bit about the geodesic domes

858 Russell: Oyster Bay was a contradiction. It is so beautiful; these beautiful quonset huts
859 were the classrooms. Can you imagine people that live on 125th street and Lexington for
860 example, and being out there in these mansions? It is like—I don't know how to put it—
861 we could go to lunch if we wanted to in the city, in the village of Oyster Bay, fantastic
862 restaurant, but there was no money that we had to spend. So you see that contradiction.

863 The classes were small. You could sit on the floor; you didn't have to sit on a chair.
864 It was informal in many ways. Some of the teachers would teach on the grass under a
865 tree. You would pass and see there's a class being held. You were not confined to a quote
866 "classroom" and such. Of course, there is no blackboard, you would have to use —if
867 you're under a tree you would have to devise a way of promoting, projecting the idea you
868 have in absence of a blackboard. In some rooms folks would take what they want. Most
869 of the stuff was full of reading and discussion. That's another thing about Westbury,
870 Westbury was primarily verbal, engagement, talk, debate, argument all of that. Again,
871 Harris's creative tension which leads one to think about, "Hey, why did I say that? What
872 did he say?" It permitted you to use your faculties of listening for example. "What did he
873 really say? What did he really mean?" And then of course you had to read. It was more
874 liberal arts than anything else.

875 Quirke: Did the students articulate —when you described Oyster Bay and this sort of
876 contrast or dissonance between coming from Spanish Harlem and going to Oyster Bay—
877 did the students articulate that difference to you?

878 Russell: Look, you know, Westbury for example is a place of polo where they used to
879 play. Some of the guys used to ride horses up there. A guy from Harlem riding a horse,

880 the contradictions were there, but they like it. Don't get me wrong. But also, they always
881 wanted to get back to Harlem, or get back to that which nurtured them. They liked the
882 feeling of being out there. That was one of Harris's senses again, take them out of the city,
883 maybe there we can deal with them. I can't remember everything, that's a long, long time.

884 Quirke: I wonder if there's any other significant figures at Old Westbury while you were
885 there that you want to tell us about, or you think we should interview as part of this
886 project? Students, faculty or administrators, whatever.

887 Russell: There is a lady who went with me her name is Marguerite De Abreu She'd have a
888 different, or perhaps not different but a more poignant view in her mind. She worked
889 directly with many of the youngsters. She would remember them more than I did, you
890 know, because I would still be active outside and she would be there. I would give you
891 her number, I'll tell her first, and you can ask and see if she wants to do it.

892 Quirke: Is it D'...

893 Russell: De Abreu. Marguerite.

894 Quirke: She was a faculty member or administration.

895 Russell: She was my second, she worked with me. She worked very closely, I think, with
896 the students, more so than I did.

897 Quirke: Let me ask you one more question about diversity at the college, because
898 certainly when I was first thinking about this as a project. The stories that we heard were
899 the first Old Westbury was white, hippy, middle-class, blah-blah, blah. Then we get to the
900 reunion last year, and I see well it's actually its not all white, and also that many of the

901 white students that I encountered were working-class kids; they were not middle-class
902 kids. I think it's way too easy to paint all white people as middle class. I just wondered
903 can you talk a little bit about that diversity. When you were there and how it played out?

904 Russell: I don't like to say things if I don't remember clearly. What I would suggest is,
905 they were not upper class they were mostly working class, and lower middle to middle
906 class. There maybe one or two, but both were aspiring middle class but that never came
907 out as such, because they're overriding ideological mantle was the war in Vietnam, the
908 civil rights struggle, the hippy generation. Whether you were upper, you would swim in
909 that sea. Ghebre Selassie, for example, he came from an upper black middle class Africa.
910 He had to define who he was. And guess what, he was the only one I know who almost
911 took a trip he didn't return from. It's not that—sometimes they want to see you quantify
912 everything. We can't. The borders were porous. I don't think anybody asked how much
913 money did your mother make and what do they do? There were a few, but my sense, my
914 guess, is that most were from the middle to lower-middle, not upper-middle, not rich. I
915 don't know them. How do I put this. Let's take Paulette, she drove and MG, she was older,
916 black. Was she upper middle class? I don't think so, but there she was with the MG sport
917 car. I can remember, really sharp, drove all along.

918 Quirke: What was Paulette's last name, do you remember?

919 Russell: Paulette, I don't remember. They would know, you can ask Mickey.

920 Quirke: Well we have a list of all the original students, maybe she's on that. Well I really
921 enjoyed this interview, is there anything more you want to tell us about Old Westbury?

922 Russell: I just believe that from Westbury there are a lot of lesson to be learned. Lessons
923 like how best to manage the interaction between people of different viewpoints and
924 ideology. I believe that from it I learned that I have to step back and try not to assume
925 that my perception of the universe is the only one. But at the same time if I believe it
926 strongly I have to fight for it. But I have to be willing to listen to what the other person is
927 saying.

928 I believe that the notion of independent study is extremely important because it
929 gives a student the opportunity to use his or her own imagination to strive for the goal he
930 or she wants. I believe also in what I called placement, because you see everything is not
931 in books. You could read all the books you want, but you never know what you know
932 until you are placed in a position where you have to try to see if what you learned is really
933 applicable. Also, what happens when you are placed is you get the opportunity to get
934 what I used to call OJT, On the Job Training. Those were some of the elements. Also the
935 element of Old Westbury that I liked was that it was an attempt to challenge you to think.
936 To read, not just to emote, but to read. It is for that reason that I am sorry that we were
937 unable to keep it going. That's it.

938 Quirke: Thank you very much.