Nannie Washburn: I was born in Douglas County on May the 3rd of 1900.

Robin D. G. Kelley: How did your mother and father meet?

Washburn: That I don't know. I want what I say to be true.

Kelley: Oral history is always about the dialectic between the past and the present in which they're trying to remember the past.

Washburn: We went to war with the law. They was coming to take my daddy out. Sheriffs and all come out there, and we just beat 'em up. Beat 'em up.

Kelley: How old were you then?

Washburn: Nine or ten years old. But I was helping them fight.

Kelley: Mm-hm.

Washburn: I wasn't scared.

Kelley: No matter what question I posed, the answers I got were stories. And those stories were often very visual. They came with a certain amount of editorializing, which was fantastic.

Kelley: When you had meetings, what would you talk about?

Lemon Johnson: Planning for something for us to do to make conditions for us better.

Kelley: There was nothing like being in Lemon Johnson's shack, sitting on his bed.

Johnson: If you're cold now, I'll light that heater.

Kelley: Oh no, it's okay!

Kelley: Seeing the life and conditions in which they were living.

> **Kelley:** Now I was wondering about the Sharecroppers Union...

Kelley: Or to be in a room with Hosea Hudson at his sister's house.

> **Hosea Hudson:** I ain't lying, I'm telling you the facts! The whole world sits on the power of the working class.

Kelley: Seeing how they remember, you know, physically.

> **Kelley:** So when did you join the Sharecroppers Union?
>
> **Charles Smith:** Oh, 1935.

Kelley: And then also the fact they kind of had props sometimes, you know? Things to show me. Show and tell.

> **Washburn**: Before I go any further, I want to show you. Here's my sister. She is a Communist too.

Kelley: I mean, listening to this interview again, I love it when she says, "I want what I say to be true." Like "God's my witness" or "You're my witness." I'm not going to lie to you.

My name is Robin D. G. Kelly, I am a professor of history at UCLA. I write about social movements, politics, race, especially radicalism in culture. Hammer and Hoe was my doctoral dissertation and became my first book about the Communist Party in Alabama during the 1930s and '40s. Hammer and Hoe entailed oral histories with people who were there—members of the Party, like Hosea Hudson, and members of the Sharecroppers Union who were very close to or in the Communist Party—who generously shared their stories and their homes with me.

So let me just back up here. I went to graduate school to study African history. I wasn't so interested in the US. Except by the time I started graduate school, I was a member of the Communist Workers' Party. It was like '82, '83, I think '83.

> **Walter Rodney**: The international capitalist system has never been more socialized than it is today—

The other part of it was, I had read Walter Rodney's How Europe Underdeveloped Africa and I wanted to study political economy.

> **Rodney**: Never has so much wealth been concentrated in so few hands.

Kelley: Going beyond even the question of his theories of underdevelopment to his political organizing work.

> **Rodney**: The nationalist struggle in Southern Africa has already begun to transform itself into a class struggle.

Kelley: All that made me interested in the Communist Party of South Africa. And so I had gotten a grant to do research in South Africa. I was set.

> **Anti-apartheid marchers, 1985 archive**: Apartheid no! Freedom yes! Apartheid no!

Kelley: But, because I was actually involved in the anti-apartheid movement, I was not permitted into the country.

Before I actually applied for the visa, I did come up with the idea of doing a comparative study, of South Africa and the American South. And that is the left, specifically the Communist Party, in both places.

And Cedric Robinson, who was a professor at Santa Barbara, UC Santa Barbara, and, you know, really became the most important mentor to me, says, "The problem with the Communist Party USA leadership is that they did not understand that the center of American radicalism was the U.S. South." Nobody was saying that! They were like, "The South is backwards. The South is backwards." You know? "How can we—" To this day, to this very day! There's people who still say that.

So once I was denied a visa to go to South Africa, I remade myself as an Americanist. I drill down on Alabama.

> **Kelley:** I'm testing, one, two, three. Okay. Does voice actuation high make a difference? Can you hear my voice, can you hear what I have to say?

Kelley: I was a neophyte. I mean, I'd done oral histories before, but I didn't know what I was doing.

> **Kelley:** You know my questions are sort of haphazard, because I'm trying to fill in gaps, but if there's anything that you can think of—
>
> **Marge Frantz**: Fine. I'll follow your questions—

Kelley: Because I was not on the radar of the US history people, I could not get a grant, a research grant, if my life depended on it. So, I did my research on a credit card with a max of six hundred dollars.

And I basically traveled everywhere by bus, which I don't suggest to anyone, to do that. There's no glory in it. The gear, I had a pretty cheap tape recorder and cassette tapes. And then what made matters worse is I was so broke, I was taping over used tapes. I didn't have money to buy anything really sophisticated, which is probably why the Lemon Johnson recording is so bad.

> **Kelley:** In Tallapoosa County?
>
> **Johnson:** Yeah, Tallapoosa.

Kelley: And this was my first trip ever to the Deep South, you know? And, no matter what the landscape might look like from the window of a bus or from a hill in Montgomery, when you could look around and see cotton fields everywhere, this was not 1935, this was 1986. And whatever expectations I had had all shifted.

> **Kelley:** What was it like growing up on the farm?
>
> **Washburn:** The life?
>
> **Kelley:** Yeah, what was it like for you?
>
> **Washburn:** Well, I didn't have it too hard, because I was just too young. But my mother and the rest of them did.

Kelley: Well, with Nannie Washburn, we actually, I went to her house, we sat on the porch first. And it was a cool day, but this was Atlanta. And so we could sit outside. And then we went inside because she wanted to show me some pictures.

> **Kelley:** And this is your sister, Annie Mae?
>
> **Washburn**: Yeah, see? We both got arrested and was charged with insurrection, trying to overthrow the government. Just because we was in the picket line. I wanted to show you that.

Kelley: She was a fairly well-known elder activist in the kind of Maoist left. And she had a relationship to the Communist Party earlier on, and was still kicking.

> **Kelley:** Who was your mother and father, what were their names?
>
> **Washburn**: My father was Stonewall Jackson Leathers.
>
> **Kelley:** Stonewall Jackson Leathers?
>
> **Washburn**: Yeah, all that. And my mother was Francis Elizabeth Manning.

Kelley: By the time I met Nannie, I had heard stories and read stories about kind of left-leaning or progressive Southern white workers protecting or hiding Black workers in times of crisis. It's rare, but it happened. And so she just reinforced it. And she was the perfect person to interview for a novice, because she was a fantastic storyteller.

> **Washburn:** And my mother in the wintertime would have to gather watercresses on Chattahoochee River and wild onions, and fry the wild onions. We'd just about starve. But they tasted good!
>
> **Kelley:** Just about every winter, it was like that?
>
> **Washburn:** Yeah, it was tough times.
>
> **Kelley:** Sharecroppers, they don't furnish nothing but the, you know, food or nothing. Well, they didn't to my daddy.

Kelley: Basically a sharecropper doesn't own land. The sharecropper's family rents the land in the form of a debt. So, they start out owing the landowner for seeds, for tools that they might use. Furnishings basically means that the planter will give you enough food to survive the winter. And so one of the reasons why they began to organize was that landlords were either refusing to give furnishings over the winter months or giving less. It was, you know—sharecropping was a deep form of poverty.

Kelley: What kind of crops did he grow?

Washburn: Cotton and corn, is what he grew.

Kelley: How long did your family stay on the farm, and then what did they do after they left?

Washburn: Went to the cotton mill, Elizabeth Cotton Mill. I worked there about six months. And I'll bring in something here that I'd like for you to know about. That riot that come in East Point, hatefulling around.

Kelley: Was this the 1906 [Atlanta Race] Riot?

Washburn: It was part of it.

Kelley: Mm-hm.

Kelley: One of the things you learn about her life is that her mother, her parents, really, had close relationships with Black working people, which wasn't unusual, but a certain kind of sympathy, a political sympathy, which was unusual.

Washburn: That was Clark's Cove. That was the name of the Afro-American section where they had to live. See, they didn't let Afro-Americans to live close together. They had them separated. And they was hanging them over there, burning the house down and all those things. They was killing, shooting them. That was awful. That was when I was a little girl. Crooked bunch of whites.

And there's one woman that made her getaway, she was a Afro-American. And she made her getaway. But they had to come through the woods, along

about a quarter of a mile of woods to the Cotton Mill Village. It was the company's houses. And we had to—my mother got notice that we all had to go in the Cotton Mill that night. And my mother, she hid that woman in the closet.

Kelley: Your mother did?

Washburn: Mm-hm. If they'd have known that, they'd have lynched all of us. But my mother was a real radical in her heart.

Kelley: Why do you think your mother was a radical?

Washburn: Well, he knowed right from wrong. And she was a lover of humanity. I sure appreciated her.

Kelley: It's so interesting to hear her tell that story. You can see intergenerationally what it means to have a consciousness of being in a class, but also recognition that Black workers face a certain racial terror that white workers don't have to deal with, you know? Beating, shooting, hanging, burning, disfranchisement, the loss of the vote, segregation, an economic system of exploitation. All that. So they made a choice. They made a choice to stand up.

Kelley: Do you think that's why you and your sister Annie Mae were radical?

Washburn: I think that being around that. You know people. Like I am. You know, I love people.

Kelley: Did you know about the workers movement?

Washburn: My brother Archie, he was a radical. They'd have a meeting in the Salvation Army across the street, to have one to break it up, you know? [Singing] “And work and pray, live on hay, for when you die, you'll get pie in the sky!” I want my pie down here! [Laughs]

Kelley: [Laughs] Is that how the workers respond? They say they want their pie down here?

Washburn: Yeah.

Kelley: [Laughs] That song is an IWW classic, you know, Joe Hill, one of Joe Hill's songs. Quite a treat, to hear Nannie sing that song.

RW: Was he a member of the IWW?

Washburn: Yes, he certainly was.

Let me, before I finish that, let me just back up on one thing about oral history. I should have mentioned the fact that I was trained in oral history by none other than Sherna Gluck. Sherna Gluck is kind of a legend back in the ’70s and ’80s. She did all these oral histories in terms of the feminist movement.

Sherna Gluck: I think we stand in so many complicated ways in relationship to the people we interview. And what we have to do is be self-conscious of the complexity of that.

Kelley: And so I took a class with her, and there were like two people in the class, myself and one other person. She taught me method. She had us read stuff. That didn't make me an expert, but it did introduce me to the idea that oral history is not just an interview. You know, there's a methodology.

Gluck: In the interviews I've done in Palestine, I'm simultaneously—obviously, I'm an outsider, on several counts I'm an outsider, but in terms of the political work I've been doing, I'm an insider.

Kelley: You know, it wasn't just strategies and tactics, but like, what do you listen for? How do you develop a questionnaire?

Gluck: The questions that the outside community is interested in may or may not get addressed.

Kelley: Family histories, for example, sometimes it's after the fact that we think, “Well, wait a second, where does this person come from?”

Kelley: When did you join the Sharecroppers’ Union?

Lemon Johnson: That was 1930.

Kelley: 1930. Was it here in Lowndes County?

Johnson: Right here.

Kelley: Okay, so Lemon Johnson grew up in Alabama, in Hope Hull, Alabama, in Lowndes County. He was, as a young man, a member of the Sharecroppers Union. He participated in the cotton choppers' and cotton picker strike of 1935. He didn't have a phone. So all of our correspondence was by mail. I'd send him a letter, and then he'd tell me where he lived, and I said, I'll be there on such and such a day. And I showed up at his house and it was really, he was ready for me, he was prepared.

Kelley: Who was leading it then? Who was the head?

Johnson: Me, Ed Bereson, Joe Jackson...

Kelley: It was an old sharecropper's shack, maybe two rooms. Had a few acres of land. I remember the roof being caved in. I remember that vividly. And he had to put newspaper or something up to close it up because this is wintertime. And he was very comfortable. He's been there all his life. He was living by himself. He had, I think, some relatives, maybe a nephew or grandson who'd come by every once in a while. But it was like stepping back in time in many ways. He was incredibly gracious. Both times I visited him, he'd always have food for me, a whole spread, and would take his time. And so he never left Hope Hull, nor did he ever leave, at least emotionally, his connection to the movement in the 1930s. It was something he took great pride in, his participation.

Johnson: I know a whole lot by experience.

Kelley: I mean, he was a hero of the story. He was exactly the archetype of the Southern Black Communist of the Black radical tradition, in that he didn't need to be trained as a communist. He understood from the Bible, and also from whatever reading he did, what it meant to build a movement.

Kelley: When you had the meetings, what would you talk about?

Johnson: Planning for something for us to do to make conditions for us better.

Kelley: He also understood power. I mean, Lemon Johnson constantly kept saying things like, “If you don't shoot, they're going to shoot you.”

Johnson: That’s the only thing that will stop them from killing you. You’ve got to shoot.

Kelley: And so his memory was of the violence, of the confrontation with the landlords.

Johnson: You see, they had to shoot to live.

Kelley: He was very clear about the objective of the Sharecroppers Union, and that is to fight for better conditions and that you had to be organized and militant.

Johnson: The cotton strike started in August 1935.

Kelley: What Lemon Johnson is talking about is this strike plan for August 1935 to begin in Lowndes County on J. R. Bell's plantation. He had something like over a thousand farm workers who were being paid forty cents per hundred pounds for picking cotton. And so the Sharecroppers Union pushed to make that a dollar at least. And so they called a strike. And they refused to pick cotton.

Johnson: When the workers refused to pick for forty cents for a hundred—

Kelley: Sheriff Woodruff from Haynesville came and confronted Willie Witcher. Witcher was one of the sharecroppers on J.R. Bell's plantation. Incredibly courageous organizer for the Sharecroppers Union. And, Woodruff is trying to convince Witcher to call off the strike —

Johnson: Said he didn’t want to hear forty cent talk—

Kelley: He’s like, “Nope, I’m not going to do it.” And he walks away. And the story that Lemon Johnson tells is that the Sheriff turns around and shoots him in the back of the thigh.

> **Johnson**: Hit him in the leg. The Sheriff threatened to kill him. Witcher replied, “You might kill me.” That's the good part. “But you’ll never scare me.” That's the best part of all.
>
> **Kelley:** [Laughs]

Kelley: That's classic. “You may kill me, but you'll never scare me.” And I'm so glad listening to this, almost bringing tears to my eyes because I remember that. And that's what scared the hell out of the planter class. They didn't know what to do. All they had were their guns and that didn't seem to work.

I'm not sure how much, if this ever got on the tape or not, but I remembered so vividly, where I asked him, you know, “So how did you win the strike? How did you win?” And this is where props come in. He opens up a drawer that's sitting next to his bed, and he pulls out a copy of Lenin’s What Is To Be Done?, and he puts it on the bed. And next to that, he pulls out a box of shotgun shells, and he puts it next to that. And he says, “Right there. Theory and practice. Theory and practice.” You know? [Laughs]

> **Kelley:** Before we talk about the Sharecroppers Union, were you born in Alabama?
>
> **Charles Smith**: Yes, I was.
>
> **Kelley:** So when did you join the Sharecroppers Union?
>
> **Smith:** Oh, 1935.
>
> **Kelley:** 1935? That was during the strike?
>
> **Smith:** Yes, right.

Kelley: Charles Smith was a very unusual figure in that he was among the youngest of the strikers. I believe he might have been eighteen years old at the time. He also went on to be active in the civil rights movement. His home became kind of headquarters for Stokely Carmichael, for Willie Ricks, and others in SNCC.

> **Kelley:** Why did you decide to join the union?

Smith: Well the economic conditions of the general area. And I thought that the more members, the people being molested by the big landlords, could better, you know, strengthen their organization.

Kelley: Uh-huh. So, when you joined, was the union very popular?

Smith: No, it wasn't.

Kelley: He was also in Montgomery County, which is one of the few places where the strikers did win a dollar per hundred pounds wage rate. And I think they were also able to have the right to gin their own cotton.

Kelley: What would the typical meeting cover?

Smith: Well, it would cover such things as minimum wages and how to approach the landlords to raise the level of wages.

Kelley: Charles Smith was spry and active. And it seemed like, you know, if a cotton picker strike broke out that day, he was ready!

Kelley: If you were to summarize the significance of the Sharecroppers Union in Alabama, what would you say its significance was?

Smith: It brought out a restlessness that had been sort of sleeping in several communities. And there was a need for some form of togetherness to deal with oppression. And it looked like this Sharecroppers Union had the wherewithal to deal with it.

Kelley: So it sort of, like—can you say that it laid the foundations for what became the Civil Rights Movement?

Smith: Right, right. It has to some degree some direct connection.

Kelley: What I heard from people like Charles Smith and Lemon Johnson was not just the level of violence that they faced, but the level of militancy that they confronted that violence with. They didn't seem to be afraid of, not just white

people and planters, but the county sheriffs and the deputies. And they continued to do this work.

> **Kelley:** Okay, you were telling me that you had a lot of people in Montgomery—

Kelley: Hosea Hudson was probably the most famous Alabama communist. He was a leader in the party. He had joined the party in 1931. He wrote his own book, I think in 1972, called *Black Worker in the Deep South*. I'd already made him larger than life because I'd read every single word he'd ever said in print.

> **Hosea Hudson:** That was more or less the bases. Montgomery, Mobile, Selma, Birmingham—

Kelley: He wrote letters, I corresponded with him, so, I felt like I knew him.

> **Hudson**: I got in the party because of what I heard, because of what I found out they stood for, for the betterment of the Negro people.

Kelley: But when I met him, he was living with his sister in Gainesville, Florida, in one room in her house that was quite—I mean, the room itself was in bad shape. There was roaches, he had his food there. And I think he was not entirely defeated, but there was something about him not being involved in a movement and being kind of trapped in this house.

> **Hudson**: I joined the Party in September in 1931.

Kelley: He was wearing some khaki pants that were a little bit too big for him, falling off, kind of. And a work shirt. He reminded me of my grandfather who was a Baptist preacher in Boston but was from South Carolina. So all these turn of phrases that he would use, like, “how be it soever,” you know, my grandfather used to say stuff like that.

> **Kelley:** What was the main reason behind Black people joining the Party? Why do you think most people made that decision? ‘Cause it’s a big decision.

> **Hudson**: What big decision?

Kelley: To join the Party.

Kelley: Hudson was trying to teach me a lesson and I was asking the question because I wanted to be taught this lesson. And the lesson is, why do people join? Why were they willing to risk their lives to build a movement?

Hudson: The Negro people in the Deep South—in Georgia, South Carolina, Mississippi and all of these, the Deep South—the Negro peoples' backs was up against the wall.

Kelley: And when he says, you know, the Negro people's backs were up against the wall, that goes without saying. And yet there was something even bigger.

Hudson: The preachers and leaders was calling the Negro "the low class." The low class of people. Who were the one that police was—

Kelley: Killing.

Hudson: —beating heads and killing, and nobody was saying nothing about! Outcasts! The party comes along, these people were somebody! You understand?

Kelley: The party intervened. As he puts it, took people and made leaders out of them.

Hudson: They took these people and made leaders out of them. That's why I fell in there. You understand?

Kelley: Building a movement through education, through organizing, through training, preparation.

Kelley: You said yesterday you wanted to make some closing remarks?

HH: In this new period, we have to develop ourselves a new outlook. We have to have an outlook today to organize. And how are we going to do it? Everybody says, "Organize." We have to organize them in committees, in communities, in the blocks where they live. Don't wait to try to get a house

full of people. Start off with two or three. And put everybody to work around—not just do it, what you're going to do?—around a program. This is what we got to tell the people! The people don't know! Is that right?

Kelley: Mhm. That's right.

Hudson: Do I make sense what I'm saying?

Kelley: Yeah. [Laughs]

Kelley: You know, that's my mantra, you know that, right? I mean, I remember that moment. And, you know, it is so relevant right now. "We have to organize in the blocks where they live. Don't wait to try to get a house full of people."

Ever since that moment, I've always taught that mass movements often begin someplace. They begin with two or three people. They begin with small groups. And that's exactly the strategy he's laying out. And he says, "Put everybody to work around a program." It's so basic. It's organizing 101. But we've kind of lost that, you know, and it's just so heartening to hear almost like the spirit of Hosea Hudson returning with the key lesson. And that is, you know, we don't need to wait. We do need to move and we do need to agree on a program. And that's where theory and practice come in, you know, you've got to have the theory part if you're going to practice.

Hudson: I hope I said a few words.

Kelley: Yeah, well thanks a lot Mr. Hudson, I really appreciate it. I—

It reminds me of why oral history is its own genre. It is a kind of mode of communication that allows us to learn information intergenerationally, to capture how ideas and histories and memories and meanings are conveyed within a social movement. And you can't do this simply by going to an archive. You've got to talk to the people.

[Harry McClintock, "The Preacher and the Slave"]