The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program

PROFESSOR DAVID B. COPLAN

Interviewed by: Daniel F. Whitman
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INTERVIEW

Q: This is Dan Whitman on the campus of the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, interviewing David Coplan on February 17, 2010. And we are going to talk with Professor Coplan who is in the Anthropology Department currently at Wits and we are going to focus at some point about the opportunity given to him by the Fulbright grant that he received at one point. But David first I'd like to ask just some general questions about your own personal background; you came from where, you had what sort of childhood and early education, and let's get up to the point we're going to focus on later.

COPLAN: Briefly, I'm from upstate New York originally and also was brought up in Western Massachusetts and Boston area and so on. So I'm a Northeast closed kind of a person and went to Williams College, which is in western Massachusetts, but then got interested in what we would today call the world music movement as a teenager. We had a kind of a folk revival at the time in the country in the 1960s, and there were shows on TV. You know, big thing, and that was the kind of thing I was interested in and as a result I spent a lot of spare time involved with that. After Williams College I went to visit friends in Ghana in West Africa because I'd been playing percussion in a band to make money over the weekends in college and I was a drummer. So I was interested in the Afro percussion thing, the Latin, the African thing more than—and it was a very friendly country and I met all sorts of people, so I decided to stick around. I was just taking a break from education but I registered for a master's in African studies and performance at the University of Ghana, Legon in the very, very pleasant two years I spent in Ghana. So I wasn't Peace Corps but I was that sort of a person.

Q: What years were those?

COPLAN: Those were 1970–1972. And then I thought I'm going to do this because I spent this time here and in those days you couldn't really do African music in the Music Department, and so I went for anthropology, which I had some credits in already. And I got a fellowship to go to Indiana, which was very famous for their musical program but also for anthropology, so they had strengths in those things. African studies was one of the biggest centers of Chapter V or Chapter VI; anyway it was an African studies center

funded by the government, so it was a good place for me to work and I completed my PhD there. But in the middle of my entrance in West Africa, South Africa was coming into the news and everything and I had a summer job researching a film for an independent producer in 1976, June 1976. I arrived here on the sixteenth of June 1976; this is the day of the Soweto uprising.

Q: Oh yes, of course.

COPLAN: So I arrived here. I did my research but it was a very wild time here and it was amazing to be in Johannesburg during the Soweto uprising by accident, you know, the accidental revolutionary that was me.

Q: And in fact you were in Johannesburg?

COPLAN: Yes, I was in Johannesburg.

Q: Right next door.

COPLAN: Yes, I was in Soweto itself on many, many occasions, yes, and saw the smoke and flame, ran from the cops, and got detained in the prison over here and all that kind of stuff and so I was doing my thing. The State Department—

Q: Just a second. You were here because you were hired by a private film company?

COPLAN: No, that was the year before. When I came back, I came back to do a doctorate thesis on black show business in South Africa; so in 1975 I came—

Q: Black show business in South Africa?

COPLAN: Yeah and that was my own project the year I had come with the film job.

Q: Okay.

COPLAN: So I arrive and the Soweto uprising is on and I'm thinking, Well I got to go home. And my friends here said, What, go home? This is the biggest scoop in African studies since, you know, Nkrumah. I mean, you're not going to go home now, you'll be the only here from all those people and we can't go home, we got to go home to Soweto and get shot at so—

Q: And that's right—

COPLAN: What's wrong with you, you know; can't take it, and all. So I said, you know, this is a scoop so I stuck around for the whole year and went through all kinds of things and got thrown out. State Department wasn't happy—

Q: Got thrown out?

COPLAN: Yeah of the country, persona non grata.

Q: Wait, wait, you got here in June—

COPLAN: Mm in April—

Q: —the uprising was—

COPLAN: —in June.

Q: —underway—

COPLAN: Yes, underway.

Q: And so you were asked or told by the South African government to leave.

COPLAN: Yes.

Q: When was that?

COPLAN: The end of April of the next year.

Q: Ah I see, so you were here ten months.

COPLAN: Yeah.

Q: I see.

COPLAN: And I was running around but I got caught eventually and, you know, it's easy to throw foreigners out; it's harder to throw your own citizens out. But any white that was crossing the racial boundaries and basically looking or living in Soweto was—so they threw me out. But I had all my stuff that I'd collected, I didn't lose my material—

Q: Your data, your—

COPLAN: Yeah, my data right. So I went home and I wrote the first edition of this book as a doctoral thesis and then as a book, which was this edition, the original one.

Q: Okay. In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre, David Coplan, Raven Press, Johannesburg, 1985.

COPLAN: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

COPLAN: And I wrote that and there wasn't anything on the topic really so it got around. The middle of the 1980s, the struggle period, South Africa had a lot of interest but by that time I had my doctorate, I was teaching in New York at CUNY [City University of New York], and I was even teaching a South African course, which might not go today because who cares but at that time the students were interested.

Q: CUNY, which—?

COPLAN: Old Westbury it was called. But the book got around, even in London people saw it, and I got comments and reviews and it was reviewed in the *Village Voice* and many papers in New York because of South Africa's visibility at the time. So it kind of got around as a kind of off center treatment of South Africa because most of what was about South Africa was political economy, violence, politics, ANC [African National Congress]; this was a kind of a look at people's life. So I got known here in South Africa, it was published here as well as abroad so I was known here. So long story short after some time went by and I was not allowed here during all those years, I was not allowed in South Africa, I went to Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland on a Fulbright which the government very kindly let me keep even though I was not allowed here and I did work on South African exiles and many other aspects in the neighboring little countries.

Q: You must have been based somewhere?

COPLAN: I was three months in three different countries and three months in London.

Q: When?

COPLAN: That was 1978.

Q: Nineteen seventy-eight. So in fact you were roving in the area.

COPLAN: Yeah, in 1978.

Q: Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and—

COPLAN: With the Fulbright at the time.

Q: Right, right.

COPLAN: But that was a different kind of Fulbright from the one I got later.

Q: This would have been a study grant perhaps?

COPLAN: Yeah, and I was going to do research and I wasn't teaching and it was

Fulbright and the government very kindly, when I couldn't get into South Africa, they accepted the idea that valuable work could be done in BLS [Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland] countries, which was good of them. I snuck in a few times—

Q: The U.S. government, USIA [United States Information Agency]—

COPLAN: Yeah, the Fulbright people. I convinced them to let me do it in the surrounding areas. They were so keen to have an American anywhere, a relatively courageous American anywhere in the thing, so they allowed this.

Q: Was Fay Lewis involved in any of this?

COPLAN: Yeah, I think she was; I'm not sure. Anyway, they allowed this. I convinced them there was something to do and I worked with exiles in all those four countries.

Q: These were South African—

COPLAN: South African exiles, stuck to them like glue and everything. But also learned quite a bit about what was going on in those countries themselves and lectured at all those colleges in each of the countries plus Oxford and SOAS [School of Oriental and African Studies] in London and became one of the people in the radical revisionist social history movement that was very powerful here and in London at the time. So I attended oh, conferences and I was part of that group of new, you know, social scientists and historians rewriting South Africa's story and so on and that was due to the Fulbright. And I went to some of the famous meetings and things; I knew ANC people and all sorts of people.

Q: Some of whom were based in London, weren't they?

COPLAN: Yes, many were based in London and some in Lesotho and Botswana.

Q: Right and Lusaka—

COPLAN: Yeah, I didn't go to Lusaka, but in those days in Gaborone and in Masaru before the attacks, the armed attacks by the South African Defense force—course—was there but I didn't really know him. Those people were around and there were safe houses and—so I did all that. Then I finished all this, went to New York, wasn't allowed here. Finally in 1991 it was thought that the Fulbright program could be restored in South Africa after twenty-nine years or whatever it was. There was discussion about—I even went to the ANC in New York about what they thought about and because I was a person there.

Q: Now there was a cultural boycott and an academic boycott.

COPLAN: Yes, there was.

Q: So while there were arguments both ways perhaps?

COPLAN: Yes, we all, everybody knew it was going to come to an end but 1991 was the year of kind of an uncertainty although it was a wonderful time.

Q: But it was the year after Mandela was released.

COPLAN: Yes, Mandela had been released, the unbanning of the organizations and the CODESA [Convention for a Democratic South Africa], the first negotiation things had happened. So wonder of wonders but people had gotten used to the shock by 1991 and the process had begun and Fulbright thought maybe they should be part of that and not wait until it was all signed, sealed, and delivered. I went to the agency and they said, No it's fine now, Joe Slovo is going back; they said, Joe Slovo's going back, I suppose you won't do any more harm. So then it was the problem of the government, the South African government, which was still the National Party, and they had a police file on me and everything but again, the American government and the guys in the Fulbright program were now going to restore the program and people applied. And even though I was a musicologist, which ordinarily wouldn't seem a priority, it was kosher enough and because of my name in the overall networks of South African awareness diplomacy and so on, including UCT, the University of Cape Town, they knew my work well and they wanted to have me come for a year. So they grabbed this Fulbright and said, We'd like Prof Coplan to come on this Fulbright. And I don't know whether they were asked if music was really the thing or not. They just said, No, this is the guy we want from the Anthro Department because I had been a guest lecturer there and we had all gotten on very well. So I applied and certain people in Washington persuaded them that although it looks like music but you know, this is somebody who's been requested, he could do something for you, he's intimate in the townships and so on.

So indeed it all happened, there were six of us and we arrived in 1991 and Brooks was here and we had our orientations and so on with Fulbright. And I remember another guy was Tim Simone, called himself Monique Abdul Simone. He's now in London. He was one of them and there were several others around. And I was very proud to be among the very first group to come back. ANC had no problem with it, they considered academic context now to be a benefit to them. Very shortly thereafter in 1992 of course the sports boycott went. There were those even then, Dennis Brutus who said, "No, it's too early" and so on but the ANC was willing to give up that real estate.

Q: So with hindsight this looks clearly like a positive thing to do but you had to do some soul searching at the time.

COPLAN: Yeah, because I didn't know what the situation was in terms of—there was the academic freedom in this university and UCT was considered unrestored at that time. We had a ceremony here some few years later, when they had a ceremony marking what they considered to be the restoration of academic freedom; this did not happen in 1991. So anyway, my mission and ideal was to teach young South Africans at the very moment of

the new society, the very ground floor, you know, because I thought education was the battlefield for the future of the country and, you know, which way would it go? And I thought university teachers would have quite a bit to say about this and I felt getting in there as soon as possible was the very best thing we could do. Because before you know it two or three would go by and these people would be managing cities.

Q: Without the background that they might have, that they could—

COPLAN: Well whatever you can do and say; my students have gone on to do and be everything you could think of, you know.

Q: So this was your second grant—

COPLAN: Yes, this one was a teaching one.

Q: Teaching, yes.

COPLAN: I also did a research one but it was heavenly teaching. I taught at UWC [University of the Western Cape] and UCT.

Q: UWC for the reader, the one previously designated a colored—

COPLAN: Right.

Q: And yet in the early 1990s everything was changing.

COPLAN: Everything was changing, yes. The number of Black students at UCT was 20 percent then. I worked until the end of 1996, not under Fulbright but it was 62 percent by the end of 1996, so there was a very rapid change literally in the complexion of the student body and of course the whole thing. Anyway, I taught there for a year; I had a wonderful time. My colleagues and I got along extremely well because I pitched in. I didn't say oh I'm busy out in the township. I got a lecture to do, I did all my campus responsibilities first and then my own stuff. So I went to every meeting, I volunteered for every dirty job. So we all got on extremely well and I went home.

But I remember the year as one of the most remarkable, outstanding—I have many memories of that time. And it was as if every time you came into the office you had something else to congratulate your colleagues about because 1991 was when the pillars of the system really fell. They didn't have an election until 1994 but by the end of 1991 every single legal pillar or post of apartheid was gone, including the five major ones and all the little ones. So you'd walk into the office and, you know, the mixed marriages act would be gone, then the separate amenities act would be gone, then group areas was gone, population registration act was gone. One by one the White parliament as it was, went through the process of repealing each and every of the major ones.

Q: During the year you were here?

COPLAN: During 1991, not 1994 but 1991. So strictly speaking—

Q: It was remarkable having been a witness to that.

COPLAN: I mean it was every day you'd hear these unbelievable things on the television and on the radio and talking to people. And see I believe apartheid ended in 1991 because having an election that's democracy, you got democracy in 1994. But apartheid is not the same thing as democracy; apartheid is the legal structure with specific laws which were repealed in 1991 so you can call it undemocratic, you can call it discriminatory, you can call it anything you want but you can't call it apartheid.

Q: Yeah. Why did the White parliament do that at that time? Did they see it was coming, it was inevitable? What do you feel was their motivation? Were they being dragged into this or were they very happily going into it?

COPLAN: Oh their top people in 1989 when their state president Botha was not in favor of crossing the Rubicon—

Q: Right, right.

COPLAN: He was not in favor. But I used to call them the—yuppies—

Q: The—yuppies— (smile)

COPLAN: The de Klerk generation.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: They had come to represent successful constituencies economically and they had, you know, many of them had education and travel overseas, they were not high bound, and they had come to see that what they had worked for in their period of power to maintain it they would actually have to give it over. They had actually come to see in some way that they couldn't—

Q: So this was partly, they submitted to what they knew was coming?

COPLAN: Yes, because they saw there must be a way to maintain the way of life that the middle class, Afrikaans middle class had finally achieved after so much struggle. So can you do that by forcing apartheid against the world? No. Citibank isn't going to loan you any money, nobody would sell you any weapons although the boycott you know under the cover, it was becoming economically and militarily more and more. So they went to see Mandela in 1989, among other people, and they said, Can we trust you? There are two things we want: first of all we want to be citizens of South Africa like everybody

else, number two you will not hang our people, our, you know, our elite.

Q: Yeah, the Bruder bond and—

COPLAN: Yes, no Nuremberg trials and, you know, if you are going to hang our people we will make life as—we'll go back to the—so—

Q: The president at that time, did they go to Robben Island—?

COPLAN: It wasn't Robben Island, it was Victor Verster [prison] in the mainland of the Cape up near Franschhoek, a pleasant country club type place for minor offenders.

Q: Just for the purpose of these negotiations?

COPLAN: No, no he was taken off Robben Island about five years before that and then he was put in Pollsmoor, which is no fun but it's on the mainland for easy access because we were already talking to him and then he had like an apartment with flowers and in a vase—

Q: What was the name of that town again?

COPLAN: Near Paarl, it's called—it's called something else now. And he had a kind of a bungalow. He was still a prisoner but you know they were beginning to treat him like *the man* and they all trooped up there, except—and Madiba said, "No we can do this because to destroy the country is no good for anyone and to burn the whole thing and to have to tear it all down so that we can have unqualified surrender is not in our interest, we want to take over what you have built. So I am not sure what the deal will be but that is what we want. We want to rule the country that you have built. Santin, you know, why burn Santin? It's a perfectly useful place." So that's what he said to them and they believed him and so the negotiations were actually beginning. In 1991, no it wasn't 1991, it was before that there was a referendum for whites saying do you want this process to continue, maybe it was 1992. I was in New York at the time, it was 1992. They had a white referendum saying we started this process, do you want it to continue? And the whites overwhelmingly voted yes and it was probably because the sports boycott was being ended and they were happy with that, they were thrown a bone. It's amazing how heartfelt their distress was about that boycott and how much they wanted it canceled and they kind of went for it. Because everybody could see there were two choices: burn the country or live with—

Q: Change.

COPLAN: Yeah. So the Afrikaner's middle-class engineered it. Their poorer working class followers weren't so keen because they thought we've been lied to and we've been—but they were not in charge. There were the English banks and companies involved, very keen to get this business out of the way who were willing to partly fund it,

you know, but Mandela was living in a big house in Houghton, given to him by one of these financiers and so on.

Q: I saw that a couple of days ago.

COPLAN: So you know it was going to happen and Mandela really was key because he was the only one whose word was law on both sides. If he said it then it was believed on both sides, credited on both sides.

Q: Amazing how much the importance of one individual—

COPLAN: Well in our case we were just lucky, we had a George Washington and he understood what that role was about. And oh, the ANC used to complain, Oh the old man's too conservative, he's giving away too much, he's bah, bah, bah.

Q: Still do.

COPLAN: Yeah but they're full of shit because—be that way. I said to them, "You're here so you don't understand what he means worldwide, you've got to have a symbol otherwise there will be no, the glue it'll come unstuck."

Q: What type of person did you have this type of conversation with?

COPLAN: Well the more angry of the ANC and of course PAC [Pan Africanist Congress]—

Q: Officials as well as student followers?

COPLAN: Oh yeah, well adults, their legal people, their organizers, and their people who were around, had this idea that somehow they tended to see their so-called victory as like a military victory. Now they never fired a shot in anger the whole—but they had this idea that they had somehow overcome and now they wanted, you know, this and this and this. They wanted to press a much tougher deal on the previous government and so and so but now it wasn't only Mandela it was Cyril Ramaphosa and all those other people—

Q: Now you had credibility obviously with the ANC leaders though you were a foreigner and not black; how did you achieve that credibility?

COPLAN: Well people knew that I had been around the townships for a longer time than that and that I had not been afraid, that I had lived on the other side of the line, you know, I had a little bit of a legend in a way. I had some good friends who would introduce me to people, you know, come and meet Barney Machen, come and meet, you know—was around, in London. Particularly go to the place there in Kings, ah what do you call it, there's a book store there African— Anyway there's an African center there and I met not only musicians but a lot of political people and Louis Nkosi and a lot of other people,

Denis Goldberg and some of the Rivonia trialists that I asked informally. It wasn't a political contact but they were interested in this show biz thing, the ANC had read the book and said you know there is a role for culture, we should do more of it, this is a bit of a wakeup call, you know—

Q: Did you see it that way also? At the time you did this work, did you see it as a tool for social change more than as an observation or a cultural thing?

COPLAN: I saw it as documenting, singing the unsung heroes. I felt that this city, Cape Town, like any other great city had been partly made by their artists because black people did not have the power to decide the architecture and the buildings and the layout. The landscape of apartheid was imposed. It wasn't at all what they wanted, Soweto was not at all what they wanted, but the music in Soweto was what they wanted, that they produced. That bound their society together, gave them hope on a good Saturday night; it was a form of mobile expression that they had determined, no matter what the apartheid laws had determined.

Q: So this was a tribute to those whose works were not visible in the form of architecture—

COPLAN: Yeah and in the form of how the city is run, or how you live or the schooling and all those hard things that had been imposed you know, living in the matchbox houses. But they created show business here and every attempt to kill it really failed as we know now even better.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: And how black society works here had a large component of cultural intervention because they couldn't intervene elsewhere, the theater, music—

Q: So this was the one type of expression that was easiest to get. Perhaps is there a parallel with Eastern Europe in the 1980s?

COPLAN: Yeah, in a sense of the singing revolutions and the use of nationalist songs and meetings in Vilna or in Prague where you have five thousand sing and you know singing patriotic Czech songs. And what are they going to do, because they're Czech too.

Q: Right, so this was the clever use of human expression on the part of people who were dissatisfied with their system—

COPLAN: Well, yeah.

Q: —and who did what they could at the time given the constraints.

COPLAN: People, you know, African people want society, even with our students, the

idea of studying completely alone in your own little one person room is difficult at varsity, they are used to doing things in these bunches. So there's always a lot of people around and everything. They came to Johannesburg, which tried to prevent them from creating a society but you can't prevent Africans from doing that. And the more pressure that was brought against them the more stubbornly they reacted back: we will have dance halls, we will have taverns, we will have restaurants, we will have church choirs, we will have sports associations, we will have this, this, this and other things, men's clubs, literary clubs, ladies auxiliary, we will have this and this, we will have those things. And then they tried to mess them up, deny them, we will have a football league. I mean for years and years and years there was no place to play football. There are eighty-five teams in the association, eighty-five football teams in the—and they had two official sports grounds allowed to them. Now why would you deny people a ground to kick the football around? You know, what does it take? But not anything that was organized, you know, because in Natal football was very big; and who was the president of the Durban and District football association? Chief Albert Luthuli. So they didn't like it, but—

Q: It was a potential for social venues that could create unrest—

COPLAN: When they would have a game and people would come, Albert Luthuli would get up and give a speech before the game.

Q: So in fact the regime, while its motives were now historically bad, in fact they were on the right, they understood—

COPLAN: Yes, of course, they understood.

Q: They understood the danger to them.

COPLAN: Yes but everything was a danger to them either punitively or really. Because any little crack, you know, the leakage in the water of occupation by black society would happen and music was one place that's very liquid because you don't need recordings to survive, no live performances then you're gone. How can you patrol live performances everywhere in the vast outback of the black society? They denied them halls, they denied them recording, they denied this, they censored them on the radio, they did all that stuff, it didn't work.

Q: So, in your own development as an observer of this, initially it was the cultural itself which attracted you, I'm guessing—

COPLAN: Yeah.

Q: Tell me if I'm right or wrong; whereas progressively as time went along and changes happened, you saw what you were doing as part of the larger picture. Is that—am I getting it?

COPLAN: Yeah, I saw these incredible musicians who were playing, it's as if nobody ever heard of Harlem you know, but Harlem was there. There were all these great musicians and they didn't have—they weren't being sung. So I started doing that because I was so amazed by the quality, the artistic quality. I mean they had great bands, fantastic performers who were being crushed or were losing their professional ability to live off their music, they were, you know, dying of alcoholism and poverty, and these were these great performers. So I wanted to document that but I also wanted to do it so that local people here would do more with it. I mean it's a pretty small book for the history of it but it's two pages for everybody here I think. The idea was for local writers, the young radicals, the radical young black intellectuals to see performing arts as a worthy and important field to document. And so it was kind of a kick in the pants because people would say, Oh you American, how can you write about this? I'd say, "You're not doing it. You do it better than me. I'll do something else."

Q: And did they meet your challenge eventually?

COPLAN: No but eventually they did.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: But it took a long time. At first nothing much happened but now in recent years there are quite a few.

Q: Recent being since the mid-'90s?

COPLAN: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: Since this century.

Q: So you were pretty much a solitary—

COPLAN: Solitary, there was nothing—

Q: —in the 1970s into the 1980s and into the early 1990s.

COPLAN: All my references are primary sources if you look at all those footnotes in there, they are all primary sources. I don't quote other authors on their book, on music—

Q: Because there were none.

COPLAN: Yes. So it's all newspaper clippings, interviews—

Q: Excellent.

COPLAN: —still to some extent. Now in this one, 2007, I cite all these great authors who have come up since—

Q: This one being, this is called—

COPLAN: It's the second one, second edition.

Q: Oh, the second edition of this In Township Tonight! Three Centuries of South African Black City Music and Theatre.

COPLAN: That's what it is. Now you see it's much bigger and what I've done there is to quote all the research which was done in the interim twenty-five years of which there is a great deal because people came up in the 1990s and started to do things. All of them of course said they didn't know who the hell I was because life is like that. But they gave away the game half the time because they said things in their books that they could only have gotten from inside.

Q: Ah, so this is the cortex of the period—

COPLAN: It's the cortex, yes—and it's politically more radical than the later one because I'm older now. (laughs)

COPLAN: This is more crusading.

Q: Yeah, does age deradicalize a person?

COPLAN: Well not necessarily; Dennis Brutus remained a fruitcake for his entire life and he was impossible but I admired him. (laughs)

Q: I met him—at Northwestern right, is that where he was?

COPLAN: Yeah, absolutely. But you know what they say, if you are not a radical at twenty you have no heart and if you are still a radical at fifty you have no head. And I'm afraid this is me.

Q: Yeah. Now when you say fruitcake, and we're both chuckling, I'd seen him on several occasions in African Studies Association meetings—

COPLAN: Yes, yes.

Q: I think he was into reparations. I'm not quite sure—

COPLAN: Sure.

Q: But in what way was he off course in your opinion?

COPLAN: Well this guy in 1992 he was the one who was leading the sports boycott thing so of course didn't want to go out of business. So he said, "Keep the sports boycott," and he made a great emotional plea which echoed internationally. And he was paid zero attention by the ANC because they said, No, no it's time to give that one away.

Q: Well he was saying this from Chicago—

COPLAN: Yeah. And they said this is a piece of real estate we can give up—

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: —in the negotiation. You know you always give away the things that you don't really need—

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: Well they really didn't need the sports boycott and made the boys happy so wisely they said, Well give them that because they were real politicians.

Q: So Dennis Brutus's writings were very admirable I think; maybe was fixed in a time and place and didn't quite change along with the times.

COPLAN: Well you know he still maintains—he did all sorts of stuff. He then, he just said—we used to have these anti-summit demonstrations. Whenever we had a summit we had a world—we had a racism summit, we had an ecology summit—

Q: Oh yes of course.

COPLAN: —we had a world summit on sustainable development; we had a summit on this, that, and the other damn thing. Well, Dennis each and every time, organized a social movement demonstration against the summit and he wanted to parade in Santin of course where the summits were going on but the authorities wouldn't let him anywhere near there—

Q: Now we're talking about the 1990s—

COPLAN: Yeah.

Q: The new—since the elections—

COPLAN: Yes, in the 1990s. There he was every time—

Q: Closed the summits—

COPLAN: He didn't—he thought that these summits were sort of World Trade Organization, Washington yeah—

Q: Ah, hyper-capitalism—

COPLAN: Yeah with their summits on X and Y so you oppose this from the point of view the same way you opposed WTO [World Trade Organization] or GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] or Davos [World Economic Forum]. You know, you go and demonstrate at DAVOS—

Q: Yeah, but the environmental summit—

COPLAN: No, no, no but it was somehow an establishment thing, see that's the thing about Dennis being off the—

Q: Right, right.

COPLAN: Well he offended the hell out of the government, of course, because they were proud of these summits.

Q: Sure, they became the center of world attention.

COPLAN: Yes they were building up, they didn't want—I mean who the hell was—never mind, so—

Q: Yeah, right.

COPLAN: The social movements, and many of the social movements he championed were the ones the government didn't like, like the Landless People's Movement. They were there well the government didn't like the Landless People's Movement.

Q: Ah—

COPLAN: They were troublemakers who kept invading and building jacks and stuff—

Q: Right.

COPLAN: And any of these, you know, the Treatment Action Campaign which was bugging them about AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome], they were down there with a thing. So they couldn't get to Santin so they demonstrated in Johannesburg in the middle of town here in Brandenburg. Well that wasn't too wise either because, by the way the center of Johannesburg is a decayed, inner city American style dump—

Q: I know I was just there this morning.

COPLAN: Now it's getting a little better but in those days it was a dump. It's like in the middle of Detroit or the middle of St. Louis. Well so the cops moved in and there was some violence and burning of things but who cares because in the center of downtown Johannesburg there's nothing worth saving so they surrounded them and brutalized them and got rid of them, which in Santin is a little more difficult because there's property to protect, valuable property.

Q: Now we're talking much more recent history—

COPLAN: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: So Dennis kept on because—he came to me personally once to talk about the peasants being kicked off their land in Lesotho because of Lesotho highlands water scheme and we didn't have a very good conversation because he knew I was a scholarly expert on Lesotho, I've written a book on it—

Q: Ah yes, having lived there.

COPLAN: Right. So, I speak Sesotho—

Q: Oh.

COPLAN: So I said to him, "Dennis these are hamburger people in a world of big steaks. The highland's water scheme is considered one of the best practiced projects on the continent. It is going to produce a huge amount of money and by the way the water that comes out of my tap, and it's on and the peasants will be compensated, badly of course as these things are, they won't get what they want but they will get something, but with this you will not fuck, you won't. It's a multi-billion grant, it has nothing to do with international agencies, it's a bilateral between the Lesotho government, South African government, they are not going to let you—" So he wasn't too happy, he thought there should be some dinging and so forth.

Q: Yeah. On the delicate and enormous, important matter of land ownership, my understanding is that Mandela truly believed that ownership in the European sense with documents would be best maintained to keep this place together.

COPLAN: Right.

Q: And that became the prevailing view. A lot of ANC people were unhappy with that—

COPLAN: Sure.

Q: —and I guess Brutus might have been similar to those people.

COPLAN: Yeah, sure in PAC they always talk about land.

Q: And that's still an issue, a big issue.

COPLAN: Sure and what's their policy? Alright, you don't like the ANC policy, what's your policy? What? Give away land on the street corner like they did mortgage in the U.S.?

Q: If they did that do you think there would be a danger of this becoming like Zimbabwe?

COPLAN: Yes, plus you wouldn't have any food. Food in this country is produced by agri-business with a capital A and B just like in the states. The farms are gigantic and they run according to high-tech and we supply one-third of the fruit that's eaten in the western EU [European Union].

Q: Wow.

COPLAN: And you know what their standards are like? If you have a curved banana—

Q: Or a cucumber one centimeter too long.

COPLAN: Whatever it is. So in Paris one morning when I was there, the fruit air outside, you know, because they have open air markets in Paris, and I said, "Oh monsieur," I speak French also, I said, "Monsieur you know, your fruit is very beautiful today I must say." He said, "Well you ought to know, a third of it comes from South Africa."

Q: So the retailers know that?

COPLAN: Yeah.

Q: In Paris?

COPLAN: Granny Smith apples and stuff, he knows where it comes from.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: He was teasing me because he knows I'm— Okay fine, so we have to do that. We have to produce to a standard and to a price. You just find out what the urban workers will do when bread goes to twenty rands a loaf, they know this. And the other thing is you cannot give land to people who do not know how to farm it in the twenty-first century—you simply cannot do it. You can train them, you can try every program possible with farm workers and people but you cannot give farms because they will fail, and then what? And unfortunately the radical side thinks farming is something you do

with twenty, forty acres and a mule.

Q: Right, economic units that are not viable in the twenty-first century.

COPLAN: Look at America.

Q: Yeah, or maybe where the land was in fact redistributed in the early nineteenth century, social justice economic failure.

COPLAN: That's right. Plus the burra are very much responsible for this, the National Party, because they kept blacks well away from farming. Blacks were farming, blacks were farming just in up-to-date manner as whites were until 1920. I mean yes it was horse and ox plowing at that time—

Q: The technology of that period, yes.

COPLAN: —some early tractors. Blacks were doing all that. The farms and the free state and so on that the blacks had, had the same technology as the white people and they expelled them massively. No black could have a farm except in the homelands which were destitute and no white man could have more than five black families on his farm. So there were massive expulsions beginning in the 1920s and from the 1920s until now, I mean 1994, they kept black people well away from independent farming and developments in agriculture. So where are we going to get our farmers now? We might as well get them from Lesotho and Mozambique.

Q: Or the Czech Republic.

COPLAN: Yeah, the Czech Republic.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: Because the people don't know what—you know who grows food?

Q: Right, those who know how to grow food.

COPLAN: And those are the whites.

Q: So the ANC policy, is this a coincidence that your own personal beliefs are pretty much in line with the ANC, the much disputed ANC policy?

COPLAN: Well you know I'm kind of a practical type, I've been out there and they're like that.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: They, you know, they've been read the rule book by Goldman Sachs. When they became—in 1994 as soon as that administration was officially there, Trevor, Manuel, and all the rest of them trooped over to New York and were lectured by Goldman Sachs, this did happen, these are the rules you can play by them or not but since you're not an oil producer we suspect you will want to play by the rules of the Washington consensus and that way you'll have money to do the stuff you want to do and you'll have friends. If you don't do it our way you'll have no money and no friends except you know you can have—

Q: Soviet Union ah we're past that period but—

COPLAN: Yes, right Russia—

Q: North Korea they'd be friendly with—

COPLAN: Yes or the present day Venezuela or Cuba or you know you have those as friends.

Q: And then again to the reader, Trevor Manuel, one of the most highly-regarded and successful, if not the most, ministers in the past ten years.

COPLAN: Yes and finance minister portfolio.

Q: Yes, a world recognized, shrewd person who serves his country well.

COPLAN: Yes. If he leaves government he will be taken up by an international agency immediately because he talks the talk and walks the walk.

Q: In a very delicate precarious situation.

COPLAN: He's a very nice guy; I met him a couple of times in night clubs. Of course you can't get through his bodyguards but I know he's a nice guy. (laughs)

I went up to greet him once and I got this far and slip by bodyguard, but anyway because I know who he is but anyway, he is a genial kind of—You know he came to speak to us at the university and everything was balanced on the one hand this and on the other hand that and he talked about doing a little bit of good—

Q: So he really knows his business.

COPLAN: Yeah but he didn't say we can make massive strides, he said, "If we are careful we can make incremental progress," that's what he said. This impressed me because that's the reality of the world. If you are careful you can make incremental progress, you cannot make vast revolutionary strides by giving out land on the street corner, you can't, and he knows it. I mean look at the quality of our food, it's excellent.

Q: Yeah. Again in the 1980s when this country was a pariah nation, especially in black African countries, all the imported food was from here but it was never labeled—

COPLAN: No, they'd put it—

Q: —accurately; well they'd say imported—

COPLAN: Yeah.

Q: —on the can I remember.

COPLAN: Sometimes they would say, from Lesotho and Lesotho made good money off that.

Q: So they were the go-betweens—

COPLAN: They'd stamp it.

Q: The pass through.

COPLAN: Made in Lesotho.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: That was their job. In a town called Maputsoe, that's where the stamping was done. South African products were rooted, it's not that far, it's only three hours away, the stuff would be rooted and then back to Jan Smuts Airport for—

Q: Exporting.

COPLAN: —but it would say from Lesotho.

Q: Right. I didn't remember that, I do remember from sub—countries seeing tins, I believe, which just had imported without any origin without any—

COPLAN: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. Amazing, you were there.

COPLAN: I was there.

Q: You made it your business to be there.

COPLAN: I was there in 1994 too. I came back to work in 1993 and UCT specifically to

be here for the election which was brewing and I knew it was happening.

Q: You just needed to be here.

COPLAN: I needed—I didn't want to miss that party.

Q: Yeah. What was it— Now you're from New York City, why South Africa in particular?

COPLAN: Accidental. I find a lot of comparisons between black experience in both countries except they're the majority here but, and they have languages. But UCT they—I had been there in 1991—called me up in 1993 and they said, Man you got to be here for this plus we have a post somebody resigned—a Czech guy who went back after the change in Czechoslovakia to be in his country to be part of it, so he was— And they said, You got to come here and do this, you are the devil but you are the devil we know. (laughs) So they said, We need new blood but we're afraid of foreigners but you we know, so you got to come back.

Q: Explain. What was UCT like? Were they being dragged into transitions they were uncomfortable with? Why were you the devil?

COPLAN: Oh because any New York American, you know, sort of loud talking non-British—

Q: No, that can't be—really?

COPLAN: No. To them I was a cab driver. I mean you know sort of—

Q: I was a cab driver.

COPLAN: There you go right, this sort of thing. But I knew they're British, that's the thing, UTC in those days was very British—

Q: So in the mid-1990s you are not implying that UTC was resisting the change; you said they went from 20 percent to 60 percent—

COPLAN: Yes.

Q: And this they did of their own accord?

COPLAN: Yes.

Q: Like with Wits.

COPLAN: Yes, exactly. Now Wits has always been a bit more working class, a bit more diverse in its intake. Lots of sharp business people have gone through here from the cities

you know, at the heart, collective heart. UTC is more the house on the hill and more the private schools and it's more British.

Q: UTC is Dartmouth, Wits is Columbia, ah NYU [New York University].

COPLAN: Yeah, something like that. Yeah, they're an urban school, but we were a real commuter urban school.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: Right. They had all the residences and things. But they weren't British British, they were British South African, but that in more Catholic than the Pope. They were British and all their manners were British and I had to learn all those, I had to learn how to be like them because they—

Q: Weren't going to adapt to you?

COPLAN: No, they didn't like the style of—no. So you had to know how to go to a meeting or talk to the dean as was.

Q: Meaning what? With some deference, with some oblique language, is that what you mean? Americans tend to be very direct.

COPLAN: Yes. No direct confrontation, no personalistic anything, talking to the air, you know, *some people, some colleagues seem to believe*— (laughs) By which you mean—

Q: You.

COPLAN: You *dummkopf* (stupid person). (laughs) You *dummkopf*. You don't do that, you just say I mean there is some colleague and I find this unacceptable, you don't say who you find unacceptable—

Q: You depersonalize it.

COPLAN: You depersonalize things, you do your anthropology, you live in the culture in which you live in, you learn how to tell jokes in their diffident manner, not the kind of thumb in the eye style of academic politics we have in New York.

Q: Yeah.

COPLAN: You don't stick your thumb in anybody's eye.

Q: I notice you said New York not the U.S.

COPLAN: Where I went to, Indiana, I went to school there; I had to change my sense of

humor.

Q: Yeah. (laughs)

COPLAN: You don't swear, you don't—

Q: You don't swear? How could you possibly survive there?

COPLAN: Well if you're a New Yorker it is very difficult because we do tend to say schmuck and stuff. No you don't l—

Q: In Indiana they don't even know what that is.

COPLAN: No. You don't swear and you don't—nothing that could be considered edgy or nasty or cutting. I mean in that sense Columbia is more like Cambridge. (laughs) In Cambridge you can be perfectly nasty in your own particular way because this is a high-stakes environment.

Q: Part of the game.

COPLAN: In Cambridge cutting wit is okay, in Indiana cutting wit is not okay.

Q: Cutting wit even there may be without direct confrontation although wonderful anecdotes come to mind of how people outsmart themselves in correspondence. I'd say Upper Lind and T.S. Eliott had a hilarious correspondence. Lind outdid Eliott by saying, "You are a better flatterer than I am," and Eliott confessed to a friend of his, "I think he outsmarted me, I'm not sure." (laughs)

COPLAN: Yes, that's right. There are all those kinds of things. So, but I learned a thing. But they called me and said, You must come back and I upped the offer, you know, because I'm an American; they don't negotiate.

Q: Ah.

COPLAN: They make an appointment, they don't make an offer.

Q: Take it or leave it.

COPLAN: Take it or leave it.

Q: But you negotiated.

COPLAN: Yeah because, you know, this is where I pulled out my American thing. I said, "Well I know how you feel but in the States we negotiate. Now if you don't want to, it's okay, I'll stay where I am, I'll stay in New York."

Q: Like walking away from the object in the—

COPLAN: That's right, exactly, it's beautiful but—

Q: And they called you back.

COPLAN: They called me back. (laughs) They called me back because—

Q: Not only were you the devil but they needed you and they knew they needed you.

COPLAN: They had a problem, they were living on old scrapbooks, they hadn't had an injection of intellectual, a transfusion.

Q: To their credit they knew that.

COPLAN: They knew that, they even said so. And they said, We don't know what to make of Americans. We don't know whether they are coming for the party, they'll be here for two months or what they're doing. The Brits don't really want to come or it's not easy, some do but we can't get enough of them. Of course the Europeans are hard to figure out. So you've been here for a year, you talk to our students like you sold.

Q: Great, wonderful story.

COPLAN: So I said, "Well you must be nuts, I mean why would I come to South Africa? I'd end up a refugee in my own country; I'll be working in a call center." They said, No, no, no, no, no, we got it fixed, it's going to have to work. UTC will never—I mean you know no matter what these guys do—you know, it's fine—

Q: We will—

COPLAN: —survive.

Q: —ride the waves—

COPLAN: Yes, exactly.

Q: Was there a question of they'd be stuck in the situation and collapse and—

COPLAN: No because the Englishman if you know him never collapses.

Q: They outlive their problems.

COPLAN: The Englishman doesn't care if it's one patrol facing a horde of barbarians. That's what cricket is all about, right? A single batsman has to fend off balls from every

direction for about five days, you know. This is like Afghanistan in 1840. (laughs)

I mean they are—they stick to their position and what they will do as all is coming apart around them is stick to their position and they will ride it because they have iron will. They ran an empire on two cents. I mean it was one of the cheapest empires ever run. They got the native to work for them and they did all these things throughout Africa, Asia—

Q: Frugality, discipline, determination—

COPLAN: And double-talk.

Q: Double-talk. (laughs)

COPLAN: They are incredible double-talkers, they cannot be trusted. But after all when you are trying to rob Peter to pay Paul and you know—

Q: You've got to dupe a lot of people.

COPLAN: You've got to dupe a lot of people, which they did. Then of course they—at Singapore the Chinese found out what the British empire was worth but never mind that it was late. They abandoned their Asian empire as soon as the Japanese attacked.

Q: Ah, yes.

COPLAN: Because they couldn't hold it but even so, it was—

Q: Yeah, right, we're out of here—

COPLAN: Well they had the Nazis on their back and—

Q: Right, having daily attacks—

COPLAN: But they didn't run from India—jewel in the crown.

Q: That was a very emotional thing.

COPLAN: Well it wasn't under direct attack. Burma was, that's the only place they held, that Britain held in Asia was Burma with our help, but did hold. Otherwise we were in the Pacific alone after—

Q: That's right, that's right.

COPLAN: —1940. Anyway, that's another story. So the British, they're idea was—you know, because I would say to them I had taught in New York during the democratization

period there, you know, City College became all black and all those things and I knew set up and I knew about black students because I had many in a public university. And when we would have meetings about curriculum change and dealing with students, you know, very, very difficult stuff—

Q: So this was very applicable to what you came into.

COPLAN: Yeah, so I would say, "Well I've got a suggestion about what you could do about this," and the head of department's eyebrow, one eyebrow, would go up and he would say, "David we know how to handle it." In parenthesis we know how to handle our natives, that's what he meant.

Q: New York City?

COPLAN: No, here in South Africa. I was not to tell a British officer of the university my New York ways of dealing with a native, or my natives, the different natives.

Q: Initially. I'm guessing this may have changed.

COPLAN: By now I guess but at that time, the whole time I was I learned not to say, "We did this in New York." If I thought it was a good idea I would just do it and not talk about it; just go ahead and say nothing because they are not on your time. But to suggest to the head that we do this strategy that I had worked up in New York, no, no.

Q: So they hired you knowing they needed you; did they choke on their decision at any point?

COPLAN: No, it was fine with them although they used the word "maverick," that was their English word for me.

Q: Now an American would find that a term of flattery I think.

COPLAN: Yeah, for them they would say, You always need a maverick—meaning somebody— (laughs) But what they sort of meant was—

Q: An eccentric.

COPLAN: An eccentric who comes up with stuff sometimes.

Q: Someone playing by different rules, yes.

COPLAN: Yes, which you can always tell them to buzz off but if you are interested in what he's doing you can—

Q: It's very much a double term because it can be pejorative or auditory depending on

the mood you are in when you are using it.

COPLAN: Yes, the British accept eccentricity and there are many British eccentrics in university in that style of coo-coo-ness.

Q: Well it's a safety valve for—

COPLAN: A cosseted society in which your name and anything you do is talked about and you know a small island with lots of people but here the same thing—the university—who's slept with so-and-so's wife is the biggest issue on campus. So I was the American version of this and since I had no power and I wasn't anybody, I was fine and I was even acting head of department on many occasions.

Q: Anthropology?

COPLAN: Yes.

Q: Yes.

COPLAN: When the head would go away for three months, he'd say take care of the department Coplan, the other guys can't be trusted.

Q: What was the size of the department?

COPLAN: We were only six or seven. But he didn't feel he could trust any of his local subordinates to run the place. (laughs)

Q: Though you were a maverick, you were the one he trusted.

COPLAN: Well it's sort of, you know, you're the one who really can't maneuver through local networks terribly well.

Q: Oh I see, you can do no harm because you don't know how to.

COPLAN: Well I don't have the resources; I might know how to but I don't have the resources, plus I'm not at everybody's throat like the locals. See his problem was everybody was at everybody's throat the minute he's not there whereas I wasn't at anybody's throat.

Q: Yes, you were the neutral outsider.

COPLAN: Yes.

Q: At what point did you feel at home in this country enough to put your stakes down? I guess you're here permanently at this point?

COPLAN: Yes.

Q: When did that happen?

COPLAN: I think when I came up here.

Q: Up to Wits?

COPLAN: Yes.

Q: Which would have been—?

COPLAN: Nineteen ninety-seven. There were two professorships. Now a professorship here is a—there's only one of them, there's only one professor in a small department and a big department will have more. So Americans come here and it is professor this, professor that, professor the other; in the British system here I am the only person with the rank of professor and this is true in—

Q: The others are instructors or adjuncts or—

COPLAN: Senior lecturer, we have a principal tutor even and we have associate professors now, which is an American rank that didn't exist in their system that was brought in to reward people who were at the top of senior lecturer. Never going to be a professor so give them something.

Q: Something.

COPLAN: Yes because there's only one professor, who's me.

Q: The person being what we'd call the chairman of the department.

COPLAN: The chair of the department, right. There were two of them: UCT, my own department, and this one. And UCT there was a lady in our department who was a friend of the vice chancellor, who had gone to UCT and the fix was in there, it was a woman so no hard feeling you know.

Q: Yes, sure. So you came to the—

COPLAN: Well I got this offer.

Q: The virtual—the intellectual capital of this country.

COPLAN: Well I thought of it as where South Africa was being constructed.

Q: Yes, Johannesburg.

COPLAN: Yes, that's where the country was going to make itself, this is where we are fossil and foss, this is where there's a lot of conflict but that's creative, people were doing it.

Q: You referred to Hahting. Where do you put Pretoria in this mix?

COPLAN: Pretoria had the problem that it was purely out for columns in its white being before where Joburg [Johannesburg] was the English financier, the gold miner, the cosmopolitan city, the city of sin—

Q: The journalistic—

COPLAN: Yeah, the journalistic, yeah all this cosmopolitan life.

Q: And Wits was English speaking and Tucks was Afrikaans speaking.

COPLAN: That's right.

Q: So inevitably you think Johannesburg became the real center.

COPLAN: Because they moved very quickly. Alright, Pretoria is the less crime and they have nicer whatever in the city, not much, but it was hard to get that city, which had been the administrative capital of the apartheid regime to loosen up and, you know, get on stage and start bringing in all these things; where Johannesburg had no problem. This city was a mining town, today it is not a mining town; it is a construction, services, communications, financial center for the subcontinent. Everything south of Congo starts here in this. People talk about Johannesburg, for a city to change from a resource provider, you know, we give you our gold, to a sophisticated European-style provider of those kinds of services is a real achievement. I congratulate the city and its people on that.

Wasn't easy to do, we had the Clinton years and some prosperity to help, did help—people wanted—but Africa began to be a place to do business in that time, the rest of Africa and Johannesburg's the place to start; banking, communications, heavy equipment, food, well-trained people, the internet. At that time South Africa had 95 percent of all web sites active in Africa; could Egypt, Morocco, you name it—in the 1990s. Now, different proportion today but when I came here 95 percent of all web sites that were up in Africa were up here. So they have done it and we are now—Capetonians said, You are going to lose everything to us, we're a much nicer city, people won't want to go to school in Joburg, people won't want to have a corporate headquarters. I mean people leave New York and they go to Scottsdale, Arizona, you know, New York is a shiveal, it's the past you know—like that.

Q: How wrong they were.

COPLAN: How wrong they were.

Q: In both places. Now that—especially with crime lower than it was—

COPLAN: Yes, they really worked it out.

Q: Everyone wants to go there. And of course I have to ask about crime in Johannesburg since that's what everybody talks about all the time. What's your take?

COPLAN: It's very bad and it's a political football as well, which usually isn't such a good thing. If you are going to say let's fight crime you need to get the politicians more out of the way and get your crime fighters in and take the consequences of that politically, which New York did.

Q: Zero tolerance.

COPLAN: Well Giuliani—

Q: Michael Bradley.

COPLAN: Yeah, and so on yeah.

Q: Who came here by the way.

COPLAN: But we can't do zero tolerance because a uniformed male police officer is four times as likely to commit a felony as a member of the ordinary public. So who is tolerating who? The cops are the criminals; it's a whole other thing. Now these statistics change but they also fool us so don't quote me on statistics.

Q: No.

COPLAN: It's a tough thing. It's very bad and the reason it's bad is because we had a very violent society, not in terms of warfare, but in terms of interpersonal violence. We didn't have civil wars like Nigeria; we did have daily face-to-face, even verbally-violent confrontations. People were ugly to one another for a very long time in a very harsh economic environment. And that seeped into our habits, so people can be very tough and rude here if they want to but a Joburg is not you know a craw, okay.

Q: It's not touchy-feely.

COPLAN: Yeah, it's not what they call *mentlic* (mental) in German.

Q: Cozy, yeah.

COPLAN: Simpatico whatever you call it, it is what it is. And these habits of saying why should he have it, I'll get it, in the sort of, you know, mammals—

Q: The bitter feelings.

COPLAN: Yeah, mammals paradise, you know, the land of gold and greed has affected a lot. Now why does this affect crime so much? Because a huge amount of the population is unemployed and unemployable because we had these two societies, the first world part that was all white and now includes a very large swathe of everybody else but then the left-behinds. The ones in East St. Louis, you know, the ghetto, don't have a way out and they look and they see this obscene opulence in some cases, you know, the disproportion and they don't feel, oh let me find a little piece of cloth and pen and I'll sell that pen for twenty cents and then I'll take that twenty cents and like my ancestors did—

Q: They want it immediately—

COPLAN: Well yeah. It's not like the people who came to New York and so if they can't get it they'll take it.

Q: How does this affect the climate and atmosphere of a campus like this? I just walked through teeming masses of I think they were first year students; is this the first week of classes now?

COPLAN: No, it's the third but they are teeming because they are the most numerous.

Q: And the diversity it's very impressive.

COPLAN: It's everybody, including the foreign.

Q: The atmosphere, climate, is it outside this campus? Is this campus nice and remote from that or is it really part of a—?

COPLAN: More than UCT, which is on a hill well above not even the city but a suburb. We are in Johannesburg. That's the whole point and this green fencing that's around the campus was never there before, you walked onto campus. But then there were bank robberies of our little bank things we have here. I don't know how much cash they have around but it was enough to attract the wrong sort of people and rapes of the female students mostly but I guess males also and unsafe residences and stuff. And so the university decided to go a bit like our competitors down the road here, the UJ [University of Johannesburg], which was always a bunker, that was a bunker from day one with a fence and heavy security and concrete bunker. We adapted to that, we put fence around—

Q: Yeah I went through two security checks just to come in today, yeah.

COPLAN: Yeah, so we've had to do that. Now the society that surrounds us is also on campus; we are part of the city even though Jorissen Street is a little bit of a divider there but—

Q: But when you decided to leave UCT and come here you knew what you were doing, what you were getting into?

COPLAN: I'm from New York. People said, Aren't you scared? I said, "I hang around Columbia, three blocks from 125th Street, I mean—"

Q: Right, Harlem.

COPLAN: Yes, it's not a problem. But we can't say our society is not here on campus. Some of the students do but people out in the society unfortunately do sometimes, not very often. It has gotten better but enterprise of security has—I didn't like it at first; I couldn't get a guest on campus without going down to greet them at the security.

Q: Right.

COPLAN: So anybody who might know me and say oh let me drop into Dave's office, unless I knew they were coming, they couldn't do that. Well at a lot of universities you couldn't do that but I didn't like it anyway. Because I felt the university was part of the heart of the city and we were. You know any great city or not so great city does have a great university. You can't name one city worth a shit that doesn't have a university of some kind that drives or more than one.

Q: We're getting to the end of this discussion. You're an American, you were an American—

COPLAN: I'm an American.

Q: You're a man of the world.

COPLAN: I'm also a citizen here, certificate of naturalization.

Q: Ah, okay. So you are—

COPLAN: Dual citizen.

Q: Dual citizen and you transcend borders I think.

COPLAN: I transcend borders.

Q: What is your hope of what you will achieve in the rest of your career as an anthropologist, as a musicologist, in this city, and in this country?

COPLAN: Well I am getting old and tired—

Q: No you're not.

COPLAN: And I've worked all my life, well after varsity, so there will be some gone fishin' about it eventually but I have slowly, without seeking to, become a bit of a public intellectual on the TV. In fact they began to complain—the TV began complaining that I was on there too much but anyway—

Q: You don't compete with Brookes, you complement.

COPLAN: Brookes is a very influential person, his long years here and his position at USIS [United States Information Service] and his ability to soak up everything.

Q: I mean you're friends, I know you're friends.

COPLAN: Yes we are. He's another person of this kind, there are a few Americans that have, in their own different ways, because John Strimwell as well has made a big impression. Brookes in his own more quiet way although he's on the radio a lot. Well he's on the radio but he's also got his own radio station, he's got *Radio Today* where he does a radio, it's community radio.

Q: What you do is on TV?

COPLAN: It's on TV but I also do radio. But I am the sort of academic.

Q: He's the observer, the social observer—

COPLAN: Yeah or the diplomat, the governmental wise head, the world view—

Q: Have you ever appeared together?

COPLAN: Never appeared together, that's funny. We've done some things we planned to do together, conferences and things but we haven't been invited to be a team although I have been invited with others.

Q: If I had a radio station I'd certainly invite you.

COPLAN: Well I've been on his show. But anyway I get called and it's not only on the music and culture and show business thing although it is that and being Lisutu speaking helps a bit because there aren't a lot of city whites who speak an African language, they tend to be rural.

Q: Which African languages are predominant in—?

COPLAN: Many of them were.

Q: Yeah, okay.

COPLAN: If you come from Nipomo and you speak Shangaan—

Q: Ah, I got it.

COPLAN: —and they think that you have something they want, they hit people because they are hittable, which is not a new philosophy—

Q: Right.

COPLAN: —the weak and the next door neighbor. But they didn't both check if you were Venda or Zimbabwe. So they did that but I spoke and wrote about it at the time because I felt no, it's—

Q: Bring the—

COPLAN: —bring academia to what is happening in the streets. Don't wait three years to do a research project about why it happened and mull it over in principled distance from the topic. Then when everybody has forgotten about it there you are with—

Q: An analysis that is no longer relevant.

COPLAN: —or rushed into print, which academics are not supposed to do but I did because you got to get them when it happens.

Q: David Coplan, thank you very much.

COPLAN: Thank you, Dan.

End of interview