

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

KAREL NEL

Interviewed by: Daniel F. Whitman

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[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Nel.]

Q: Can you give some background about your own childhood and social origins in this complex society.

NEL: My parents in the late 1940's were at university here in South Africa, then decided to move to Canada. Just before they left, a friend told them instead of running away from the situation, stay and doing something. They ended up going to teach in Natal, an African language teaching school. They worked in black education and in many ways tried to change things. They ended up, when the nationalist's government came in during 1949, they were thrown off their posts. It was quite a conflicted childhood, because there was a feeling that something was happening and that one didn't know quite what was happening. One of the most defining moments was a Friday evening where my father was traveling and my mom took my sister and I out of bed and drove us to my grandparents because there was a dynamite truck coming down the road. It was coming from the direction of Mandela and his follower's farm. The next morning I was standing on the bed looking out at his garden and suddenly the curtains were sucked out of the windows and there was a huge "WOOSH", there was a detonation to where all the loose ground jumped up two feet. The dynamite factory had been sabotaged. That particular moment in my life I think I realized there was something huge afoot in the country. As a child it was like one didn't understand what it was but it was like living on the edge of something very traumatic.

Q: Your parents intended to go to Canada because they were... what?

NEL: I think they were unhappy with the shift that was occurring in South Africa. They didn't appreciate the segregation. They talked with black colleagues and were involved in education, an altruistic activity. They were both teachers and Canada was always making room for more teachers.

Q: This explosion rattled the entire area?

NEL: It was at least five miles away, and it was the whole dynamite factory. Obviously dynamite was explosive and could really send a message. I don't remember the history of the case.

Q: Were these thoughts at the time to be from the regime or opponents?

NEL: The opposition

Q: Did your parents save your life by moving you out of the house?

NEL: No, our home wasn't damaged but you couldn't be too brave, we had to be cautious. I was only seven years old. I suppose from that moment on until today, I have intended to live for the day. I haven't had a projected life pattern, and it's been both wonderful and debilitating.

Q: Living for the day because of the uncertainty of tomorrow...

NEL: From that moment onwards yes...

Q: You had the advantage during this time of not being one of the subjugated groups, do others like you share this same sentiment?

NEL: I think it probably permeated throughout the society. Most of the artists lived very short lives and I think the feeling of insecurity came from two different viewpoints. I think it was there and that created the urgency among society that there is constantly the potential for change. For me it has always been exhilarating to live in a situation like that. When I finished university, I went to London for a masters and it was impressive training but Britain felt very root bound. Everyone had their particular stock in what they had and what they were going to have. After I finished in London, it was very interesting to visit America and to feel how there was not the same kind of ceiling. There was openness to the society and to the aspirations that could actually go somewhere. At that point I knew I was going to get my second degree in the States.

Q: What was the schooling like before university?

NEL: I was Rivonia Primary, then I was Hide Park High, I focused closely on art. I became interested in African art when I was 16, and I suppose just living in South Africa I felt the need to understand all the art produced here and on the rest of the continent.

Q: When you talk to South African Historians they say they do not know much about the continent because of the isolation of the country. Was that not the case with the plastic arts?

NEL: No. Mainly through books. There was nothing in the museums and I met a South African artist named Walter Battiss and Battiss had been interested in rock art and the sand and that influence his work. He is a very important artist in this country. Then I eventually got to know a German art collector and dealer Edgar Gunther. And an Italian dealer and collector of African Art called Vittorino Meneghelli. It took two immigrants, a German and an Italian really to introduce the greatness of African art to the generation of

artists which included Cecil Skotnes, Edoardo Villa, Sydney Kumalo and Cecily S0sah. They're part of a group called the Amadlozi group.

Q: And this was a group formed in what, the 50's?

NEL: In the late 50's, early 60's and so Edgar and Vittorino sort of became mentors. And I learned much of what I know today from the directions the two of them.

Q: Did you get to know them both personally?

NEL: Yes. I was a boy of about 12 at the time and Vittorino died last week and Edgar is alive. He's 88.

Q: They came and stayed in South Africa?

NEL: They came after the Second World War because Italy was in disarray.

Q: And Germany was defeated?

NEL: Yes. So those two had enormous influence on South African Arts and certainly on my life. And subsequently I have become one of the experts on African Arts in South Africa. I work with many of the museums.

Q: When you say African art, do you mean contemporary or traditional or both?

NEL: My expertise is in traditional but I am a curator so I do have knowledge of contemporary so I advise Sotheby's and worked with the MET and I was on a project with the British museum. And I have worked on curating with the Museum for African Art and Oceanic Art in Paris and I've written a book with Sandra Klopper called The Art of Southeast Africa which was published by Five Continents Editions. So it was those initial interests that projected deep into this.

Q: So you are more than a scholar I think. You are a practicing artist?

NEL: I am a practicing artist. When I finished my schooling, my total focus was on being an artist, a curator because I started collecting in my high school years African art, particularly African currencies because they were reasonably inexpensive and authentic. And that collection has grown huge and that collection is housed at the Nedcor headquarters opposite of the Hilton hotel.

Q: Did you donate the collection?

NEL: It's on semi-permanent loan for public view.

Q: Otherwise it's not being seen by the public

NEL: Right.

Q: You have currencies from all over the continent?

NEL: Yes, it's some of the great cross ingots from Katanga made from copper that goes right through great Zimbabwe up into Malawi and some of the big metal blades from central Congo and some of the very rare Masuku ingots here from Messina.

Q: How did you acquire this in the 70s, 80s? South Africans were not welcome in other African countries?

NEL: There were four pieces through coin dealers, the smaller pieces. Then there were odd pieces that strayed into curator stores. Then when I started to travel I started acquiring in Paris and Zurich and in the States.

Q: That sounds like a life of artistic adventure enviable by anybody.

NEL: It's wonderful. I always say I live in heaven! (laughter)

Q: Sounds like so much fun. Sounds like an adventure movie also. How were you able to do this as an individual, not attached to an institution?

NEL: These were modest objects, not of any great value today but they are collected but they are more of a general curiosity value I supposed like a coin collector but these are sort of dramatic objects they represent the nexus between actual value of the material as well as value in shaping and the aesthetic coating of the objects, which talk about exactly where they come from and their status.

Q: Are they useful as anthropological or archeological specimens in some way? Is there something about the aestheticism that says something about the societies they come from?

NEL: Absolutely. They were made by the blacksmiths and the blacksmiths were certainly in the South African region up into the Congo the blacksmiths were kept separate from the society generally because had secret knowledge from the ancestral world and they were very powerful because they actually produced the metal for the blades which were used for hunting but also tilling the earth or for warfare and of course making currency and so all these values

Q: So you would say they would be a bit like alchemists in Europe something like that?

NEL: Yes. It was the male domain and their wives were quite often the potters because of the association with fire and so there was a strange link between those two and the technologies and they had the basic technologies. So that always interested me.

Q: So you were drawn at about the age of 12 or 13 one step at a time into this vast area.

NEL: Yes. And that has continued right with me through my life and more recently has extended to the Pacific. And I have traveled with groups of anthropologists, marine biologists, ornithologists through Micronesia and Polynesia and eventually up by Papua/New Guinea and the Marquesas Islands to Tahiti to Easter Island and Hawaii.

Q: Are there any commonalities that drew you from one to another?

NEL: Well I was particularly looking at how value is created in a society so I was looking at the currencies and I was looking at how those formed across the broad sweep of the Pacific. One of the reasons why I got to know the Pacific because of a young South African I couldn't travel in Africa so when I got to Berkeley I was almost exactly the opposite side of the world from here. And so I would fly there and back through the Pacific.

Q: Ah so it was Berkeley that got you into the direction of the Pacific?

NEL: Yes.

Q: Now we leaped ahead a bit here. First let's get you to Berkeley.

NEL: I initially went off to my schooling here in Johannesburg I did an undergraduate at Wits Fine Arts 1974 -1977. And I studied fine art, history of art, anthropology, and music.

Q: It sounds like a wonderful educational platform it has allowed to branch out without narrowing yourself.

NEL: Yes. So my degree was in fine arts. My sub-major was in history of art. But I had these other forays which informed my work as an artist and the interests

Q: Being a practicing artist and academician, is this a full package for one person? Was there any question of the ability to do both?

NEL: Well there was when I finished studied in 1977. I wasn't sure whether I was going to go to New York to study curatorship at Kipper Union or if I was going to continue as an artist. I was given a scholarship to continue my post-graduate studies in fine arts which took me to St. Martin's School of Art in London which at the time was one of the most famous sculptor schools in the world. And I was there for 1988-89 with a team of fantastic post-graduate students from all over the world. And it was a very defining time for me working in the studies and also access to the great collections in the British Museum and getting across to Paris to see some museums... getting to see the Brancusi's and the African Art Museums

Q: President Sarkozy recently was in Washington, there is a very interesting exhibit about some of the post-surrealists in France and they're very evident influence that came

from Africa. So you'd see an African object right next to another. Was this something of curiosity to you while you were in London? The cross-pollenization between Africa and some of the European artists of the late 1900's to early 20's?

NEL: You saw the show in Washington?

Q: Yes, exactly.

NEL: Well yes it played a very important role for Matisse because they changed kind of the visual syntax of Western art quite dramatically.

Q: Was this a particular concentration of yours or part of the class you were in?

NEL: I've been very interested between this interface between African art and contemporary art and so you know Picasso and Brancusi were two particular artists who interested me and others through their interest in Egyptian art.

Q: So you noticed these cross currents?

NEL: Definitely. While we went to Martins with Tony Corer we were looking at the great era and the great sculptural traditions that moved from Egypt to Greece to Africa to the Mesoamericans. We looked broadly. We live in a post-modernist period where one has access to great sculpture made over the centuries and we've been able to look and to try and understand what that was. That was a great privilege. And I was then given a major sculptor prize in this country and I used that money to travel to the States after my studies in London.

Q: What Award?

NEL: It was called the Afrox Sculpture Award. It was a very large sculptural competition in this country. It was from the youngest sculptors to the most established sculptors. One year I won the student award and the year I went to St. Martin's, I left a sculpture behind to be submitted and it was given a major award. But that enabled me to go off on my studies in the United States.

Q: Not everyone would use award money for that purpose. This is like a MacArthur Genius Award. Some people like to use them to further their endeavors rather than to have fun.

NEL: For me work and pleasure is the same thing.

Q: What happens to a sculpture once an award is won?

NEL: It is eventually sold to the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Q: Although you say you didn't base your life on predictability, it seems as if very good things happen.

NEL: I just live my life to the full and in each moment. I went to the States, spent time in New York, went to across to San Francisco and met up with some of the African Art collectors there in 1989

Q: At the end of your stay in London?

NEL: Yes. I then went and met the Kaisers and Jim Willis and many of the collectors and dealers in Los Angeles and then came back. I got a telegram saying, "If you want a job come back home" so I came home to the university and started teaching almost immediately so I was very young and it was a steep learning curve.

Q: So Wits got you. Which you had not thought you would've gotten in to. So this is the department you graduated from?

NEL: Yes.

Q: So they had known you as a student and on that basis they felt they needed you to teach in the department?

NEL: Well a new professor, Alan Crump came in who had studied at UCLA. He had been there on a Fulbright Scholarship and he then came back and I met him very briefly just before I left and he set up the department and I was sort of the only post-graduate that was included in the staff which was included in the staff and it was wonderful to be part of that. So I came back, I started teaching with a remarkable group of young artists who Alan Crump had pulled into the department, there was Neels Coetzee, and Peter Schultz and Penny Siopis, the painter, and basically Alan Crump had pulled into the department from throughout the country.

Q: What was Alan Crump? Was he a curator or an art historian . . . ?

NEL: He was an artist, at the age of 30 he was given this major professorial post and basically said, you know,

Q: That's very daring on the part of Wits, to entrust such a large undertaking to a relatively young person.

NEL: Well he was very impressive, and he felt ready to pull it together and so it was appropriate to-

Q: So you're saying he had been on the Fulbright to UCLA.

NEL: Yes.

Q: We're starting on the sub-rosa theme of Fulbright. So you were there in '89 or '90 and you started teaching.

NEL: No, I started teaching in fact in 1980.

Q: Oh, I see.

NEL: So, I was in London '78 - '79

Q: I must have wrote it wrong, I wrote '88.

NEL: '78-'79.

Q: This is why I've been confused here.

NEL: And then I started to teach in 1980.

Q: So, 1980 teaching at Wits. I was in Brazzaville at that time. And was this a long-term commitment?

NEL: Well, I never thought it would be quite as long!

Q: Yeah. Here you are still.

NEL: Well, I had my first exhibition in 1980. No, 1981, I think. I was given the Olivetti Award, which is all about encouraging young artists. So I was given an award to travel to Italy and I spent some time in Greece and England, so after teaching for two years I went off to Europe, and then came back to teach again and then I started to work on a very large works, which were shown at the guest artist at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and then I was given a very big commission and my career really took off.

Q: While teaching?

NEL: Yes. So I have had all these years, I normally exhibit every year or every second year, so it's been a fun, because life, you know, teaching, being involved in museums, advising museums, and teaching, and writing, and there's never a dull moment. And then, the head of the university, the rector, I was with him one evening, and he said, "Well, what would you like to do?"

Q: Just write your own thing.

NEL: Yes. And I said, "Well, I would really like to study at Berkeley." And he said, "You know, you should start applying for grants and you should apply for a Fulbright." And I was particularly interested in Berkeley.

Q: The director of the University? He said to go?

NEL: Yes.

Q: Wonderful, I think. Very enlightened.

NEL: I was interested, because I suppose as an artist I was very interested in where we come from and where we are going to. And I live half an hour away from an archeological site, where some of the earliest hominids in this country have been found. So I have Philip Tobias, and Ron Clock, and many of the paleontologist since I was at the university, since my early years at the university, and I've read extensively in that area. And I was interested in sacred art, African art, and I've always been intrigued by the way the values of society are encoded in the art that they produce. And I even started to question the values of the society of the world that we live in and it really does seem to be underpinned by our technology and by our children.

Q: In South Africa, it might still be the case, but when I was there it was the Ministry of Art and Technology, was explained to me, at the time it seemed an odd amalgam to an American, it was explained to me at the time that artists and anthropologists understood the close association between technology for certain purposes of utility and art, which came out of that in a natural fusion, the earliest people doing things were making things for their use and by the way embellishing them so that they had that secondary purpose. I take it that you believe there is a correlation between art and technology?

NEL: Well, you know if you look at the earliest stone tools produced here, one does see that they are made for use, but they have been refined and become very aesthetic objects, so I think that technology and aesthetics are related, and technology and currency is also closely linked you know, that it has to do with what I call, stored labor, and when one looks at how in many cultures throughout the world, where hardness of material is highly valued, because that is our way of inscribing our presence not the world and shaping the world, so diamonds and steel. I mean, those have been two major driving forces and then gold, the strange anomaly in currency is that steel or iron, which enables them to make spears, when it's molded into currency, it very often is forged to such a thinness that it's useless, so we move into another kind of economy, a symbolic economy.

Q: Prehistoric electronic trading.

NEL: Yes, so it happens in the Pacific as well, so I felt that as an artist in this time, I needed to understand the scientific parameters which shaped our consciousness and our value system, so I started to read extensively and I eventually in choosing Berkeley, I went to study and to attend lectures by the Nobel Physicist, Donald Glaser, who worked in the molecular chamber and in particle physics and then had shifted his direction into perception and neural networks and another physicist, Fritjof Capra, had studied the impact of science on society, and he was also interested in the philosophical in science, and then attended lectures by a cognitive linguist, George Lakoff, who looked at the origins of metaphor, and how metaphor is used in art and science, and then I attended T.J.

Clark's lectures in history of art and I got to know Donald Johansen, the anthropologist who found 'Lucy,' and I spent time with him.

Q: But you yourself drew very innovatively. It sounds like from many different disciplines that came together in you, perhaps uniquely. We mentioned disciplines, anthropology, art history, physics, archaeology, but this all made sense to you, somehow.

NEL: In a way, I'd been aware that we'd been living in a period of such extraordinary specialization that we had specialist zombies, we all kind of knew about one thing, and I didn't want to do my master's degree here at Wits or in South Africa, because it was still very much based on how that old British style, you know, you looked at one tiny thing and I was interested in the interconnectedness of things, which Berkeley really enabled me to do within the American system.

Q: Zombies do exist in the American system.

NEL: I'm sure they do. But there's also this extraordinary ability to see the links between disciplines.

Q: We call it interdisciplinary. It's a great virtue on the American campus, not always realized. But you felt that Berkeley was ideally suited to allow that to happen.

NEL: It was, and there were great African art collections and dealers there, who I also got to know, that had had some contact on that very first visit, and so it was my broad umbrella was sort of perfectly matched to that site, and of course when I applied for the Fulbright scholarship, I went through Pretoria and it was quite a grueling process, and Joel was really remarkable in being that kind of link. There were questions around, art research and also what also a bona fide -

Q: This committee, was it composed of former South African Fulbright's?

NEL: I can't remember.

Q: Well, you know, Fulbright people putting you in a tight spot.

NEL: It was fine, you know? It was good for me, and of course disappointing to not be given the Fulbright, but fabulous that it was the generosity to facilitate it, and one understood we were living in this very contested country and it was great that one must all give them a chance.

Q: A couple of questions getting back to the placement rather than the bursar. You've mentioned the word "value" a couple of times, with currency and aesthetics but we haven't linked the notion of values to society, which I think normally there is a link, unless it's a purely personal individual "what's it worth to me" . . .

NEL: Consensus values.

Q: Tell me what relations you were able to detect. Consensus values would be those shared by a group or by a section of a country or a country.

NEL: Well, in currency value is what is placed on them. It's kind of weird, like in gold, to take out this enormous amount of labor to take it out of the ground, then it will be sold and bring America's gold on the gold exchange and be put back underground in Fort Knox. What kind of logic is that?

Q: The crucifix of the gold standard.

NEL: So you know I'm interested in those kinds of anomalies.

Q: Again, just to provoke, you're talking about values in a commercial sense, the worth of an object by convention and we agree that a piece of paper would be worth a meal or something like that. Did this extend in your own thoughts or training beyond the commercial side of it to the values, the ethical values, or is it outside of the area . . . ?

NEL: You see I don't think they can be separated, I don't think they can be, this is of course, the huge debate around sort of labor within the capitalist and socialist or communist society, but I think in the end for me, the free will is the crucial deciding factor and I'm really relieved that America did win the Cold War, because I would hate to be in the kind of authoritarian society of ex-racial Germany, having lived through an authoritarian society here and having grown up in it, it's very frightening because it is prescriptive, it is dehumanizing on both sides and it's frightening because there is an obligation of personal responsibility and there's people who actually stand their ground, I mean we've had such remarkable figures, be it Mandela, or Tutu or Nadine Gordimer who were in some ways really able to stand their ground for many of us, it's difficult to do that.

Q: So, Mandela, Tutu, Gordimer, you feel in a sense were protectors of a type of ethos that you needed to survive intellectually?

NEL: I mean, they shaped the nature of this country, just by Mandela's humanity and at the same time his strength, I mean he couldn't take the gun dealer and eventually he had to become a freedom fighter, because you can't stand in front of the firing line.

Q: Now, you've mentioned three well-known figures, what about yourself? In your work, or the work of the composite number of people in your field, there's been a lot of talk of theatre as a work of social transformation, dance, and the plastic arts. I'm not assuming that you took this up because of some other purpose . . .

NEL: You see, I think there has been a bit. Art became a cultural weapon in this country to try and transform society and myself and my work are a bit of an anomaly here because I was interested in world art, in sacred art, in values that extended beyond political boundaries and so I came in for quite a bit of criticism, because I wasn't taking a

political position, and I've just had to live with it. We all do what we need to do, but that means I am quite often excluded from the books of the importance of African art, because I'm in the new book on African art by Sir Williams, I'm not in the book because I don't really fit the category.

Q: Those who are not sucked up with the commitment and who don't have a program behind that suffer as a result.

NEL: Well, I don't think I've ever suffered. My career it's, I spend half the year in the States, and I'm working on a show for the Smithsonian.

Q: I'm not suggesting that you suffer, but there is maybe a certain skepticism, a lack of recognition among those who insist that art must be used for that purpose?

NEL: It's fabulous that Hogarth and Blake both existed at the same time.

Q: I never thought of that, they're so different.

NEL: And you know, the one doesn't, I greatly admire Hogarth.

Q: One's a satirist, the other's a romantic.

NEL: There's an extraordinary view of a moment in time that there has been a kind of weariness at times, but as I said, one does what one needs to do.

Q: Hogarth ridicules, I think, the bourgeois society of his time, and Blake was on some other planet, I believe.

NEL: He was aware of society, but at the same time, he was a mystic, he looked beyond form. And you know my interest, I suppose, in science and in sacred art and physics, does have a different vanishing point.

Q: Does the durability and production of our analysis through the centuries, is this something that preoccupies you? Frankly, I think we remember Blake before we remember Hogarth. Blake was the less politically conscious, through his work, yet it has a greater permanence, is this something you deal with or would you rather follow your intellectual curiosity.

NEL: I mean, there have been times where I remember Fritjof Capra talking about Africa and mystical art and he said to me, politics can be important in art, but who was the prime minister of France at the time Gauguin was painting, and eventually I remembered it was Clemenceau, but one had to find it.

Q: Wonderful point.

NEL: In the end, I'm not interested in programmatic art, I'm interested in using art as a way to understand the world, for myself, and to be able to share those insights with the public.

Q: Moments of political stress will come and go, the art object will not, it will remain. What was on their mind when they made the Elgin marbles?

NEL: In the end, it is a matter of following what you need to do with intensity, so after my period of study at Berkeley I came back to South Africa, and I've taught here ever since, but now I only teach every six months of the year, because I either teach in London, or Los Angeles, or New York or Copenhagen or I'm curating.

Q: I'm more likely to see you in Copenhagen than Los Angeles and I hope I do.

NEL: I spend more time with scientists and in looking at that kind of view of the world, I do myth artists, at present the resident artist on the most ambitious project ever taken to map two square degrees of the universe, so I've been working with a team that are based throughout the world, and we've had 1/10th of Hubble's time every two year period, and we work with the Subaru telescope on this 1300 ft high volcano in Hawaii and with a very large array telescope and with Chandra, another telescope up in deep space, and our interface with the astronomers, and I work with actual data and with imagery, and that work is being exhibited in London and here in South Africa, and in the states and that body of work grows.

Q: Help the reader, there appears to be a great leap intellectually. Help the reader understand the relation between collecting data to map two square degrees of the universe and the production of human art.

NEL: Well, all science is or was to understand the ineffable or incomprehensible, makes you submit a full diagram of what both art and science do constantly and so, when we are dealing with the data which is just coming in on the visible spectrum through Hubble, we are also looking at data that comes in from infra red radio, and that has to be codified in particular ways.

Q: This is the data that was emitted...

NEL: Millions of years ago. And that all gets stacked on top of one another to get us to -

Q: Do you feel you are a member of this team as a scientist, as an artist, or is that a specious distinction?

NEL: No, no I don't think it is. I mean, that's been a privilege is to be a part of this team, and to be at this cutting edge of how we see ourselves positioned in the universe, we always are trying to understand where we are, as a species we hate to be lost, so we've come up with grids and land sets all these things to constantly position ourselves on the planet, and latitude and longitude which we've now projected from deep space into our

field, which is basically three thumbprints by three thumbprints, just below the constellation of Leo, and it's the largest contiguous area to be really studied to this enormous depth and part of the team has been involved with Hubble upgrade and we...

Q: What are the nationalities of the other people working on this?

NEL: Well, we meet each other up in Paris, the Franken Institute in Munich, so French, German, the Institute in Kyoto, so Japanese, Swiss, American, Russian, it's an international team.

Q: Could you have done this, as anything other than a South African exposed to Europe and America?

NEL: Can you be a bit more specific?

Q: Many hypothetical in there. Let me ask it the opposite way. You are a South African, who has been exposed to American and European approaches to the things that you are interested in, do you feel that that puts you in an advantageous position to achieve what you have achieved?

NEL: Well, I think that being South African has given me many rich gifts, it's been a remarkable country to grow up in, with all of its difficulties, but a remarkable group of people on ground level, if I look at the care and the joy and the sense of sharing that still happens on the streets, I can't believe that people will be so generous and warm and caring after being put through the apartheid system after so long, and then you know, the ultimate pinnacle of it is the kind of forgiveness that one sees in Mandela, which is so deeply moving, that has its foundations in politics, but you know, it has its strength in the kind of philosophical and the spiritual, you know, because his ability to include and to be generous, transforms everything. I think South Africa could still be very much in the place where Israel is if we hadn't had Mandela as cleric, and to have that sense of leadership.

Q: And the sense of antagonism of its neighbors and not finding a way to actually resolve it. Now, you just transcended borders and expressed some things about human nature, I have to be prosaic and ask you about your American experience.

NEL: I think that America has this astounding ability to create almost infinite potential, as I perceived it, and certainly how I experienced it as a student. I was surprised by my American lecturers and students, initially, not wanting to know everything about South Africa when I arrived, and who was interested were the young black students who sought me out and wanted to know, and one of the really interesting things that they had to say, one of them made a comment that blacks in South Africa are really lucky. So, I said, why? You must be joking. He said, well, at least the racism is committed to law, and that in a sense it could be fought against, and in America, that there is a covert racism that these young students felt, that was almost impossible to address, and left them extraordinarily angry and it was quite shocking to hear that and to have that followed a

few months later by the Rodney King, the riots in Los Angeles. So, for me it's extraordinary how one can point fingers at each other, but in the end we have to be aware of each other's human needs, and be able to understand how to transform a society, and the big problems are the higher the walls become, the separation between people and the lack of communication, the more fear there is between people. And I think materialism often creates these barriers between people and that we see the high walls here in Johannesburg and see what's happening behind the wall of the next door neighbors.

Q: Many high walls, earlier.

NEL: And in the end, the high walls, they are out of fear, and you are not quite sure who is in jail, you know. I'm going to have to run.

Q: Karel Nel, thank you so much for this conversation. I hope this is something we can continue. This is an amazing corpus of knowledge and experience that you've shared with us today.

NEL: Well, thank you and I'm sorry that this has jumped all over but that is part of the nature of my life.

Q: This is the nature of oral history. Thanks, Karel.

End of interview