

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

Internationalism: To Tanzania

Clip 1: Courtland Cox & Geri Augusto “Looking for a Critical Mass”

Courtland Cox: At least for me, Charlie said we had run out of ideas. I, well let me, I'll just say it and then we'll decide whether I had run out of ideas. I had come to the view that if we were going to solve both the economic and political problems that we faced in the United States, we did not have the horsepower here in order to do it. So it wasn't so much of I don't know what to do therefore, no, I was deliberate to me, can we figure out how we make alliances beyond you know where we are in the United States to begin to figure out a critical mass that could help us. I kept looking for a critical mass and I knew we couldn't get it here. Even after having been, especially having been to Lowndes, looking at Black Power, looking at all this stuff, I just knew that what we had wasn't sufficient, it just won't get us where we at. And we had to look outside this country you know and then you know I found in Africa the same kind, at least in the leadership level outside of individuals, the same kind of relationship that I left here in the United States you know I said well you know I mean we could talk about individuals, Walter Bgoya all these people who were with us and so forth but if you looked at the leadership of Africa, in terms of its governments and stuff, I mean those guys were like non-serious actors.

Geri Augusto: I think what precedes looking for a new politics or a government that serves is still I would say a basic question which is about definition of self. Definition of self and other human beings. Definition of yourself and of other people and therefore then you could think about all these other things. And I think that part of our search was for a definition of self that was broader, that was different that was changed that didn't pick up and reprise the same things that we had had playing out throughout 500 years of Black history I mean really I think that the self-definition, which is far from over, precedes these other things.

Clip 2: Geri Augusto “We Had a Lot of Problems”

Geri Augusto: A lot of times people have asked me over the years -- was it your dream to go to Africa? No. It was not a dream. We were not going, people came out of the Center for Black Education, people came out of SNCC, who came out of the Drum & Spear work, we weren't looking, we weren't searching for roots. We did not go to Africa looking to discover our roots. It was not a dream. It was not even a Marcus Garvey type of thing, you know, a dream of a certain kind of Africa. It was precisely that now we have a lot of problems, it's the '60s, brought to the fore a lot of problems for Black people, you know, in the United States. Plus, you know, this kind of pressing down on you that you are an inferior person and in particular not that you can't do things well but that you don't have the capacity to think. You don't have the capacity to think abstractly. You don't have the capacity to theorize about anything. You don't have the capacity to come up with your own answers. For anything. And here was a place, a possible place, that real people that are not living in 1860 or 1950, they're living in late '60s early '70s who were independent and them that wasn't were trying to get so. Which is also attractive.

Clip 3: Jennifer Lawson “Consistent with the Work We'd Been Doing”

Jennifer Lawson: So now that we're up to this is around 1969, 1969 and that we are and this is a challenging time because this is also the time when Rap Brown is underground, Angela Davis is underground, so that there is a lot of FBI sort of questions and everything about who we are, what we're

doing and at this point there was also Courtland and Charlie were beginning to do work with the Tanzanians, I met Walter Bgoya through the two of you and through Anne Holloway, Anne Forrester Holloway, we're beginning to have discussions with the Tanzanians about the possibility of working with them for the Sixth Pan African Congress, and there was also discussion about cultural activities that would be related to the Sixth Pan African Congress. So, Courtland and Charlie then go to Tanzania on several trips and they go to Tanzania, and at some point, one of you communicates with me and asks me if I would be willing to come to Tanzania to work as a coordinator with a group of local artists. There was the idea that there would be a cultural center that would be developed for the Sixth Pan African Congress, and there was a West Indian architect who would design this center and that there would be work done with local artists as a part of creating this center, and they wanted someone who would work with the artist and the architect and asked if I would be interested in doing so, and I said yes. I would. And suddenly I find myself then moving to Tanzania. And this was something that was consistent for me with the work that we'd been doing with Drum & Spear and with the Center for Black Education. The Center for Black Education was located in a very close proximity in Washington, D.C. in the northwest neighborhood to Drum & Spear Press. And that we had courses there and there was a large number of people who were associated with the Center for whom the discussion about the role of Africa and the importance of Africa was central.

Clip 4: "Because of Nyerere"

Geri Augusto: The University of Dar Es Salaam, it should be said at this time, was in a fervor of competing and circulating and boiling sets of ideas about politics and what should happen. So you had everything, the Trotskyites, the Maoists, your Libyans with the *Green Book*, not a *Little Red Book* but a green book. You had Swedish social democrats, you had, I mean that University of Dar Es Salaam was a boiling pot of radical ideas of various stripes. So for me, coming from where the big thing had been race, the critical thing had been race, I was raised in a Black nationalist household, I think one could say that, my mother was the quintessential race woman. This is the first time that I meet another dimension of what today people call intersectionality. Okay, so it's not just race. It's also race and class. And Walter Rodney was very critical in that because he was gentle. He would say, I remember us going to the beach sometime on Sunday, this is after everybody had left, so this is now over into another period. But he would say, "So you believe Black is always right and the best thing?" Something like that, kind of joking. "What do you think of Idi Amin?" I would drown in the water, it's horrible. "Oh, so it's not just enough to be Black, you might have to make you some other ideas. What do you think about Castro?" I'm for it. "Oh, well he's not Black." So he'd just kind of gently walk me through the possibility of considering, and the main thing was that FRELIMO had this line which was critical. FRELIMO, the liberation movement in Mozambique, which is critical for me. They said, we're not really against peoples, we're against regimes. We don't really have a problem with Portugal, as in Portuguese people, Portuguese language, Portuguese food. It's the Portuguese colonial regime, in alliance with South African Apartheid and the imperialist United States and so this is a different set of arguments that we began to get.

Charlie Cobb: And let me just say before you go on, that was, that ferment was larger than, in my view, the university --

Geri Augusto: Oh yeah

Charlie Cobb: Dar Es Salaam was like the capital of radical thought in Africa, I mean --

Geri Augusto: About everything, economics, politics, how to do history --

Courtland Cox: I mean the attraction was Nyerere --

Charlie Cobb: Because of Nyerere

Geri Augusto: Climate created --

Courtland Cox: He was the person that opened up space that allowed people to think differently. I mean, we didn't go, we could have gone to other places but nobody wanted to go to other places because not only he was thinking differently about his country, but he was also, he was one of the guys, he would entertain people in the presidential palace but he didn't want to live there.

Geri Augusto: He didn't live there.

Charlie Cobb: He didn't live there.

Courtland Cox: I mean, you know, I mean my sense was he was open to talking about what it meant to really govern in a way that was beyond neo-colonialism. I think that was very important to us. And also supporting, you know, the liberation movements, which was not a popular thing to do at the time. So, I mean, I think Tanzania, I mean, while while we were we were you know, Black consciousness was important as a, you know, here in the states, what if we looked for people we wanted to align with, we went beyond that discussion, we wanted to see people who were trying to do something that was meaningful to people's lives.

Clip 5: Geri Augusto & Charlie Cobb "Kiswahili, A Political Language"

Geri Augusto: Kiswahili is the one African language, indigenous, which became the language of political thought. So when there wasn't a word, there were many words that were taken, like Uhuru means freedom, but Ujamaa, they fashioned it into what it meant. The literal translation of jamaa is family, so Ujamaa, it could be familyhood, but they imbued it with a meaning. The example that always stood out to me was that they had a word for imperialism. And it's Ubeberu, and Ubeberu, when I ask okay what, so this is making up a language. Kiswahili it existed really 400 years or so but they made up a political language that gets adopted all over Africa and all over the world. So beberu is the billy goat. So when two billy goats butt heads over a piece of territory and everybody else is scattering and the grass is trampled and these two are butting, that's what beberu means. So Ubeberu is a style of politics where the powerful, and you think of Soviet Union, United States, are fighting and then the fallout is on the Africans and so forth. And they made up that word. So if you're explaining to your people, in their own language, which doesn't happen even today in most African countries. You, your university teach, your primary schools teach it, you establish a publishing house to print it. In the radio they're talking on it. If you want to come to testify in Parliament in Tanzania, Bunge you could do, not you could, you had to do it in Kiswahili. It's important to know that of the 54 independent countries in Africa, there're probably only three that you could name that do it that way, so it meant that a woman who came from a village upcountry and had a complaint and said that I'm going to a session of Parliament could understand everything that was going on. What were the other ones done in? English, French, Spanish, and not that they had a Parliament, Portuguese. So the official public languages. For Tanzania to be that kind of place. So you could see the mix, all the stuff you're getting by being in Tanzania. So after they asked --

Charlie Cobb: Including the president being on the radio.

Geri Augusto: Yeah.

Charlie Cobb: You know, telling political stories --

Geri Augusto: Eloquently.

Charlie Cobb: As folktales.

Geri Augusto: Eloquently.

Charlie Cobb: But they were political stories. And but he himself was is kind of the Tanzanian version of Fireside Chats but much more political than Roosevelt's.

Geri Augusto: He would do them outside, under a place called Mnazi Mmoja, One Coconut Tree. In the middle of town and why he would be having these, not to drum you up for the next election but to discuss the oil prices or to discuss Portuguese have bombed southern Tanzania again or to discuss Apartheid or to discuss racism in the United States. I mean these are the things, and by his example, other leading politicians would be speaking in Kiswahili.

Clip 6: Jennifer Lawson “The Stories that Were Being Told”

Jennifer Lawson: When I moved from Kurasini to the Y and then from the Y to an apartment, I had an apartment in the center of at that time Tan -- Dar Es Salaam. There was a central market, Ilala, Ilala Central Market, and it was a communications hub, it was a real center of activity because it was the largest food market. And they put in a block of new apartment buildings and so I then was fortunate enough to get an apartment there. Right across from me in another apartment building was the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah and he was there working on a new book and that I had a group of us in order to learn Kiswahili, we started taking courses at the university and then we eventually hired, University of Dar Es Salaam, and we eventually hired our professor there who I think was Grant Kamenju I think that was his name...Yeah, so there was a group of us who then would come to we would meet in my apartment and we would be tutored in Kiswahili and that through Kamenju I also met some other Kenyan writers, because he was also a writer and so I also met some other Kenyan writers. But Ayi Kwei Armah, living right across from me then, became a -- we started a dialogue and that I had met this was we're talking now about 1969, 1970, in fact 1970, and that I had met Kansi in Cuba and that Kansi and I had become pen pals from that experience, and so when I arrived in Tanzania, Kansi was in Mozambique and that, but that when he returned he became Ayi Kwei's roommate and so they then lived across --

Charlie Cobb: That's an odd combination.

Jennifer Lawson: Yes, in fact, and so here you had, and Kansi was a writer as well so you had Kansi and Ayi Kwei right across from me, and then Walter Rodney was now there as well, and we then all started talking about literature and this was a conversation that really Ayi Kwei had initiated and about what where we were in terms of the literature for our people and the stories, the historical and contemporary stories that were being told. Another person who was sometimes a participant in this discussion but only on an occasional was Willie Kgositsile [20:28] who was now the poet laureate in South Africa.

Clip 7: “Beyond a Citizenship of Any Particular Country”

Courtland Cox: we began to, in these conversations, began to redefine ourselves as beyond a citizenship of any particular country. That we define our -- we began to see ourselves as part of a movement going forward that was able to be influenced, to be able to get various kinds of you know sustenance, intellectual sustenance and so forth, across borders. And I think that that was at that particular time considered very dangerous because I think beyond, beyond the “definition” that we had of being Pan-Africanist and so forth, the discussions we had were very, very important in solidifying who we were and what we wanted to do. So, I think you know because of those kinds of things when we came back with the Sixth Pan African Congress, we were you know well known, people were comfortable with us, and in addition we had C.L.R. with us but we were known quantities and known entities.

Charlie Cobb: Yeah I think from our side what we had learned or really, and I think it’s driven by the SNCC experience, is that there’s a much bigger, richer world out there that we can gain access to and learn from and that’s on our side. And then from the government’s side, meaning the U.S. government’s side, their concern was that we’re being welcomed by many parts of the world you know I mean there are people like Julius Nyerere or Fidel Castro or Sékou Touré all saying yes, we’re interested in what you’re thinking. We’re interested in what you’re trying to do.

Geri Augusto: This is why I sometimes describe this as SNCC’s foreign policy because that’s how it would seem. These are a set of people who come out of a struggle that was local, native to this country, and now they have developed a world profile, they’re all still young, ain’t got no money, and they’ve developed a world profile in these places that are making, attempting radical transformations and welcomed as such. And each one of these countries would have had a U.S. Embassy, and the World Bank was there and Red Cross was there, all the major American entities would be there, so why would these people who show up who have no money, may not even have a decent suit or clothes and are welcomed not just by ordinary people but by the head of state? By the head of state.