

ANNE LEWIS AND JACK O'DELL IN DIALOGUE AT DOXA

This is the transcript of a dialogue between Civil Rights Movement veteran activist and strategist Jack O'Dell and documentary filmmaker Anne Lewis ([Anne Braden: Southern Patriot](#)). O'Dell was a leading advisor to Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., an editor of the progressive magazine **Freedomways**, and a colleague of racial and economic justice activist Anne Braden. The conversation took place in Vancouver on May 7, 2013 at the **DOXA Documentary Film Festival** after the screening of [Anne Braden: Southern Patriot](#) and focused on the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement for today's social change activists.

Moderator

Well if there's a film that I think exemplifies the Justice Forum, it's the Anne Braden: Southern Patriot film. That was really such a beautiful film to watch and I'm all goose bumps from watching that film. I just want to let you know that the question and answer period that we're going to now start is going to be recorded on CGFS, the student radio station for SFU... We're first going to have Jack O'Dell come up to the stage and then Anne Lewis, the filmmaker, will join him.

(Reads Jack O'Dell biography from the program.)

Jack O'Dell

I'm very delighted to be here. We rejoice and are exceedingly glad that the DOXA Film Festival has chosen this wonderful film by Anne Lewis and Mimi Pickering. It has brought to attention a piece of American history and has underscored the importance of documentary film in our lives today. I learned a great deal from this evening of experience. I have to digest it. It was one of the most effective and well-done films I've ever seen – I've seen a few films – because the detail is there and the sense of purpose and the sense of direction, the compassion, the humanism, the importance of integrity, all of these qualities are in this film. I hope that those of us who have had the privilege of seeing this will be able to work out a scheduling that will enable others, perhaps in other venues, to share this kind of experience that we have had. This film is a masterpiece of documentary work and it is the kind of art that lives with us if we digest it. It's the kind of art that turns our mind to goals and achievements that really matter. There's so much in this film. I'm just glad we had a chance to see it.

When Dr. King was coming out of the first attempt on his life in New York in 1958, the press asked him, what does your movement hope to achieve. His remarks were, we hope to achieve a nation at peace, a nation at peace with its own conscience. That is a powerful observation and Anne Braden's contributions, her life story, centers around this question of our conscience. When you heard her say that segregation is simply wrong, that is an observation that is filled with humanism. And when she acted upon this, she did so in concrete ways to make it real. So I want to, before we have our questions and exchange, outline three or four things that are related to how we keep alive this tradition.

She said that segregation was simply wrong. Millions of Americans thought that it was fine. They thought the very opposite. But she acted on that with a sense of the new consciousness when she and her husband Carl decided to help this black family have a home. Now other things were going on at the time. The Supreme Court had said that in the field of education the doctrine of separate but equal is unconstitutional. But Anne was helping a black family buy a home in a white neighborhood. You can see the interest in keeping segregation alive through the courts getting this or that part of the segregation system reduced or nullified but leaving segregation very much intact. Can we imagine what it means for a black family to buy a house in a white neighborhood when we have seen, even in the North, red-lining. Blacks couldn't even get a down payment for a house. When Dr. King took the movement to the North to deal with open housing, he said that was the worst situation he had ever seen in his life – the violence. People were up in the trees throwing down rocks at the marchers.

The mythology was that if a black family moves into your house, the value of that house is going to deteriorate. This is one of the underpinnings of the big lie technique that there must be segregated neighborhoods. But Anne Braden broke through that. We can remember times in Birmingham when we had to stand armed guard at a house because it was threatened with bombing by the Ku Klux Klan. We should also look at the systemic question of a black family buying a house in a white neighborhood. The black family would take the risk of buying the house, then there would be a campaign for the white families around there to move and they better sell quickly because the blacks are coming, so they would sell the house to the real estate agent for less than the house was worth just to get out of there. When the black family moved in, the price went up more than the white family had paid. So the real estate interests were able to profit from this racist ethos. You know, pays good money.

The next step beyond beginning to act on our consciousness is to inform our consciousness with information. President Roosevelt in 1938 gave a speech to the nation – Fireside Chat – in which he called attention to the South. One third of the nation, he said, “ill-clothed, ill-housed, and ill-fed.” That is the legacy of racism. It's the legacy of institutional racism. Overcoming this was what the promise was. We're entering the World War II period and this question of a good life after the war. The Atlantic Charter was adopted – freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly and political associations. This was the aim of the War according to the Atlantic Charter, which was adopted by President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill on an aircraft carrier outside Quebec. And so the Atlantic Charter was one of the documents that outlined what the intentions of the Allies were. The black community took this seriously and we adopted a Double V Campaign – victory abroad, yes we want to fight fascism, but victory at home as well.

Of course we had our own examples of the war – Camp Claiborne in Louisiana where I was living at the time before going into the Merchant Marines. Prisoners of war from Germany were being brought back to Camp Claiborne. And black troops were there to watch them, to guard and see that they didn't break away. The Nazi troops could go on

to the PX that was on the Camp area, but the black American soldiers who were guarding them, could not. We fought the war in a segregated army, navy, Marine Corps. One of my buddies Andy Carver died on the beach at Salerno. We were from New Orleans; we were on a mop crew together, just a case in point. And when I heard about his dying, I had to think about it you know. He never knew what it was to be served at a lunch counter in New Orleans or to ride in the front of the bus or ... So there were many realities that would drive us to take a stand with regards to this segregated society.

Then there's the fact that organization decides everything. Once our conscience is set and our action is set and our memory is affirmed by the experience that tells us this action which we are about to take is right, then the question of organization decides everything. The white southerners who were our allies had three different organizations. In the period of FDR it was the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, based in New Orleans. In the later period of the late fifties and early sixties it was the Southern Regional Council, headquartered in North Carolina. And then Anne Braden in the later years formed the Southern Organizing Committee in Birmingham. You know these were organizations around which a person of conscience could exercise some rights for change.

There was a book in 1942 that came out that was very popular called "What Does the Negro Want" and it had a number of people, prominent college professors and sociologists and so forth in it. "What Does the Negro Want" and this was considered a real contribution to the society. Well it was quite a few years later that Aretha Franklin spelled it out. She said, r...e...s...p...e...c...t. The question was, was the society prepared to concede that. We heard the same question when Jesse Jackson ran for president forty-two years later – well what does Jesse really want? Jesse wants to be president. Well now wait a minute. What does Jesse really want? As if there's some mystery about some African American person or family desiring the same things everyone else is promised.

Organization helps to implement the dreams and the vision that we have of change. We build through grassroots movements. All of us learn what the problem is and how we can seek to undo it. We draw upon past experience as a way of affirming that at this stage the tactic of this movement is correct, and then we draw upon a larger culture that sustains our action. Whether it's bebop or country music or the poetry of some outstanding rapper, these cultural contributions help us confirm and affirm that what we are doing makes a lot of sense.

And so we are in a new period of such pain, if you will, and such challenge, such possibilities of change but also possibilities of backward motion taking us to a very difficult stage of barbarism. I'm reminded of something I picked up recently, a poem called "The Deserted Village" by Oliver Goldsmith:

*Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay*

Oliver Goldsmith wrote this in the 1780's. But you know we can see the deserted villages around us today as technology has eliminated certain types of work. It would be a good test of Nat King Cole's song, Route 66, to see how many deserted villages there are that one time sustained life, regular work, families, good schools, the basis for college education. So much is at stake – to see that the deserted villages of our time are allowed to flower and once again play a role of unifying our communities.

It's a long haul, but a good haul. In our deserted villages, we in Canada are reminded that our problems today are part of the metabolism of empire. Britain, Canada, United States, our deserted villages are part of the metabolism of empire. And so we are at that point in our history where we know certain facts and now there is a new arena in which facts and truth will bring us to a different day. Thank you very much.

Moderator

So I'd like to invite filmmaker Anne Lewis to the podium please.

Anne Lewis

First I want to thank DOXA and particularly thank Jack O'Dell for that wonderful talk and thank you all for coming. I looked up doxa because I had no idea what it meant. It's an opinion or belief that's argued openly, that's debated openly. And in thinking about this film, even free expression or right to hear ideas is still not a right that we have.

I think there are perhaps three reasons why this film might be unsettling. I do hope it is unsettling, that people are somewhat uncomfortable with it. Most of us really believe that we have freedom of speech and that is probably not completely true -- I think that we need to recognize that. The second thing that might be somewhat unsettling is the idea of white supremacy as opposed to prejudice or racism. It's very easy for us to say that we are not racist or that we are not prejudiced, although I'm not sure that either of those are completely true, but we can then separate ourselves from people who are and kind of look down on them without ever really committing to economic transformation or to political transformation or even to the kinds of things we might do in our own communities. If we take on that idea of white supremacy, it becomes a very clear understanding of our society and then we really do have to do something beyond feeling critical of other people. So I think that that's an unsettling and disturbing idea that we need to think about and debate openly. The third idea is the idea of transformation, of some kind of vision for the future that Anne talks about with great optimism. CT Vivian also speaks with great optimism, and I think the film as a whole looks towards that future with optimism and a sense that this is a possibility. And that idea, I think, we really need to commit ourselves to as well. What's unsettling about that and I think Jack alluded to that a number of times is the question of organization. We cannot come up with that future as individuals. It's got to be a collective decision. And so that puts us in a situation where we really have to organize which is a very difficult thing for all of us, to be a part of a collective voice. You know it was great to see all of the unions that were mentioned in the trailer that are committed to this festival. That is one model of organization that we could look towards. The other is the kind of organizations that have come from the grassroots level, and then there's the truly transformative civil rights movement that we

saw in the U.S. South and are still seeing the remnants of. I think we should move to questions and answers.

Question

The whole issue of people using communism as a reason to fight against this movement instead of focusing on what they were actually fighting for, just kind of using that as a distraction. Is that something that went on for an extended period of time?

Anne Lewis

The use of anti-communism or red baiting is one that has been bitterly felt in the U.S.; I don't know if it's true in Canada. But it has been a kind of anti-intellectual argument that has not allowed free discussion of ideas that might oppose capitalism. And it was used very extensively in the U.S. South – if you said that you were against segregation you were automatically assumed to be a communist therefore the enemy of the United States. And that was enforced, of course there was McCarthy but then it was the Un American Activities Committee that lasted until it was broken up by the mass civil rights movement in the sixties. So what we think of as McCarthyism – and McCarthy descended into alcohol and lunacy in the early 50's – really continued on through the sixties, reemerged in the 70's, and we still have versions of it today.

Jack O'Dell

Anti-communism had as its purpose creating an atmosphere of fear that could be translated into stymieing the labor movement. That was one of its main casualties. In 1949, the CIO expelled a million members because they opposed the Marshall plan. I was in the National Maritime Union at the time.

Now the black community had depended upon the CIO to be the force that would organize the South. The CIO had organized five million workers in the 1930's and we had gotten the Wagner Act passed, social security came out of that action, and the double victory that we were talking about was looking forward to the fact that the South would be organized into the CIO unions and with its no discrimination policy things would be fundamentally different. That obviously did not happen. The net result was that the CIO lost much of its support. It ended up as part of the AFL-CIO and subservient to the AFL, which was largely made of Jim Crow unions. Many of the railroad brotherhoods, for example, in the AFL still had white only clauses in their constitutions.

This question of expelling the communists was very critical to having “the American Century.” The communists on the issue of race were the conscience of the country. As a result, the United States is one of the few countries in the world that doesn't have a multi-party electoral system. We're stuck with two parties, both of them are controlled by big business and we try to hold onto our democracy and improve it within that context. The anti-communist crusade of the late 40's and early 50's had a direct bearing on this reality.

Question

Hi, just wanted to thank you so much for this film. It's incredible. It was great to see all the archival historical footage put in context and I'm so grateful for the speakers here tonight and your wealth of experience. I'm interested in your individual takes on the idea of new technologies in terms of organizing. If you look at what's happened with Arab Spring, if you look at the use of these technologies which are so different than the ones that are discussed in the film, the ones that were used in the sixties, the ones that I've been a part of, my mom, my grandmother, and it seems to me that that combination of media and new technology is what's going to carry these ideals and the fight against systemic racism forward globally and for the next generations.

Anne Lewis

This is going to sound strange coming from a filmmaker but I'm also a union person and I cannot tell you how strongly I believe in people talking to each other face-to-face. I think new technologies are as important and revolutionary as the invention of the telephone or perhaps the printing press. They are wonderful ways for us to learn more about the world and to perhaps have some communication. What they don't do is restructure society. And the sadness for me in the Egyptian situation at this point is that all of that technology and all of that wonderful spirit, which really was people physically going to the square, also was organized in part by unions that were fighting before then, was not so unorganized, and yet it did bring down Mubarak but it did not transform that society. And so I think that there are limits to technology – not to say that it isn't a wonderful development but I think it's limited.

Jack O'Dell

I concur in that general observation. I think it's very important to appreciate talking to people on a one-on-one basis or in small groups. It is not how fast we reach people; it is how deeply we reach them. I mean the speed has its quality, I mean if you get something out fast – we're going to meet – there's a use of that. But we used to say that on Sunday church work is done in the churches and Monday night meeting is the real work of the church – feed the hungry, clothe the unclothed, preach good news and study war no more. In those meetings people gathered together in order to hear the latest information on our movement – and this was all over the South. We would carry with us the information from the Monday night meeting over the next two or three weeks.

There's no substitute for communicating face-to-face and in well-organized groupings where you can get feed back. That's not watching a screen. Fast is okay but it should not possess us as the ultimate way to organize. Our ability to communicate with each other is based upon our personhood. That's what we inherit through the long centuries of evolution – the ability to speak with each other and to be heard and to listen. The technology that takes that and runs with it has to be used in a way that's going to facilitate what we're talking about and not become a substitute, because the substitute will not allow the results of our conversation to hold together. Just being able to look somebody in the eye, listen, give your opinion, see what they think, and you leave there with a camaraderie that a telephone call isn't likely to produce nor anything even more sophisticated.

Question

I'm interested in the contemporary situation in the South, in particular amongst the youth, teenagers and this sort of thing that are going to school I assume in integrated schools and living a more integrated – or maybe they're not. I'm particularly interested in what these studies have shown in Vancouver and Canada where young people see this assimilation of immigrants and that basically seem to say, what are you even talking about that's such a big deal. That, by your expression has not happened in the South in the United States.

Anne Lewis

Well it's happened in the South probably as much as in the North – perhaps more. There have been a bunch of studies of what we're calling re-segregation of the schools. So after the decision in '54, it didn't mean that schools were integrated. Those were hard fought battles. And the busing crisis that you see in the film was one of the hardest fought battles – to integrate the schools. Schools were increasingly integrated up through that point. Since then it's gone backwards and Austin, Texas, which is thought of as a very progressive city, is the tenth most segregated school system in the South. We're very close to a Latino majority in the City so it's not just African American segregation it's also Latino segregation and it's by neighborhood. So it's a reflection of the neighborhood segregation and it's very intense and there's no question of equality. The white schools are much better than the African American schools or the Latino schools and so we have a perpetuation of that inequality. So I have to say that it's not resolved.

Of course I don't know very much about Canada but I was very interested because I'm a tourist here looking at the tourist brochures and it looks like there's nobody but white people in Canada from the tourist brochures so I wonder who the country is for and how much segregation there actually might be. The United States North is very segregated as well.

Jack O'Dell

To pick up on that, I think we'd be accurate in saying that there is a formal desegregation racially but the poor are now segregated and African Americans are a large percentage of the poor. And so it's the shift from race to class and it is just as effective. It is no accident that the schools in our community are bad. They're not bad because they're segregated; they're bad because there's no money because everything that's public is under assault. And the idea of having a quality education is for people who are at an economic level in their families that they will be doctors, lawyers, teachers, technicians, and so forth. This is the great challenge for us but it is important that we now appreciate the fact that the pendulum has shifted somewhat to a need for an emphasis on class as well as race. And that dialectic has to be worked out in such a way that this large component of the population who incidentally in the United States -- Asian Americans and Latinos and blacks -- are a majority of the electorate. So the struggle for democracy then is being placed on a new qualitatively different organization of society – that is, the used-to-be minorities have become the majority. The American people will be able to sustain this institution called the public school system to the extent that those populations are served with the idea that the leadership of the country is to come from that group.

Question

Considering the change in the political landscape in the United States, from what angle can one be an activist? Like it seems so defused, the different ways of addressing what is happening in the States, and it seems like there was the Occupy movement and that's about all I heard about personally as a Canadian.

Anne Lewis

Well that's something, right? I think you have a very volatile society in the United States and there has been a lot of organization and there will be more – around the environment, particularly environmental justice; immigration – we certainly saw big demonstrations not that many years ago; from working class people who are still trying to organize unions to people trying to find peace and safety within their communities, I think we have a lot of movement that's just not being covered very well. Whether we will unite and we will transform the society once more, I don't know, but certainly in terms of the women's movement we're fighting a horrible repression of the women's movement in Texas right now, but we are fighting. And I think that that's probably what doesn't get reported. The fight for gay rights and lesbian rights is very much with us and I think will continue until some justice is found.

Jack O'Dell

I concur and I would just add that here in Canada as well as in the United States housing, health care, the rights of minorities, there are great issues of this moment in history having to do with wealth and the environment which effects all of us deeply. We have the scientific work explaining it but we have not found the avenues for organizing around this knowledge. This knowledge needs to become the property of people at every walk of life because (I think it's one of the last things we saw in the film) the spiraling of economic and political life in the country carries with it the possibility of a fascist ascendancy in the United States and that would be a tragedy for the world.

And so in every area there is a need for forward motion in the society and confidence in the possibilities for change. These problems that we're facing are not beyond our ability to solve them. There are scientific solutions that are being worked out every day that are consistent with democracy, but in the United States we have to overcome this idea of American exceptionalism, which is an infantile disorder that has prevented people from coming to grips with reality. These are challenging times. r. King said in his Riverside Church Speech that the world expects of America a maturity we may not be able to achieve. I think we have to grab that challenge with all of our might and say we will achieve that maturity. And that maturity will be a gift to the world because without it the world will stand in danger of an America that is very dangerous. Thank you.