

Interview with Abdul Alkalimat by Brian Dolinar on September 26, 2011 in Urbana, Illinois.

BD: Tell me how you first recall learning about Ollie Harrington, whether it was through his cartoons, or how you first heard his name?

AA: Yes, it was through the cartoons. I'm from Chicago and a life-long reader of the *Defender* and got involved in Black Studies early on, so I knew of those cartoons. I was the director of Black Studies here at for almost ten years. Then various difficulties emerged and I wanted to have some space. So I left the University and I got a teaching gig at the JFK Institute for North American Studies in Berlin. I went to Berlin with my daughter. She went to school and I taught. Ollie was living in the East. He had the habit of coming to the West to shop. We used to meet at a coffee shop/restaurant right across from the zoo called the *Presse Café*. And I used to go to the East to visit him at his apartment.

BD: So how did you first make contact with him?

AA: I ran into someone at the JFK Institute who had a contact and then I called him up and we arranged a meeting.

BD: Why were you interested?

AA: Well, for several reasons. I have been involved in Left politics and I'm an African American. And so those two things led me to want to talk to people who shared those same experiences.

BD: Do you remember first meeting him at the *Presse Café*?

AA: Yeah, dapper, hipster, really a very positive kind of guy who always had a smile on his face. He was very interested in talking to younger people and sharing his experiences. Once he found out that I had a little bit of knowledge and a lot of interest, he would start telling stories.

Everything from his earlier life in the US, his experiences at Yale, in Harlem. The circumstance that led him to leave the US, go to Mexico, and then from there to go to the south of France, from there to go to Paris, and then Paris to Berlin. There's a whole series of anecdotes and stories of that narrative.

BD: According to his memoirs, his explanation was that he got a tip from somebody working from inside the government, and sometimes he will say it was military intelligence, another time he says it was the FBI, but it was some black agent who met him at a bar and tipped him off that

he was being followed. Ollie asked the guy—why would you risk your job? And the guy holds out his hand and said we both have the same color skin. This was 1952.

AA: The story that he told me was that he was sitting in a bar, the guy says I think you ought to take a vacation, Ollie. He was paying and opened his wallet to get the money and he showed his ID. As Ollie summed up the situation, he said, “Excuse me.” He went to the bathroom and kept on going. Didn’t go home. With his contact here, the CP [Communist Party], he made his way to Mexico, connected with the CP in Mexico.

BD: Mexico City?

AA: It was Mexico City, but it was some other place where he ended up staying.

BD: Because there was a collection of artists at the Taller de Gráfica Popular in Mexico. Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett were there. Margaret Burroughs went down. Was it that same group of folks?

AA: I think so. They put him up. So he stayed and worked there.

BD: As an artist.

AA: Yes. And then he went to, and again these are party connections, he went to France. The CP in France helped him establish himself in the south of France.

BD: Where specifically, do you know?

AA: I actually did a very extensive interview with him. I’ve got to find those tapes. It’s about a two and a half hour interview.

He felt that the time was easing up, he then moves from the south of France to Paris. That’s when his very close association with Wright starts. He, of course, has told that story in print. His very bitter reflections on people like Michel Fabre, that’s an interesting story because I subsequently connect with Fabre and he tells me in this very innocent sort of way that his interest in African Americans comes from his relationship with the French Navy who funded his trip to the U.S. which gave him exposure and contacts.

And his memories of being in Paris, in the cultural scene, and then the trip to Berlin where he said that’s the third library, and collection, and household that he lost. The story he tells is that he’s in this hotel, he went for an interview. He hears this rumbling outside, looks out at tanks, and there he is, stuck. For the next thirty years he is there.

BD: The CP contact, did you get a sense of how early those were?

AA: My sense is that he was very much of an activist when he was in Harlem. I don't have any exact recall of a date or a circumstance when he was recruited or something like that. The main thing is that that was the period, everybody was. So what was your degree? Did you have a card, or did you not have a card? I'm not sure how important that is. In other words, there's a lot of factoids one can have, but in the general mix of things, you can name a lot of names, were they or were they not. But when you step back it doesn't really matter in the sense that—what was their politics, what was their behavior, what did they do? Clearly, he was a person who was within the culture making intellectual comment and political comment. The same is true of Langston Hughes, was he or was he not? The question is—what was the function of Jesse B. Simple? I imagine the FBI would like to know.

BD: Can you tell me anything about Ollie Harrington's appearance when you first recall meeting him?

AA: Well, as I say, he was always a dapper kind of guy, in a sense of always well put together, well groomed, and generationally correct with his language, his behavior. He was what people would have called well-mannered. As I said, a very jovial kind of guy. But was unchanged. I think Ollie remained a Communist even in East Berlin.

BD: So, you start going over to his apartment in East Germany and meeting him there. What was his apartment like, his home life like, his studio?

AA: It was large. You know, tall ceilings, big European apartments. He had a large room that was kind of an office/studio. Typically cluttered, all kinds of works in progress.

The biggest thing was his contradictions with Germany. On the one hand, his belief in the ideology, the critique, and the vision was in contradiction with his experiences in East Germany. For example, there was a bar where the **WHAT???Subway?** stopped. And you had to get off, walk across the street, walk two blocks, and take a left, there would be another block to his apartment. Well, you had to pass a bar. After being in this apartment for so many years, he was attacked by people coming out of this bar. Nazi types. There were neighbors that saw him being attacked and said nothing. That really stuck in his mind as something that reflected the contradictions.

Claude Lightfoot came to East Berlin and they met and were talking. Lightfoot was staying in a facility that was a central committee facility and he was writing a book about the end of racism in East Germany. Ollie said, "That's bullshit. Let me take you to some places and I'll show you

the fact that all the Nazis didn't leave. Underneath the officialdom, there's a reality here." Lightfoot's response was, "You're fucking with my book Ollie." And that was the end of that.

He was trying to explain to me how the problems of a given society were essentially the obstacles that had to be dealt with but did not reflect, in his mind, the end of what he saw as the inevitable progress of humanity.

The other thing that was a massive experience for Ollie and his family was when the wall came down. The papers on the Stasi started coming out and the contradictions, who was reporting on who, etcetera. His wife was a party official, who was working for a radio station in Latin America. The GDR was broadcasting in Latin America. A lot of people were caught up in this process. Families got broken up. It was really a psychological trauma. So they started forming support groups to try to work through this. How could this happen to us? Why did it happen? And how are we going to survive? He was obviously also going through that through her, so that was a very traumatic experience for them. I can remember being over there at times and she was just in a zone, a daze. People committed suicide. It was really a deep experience.

The third thing was, of course, his son. He had concerns that his son would not have had the African American experience as part of his identity. At the same time, be in contradiction to his aspect of German experience.

I was very involved with the Afro-Germans in the West and the I.S.D., which was a nationalist organization of Afro-Germans. I was involved in helping to start that. Actually, there were two of us around during this period, one was Audre Lorde and myself. That was an interesting and strange cooperative in contradiction kind of experience. That became a very important, big organization. I was trying to hook up so we would have at least that connection inside the country. I'm not sure what happened afterwards. That's another connection. I know that there are people in East Berlin that became involved with the I.S.D. and I'm still in touch with them. They have Black History Month now.

BD: Did you get a sense when you were around Ollie, who were his other friends?

AA: I got the sense that he was very isolated, very isolated. He really enjoyed coming over to the West when he finally got papers to be able to do that. I don't remember him introducing me to anybody else. Maybe once, there was a guy who worked in a record store. I think once he either happened to bump into us or it was planned, I don't remember. But he was also on the scene.

We had other experiences, like at the *Presse Café*, one dude jumps up and starts singing this Nazi song, and then starts yelling out. There were other third world people in that place, because it was near the train station. "We know who you are. We don't forget. We're gonna take care of

you.” People started to get up and leave. Eventually, we did as well. It was ever present. This was a tough situation. And I imagine still is. Not unlike Champaign-Urbana.

Ollie reminded me of those of us from the sixties, in the sense that he liked talking about his peers, his generation, and trying to find meaning in what they did.

BD: But his generation being the thirties, that distinct generation.

Yes. And reflecting on the people who changed. He was very proud that he didn’t.

BD: Changed how?

AA: Left politics. Or even being active. Another point was that he was not rewarded for his work in Germany. He tried to submit his stuff for various contests and never won. Then there was a Soviet competition and he submitted and won. It was published in this magazine, and that was a big thing. Another example of being accepted, but not accepted. To tolerate the official line required that. Yet there were people who lived in the same block that he was dealing with for years and years, never said hello. There were so many stories that constantly talked about that contradiction between the official line and the reality.

First of all, the best experience was in France. If you would have said, where would you like to live? I think he would have said Paris. But then again that’s remembering that time and those relationships. Not the buildings or whatever restaurants happened to be there then.

BD: That community of folks.

AA: Exactly. That would be his point of reference. But there was also this longing for Harlem. There was that echo. When I finally met him, his marriage, his kid, that’s what was keeping him there. I remember him trying to muse out what it would be like to pack up and come back to the States. But his main concern was fear for the future of his son

[cut some material already in print about Wright’s death, Chester Himes]

BD: Can you talk more about his politics? His art was his politics. But outside of his art, to what degree was he involved in politics? He doesn’t seem like he was somebody who was participating in marches, sending out letters, and writing essays.

AA: I certainly don’t know about any organizational activity, per se. I do remember him talking about making posters for various campaigns, both in Germany, in Europe, as well as in South America, different contacts. I think some of that came from his wife, because she was connected

to South America. I can remember seeing posters dealing with different countries campaigning against police state activity, and different things. There's similar kinds of themes he has in all his art. So in that sense, I think he was engaged with political activities. You always try to reach people, but one thing is to go to a mass audience, cartoons in the newspapers, it's another thing to design a poster for a political campaign in a particular country. I can remember him talking about that. He was an artist using his art in a political context.

BD: Was kind of Marxist was Ollie? Seeing all these contradictions, why did he remain a Marxist?

AA: That's what I was saying earlier. He believed in the critique of capitalism. He believed in socialism as an answer and he wanted to clarify to me that Germany, or any country's contradictions, weren't equated with that. As he was saying, this is not the socialism that I believe in. It's an experiment. All the Nazis didn't leave. The big Nazis left, but the people who were involved didn't leave, in the West or the East. So there were these problems that remained.

When Claude Lightfoot makes his statement. Claude Lightfoot is a person who, as a party official in the CP, which is associated with the Soviet Union and the GDR, state policy and state practice becomes equated with the theory or ideology of socialism, and therefore one becomes an apologist for that. Ollie was making a distinction. That's the story of Claude Lightfoot writing a defense, a branding, of socialism, the face of the GDR, and not being interested in the contradictions in the GDR that Ollie wanted to expose him to.

BD: What was, for him, the importance of Marxism for black people.

AA: Well, here's a guy who had waited tables in country clubs and had seen the underbelly of the rulers, and been a student at Yale in the art department, and at the same time had lived at the YMCA in Harlem. He had seen these different sides and had chosen the future. Of course, the leading intellectuals and cultural figures also were promoting this. This was the theme of the oppressed in the world. That vision, you could even caricature it and say utopian vision, was something that wasn't destroyed by looking at the specifics of Germany. Him looking at the specifics of fascism in the GDR. And looking at what were the mechanisms of change. So that he benefitted, to some extent, from state policy, but understood the difference between state policy and the reality.

[commentary on Obama moment, loud espresso machine makes inaudible, Black Studies]

BD: You mention Ollie benefitting from state policy He seemed to be well treated in East Germany by the CP. When he was visiting you in West Germany, could he pass back and forth easily because he was in good graces with the CP?

AA: Eventually, he got papers. He didn't have papers when he left. He was there without a passport, without anything, so he couldn't move. Once he got a passport, then he was a US citizen and he could go back and forth through the checkpoint. Had he just had these German papers, he couldn't have done that.

BD: In any other ways was he well treated by the CP in East Germany?

AA: Because of his wife, and because of official state policy. Remember, the GDR often took the lead position on the importance of the race question, in part to cover over the whole Nazi experience. For example, the whole "Free Angela!" campaign, the GDR took the lead in the global movement. As far as their policy, they would have avoided any confrontation, any conflict. But as I said, he wasn't winning any prizes. He wasn't being celebrated as a great artist. They did have privileges, but that was because of his wife. When I say privileges, I mean she had a good job, she had good income, she did travel. They had access to things.

I remember the GDR was grey. It was like a black and white movie. The stores were bare. Even the bookstores weren't lively. Partly, it was because the West was such a showcase. If you were 18 to 26 and in West Germany and you got to Berlin, you were exempt from the draft. So it was like a youth capitol. There were people still living in communes. There were all kinds of alternative scenes everywhere. The African and Afro-German set that I became involved in was very much a part of this.

There was a store in West Berlin called [Ta-ta de???CHECK???], the shopping center of the West. This place, you wouldn't believe it, was like Macy's or Marshall Field's on steroids. The top floor was food. That counter there [pointing], about three times as big as that, at least, nothing but tongues of animals. Take that and multiply it. It was like Paris, you could sit down and eat something. When I first went there, I was absolutely thrilled. Then after five, ten minutes, I really got pissed. They got all this shit up in here? And I'm just now seeing it? Why don't they have this shit everywhere?

That was West Berlin. East Berlin was a really drab and dreary place. That's just at the level of sense perception, consumption. On the other hand, as far as what they had done there as far as cultural heritage, taking three or four bombed out buildings, and gathering all the bricks and material and restoring one of them from the bombing. It was more than the gaudy, tear it down, and build a new structure in the West. You had to look and you could see a whole different approach to restoring the integrity of the city. The massive apartments that they built were following the Nazi architecture. Like the Robert Taylor homes in Chicago. Giant, ugly, square buildings. Whereas in the West, every creative architect was there.

It would be easy to make a judgment. But if you looked deeper you could see there were alternative values at play. They were showcasing all of it, in part, to the East. That also explains what Ollie enjoyed, because coming to West Berlin was like a trip to the US, in some sense. He certainly could get access to music, to buying CDs, and things. I remember seeing him with his shopping bags full of stuff.