

## **UFAHAMU Interviews Dr. Robin D.G. Kelley**

*For this special retrospective issue commemorating 52 years of Ufahamu, the editors had the unique opportunity to interview former editor, and current Gary B. Nash Professor of American History at the University of California, Los Angeles, Dr. Robin D.G. Kelley. Dr. Kelley is a renowned historian of social movements, culture, labor struggle, and Black intellectualism in the U.S., African Diaspora and African continent himself. Known for such acclaimed publications as Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination, and Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression, Many are less familiar with Dr. Kelley's background and academic training in African history. Dr. Kelley walks us through his time as a graduate student trying to study South African communists, and how Africa remained central in his work despite its shifting focus (in large part due to the political constraints of Apartheid) over the course of his time as a UCLA student. Becoming part of Ufahamu was amongst Dr. Kelley's first endeavors on campus and, as he tells it, remained a hub of radical intellectualism throughout the 1980s. The conversation below spans a wide variety of topics, from his biographical experiences with the journal, and Dr. Kelley's thoughts on shifting intellectual and political dynamics regarding Africa. The interview published below begins in the midst of our conversation on a discussion of a 1984 conference flyer and program handed to us and organized by Dr. Kelley titled "Imperialism: Real or Imagined . . ."*

**Robin D.G. Kelley:** If you notice, it's top heavy with a lot of members of the Communist Workers Party and Stalinists and . . .

**UFAHAMU:** Didn't the Communist Workers Party have a different name earlier in the 70s?

**RDGK:** Ok so there was Workers' Viewpoint. Workers' Viewpoint was a publication and it became the Communist Workers Party in, I think, 1979. Because we had people from there, and that was my organization, the more traditional communists inside the organization, and one person in particular, kicked me out of leadership. But not out of *Ufahamu*, and they didn't drive me out of the organization. The sad thing is, they didn't help organize the conference

because they had gone with the Venceremos Brigade to Cuba and they left the whole thing on my shoulders. Eric Wright and me, we organized the whole thing. And then they come back and they're pissed off because we got all these CWP people. You'll notice that we got Riyadh Mansour from the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organization]. That was my doing! [laughs]

**UFAHAMU:** We saw that! How did that happen?

**RDGK:** Well it was interesting. You know the history. The PLO wasn't actually recognized, and this conference was in like 1984. It was recognized but not recognized, it had kinda gone underground. They were trying to be visible but not visible. Riyadh was the representative to the United Nations and we definitely wanted to have Palestine represented at the conference. The PLO was it, you know. I mean there was the PFLP [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine] but PLO was at that time the face of the Palestinian liberation movement. Then the JDL [Jewish Defense League] showed up. But this is my only copy of this conference flyer. I need to make copies: it was really historic. It was packed.

**UFAHAMU:** I see that the cover design of the flyer says "arise ye wretched of the earth." Was that the call of the conference?

**RDGK:** Well no, that was just the design that we kinda came up with. The title (of the conference, "Imperialism: Real or Imagined?") was meant to be provocative. No one thought that imperialism was imagined. Eric Wright came up with the idea, you know like "maybe we can get people fighting so they would show up." No one on any panel thought it was imagined, that was just to draw people in. These were the days where there were no conservatives in the African Activist Association and *Ufahamu*. There were no liberals. Everyone was some version of a communist or a socialist. I don't mean there was a large majority, I mean everyone. There was no one that wasn't. So we were having fights between various left factions. That's the fight. That conference prompted this fight between me representing CWP and Pierre and others representing the CPUSA and other organizations.

**UFAHAMU:** This conversation has already answered some of the questions we wanted to ask. During your time at AAA and *Ufahamu* what sort of tensions existed within the organizations?

What were the political dynamics? Were you struggling against the administration?

**RDGK:** Let me trace how I got there (to *Ufahamu* and AAA), that would explain what I entered into. *Ufahamu* was one of the best known journals for anyone doing African Studies in the 80s. A lot of us didn't know it was a graduate student journal, we just read it. As raggedy as it might look with the type, people read it. When I was an undergraduate at Long Beach State I took many classes, but there weren't many African studies classes. African Studies was sort of a mess. Black Studies was run by a bunch of nationalists like Karenga, Amen Rahh and people like that. But Bede Ssensalo taught African literature and I took his class. Bede Ssensalo actually published at *Ufahamu*, he was the only person at Long Beach that did. So when I got to UCLA the first thing I did, I think maybe the second day on campus, was go to the second floor of Bunche Hall and introduce myself to Kyalo Matipo, who was the editor. He was older, relatively speaking, so he must have been in his 30s. He was a returning student, tall, thin, brilliant, cosmopolitan, Kenyan. He had the interesting distinction of having been imprisoned in Kenya, he was an activist, but he was also in some Disney movie playing an African [laughs]. I don't know why he did that but that was one of the funny things we would talk about. Anyway, he was the editor. I went to the office and I said "I'm Robin Kelley," of course I had *just* started graduate school, "and there is nothing more I'd like to do than be on the editorial board of *Ufahamu*. So I was actually on from the beginning. If you look on the masthead for, I think it's volume 13 number 1, 1983. I'm on the masthead as general editor. In those initial days, *Ufahamu* was dominated by African scholars from the continent. There were a few African Americans. The main people were: Ali Jimale Ahmed, P. Garvey Okoth—who was also in history with me—Christiana Oboh, Fasil Demissie and his wife Sandra Jackson. Fasil was an urban planner, Ethiopian, and he was a book review editor before me, really really brilliant. There was Segun Oyekunle, there was Ndugu Mike Ssali—I'm not sure if he was actually on the editorial board but he published with us and was part of our local crew. He wrote on South African cinema. We were publishing pieces—oh yeah! And Kandjouura Drame, whose cousin was actually my student years later. He was a former editor. Again, these are very

cosmopolitan West, East and South Africans—basically all over the continent, they were the dominant force. Then there were a group of us who were African Americans. Marc Cherie who was Haitian, I guess I shouldn't say "was" because these people are all still with us. Zeinabu Irene Davis, she came in with me. By the way a lot of people were film students. Pierre Desir, who was president of AAA before me. Doris Johnson was another one, Eric Wright. What was interesting is that in my recollection, at least early on, most of the African national students were doing editorial work in *Ufahamu*. It was the African American students who were more active in AAA. That's not to say that there weren't African students in AAA but my recollection is that who showed up in the meetings—which were small!—you know maybe 6 or 7 students, were primarily African Americans. Tim Ngubane wasn't in *Ufahamu* but he ran the program at UCLA which brought and assisted South African students to come to UCLA. UCLA probably had more South African exile students than any other state university in the country if not more than any university. So you got to think of this circle as both what's inside of the official membership and what's the circle of African activists outside of that. Tim wasn't a student, he was an administrator but he was young and very much a major part of the anti-Apartheid movement here.

So I show up, I'm there and stay with *Ufahamu* for three years from 83-86. I'm only in grad school for four years by the way. I think that for a lot of the folks involved in *Ufahamu*, just the publication journal itself and the kinds of things we were publishing? That was the bulk of the activism. I'm not saying there was a split between the journal, because I worked on the journal more than anything else, it's just that we didn't really separate the organizing work on campus from the editorial work of getting the journal out. It was the most important thing, it took up all of the time. So in terms of activist stuff, most of it was supporting the anti-Apartheid movement, but you'll notice on the conference flyer that Grenada was a huge thing.

**UFAHAMU:** Right, the invasion was a year before?

**RDGK:** This was '84, this was right after the overthrow. This is just months after. That's why we showed *The Future Coming Toward Us*. '84 was also the year of the Olympics. I was involved with the ad-hoc committee to keep South Africa so I wrote the piece I did

in that special double issue. I was working with Dennis Brutus and with Mike Jones—he was a member of the CWP, and so was my sister. Those were the main things. AAA basically meant doing support work around African liberation. In this case it was Southern Africa. Even though Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique was officially no longer under Portuguese rule, it was still a really important part of our support work. Another thing I should say is that, of my early pieces in *Ufahamu*, my first publications, if you notice we have that first issue I worked on and then by the next issue—'84, the double issue—I've got four things in there. Two book reviews and two essays. And one of those essays I actually don't have a copy of. The essay on Congo. That piece was written specifically for *Ufahamu*. It wasn't written for a class. It was a conversation I had with Matipo and that was the first time in my life I had been really edited. I didn't know what that was like. He had sat me down and for an hour, line-by-line, rewriting, "what do you mean by this?," for an hour I sat in his office. And the offices—you know how the offices are—it's not really an office it's a carrel.

**UFAHAMU:** [laughs] Yes, we know.

**RDGK:** So I had to sit down and just listen to that for an hour but it was really amazing. That's how I got involved, and how a lot of us got involved. It was very hard to do African Studies, African history, or African film without being connected to *Ufahamu*. It just didn't make any sense. And if you weren't connected it's because your politics weren't aligned. The most important person in our entire configuration was Teshome Gabrial. He was a faculty member, he was our advisor—advisor for AAA and advisor for *Ufahamu*—a former editor of *Ufahamu*. He was pretty much the person who invented Third Cinema. He doesn't get the credit for it. He was the person who I would turn to for support. That's what the landscape looked like.

**UFAHAMU:** Were there tensions regarding the centrality of Africa in either *Ufahamu* or AAA? As we can see in the conference you were talking about Grenada, you were talking about the Philippines *in addition* to talking about South Africa and African American struggles . . .

**RDGK:** No tensions at all. What was interesting is that *Ufahamu* stuck with its mission which was to publish lots of different kinds

of writing that centers Africa and Black people. We had a women's issue, for example. We published things that were Africa and the African diaspora. We didn't, in terms of *Ufahamu*, it wasn't a third world publication. So what you don't see is articles about the Philippines, unless it relates to Africa. So that's *Ufahamu's* thing. As far as trying to organize this conference. The conferences were always meant to organize around the moment of crisis. They were not meant to be places where graduate students give papers. We weren't trying to promote ourselves, we weren't trying to promote academia. That's why people showed up. And that's why people showed up sometimes armed. When the JDL came to our conference they came with guns. You might think, "who could bring guns on campus?" in those days you could! Well . . . you still can . . . campus police have guns. But the JDL, when we had Riyadh, were all up in there. The politics were: wherever there is imperialism, whenever there is oppression, we were anti-capitalists and anti-imperialists! The very last paragraph of my piece on South Africa sums up our politics: "don't get it wrong, the anti-Apartheid movement is not South Africa's savior, we are not South Africa's saviors. We are not trying to save South Africa. The liberation of South Africa is up to South Africans. If we can support them to win, then maybe they can help liberate us." That was our position. That was my position but it was also a reflection of what we were doing. That was never an issue.

Now there was an unspoken tension. A little minor tension about what it means to be born in the continent versus being born here or in the Caribbean. Generally speaking it wasn't that significant, not like today. But there were a few people who brought up the question of authenticity. For the most part, however, people got along really really well. They only significant blowup that I can recall was around this conference. And that blowup didn't involve any Africans from the continent. None. It was a group of Black Americans—basically 4 or 5 people. They did an intervention and were like "why did you bring all these CWP people in here," so I didn't run again. I didn't want to be chair again. But that was it! There was no issue of privileging any part of the continent, any particular discipline. At all! You'll notice in that first issue we have an article about healthcare, an article about anti-Apartheid cinema, an article about literature, criticism, a lot of poetry. Everyone was a poet! Or, everyone tried to be a poet. There were

short stories. Every discipline was represented. Most importantly, *Ufahamu* was not seen as a vehicle for graduate students to get published. Nor was it a vehicle for graduate students to get published in their class. One of the things I published on the third international was coming out of what would've been my dissertation, but I changed it. The subject matter was not suitable for most publications. It was about self-determination and the Communist Party of South Africa. So it was relevant to the thing but that's why we were publishing all these other people. Take Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, he's big time now but he was publishing all kinds of stuff in *Ufahamu* at the time. On African history and academic tourism as he puts it. Micere Mugo was publishing in *Ufahamu* and she was one of our keynotes. We had bigtime people who were not students publishing.

**UFAHAMU:** What were some of the most memorable interviews or discussions that you had during your time at UFAHAMU:

**RDGK:** That's one thing we actually didn't do much of: interview people. Every issue was a struggle to get it out. I'll tell you one thing that was important. *Ufahamu* was in a financial crisis. In the files somewhere should be the report that we did to make *Ufahamu* a much better, more permanent journal. The Africa Studies Center was a fiscal sponsor and we are struggling to get funds. I'm going by memory but the report probably says it all. At the time there was an expose, which shouldn't surprise anyone, that the ASC was receiving funds from the Department of Defense. For the people who don't know how things work, and I was one of them, I was naive, we were all pissed off. So people began writing stuff, protesting. There was talk to try and get *Ufahamu* out of African Studies and either move it to the Center for African American Studies or just make it independent. For some reason, I don't know how it came up, there was a negotiation where Robert Hill stepped in and said we need to figure out a better way to make *Ufahamu* both more independent but also more efficient and better looking. The idea was to get in house publishing using computers. We didn't use computers! Doris typed it. Then we got computers and we were able to put it through the computer. Long story short, we created a committee. I was on the committee representing students. We came up with a report that leaned towards Bobby Hill's idea of getting our own in house

printing stuff which also benefited the Garvey papers as well. Why is this important? What are the politics behind it? What I just described was kind of an efficiency problem fixed. The politics were around the question of *Ufahamu's* independence. That was the main political question. How do we keep our independence without having any limits placed on African Studies. We weren't necessarily the fans or cheerleaders of African Studies. It was an antagonistic relationship. Michael Lofchie was a good person by the way. When you're young, and I was really young, you think that everyone in administration is a bad person. So we waged war. The most important thing ultimately is that we decided to compromise. Once you take the equipment you're in the African Studies domain. So I left. I don't think I was all for that strategy. But, *Ufahamu* prevailed, it exists to this day. That could've been the death of *Ufahamu*. They were trying to get rid of it.

What you begin to see is a slow process of professionalization where it becomes more of a scholarly journal than it was the arm of the African Activist Association. To be fair, it was always a mix. It's not like we did not publish scholarly pieces with footnotes, we had all kinds of scholarly pieces. From the beginning! A lot of it centered on literature and theater and film and culture. But we also had political stuff. A lot of the political stuff you don't see today.

**UFAHAMU:** This leads to another question we have. Were there particular intellectuals that *Ufahamu* took inspiration from during this time period of the 70s into the 80s?? Whether they be academics or political figures. Or were there other movements alongside the anti-Apartheid struggle which influenced the direction of the journal. I am thinking in particular about your *Ufahamu* piece on the workers' revolution in Congo-Brazzaville, which I know you also reference in *Freedom Dreams*.

**RDGK:** Well we have to say 80s, because I'm not that old [laughs]. In the 70s I was in high school. I started college in 80, got my BA in 83 and I started graduate school in 83. I finished my Ph.D. in '87. That's why I'm younger than everyone else. I did my BA, MA, Ph.D. in seven years. So that's the period, really post 1980 that we are talking about. As far as the first question, yes there were some people that were really important to me and my generation. Of course, Walter Rodney. There's probably no person

more important than Walter Rodney. You know, one of the first research papers I ever wrote was on railways and political economy in Rhodesia, which was based on Rodney's work. So Rodney, CLR James, obviously Cabral, Fanon. Everyone we were reading in my study group as an undergraduate. And my study group was the All-African People's Revolutionary Party. This is before the CWP. These are the people that everyone was reading at the time. Of course we were also reading Angela Davis and Barbara Smith. But in terms of African history, Rodney was the most important, but there were also people like J.E Inikori, an economic historian dealing with the slave trade. Bernard Magubane, everyone was reading Magubane, he was publishing in *Ufahamu*. Horace Campbell, who I got to know and is still a friend, he was publishing in *Ufahamu* and we were all reading Horace Campbell. And then of course it was while I was at *Ufahamu* that I got in touch with Cedric Robinson. Cedric, I met him at the African Studies Association meeting. We gave a paper. I wanna say he gave a paper on the Italo-Ethiopian war. Whatever it was, after he gave that paper I wrote him right away to be on my committee. Now how did I meet him? There's one step I skipped over. We received a copy of *Black Marxism* in the mail. I was a book review editor and I agreed to review it but I never did. That's all well documented. The important thing is that in the early 80s, well, two things. We today in the 21st century tend to think about "influences" in terms of who's reading who. That's not how we thought. Influences were tied directly to movements. If you wanna catalog that early period it is Grenada, it is South Africa, it is Brixton and the rebellion of '81 before I got to graduate school. In graduate school it was Panama. So these were the struggles we were involved in directly. You bring what you're reading to the struggle as opposed to what you're reading brings you to the struggle. But everyone's reading the same thing. *Development and Underdevelopment* by Wallerstein—everyone's reading that. Everyone's reading Marx, Lenin, and Engels. To go back to something else, in terms of political tensions within the editorial board. No one really took positions. You know, I named a bunch of people in *Ufahamu* but you couldn't really say easily what their political positions were. Nobody did that. Everyone had a baseline, not everyone had agreed but the baseline was: we are anti-imperialists, we are socialists, and we are attentive to class power—class power within Africa and the

diaspora. Much of what we were gonna look at isn't gonna be your classical nationalism, because that's the divide. There's the classical nationalism versus a kind of Marxist nationalism versus a kind of Marxist globalism. The book that everyone was reading in that period was Arnold Temu and Bonaventure Swai's book<sup>1</sup>—oh, and everyone was reading A.M. Babu, that was really important—but the Swai Temu book was the book that people were fighting over. It's a little thin book that was a critique of nationalist historiography. Have you heard of it?

**UFAHAMU:** No.

**RDGK:** Well you have to read that book. Everyone has to read that book. It's a Zed Press book. It came out in 1983 and it's called *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique*. It centers on Tanzania. It's a group of intellectual in Tanzania who are pushing back against a romantic history of Tanzania, in fact, and pushing for class analysis. That was the lightning rod. When I had got into graduate school everyone was talking about it. The question of class, the question of gender was a debate but it wasn't as big. So bringing Stephanie Urdang in was important for all of us. She was writing a lot in those days on women in Guinea-Bissau. Christian Obo had this other book on gender in Africa when we met as an editorial board, everyone came from different places, and everyone was tied to their home struggles. So Ali Jamali was Somalian so his concern was what was happening in Somalia. There were those of us who were from Nigeria and they were writing about what was happening in Nigeria in *Ufahamu*, Nigeria was their concern. Matipo was Kenyan and so was P. Godfrey Okoth, they didn't always see eye-to-eye but that was their concern. For those of us here, the United States was our concern because, in our position, we were in the belly of the beast so we have to stop imperialism in its tracks. It's nothing new, it's the same discourse you're gonna find in the sources. But no one was saying "oh I'm going to follow this person, or you need to read this person." The kinds of debates that you see today between Afro-Pessimists, you would never see that in those days—ever! If anything, there was far more sectarianism among the US-based people than those who were on the continent. My recollection is that none of the folks who participated in *Ufahamu* from the continent had plans to stay. I'll give you one example: Seshi Chonco was South African. He came into

African studies either the year I came in or the year after. And he went back to South Africa after he got his degree. But then he went back and became a *billionaire*. He's like a big entrepreneur and there's lots of scandals and stuff in South Africa. But you know he was one of the people who were one of the most militant.

**UFAHAMU:** Apart from the people and the struggles that were influenced from the outside, was there a local influence on the direction of *Ufahamu* and AAA either at UCLA or the broader Los Angeles community, whether they be activists or teachers or elders?

**RDGK:** Nope.

**UFAHAMU:** No?

**RDGK:** The idea of elders influencing us didn't make any sense. Because we were the movement.

**UFAHAMU:** Hmmm.

**RDGK:** First of all, *Ufahamu* was intergenerational. Like I said Matipo was probably the most forceful figure. He was the editor at the time. He was in his late 30s when he was with us. So he was the influence. We all had our own lives. I had my own. My life was working with people in the CWP. Some of the working class organizers in San Pedro. Later there were some other people but for the most part we didn't look at anyone because we already had it. I know that sounds so strange because of this current idea of mentorship. We made shit up as we went along. We wrote for each other. We weren't asking for support. In fact, if anything we were resisting the idea that there should be any oversight. The one important figure was Teshome. Teshome Gabriel was really important. Not so much as a mentor, he was a really important figure but it's not like we turned to him for advice. But we didn't turn to any for advice! Because we were running the show! If anything, people would come in, I came in 1983 and I was 21 years old and I was a baby and they would treat me with a little bit of disdain at first because I was so young but after a while it was like "you have to pull your own weight" everyone does their stuff. You had to make decisions without turning to anyone for advice. So the people that we read were important but we didn't read them as if they knew everything. Notice, and I can only speak for myself,

one of my first pieces in '85 was a review of *A Philosophy Born of Struggle* by Leonard Harris. Was I nice to these people? No! I wrote a very rigid problematic essay. But I was coming at it as a Marxist saying these are the strengths and these are the weaknesses . . . in a field that's not mine! Now I'm not the only one doing this, I'm not special, I'm doing what everyone else did. We came to *Ufahamu* as intellectuals, and we do intellectual work. We didn't think that our professors were smarter than us. We didn't think any activists were smarter than us. We didn't think we were smarter than them, but we were equals. And we had a task to do: get this journal out. And we did that. In fact, I think that report that came out was an effort to reign in and discipline *Ufahamu*. To say that there are some wiser heads. And we didn't think there were wiser heads! It's not arrogance. It's called adulthood [laughs]. It's hard to explain. But we really did feel like, "who's gonna tell us what to do?" And if we make a mistake we have no one to blame but ourselves. I don't know if that helps, but if there is a takeaway it's that: whatever things we were trying to write and do and organize around, it had to do with real world situations. You'll notice that not even Cedric Robinson's book became a source of debate. We didn't do forums or conversations and stuff like that. I didn't even write the review. It was like, what are you organizing around and that conference was evidence of how we thought. Who we brought together, what we were trying to do and notice that that conference didn't produce a special conference of *Ufahamu*. We weren't thinking in those terms — that we would get a commodity out of it. We wanted to build people together and build a movement. I hope that makes sense. I know it sounds strange but it is true. I have to say that I looked up to all the African students because they were all older than me. Okoth was even older than me and he came in the same time I did. What do you do when you are editing with people who could tell you about the time they were in prison? You're not gonna be like "let's go find a mentor" [laughs].

**UFAHAMU:** I think this does make sense historically too. I think that a lot of people our age or in our generation, both organizers and intellectuals, think about elders and mentorship because they are thinking back to the revolutionary era of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, but if you are *in it* then you were in it, you know?

**RDGK:** Right. And that also goes to the 60s-70s as well. One of the books my class was reading this week is the book on the Young Lords. Sure, they had mentors, kind of. But they figured that stuff out on their own as really young people, they didn't stop and wait. They didn't get permission. Same thing with study groups, when we had our study groups back then at UCLA and Long Beach State. We didn't go to a professor and say "we are going to start a study group, what do you think we should read?" It never occurred to us to go to a professor. Because we were trying to wage war against our professors.

**UFAHAMU:** You saw your professors as reactionaries -

**RDGK:** Right!

**UFAHAMU:** And not as people who could actually lead you.

**RDGK:** Exactly, they were misleaders! You know, that old classic Stalinist formation [laughs]. So we just picked our own stuff, read our own stuff, together as a cadre. We didn't think of ourselves as students in that sense. What else do you got?

**UFAHAMU:** I have a broad question relating to that. How do we assess the trajectory of, well, everything, then? If we think about the radical origins of *Ufahamu* starting in 1970, built from the fervor of the late 60s in distinction to what we see now. You alluded to it a little bit, regarding the professionalization of the movement and how things have changed. You all saw yourself as the movement at the time. Could you speak to how you see or assess this trajectory?

**RDGK:** Well let's begin with the origins of *Ufahamu*. It's important to acknowledge that it wasn't formed in the streets, it was formed at the African Studies Association at Montreal in '69. The idea for it at least. In other words, it was a breakaway within an academic student. The foundational issues were rather simple. African Studies was white and all these Black scholars—and not even to say radical scholars!—were not getting much traction. So there was a breakaway within the ASA, and Walter was one of the major figures of that breakaway. *Ufahamu* came out of that break. It was always intended to be an academic journal. But an academic journal that was a truly, deeply Africanist journal that was concerned about the people, run by Black people. That's why

it never ever becomes a *Worker's Viewpoint*. It may be the journal of the AAA but *Ufahamu*, even at its most radical moments, was never an activist journal. It was a journal that was *critical*. Think of it not as scholarly, but critical and asking the really hard questions. Asking the really hard questions and marshaling the evidence to answer questions like: where do we go? What do we do? How do we understand African culture, history, politics, literature, life fundamentally? Over time, because some of those same intellectuals were being imprisoned—again the timing is important. '69 is only nine years after the Year of Africa, the year all these countries are getting independence. And still they're not done yet. '69 sees the split of so many movements, whether we are talking about Congo or FRELIMO, where they are saying we need to be Marxists rather than nationalists, or that we need to be Marxist nationalists. And this is playing itself out in the formation of *Ufahamu*. Go back to the first issues to see.

Overtime as students get more active and begin refusing African Studies and its imperialist origins. That's when there is increasing tension between the university and the journal. Professionalization is a little different. It's when that engaged critical scholarship that was about trying to move us forward, ask hard questions, deal with questions like socialism, that starts to fall by the wayside and *Ufahamu* begins to look more like the Journal of African History or the Journal of African Studies. We were a peer-reviewed journal but it's not like we sent stuff out to outside journals. We were the peers! It's important to recognize that we were reading and making editorial decisions on writing not by graduate students, from the very beginning we destroyed the hierarchy. There's no hierarchy. The typical stance was that we should've sent the articles out to experts so they could evaluate it. I don't remember ever sending out an article, it was internal.

**UFAHAMU:** What was the level of submission like? Were you getting a lot of articles to be reviewed from across the world?

**RDGK:** We got a lot but I couldn't tell you how many because I wasn't the editor in chief. I remember reading and rejecting some because we divided that up. I guess it just ebbed and flowed. I have correspondence I was reading with my friend Linda Day. I met her at African Studies and was trying to convince here to send something to *Ufahamu* but she said based on the description

that her work wouldn't fit. We did eventually publish her piece but the point is that we were always looking for things and talking to people, soliciting things. We were also trying to create special issues. But I don't think we were inundated with essays. Nor did we privilege graduate student essays. I go back to pieces that I've published. I didn't have any special access. It had to be accepted too. Although the piece on the South African Communist Party and the Third International that *Ufahamu* recently republished? I have a bunch of places that rejected me all over. But *Ufahamu* published it. I sent it to Journal of African Marxists and they didn't want it, I sent it to Comparative Politics, a bunch of different things but they all rejected me, but *Ufahamu* published me. That's maybe the exception. I have to be honest and say that our submissions probably declined on the eve of that report. Something had to have prompted that report. You saw it, it's built on *Ufahamu's* decline. I just don't remember any significant decline, I think it was more of a decline. But it's framed like that. It's quite possible that we did lose some submissions but it kept going. You all could figure out what you see as professionalization, I mean I see it a certain kind of way.

**UFAHAMU:** Do you have comments about how this relates to the field of African Studies in general since you were a member of *Ufahamu*, and this phenomenon's relationship to Black Studies today?

**RDGK:** Two things to always bear in mind. *Ufahamu* was physically located on the 10th floor of Bunche Hall. The Center for Afro-American Studies was in Campbell. So we weren't even in the same building. We had no relationship to the thing called Afro-American Studies, except for us who were doing that work. No one on the editorial board, myself included, specialized in what we think of as Black Studies. We all were doing African Studies. Maybe from a Black Studies perspective, but no one was talking about that in the same way they do today. You know, how people say "Black study," instead of "Black studies." It's a whole kind of, like, stylistic thing as if we know what it is. What was clear to us was that we study Africa, and African people from a perspective of anti-imperialism. CAAS wasn't doing that, they were doing some other things, not bad things but they were doing other things. We dreamed of combining the two, we talked about that.

That was part of the debate around what to do with *Ufahamu*, to sort of merge. There's that.

The other thing is that, in those days and even since. Most African journals weren't as interdisciplinary as ours. You have the African Studies Review. That was considered the leading journal in the field of African Studies. Most of it was social sciences. Every once in a while you get some stuff that's more humanities.. But that was a social science publication. Then you have specialized, disciplinary publications: *Journal of Modern African History*, *Journal of African History*.

**UFAHAMU:** *Review of African Political Economy*.

**RDGK:** Right, these are very specialized in particular disciplines. There was not a single field or discipline that was not represented in *Ufahamu*. And poetry! And short stories! That made *Ufahamu* totally unique, there's nothing like it. And that's not where African Studies went. African Studies continued along the path, as a field, that it was born in. And that path was area studies. And we did not do Area Studies, we did Liberation Studies. You can say the same thing about the *Journal of Black Studies*, which has a history here at UCLA since Molefi Asante was on the faculty. What they were doing was mostly social science of a certain type. Even that wasn't that broad. I can't think of placing *Ufahamu* within a particular body or field of work. It was its own unique vehicle. That had everything to do with an editorial board made up of graduate students who came from every single conceivable field.

**UFAHAMU:** At the time, it sounds like there wouldn't have been a tension in the fact that you were doing this work with *Ufahamu* but were also working on the dissertation which would become *Hammer and Hoe*. Can you speak to how your graduate work related to *Ufahamu*, if at all?

**RDGK:** That's why I was going through all these old papers. I wrote a lot in the field of African history for my coursework. All the courses I took were African history except for one. Even pre-colonial Africa, I had tons of review essays. I reviewed Tom Spear's *Kenya's Past*. These were long critical works that were never published. So I was doing this work in the field sometimes with professors who were not necessarily hostile to *Ufahamu* but the kind of writing I was doing in my class wasn't the kind of

writing I'd be able to publish in *Ufahamu*. When it really got to be time to work on my dissertation, I got the Social Science Research fellowship in 1986 to go to South Africa so I switched fields. I switched fields to work on the US side of my dissertation prospectus which was comparing South Africa to the US South. By then I wasn't really working with *Ufahamu*. Like I said, 1986. '86 was the year I devoted everything to my dissertation. I was focused on that and I wasn't even focused on that. I was in Alabama, DC and elsewhere. So I didn't break ties but I was no longer actively working with the journal. To put it bluntly, working on *Ufahamu* was a separate thing. There was no way to reconcile doing both at the same time without doing double work. Running a journal was hard work. Especially in those days where you're not only editing but you're vetting. In those days proofreading was by hand and with white-out! If you look back at some of these pages you'll see that. It was hard work. Hard work to get every single issue out. Like anything, not everyone does as much work as others. Did I learn a lot from working with *Ufahamu* towards my dissertation? Absolutely. Members of the editorial board were soundboards for each other, for the work that we did. It was cool because there was no particular discipline that was over represented. We had planners, we had literary people, we had film, theater, history, political science, anthropology. Every single discipline you could imagine, someone was represented in that circle.

**UFAHAMU:** It does sound like this was a uniquely interdisciplinary space and I would say that your own work, whether it be *Hammer and Hoe*, *Freedom Dreams* or *Thelonious Monk*—seems to capture the spirit of *Ufahamu* in that regard. Were there other spaces or publications that were as interdisciplinary as *Ufahamu*?

**RDGK:** Nomo. Do you know Nomo?

**UFAHAMU:** No.

**RDGK:** You should look that up! Nomo was an undergraduate Black studies, or Black Student Union journal. The editor was really really brilliant. He was this brilliant editor and writer who never left UCLA after all these years. Go back and see if you can see any issues of Nomo from the early 80s. He was who convinced me to review Leonard Harris' collection, a piece about African American thought and philosophy which you would think

wouldn't go in a journal like *Ufahamu* but it makes perfect sense. Nomo was an exception. They were like the junior version of what we were doing except it also had a newspaper feel. They had poetry, short stories, journalistic pieces, criticism, reviews and if you look at the level of writing it's at a way higher level than you see undergraduates doing today. Very sophisticated. Although I shouldn't say that, kinda mean [laughs]. There might have been some other publications, I just don't remember.

Nomo is still publishing! Been going on ever since then. It was respected in those days. *Ufahamu* was meant for an international audience, NOMO was meant for the campus. It's worth looking at. It does something very different but it was a publication we respected at the time *and* it had a political impact. You know the circumstances in which Black Studies is formed at UCLA is very different from the circumstances of African Studies. African Studies started in 1959 with money from the Ford Foundation and other things, there were no protests, not for African Studies. You probably imagined this coherent movement [laughs]. And that's just not . . . it was a convergence of many different movements and veterans of movements coming together to put this journal out.

**UFAHAMU:** And young veterans at that.

**RDGK:** Yeah. Although if you're in your late 30s, that's old to be a graduate student. Nowadays you got really young people. I was a youngster, way younger than everyone else. Pierre Desir, who I mentioned earlier, he was in his 40s. A lot of us would go to North Campus, what you call Northern Lights now? We would call it North Campus. You know, the chairs outside. We'd sit out there drinking coffee and talking all day. Pierre would get there at 10am and leave at 5pm. After a while I was like, I can't hangout with y'all I gotta work. Work work work. But there was a whole community there around North Campus of mostly filmmakers. All of us were tied to *Ufahamu* or AAA and we'd talk all day long, debate and discuss things. These were nonsectarian conversations. If anything, we all shared a hatred of the Revolutionary Communist Party and Bob Avakian.

**UFAHAMU:** Oh yeah they're still here. We see their flyers everywhere. Even Erykah Badu concerts.

**RDGK:** They're like gum. They've been around since then, we were fighting them back then. They always come into my office asking for my support, not knowing that we've been fighting since 1983! Other than that, it wasn't cliquish. Sometimes we'd have ten people in those circles, sometimes we'd have five or three.

**UFAHAMU:** Did you have any relationship to the LA Rebellion filmmakers?

**RDGK:** Of course! They were the LA Rebellion, the second wave of it. Zeinabu, she made the film! She was one of my best friends and she was part of the circle in *Ufahamu*. Her name comes up there and in *AAA*. Our tight circle was me, Doris Johnson, Zeinabu Davis, Marc Cherie—Marc and Zeinabu ended up getting married—Pierre Desir, and Eric Wright, who was my best friend and a trumpet player. That's the African American circle. The LA Rebellion crew begins before. Billy Woodberry was working at UCLA at the time in the film department. I knew Billy because he was very close friends with Sidney Lemelle. He wasn't a part of *Ufahamu* but he was a graduate student in African history when I got here. Sidney and I edited that book *Imagining Home* which came out of a conference we'd put together at Pomona College that Ruth Wilson Gilmore helped us organize where there was a young undergraduate intern who was this guy named Vijay Prashad [laughs]. And he was doing all the running around picking up people at the airport and stuff. There was Charles Burnett.

**UFAHAMU:** Who did *Killer of Sheep* . . .

**RDGK:** Right. There was Alicia Dhanifu. There was Haile Gerima. They all came up in the late '70s. Before us. Billy, like I said, was still part of the continuum because he stayed at UCLA at the beginning. Teshome Gabriel was a part of it at the beginning. Teshome Gabriel was the theorist, the intellectual, who had influenced *all* of the LA Rebellion filmmakers. There was no one more important than Teshome in all this. By the time I got to UCLA in 1983 it's only about 5 or 6 years after the beginning of the LA Rebellion film movement. Clyde Taylor, who became my colleague at NYU was the one who coined the phrase. He was here as a film critic. What's the relationship to *Ufahamu*? Just look at the articles. The articles about film. They were shaped by Teshome's notion of Third Cinema. Shaped by the presence of

experimental films by Black artists. And remember that Gerima is Ethiopian. When we think about “Black artists,” he was an Ethiopian national. Ndugu Ssali was writing about some of that in *Ufahamu* as well in the early '80s. Yeah, one could argue that what becomes the LA Rebellion as it takes off with the second generation is inseparable from *Ufahamu*.

**UFAHAMU:** Ok, wow, thank you! We would not have put that together. We have some more random questions. The first is in response to the shift of your dissertation work due to your inability to get into South Africa because of the state of emergency, was your research always connected to the US South?

**RDGK:** No. It was a complete shift. I came to UCLA to work on Mozambique. I wrote a long paper on Mozambique as an undergrad working with Ned Alpers. I just couldn't learn Portuguese. I took the class and everyone could speak Spanish, but I couldn't so I was lost. I had a background in kiSwahili but ultimately I switched to Southern Rhodesia first, Zimbabwe, then to South Africa. I went from doing development and underdevelopment work and then switched to social movement work. And that was the communist party. Initially it was the communist party and then I decided to expand out to make it comparative. That was before I met Cedric but Cedric helped me think of what a comparative dissertation would look like. And my dissertation prospectus that I defended was comparative, specifically between Johannesburg and Birmingham: Two industrial centers emerging at the exact same time in the 1870s and 1880s with a strong industrial labor movement and a communist party. It was only because I couldn't get into South Africa that I abandoned the South African part of it—temporarily. I was always gonna go back to it and I ended up publishing stuff on South Africa after that, but I could never get into the country at the time.

**UFAHAMU:** My second question is kind of selfish. I have a lot of students who ask about this: the origins of the idea of the “global south.” Its relevance to Africa, its relevance to South Africa and the US South in relation to the notion of the “third world” and this evolution between the two terms. Especially as “global south” is a more popular term now, and especially as many students think of “third world” as a purely pejorative term and are more into the

idea of the “global south.” Maybe I’m wrong but it seems like the ’80s is the moment when this idea of the “global south” becomes something people latch onto—

**RDGK:** I don’t know how, I really don’t know how “third world” became pejorative!

**UFAHAMU:** I always make a point to explain this to my students—and no matter what class I’m teaching it comes around—the origins of the idea of “third world” and how it is understood completely differently now.

**RDGK:** I don’t understand it because there’s nothing—if you think about the origins of “third world,” it refers to a notion of the third estate. It was a reference to the French Revolution. It also refers to non-alignment. You could say that non-alignment is an epithet. If you have a different politics, of course.

**UFAHAMU:** If you’re aligned.

**RDGK:** [laughs] But these aren’t people who are saying that. These are people who are saying that “third world” reminds them of the ghetto. “Third world” is *way* more radical than “global south.” It is a claim on the world in the making. It’s a rejection of the bipolar politics of Western capitalist, or even socialist capital. Because at this point (in the ’80s) all the socialist nations are basically neoliberal, you know. But it’s a claim that we are gonna build a different world, the Third World project. So I don’t really understand how that happened. All I know is that we used “third world” all the time as a source of pride, in the ’80s. In fact, the name of our coalition between MECHA, the Black Student Alliance, the American Indian Students Association—we were called the Third World Alliance!

**UFAHAMU:** Here at UCLA?

**RDGK:** Here!

**UFAHAMU:** We also talked about another incident in a separate conversation about back when you were faculty at UMASS Dartmouth when it was Southeastern Massachusetts University—

**RDGK:** Yes, students there came up and they wanted to figure out how they could bring together the Cape Verdean students and the

Caribbean students and the African American students. I said, call it Third World Alliance! So Third World was this kind of pride.

In terms of my project, I wasn't thinking about either Third World or Global South. I was thinking about South Africa on the verge of revolution. The hope for South Africa was that it was the most industrialized nation on the African continent and that revolution in South Africa would *automatically* generate the kind of socialist society that no other place had ever had: because of the development of productive forces, you know. Of course, that just turned out not to be true at all! [laughs] Not even close, you know? But that's how we saw it.

**UFAHAMU:** In your opinion, what is the most important impact that the journal had?

**RDGK:** I can speak about the impact it had before I got there and while I was there. I mean, like I said, there wasn't a journal I knew of in the field of African Studies more exciting than *Ufahamu* in the early '80s. Part of going to UCLA was to be a part of *Ufahamu*. That was a choice. Like I said I ran up the stairs—well I took the elevator—begging to be a part of *Ufahamu*. The other thing is that precedes a shift toward a more academic approach to African Studies. When I say academic, nothing wrong with being academic, but it's a kind of closed academy where I think we were trying to connect scholarship and movements, to understand what was going on in the world. There was an urgency to *Ufahamu*. The fact that it was the journal of the African Activist Association—it was a wing, an arm—most journals don't have that. I don't know about the Organization of American Historians' activist wing, you know? So, to me, that alone was exciting. The problem is that when you try to assess things in terms of excitement, to be perfectly honest, once you're in the work and you're editing the journal. You don't have time to sit back and enjoy the accolades or the importance or the political contribution. You're just trying to get the journal out. So it's only in retrospect and in hindsight that you can see what you accomplished. I think that we put out some great issues.

**UFAHAMU:** Do you have a favorite issue?

**RDGK:** Out of the ones I worked on, the double issue dealing with South Africa and the Olympics. Because, sure, I got four

things in there [laughs]. The women's issue that we did. Ula Taylor has a piece in there. I thought that was a really strong issue. Some of my favorite issues are not things I worked on. If you go back to the early '70s and the issues that have pieces by Cabral and Rodney and Ngugi, a lot of Ngugi stuff while he was imprisoned.

But overall, no matter what was the content of the journal, there's nothing like working with a lot of Black socialists. Period. Like a whole floor full of Africans from the continent, all parts of the continent. Africans born here and in the Caribbean. All of us actually coming to the work, in some form of fashion as anti-imperialists, socialists who all think that class struggle is a core part of our responsibility, our obligation, our being.

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique. Post-Colonial Historiography Examined.*

