

Interviewee: Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran

Interviewer: Lauren Perlaki

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Lauren Perlaki: This is Lauren Perlaki conducting the follow up interview with Dr. Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran on Friday May 8th 2015. Thank you for joining us again.

Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran: Oh, thank you for having me.

LP: We talked about your mother and your father in our last interview and you briefly mentioned your sister. Do you have any other siblings? Can you tell us about them?

EWO: I have an older sister. I have a younger brother who is deceased. He died about fifteen years ago. He was a Vietnam War veteran and quite challenged after the war. My sister is older and recently retired.

LP: Could you tell us about family events or celebrations, rituals that stand out in your memory? And then, what made them so important for you and your family?

EW: You know, it's interesting, we're not a family that does family reunions or anything like that. Holiday meals were a big thing in our family, particularly Christmas and Thanksgiving and New Year's. My mother's sister was responsible for the New Year's dinner and we would all gather with her. But I think it's the family stories that have, have shaped us in so many ways. Stories about my dad when he was younger or my mom when she was younger or even us that that are the things that are kind of the symbolic markers for us.

LP: Speaking of your parents, you mentioned both of your parents that though they lived in LA considered themselves to be Harlemites. Could you give us an idea about the years that they lived in Harlem? When were they born and when were they living in Harlem?

EW: My dad was born in 1915 in Buffalo, New York and by the time was seven he was on 125th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, so the heart of Harlem. All of his education was in New York. He went to Townsend Harris High School and then to the City University of New York. And grew up in the Harlem Renaissance¹. Tells us the story that when he was a newspaper boy he met Langston Hughes² and took Langston Hughes to the Brooklyn or the Bronx zoo. So, that's one of those famous family stories and I have a couple of letters that Langston Hughes wrote to him. My dad wanted to be

¹ The Harlem Renaissance, a cultural, social, and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem, New York, spanned the 1920s. During the time, it was known as the "New Negro Movement". The Harlem Renaissance was considered to be a rebirth of African-American arts. Though it was centered in the Harlem neighborhood of the borough of Manhattan in New York City, many francophone black writers from African and Caribbean colonies who lived in Paris were also influenced by the Harlem Renaissance.

² Langston Hughes was an American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist from Joplin, Missouri. He was one of the earliest innovators of the then-new literary art form called jazz poetry. Hughes is best known as a leader of the Harlem Renaissance in New York City.

a writer and so he would send stuff to Hughes and Hughes would comment back. My mom was born in Tampa, Florida in 1914 and came to New York because the schools in Tampa were segregated probably just when she was ready to enter high school. And went to high school in New York and then went to Hunter College in New York and worked at the Schomburg Library which is the central library--and was then--for African American art and culture. And my parents actually met at the Schomburg.

LP: That's really nice, how did they meet?

EWO: My father was being tutored by a man by the name of Harcourt Tynes who was very close to Alain Locke³ and some of the other seminal thinkers during the Harlem Renaissance. And he had apparently gone to visit Mr. Tynes at his home, and Tynes had given him a book, and he was to return the book to the Schomburg and went to the Schomburg with the book and my mother was working that day. And he said he looked at her. She was on a little ladder putting books up and he said, "I'm gonna marry that woman." And many, many years later, he did.

LP: That's a sweet story. So, then, I would like to hear more about the relationship with your father.

EWO: Okay.

LP: Previously you had mentioned that your father had fought in the war, he was a minister, and he worked on some high profile cases as a lawyer. Can you tell us a little bit more about your dad and his importance to you and how his work might have affected your family?

³ American writer, philosopher, educator, and patron of the arts. Locke was the first African American Rhodes Scholar in 1907. He was acknowledged "Dean" of the Harlem Renaissance.

EW: I think that he was a strong shaper of, of all of us. Just - you kind of have this sense of legacy and that you have to live up to his expectations for you, but not expectations that ever felt heavy. He had a great belief in all of us and what we would be able to do. And he never really talked about his activism, but we, as children, knew things were going on. So, I know at one point he had a case once that involved preventing a dump from being created in the African American community. Now we would call it environmental justice, but then it didn't have that kind of title. He was involved in local community politics. As I had mentioned, our home was a place that received people who were coming new to Los Angeles. He did work with the longshoremen. One of his close friends was a longshoremen and they did a lot of work trying to desegregate the Longshoremen Union⁴. So, he was just always active. And I think we all kind of looked up to him.

LP: And you mentioned, he didn't talk about his activism very much, but did that come out more so as you got older?

EW: I think, I think a bit as I got older, it, it came out. He went in 19-, it must have been '56 that he went to the NAACP convention. It was in New York. And he and my mom drove for the conference and got an opportunity to interview the early SNCC workers when they were just beginning their start. And I remember him coming back and saying, "These young people, these young people are so ahead of us. We're so far behind." And he had tapes, he had taped them, and so we get to listen to the tapes. And he always had us pay attention to the news, so we, we knew when things were happening. I can remember the Sunday that the girls in Birmingham were killed because we were sitting at the, the table next to the little television and this news flash came on. So we were

⁴ A labor union that primarily represents dock workers on the West Coast of the United States. The union was established in 1937 after the 1934 West Coast Waterfront Strike, a 3-month-long strike which ended with a 4-day general strike in San Francisco, California.

always really aware of what was happening. I found out, maybe it's been six years ago now, that he had actually introduced Malcolm X at a program in Los Angeles. None of us knew anything about it. And a cousin of mine who does research on Los Angeles Civil Rights found this tape and sent it to my sister and I. And I said to my sister, "Did you know anything about this?" And she said, "No." And then we tried to figure out why. Whether it was that he perceived it was too dangerous. I mean, we knew about King but this was like a complete mystery to all of us and now there is this Malcolm X website and so a lot of the tapes left over from places where he spoke are available, and my cousin doing his research found this and he said, "You won't believe this, but your dad's here."

LP: Do you have, maybe, a hypothesis as to why he never mentioned it?

EW: Well, the only thing I can think about was that maybe there was some danger there. This, this was a rally that took place after someone, interestingly, had been killed by the Los Angeles police. What goes around comes around. And, there was a big rally. It was after he had separated from the nation of Islam, but he was still considered a polarizing figure. And this was an event where a lot of the black ministers were joining him, Malcolm X, in this event, and so it was a real turning point, I think, in the African American community, because the religious community had kind of stayed away from Malcom X. So I don't know if it was that. Interestingly, he lived to be 95 and we never talked about it. We never talked about it. And he never said. He had a picture that he used to keep in his room, which was a picture of Malcom X meeting Martin Luther King, and yet he never said, "I knew both of them." So we can only surmise that it was, perhaps, he perceived it would be dangerous. I don't know.

LP: You also mentioned in your first, our first interview that your father was someone who people who were new to the area could go to, to get settled into the neighborhood. Could you tell us more about this particular role in the community?

EWO: Yeah, there was a man by the name of Wesley Brazier, and Mr. Brazier was the head of the Urban League⁵. And at that time, for people relocating to the community, the Urban League was seen as the place that could help you get a job and do that kind of thing, where the NAACP⁶ was more engaged in activism and civil rights work. So, my dad and Mr. Brazier were very, very close and when people would come they would be told, “Find Wes Brazier.” And then Wes would kind of decide how he was gonna distribute whoever came, depending on what was needed, or the skill set the person had. So people would come and they might stay two or three days or they might just come to get some counseling about where they should go and where they might look.

LP: Do you believe his position in the community affected how you neighbors viewed your family? Or how others viewed your family, and has this shaped how you think families have a relationship to each other and their communities?

EWO: Well, I think my dad was a real respected person in the community. I don’t think it created any animosity or curiosity, ‘cause everybody was upward-striving. These were all folks who’d gone through the war and they were trying to make a living and make sure their children had better opportunities. I think what it did give me is a deep-seated sense of community responsibility. And that you have a responsibility to pay back or pay forward, however you wanna talk about it and that your achievement is much less about your personal achievement, and how you can use whatever,

⁵ A nonpartisan civil rights organization based in New York City that advocates on behalf of African Americans and against racial discrimination in the United States. It is the oldest and the largest community-based organization of its kind in the nation.

⁶ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. African-American civil rights organization in the United States, formed in 1909.

either gifts you have or privileges that you've had to make a larger community better. And I would say both my sister and I carry that as kind of a sense of a responsibility.

LP: You have spoken of your father and mother as activists. Could you talk specifically about how, and I know you said you didn't know much about your father's activism, but, what you did know, how that affected who you are and then who you have become, and also how you see the world?

EW: Well, I think part of it is what I just said. That sense that you have a responsibility to a community that's much bigger than yourself, I got from both of my parents, I think, a hope that even though things change slowly, you have a responsibility to stay in the game. You can't walk away from it. My dad over the course of his life moved several times, and until he was virtually disabled there was no community he didn't get into that he got to the center of things, or created something. We, he moved to North Carolina, was living with my sister in Durham, and got involved in saving an African American library that the city was going to close. He moved to Winston-Salem to live with me. He created a book club on the American dilemma and got grants and was training people. So he always, wherever he went, and I think that's something that we've carried. I think as I get older, I think, kind of recognizing the length of the arc of change. When I was in college, a friend of mine and I had a conversation with my dad about how his activism in college had been all wrong and if it had been right we would not have, we would not be having to be student activists. And he kind of sat there and smiled as we went on with our hubris about how we had made the world right. And I often remember that conversation because it's, it's easy to get cynical if you don't realize that change is incremental. It's not always progressive. There are real points of regression. And that you, the kind of hope that he showed of always getting in somewhere and giving it your mind and your best thinking and your action is what we carry from him.

LP: So your mother: in our first interview, you offered some striking memories of your mother. For instance, you recalled how she advocated for your older sister when she was in junior high school. And how she responded to the Watts Riots⁷ and when she stopped pressing her hair and got an Afro. Could you talk more about her role in your life? Are there stories about your mother that you would like to share?

EWO: Yeah, my mom was incredibly soft-spoken. And I was talking about those family stories. The African American community was trying to engage people to support the war effort and my dad was gone. He was fighting. And there was a gentleman in the community who was involved with this and my mother was involved with it. And my mother said, “Well, what if we could get Sugar Ray Robinson to come to the rally, if we could get-” No, Joe Louis.⁸ “If we could get Joe Louis to come to the rally, everybody would come ‘cause they’d come to see him.” So everybody thought that was a good idea. And this friend drove my mother up and they went to Joe Louis’s house, knocked on the door, and whoever was the butler came to the door and he said, “What do you all want?” And this gentleman’s name was Mr. Williams. Mr. Williams said, “Oh, we’re here. We’ve come to talk about so-and-so” and my mother must have said something. And, apparently, Joe Louis and his buddies were back in the back drinking and gambling and the butler was gonna close the door and when he heard my mom’s voice, he said, “Who is that? Tell her to come on back there!” So they went back and Mr. Williams said to my mother, “You make the pitch.” And she did, and he showed up at the

⁷ Race riots that took place in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles from August 11 to 17, 1965, resulting in 34 deaths.

⁸ Joseph Louis Barrow, best known as Joe Louis, was an American professional boxer. Louis held the world heavyweight championship from 1937 to 1949. He is considered one of the greatest heavyweights of all time.

rally. And that's the way she was. She never made a fuss and I can think of few times when she did not get what she wanted.

She was a lover of history. She was a lover of reading, so she really pushed us to read. When I was about 16, my dad had a massive stroke and in her own quiet way she just took over the family for the five or six years that he was disabled. And it was just like nothing happened. She was unfazed by anything, kind of always curious, and very demanding in a loving way.

LP: So we talked earlier. You described your mother. When we talked earlier, you described your mother and her friend to be very middle class African American women. Can you explain what you meant by the distinction of being middle class and what does this position mean in your life?

EW: I think then, being middle class really, consciously or unconsciously, meant imitating white people - so the straight hair, the definition probably of what was the good, owning a home, sending your kids to school. And I'm not saying those were white values, but a lot of it was predicated on what the white community was doing. And especially in terms of how women looked, how they dressed, and that deciding for that generation. My mother would have been well into her forties, that she was gonna go natural with her hair was just like, you know, *Ebony Magazine*⁹ didn't have any women with hair that wasn't straight in 1965. I mean that would have just been unheard of, so this was a real revolutionary act on the part of these women. And it was part of, I think, beginning of claiming that or maybe reclaiming that black is beautiful. That was to some degree part of the Harlem Renaissance, but in a very idealistic way. And this was like, suddenly she had dashikis and African clothes and it was just amazing. She was going through the same thing my sister and I were going through and there was 25 to 30 years difference between us, just in terms of womanhood and

⁹ A monthly magazine published for the African-American market. It has been published continuously since 1945.

personhood and how we looked and how we dressed, the kind of jewelry we used. All of that, for her age group, was quite significant. We could have been seen as rebels, young rebels, but these were women who were claiming a new sense of themselves in really powerful ways.

LP: So kind of in that same vein, you've said that it was during the Watts Riots that your mother felt free for the first time. What do you think she meant by that statement and can you elaborate on that sense of freedom?

EW: I think it was just that she could be fully self-referent as opposed to a white, a woman, or a white society being the reference or the standard. That she could be fully who she was. If she wanted to be loud she could be loud. Just constraints that may have been unconscious but there, were somehow released. I'm sure a piece of that was also the capacity to release some anger. Black people are not supposed to be angry. I mean look at how Obama is treated and the way that he regulates himself so he never appears to be angry. Because an angry black man or an angry black woman is a very threatening thing. And I think the ability to also say, "Yes, I am angry, and this anger makes some sense and I have a right to express it rather than suppress it." I think all that was a part of what that freedom meant, and what she meant when she said, "I felt free for the first time."

LP: Have you had a similar experience, have you ever experienced something similar to what your mother experienced?

EW: You know, I think mine was different. I think I felt fully that sense of freedom in an odd way when I went to Nigeria, just because there were other factors at play. But that was the first time in my life that race had not been a factor at play. My gender might have been at play. My American-ness might have been at play, but my race wasn't at play.

LP: So at home and at school you were surrounded by strong female figures. How did that impact you as a girl and later as a woman, especially someone in a strong leadership position?

EW: I have much less seen myself constrained by gender than by race. All the women I knew worked and they worked in a breadth of, of sectors. So I knew women who did service work. I knew women who were professionals, teachers and, I don't think I ever knew a woman doctor, but vocational rehabilitation counselors, social workers. So I always knew women working outside of the home and making that kind of life work. I also went to an all-girls high school and I just think there, all of that gave me a sense of empowerment that I don't think I ever felt that I couldn't do something because I was a woman, where I did feel that sometimes my opportunities were constrained because I was a person of color. There were probably things that I didn't see also. So, for example, I had very few professors who were women. When I was in college, I was in a place where there were five colleges together and only one of the academic deans was a woman. So there was, there was some of that, but it just was not as salient for me as, as race was.

LP: So in class we've been reading Audre Lorde¹⁰ and she wrote about the particular challenges that come from being visible as a black woman. Could you talk with us about the challenges you have faced as an African American woman in a prominent leadership role?

EW: It was very interesting. When I first came to Kalamazoo College, people would say things like, "Well, she'll be good with students, but she won't be able to raise money." Interesting juxtaposition. She'll be the good mother, but she won't be able to do the hard stuff. Prior to my coming here when I was in a role as chief academic officer, people repeatedly--when I was being

¹⁰ A Caribbean- American writer, radical feminist, womanist, lesbian, and civil rights activist, Lorde's poetry and prose most often dealt with issues related to civil rights, feminism, and the exploration of black female identity.

introduced to speak or something - would say I was the dean of students. And, one day I just, I went off in a group. And I said, "What is it that it makes it impossible for people to think that a woman of color could be in charge of the academic enterprise that we would have to be in the caretaking enterprise?" And I don't mean to diminish the work of a dean of students. But it's just, it's a really interesting juxtaposition that that's where, where right on paper it said, "She is the vice president and the dean of a college," and it would get introduced as the vice president dean of students when it wasn't even there on the paper. So it was kind of what, what was inside people's heads. But I also think the time that I spent in Nigeria freed me--in a way that sometimes in talking to my peers I don't see--from paying any attention to any of that stuff. Because I've had a long time to be away from that defining me. And so I've been able to separate that from being something that's constantly rubbing on you, people questioning your capacity in some way. So now, more than anything, I laugh at it. I just, I just feel like it's somebody else's problem. It's not necessarily mine. And I play with it a lot. There was a time that I was invited to an event. I was at a professional meeting representing my former institution and I was invited to a dinner. And at the dinner I was the only pro-, I was the only women in the group who was a professional. It was all men with their wives accompanying them. My husband wasn't with me for the conference, so I asked a friend of mine who was a dean at another college to come and go with me to the dinner. So it was the two women of color who were the professionals, and there was a man sitting next to me, and he said, "What did your parents do for a living?" And I thought, that's a really odd question. And what it said to me was "You don't belong here, so you must have an unusual story that I'm trying to figure out. Because you don't, by your very nature, you don't belong in this group." So I told him, and then immediately turned the tables, and said, "What did your parents do for a living?" And he told me that his mom worked at home and his dad had been a farmer and he was the first in his family to go to college. And I said, "You've done very well for yourself." And I, because I just wanted him to understand that I understood what he did, whether he understood what he did. And, after I've done something like that, and it's not

always nice, you know, when I look back, that was probably not a nice thing to do, and I wanted to put him in his place, so I did it. [laughs]

LP: So, you yourself have worked in the advancement of young women, and we understand that in 1999 you were awarded with the Gender Equity Architect Award by the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education in recognition of your work in leadership development and mentoring young women and girls - and then in 2002 with the Salvation Army's Strong, Smart, Bold Award in recognition of your service to women and girls in Forsyth County?

EW: Forsyth County.

LP: Forsyth County in North Carolina. Could you tell us what inspired you to mentor young girls and women?

EW: Well, I think young girls and women are our future. I also did work with young women when I was in Nigeria as well. And in the Gender Equity Architect it was really about preparing women to be department chairs and to be deans in colleges of education, because even though the vast majority of teachers are women, the leadership in schools of education was predominantly male. And so a few of us who were, I guess in the early wave of women education deans, developed a leadership program for women who were department chairs and women who had been tenured, so that they could begin to think about these roles and envision themselves in these roles. So that was more kind of higher-ed focused. And then, the other award. The 'Smart Bold' was really working directly with young girls, really ensuring that they finish school and they were operating to the best of their potential. Because we discovered in Forsyth County that what was happening was that when girls finished middle school, if they were high-performers, and were ready for an AP class, and they were African American women, they would opt out of it because there were no boys. And so it was, it was

this kind of ‘I don’t want to push myself if I’m pushing myself beyond my social group.’ And, how did you mediate that? How did you work with that? So, that was around a lot of the intervention to make sure they were really aspiring academically.

LP: So, I want to turn to your college years and the Civil Rights Period. As a transition, though, I would like to ask a question that comes out of one of our readings in class from W.E.B. Du Bois¹¹ and his recalling a memory in *The Souls of Black Folk* when he first became dramatically aware of his racial identity. Can you recall a similar story? Was there a specific experience when you became aware of your race?

EW: Yep, I was in the second grade. We were given cut-outs to do for Thanksgiving, and I colored my pilgrims black. And I was in a school with primarily African American students, but everybody else left their pilgrims white and they had blonde hair. And, and everybody laughed at me. And I remember going home and being really upset because people had laughed because I had colored these brown-skinned pilgrims. And it was much later when I began to study psychology, and I became exposed to the self-concept studies that are done with young African American children, that I realized that was actually a sign of a very healthy self-concept. Because I was, it might not have been historically correct, but at that time what children do is they put themselves in the characters they see, and my classmates had already stopped doing that in second grade. But at the time it was very painful because I was the one who got made fun of. And I remember going home and my mother found some way to salve it over. I don’t remember what she said, but she said something. But

¹¹ An American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, Pan- Africanist, author, and editor. DuBois completed graduate work at both the University of Berlin and Harvard where he was the first African American to earn a doctorate and then went on to become a professor. He was one of the co-founders of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

that was the first instance where I really realized that there was something different, although I didn't know quite what it was.

LP: So, thank you...

EWO: Oh, you're welcome.

LP: ...for that story. Were you, well, we were struck by a memory from your college years. You mentioned that during your sophomore year of college you took a race and relations course, and you read the book *The Mark of Oppression*¹². Can you recall how your peers reacted to that text? And, how did you deal with their reactions?

EWO: I can't remember directly, but what I do remember was I could not talk about the way it was affecting me. I didn't feel that there was a space in the class for that conversation so it was much, it was two years later when I told the story as a way of trying to explain why we needed African American Studies in the curriculum. But, I couldn't speak it then, so I probably just listened to other people. And I didn't have the intellectual capacity to challenge it from a theoretical framework that I have now - I didn't have then, so it was just that I didn't feel that was a right description of me but, gosh, it was written by somebody! So here was scholarship saying essentially that something was the matter with me. I didn't have the theoretical framework, so more than anything I was just silenced and working it out at night in these nightmares that I was having.

LP: Do you recall anything about the nature of those nightmares?

¹² *The Mark of Oppression: A Psychosocial Study of the American Negro* was written by Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey in 1951. Kardiner decided to study one segment of American society, the Negro, who is separated from the white majority by the "psychological scars created by caste and its effects" and he classified these scars as the mark of oppression.

EW: I remember waking up panicked. I can't tell you what the content was, but waking up panicked by them.

LP: During the time of this class, you also took a trip to Berkeley to a Black Power conference. We would like to hear more about your experiences at this conference and how you came to understand the Black Power Movement. What memories stand out from this event?

EW: I had never been in the presence of that level of African American intellectuals. And I can remember one person getting up after another and I was just blown away. The first time I heard the name Frantz Fanon¹³, it came out of Stokely Carmichael's¹⁴ mouth. And, of course, then I ran to get *The Wretched of the Earth* to read it. But it just opened up a new way of thinking that I had not been exposed to. And while some of it was rhetorical. Some of it like the introduction of Fanon and using the analysis of colonialism as a way to think about the African American experience was just mind-boggling for me.

LP: So, you then recall Stokely Carmichael's speech? Is there anything in his speech that sticks out to you?

¹³ Born in Martinique, Fanon was a psychiatrist, philosopher, revolutionary, and writer whose works are influential in the fields of post-colonial studies, critical theory, and Marxism

¹⁴ Also known as Kwame Ture, Carmichael was a Trinidadian- American revolutionary active in the Civil Rights Movement, and later in the global Pan- African movement. He was the first leader of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), later the "Honorary Prime Minister" of the Black Panther Party, and finally a leader of the All-African People's Revolutionary Party.

EW: Well, he went, he talked about Fanon. He talked about *The Wretched of the Earth*. He talked about - it was the first time I'd heard the term "lumpenproletariat"¹⁵ but really to kind-of begin, to get us to think about the position of the African American community, less in a way to be asking to be let in the door, which was essentially the philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement more than "claiming". And I remember my, and he was also saying we shouldn't be hampered by nonviolence. And I can remember coming home and having a big argument with my mom about 'maybe nonviolence wasn't the way to go.' And her saying, "Let me tell where violence will lead. There's no way you can win." So it opened things about the movement and challenging the movement I didn't realize at the time. But the other thing that was going on there was that it was very gendered. All the speakers were male. There was built into this false notion of African surrender, so the man's at the top and the women are supposed to follow behind. So there was a lot of that kind of stuff. It was embedded at that event and in some of the other subsequent movement efforts that it took a while for women to contest.

LP: So, on campus, you were one of very few women of color. Could you share some of those memories or just even any day-to-day experiences that you can recall?

EW: Well, there were very few of us. It took us a while to find one another and to also be comfortable occasionally being together. Because you felt like you were being watched all the time for everything and I can remember being with my white friends and they would be late for

¹⁵ *Lumpenproletariat* is a term that was originally coined by Karl Marx to describe the layer of the working class that is unlikely ever to achieve class consciousness, the beliefs that a person holds regarding their social class or economic rank in society, the structure of their class, and their class interests, and is therefore lost to socially useful production, of no use to the revolutionary struggle, and perhaps even an impediment to the realization of a classless society.

something. And I'd say, "I can't be late, you guys. You know, you guys, if we walk in the room late, the only person they're gonna see who's late is me." So there was a lot of that carrying the burden of race that I think we were all very, very conscious of. There were very few opportunities for social life that were consistent with our own backgrounds. I mean we would actually go to dances they had and the Pomona College ballroom was kind of a step-down place, so you could sit along the ring, and we would sit along the ring and laugh at how white people danced 'cause they couldn't follow the beat. I have a theory that it was after school integration that white students learned to follow polyrhythmic beats. But in 1967, they could not follow a polyrhythmic. And that was our entertainment because there was nothing for us to do, so our entertainment was to say, "Okay, let's go watch these people dance off the beat because they cannot follow the beat." I think the women also felt, in a way, that they had fewer social options than the men. The men could date anybody they wanted - red, brown, purple, or yellow. There were gonna be very few opportunities for African American women to date outside of that African American male population that was very small, so there was a kind of a social isolation piece to it. And yet I don't, we weren't miserable. We just "Okay, this is the way it is." And you just do what you have to do.

LP: Were you ever affected academically? Or just maybe like, personally, personal life?

EW: I think I was affected academically because at the time, when I felt like I wasn't doing well, I felt it belonged to me. And I didn't realize that all my other peers were feeling the same way 'cause they could talk to each other about it. And so if somebody were to say, there was a very notorious history professor, "Gosh, Dr. Larnihan is killing my rear end." Well, the white students could say that to one another, but I couldn't ever feel like I could enter that conversation and say "Well, you know, he's kicking my rear end, too." Because, in my case, my reading of it was that there was something that was the matter with me. I had only one instance where I really felt the professor was, in fact,

racist. And I mean outright racist in terms of the way he responded to my input in class, the way he marked my papers. But what I probably didn't have, with the exception of one or two faculty members, was faculty members who pushed me. So, nobody did anything overt, but nobody said, "You can really, you can do this and you can." I had one professor who did that. It was actually my first advisor who had a profound impact on me, and he wasn't tenured. I think it was my junior year. He went up for tenure and he wasn't tenured. And I think he wasn't tenured because he was very politically progressive, and I think that didn't fit in that community, and I think it was that progressive view of the world he had that led him to be the one who really pushed me. The first thing, and I've shared this story sometimes with students, he said to me the middle of my first year, so maybe after the first semester, "I don't see you at anything." And he said, "You know you came to college to study and learn, but some of the most important learning is these lectures outside the classroom." Well, in my mind, because I didn't feel that I could compete academically, I felt the longer I stayed in the library, the more I was gonna learn. And what he was saying to me is, you're missing everything else that Pomona College is bringing because you're spending too much time in the library. And he said, "I'm going to start looking for you." Well, if you're the only person in the class, and your advisor says he's going to start looking for you, you better show up because he can find you if you're not there. It really changed the trajectory of my college experience, and I was much happier.

LP: That's great. So we would then also like to hear you talk more about your time at Pomona during the development of Black Studies. What do you recall about the debate in relation to Black Studies?

EW: Okay, because the Claremont Colleges have five colleges together, the Black Student Union was a five-college group. And so, what we decided to do was to propose a center that would serve all

five of the colleges. So that meant that we had to negotiate with five different faculties, five different presidents and sets of deans. And so we probably had to do, in some ways, more strategic work than other people had to do 'cause, and each campus had its own culture. So the argument that you could make at Pomona was not the argument you could make at CMC and might not have been the right argument for Pitzer, so you had to figure all of that out. We did a lot of research. We did a lot of writing. We did a lot of speaking before all of these faculty groups. And they were some of the, I think our contention was, we didn't see our experience in the work. I was a sociology major. We did not read Du Bois, for example, in our sociological work. So, we felt as if there was a whole set of literature that we should know and other students should know. But I think at the time we were much more focused on what we should know than what would be good for the total student body to know, and that the institution had a responsibility - particularly if we were going to solve very severe crisis in the African American community. We needed to be better grounded in an understanding, and an understanding that didn't come from a deficit model because everything we were reading, including *The Mark of Oppression*, began positioning people of color in a deficit position. And so that was part of the argument. And, I can remember being in front of the Pomona faculty in particular, and saying, "You know, I haven't gotten very much out of my education." And somebody standing up was saying, "Well, how can you say that? You speak so well." And I was furious. I said, "I learned to speak from my daddy, not from you." 'Cause it was, it was just this kind of assumption about who I must have been when I got there, rather than I had to be super to get there in the first place. I must have been a deficit, and, of course, I bought right into that, and then it was Pomona who had shaped me. So, we galvanized students from all five campuses and we would go from campus to campus with these positions. And then we ended up, I think there were eight of us. There were, I think there were two people from each college, except Harvey Mudd, because at that point there were no, that's an institute of technology, there were no black people there at the time. And, we went into long negotiations with the presidents, and I think each board chair, before we were able to create this

inter-five college Black Studies program, and we had to do all of the work. I mean we had to figure out the faculty lines, we had to, there was nobody there who could advise us, who even knew how the colleges worked. So, we really had to do everything. If it was a joint appointment, how was that gonna work? So, I learned a lot about how colleges worked [laughs] just trying to put it together. Yeah, but it was difficult. It wasn't easy. There was a point at which there was a take-over of some of the buildings. There was some, some pushback from some of the majority students, so it wasn't, it came with both activism and some kind of retrograde responses.

LP: How would you compare or differentiate between what happened at Pomona College to what is currently happening at Kalamazoo College?

EW: It's interesting. I had breakfast with a friend who was from Pomona College about two weeks, two days ago, and she says, "Well, what's the difference?" And I think there are two, maybe three. In the 60s, there was a real recognition that leadership, even within the movement was very important. So there was, to a degree, kind of a hierarchical structure. There were those of us who were the leaders. There were people who were assigned this work and that work, but there was kind of a hierarchy there. And there were people there who you just said, "You know, it's just time for you to show up. We'll do the talking. You just show up." But it also meant that when there was, when it was time to sit down and negotiate, there were people that everybody was comfortable saying, "You go sit down to negotiate." And I think what I've seen now post-Occupy is a kind of a reluctance for somebody to own the work as the leader. And that can make negotiation very difficult. So that's one change. I think the other change is that with the presence of social media – even the arguments being put forth by the people in the movements themselves cannot be controlled and that just makes it very complicated. And I think the third thing that, I would say that is - it's a question for me intellectually – and I've had this conversation with some of my other presidential peers – is

because many of us, because many of us came through that first movement and because there seems to be such dichotomous thinking about “we” and “they,” there’s a lack of appreciation for the fact that some of the people in leadership of institutions really get this now, and that because they do there may be other ways of problem solving. But I think it is really easy to make it an “us” and “them” argument, and where it was “us” and “them” in the 1960s ‘cause there was no “us” on the “them” side, if you know what I mean. So, I think, I’ve talked to some of my peers who are kind of struggling with the same thing. What do you do when at the heart you understand this? But you’re also able to look at mistakes you may have made and that knowledge can’t inform the conversation. And those are the three things that I’d say, that from my mind, are different.

LP: When talking about your decision to return to Africa and eventually take up a teaching position in Nigeria, you said that it was time to get out of the country. That there was only so much failing to live up to the promise that you could take. Could you talk more about that - your sense of time and your response to it?

EWO: When I graduated I was really angry. I was very angry at the institution because it had signed onto something, and then it had failed to live up to its promise. I think I was completely drained from having to be the spokesperson. It just took a lot out of me, and I just felt like I couldn’t do that anymore. And to kind of get to a place where I didn’t have to worry about that was what I wanted to do. Then I came back and went to graduate school and saw a retrenchment on all of the progress we had begun to make, so that people made commitments in the late 60s and early 70s, and by the mid-70s, when I was in graduate school, all of them were beginning to erode. And unlike my father who stayed in it, it was just like, “I can’t do this.” And so, for me, very often it was just, “I can’t do this.” And so it was a conscious refuge.

LP: So this last question, the past invites a consideration of the present in the United States and at Kalamazoo College concerning issues of race, the justice system and matters of social justice. Could we start first with a more personal perspective? As a mother, could you tell us what concerns you? Are there stories you might share about your position as a parent in raising your children in America?

EWO: It was interesting, somebody said to me last Friday when the students did the walk-out, “It was nice for you to go.” And I looked at the person and I said, “I was the only person standing there with three black male children.” I was there to support my students, but I was there ‘cause those are my children. Nobody else standing there had African-American children. So there’s a way in which it affects me quite profoundly. My son recently took a job in Los Angeles. He’s thirty-three. And before he went I sat him down. I said, “I need to talk to you about the Los Angeles police. You have never seen a police force like the Los Angeles police.” So when the gentleman in New York was killed and then the grand jury said there would be no hearing, he called me up. He said, “Mommy, I want you to know I have a week of food in the house. I don’t have to go out.” Now, one, I was relieved that he listened to me, but, two, that’s a hell of a way for your children to have to live. This same son, we often tell a story, he was in high school, had a white friend that he was very close to. They’d gone bowling, driving in the friend’s car – the friend had a Volvo. My son left his wallet in the car when they went in to pay. So his friend gave him the keys and said, “Go in the car and get it.” Something with the fob or something, he couldn’t get the car open. Twenty minutes, my son hasn’t returned to the bowling alley, so his friend comes out and there he is spread eagle on the car with police all around him. And my friend is, his friend is trying to say, “That’s my friend. I gave him the keys,” and they kind of push him away. Eventually, they all sort it out, but this is not a foreign experience to me. My older son was once pulled over for speeding in a small town in North Carolina, and we had given him the talk, and he was issued a speeding ticket, and when he told us about it he said – and he was six foot three – he got out of the car and said, “I’m a student at Morehouse

College¹⁶.” I went, “No, you didn’t! That’s exactly what we do you, see how you set those police up? You got out to tell them you were a college student?” [rolls eyes] So, I mean, it is very real to me. My father defended several cases of people who were killed by the police, and as I mentioned, that Malcolm X rally that we eventually found out about, so when all this began to happen there was a phrase we used in Los Angeles a lot called “justifiable homicide.” And, in fact, a friend of mine, who’s a filmmaker, in 1975 made a movie that won an award called *Justifiable Homicide*. And it was about how anytime the Los Angeles police or sheriffs killed somebody the grand jury came out and it was a justifiable homicide. And it just really feels to me like we’re right back there again. And I think the difference is that, for a younger generation, I think this is coming as a surprise and so they’re in shock. And I think for others of us, we’re just remembering.

LP: Do you think anything has ever, has ever really changed or it’s just kind of, because you mentioned this younger generation being more surprised about it or by it, this knowledge. How, as a question, how far do you think we’ve progressed or if we have at all with race relations and police brutality?

EWO: There are ways in which we have made real progress, and I think we, we cannot deny that. And yet there is a pernicious persistence, I think, to certain forms of racism. And I think part of what’s happened is because of this mass communication, people can now put all the dots together. So they can say Ferguson and Los Angeles and Cleveland and New York. Where before they might’ve just said Los Angeles or just Cleveland. And so, the magnitude of it, the continuing persistence of it, the tendency for people to justify it doesn’t feel like there’s much change. And there’s a sense for me that, at the personal level, the presence of an African-American president has unleashed a kind of

¹⁶ The only all male historically-black institution of higher learning in the United States.

personal racism – I’m not talking about institutional racism, but personal racism, that is, even I was surprised by.

LP: Sorry. [pause] Back to your children. Are there stories you might share about your position as a parent in raising your children in America? And what have you said, maybe, during, during those moments? And how have they turned to you in relation to issues of race over the years? Are there any other stories?

EW: Well, in addition to the stories of the boys, my, my children’s stories are different, because they are Nigerian African Americans. They are all born in Nigeria, so all having a grounding foundation in Nigerian culture and, to some degree, not understanding the African-American situation as well as I do sometimes. So my daughter grew up in North Carolina – all the kids did, but she came to the University of Michigan for an MPH. And when she got here she called me and she said, “Mommy, they keep saying Detroit. They keep saying so and so and so and so Detroit. It’s a code for something, but I don’t know what the code is.” And so when I was visiting her, I took her on a ride through Detroit, and I tried to give her a history that she was not part of. She came to the U.S. in the late 80s at 7, so she just didn’t have that whole historical context. And yet, as they’ve lived here, now they’ve had their own experiences with race that they have crafted, but I think always with the overlay that they spent the seminal years of their childhood in environments that really affirmed who they were. So they’re unusual in some ways, and they know, they know very clearly how the world sees them. The world sees them as only African-American and with whatever baggage that brings, so I think they have a more nuanced understanding now.

LP: Of all the recent events that have led to such movements as Black Lives Matter¹⁷, is there anything that stands out for you? What do you feel is important to say or be said at this moment in our history as a nation?

EW: There is a persistence of racial oppression that I find deeply troubling at the same time that there is probably greater diversity of opportunity within the African-American community than one has ever seen. So you take, for example, the progress that's been made on GLBT¹⁸ rights, in many ways much faster trajectory. And you just take this declining persistence of race even at the same time that even the term "race" means so many different things to many different people. It's really complex, it's troubling. It's really complex to try to get one's handle around. I mean my children's experiences and they're, the opportunities that they will have are tremendously different from some people who look just like them. And yet, in the flash of an eye, everybody's treated the same way. And so, how do you think about that, if you're the person? How do you peel all that away? It's pretty complex.

LP: What experiences, memories, or people from the Civil Rights era might serve you now?

EW: Well, you mentioned --

LP: Sorry, serve us now.

¹⁷ An international activist movement, originating in the African American community. BLM campaigns against violence toward black people and broader issues of racial profiling, police brutality, and racial injustice in the United States criminal justice system.

¹⁸ Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender

EW: Well, you mentioned Audre Lorde. And, for me, I think I always remember her notion of the transformation of silence into action and her notion of what should I, if I don't speak, if I'm silent of what was I afraid? And I just think that's a powerful metaphor sometimes for thinking through what one does. Other people - I think there's a way in which it's important to be grounded in the history to understand it, but also to ask, "What's different?" I mean one of the people who inspired me, inspires me, tremendously is Grace Lee Boggs¹⁹ who has lived through everything. You know, she's at the end of her life now. But she was, when I went to see her in September, she was still telling me what to read from the bed. The curiosity, the willingness to critique what happened in the 60s and move in a different direction and ask a different set of questions. I just think she is one of the most inspiring people in her honesty of all of those folks. Because there are a lot of folks who just get stuck in "I did" and Grace just continues to evolve. She's amazing to me.

LP: What have you found most difficult during this time on campus and what have you found to be the most inspiring?

EW: I think what I've found the most difficult is the difficulty that we are finding in really making a space where really different approaches to solving the challenges before us are really seriously thought through. I fear a little bit that there's a tendency to reach back to a different period of time and say that's the solution, and if that were the solution we wouldn't be having the challenges we have now, so it's frustrating not to have the answer to everybody, and yet I think the real work of doing the, doing the hard work of finding a new set of answers - I think there's some various ambivalence about really participating in that, so that's problematic to me. I think the personalization of some of the protests have been, I think, not the best reflection of, as we do this work we should be humans, and we should be people of good spirit, and that saddens me that we've had some stuff that

¹⁹ An American author, social activist, philosopher, and feminist.

really seems shame and blame rather than let me really sit and talk with you and let's figure this out. So that, I think. What's been good is that this moment has brought us to a point where everybody is saying, "We have to address this." And not saying, "Well, it's really so-and-so's problem. It's a student development problem or it's only a faculty problem or it's -" But that there's, perhaps, a greater openness to say, "Okay, we all have to look at this and everybody has a piece in it." And I think, I think that's what's promising.

LP: Well, thank you so much for your time and for answering our questions and, yeah, just thank you.

EWO: Well, thank you.

LP: [laughs]