

**Interviewee:** Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran

**Interviewer:** Lauren Perlaki

**Location:** Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, MI

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**Transcribers:** Lauren Perlaki, Victoria, Dana Lindsey

This interview was reviewed and edited by Donna Odom, Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society.

**Lauren Perlaki:** This is Lauren Perlaki interviewing Dr. Wilson-Oyelaran on April 27, 2015. Thank you for being a part of the Engaging the Wisdom Oral History Project. Would you please tell us your name and your current address?

**Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran:** My name is Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran. My address is REDACTED.

**LP:** Great, thank you. So, could you tell us when and where you were born?

**EWO:** I was born in Los Angeles, California in 1947.

**LP:** So you grew up in Los Angeles?

**EWO:** I grew up in Southern California, yeah. South Central, Los Angeles.

**LP:** Okay, were your parents originally from the Los Angeles area?

**EW:** No. My father was born in Buffalo, New York and grew up in New York City. My mom was born in Tampa, Florida, but was sent to New York when she was about 13 for better educational opportunities. So, they really both considered themselves New Yorkers, Harlemites.

**LP:** [laughs] So then they met in New York?

**EW:** Yes, they met in New York at the Schomburg library.

**LP:** Oh, how wonderful! So what drew them to L.A.?

**EW:** After -- well, my father came out for the war, was in San Francisco. I guess both of my parents left New York and went to San Francisco where my father's mother was living. And then after the war, they relocated to Southern California to a community that was being created for African-American G.I.'s who were coming back from World War II. So, it was *de facto*--not *de jure*—segregated, but brand new homes. All these guys were coming back with the G.I. Bill and an FHA loan so they could try to get settled.

**LP:** And then did you grow up in that community as well?

**EW:** Yes, yes.

**LP:** So, what was it like to grow up amongst the, I'm assuming, G.I.'s in that kind of environment?

**EW:** Well, it was a very upward-striving community. A lot of the men who had not finished their college degrees before going into the army used the G.I. Bill to get their bachelor's degrees. A lot of the women were teachers or social workers. Everybody on the street knew you. It was one of those...the community raised all of us. So, you couldn't get away with very much.

**LP:** [laughs] But that definitely has, I bet, its advantages and disadvantages.

**EW:** Well, I think at the time we really thought that they were just advantages. The minister knew all of us by name. There was a church on the corner about three blocks from my house. The minister would come out at 3:00 when school got out and just watch all of us on the way home. So, it was, you really felt supported.

**LP:** That sense of community. So, then, what did your parents do for a living? When your dad came back from the war, what did he do?

**EW:** Well, when my dad back to [*sic* from] the war, he used his G.I. Bill to go to law school and worked as an attorney and a minister for most of his life. For a while, he worked for the state in apprenticeship. He was doing that while he went to law school. My mom stayed at home until, probably I was about 10 or 11, and then she went to work for the state of California in vocational rehabilitation and worked with the blind.

**LP:** Wow, sounds rewarding.

**EW:** Yeah, she enjoyed it.

**LP:** That's great. It sounds like rewarding careers, too, that both of your parents did, and work that they did. Just great. Can you tell us some memories of your childhood days at home? Any, any fond memories that stick out in your mind, specifically?

**EW:** Well, I loved school. I loved my teachers. I was a Girl Scout. We had a great Girl Scout troop. And our neighborhood was, was, we perceived it as very safe. So, for example, there was a man who lived maybe three houses down and had a little pond in his back yard with fish. And we could just go there--whether he was home or not--and collect fish or collect tadpoles or whatever we wanted to do. It was a very easy growing up, I think.

**LP:** And, do you ever remember acting out against your parents' wishes as a child?

**EWO:** Oh, I'm sure.

[laughter]

**LP:** Do you remember any kind of big moment that your mother or your father might have warned you against or said, "Oh, I don't know," and you just kind of took the plunge anyway? Anything in particular?

**EWO:** I'm trying to remember if any, any of them come to mind. And nothing comes to mind, but I know I did it because the thing I remember is being sent out to the backyard to pick the switch that I would get a spanking with.

**LP:** Oh, no.

**EWO:** So, I know I did stuff. And I was probably very headstrong as a young girl, so, it could have been any number of things.

**LP:** Could you describe, then, also, where exactly from L.A., like where in L.A., you are from?

**EWO:** Mm-hmm.

**LP:** What was the neighborhood called?

**EWO:** It was called the Bellevue neighborhood. It would now be considered part of Watts. At the time when we grew up, we did not consider it part of Watts. We considered it adjacent to Watts - 118<sup>th</sup> Street and Avalon. Watts, the center of Watts, is 103<sup>rd</sup> and Central, and we were between

Avalon and Central on 118<sup>th</sup>. So, that would be how you would name it. It's, it was, as I mentioned, an all African-American community. Now, it is significantly Latino.

**LP:** What do you think--or do you know when that shift occurred that the boundaries, I guess, of the neighborhood, kind of changed?

**EWO:** After the riots, the Watts Riots<sup>1</sup> in 1965, people began to describe the whole area as Watts - probably from 103<sup>rd</sup> going south to 120<sup>th</sup> and going north maybe to 86<sup>th</sup> street. So, that whole area began to be defined as Watts.

**LP:** Were you in Los Angeles at the time of the Watts Riots?

**EWO:** Yes.

**LP:** What was that like?

**EWO:** I was away at Girl Scout Camp when the burning started. And so it was really, and I was probably--it was probably the end of my junior or senior year of high school and I can remember it being really strange because I wasn't at home. I was about two hours away, didn't have access to a car. Didn't have access to a phone, so, kind of hearing, didn't have access to a telephone really. So kind of hearing what was happening in some ways was a little bit scary. When I came back from camp, the burning had stopped, and it was kind of stunning to see that that had happened kind of in your neighborhood. Actually, not, the, the arrest that led to the riots was actually not in Watts. It was on Main and 113<sup>th</sup>, so very close to my home. But, the, the actual rioting began on 103<sup>rd</sup> and Central. And, you know, when I was a kid, that's where we went to swim. We would walk from 118<sup>th</sup> to

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<sup>1</sup> Race riots that took place in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles from August 11 to 17, 1965, resulting in 34 deaths.

103<sup>rd</sup>, just kids, no adults with us. We'd walk there, take swimming lessons, go back home. What I think was most striking for me was talking to my mother about it, and my parents had always been really active in civil rights and progressive kind of activities, and my mother said, "For the first time, I felt really free." And hearing that come from her was just, it was quite striking for me.

**LP:** Yeah. How would you say...or did you notice any changes in your neighborhood after the Watts Riots? Any kind of, were people different at all? Or was there any kind of stark difference between the neighborhood after the riots to the neighborhood before the riots occurred?

**EW:** Well, there were a couple of things that were going on at the same time. That was also the very beginning of the Black Power Movement. So, the, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was already doing things. But, this was more the shift to people actually taking action that people might have defined as violent action, and in their own communities. So the city responded in a number of ways. Some new schools were built over time, like in a 2 to 3-year period; a new hospital was built in the community. There was no hospital in the community, so there were some very real changes in terms of access and opportunity for people. And, I think on the psychological side, there was also a pride. But that was also, you know, it was coupled with the Black Power Movement. So, it's not like you can say, "Well, the riots did it." I think it was everything that was happening at the time: what was happening in the South, what was happening in the cities, the music, everything, I think, gave people a better sense of pride. For me, the, the shocker was when my mother stopped pressing her hair and got an Afro. And that was just like, "whoa!" And then, what was funny about it was we went to see another friend, and my mother had gone Afro and she was kind of patting her hair like this [waves hands over hair], trying to figure out how her friend was going to respond. These were very middle class African-American women. And, she opened the door and her friend had an Afro too. And just the look on the two of their faces, and it was kind of a

real recognition about how they suddenly saw themselves differently and could affirm who they were in very real ways, rather than trying to be like somebody else.

**LP:** So, to go back to school, at the time you were in high school, and we understand that you went to Our Lady of Loretto High School. Can you tell us what led you to attend a private Catholic high school? And what was it like being there, attending school there?

**EWO:** Okay, well, it started with my sister. I have a sister who is five years older than I am, and she went to the local junior high school, which was predominantly white. And the only African-Americans were those coming from our neighborhood into that school. And she had a horrible experience, and my mother, being the activist mother that she was, kind of went down to the school and gave them a very hard time, and she was not satisfied. She felt that my sister was not being challenged. She was being put in a lot of classes that were beneath her academic ability, and so at the end of her 7<sup>th</sup> grade, she went to the local Catholic school.

And I knew that I didn't have a choice. I mean, whether I wanted to or not, once I finished 6<sup>th</sup> grade I was going to Catholic school. The question was, which one was I gonna go to? So, I went to, for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I went to a school, a Catholic school called Our Lady of Loretto. It was very mixed racially. There were a few African-American students. There were more Latino students, and there were a lot of white students. From there, you had to take a test to be admitted into secondary schools, which started at the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. So, these were 9 to 12. And, the school that I really wanted to go to had a reputation for only admitting two African-American students. It was an all girls' high school, but they would only admit two in each class and there were two other women in my class who really wanted to go there. And, I was a pretty high performer, so I knew if I took the test and put that school on my list, that I would get it. And, so, there was another school that was farther away. It was actually about twenty miles away from home, a fairly new school that was close to where my

grandmother lived. And we found out about it and three of us went and visited that school and decided we wanted to go. So, we went and we were literally going all across town to get there, and our first couple of years our parents would car pool. So one parent a week would take all three of us down and then we would take the bus back home. And then by the time we were juniors, one of us was driving and so we managed to drive up there. It was a great school. I was challenged. I had great teachers. I did not realize it at the time, but I think there was something very powerful about going to an all girls' high school. I mean, I didn't, probably, have to go through the drama that a lot of women have to go to--in terms of who they are and how they look--in high school. And, I think I only recognized its power when, later, I was working at a women's college, and I looked back and I said, "Yeah, I had that all-women secondary experience." Of course, it was run by nuns, so everything was done by women.

**LP:** So then, in high school, you mentioned that you had really great teachers. Were you close to any teachers in particular?

**EWO:** Yeah, yeah, I had a high school teacher who I was very close to who was a nun by the name of Mary Margaret. And we remained very close until she died. I had three elementary school teachers who were absolutely seminal in my development because they really pushed me without letting me know that they were pushing me. And I remained close to them all through getting my PhD. They're deceased now, but I use the three of them actually as the standard for judging whether I'm doing something well enough or not. If I get a thumbs-up from them, then I know I've given it my best. So, they were very important to me.

**LP:** So, to kind of go back to your community in which you grew up, how aware were you of racial segregation - maybe not necessarily in your community, but outside of your community growing up? How did that affect or impact your youth?



**EW:** Well, my parents were very active in civil rights issues in the city. So, it was, it was interesting because the community was all African-American, that just seemed normal to me. I can, I can remember the first time I went to Girl Scout Camp. I might have been 10, and I went for the physical, and I remember coming back and saying to my mom, "I'm going to be one of the only black kids there." And she said, "Will that bother you?" and I said, "I don't think so." But it was like the first time that I was really going to be in an environment where I was the minority. My church was all black, my school was virtually all black, and there was no sense that there was any deficit. So, in some ways we would have defined it as "separate and equal." So, we didn't grow up with any sense that there was something that we did not have because our community was all African-American. I was aware, because of the work that my dad did, about a penal system that was unjust, because he had some very high-profile cases that had to do with people being arrested. My dad's best friend was in the Teamsters Union and did a lot of work organizing black longshoremen, and so I was aware that there were issues and that they weren't immediately pressing to me.

**LP:** So, you came of age during the Civil Rights period and, could you talk about those experiences or memories from that time period that maybe stand out to you - any memories in particular?

**EW:** Well, I can remember when in 1954, I think it was, when the girls were killed in Birmingham very clearly because we were getting ready for church, and in California it was three hours earlier. So we were getting ready for church and probably having breakfast, and the television was on when the story of these girls being bombed occurred. And, and just remember being in shock that somebody could do that to little children. We watched on television, again, the dogs on the young people in Birmingham. My father and mother went to the NAACP convention. I think it was 1950, maybe '64.

And my father came up, came back, just so fired up having heard these young kids from SNCC<sup>2</sup> and so we had, he had audio tapes, these great big reel to reel tapes that he'd taken of these kids. And, and there...so we listened to all of them. And then, there was sympathetic picket, picketing at Woolworths and Kresge's, which were the stores they were picketing in the South. We had access to them in, in California, but just decided to picket them in solidarity, so we, our youth NAACP group, went down to do that.

**LP:** And can you tell me a little bit more about, about that experience?

**EWO:** Well, doing it in California is very different from doing it in the South. So, it was, we were going to go down and picket and it was going to be fun. And we knew why we were doing it, but no one was hostile to us. The people at the store didn't ask us to leave, the people on the street, so we just did it. When I went to college I think the involvement then was actually much more serious, because we were very engaged in work around black studies in a lot of colleges and universities and that was work. The, the other felt like fun, but the work at college seemed like really hard work.

**LP:** And, why? Can you tell me why that -?

**EWO:** Well, the institutions were really very, very resistant. When I entered college I think there were 400 people in my class and there were two women of color. And, the equivalent would be one lived where the Arcus Center was and the other one lived where Anderson Center was, so it took us two weeks to find one another. And, I think, when I started, we all felt if we were of color that we

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<sup>2</sup> Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) often referred to as "snick") is a group that emerged during the 1960s with a goal to give younger blacks a voice in the Civil Rights Movement. It was involved in the Freedom Rides aimed at desegregating buses and drives for black voter registration during the 1960s. The group disbanded by the 1970s.

were carrying the burden of race for everyone. I can remember I had three friends who lived on my hall – white. They were late for everything. And, you know, one of the classic stereotypes is: “Black people are always late.” So I kept saying that I can’t be late. And they didn’t understand. It got to the point that I could not go with them, because I knew if I walked in late it meant something very different than if they walked in late. So there were all those kinds of things that I think one carried into institutions that were completely unconscious.

**LP:** So talking about college, how did you go about choosing your major?

**EW:** I chose is it by default [laughs] My sister had been a zoology major and it had been very difficult for her, so I knew I wasn’t going to do the sciences. And sociology just seemed easy enough to do and so I did it. So it wasn’t that I had a tremendous passion or anything; it was just by default.

**LP:** And then, how did that impact how, ‘cause then, once you declared you took more classes for your major, did a passion, did you grow a passion for the work you were doing and what you were studying?

**EW:** Not really. I was much more interested in education than I was in sociology and we didn’t have an undergraduate major in education, so I was able to use sociology and do a lot of things that had to do with education. So that part worked out. I think one of the most seminal things for me was that I took a course in race relations in my sophomore year. And as part of it, a bunch of us drove up to Berkeley for the first Black Power conference that they had in Berkeley, and we heard Stokely

Carmichael<sup>3</sup> and we heard Ron Karenga<sup>4</sup>. And that was the first time I heard the name Frantz Fanon<sup>5</sup> and then went back to read Fanon. But it was a...that was very seminal event in my thinking and in my intellectual development, because it opened me up to a set of scholars of color, who were thinking critically about these issues to whom I had no introduction to—even in a race relations course. And the other thing about that course that I remember as very seminal is we had to read a book which was then considered a classic, called *The Mark of Oppression*. And, essentially, the argument was that black people were crazy. And it was done by two psychoanalysts, who did a lot of interpretations of Rorschach tests. And I remember reading this book that was saying to me that I was crazy--that I was...because I did not or black people in general, because black people in general did not respond to Rorschach tests in the way that white people thought that they should respond, they were either sublimating or suppressing or what have you--and having nightmares about it. Not being able to tell anybody about it until my senior year. And when we were doing the advocacy for African-American studies, I told people that story in a faculty meeting and my advisor, who happened to be the teacher of that course—and we were good friends—but he said, “You couldn’t tell me that?” I said, “How could I tell you that?” Later that book received quite a critique when black psychologists began to look at some of that work, but we were right at the point where there wasn’t a critique. There was only one presentation and that’s what we had to deal with.

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<sup>3</sup> Later known as Kwame Toure, a civil rights activist, best known for leading the civil rights group SNCC in the 1960s.

<sup>4</sup> Maulana Ndabezitha Karenga (born Ronald McKinley Everett) is an African-American professor of Africana Studies, activist and author who created Kwanzaa.

<sup>5</sup> Frantz Omar Fanon was a West Indian psychoanalyst, author and social philosopher known for his theory that some neuroses are socially generated.

**LP:** So you mentioned seeing these black scholars and kind of along in a similar vein, I understand you were able hear Martin Luther King, Jr. speak. Could you tell us when and where?

**EW:** Yeah, I was 9. It was - no, I was older than 9. Wait a minute. It was 1959, because it was before, right before the 1960 election. And, as part of - and the convention was in Los Angeles. So King and many of the other civil rights leaders came to a pre-rally the day before the convention was to open. And it was really to push the national civil rights' agenda and Humphrey and Kennedy were both contesting for the democratic election. And that was at a time when the convention was really where the decisions were made. It's not like now, where everybody knows what's gonna happen and the convention is an afterthought. The convention was the thing and it was where the deals were made. Humphrey came to that event. Kennedy did not. And this was kind of the tussle about who was gonna get support from the African-American community. And Martin Luther King was there and my dad had some role. I cannot remember. Now, I think he spoke also. I'm not sure, but afterwards he grabbed me so I could go up and, and meet him. So I've, I've written a poem, because I don't remember what happened. But I remember him being very tall and I remember him taking time to speak. You know, I don't remember what he said, but it wasn't like he said, "Hello," and he went on to the next person. So I can remember the feeling of it, but not what transpired.

**LP:** That's wonderful though. Okay, to kind of shift gears a little bit. I'd like to ask you about your study abroad experience in England. Why did you choose England and what did you study while you were there?

**EW:** I chose England, because my foreign language skills weren't good enough [laughs] for me to go anyplace else. And it was really a great experience for me, because the focus of my independent study research was on the education of immigrant children in Britain. Again, education being my passion. And so, by virtue of that topic I got to meet many people in the West Indian community,

many people in the African community, former colonial. So, people from Kenya, people from English-speaking West Africa. I got a chance to know people in the Indian and the Pakistani community there. So, my experience was much more global, even though it was based in England.

**LP:** How would you say that your experience impacted what you would like, what you would have then wanted to do in the future, about the path that you would have liked to have taken? Did it, did that trip inspire anything specifically? Any kind of work that you and you, yourself maybe were drawn to?

**EWO:** I think it made me much more interested in the place of origin of the people that I studied. And when I was young, we very often had foreign students in our home, particularly African students who would start to come to the church and my family would adopt them. And when I left England, we left by boat. We actually went to Italy and then got on the boat in Milan. I can remember very distinctly when we were going through the straits of Gibraltar—and this is literally true—all the white people on the boat went to say goodbye to Europe and the few black people that were on the boat went to look at the coast of Africa because it was the first time we would have seen the coast of Africa and I made a vow. I can remember. I made a vow that my next trip was going to be to Africa. And I was lucky enough that fifteen months later, I was back in West Africa. So in some ways that was the most seminal thing. I think the things that I learned about the education of immigrant children were things that I was trying to ask myself - whether they could be imported into the United States. The other thing that I remember is the, is the only time I've ever been called nigger happened in England. It didn't happen here, or at least to my face. And, I remember that being such a shock. I, I might have expected it in the United States; I didn't expect it there.

**LP:** Do you mind telling us about the specific experience?

**EW:** Yeah, I can tell. My two roommates, who were white, and I had gone to Chelsea to an outdoor market. It was a Saturday morning. We'd gone to Chelsea for an outdoor market and we were coming back and a bunch of guys, probably football hooligans, were in a car and just started yelling, "Nigger." Now this, I was in England at the time when there was a real nativist movement going on, particularly in Birmingham. There was a lot of anti-immigrant sentiment. Less so in London, which is why it was so surprising. Had it happened in Birmingham, I would not have been as surprised, but - and they didn't accost us or anything. They were just kind of driving in their car, but it was still quite stunning.

**LP:** So what was it like studying immigrant children during a time in England you mentioned was anti-immigrant? How did your studies, how did you see parallels between what you were studying and what was going on? What was it like learning what you were learning during that time?

**EW:** [pause] The - most of the schools were segregated. In many cases, the expectations for the students were quite low. A lot of the curriculum materials had a subtly racist tinge, so I can remember there was a, a reader, probably second, Primary One, Primary Two. "This is a cat. This cat is black. His name is Nigger." And that was on the reading cards that the kids were using. So, it was and it was just part, nobody found that objectionable.

**LP:** So to kind of shift gears again, what influenced you apply for the Thomas J. Watson Traveling Fellowship? I know you mentioned on the boat looking at the coast of Africa. Did that, was that kind of, applying for the scholarship sort of, was that kind of your way of being able to go and being able to just study there?

**EW:** I was at a point where I was not sure I wanted to go to graduate school. I was pretty down on what I thought higher education was capable of doing as a result of my college experience. The work

that a lot of us were trying to do to change the institution and it's in many ways resistance to change. And the opportunity for the Watson came along and it was this: they gave you six thousand dollars, which almost fifty years ago was a lot of money and you could take anywhere you want. I had been working with a group of students for, I guess, three of my four years at the college. All...Students who were all from Central City, Los Angeles, either East L.A., which was largely Latino or South Central L.A., and they would come to the campus one Saturday a month for tutoring and exposure. And then in the summer, they went to an elite private school where they got a lot of infusion and really a top-level education. I had been working with, the end of my junior year, I had been working with the cohort of young men. So they would have been probably juniors going to seniors or maybe sophomores going to juniors. But I was teaching an African history course, African-American history course and I realized that every time I tried to show them something about Africa that they did not believe it because the pictorial presentation of Africa that had been so much a part of their upbringing, that when I would talk about there were cities and there was this, they simply didn't believe it. So what I wanted to do was go and develop visual curriculum materials that I could bring back to try to cut against that just deeply-held view that was largely because of what, the way television was projecting Africa. And that was primarily their main source of information. So it was Tarzan and Rambo, Sambo, and that kind of stuff. And it seemed a wonderful thing to be able to do, since I didn't want to go to graduate school and it was - [laughs]

**LP:** And then, I also understand that you lived in Nigeria for fourteen years.

**EWO:** Yeah.

**LP:** Can you tell us about that experience? You know, fourteen years is a long time, but, I guess we can start off: Why Nigeria?



**EWO:** Well, I took—I got the Watson Fellowship. It was to be for a year and the money went farther in Africa. So I spent six months in Ghana, six months in Nigeria, and six months in Tanzania. And I came back and went to graduate school, and by the time I finished graduate school, it was again time for me to get out of the country. This is a country that has much promise and often doesn't live up to that promise. And my age then I, there was almost, there was only so much failing to live up to the promise that I could deal with. So I'd been back five years and it was time to get out again. So when I finished my PhD, I did not apply for any jobs in the United States. I only applied for jobs abroad, and so I applied for a job - [clears throat] Excuse me. I think the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. And one of my friends wrote and said, "Oh, since you were last here, we've gone to Swahili as the medium of instruction." Check. You know, I wasn't going to be able to teach in Swahili, so that took that off the map. And then I got job offers in Nigeria, the campus where I had been on the Watson, and also in Ghana. And I got a note from a good friend that I'd been in graduate school with who was back in Ghana. He was going in. And he said, "The housing situation is really not good right now. This is not a good time to come." So by default, good default, the decision was made for me and I went back to the University of Ife<sup>6</sup> in Nigeria where I had been before and ended up staying fourteen years. Yeah.

**LP:** And then, while you were there, you met your husband and also had four children.

**EWO:** Yes, yes.

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<sup>6</sup> Now known as Obafemi Awolowo University. It is owned and operated by the federal government in Nigeria and located in the city of Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria.

**LP:** What was it like raising a family in Nigeria? How was Nigeria different from the United States and how was raising a family in Nigeria? How was it different from your youth growing up in the United States? How did your youth differ from your children's childhoods, would you say?

**EW:** In a lot of ways, I think they were similar. My house was a house, when I was growing up, where you could come home and anyone could be there. In the late fifties when black people came to Los Angeles, they were given three or four names of people that they should meet who would help them get started. One of those people was my dad. So we never knew who was going to be in the house. We never knew whether they were going to be there for three days or five days or a month. And, and in some ways that notion of hospitality is very much the way African hospitality is and so our house in Nigeria was the same way. We never knew who was coming from the village, how long they were gonna to be there, and you just kinda got used to that and you had these extended uncles or aunts or whoever was coming. And, and so I think in that way it was very much the same for my children. In the same way that I grew up really feeling like I was in a majority--at least until I got to high school, my kids grew up feeling like they were in a majority for much longer. Our older kids were almost through high school when we came, and then, the younger children where one was in third grade. No, one was in fourth and one was in first when we came. So probably discipline was stricter in Nigeria than when I was growing up, but it was less different, I think, than one would think.

**LP:** That's great. So, also, during that time there was a lot of turmoil going on politically and how did that affect your life on a daily basis?

**EW:** There were times when food was really quite scarce. So, if you can imagine such a thing that as chair of department one of the things I oversaw was the distribution of bags of rice to staff. And it could be that was harder to do than to tell somebody they weren't getting promoted. So, there were

times when, when, when food was scarce when it very difficult. I lived through three different military coups while I was there. And you just learn, you learn to take it with a grain a salt. Okay, the markets are going to be closed. Stay in your house. Don't go out 'til things settle down. Make do with what you have. There were efforts, I think, for people to do grass- roots organizing. Some of which worked very well and some of which was pretty challenging. And, of course, I was only on the margins of it. As a foreigner, you, you don't get too involved in stuff like that.

**LP:** So, were there any other challenges that you faced in Nigeria other than the ones we just talked about? What was it like to, to move from the United States to Africa, to Nigeria? How were you impacted at first by the different cultures and - ?

**EWO:** Well, when I went the second time, I knew where I was going and I chose to go. And I think there are always cultural differences where you go, oh, this thing is gonna drive me crazy or that thing, but I really, it was a choice I made that I, I, I was making a conscious choice to live in a place where I was going to be a majority. No matter all the craziness that, that came with it. Sometimes they were issues related to being an American, but not that much. And again, I was going back to a place where I knew people so it was not that difficult. Very often there were three of us who were very close. We would spend a lot of time helping the American students who were having difficulty. We were kind of the bridgers across the culture for when students were coming in really having difficulty getting adjusted to the changes. I knew what the food was like. I could speak the language, so I think more than anything what was, was frustrating was the failed politics rather than the culture itself.

**LP:** So then, eventually, you left Nigeria to go back to the United States? Why did you leave?

**EW:** Well, my parents were getting up in age and not very well, and my sister was trying to manage both of them. The political situation was becoming more and more untenable and so the confluence was such that it was, it was kind of time to go.

**LP:** And then, when you came back to the United States, where did you come back to? Did you -

**EW:** North Carolina. So when we came back, we came back to North Carolina and I was there until I came here.

**LP:** Wonderful. And when you were in Nigeria did you try and stay up to date with current events happening in the United States?

**EW:** Only to some degree, I think I was much more immersed in what was happening in, in Nigeria. And, of course, we read the *International Herald Tribune* to kind of have a sense of what was happening, but not really. I came home every other year for the summer. So I was home for a month to six weeks every other year, but it wasn't my focus. My focus was really on Nigeria, and being in Nigeria, and then when I was focused on the U.S., it was my family.

**LP:** So then, you said you came back every other year to visit. Were you ever struck by maybe the country or wherever you were coming back to in the United States wasn't the same United States that you had left previously? Were there ever any moments of 'wow, that's very different then when I was last here?'

**EW:** Yup, when Ronald Regan emptied the mental hospitals and many homeless people who had mental, mental, many people with mental health challenges became homeless. And I can remember coming home. I can't remember the summer, but I can remember coming home and being in downtown Los Angeles and being shocked by these people who were carrying grocery baskets with

everything they owned in them and not knowing where that came from. I mean just, it was just very stunning. The other thing I remember that I thought was a kind of very negative culture shift was an emphasis on the rich and famous. When I grew up there were people who were poor and they didn't have much, but they had great pride in who they were as human beings. And, somewhere, it appeared that it became bad to be poor and that poor people were bad people. And I equated it to some degree with all this, on the television, this, the rich and famous. This kind of creating a very false sense of value and it was everywhere on television. So those are the two things that, that when I think back, coming home times and going, what is this? Those are the two things that jump out at me.

**LP:** So how were your experiences because I know when you came back from Nigeria you taught in North Carolina and how were your experiences different from teaching abroad and teaching in the United States? Did they differ? Were they similar?

**EWO:** I don't know. I think the way I have taught probably did not change. I was, I believed in active learning which was not very common in Nigeria. So I was probably out of sync in Nigeria 'cause I had my students doing a lot of group work and projects and, and visits and it wasn't just the standing up and lecturing. So, I think if I was out of sequence, I was out of sequence there more than, than coming back here. I think the pressure to succeed was greater there. Students, in very real ways, their whole lives depended on their ability to be successful. And so they, many of them had given up a lot to be students, had sacrificed a lot to be students, in a way that students here are much more privileged. People would, here would be people who didn't have dorm money, so they had what they called squatting in a room that should regularly hold say four students, could have twelve students in it, because people didn't have money. There was an expression they called it 1-1-0, meaning 1, you ate a meal, so you might of had breakfast and lunch. Or you'd have students who would say, "I'm on

0-0-1,” meaning they’d have one meal a day. So the, the sacrifices and the, the challenges to be able to be a successful student were much more severe there.

**LP:** Well, thank you so much for your time today. I really have enjoyed speaking with you. I look forward to our next interview.

**EWO:** Well, thank you very much. Appreciate it.