Abena Busia Oral History Content Summary

Track 1 [duration: 1:35:50] [session one: 18 March 2016]


[05:08] Story about fleeing Ghana by ship aged six with mother and three siblings, borders closed in search of AB’s father. Remarks on mother’s bravery. Mentions Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, Freetown, Sierra Leone, Clarks shoes, British Press, Elder Dempster Line.


[15:00] Recollections from early years in Ghana, growing up on University of Ghana campus. Mentions Fuchsia, Gladioli. Story about recurring memory of friend Susan Niculesku, Akwaaba doll. Describes having two exiles, first returning in 1966 after living in The Netherlands and Mexico. Mentions The International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Hague, friends from The Philippines, AB’s father fellow at St. Antony’s College, Oxford University, UK.


[37:04] Describes father’s vision at time of Ghana’s Independence. Mentions Kwame Nkrumah. Describes family meals growing up. Describes household responsibilities, learning to cook, sew. Remarks that both parents enlightened. Story about cooking


[56:05] Describes favourite subjects, secret ambition to be bridge builder. Mentions Industrial Revolution, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Clifton Suspension Bridge, Bristol, UK, Newark Liberty International Airport, USA, LaGuardia Airport, USA, John F. Kennedy International Airport, USA, Newark Liberty International Airport, USA, New Jersey, USA, Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, St. Anne’s College, Oxford University, England. Study of English Literature at St. Anne’s, Oxford University, then DPhil in Anthropology and Geography. Discusses Structuralism and Semiotics changing approach to English Literature. Describes acceptance of visiting lectureship at Yale University, United States of America (USA), leading to offer to teach Black Literature at Livingston Campus, Rutgers University, USA, remaining in country since. Remarks that intellectual transformation to becoming a feminist occurred at Rutgers, mentioning that current Chair of Women and Gender Studies.


[1:09:12] Discusses favourite books growing up, AB class librarian at school in The Netherlands, reading all Jane Austen novels except ‘Emma’ by age 15. Describes essay written for Oxford University entrance. Mentions Headington School, Georgette

[1:14:00] Describes own feminism ignited by ‘growing up and looking at the world.’ Advocates single sex education for girls, regretting male intake at St. Anne’s College, Oxford University, UK. Remarks on own environment at Headington School Oxford as empowering. Discusses racism in USA comparing to England. Describes joining civil rights movement against enforced racial segregation in public transport system while at Brandeis University, USA. Describes impact of African-American Literature classes. Discusses personal consciousness of race pre-dating question of being female until ‘realised space and tools to interrogate assumption’, now central to all AB does. Discusses race and class in daily life England as compared to USA.

[1:21:20] Acknowledges involvement in African Women’s Development Fund (AWDF) since foundation, as life-changing. Describes admiration for Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi. Mentions Charlotte Bunch, AB on board of Center for Women’s Global Leadership. Story behind Charlotte Bunch’s involvement with Rutgers University, USA as Laurie New Jersey Chair at time when no Women’s Studies department, leading to establishment of Center for Women’s Global Leadership. Mentions Mary Hartman, Douglass Residential College, Institute for Women’s Leadership, Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers University, USA. Describes Young Women’s Leadership Institute for ‘creative middle ranking’ run by Charlotte Bunch every summer, AB’s role selecting African participants.

[1:25:34] Anecdote about meeting Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi. Mentions United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, Austria, 1993, Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA), New Brunswick, USA. Describes invitation to join AWDF board, collectively choosing Ghana for headquarters. Mentions previous work with prison missionaries, Riverside Church, New Jersey, USA, Uganda. Describes cocktail party raising $13,000 in 90 minutes, quoting sums, organizations, countries involved today. Discusses key to success.

[1:30:22] Describes focus of organisation as linked to enabling autonomy. Mentions Joanna Foster, Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF), Hilda Tadria, Zimbabwe, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Describes areas of focus including Health and Reproductive Rights, Economic Empowerment, Political Participation and Peace. Addition of Arts, Sports and Culture on tenth anniversary as avenue for girls’ leadership. Explains conditions of grant, including female board, expectation from grantees. Explains seven-year role as Programmes Committee Chair with example. Describes network of female grant officers, capacity building unit, Continent-wide advisory board.
Track 2 [duration: 35:25] [session one: 18 March 2016]


[06:00] Describes attending Global Fund For Women’s 25th Anniversary Gala, announcement of Charlotte Bunch Human Rights Defender Award. Mentions Hillary Clinton. Describes involvement with women’s organisations radically transforming own teaching, informed by feminist pedagogy. Describes focus of forthcoming Comparative Feminisms course will be African and African-American, African and Afro-Caribbean feminisms, around women of Global South recognising distinct historical engagement, trajectory, history of power and displacement informing work.

[10:00] Mentions work and writings of Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi and importance of teaching in American classroom. Remarks on African women’s engagement, that ideas of freedom, liberty, justice need not come from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Michel Foucault, interest in how foremothers survived, indigenous engagements, exploring how embedded in language and traditional practice, enabling achievements. Discusses sisterhood as blessing, own learning to think differently, difficulty of work. Remarks on superficial nature of lip service paid to openness and egalitarianism. Comments on distinct characteristic of AWDF as foundation that funds organisations, only one founded by African women, run by African women to fund African women’s movement. Reflects on articles written becoming more like creative non-fiction, change of previously separated poetry and pedagogical practice now informed by AB’s unified sensibilities.

[20:00] Describes implementation of programme. Mentions AWDF, Buduburam Refugee Camp [for Liberians], Ghana, Peace Corps, Columbia University, USA. Describes background of involvement with African Feminist Forum and its focus on individual feminists, development of Charter of African Feminist Principles to maintain open feminist spaces, resist patriarchal structures within organisations.


[30:50] Discusses being board member of Women’s Learning Partnership (WLP). Describes impact of WLP’s leadership training, AB using for, Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program, and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) transformative leadership initiative. Mentions Carnegie Corporation, Ousseina Alidou, Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria. Describes learning curve of helping to found AWDF USA and continue to raise funds from diaspora community.