

**Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project**

**Interview with Aaronette White**

*Interviewed by Alexandra Rutherford & Laura Ball  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
March 4, 2011*

**When citing this interview, please use the following citation:**

White, A. (2011, March 4). Interview by A. Rutherford & L. Ball [Video Recording].

Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History and Online Archive Project.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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AW: Aaronette White, interview participant

AR: Alexandra Rutherford, interviewer

LB: Laura Ball

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AR – Please state your full name and place and date of birth for the record.

AW – Okay. I knew there would be a hard question.

AR – [Laughs] That's as hard as it gets, really.

AW – Aaronette Michelle White. I was born in St. Louis, Missouri, May 22, 1961.

AR – Wonderful, thank you. Tell us a little bit about how you became a feminist.

AW – Well, I became a feminist without really knowing it because the circumstances surrounding my life just drove me to feminism. I mean, feminism ended up being something that found me, and then people described me as one without me knowing that I was one. I was raised to be able to speak my mind and to be assertive, but appropriately and respectfully. But that I always speak my mind. My mother always said, "You have a right to your opinion but you have to say it respectfully." My father didn't believe in that but we knew we could at least voice our opinions with our mother, because I have four other sisters. So I think that assertiveness really helped a lot. That type of early assertiveness training, without calling it that, helped tremendously when I felt that some type of injustice was occurring.

AR – Right.

AW – I had a healthy respect for equity in my family because of my mother. She tried these new parenting techniques that most African Americans felt were too liberal or, in fact, "too White." My father even felt like, "You can try that but I am going to do it the old fashioned way." But my mom would try to talk to us and to give us a voice, and boy did I get a voice [laughs].

AR – [Laughs].

{2:04}

AW – I think just because I had a voice and tended to gravitate toward leadership positions, and loved school, that ultimately, when I felt that something was wrong or that I was being wronged, I spoke out. It seemed to be the case that I was always speaking out when I felt that something racist was happening or that something seemed gender-related but I couldn't quite describe it.

First I found my voice to speak out against racism. Then when I realized that I was around African Americans [including African American men] and race wasn't the issue and something else was going on, then I learned this vocabulary about sexism. In undergraduate school, at that point, it always seemed like I was pressured to choose my race first, as opposed to my gender, because my racial identity was stronger, it was something that was nurtured earlier, and that I was given more of a political consciousness about earlier than my gender consciousness.

But I knew things were happening in undergrad. I knew I got upset when I knew that men were raping women who were in these so-called, "Little Sister" groups. I felt like, "Why are they pledging 'Little Sister' groups and letting men pledge them, and then these men are using those women? If they are going to pledge anything perhaps they should pledge a sorority." So it was still kind of class-biased, but at least I was seeing that something was happening to women and men shouldn't have this much power.

AR – Okay.

AW – Then I was raped by one of my professors. He was the highest-ranking Black man in the university system. He was an assistant vice-chancellor. He was supposed to allow me to do research with him in Sierra Leone, West Africa. He was teaching me Creole, the language of some of the people in Sierra Leone. He invited me to his home for that and he would tutor me and be very nice. Then one time I came to his home and he said, "You know, when we go to Africa we are going to have to stay in the same room together. You are going to have to be able to trust me and you [have to] be mature." I was like, "Oh my gosh, I'm mature. I am a senior. I am mature. I don't have a problem sleeping in the same room with you." He's like, "We are only going to have one room and you have to sleep in the room with me so maybe you ought to try now." It was total predatory behaviour.

When I went into the room with him he just started touching me inappropriately and I was saying, "No," and said, "No, relax. I thought you said you were going to be mature.

AR – Wow.

AW – [He was] such a predator. I didn't know where I was because I was used to being on the campus and I didn't quite know where faculty lived and all of this. It seemed like a forest area.

The next morning I just got my strength and I said, "Okay, if you don't take me back to the campus, I am going to tell..." and I mentioned the name of a person who was his subordinate, but who I knew.

{5:00}

AR – Right.

AW – He said, “Oh, so you’re going to act like these White women and act like somebody raped you and had sex with you without your permission? I get those complaints all the time.” He was the vice-chancellor for student affairs!

AR - Oh my gosh.

AW – And he is saying to me, “You’re acting like these White women who lie about rape. Come on, I didn’t expect that from you.”

Long story short, I was slowly being conscientized. I knew that I threatened him and I did tell the person [the subordinate]. I told on him, and that person said, “This is the highest-ranking Black man in the university system. He will use his power to discredit you.” I was like, “I think he has got a point there. I think he is right. I am just this undergraduate student. This professor, he is vice-chancellor, he raped me but who are they going to believe? They are going to believe him.” He said, “Just graduate and get out of here.” And I did, but I kept it in.

AR – Yeah.

AW – Then I had gone abroad to vacation after passing my qualifying exam as a graduate student in my first year in graduate school. They used to give us those long, written exams. My parents said that if I raised half the money they would raise the other half and I could go to Africa for the first time because I had been wanting to. I didn’t get a chance to go with that professor who raped me. I was like, “Okay, now I can go.”

The person who sponsored the trip didn’t get enough people and said I would have to stay with his family. I understood how people don’t come through with their money and so I went there. Instead of staying with his family, I ended up staying with him and this other guy, and this guy raped me for the week that I was there. I was like, “Something is wrong is wrong here, something is really wrong here.”

I was raised to trust people. I trust the men in my family. I don’t have a history of men doing anything wrong [to me].

AR – Right.

AW – But something is terribly wrong here because I know that I was raised to trust people but I can’t trust these men.

Then I got a Master’s [degree] in clinical psychology and started working with women. I started reading more about women’s issues and I said, “This is what people are talking

about; this imbalance of power, how things happen to women because we keep them secrets, because we are quiet about it, we don't realize these things are happening to other women too."

{7:33}

I was reading about how women had talked about being raped and I was like, "I was raped, too." I was just taking all of this in, and then the final piece to this where I really started claiming my identity as a feminist, was during the Mike Tyson, Desiree Washington appeals trial where he had already been found guilty of raping Desiree Washington. Then there was this "free Mike Tyson" movement among Black working class and even Black middle class ministers who felt that he had been wronged by this Black woman, that she was lying about him raping her.

All of it came back to me and I was so angry. I got a therapist and I said, "This is what has happened to me. I want to do something on behalf of Desiree Washington and women who have been raped because I have been raped." My therapist held my hand and said, "I am going to help you use activism in a therapeutic way."

AR – Oh, neat.

AW – I became an anti-rape activist and I started saying that I was a feminist.

AR – Wow!

AW – That trial happened around '92, [so] '93 is where I started proclaiming it and immediately joined the anti-rape movement and the feminist movement and have not looked back [laughs]. Not looked back since then.

AR – Yeah, and you've published so much on Black feminist models of anti-rape advocacy and so on.

AW – Yes, I have.

AR - That was the point when this all came together?

AW – That was the point. That was the point when it came together. Then I started doing research on misconceptions about rape in the African American community and how, because of racism and the history of Black men being *falsely* accused [of rape] by White women, Black women couldn't even accuse Black men [of rape]. I said, "Look, we don't have a history. Black women do not have a history of crying rape falsely on anybody, let alone Black men. So I took a stand that was not a popular stance, but I found other African Americans who agreed with me. My mom agreed with me.

We signed an ad saying that Black women have a right to speak out. We took that ad and placed it in all of the popular Black newspapers in our city and we signed our names.

SR – Wow, wow.

{9:48}

AW – [We said] that we felt that that a Black woman has the right to speak out, that we understand the history of racism and rape with Black men, but we don't have that history and we want to speak out against it.

My father disagreed with me but my mom was like, "I agree with you." We had that disagreement in the family, and all of my four sisters signed the ad and they agreed. That was my step out; feminist activism, feminist-defined, and I was like, "I've got my family behind me." I know that some people maybe would not have had their family, and I think I would have done it my family's support, but it was nice having my mother's support.

AR – Absolutely. In addition to the family support I am wondering about, by that time you were also in psychology, right?

AW – Yes.

AR – You were a psychologist.

AW – I was a psychologist by then.

AR – Talk to us a little bit about your experience of then combining activism and psychology.

Aw – It happened in a really interesting, organic way because remember, I have a therapist who is helping me come to grips with my own rapes, I am engaging in this activism about misconceptions about rape because I felt that that is why I kept silent, because I felt that people would not believe me. Then I turned to psychology. I said, "What does psychology have to say about these attitudes that people have [about rape] that are sexist, that are rooted in patriarchy? How do the attitudes that African American's bring about their experiences of racism feed or resist these types of misconceptions?"

Social psychology has that information! There is a whole social psychology of rape, of how we develop attitudes towards rape, of rape culture, how society creates a climate for women to be raped and to be ignored when they talk about rape. So I turned to feminist psychologists and the writings of feminist psychologists who were doing research on rape. I used their research in the newspaper ad to say, "See this study. This is where we are getting our facts about rape." It was my introduction to feminist psychologists because up until that point I really hadn't met that many and I hadn't been mentored by any directly.

AR – Okay, so you did your PhD at St. Louis, right?

AW – No, I did my PhD in St. Louis at Washington University.

{12:17}

AR – You listed your advisors as Jane Loevinger, Bob [Robert L.] Williams, and then Michael [J.] Strube, right?

AW – Yes, that's right.

AR – At that point, when you weren't actively, consciously doing the feminist bit, what attracted you to psychology then? Were you doing?

AW – Remember, first I had a Master's in clinical psychology.

AR – Yeah, and then you went into social work.

AW – Then I switched into social work because I was realizing that I did not like looking at Black people or women from a pathological lens.

AR – Okay.

AW – Clinical psychology does emphasize pathology, and I felt like I'd like to see what is happening to women, particularly Black women, in society, that is creating all of these psychological issues and problems. I don't believe that it is an individual issue. I just always believed it was a societal issue and that clinical psychology wasn't able to get at some of the questions I wanted to get at - despite racism, despite sexism, how are some Black women surviving? How are some Black women still learning to love themselves and stand up against their families if they feel their families are wrong when it comes to gender issues? How are they standing up to their husbands? How are they standing up to their boyfriends? So I want to understand what Black women [are] doing with all this information.

I started reading more about Black feminism, about womanism, and then making some decisions that this was going to help me understand how African Americans were resisting or accepting these misconceptions regarding rape, and that somehow this was going to be connected.

AR – Okay.

AW – I decided to go into social psychology because they dealt with attitudes and they dealt with societal issues from a psychological perspective. That was when I switched from the Master's in clinical to the PhD in social psychology. But before, I got the Master's through being mentored by a well-known African American psychologist who helped me get my wings and to get my grounding in terms of Black activism, African

American activism, and radical activism in the Master's the program. The clinical program had a specialty in Black psychology, minority mental health.

{14:34}

AR – Neat.

AW – That was when I became more of a Black activist.

AR – Who was the mentor?

AW – Dr. Robert L. Williams. He was the only tenured African American in the psychology department at Washington University. He became my mentor. I did the Master's with him and then switched to the social psychological program.

Jane Loevinger was one of the early, early *women* psychologists.

AR – She is really early, yeah.

AW – She was doing psychometrics and personality theory.

AR – What was that like?

AW – I don't even know whether she called herself a feminist in terms of the label, but she certainly acted like one.

AR – Interesting.

AW – I loved watching her assert herself in that predominantly White male department. That is really why I asked her to be on my committee. I said, "I at least want one woman on my committee, and she has been around and she has dealt with these men so she can deal with them on my committee too because I don't do her form of personality development."

But because she did have a background in testing and measurement, I did come up with a Black identity scale for my dissertation that she helped me with, to pull her more into the dissertation committee, in terms of her specialty.

AR – Okay.

AW – She was from a very different generation, but something about the way she asserted herself was very comforting to me.

AR – That is so interesting because I saw her name on your CV and I know a little bit about her. She is actually at the "Women Past" part of our [web]site. I'm like, "How does



she fit in with all of this?” It is only when people tell about their personal stories that we really understand.

AW – Yeah, her background in psychometrics helped me develop an attitude measure to look at a Black racial identity development, and she helped me fine-tune that scale in terms of its validity and reliability.

{16:31}

She was also a great feminist, kind of, police to make sure that the guys...

AR – She kept everyone in line.

AW – Exactly.

AR – Tell me, you’ve used a lot of different methods in your research over time. One of the things that I noticed in your work is a lot of life history, a lot of narrative. How did you come to that as a method?

AW – That is something that [came about] most recently, I guess in the last ten years. I was trained like most psychologists: that quantitative [research] is what you do and when you do qualitative [research], mix it with quantitative. You use a mixed methods approach to be accepted in the literature.

That is how I was trained. I figured, “Well, I will at least mix the methods because I do like talking to women and I do like hearing their voices. Not just the tests and measures that I have created, but what they have to say.” The types of research questions that I was beginning to develop in work were research questions that were not being frequently asked, so I didn’t want to go in half-cocked, thinking that I knew what I didn’t know.

One thing I had been taught by all of my mentors was to accept what I didn’t know. I’m like, “I really don’t know about this issue and I need to hear what the women tell me about this issue. We don’t have a lot of feminist Black research. Since I am listening to the voices of Black women and I am listening to their voices in terms of how they have struggled with race and gender and class, and then later how they struggle with sexuality issues, then I need them to talk to me. It really came from this feminist position of, “Women’s voices are not listened to. They are often downplayed and ignored. What research methods allow me to clearly hear women’s voices without my voice getting so directly in the way?”

That is when I started using interview approaches and started using more narratives because I started asking questions where we didn’t have a lot of information about Black feminists, so I needed to listen to them first. We didn’t have information about Black feminist men. People didn’t believe men could be feminists, let alone that a Black man [could] be the poster child for feminism.

AR – Right, right.

{18:49}

AW – It was like, “I need these men to tell me, ‘How did you learn to be sensitive about women? How did you come to care about women? How do you use feminism to define masculinity?’” There is no way I could have come up with these surveys. I didn’t even know what to ask so I just said, “Tell me about what it’s like to be a man who calls himself a feminist or who identifies and supports feminists. What is that like?” Those are the best questions I could come up with. I didn’t have any brothers. I knew that I hadn’t really dated any feminists yet, but I knew I had been seeing them in the movement. I was wondering, “How did these men get into the movement? What is a man doing in the anti-rape movement? I mean, yes, I always believed that it was a man’s problem. I mean, rape will stop when men stop raping, but how did they get here because most of them don’t see it as their problem. How do they use feminism and feel like ‘men’?” Well, they told me.

I have just been hooked on the narrative approach then for some of the newer questions that I am asking. I have accepted that it takes me longer because the coding and the, oh my gosh, but I get so much out of it because it’s a relationship. It becomes this dialogue. I don’t forget those voices. They are not just numbers, they are not just participants, and I usually have lifelong relationships with the people who I do these thick, description narrative in-depth interviews with.

AR – Right.

AW – They touch your life. They have changed me. Survey results have never made me feel that way! I think there is a place for them. But narrative results, they changed my life.

AR – Right, right. Does anyone want to jump in?

LB – Looking at your CV and some of your published works, there are some interesting catches to get into some of the ways that people form their identities and stuff like that. I saw John Coltrane...

AW – Oh, yeah.

LB – That is just so cool! You can use music and cultural [aspects] as a way in. How did you [become involved in that]?

{20:59}

AW – That’s interesting. I am glad you asked that because there is a very interesting story about how I finally found my creative writing voice again after years of it being beaten out of me through the APA style and graduate schooling. I started out as a poet

and a playwright in grade school and then I ended up writing like an APA psychologist. I was like, “What happened?” I just thought she was dead, the poet, the playwright.

I was always belonging to these grassroots feminist anti-rape organizations and so forth. They were saying, “We can’t read what you all are writing, what you psychologists are writing, what you academics are writing. We feel left out.” I said, “Yes, we have got to write a version for them.” So I started writing versions of my research for the Black newspapers and for the organizations that I belonged to, minus all the APA style, just doing abstract summaries, but friendly abstracts that tell a story and just give the general findings [by] just using words. I started handing my findings out.

For instance, the people who signed that ad [in the newspaper] during the Mike Tyson appeals trial, I decided to research them: “Why did you sign this ad?” I wanted to find out what their attitudes were like in that they didn’t mind going against the majority of the African Americans who were supporting Mike Tyson the boxer.

AR – Right.

AW – Then I did research with them and then I said, “I need to know what I found, but I can’t send them this article that I just sent to the *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. I can’t send that to them.” They would be like, “What is this?” So, I learned how to start writing for an educated lay audience.

Then I decided to apply for a creativity fellowship. It is no longer offered, but they used to offer a fellowship for people who wanted to do whatever you want creatively. You could be from whatever country, you could be from the United States, you could be an academic or a non-academic, and they will fund you for the summer to do your creative project and you just have to present it. They will give you housing, food, and a bicycle in Midland, Michigan, so you can ride the bike trails and think. It was a set of four or five people and you all live [together]. They had artists, physicists, anyone.

I thought I would apply, and I said, “I would like to learn how to discuss social science research results using music. Since I liked jazz and since I am usually talking to an educated Black audience that usually likes jazz...” I needed to be more specific, so I said, “... using John Coltrane.” [I said that] because the guy that I was dating at the time loved Coltrane and he had brought me all this music and I was beginning to love Coltrane. I learned about his life and how he was addicted to drugs, and then he became very spiritual. I was like, “This is what men go through when they are trying to become feminists and use feminism to redefine masculinity. I will use John Coltrane because he went through various musical stages and created very different and innovative sounds in jazz. Feminist men have to create innovative definitions of masculinity. They have to create innovative ways of being a man doing manhood differently, sometimes not being a man at all.”

“That’s it!” I said. They [fellowship committee] thought that I was very creative. I didn’t know how I was going to do it. I spent the summer listening to all of John Coltrane’s

music, learning how to do PowerPoint slides with John Coltrane's pictures, and learning about jazz improvisation and innovation in saying, "Psychologically, men improvise when they are becoming different types of men. When John Coltrane moved from more mainstream, traditional jazz to world music (he was one of the leaders in "world music" because he started using African instruments in his jazz), I was like, "This is when men start saying, 'Hey, I need this from feminism. I need to question what it means to be a man. Not only do women need to question what it means to be a woman, but I need this instrument, I need that...'"

{25:07}

I would present my results and then play John Coltrane and say, "This is when John Coltrane changed his music from this to that. This is when feminist Black men start realizing that they need to talk to women in ways like, don't call women 'bitches', don't call women 'hoes'. Use this new language. Just like John Coltrane was using this different language in music, these Black feminist men are learning how to use a different language."

I got funding for it and I pulled it off. We were listening to music, I was showing graphs of my research, then playing John Coltrane, then putting his picture on, then putting a feminist guy's picture on. I was like, "Wow, this is what it means to be a psychologist! I wish they taught me this stuff!"

So I just spent my summer listening to music. I said, "I am going to start using metaphors that people can relate to. Then I realized that even academics like that kind of writing. That is when I decided to submit it to an academic journal and they accepted it. Of course, they thought it was weird. They said, "Some people think you need to take John Coltrane out and just give your results." I thought, "But you're missing the point of the article! John Coltrane has to be in there and he went through many life changes, and so do these feminist men. It's perfect."

AR – Yeah.

AW – One thing John Coltrane said was, "You have to practice, practice, practice." John Coltrane would spend like fourteen hours a day practicing his music in the bathroom. These [feminist] guys have to keep practicing, practicing, practicing new forms of manhood. You never graduate. You never get where you don't have to practice. John Coltrane, as great as he was, he still had to practice. He said, "You just have to keep refining your method, bring out your own spirituality." It's a wonderful story. I was like, "It is their [feminist men's] story, and so I am going to start writing like that. I am going to start writing in different ways and start experimenting so I can touch other people's lives who normally would not read a social science paper."

AR – Well, I love John Coltrane and now I am going to listen to him in a whole different way. This is great. Tell us a little bit about how you became interested in Black fatherhood because you have also written about African American men and fatherhood.

{27:29}

AW – I became interested because of Black feminist men and what they told me. They were telling me that they were trying to parent their children differently.

AR – Okay.

AW – I had not even anticipated that. Like I said, I didn't know what they were doing so I was like, "Tell me, what does it mean to be a feminist, Black man?" The ones who had children mentioned that "Well, being a feminist father is something that I struggle with." I thought, "Wow!" Then I carved out that study from the study just to focus on the men who had children or who had parented, because some did not have biological children. One had kind of adopted his younger brother and sister during the summers and he would take care of them when their mother died. Then their grandmother would take care of them during the school year. Another had stepchildren even though he was divorced from the woman. He remembers that experience. Then others did have biological children.

I asked them, "How does being a feminist father differ from the way you were parented and how do you think about that?" That is how I ended up doing that article. I found something that I hadn't even planned on looking for in those interviews. I saw all of these narratives about, not only just being a feminist Black man, but being a feminist Black father.

AR – Interesting.

AW – I decided to analyze their answers on certain questions to see what they had to say that was different from what maybe some other men may have said. My most shocking finding on that part that was definitely African American specific, given that most African Americans still believe in corporal punishment and spanking their kids (I was spanked, my parents believe in it, my younger sister doesn't and many of us [siblings] don't anymore because we have seen the research [stating] that the use of corporal punishment increases the chance that the child will be a bully, among other things), most of them were familiar with that research and decided that they wanted no violence in their home. That meant no spanking and that they would use "time out" and other procedures. This is big for Black men and for Black people in general because we are socialized to believe that you have to spank and you have to give kids whippings.

I personally believe that this is something from colonialism and from slavery because of the way the slaves were always beaten into submission. You get whippings to keep you in line so you won't get into trouble outside of the home. "This is how you have to act if you don't want to get into trouble with the police officers. I am going to beat you now since you are getting beaten later, so you can understand that you can't do this and be a Black person and survive in this country without understanding that you are going to have these physical consequences.

AR – Right.

{30:17}

AW – We now know that there are other ways to parent. The Association of Black Psychologists has done well in beginning to talk about ways that African Americans can parent without whipping their children. Usually it is seen as something that just a few new age people do who are African Americans. I was very pleased that these guys came from different backgrounds and all of them who had kids had come to the same conclusion. They didn't know each other and it is not like they are getting a lot of support for this, but they did not spank or hit their children.

AR – Interesting. Wow.

AW – That was amazing.

AR – Wow. We are going back and forth a little bit, but I want to go back to your personal trajectory in terms of your journey through psychology. You got your PhD at St. Louis and then, if I am reading your CV correctly, your first academic job was also at St. Louis.

AW – Right. I got the degree in St. Louis and then I got married. Then my husband at the time had a medical practice and was a surgeon and had a well-developed practice for over a thirty-year period. He was thirty years older than I was so it made sense to stay in St. Louis. I took a job at St. Louis University and I guess I had taught there part-time as a graduate student and then they brought me on so I decided to stay there.

AR – Okay. What stands out for me is then you went on and you did all of these interesting, different things, then you end up at Penn. State [Pennsylvania State University], and now you are at Santa Cruz [University of California]. Give us a sense of what that journey has been like.

AW – Well, what I decided is that I didn't like the idea that people were going to be pressuring me using tenure to threaten me as to what I should research, how quickly I should research, and with whom I should do the research. I thought, "No, this is too much control. I had just finished being a graduate student and if being an assistant professor is just being a glorified graduate student. I am not having it. So I need to create my own journey here so that I am still able to ask the questions that I want to ask about African Americans, about African American women, without someone to tell me that I can't ask that because that's not a good question for tenure.

AR – Was that the message you were getting?

AW – That was the message I was getting. So I was at St. Louis University and I was becoming very bored because people were constantly telling me that my ideas were too radical and that that wasn't the best way to get promoted and tenure.

{32:35}

I divorced my husband for other reasons. I just decided that it was time for me to travel again. I went from kindergarten to the PhD so I had not had any breaks in my education. I was twenty-six when I defended my dissertation. I was like, "I need to be able to live." My husband was holding onto me very tightly. I wanted to travel and he was thirty years older and he was feeling like he needed me there to have kids. He had five grown kids. I said, "Okay, I need to rewrite this script." I said, "Let's be friends. Let's keep the friendship but I would like a divorce. I want to travel. I understand that that's hard on you so let's just go back to the friendship. Then the expectations will change because I won't be your wife."

Then I resigned from my job at St. Louis University, which everybody told me [not to] do. "I mean, come on! They love you there." I understood that, but Mandela had just become president, I had been a part of the anti-apartheid movement, I had friends in South African, and I said, "I am moving to South Africa."

The Rodney King beating had occurred, Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas... I was very disenchanted with the United States. And Mandela was president! I was like, "Okay..." [motions leaving]. Rodney King, Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, St. Louis University, people trying to tell me how to do my research, or Mandela! Teaching at a Black college in South Africa! Freedom! Single!

I sold my things and I moved to South Africa.

AR – That is so neat.

AW – I taught there in a historically Black institution. Then, I guess just like the '60s here, which I was too young for, [there were] all these radical ideas and then things started getting co-opted. Ideas get co-opted. Of course, this new South Africa was beginning to look very much like the old South Africa, except Mandela was president. Exiles were coming back who had gotten their education and people started feeling that foreigners were taking the jobs of exiles and people who could take those jobs who were South African. The implemented an affirmative action program. I agreed and I really felt that South Africans should have a chance to lead their own country. If I am in the way, I am happy to move. Well, I wasn't happy to move, but I moved.

I became very depressed and I was like, "I think I am going to have to leave this country after saying that I am going to move here for the rest of my life."

AR – Oh, wow.

AW – Ultimately, I apply for another job and didn't get it. A South African got the job, a White South African. I said, "This is not what I thought I was going to be doing here," and having some older White South African guy get a job at a Black school where I felt,

“Now wait a minute. In this case, you know, maybe I could be more effective [than him].”

{35:19}

So I came back to the United States. I did get another job with the Department of Mental Health. That is when I had a contract with them, so I was able to land on my feet. They said, “You could get a job anywhere. Look, in South Africa there isn’t a career for you.” You know what? They were right. I came back to the United States and got a job in one week. I know it doesn’t always happen that way but I did have marketable skills, and they were right. I don’t feel badly about that, you know? It was just the reality, the economics, the political economy. I didn’t take it personally. But I was depressed because I had left this country and said goodbye for good.

AR – Right, right.

AW – So, I was back [in the United States] and I just made the most of it. Then I took a job at a historically Black institution, Wilberforce University, because I felt that if I taught at a historically Black institution in South Africa but had not taught one here, what does that say?

I went to see what that was like. Most historically Black universities and colleges have a kind of religious history. This one did as well. There was the AME Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church and I realized that I don’t do well in religious institutions. They have very, very different ideas and I don’t believe in organized religion. I believe that it has oppressed and hurt women and Black people. That was a challenge. The students there were wonderful but I knew that, intellectually, my growth would be stunted if I stayed there too long.

I then got three postdoc[toral]s and I went straight to Harvard University. At least one of those postdoctoral fellowships was because there was a Harvard professor who had attended Wilberforce University, William Julius Wilson, the sociologist who received a Medal of Honour from President Clinton, and he was on their board. I had already been to Harvard once and he said, “You’ve been to Harvard already and you’re at a historically Black institution?” I said, “Yes, well I feel strongly about Black students and their education.” He said, “I have never known anyone who had been to Harvard and then went back to a Black little school.” I said, “Well, I did. In the future I plan on applying for some other fellowships when I finish what I am trying to do with the students in the international programs here.” He said, “Tell me when you want to do that and I will write a recommendation letter for you.” Well, don’t tell me that! I wrote his name down and his information, I finished what I was trying to do with them [the students], and I was like [enacts informing Wilson that she is ready to apply].

He wrote me a recommendation so I got a fellowship at the Du Bois Institute [Harvard University] and worked with Henry Louis Gates and Cornell West, the last year that he was there.



AR – Oh my gosh.

{37:59}

AW – When Cornell West left, that is who I planned on doing work with, and went to Princeton, then I got another fellowship at the Kennedy School of Government in the Women and Public Policy Program. That is where I started to research on African women guerrilla soldiers. They had a Women Waging Peace organization where they were retraining women who were in countries where there had been civil wars who were now in leadership positions. It just so happened that a lot of those women had also fought in those liberation armies. I was interested in the ones who had fought in the different African countries.

After that, I went to Penn. State University. I was there for four and a half years and got back on the tenure track then because I had been doing all of these different postdocs. I was in Amsterdam, I did a postdoc in South America. I was travelling and, of course, I was in South Africa. Then after I used every postdoc I could think of, about eight of them, I run out of postdocs. I said, “Okay, I am going to have to get back on the tenure track, but at least people aren’t going to be telling as much what to do because I have still been publishing.” I published that whole time. I kept publishing, without that pressure of perishing.

Then I had heard about the job at UC [University of California] Santa Cruz when I was at Harvard. But I was at Harvard. Then I got another fellowship at Harvard so I didn’t apply then. After ten years of emails from the former Head of the Psychology Department at UC Santa Cruz, and his wife, his partner, who was also in the Psychology Department, I said, “Okay, I am looking for another job and I have been here for four and a half years. I am happy to apply because I am going to go for tenure here and so I want to have another offer.”

Now I am at UC Santa Cruz, but after eight years of postdoc, which people said is a big no-no, you should never do that, it is not recommended. But what is important is that I kept publishing.

AR – Right.

AW – When people said, “It looks like you never stay anyplace. It looks like you are always traveling, always moving. How do we know you are going to stay?” I said, “First of all, you have to understand that I went from kindergarten to the doctorate [degree], okay? I was still growing up.” That took care of that. Then I say, “Also, I stay where I am welcomed and wanted and where I can be of service. When I feel like I am no longer of service, then I do leave because I feel like it would be an injustice to the people there.”

People never told us these wonderful answers, the truth, which we could tell people. [Laughs] You know, the truth! I don’t have to act like that was bad record. That was good

record. That makes me who I am; the fact that I have lived in all those places. I am bringing all of that to students. That is why I love teaching and that is why students know I am not just perpetrating in front. I believe this stuff. I live it. I have these experiences because I jumped around like that. Not everybody is meant to be on this linear path.

{41:00}

AR – No.

AW – That was not my path. As a result, students benefit from it and I had benefitted from it. They have a much more mature professor than me just trying to keep teaching at twenty-six. I know some people have done it and they were more mature, but I was very, very immature. That was why I was telling my first husband, “Look, I just want to be your friend again. I don’t know what I did here, but this isn’t fun. I didn’t know marriage was like this and I don’t like it.” So I think that was a testament to my immaturity. At the same time, it gave me the window to really develop further without someone kind of controlling me.

AR – Yeah. Well, you talked a little bit earlier about Aida Hurtado and her role. Can you tell us more about her?

AW – Aida Hurtado was the woman who was emailing me those ten years and started mentoring me from that point onward. She was just determined to get me to UC Santa Cruz. Ten years! Her husband, Craig Haney, also a social psychologist, joined in on the show, I guess. They’d be tag teaming each other like, “You send her an email, you send her an email.” They invited me to his birthday party one year and I was like, “Who are these people?”

She started reading my manuscripts. I mean, she just started mentoring me. I still hadn’t even shown up, I hadn’t met her. Then at the five-year mark, I met her at an Association for Women in Psychology conference. She was the keynote speaker talking about her book on Chicana feminists. I was like, “Hi, I am the person you have been emailing for the past five years.”

AR – Wow.

AW – She says, “Oh my gosh! Let me take your picture!” I didn’t know she liked to take all these pictures. She was like, [enacts snapping photos], and “You have got to come to Santa Cruz! You have got to come!” I was like, “Oh my gosh, she reminds me of me, except she is Chicana!” It was so weird to see myself in her.

I said, “Okay, maybe I will.” I didn’t know anybody in California. My people are all from the Midwest. I was like, “This is another planet. I don’t know what people are doing [there].” But I knew I loved tofu and people told me that people in California love tofu, so I said, “Tofu will get me there. Tofu will get me there.”

{43:15}

I went there. I never thought I would like the psychology department. I mean, I was in women's studies and African American studies and I was pleased. I just felt like psychology held me back. After I left Harvard I decided, after being in interdisciplinary situations at Harvard, that I am too interdisciplinary for psychology. I need to go into women's studies or African American studies or both, which had a joined department with both, because they are the only people who are going to allow me to do it the way that I like to do it as long as the populations there with women are Black people. That is a very minimal requirement. They did not say, "Do quantitative [research, and so forth]." They are just saying "Black people. Women." I was like, "I can handle that."

In the psychology department at UC Santa Cruz they are all left of center, they are radical, they all focus on social justice issues, it's applied, there is not even a clinical psychology program in the psychology department, but the social psychology program is probably the most radical graduate program in the country. The most radical.

AR – That's wonderful.

AW – We would bring in students who are activists and want to be scholar activists. I had never heard of this. I was like, "I can't believe their students!" I met the students and I met the faculty. The whole university has a history of being an experimental university where first they had no grades and they had no disciplines at UC Santa Cruz. It was one of those experimental campuses.

Eventually they did get grades, they did get disciplines, but they weren't even organized by the disciplines. They were organized by themes; social justice, international issues... If you were a physicist interested in international issues, you were in the international issues themed college. If you were a psychologist, your office was next to a physicist or anybody who was interested in that theme, regardless of your discipline. So they have a history of thinking out of the box.

AR – Yeah, absolutely.

AW – All of the departments have a history of thinking out of the box, as well as psychology, particularly social psychology. I fell in love with the students, the undergraduate students, the graduate students, and the department. They said, "We knew if we could get you out here..."

AR – You would stay.

AW – They were right. Once I went out there I said, "Oh my gosh! It is like a place I have never been." Santa Cruz is where all of the hippies have gone, where all the medical marijuana is.

AR – Yeah, yeah.

{45:46}

AW – I think it is a wonderful mix. It's where all the surfers are. Somehow it is just easier to be who you are and it is easier to teach students to be engaged in social change. A lot of the student *and* the faculty are activists. It is just a different experience for me. I have never experienced anything like it.

There are not a lot of African Americans.

AR – Okay.

AW – I do miss that community and I miss my family. But for now it is such an amazing experiment in my own life that I am here as far as I can see.

AR – Great. I am going to turn it now a little bit to the future. You mentor students now. Is Vicky Nam one of your students?

AW – Yes! She's my graduate student.

AR – Is she here?

AW – She's not here. She was here the last two years but she is going to be getting her doctorate definitely this year.

AR – Yeah, she's almost done, right?

AW – She's almost done.

AR – Okay, so here is a weird thing: My partner was one of Vicky's professors when she was in her undergrad at GW [George Washington University] and they made a connection there. When I met Vicky two years ago at AWP, she's like, "Do you know Wade [Pickren]? You're Wade's wife, right?" I'm like, "Yeah!" We made a really neat connection. So Wade said to me, "Is Vicky going to be there?" I said, "I'm not sure, I'll ask Aaronette."

AW – She's not here this year, but I will tell her. Oh my gosh!

AR – So, say hi to Vicky for me.

AW – Your partner's last name, is it the same as yours?

AR – It's Pickren.

AW – Oh, Pickren. My goodness!

{47:55}

Well, I have these wonderful graduate students! I had a U.S. Fulbright recently at Addis Ababa University and I had eighteen students that were getting their Master's degrees in gender studies at an African university in Ethiopia. I supervised two students' Master's theses, of which **Basa**, who is here at the conference this year, is one. We are going to be presenting on former Ethiopian women guerrilla fighters and what they have to go through after the civil wars. Then I had another student, **Beitelhem Efram**, who did her research on Ethiopian lesbians.

I have an Ethiopian connection now. I had a South African one, I still have a South African connection, and now I have an Ethiopian connection. I plan on writing a book with my eighteen students about applying Ethiopian feminist perspectives to daily practice, to their lives, so pretty much like the African Americans do in feminism book. I am taking their stories and show how feminist theory and how they use feminist theory in their daily lives, given some of the cultural situations they are presented with.

I am publishing with my two Master's students. Their theses will be published later on this year. The one who did the research on the Ethiopian lesbians, her research is going to be in the Journal of Lesbian Studies. **Basa**'s research on Ethiopian women guerrilla fighters will be in the Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, the special issue on women in the military.

AR – Wow.

AW – So I feel like I have these students in Ethiopia who I want to continue mentoring. I always want an international connection somewhere in an African country in particular because I feel like those of us who have done well in this country need to try to also assist our other brothers and sisters across the African continent. I came out of the pan-African student movement and that is where that belief was developed when I became a part of the anti-apartheid movement as an undergraduate.

AR – Okay.

AW – That is where I developed this kind of pan-African activism. I have a right to also see Africa as my home, collectively, just as I see the United States, because my ancestors came from there. I definitely feel in tune with that lineage with that history. So that is my major goal.

I am thinking about one day developing and founding an NGO [non-governmental organization]. I am thinking about, at some point, taking a leave of absence from the university and working for Human Rights Watch over their Africa desk. I just threw these [ideas] out, these are things [I think about for the future]. I am also thinking about sometime retiring early so that I can write fulltime, and then volunteer to teach at these different African universities in their gender studies program without having to worry

about money because I will be getting my pension early. I am going to be talking to a financial planner about retiring early so that I can do those things.

{50:57}

AR – Great. What advice would you have for feminists, for feminists of colour, who are coming into psychology at this point?

AW – Oh gosh. It is very simple; dream big. Dreams really do come true, and learn how to manage money. If you do that, then you can pay your own way. It is a skill and not many of us have been taught that skill. My mom taught me, and then I dated these men who managed their money well and I asked them how they did it, how they made it. Instead of just dating them, I thought, “Let’s learn something. Let’s get something out of this, you know?” I was dating these men that had a lot of money and I’m like, “How did you get that money? I’d like to know.” So I found out what they were doing. They were playing the stock market and I didn’t want to have to learn about it but I did!

Feminists, we need our own money and we need to fund our own projects. We go to these wealthy foundations that play the stock markets asking them for their money. Use the system that we have to our advantage until there is a better system, and make sure that we are not just always begging for money. Our movements need to be funded, and when we get outside funders, they change our movement. So, we need money.

One of my role models in terms of how to use wealth to help the feminist movement is Jane Fonda. Here is someone who has a lot of money, she has been married to wealthy men, and she gives to feminist and women’s organizations. She is a feminist, with a capital “F”, unapologetically. I read her autobiography so I could see where this money came in, how did she do that, because I’m like, “I want to do that.” I want to have money to give to the movement, and to sit back and be going, “Yeah! I’m funding that!”

AR – Yeah, yeah.

AW – You know, when I can’t run around doing it. I want to have my own money so I can continue to do radical research that is not changed and watered down, and to use the fact that I do have tenure now to access more resources to bring more women into the fore who have a radical agenda. I am like, “Hold onto your radical agenda. I did and I am here. I know it wasn’t easy and I know not everybody is as flexible as you are, but being flexible is the key too. [Also] having that confidence that, no matter what, I’ve got skills, I know that I can work, I know that I can find a job for myself, I know that I can create jobs for myself, and I know that I don’t have to feel just like this vulnerable ship on a sea that is too big.

AR – Right.

AW – I’m like, “Okay, I have got a motor. I can run it and I know I can steer. I really, really encourage women to dream big, that they [dreams] do come true, but you plan it.

You have a plan. You have a plan A, you have a plan B, and a C, and you learn how to budget the money.

{53:36}

AR – Yeah.

AW – I really don't think we talk about money enough. We are finally talking about sex, thank goodness, but it is time to talk about money. It is not a dirty word.

AR – Money and power, right?

AW – Yes, because is linked to power. We need more of both, so they kind of come together sometimes.

AR – Is there anything we haven't asked about that you would like to contribute to this interview?

AW – Just that I have so many feminist fairy godmothers.

AR – Yeah, tell us.

AW – I have been just so lovingly guided through this maze in so many different ways; through the Association of Women in Psychology, through the Association of Black Psychology, my family, women internationally, and feminists in African countries. I do believe in networking, and networking in this loving kind of way where we practice what we preach. Feminism is not just something we do intellectually in front of our computers and in our heads. It is something that we live and breathe. We are not perfect at it but we are in there trying. If we keep these principles at the fore, we really can change this world. I really do believe we can. Thank you.

AR – Great. Thanks.