

## Interview Transcript

Elizabeth Carleton interviewing Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran

2019-08-27

Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran: Well, I must say your questions had me going through a bunch of material, but I think I have answers to most things.

Elizabeth Carleton: Okay, well that's great. Feel free to talk about, you know, anything that you think might be good to talk about. It's really up to you.

Eileen: I'll just start with the first question and move through them as best I can. "The policy statement, how long did it take to create and what was that process like?" Let me begin by saying it's really had to jog my memory. So here's what I remember. Memoir versus history, so to speak. During the fall, as students were working with the committee that had been set up in the spring dealing with minority issues, there was greater and greater frustration. At the same time San Francisco State had created a Black Studies Center, and we began to have lots of conversations that ranged from - should there be an independent black institution as part of the Claremont colleges - I mean, there were two women's colleges. Why couldn't there be a, it wouldn't have been historically black, but why could there not have been an African American College?

So we had lots of debates within the BSU and, and finally ended up some time before the Christmas holidays with a sense that what we should be asking for was an autonomous Black Studies Center that we had lost faith in the colleges themselves to deliver. And that our conception of what we wanted had changed. So if you read the report from the president in June of '68, it, it reads more like a response to the needs of black students. And I think by December of '68, we envisioned this as a much bigger issue of the reeducation of the whole country, not just African American students. And that there was a real need to look deeply at curriculum and its assumptions. So that led then to, OK, let's put something together for an autonomous Black Studies Center. I suspect that there were about five or six of us who worked on the actual document.

It would've been John Payton. I believe it was Julius Johnston III, who was a student at CMC. In fact, Julius had probably graduated by then because I was a senior and he was a year ahead of me. But he was working at the computer center, at Pendleton. At that time, the college had a huge computer in Pendleton. We would go to see it because it was such a novel thing, and he was working there. Danny Wilkes would have been a part of it. I suspect Franklin Peters and Clayburn Peters were both a part of it, and myself. And we all just worked on it and then the drafts would go back to the Black Studies Center for them to kind of debate it. And that was how we put it together. When I read through it, what struck me this time, and I don't have an answer, was it really did address a lot of the administrative issues around running a university.

So the promotion and tenure committee and all those kinds of things. And so I was asking myself, how did we know that? I suspect we got some help from Burt Hammond who was then the director of the Center for Educational Opportunity. I suspect we got some input from what they had done at San Francisco State and we then had to make it work for Claremont because it wasn't one institution, but it was five institutions. So that's what I remember. I think our thinking was also informed by, you know, a lot of us were going to Black Power conferences and other kinds of conferences dealing with the state and the African American community at large, not just the college community. And there was a strong sense that the education of African American students needed to be revised so that it began to address the immediate needs of the community.

There had been rebellions by this time in Watts, in Detroit, in Washington. So what were the immediate needs of the community and what about the nature of our education should prepare us for addressing those needs? And everybody takes civic engagement as an assumption now, but when we proposed this 50 years ago, nobody was doing this except maybe some of the historically black institutions around Atlanta. So this idea that some of the courses were going to be grounded in in-depth practical work in our communities was a completely new educational philosophy. I think there was a sense that the colleges as we knew them were going to have real difficulty with that as a pedagogical and educational concept. And that also then fostered this idea of autonomy.

Elizabeth: Absolutely. That's really interesting.

Eileen: So then in your second question about “‘Better’ Remains ‘Bad,’” you had a question about the white students' reaction to the BSU demands and it's very interesting because I think like any community, the white community at Claremont was quite diverse. There was a very active antiwar movement.

Elizabeth: Right.

Eileen: There was a strong pro-war movement. CMC had a very active ROTC. In fact, at least two or three of the African American men at CMC were in the ROTC. White students were across the board. There was a lot of support by students who have defined themselves as progressive. I would say most of those students were at Pitzer and Pomona with maybe one or two at Scripps and a couple at the graduate school - there were a couple of graduate students who were very, very involved. And then, you know, if you look at the student life, there was a lot of questioning about, you know, “what's the problem? Everything seems to be fine here.” And I think the point that Payton was trying to make is, “everything was fine as long as the black students didn't start to advocate for anything.” Once they started to advocate for anything, you know, I think the typical reaction, and we see it even today, is this sense of the majority that they don't want to be held responsible for anything that causes discomfort to anybody else, whether it's racism or sexism or classism. And, as a result of that, anything that made them uncomfortable, they were gonna push, back against. So there were a cohort of students who took

that point of view. Then there were a cohort of students I think who were supportive, but there was quite a bit of writing in, either the Student Life or the Collegian, about, "where did all this come from?" Kind of the notion that "Claremont's a bubble, so there might be trouble in other parts of the world, but you know, there's no problem in Claremont."

The other issue I think was who could be a member of the BSU and was the BSU racist if it was disinclined to invite white members? And remember, this is 51 years ago. So a lot of what has transpired was being worked out at this point. And by virtue of the fact that it was an approved institution at the Claremont colleges, it could not say "for Black students only" in the same way that MECHA could not say "for Latino students only." However, we were not actively inviting white students. This was deemed as a space where Black students or Chicano students could have their own conversations about their own reality. Oh, white folks were not used to being excluded from societies. And therefore the reaction became, "if it's only for black people, in practice, although not in theory, it must therefore be racist."

Elizabeth: Yeah, I mean, I think there's still some of those attitudes today, unfortunately.

Eileen: Yes, definitely. So I think that's what he meant. So what white students were saying - this must've been provoked by an article, and I suspect it might've been by one of my classmates because when we were preparing for our class reunion and we were going through the papers, which is around the time I think you and I met, I saw several articles that had been written by a classmate who was actually a good friend, you know, questioning this whole movement and questioning this notion of what appeared to be separatism and was it in fact racist. Then as I read John's piece, and I may have mentioned this to you before, but I think as you do your work, one of the things you will need to struggle with is the degree to which theory about theories about marginalization and oppression and the eradication of oppression have become more sophisticated. So there was no concept of ally. Right. So when you get to the end of, of that article by Peyton and he's essentially saying you're either in the BSU or you're not, and it's kind of (bif) distribution. The idea that there could be somebody who was called an ally, and what that ally did or didn't do, was not a theoretical construct at that time. Actually, that kind of takes me to one of the other questions you asked, which was the link between the antiwar movement and the work of the BSU. And I would say that it was the same people who were in the antiwar movement who also then were supportive of the efforts of both MECHA and the BSU. I think I remember very distinctly one meeting where there was a pretty serious difference of opinion on tactics.

It was one where I think the antiwar students were looking for a way - could these movements be mashed, if they were mashed, how might that work? And there was very strong resistance on the part of the BSU. I can't speak for MECHA. But we were saying, you know, this is our movement. You are able to participate as a supporter - The concept of ally, but we didn't have any language for it, but we are defining the tactics. We're defining the strategy. And that was very difficult for the white students. I experienced it pretty profoundly because one of my, well, my two roommates were white both of them were very active, but one had real difficulty with the notion that the BSU was in control and not "we're a collective and we're all in this together." And I think, in fact, when we had our reunion, several of my white classmates talked about what a

learning experience that was for them because of course they were at the center and they were driving their antiwar movement, but we kind of put them at the periphery. Yes. Interested in what you have to say, but the ultimate decisions are going to be made by the BSU and you may or you may not agree with them, but this is not governance by the majority, meaning everybody who cares. So that was interesting. And I think for some of us personally kind of painful too because you had relationships with people and yet this could strain some of those relationships.

Then, okay, you asked about my being one of two students of color. We were two students of color my first year and my second year. And then my classmate left at the end of the sophomore year and went back - I think she actually ended up going to Berkeley.

“Was this isolating?” I don't know that I experienced it as isolation simply because my whole life I've been in contexts where I was very often the only one or one of a few. Rather than isolating, I would define it as an environment in which I was hypersensitive about my Blackness. I'll give you a simple example. My very first year I remember being with my classmates down the hall and we were going to Western Civ, which was a huge, big class, and they were running late. And for me, I knew everybody would look at me and say, oh, there she is, she's late. So I thought the burden of having to be - I was hyper-conscious about all the stereotypes that were associated with being Black and my need to constantly counter those stereotypes in terms of everything that I did. I would say it was isolating on a social level, you know, in terms of parties and dating and stuff like that. It was not isolating on an intellectual level, but it was burdensome, you know, in the sense of kind of carrying this - you feel like you're carrying the race on your shoulders.

Elizabeth: Absolutely. Yeah, sure.

Eileen: Representing the race all the time. So, I think part of what happened when the Black Studies Center came together was that suddenly there was a space where that didn't matter. Right?

Elizabeth: Yeah. Kind of like ambassadorship, as it's called today.

Eileen: Exactly. Exactly. And you asked, “was the consortium taking any action to address this issue?” My first answer was, they were completely unaware that it was a problem. I mean, they had no clue. At the end of sophomore year, John Payton and I met with Bill Wheaton, who was the head of admissions, and we really challenged him. How about the absence of students of color? There had been three in the class above, two in my class. And he listened. He kind of took us up on it. We gave him a list of schools in LA we thought he should visit. And we actually took some credit for the larger class that came in my junior year. do we have really prepped, uh, pressured to college but nobody was paying much attention to once you get here.

Elizabeth: Absolutely. Yeah.

Eileen: I think they completely had a lack of consciousness. They didn't even recognize that was a question to answer because they assumed that there was everybody's experience. So it was as much rooted in ignorance as it was in any racial animosity.

We had speakers on campus from all of those movements (civil rights or Black Power movements). Mainly local people, like people from Los Angeles or, or you know, from the southern California area. In 1970, I believe, or maybe it was '69, Pomona had a tradition of an annual conference where classes were stopped and there was a major theme and speakers came from all over the country. My first year it was "Is God dead?" And it was either junior or senior year that it was on Urban America. Several of the speakers who came for that event were African American or doing work in the African American civil rights community. And I think that was really important for people. And then in 1970, I actually think Bobby Seale and a couple of other people from the Bay area came down to speak that the BSU posted something. I had graduated by that point. There was in Los Angeles, something called, I believe the name was, the Black Student Alliance and it was all the BSUs in the LA area. So UCLA, USC, Cal State Long Beach, Occidental, and they would meet one Friday a month. And several of us who lived in our way would go to those meetings, not necessarily representing the BSU, but kind of anybody could go. And there was kind of a discussion of what was happening on various campuses and how people were responding to what was happening. And it had a bit of an education component and so somebody might get up and give a talk about phenomenon or the theory of black power or something like that. The BSU at Claremont was not necessarily a member of it, but we were welcomed when we came. And you know, if you mentioned where there people who were particularly influential all doing a tremendous amount of reading, we were reading everything we could get our hands on. And there was a ton of stuff coming out at that time. stuff by psychologists talking about black rage, Stokely Carmichael's work on black power, uh, Huey Newton stuff. So long ice. I mean there was a lot coming out and, and we were doing a lot of reading in our own discussion. So I think the people who were thought leaders in those movements, we were influenced by them, not because we interacted necessarily with them, but because we were reading their work. And then for me in particular, and I may have mentioned this before, the my, my sophomore year there was a huge black power conference in, uh, the bay area and about six of us drove up to that conference.

We were in a sociology course on race relations at the time. So it fit very much with the body of literature. The course was taking her and for me that was just a transformative experience. Stokely Carmichael Spoil Ron Coringa Spo, fake Bobby seals boke but for me it was just an intellectual eye-opener in terms of this fear, these new theories that I was being exposed to, terms of, you know, confirmation. It wasn't targeted perspective from the, the traditional civil rights mind and you know, we would get at least side, I'm sure this happened with many of us, you know, then you have this generational conversation in your own families. I mean, I came from a family of activists, but they were very much in the Martin Luther King tradition. So I'm coming home and I'm suddenly talking about black power and my mother's looking at me and said, and you'll get shot in the streets. You know, and I, and as I think about it now, it's, it's almost the similar, I'm now in my mother's place as I talked to black lives matter.

That's interesting because, you know, because what happens, I think, you know, and I believe that it is very important in driving change is that, there is a kind of energy and a fearlessness that appropriately comes with youth. And it was interesting not too long ago, I had an opportunity to be, in the presence of Angela Davis and in a contemporary student asked her about

intergenerational differences. And part of what she said is, you know, is the energy that comes from your, you were saying it's a fearlessness and you've been civility that is very much a part of being 16 to 24, you know, as opposed to now, Angela Davis is 70 something. And, and, and, in the same way that I think our generation had to struggle with, what do we learn from our elders and what of that do we take? And what of that do we leave behind? I think the same process is going on right there. So that's just an observation. and I, I think I some learn the anti war movement. And what was the nature of the relationship between UMAS and the BSU? I would say it was independent and collaborative. as I'm like, no, there were meetings very early after the BSU proposal was put together because it was put together first. I think I shared with you mohs and they did their own work and, there were not joint negotiations, one person that have, but, but, but there was a strong sense of affiliation and in fact it was probably a better example of two groups being allied and coming together when it made sense for or whatever, but also giving people freedom to have independent, uh, positions as needed.

Right. and then the atmosphere after the bombings I think was very tense. I do not believe that it affected negotiations over the BSU I flew more than anything. It was terrifying to everybody and everybody on campus wanting to ensure that, it didn't escalate and it think there was a fear. I mean there were rumors that the husband of the woman who was injured was kind of organizing a posse for want of a better word that was going to come to campus and go after the African American students. So I, I've make everybody responded in a way of one, how do we, how do we tie all this down and, how to, how do we make sure everybody's safe? So I don't, in my mind, I don't think it affected the negotiation in mind. Can Ask mark was about Mike or re. and I think I'll take the last question. Uh, part of the first you said it's like in your 1969 interviews, you discuss your frustrations quote the ineffectiveness and the slowness and the real unresponsiveness of higher education. And do you feel differently now? And I think my answer is yes and no. With with 50 years to remember how things were. I can definitely say there has been massive change. On the other hand, when I read the, uh, students t n o just more demands. So

What's changed? There is a curriculum where there wasn't a curriculum before. They are faculty members where there were not quality members for there's representation on care where uh, it must be therapy for. So the experience of a current student, although difficult and problematic, is not nearly as isolating and challenging as mine and it is still uncomfortable. and so there's this, on one hand I can read a set of demands to find myself being a very angry and deeply disappointed that 50 years of that after 50 years of work, the documents can seem so similar. On the other hand, I do have a perspective of having it, you know, compared to what, so the speed and so, so it remains frustrating. I think one of the opportunities for real promise, however, is that new faculty who are being trained now and who have been trained even in the last 10 years are bringing a whole different perspective to the academy. And where there was me for deep training of Faculty 2015 even 10 years ago, those people are retiring and a new cohort of people are coming in who may be more predisposed to, to face some of this stuff in real terms. I think the second piece of that for me is there's a new crop of higher ed leaders now too, who are not of my generation but the generation after me. And you know, I think they, I, I want to hope they bring a more expansive consciousness.

Even in my role as a president, I was very often the only person of color in the room, yeah. That is happening less and less. So there a group called the Annapolis Group, Small Liberal Arts college presidents, top 100 liberal arts colleges in the country. For five years, I was the only person of color, only woman of color in the room. The president of Wheaton was also in the room. So that made two of us now the president of Pomona, the president of a SWOT or the president of St Benedict's. You know, it's, it's a, it's a much different landscape. And so my hope is that, this change is terribly slow and yet I've got a perspective to say that I, I've, I have seen it move. have my use of student activist activism changed? no, I don't know that. I think my views of student activism have changed. My, if I were to offer advice to student activists, I would encourage them to do more of their historical homework. I, my sense in the most recent movements that I've seen on campus is that some of the hard homework, uh, one to understand from where one has come to, to look at tactics and evaluate them, uh, to really think about their effectiveness today as opposed to 45 years ago. I would like to see more of that tactical work.

But the issues that students care about, the frustrations they feel on campus, I think are wholly legitimate. and, and you know, we're in a period of a very retrograde motion right now. as, as is the case with, with all Paul Change. My Dad used to say, slow inchworm one step forward and two steps back. And we're really in the backwards movement now in that back, you know, that creates particular challenges for this generation of students.

So those are your questions. Are there, is there anything else?

Elizabeth: I was also wondering, if there are any policies or strategies, that have really, that you've seen work well over the years, and what might be some ways of attaining success in activism, even though it's very, it's a very slow and difficult process.

Eileen: Well, you know, there are different pieces of activism, I think, depending on what you're working towards. So let's, let's talk about not merely curriculum, but pedagogy that's inclusive. so that, uh, you're changing the mindset of a faculty member who says, McGee's x, whoever x is, is just, they're just not prepared for my class. Rather than the faculty member taking the responsibility of saying, I'm responsible for the educational success of everybody in this room. Nobody has been admitted to this college who does not have to be, you know, who does not have the capacity to be successful. Well, that's a huge mindset shift right there. and I, you know, a lot of work has to be done still faculty around issues of, of pedagogy and that, that's a very slow process. but I think that's a piece of the work that needs to be done. and that's work. It seems to me college presidents and provosts should be taking the responsibility for and deans and that students should take some time to get up. So here's the analogy. When we put together the black studies center thing, we had to kind of make up classes. There was no here and there. And so part of our work was creating that there. I think there's a difference that of theirs for current activists to begin to create. So one might be, you know, what do we know about pedagogy that is working? We would have never said, you have to pay us to do this work, right? Because it's a kind of emotional burden. if you bought a happen and if you believe deeply enough [inaudible] it's not about being compensated for it. It's about doing the work because you feel deeply about the need for justice. And so I think I would say the issues that you're working on, one might be

pedagogy. if it's about the attitudes of your fellow students, what do we know about what has worked and not work? Here's an example. We demanded that everybody goes through, I think we called it racial awareness training. You know, in the 70s it did not work. Spoke to now to now say we're demanding that everybody go through anti racism training when we know that didn't work, rather than kind of looking at the literature saying, what is working now? so that's what I mean about really looking at the history. and not reinventing wheels that were actually ended up being flat rather than round cause cause we didn't know, but now we know that that approach doesn't work, but maybe there's another approach that does work. So, and that that's, it takes time.

Oh and I would also say that it is, at least for me, that work that I did became like intellectual foundation on which a lot of my career has been based. now that that might not necessarily be true for a physics major, I get that. but I, you know, to have an even pack and want to have, the work of the homework becomes really important around whatever questions you're looking at.