

# **Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

## **NKENGE TOURÉ**

Interviewed by

LORETTA J. ROSS

December 4-5, 2004 and March 23, 2005  
Washington, DC

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### Narrator

Born in 1951, Anita Stroud grew up the oldest of three children in a female-headed household in public housing in Baltimore. As a teen in the late 1960s, she helped start and lead an underground student group, The Black Voice, to protest institutionalized racism at her high school. She also became a community worker with the Black Panther Party. This activism cost her a high school diploma. She married John Wesley Stevens, a Party member, and they took the names Nkenge and Patrice Touré. They had two daughters before the marriage ended in 1979.

Touré left the Party in the early 1970s and moved to Washington, D.C. After briefly running a group called Save the People, she joined the staff of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center. As general administrator and director of community education at the Center for 13 years, Touré became a pioneer in anti-rape organizing and a champion of addressing all forms of violence against women: psychological, cultural, racial, economic, state, physical, and sexual. At the same time, as a co-founder of the Women's Section of the National Black United Front, she was defending women's rights within nationalist politics. Through the D.C. Study Group, a Marxist-Leninist group, and the City Wide Housing Coalition, she was also involved in anti-apartheid and tenant organizing. In 1982, she and Loretta Ross co-founded the International Council of African Women (ICAW) to prepare African American women to participate in the 1985 United Nations Women's Conference in Nairobi.

Since leaving the Rape Crisis Center in 1988, Touré has hosted and produced *In Our Voices*, a public affairs radio program on WPFW as a forum for women's perspectives. She also works with substance abusers and others affected by HIV and AIDS and is active in the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective.

Touré is placing her papers at the SSC.

### Interviewer

Loretta Ross (b. 1953) became involved in black nationalist politics while attending Howard University, 1970-73. A leader in the anti-rape and anti-racism movements in the 1970s and 1980s, she co-founded the International Council of African Women and served as Director of Women of Color Programs for the National Organization for Women and Program Director for the National Black Women's Health Project. After managing the research and program departments for the Center for Democratic Renewal, an anti-Klan organization, Ross established the National Center for Human Rights Education in 1996, which she directed through 2004. Also in 2004, she was the Co-Director of the March for Women's Lives. In 2005 she became national coordinator of the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective. The Loretta Ross papers are at the Sophia Smith Collection; the Voices of Feminism Project also includes an oral history with Ross.

### Abstract

In this oral history, Touré recalls her childhood in the public housing projects and her high school activism against institutionalized racism. She details the organizational structure and gender dynamics of the Black Panther Party and describes her transition into black feminist

activism in the 1970s. By recounting the challenges of promoting a broad anti-violence agenda within the anti-rape movement and simultaneously asserting women's rights within nationalist politics, Touré's story captures the personal and political struggles of promoting revolutionary black feminism.

#### Restrictions

None

#### Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSF-ODX10. Six 63-minute tapes.

#### Transcript

Transcribed by Tape Transcription Center. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler, May 2005. Edited and approved by Nkenge Touré.

#### Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

##### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Touré, Nkenge. Interview by Loretta Ross. Video recording December 4-5, 2004 and March 23, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection.

**Footnote example:** Nkenge Touré, interview by Loretta Ross, video recording, December 5, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 3.

##### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Nkenge Touré. Interview by Loretta Ross, Transcript of video recording, December 4-5, 2004 and March 23, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Nkenge Touré, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, December 5, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, 54.

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project  
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Transcript of interview conducted DECEMBER 4, 2004, with:

NKENGE TOURÉ

at: home in Washington, D.C.

by: LORETTA ROSS

ROSS: Just as the ambulance is going by. It is Saturday, December 4, 2004. I'm at the home of Nkenge Touré. We are interviewing her for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project for the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Nkenge, it is a pleasure to interview you. I am Loretta Ross, the interviewer for Nkenge Touré, a consultant to Smith College.

I guess the first thing I want to say to you, Nkenge, is that because we are really good friends, best friends, I want you to be in control of this interview, so if I use the fact that I know a lot about you to, like, go where you don't want to go or talk about stuff you don't want to talk about or get a little too personal, push back. Don't just follow me, because if I knew nothing about you, I wouldn't know to go those places.

TOURÉ: Oh, interesting. OK.

ROSS: So I don't want our friendship to disadvantage you, but I do want to know. It should be on now.

OK, Nkenge, I'd like you to start by telling me about your early childhood, where you were born, the date you were born, the economic conditions, social conditions of your birth and your growing-up years, and if you had siblings, name them, and tell us about growing up, Nkenge. And who was Nkenge? Was Nkenge always your name?

TOURÉ: Well, I was born on March 5, 1951, in Baltimore, Maryland. I lived in South Baltimore. My mother lived in South Baltimore. When I was born, I was my mother's first child, followed immediately the following year by my brother, David, who is now called Nyata, and followed the following year immediately by my brother Steven. Steven is dead now, he died in 1996. The part of Baltimore –

2:10

ROSS: What did he die of?

TOURÉ: He died of complications of HIV. The part of — my brother was a substance abuser, and had been off and on for a long time in his life. So

we believe that somewhere in the midst of that lifestyle he contracted HIV. When we were growing up, we — my mother raised us by herself. My father was from North Carolina. They called him Blue, because he was so black.

ROSS: What were your mother's and father's names?

TOURÉ: My mother was Juanita Addella Washington, and she was married to a gentleman named Grant, so her last name for a while was King. And that's the name that she maintained. She maintained that name. My mother's name is Juanita King. She kept that name even after they divorced. He was considerably older than she was and he was abusive, and she was not a person to be abused. So she did not remain in that situation.

And she tells a story where one time, he [Grant] tried to intimidate her, he was going to hit her or something, and they were out and she had a brush, a hair brush with a blue handle on it that was very heavy, and she had it in her pocket, and she pointed it, and made it appear as if she had a gun, and backed him off of her that way. I think that's a funny story sometimes.

We were raised by her because he [Nkenge's father, John Stroud, known as "Blue"] decided that family life and fatherhood was not for him, so he ultimately went back down South. He was, you know, kind of a ladies' man and a player, so I don't even know what my mother was thinking about, but she was thinking something. So, anyway, we grew up, the three of us with my mother.

ROSS: Tell me about her education.

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| 5:15 |
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TOURÉ: My mother was adopted. My mother was adopted when she about two months old by [David] Washington and he worked for the gas company, which in those days was a pretty decent job for a black person to have. I mean, it was a constant job with a constant income. They went to church on Sundays. I believe — I know he finished high school. I don't know if he finished — if he went to college or anything like that. He was my mother's — my grandmother, my mother's mother, because she certainly considers the people who adopted her to be her parents, so my grandmother [Aystinia Johnson Washington], she died when my mother was about 12, which was very devastating for my mother. And my grandfather died when she was about 20. So she was on her own for, really, her adult life.

She met her real mother when she was 28, well, almost 28. She came to where my mother — her name was Fanny, and she came to where my mother was working and wanted to talk with my mother. Basically, what happened was that my mother was initially willing to talk with her, but then she invited my mom to come over for dinner. My mom and a friend of hers, a male friend of hers, went, and Fanny had a male friend come over, and she did not — she introduced my mother as just — as Juanita, you know, she didn't say anything, and my mother obviously

felt like she should have acknowledged that she was her daughter, and she felt that she didn't because the guy was younger. Anyway, maybe that was just her reason not to deal with this woman, you know. So she didn't really deal with her after that.

So I don't really know anything about Fanny. I know that she has two sisters, and I know they're from the southern shore of Maryland, but that's really all I know about them.

We were — when I was growing up, we were very poor, and my mother was on public assistance for a while, which she didn't want to be on. When we were little, we lived behind a drugstore in this big — it had, like, a kitchen and a bathroom and a bedroom area, and this big, other area that could be a living room, dining room, whatever, and that's where we lived until I was about, I don't know, about four years old, five years old. And when I was about five years old, we moved into some of the first new high-rise projects in Baltimore. Little did we have the understanding of urban renewal at that time, OK. These were like —

ROSS:

What do you mean by urban renewal?

8:52

TOURÉ:

I mean that these were big, 11-story buildings that had, like, ten apartments on each floor and there were six or seven buildings, and then around the buildings were — and they were called high-rises, and so around them were what we called low-rise, which were more like two-story units. And basically, the majority of the people that lived in the projects were the working poor or on public assistance. It was set up and designed in a way that there was crime, all of those sorts of things that one associates with economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

At the same time, because there were so many people, and it was the 50s when we moved there, it was still the time when people watched out for each other's children, and all of that. You know, it didn't matter, people lived in the projects. People went to church on Sunday, got up and went to church. A lot of people who lived in the projects worked, you know, but people were just poor, and there was a lot of crime, but there was also, like I say, a lot of — I guess I would call it caring and compassion of people there, looking out for each other, a lot of borrowing stuff from each other. And so we lived there until I was 16 years old, is when we moved into a house in a really nice neighborhood.

So I grew up in the projects. And um, you know, we were blessed in that nobody got pregnant, nobody got anybody pregnant, nobody went to jail.

[When we were young, my mother made a conscious decision to stay home with us, not to work. After that,] [m]y mother worked. First she worked in a tomato factory. One of the earlier jobs that I remember her having was working in a tomato factory, and what I remember is that she was allergic to tomatoes, and every day when she would come home, she would have, like, the acid from the tomatoes irritated her hands and so she would have either bumps on her hands, or, you know, kind of scrapes and things in between her fingers. I remember that so very, very clearly.

The next job I remember that she had, and she had another job or two in between, but the next job that I recall, the next job that I really remember was the job that she had for the rest of her life. That was at London Town Manufacturing, which made the London town coats, the London Fog coats. They made the London Fog coats, and she worked there and, you know, she kind of worked her way up and she [was voted] shop steward. And she remained there until she retired.

That was her job and she kind of changed in there. She started off doing piece work, you know, when you get paid by the piece, and then she moved up to folding and she just had different jobs. So ultimately she didn't end up having to work by the piece, which was a good thing.

And she raised us. We lived across the street from our elementary school, if you can believe that, so it was never a thing of not being able to go to school unless it was — it had to be horrendous weather or something, because we lived across the street from the school. It was not a matter of taking forever to get home from school, because we lived across the street from the school. You could look out the window.

ROSS: Which school was this?

12:50

TOURÉ: The school was called 116A. Our school didn't have a name. It was 116A, and it was right in front of 139, which was the other elementary school by the [public housing] projects, 139. The area that I lived in was basically all surrounded — it was a project area, very concentrated area. There was Lafayette Projects, which is where I lived. Down from Lafayette Projects there was Flag House Courts, which was another project. Then there was Murphy Homes. So it was that kind of — the whole area was that sort of an area.

ROSS: How do you think growing up poor influenced the life choices that you made, that led to a feminist career?

TOURÉ: Hm. That's a good question. Well, my mother was a very strong, independent woman, and I was the oldest and so I had to be in charge and be responsible until she came home from work. I taught myself to cook just so that I could cook, so that when my mother came home, she wouldn't have to cook every day, you know. And I taught myself to cook, just to help her out, because I used to feel really bad that she worked so hard. When I was young, I was a very sensitive person [as well as socially and politically aware, although I didn't realize it then].

I also had other women in my family. I mean, I had an aunt who was in the [Glenwood] country club and, you know, took trips all the time and didn't have any girls, so I used to spend time with her. My mother would let me spend time with her.

ROSS: What's the aunt's name?

TOURÉ: Beatrice Silva, Silva because she married this guy from Portugal, Manuel Silva, who was a merchant marine and was one of my favorite

uncles. He was really, really great. And so I used to spend a lot of time with her, visiting, spending the night and all that. But my mother made me stop doing that as often because I had a — one Easter, my aunt bought me two dresses, two coats, two hats, two everything, and a two-pound box of candy. I will never forget this, because it is a shameful moment. We went past my house and my brothers, who just got, I guess, some little stuff, asked me for some candy, and I gave each one of them two pieces of candy. Out of a two-pound box of candy. My mother said, “You know what? You need to come back down here with the rest of us, because you are selfish.” You know, I’ll never forget that, because it was a really — it was a messed up thing to do, and I guess that’s why I still remember that I gave them two pieces of candy each out of a two-pound box of candy, when I had just come from shopping and getting two of everything.

But my aunt was a licensed practical nurse. As a matter of fact, she was the first person who ever took me on a trip. We went to New York on the train, and I remember looking out the window, at the cows and all the stuff that we saw passing. She was also a very strong, independent woman, you know. She owned a couple of pieces of property and even in the old days, when the person went around and collected their rent, you know. So sometimes, I would be with her when she would be going to her tenants to collect her rent, because she wasn’t (unclear) about her rent.

And she was very involved in her church, even though she had a rack of boyfriends, [male friends who had resources,] but she was very involved in her church, and she was a great dresser. She had a whole closet just filled up with shoe boxes and she knew every — she was a triple narrow A foot — she knew every pair of shoes in there, and I don’t exaggerate when I say that she had all those shoes.

She was — they [Aunt Bea and my mother] went to — I mean, they kind of followed Martin Luther King and, um, they had even gone to hear Elijah Mohammed speak a couple of times when he was in Baltimore, but my mother said they didn’t like having to be searched to go in. But she read the *Mohammed Speaks* newspaper, because she was very interested in keeping up, you know. She bought their fish and all their products and stuff like that.

16:45

I’m not sure, in trying to answer your question — I’m not really — I guess what I’m saying is, these were two strong women. They didn’t particularly espouse feminism, but of course that wasn’t exactly in their time, you know. But they did have an interest in politics and social concerns. And, um, when I went to school, high school, I went to an all-girls school, which had just recently become integrated, and it was where I really learned some of the first meanings of racism and all of that. And I was shaped by that.

I believe in the beginning I was shaped more by those kind of political forces than by feminism. You know, I was shaped by listening to Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown and Huey P. Newton. The first time I saw a Black Panther newspaper with Huey P. Newton sitting



up there in that chair, Bobby [Seale] standing there with his rifles, I was just [in awe].

ROSS: OK. We're going to get to the Black Panthers in terms of your history, but I want to stay back with influences on your childhood. What was your family's religion? What role did religion, if any, play in your family?

18:50

TOURÉ: Religion played — it didn't play a very big role in my family, in my house. Now, with my aunt, my aunt was very — as I said, she went to church every Sunday, you know, she was on the usher board and all of that, my Aunt Bea. So she was very influenced by religion. My mom, you know, she had us baptized. We were Baptists. She had us baptized, and we went to Sunday School, and followed Sunday School with attendance at church.

My mother, on the other hand, only went to church when she felt like going to church, because, as she told us, she had God in her heart, OK, so she would send us to Sunday School and church, but she didn't go a lot. But she prayed. My mother got on her knees every night and said her prayers, and every morning before she started off her day. She did. You could see her in her room, on her knees, saying her prayers. My mother still says her prayers at night and in the morning. [Thinking back, I think she didn't feel she had the right clothes to go to church; she couldn't afford them. And she was tired from working all week and needed Sunday to rest.]

So I wouldn't say that religion — and then, another part of my family is Catholic. So I wouldn't say that religion was a critical factor.

ROSS: OK. So, you went to elementary, junior high school in your community, in your neighborhood, and you started to tell —

TOURÉ: No, actually, I didn't. I went to elementary school in my neighborhood. In junior high school, my mother sent me to an all, basically, white neighborhood to go to junior high school, this school called Herring Run, Herring Run Junior High School, which was out on Moravia Road and Sinclair Boulevard.

ROSS: Why do you think she did that?

TOURÉ: Because she felt that I would do better there. She wanted to see me excel, I guess, and she felt I would do better there than to go to the junior high schools that were in our neighborhood. I had to get up early and I had to ride about 35 minutes or maybe 40, 35 minutes or so to go to school there. And the only reason that I transferred from there was — in the ninth grade — was because my brother had asthma really bad as he was growing up, and when we were in junior high school, there was a period where it was worse, and he had to go to the Johns Hopkins Hospital every week and get these shots. And he couldn't — he had to be accompanied by someone, and it was a lot to go all the way from out

there, because I had done it at least a half a year before. So I transferred to Lombard Junior High School, which was a 15-minute walk to school.

ROSS: And it was an all-black school?

TOURÉ: Oh, yeah.

ROSS: You've said things that indicate that you were feeling very responsible, not only for your mother but for your brothers. Could you talk more about that?

TOURÉ: Well, we are of the latchkey kid era, but of the latchkey era where you were not charged with abuse and neglect, you know what I'm saying? It's like, you knew what the deal was. You get out of school, everybody comes home, you do your homework, you stay in the house until my mom came home. And it wasn't, certainly, not just my mother. I mean, that's a lot of how it was, you know, all the kids, they come home, they just have to stay in the house, because my mother couldn't afford a baby-sitter or a childcare provider for us to watch us after school. And since we lived right across the street from the school, so when we were, I don't know, maybe I was nine, my brother was eight, my brother was seven, we came home and we stayed home until my mother got there.

You know, we all had our little chores that we were supposed to do in the house, and I was responsible to make sure people got their little chores done, and my brothers used to infuriate me because my mother got home from work at 5 o'clock, because they got off at 4:30, they all got their rides. I mean, you know how it is at the factory, everybody's got their routine, we're out the door at 4:25, 4:30 we're in the car, 5 o'clock, my mom was coming home, and my brothers would wait until, like, 4:45 to start doing their work. So often time we would have little, you know, things [little fights, disagreements]. Yeah, we would have little things. In fact, we had one one year so bad that my mother beat all of us, took our Easter baskets back, and nobody got anything because we broke our bathroom door. But that was a rarity, you know. We were just wild that day.

So we were latchkey kids and we just came and we did what we were supposed to do, and I watched out to make sure that people [my brothers] got their homework done and did the things that they were supposed to do. And as I said, then I taught myself to cook so that I could help my mother during the weeks with the cooking.

And on Friday, my mother cashed her check at the bank on Gay Street, where half of all the other people in the projects cashed their checks on Friday. And on Friday, we always got to have whatever we wanted to eat, because my mother did not cook on Fridays, so it's like everybody gets whatever you want. It's carryout day. Everybody gets whatever it is they want to eat on Friday, because we don't cook. And then on Saturday and Sunday, you know, she would also get up and make sure she would cook really good breakfasts and stuff [dinners].

So I guess that's kind of what would be my response to your thing about being maybe like a caretaker or something. I mean, I was the oldest girl. You know, you come out of that period where, as we were teenagers, there were things that my mother would let my brothers do that she wouldn't let me do, that I was highly offended by because I was the oldest. And that's true, I was only a year older than one, and two years older than the other one, but still, I was the oldest, and so I felt like, Why should they be able to stay out later or do certain things that I couldn't do?

On the other hand, my mother did not believe in sexism, so people rotated stuff. I took out trash, my brothers washed dishes. My brothers learned how to cook and they became really, really good cooks. They both cooked better than their wives ever cooked, you know. You never know.

ROSS: So tell me more about high school, because we started to talk about this all-girls high school, incidents of racism. You said it was very racist.

25:55

TOURÉ: Oh, Lord have mercy. Where to begin? Eastern High School was across from City High School. City was the all-boys high school, integrated. Eastern was the all-girls high school — integrated, but it had only newly become integrated. Many of the teachers at Eastern went to Eastern, graduated, came back to Eastern. Some never got married, so they were what you would call, back in the day, old maids. You know, we didn't know, so we called people old maids. Of course, some of them lived up to whatever was the stereotyped idea of what an old maid was. Unhappy, shrewish, and taking it out on everybody else and then throw some racism in on top of it all, you got something going here.

We didn't really have any black books in their library. The vice principal was black, [but] she looked white and she was clearly in line with those forces. She was really bourgeois and I guess it was, like, a really big thing for her. Her name was Rose T. Kenny. I'll never forget her. Rose T. Kenny. It was probably a really big thing for her to be the vice principal of this school, but it wasn't helping us in any way that she was the vice principal of this school. The principal was white, and I think it was a man. I don't really remember anything about the principal. I just remember Rose T. Kenny. I remember her. And we had a black art teacher and we had, like, two black teachers in the whole school, and the black, though not really black, vice principal.

And we had these girls, these girls who came from different areas and stuff to come to Eastern. Eastern had always been considered, when it was an all-white school, to be very, you know, kind of a prestigious kind of high school, so they weren't happy with the change in times [and in the color of the students]. OK, so, no teachers, no books.

ROSS: What year did you —

TOURÉ: I went to Eastern, I think I went up there in 1966.

28:40

ROSS: Very good. (tape blank 25 seconds)

TOURÉ: I attended Eastern High School, starting in 1966, which was in the larger context, a time of a lot of civil rights kinds of things were going on. Black Power movement coming into being. It as a pretty exciting time and I had just, the year before, in leaving Lombard Junior High School, had really got — I guess by the time, when I first went into the tenth grade at Eastern High School — oh, just before coming to Eastern High School, I think that when I was still at Lombard, they were going to pass a curfew.

They wanted to pass a curfew in the city for young people to be in by a certain hour, and I and other people, of course, as well, objected to that and of course the teenagers objected to that, and there was a big city council hearing at city hall, and I went and I spoke on behalf of my sorority, the BOPS, Beta Omega Phi Sigma. And I spoke against the curfew and got a standing ovation, you know. I was kind of passionate about it. I just felt it was really unfair, and I felt, because a lot of us lived in the inner city, there were not going to be things for us to be able to do that other people might, you know, have right around their neighborhood or in their houses and stuff, that we were going to really be the ones to greatly feel this. We felt that in the suburbs, they weren't going to enforce it as much, and so it was something to stand up and fuss about, you know.

ROSS: So, how did you get into the leadership, to be the spokesperson for the sorority?

TOURÉ: You know, I really — I think that several of us went and I think we were all prepared to speak. I think we had to either write our names down on a list to get to speak or just had to — after the city council people and all of those people spoke that they might have just called on people from the audience and give them an opportunity to speak, and so, I got to go up there and speak about that issue. [The curfew did not pass.]

And then, going right into the tenth grade, the issue was that they wouldn't allow us to wear pants to school, even in the winter, and it was cold, and we felt that that was unfair. So we staged a little demonstration, you know, demanding the right to wear pants to school. The compromise became that you could wear pants in the cold weather if your parents wrote a note giving permission for you to wear pants. So, you know, we kind of felt that was a halfway victory. It was victory enough. So that was in tenth grade, and that was sort of like my second political action, which I didn't really think of as being political actions. I just looked at it as just — I guess trying to stand up for what I thought was right or what I was thought was fair, and I thought it was unfair that we couldn't wear pants, and I thought it was unfair to have a curfew.

And as I said, it was this period of time where all these things were happening all around you. You know, you were looking at, really, at history being made.

ROSS: What kinds of things?

TOURÉ: Well, you know, the sit-ins for the lunch counters, the teach-ins, all the things that were happening in the South, the spreading of the Black Power movement, the coming of Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panther Party and all of that, you know. And the rise of cultural nationalism, people beginning to take African names. And so it was a very interesting time, and I guess it really fed into, as time went on, it really fed into what was happening in our school as we became more aware about the fact that — and to begin to talk more and feel more disenfranchised, I guess, by the fact that we didn't have black books and we didn't have black teachers and there was no black studies and — any of that stuff. [The administration's attitude was racist, and teachers' treatment of black students was disrespectful].

So we decided, a group of young women and myself, Phyllis Jefferson and a group of us, we decided to form an underground club called the Black Voice, and it was underground because in order to have a club in our school, you had to have [the] sponsorship of a teacher, to sponsor you for a new club. So we got this white — was she a history [teacher]? I think she was a social studies teacher, to sponsor us, and we were like an educational club, but really we were the underground Black Voices. So we really felt so radical, so revolutionary, you know. We were underground with our stuff.

ROSS: What year of high school was this for you? Tenth grade?

TOURÉ: No, I think this was the eleventh grade. It started in the eleventh grade. By the time we got to the twelfth grade, boy, we had really kind of moved ourselves forward in terms of — I was reading Black Panther newspapers, and we were sometimes going to a few meetings at this place called the Soul School, which was like the cultural nationalist organization in Baltimore. So we were kind of like learning about Africa and Patrice Lumumba [and about colonization and liberation struggles], and then also we had been a couple of times to the offices of the Black Panther Party, to their political education, what they called PE, Political Education classes. We'd gone to a couple of those and so we were also learning about the people's struggle in China and dialectical materialism. I mean, all this stuff [about Cuba and Ho Chi Minh]. It was like all these terms kind of hitting us.

But that was the kind of stuff that we were sort of like going and doing intermittently on the side. We were really focusing on what was happening with our school, and what happened was that on a personal level, we were having various incidents. I got put out of school once because in my history class, my history teacher told us that the people who were slaves were really better off than the white people who were not slaves because they were poor. And so, we were better off because we were assured housing, clothing, and food. I had a problem with her analysis. Her name was Miss Dorn. I remember her.

And I kept raising my hand. I had this little charm bracelet on that made little jingly sounds and I kept raising my hand and she wouldn't call on me. She just would not call on me. She'd look around the room, saw nobody else's hand was up, she would not call on me. So finally, I said, "Miss Dorn. I had my hand up. I'm the only person in the room that had my hand up, and you're ignoring me." "Well, what is it, Anita?" That was before I was Nkenge Touré, when I was Anita Stroud. "What is it, Anita?" So I told her that the slaves were not better off than the poor white people who were free. So the next thing I knew, she had put me out of her class, because, of course the class was like, part of the class was agreeing with me and the other part of the class was looking embarrassed, like, Oh, God, do we have to go here, you know.

So she put me out and said I was a disruptive force, and they demanded that my mother come to the school. And my mother came to the school, and my mother said, "My daughter is not a disruptive force. How can you say that, that they were better off as slaves?" So anyway, I got back in school. I got back. I was only out for that day, for that.

Then I got put out of my home ec class one time, because I had this home ec teacher, this white home ec teacher, who just — we just didn't click. We just did not click. And somehow, even though we were talking about home economics, we were really talking about other stuff that had to do with how girls looked at themselves. I mean, it's home economics. So it was, like, how girls looked at themselves and what they could expect. And I don't know, somehow or another, she didn't appreciate my perspective and my conversation. And so there again, I got put out, you know, my mother came, I got back in.

38:43

That was one thing about my mother, is if you were wrong, my mother would say that you were wrong, and she would say it in front of them, but if she was going to punish you or do something to you, she wasn't going to do it to you in front of them. So I always knew I was never going to be, like, really humiliated or anything like that. But the other thing was that if my mother thought you were right, she was going to stand up for you. She didn't care if they were the teachers, the principals, whatever. That did not faze her, you know. If she thought like they were wrong, she wasn't going to just be, you know, deal with it like that because you were the teacher, and she was a parent or something like that. So I got back in.

What happened was that we used to have mandatory assemblies. Assemblies were mandatory every Thursday. Everybody in the school had to come, everybody had to stand up, pledge allegiance to the flag. I had already worked it out — and that was another thing. I would not pledge the flag. And since I would not pledge the flag, and they couldn't make me pledge the flag, so they used to tell me I had to leave the room when they pledged the flag and I could come back in afterwards. Fine, I don't care. I'll go to the bathroom, whatever, and I'll come back, but I would not pledge the flag, which my homeroom teacher found somewhat annoying.

But I had just got to that place where as I went through the words of, "I pledge allegiance to the flag," it was, like, this ain't working for me.

This is not true. I don't think this is true. I don't think this is right. I'm not doing that. So I would do that.

So we used to have the assembly every Thursday. Everybody stand up, pledge the flat, go through the whole thing. Well it was coming up around Black History time. We were circulating these underground fliers because we wanted to get books into the library. We wanted books in the library, we wanted more black teachers in the school, and some black subject matter in some of these classes. So we flooded the school with fliers, and no one knew where the fliers came from. They were just there, Black Voice, signed by the Black Voice. They were just there. And everybody was like, Who is the Black Voice? Just kind of a little buzz, big buzz, really, going around the school.

The administration decided one afternoon that they were going to go and violate the students' privacy and go and check lockers and see if they could find out if there was a locker that had fliers in them or any indication to try to find out which students — who was this Black Voice. Now they kind of knew it was us, because we had begun as our aboveground history club meeting with the administration, you know, about these issues of the books and the teachers and so forth and so on.

And they were, like, just slow walking, Oh, yes, we'll get books. Well, you know, there's George Washington Carver. Yeah. And I'll never forget this girl, Phyllis, she said, "George Washington Carver invented all these ways of using peanuts. Are you going to tell me the only thing black people ever did was figure out how to make peanut butter?" "You don't have to get hostile."

So our aboveground talks were going very slow and they were stalling and that teacher — I don't know why I can't remember her name right now — was trying to help us and facilitate it. But so the administration was kind of figuring that we were the underground Black Voices, so they had come and went through all the lockers and stuff. But somebody who worked in the office — you know how you're a student, you get to work in the office — had heard that they were going to be going and looking for the fliers. So when they came and checked lockers, there were no fliers there to be found, OK, the fliers were gone.

So we decided that for the assembly — and we always usually had guests at our assemblies — that this particular assembly, all the Black Voice was going to take the front row, all the way across the whole front of the auditorium, we were all going to dress in black, and when it was time to pledge the flag, we were all going to stand up and give the power sign, which is what we did. And pandemonium just broke out. I mean, it was just, like, What is going on here? What is going on?

ROSS: Is that the same year that the athletes did the Black Power sign at the '68 Olympics?

TOURÉ: Oh, let me see. '68, '69, '70. No. This was after that. This was after that, after they had done that and after you had, like, SNCC and everybody doing the Black Power thing, you know, giving the Black Power sign, and James Brown singing, "I'm black and I'm proud." I mean, it was

just a whole new thing. I now had an Afro. I no longer had, like, a perm with blond frosted tips, you know. I had gone over to the Afro, never to return again.

So my little process of awakening and militancy was just moving along. I found out about Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. I didn't know them before, and I didn't know about Julius Nyerere [president of Tanzania] or Patrice Lumumba, a number of people. It was an awakening time. The People's Revolutionary Army of China. It was an awakening time.

ROSS: So how did Anita Stroud become Nkenge Touré?

44:34

TOURÉ: Well, I became Nkenge Touré in my heart before I acquired the name. I think that I became Nkenge Touré in my heart the day that the police beat me up and maced me in my face and put me in jail. I had a problem with that.

ROSS: Tell me how that happened and when.

TOURÉ: Well, that happened in, I think it was '68 or either '69, because I came to D.C. in '70, January 1, 1971. I think it was '69. What happened was that there was a teacher at the school named Miss Shepler who had graduated from Eastern, came back, taught at Eastern, never got married. She was very mean, she really was. And there was a girl named Latanya Hooker. You can edit out names — I don't know if I should be saying everybody's name, but it's how I remember it.

ROSS: It's a historical record. It's good to say their names.

TOURÉ: OK. Named Latanya Hooker, and there was a piece of paper on the floor in the classroom, and Miss Shepler told Latanya Hooker to pick the paper up, and Latanya said, basically, that her mother didn't send her to school to be a maid, OK? Miss Shepler insisted that she pick the paper up, and Latanya insisted she was not going to pick it up. So Miss Shepler slipped, she slipped, and she called Latanya Hooker a black bitch. That was not a good thing to do in Black History month. It just wasn't. It was not a very good thing to do. So everyone in the class got upset.

OK, so this went on into the next day, and so the next day, the Black Voice decided they were going to go down there and they were going to see Miss Shepler and confront her, verbally confront her. She became frightened and she locked herself in her classroom, and she intercommed upstairs or something about Black Panthers taking over, some crazed — I mean, it was just bizarre. It was bizarre.

So they decided to — they were going to have this assembly. And — no, no. After she locked herself in the classroom and we left and she went upstairs and she told them about the Black Panthers had come and they were trying to take over her classroom or something like that, they decided to have an assembly, and the assembly was basically just a kind



of a dressing down of the students kind of an assembly. So the next day, the Black Voice, we decided that they were not going to listen to us. We wanted them to transfer Miss Shepler, to fire her, and so if they weren't going to fire her, then we wanted them to transfer her to another school, to an all-white school. Don't send her anyplace else. Send her where she will be OK. And of course, they were not doing that.

So we decided we were going to strike. We were just going to have to stand for our rights. So we went to the office and took over the intercom system. And we told everybody to leave class and come to the auditorium because we were calling an assembly of our own, OK? People started leaving class. They started leaving class, they started coming downstairs. We took over. This sister named Karen went to the office. It was Karen, she went to the office and got on the intercom system and told everyone to come to the auditorium. Black Voices was calling a meeting, an assembly. [Karen later joined the Black Panther Party.]

Students started leaving class and coming down, and many of them made it down to the auditorium. Some did not because they put the gate down. There's a gate that goes across the front of the building on the inside that would prevent you from being able to get to the auditorium through that gate unless you were down in the gym area or something. So some people made it in and some people didn't make it in.

Well, the administration called the police. And the police came, but not just the police, the SWAT team came, in their helmets, with their nightsticks, with their mace, and the administration, you know, demanded that everybody go back to class and that the troublemakers, that the Black Voices come forward, that they were going to be arrested. Well, we didn't all have black on that day, we just, you know, had on different stuff.

Well, the other girls at the school were not going to let them take us. So it turned into a real struggle, and some people got hit and maced and all of that. Well, 12 of us — eight of us, I'm sorry, eight, because we became known as the Eastern Eight — so eight of us got arrested, and the most amazing thing happened, because that was in the time when they still had paddy wagons. So they put you in the paddy wagon, you know, not the police car.

So they took us out, handcuffed, put us in the paddy wagons, and when they tried to drive away, all these students had come. First of all, they had made a human chain and were holding onto the back of the paddy wagon and trying to keep the paddy wagon from moving, which was just the most incredible sight. I mean, it was just incredible. Well, eventually, they had to let go because they figured out that people, somebody was really going to get hurt.

So they drove us around for about an hour and a half when they could have taken us straight to Pine Street, and it would've took 20 minutes, that's where the children and women went, to Pine Street. They took about an hour and a half to get there. When we got down to Pine Street, they couldn't even get the paddy wagon in because the

students had left school and come and had taken over and were seated all through the street where the police station was. I'm telling you.

And so we got locked up and our parents had to come and get us out, and Rose T. Kenny came, and she was going from cell to cell, crying and saying, "What can I do?" and "How can we fix this?" and all of that. And so, I told her, "You can get the books, you can do some of the things that we've been asking to be done and been negotiating about." And she said, "OK."

My mistake, because I was young and I was naïve, was that our conversation, it was not written down, you know. It wasn't like I had some pencil and paper and made her sign something that said she would. It was just her and I, you know, and she didn't honor that.

At any rate, so the next day, we had to go for, like, an arraignment, OK? And we had to go, not to the court, but to the police district in the area where our school was located. And so of course, the Eastern Eight, we're going to wear black. I mean, we've been arrested now, so we might as well uphold our thing. So we come and we wear black, all of us, and we come in there and — black boots, black (laugh) oh, boy, black sweaters, black skirts. You know, we're just in black. And we go in, and the [charge] is dropped, because, really, we should've been suing them, OK. But I guess we didn't realize that we should've been suing them. So it was dropped, OK.

So when we came out of the police station over there, by Loch Raven Boulevard, when we came out, there were so many people outside that we were just, kind of, like, freaked out, because when we went in, it was just us and our parents. You know, but when we came out, it was students everywhere, and it was a moment of sheer terror, because they all rushed toward us, yelling, screaming and hollering. We were like, God, we'll get crushed to death. We could not believe — I could not believe. It was, like, all these — who are all these people? Where did all these students — where did all these people come from?

So we had to have a meeting, and we walked about eight blocks over to Morgan State University, and just went onto the campus, took over the Murphy Auditorium. We just went in there. We didn't have permission. We just went into Murphy Auditorium and held this big meeting, and decided that we were going to organize students from all the schools. And we decided that we were going to form a central committee from the various schools, and we were going to demonstrate, we were going to get these demands met, because they were upset because these Eastern Eight got brutalized, these girls got brutalized, plus at the other schools, students wanted to have, like, black studies and other things.

So we all kind of like joined together, and came up with these 28 demands that we had, and we demonstrated every day. One day we would demonstrate in front of City Hall, the next day we would demonstrate in front of the police headquarters, the main police headquarters, and the next day we would demonstrate in front of the school board.

ROSS: Well, how did you keep up with your studies at the time?

TOURÉ: We wasn't in school. We closed the schools down, so that — I mean, when I say we close them down, I mean that each school had some students in and some students out, OK, because we had big demonstrations every day. But the ones who were, like, the leaders, the central committee and stuff, we were out of school. For us, school was out. You know, we were going on strike. We're getting our demands met. We're getting justice and all of that, you know, and so when we first started demonstrating, they arrested us again. I was in jail on my birthday. I think that was my seventeenth birthday or something. I was in jail that day.

And so, by arresting us, that just drew more students to it. I mean, it just really became — and then the churches started helping us. They made a decision, they were going to back their young people, you know, so two of the biggest churches in Baltimore and Soul School came out. They were supporting. And the Panthers were supporting. And the Panthers and Soul School were kind of in a struggle for the hearts and the minds of us students. It was really something else.

Um, and we stayed out, basically, on strike for — I'm laughing because there was this one school, Forest Park High School, and these friends of ours, Woody and Mac and Curteen and them, when they decided to walk out of school, they didn't want anybody to try to stop them from going. So they had locked some of the doors to the school, but also they had, like, ripped the phone out the wall. I mean, they were in a — I can't even — it was bizarre.

And so, everywhere, you know, we would go for our organizing meetings and stuff, we would get on the bus and it would be, like, 50 people getting on the bus to ride across town, because everybody didn't have a car. I mean, this wasn't the high school, like Mayberry, where everybody had a car and so you might have two people that had cars and, you know, people would get on the bus. The bus drivers would give us free transfers and stuff and it was quite an interesting learning, development time.

Ultimately, of course, because we were all seniors, the majority of us were seniors, and so people fell under the pressure of their parents who were, like, Look, you're a senior, graduation will be coming up in two months or so, whatever, you're going back to school. And so, ultimately, in that way, is how we kind of lost it, OK.

So the students returned, but they had to pick two students who they said could never come back into Baltimore public schools. I was the female. And this guy named Sly, from City, he was the male, and they would not let us return to school, at all. So my mother got a lawyer who also happened to be a member of the school board. She got me a lawyer to contest this.

The day I was supposed to go for my hearing, meet my mother there — because by this time, I was working on the Black Panther Party free breakfast program and some other things and so I didn't always stay at home. Sometimes I stayed there.

ROSS: Tell me how you get involved with the Panther movement.

TOURÉ: OK, but this is from the beginning of how it started. But anyway, I was a community worker. I was working on programs. So what happened, the day that I was supposed to go, that morning, one of the breakfast programs got attacked by the police and one of the houses, so everybody had to come to the house on Gay Street, which was the headquarters one, which is the one where I was. So I was unable to leave the house on that day, to go to the school board to meet my mother and to meet my lawyer.

ROSS: So you were unable to leave the Panther house?

TOURÉ: Exactly. I was unable to leave the Panther house.

ROSS: And that was because again –

TOURÉ: And that was because that morning the police had raided the breakfast program, one of the free breakfast programs, and one of the other houses [where panther comrades lived]. So we were kind of like under siege, you know, in that it just wasn't safe to leave. And the police were watching the house and we knew that whoever came out of the house was going to get arrested and stuff, and so I couldn't go. So I missed my big day.

ROSS: What did your mother think about your not showing up?

1:00:40

TOURÉ: She was not pleased at all. She was really not pleased and she really wanted me to leave the headquarters and come home. But I really didn't choose to do that. I felt that I should stay with my comrades and what happened was that we actually stayed in that house for about three weeks, literally. The police took up positions around the house, which was a row house near, like, an underpass bridge thing. They took up positions on roofs and outside, and we were in the house.

And what happened was that the community — and I'm not talking about just students, I'm talking about the community in general. People came and they stayed in the street. They slept outside. They took turns watching. They made sure that the police could not attack that house. To me, that was community support and community mobilization like I have really never seen anything like that. I mean, I hadn't because it was all new to me. But it was just an amazing thing to watch that, you know. And so you had the — the, like radicals, the radical type, the white radical left, you know, so people would bring us stuff. They would bring us food and other stuff, and we put the baskets out the window and pull this thing, the supplies up into the house. Boy, it was something.

And so finally, the police, they just gave up. I guess they just said, Look, these Negro people down here, this is just more than we can deal with, you know, unless we want to have to herd a whole bunch of

people, and since we act under cover of night, this is not working for us. So that's what happened, you know. And my mother had asked me to leave the house and come, but I didn't feel that I wanted to or that I should do that.

ROSS: And you were 17 years old at the time?

TOURÉ: I was 17. I might have been 18 by now, but I think I was still 17, 17 or 18.

ROSS: OK. We're going to end this tape here and start up with how you actually got more involved with the Black Panthers on the next tape.

TOURÉ: OK.

END TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

ROSS: Nkenge, you were getting ready to tell me about how you joined the Black Panther Party, and how Anita Stroud became Nkenge Touré.

TOURÉ: Well, I became Nkenge Touré in my heart, I became someone with an African name, someone who wanted to speak more loudly and really be about change, and that first experience that day when we were being maced at the school and taken to Pine Street, that was sort of like the day that I became Nkenge Touré in my heart, I became somebody with an African name. I didn't know it was going to be Nkenge, but I knew that there was a distinct moment of change. That was the day, that was the day, February 12th, that was the day.

And the Party was kind of a process. It was a process of going down with others to some of the political education classes, volunteering to work on the programs. You know, leaving school sometimes because we started, as I said before, we actually did this strike, we had begun going down sometimes after school just to see what's happening down with the Black Panther Party [headquarters], you know, what's happening over at the Soul School. Learning more, just finding ourselves being there more and so, by the time the strike was actually under way — because this was something that went for about two months, this wasn't like something that happened over a week's period of time. I mean, this was a kind of protracted situation.

I was just more drawn to the Party, more drawn to the Ten-Point Platform and Program of the Black Panther Party, the programs, the community programs, and also to the idea that these are some bad[-ass] people here. I mean, you know, these are some seriously righteous people standing up against the forces that be, against oppression, “off the pig,” “power to the people,” “seize the time,” “right on.”

ROSS: These were all slogans. What do you mean by the Ten-Point Plan?

TOURÉ: The Ten-Point Platform and Program was the bedrock of the Black Panther Party. It was the platform, the program that the Black Panther Party advocated for black people, and for the black community, in terms of what people needed to rise, to have quality of life, to have freedom, to be able to live with peace and justice and dignity.

ROSS: Were those the points of the Ten Points?

TOURÉ: Those were the points — the Ten-Point Platform and Program. Now, it was, you know, we want land. We want housing for our people. We want an end to police brutality in the black community. We want education. I don't remember all of them and certainly not in order. If I were to think about them, they would all come back. We want a plebiscite so that blacks can determine their destiny. So this was the Ten-Point Platform and Program, so that was the bedrock.

The community education was for the community. Political education classes were for the community but there were other political education classes that were more just for Panthers and for community workers [to increase their understanding and to place the struggle in a context]. It wasn't like a form that you fill out or something, you know, where it's like, OK, I'm signing up, I'm joining, I'll be this for a month and then I read this form and I become a Panther. It's like, if you start out, everybody who's going to be there on a more consistent basis is a community worker. They don't all live there. There were people who were community workers with the Party that had jobs, came and sold papers on the weekends or volunteered on programs and then went on off to their classes. All of that.

Becoming a Black Panther was a process of really being more and more committed to the Platform and Program, committed to doing the daily work, the organizing out there in the community, you know, totally committing. Having some understanding of what the politics was and what the Ten-Point Platform and Program meant. Having some discipline to do some study.

ROSS: Well, you used a Marxist term, dialectical materialism, earlier, so would you describe the Panther Party as a Marxist group? Or, if so, why would you call it that?

5:18

TOURÉ: Well, the Black Panther Party saw itself as being students of Marx and Leninism, you know, as well as students of aspects of communism. Great reverence for the People's Republic of China, for Mao Zedong. Did studying, you know, the 11 points of liberalism, the *Red Book*, dialectical materialism as described and articulated by Mao and the People's Party, and as articulated by the Marxist-Leninists, you know.

ROSS: So what did it mean to try to advance a Marxist-Leninist analysis in the black community?

TOURÉ: Well, first of all, there, I believe, are some things that are very important to understand. The ability of the Party and the chapters to do their work, to advance their agenda and to advance their ideology in communities had to do with the level of development of chapters as well, and there was uneven development throughout the Party. Some people were on the West Coast, so they were closer to the national, so they met more often [and some of those classes were taught by central committee members]. But then, at the same time, there were people who, because they were out there, it was assumed that because you were out there and you're close to headquarters, you got all this and you understand this, so they were slipping through the cracks and they weren't in classes.

You know, on the other hand, you had regional, like New York and, like, Baltimore, you know, [New Jersey], Richmond and stuff would come up to New York on Sundays for the East Coast meetings. The

level of understanding of the defense captain and the educational officer [was critical to chapter development in terms of politics and leadership].

ROSS: Were you a defense captain?

TOURÉ: No, I wasn't a defense captain but I was responsible for a chapter [District of Columbia] for a while because people were not there, OK? [Others were on the West coast for training]. I was officer of the day, which is OD, which is kind of fairly integral to the running and functioning management flow, you know, of the house and the staff. I was getting ready to say the staff, the house and the staff — the house and the comrades, you know, the troops. So these uneven levels of development, how much political education was done in the chapters, would affect their ability to advance anything anywhere. OK, so.

ROSS: Having said that —

TOURÉ: Having said that, I think that on some levels it worked and on some levels it didn't work. Naturally, many black people who had a fear of the term communism, you know. Not just black people. Many people had a fear of the term communism as instilled in McCarthyism and the whole thing. Long memory. People looked at Russia as communist so therefore Marx and Lenin — and other people had never even heard of Marx, Lenin, or Mao.

One of the ways the Party kind of advanced our understanding was not with the terms but — OK, for instance, socialism. There's this movie, I think it's the movie on the murder of Fred Hampton, and there's a part where they're showing survival programs out in California and people are picking up their bags of food, OK? A chicken in every bag. OK, and this particular day, it's like the free food program is out there and the clothing program and people are just coming back from the bus in the prisons program. And so they asked this woman, this regular black woman in the community getting her bag of groceries and stuff, they asked her, did she consider herself to be a socialist or a communist. And she said, "If communism and socialism are being able to feed my family and having things that I need in my community, then yes, I am a communist and a socialist."

I say that to say, teaching not so much through the terms as through what the work is and just how people define that work of working together collectively. Collective worker responsibility.

So the newer people who were what we call armchair revolutionaries, which of course are the people who do a lot of studying of the struggles around the world and what the various ideologies and all of that are, but that's all. They don't know how to integrate that, you know. They're not integrated, so it's not always of service. And of course, you have people who have the service and can do that part of it, and need more political education so that they can have more discipline, more understanding, and so forth and so on.



I think that it was a mix, but I think that another thing was that basically for black people is, whatever the Black Panther Party was saying — they were saying, you know, dialectical materialism, Marxism, Leninism, whatever — they knew [that the Black Panthers] stood up to the police. They knew that if somebody was murdered, abused, beaten, that the Party would come, that they would stand up for you, that they would stand with you. They knew that they had programs that had demonstrated ways of taking care of the community and of the community being able to work together to take care of itself, and those are things that resonated with people. That's real, beyond whatever kind of little terms we want to put on stuff.

So I believe that the Black Panther Party was an extremely effective organizing entity in its time, and that clearly COINTELPRO and all of those kinds of state-sponsored, you know, terror and disruption and destruction, all of those were the things that — murder — all of those were things that brought the Black Panther Party down. If you think of the Party as the place where — I mean, the Black Panther Party was filled with all kinds of people, but it had a lot of people that were, under Marxist-Leninist terms, called the lumpen proletariat, you know, just the people who were unemployed, just the regular people.

You had people in the Party had been drug addicts, pimps, prostitutes, I mean, sho-nuf lumpen proletarian people, who submitted themselves to a level of discipline. Now their ability to carry that out is somewhat different, but that you submit to it to the extent that you can — experiencing stuff and taking stuff and learning stuff that you never had any experience or exposure to — was quite extraordinary. It wasn't like you went to boot camp and you did this and you did that, like when you join the Army. It was a whole different thing.

Another thing that was very also, just in terms of human dynamics, that was positive and negative, I feel, in terms of people's ability to do their work and their ability to organize: it was, for many people, the first time that they had had power. I mean, if you were an officer, you know, in your chapter or whatever, you had power in the Black Panther Party, because it was an army.

ROSS:

That's what I was going to ask you about, its militaristic aspects, and then lead into a discussion — well, how was gender dealt with within just a militarized environment?

14:30

TOURÉ:

It was in many ways an army, you know. It had a hierarchical structure, for sure. You had soldiers and troops. You had ODs and captains and lieutenants, of education of this and that, you know, the director for the health service. So, you had titles, you had people who had not necessarily ever had power before, that had people who had to basically do what they ordered them to do, OK. Whereas in the street, they terrorized them into doing it, but here it was like, you're supposed to follow orders, you know, and so people had power. So that was also a

different thing, to work with how to have people adjust to that and how to use it.

Some people used it well and some people used it not quite as well. [In fact, they abused their power.] But the point I'm attempting to make is just to try to think of the dynamics of — if you think about your black exploitation films and all that, think about those people coming into the Black Panther Party and submitting themselves to that structure, you know. Then throw in some armchair liberals, armchair revolutionaries, throw in some working people. We had a brother who used to work at the post office and then come and do papers and stuff. Another brother who worked at the airport. I mean, people had jobs. Not everybody — you know, different things. I don't know if I answered your question, but that's my response.

[Many of those who had power in the Party and were giving orders had formerly been powerless. Others who had been asserting their own power on the street were having to take orders. It was a real dynamic and people really tried to make it work].

ROSS: I believe that I — early on when I met you, you described the experience of standing on the corner and selling Panther newspapers. So why don't you describe some of the day-to-day tasks you had to do with the Panthers.

TOURÉ: Oh, God. Well, the task that many people had to do, even officers, you know — just because you were in charge of distribution of papers in your chapters or this, that, or the other, didn't mean you didn't sell papers. Basically, only like the defense captain and the OD, who had to stand, but even sometimes the OD got to go out, sold papers, you know. Of course, Central Committee didn't sell papers and stuff.

Papers were a life blood of the Black Panther Party for reasons of information and networking and organizing, and also for money. So papers were taken very, very seriously, you know, and so people went out every day and sold papers, except on Sundays. People went out every day and sold papers. Some people, all day. Some people, part of the day. On weekends, like on Friday evening, people sold papers up until midnight and stuff, and on Saturday, from, like, 10 in the morning, sell up until 10 or so at night, you know. You had your 100 papers and if you were a good salesperson, you had 150 papers. Let me tell you, 150 papers is heavy, you hold them under your arm and you're out there distributing information. Propagandizing is heavy. I don't care if you're 25 or 55, 150 papers feel kind of heavy. So you go down, you have places to go, assigned places. People had places that were assigned to them to go.

ROSS: Was it safe?

TOURÉ: Well, I mean, safe is a relative term, really, I guess. [People did not mess with panthers. They supported us or they left us alone.] I mean, downtown, sure, safe, but leaving downtown, you're just in a community, so you might be just walking through the community. It might be different places. You might be on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, because 14<sup>th</sup> Street was different than that it is now. You can walk on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, you could sell some papers. You know, walking on down 14<sup>th</sup> Street, you could sell some papers, like if you started down by S –

ROSS: In Washington, D.C.?

TOURÉ: D.C., in Washington, D.C. If you had started down around S Street, something like that, and you could walk up to Park Road, a little past Park Road, because 14<sup>th</sup> Street was different. You still had some clubs, still had some things.

ROSS: So it was a black business community?

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TOURÉ: Yeah, yeah, business and nightlife. It was a pulse street in the community. Across U Street, of course, which turns into Florida Avenue, so you know, kind of up and down Florida Avenue.

ROSS: U Street to 16<sup>th</sup>?

TOURÉ: Mm-hm, out to Southeast, out to Eastover Shopping Center, and different places. So that was, so you did –

ROSS: How was your consciousness affected by the process, the act of selling the papers and using that as a vehicle to interact with the community?

TOURÉ: Well, I learned a lot. I learned a lot about people, and I felt like I was doing my job as a soldier. I was educating people to hopefully give them tools, vision, courage, whatever, pissed-off-ness, enough to stand up and challenge whatever it was that was happening in their life that they felt was really impacting them or impacting their neighborhood.

And I was supporting the survival programs, you know, money for the breakfast program, the busing program, the medical program, the clothes program, the programs that we had that served the community. I saw myself as a servant of the people, a servant in my community, to help to make things better in my community, you know, so that people could have better quality of life and all of that.

Because to me, just personally for myself, what I believe is that whatever the struggle is, the particular struggle, the particular issue that people are organizing around, how they come together in coalition, all those things that they do, when they reach it, as the struggle intensifies and maybe becomes an out-and-out conflict, or maybe [is] settled politically without the warfare part of it, that basically all of it is about quality of life. It's about how people are going to live, you know. If

they're going to be able to live, if they're going to be respected, all of that. That's what all the stuff that everybody does, all the great revolutions that got led — all those different things, when you just synthesize it down, to me, to the finest things, that's what it is.

ROSS: OK. I started to ask you a question and I'll complete it now about gender in the Party. How were you treated as a woman? Were you respected as a woman? What happened with sex. We haven't gotten into your sex life yet. So if you want to get into it, but what happened with gender in the Black Panther Party?

TOURÉ: Gender. Interesting in that it's something people always ask about. People are now wanting to study it and document it and everything, and I can certainly see why.

Gender in the Party went in a number of ways. It went in part around the fact that as a rule, the men in the Party were sexist. And though they claimed not to be — well, let me rephrase that. Though some claimed not to be, without true study of that behavior and the dynamics of it, it becomes rather difficult to change it.

Having said that, women were looked at as equal in the sense that you were soldiers [or officers]. If people were carrying guns, you were carrying your own. Nobody going to carry your gun, Oh, let's carry hers for her. No. You got to carry your own, you got to pull your own weight. You had to be able to do all those things that Panthers do, that Panthers needed to know how to do. You had to be able to do those things. You had to know how to handle your weapon, clean your weapon, do that, take care of that. You had to, you know, be able to, know how to assess certain situations.

(Gap in tape from 25:20 to 26:30)

As a Panther you needed to be able to assess situations for danger where you might be — those were the things you were expected to know, so on that level we were treated the same as men. We were treated the same as men in terms of expectations that you would get out there and you would sell papers every day, just like men. [You also stood guard duty.] Unless your job was something else, you worked in childcare —

ROSS: My microphone is acting up, so.

TOURÉ: You needed to know how to assess situations for danger, possibilities of danger. You were supposed to have your awareness up and keep your awareness up at all times. Women were expected to do that. Women were expected to sell papers every day unless their job — unless they had a different assignment or a different detail that they working on, you sold papers.

Now, interestingly, in breakdown of work and tasks, very often women ended up in the tasks and duties that were traditionally women

— working in childcare, working in the school, working on the breakfast program, being the cooks in the house, things like that. Now there were men who worked on the breakfast program, for sure, but often there were more women than men working on a breakfast program. Definitely more women than men working with the children, you know, be it in the International Learning Center, or be it in the school or daycare center in a particular chapter.

The cooking — more often women were cooking, but not to the exclusion of men, because in a lot of places, it was the logic of who could cook and who couldn't cook, and do I want to wait for you to learn. We had this brother named George that used to make these fried chicken wings that were like — he was not ready to make fried chicken wings, and personally, I would rather just go ahead and cook them. We all eat and enjoy it rather than suffer until you learn how to do it.

And so sometimes it was practicality. Other times it was assigned. When I was OD, I would just assign people and rotate it, so you cooked, too. I mean, I tried to make it something that, on your particular day, was easier for you, but we rotate that.

ROSS: You all lived together, cooked together?

TOURÉ: Yes. It's a communal living situation. So yes, people had rooms. I mean, because most of the time, we were in a house, OK, and so the house maybe had four bedrooms, five bedrooms or something, and so people, like, there might be maybe two women in a room, two men in another room. If you were a couple, you know, then you all were in a room together. But, yeah, people lived, you lived there together. You know, ate, did laundry or went to the laundromat if you didn't have a washer or dryer or something like that.

ROSS: So, essentially, you did get back into high school, and I'm not sure how you ended up living in the Panther house and not in your mother's house.

30:19

TOURÉ: Because I was already sort of living in the Panther house when the whole first attack on the breakfast program happened, and I was kind of stuck in the house. And then — well not stuck, but stuck — and then chose to just remain as a member of the Party and became more involved, and took a little more responsibilities in that. So that's how I was there.

What my attorney worked out, since I was not there, they made an agreement that I could go to summer school, and I could take two subjects, two subjects, any two subjects I wanted to, and I could get my diploma, if I would make an apology and admit that I was wrong. And so, needless to say, that plan didn't work out because I didn't feel that I was and I wasn't going to say that I was wrong or apologize or anything like that. So, it was later that I ended up getting my GED. But it wasn't at that juncture.

ROSS: So, back to gender in the Party. So why did they talk about sexism if at all, and was there any evidence of — why did sexism — what was evidence of sexism?

TOURÉ: OK. So those are some of the kinds of examples of what I would consider to be sexism. I would say that on certain levels, the Party tried really hard to, I mean, you couldn't have someone who you were relating to — that's what we called the person you were sort of in a relationship with, or your boyfriend, girlfriend, or your — whatever was going on with you all at the time, relating to, you know, but you could not push her around or tell her what to do because she was your — . She was your nothing. She's a member of the Black Panther Party, just like you, so you can't do that, and you're not going to really basically be allowed to do that. There were some chapters where you might have been allowed to do that but for the most part, no.

Striking a female because, um, well, striking a Panther was a no-no. So you weren't going to strike a female just because you thought she was your property, or because she was a female you figured you could get away with it. No. Those kinds of things.

It was kind of a bit more subtle than that, and that's where I go back to when I'm talking about taking people who had one set of behaviors and ways of living and the significant changes they made, because if there were not that structure, the sexism would have been running rampant. I mean, it would've just been there. Women would've just been totally under the thumb, as they were in some of the other nationalist organizations and so forth and so on.

You know, women could speak out. You had women who were officers also, you know, who helped. But you had very few women who were defense captains, very few women who were defense captains. Boston's defense captain was a woman. In New Haven, Erika Huggins, when she came out of jail. Couple of places on the West Coast. Most defense captains were men. [I later learned from some of my sister comrades who went to the west coast to work that more controlling relationships were allowed there.]

ROSS: How did one become a defense captain?

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TOURÉ: That's a good question. Work your way up into it. Unless you were there at the beginning when they appointed people, you know, and sent people out to organize. That's one way you became a defense captain. If I sent you to Kansas City to start a chapter, Central sends you, you know, national sends you down there to start a chapter, the central committee, you'd better start a chapter. So, yes, you would be the defense captain, because you started that chapter.

ROSS: OK. Well, did the Party ever take any position officially or unofficially, on feminist issues of the day, birth control, abortion?

TOURÉ: Not that I could really tell. I mean, they weren't really talking — we didn't have those discussions in our chapter. We really didn't. And so, on an overall level, I don't know, I think that at various conferences and gatherings and things like that, on a national level, I believe that people took positions, but most of that never filtered back. Women were supposed — women were respected in the sense that, you know, if you look at all the liberation struggles around the world, you could see that women were struggling and they were involved, so it was really not a way for black people here in this country, in the Black Panther Party, to try to say that women couldn't.

But then, see, there was still that stuff about the sexism, because some other things that were also real was that when, um, like central committee members and other regional [officers] and male members went to different chapters, for whatever reason, they were in that city to speak, to be in a conference, to do whatever, and of course, they're going to visit that chapter and spend time there, it was almost like an understood thing that there was going to be some sisters in that chapter that would be willing to be with that person sexually when they came, you know. And sometimes you were asked, sometimes you were told, to do that. [In most cases, it depended on how the captain ran the chapter.]

Now I mean, if you flat-out refused, it wasn't like you got court-martialed or something, but it was certainly considered to be disobeying an order and you were certainly going to get some kind of discipline, most likely, for not doing that. And if you ended up not getting any discipline for not doing it, it was still made clear for a long time that you had disobeyed an order or something like that.

ROSS: Did that happen to you?

TOURÉ: Um, did that happen to me. No —

ROSS: Meaning to be a convenience for a visiting —

TOURÉ: Um, no. That didn't happen to me. Well, one time that did happen to me, and I just went ahead, and I went ahead and I obeyed this order. But after that, I just didn't like that, and I just kind of like, you know, not me ever again. I'm not going to. I don't care. If I don't want to —

There were also some sisters who — because you had brothers who were underground — part of their function was to go and spend time with these brothers underground and have sex with them and stuff like that, which was really, that was kind of a sort of a down-low thing. I mean, it wasn't like everybody was expected to do that, you know, it was like certain sisters who — and it was bad because it wasn't like people were using birth control, or protection, or any stuff like that. So some women got sexually transmitted infections — is that the correct term that we use now? Sexually transmitted diseases. We're not saying STDs anymore. We say —

38:40

ROSS: Reproductive tract infections.

TOURÉ: OK, yes, reproductive tract infections of all kinds, passing and being passed. Another thing that was sexist was that in the Party, if a brother and a sister were relating, the sister was expected to relate only to that brother during the time that they were in their relating period, whereas the brother, on the other hand, could relate to this sister and relate to another sister as well.

ROSS: So it was open and aboard?

TOURÉ: Yeah, well, it wouldn't be undercover. You would know that I relate to you and I relate to you, but you could only relate to me. So that's what I'm saying, it was a very mixed kind of — it was a mixed kind of thing. And it was around the sexual parts of it where the sexism to me was most apparent. [Male Panthers could relate to women outside the Party but it was frowned upon for Panther women to have a relationship with a male who was outside the Party. Also, there were few abortions because children were precious to the revolution.]

The next was in areas of leadership. But the areas where women were in leadership, they were strongly in leadership, you know. Erica Huggins, Elaine Brown, Brenda Bay, Artie Seale when she was in the Party, Audrey Smith. Women who, when they were in power, they were in power. And there was also a time in the Party where basically all the brothers, the key leadership brothers were in jail or they were on the road raising money to get Huey and Bobby out of jail, and virtually the Party was being run by women, at all levels women were running the Black Panther Party. So it was a mixed kind of a thing, but the sexism was definitely there.

And there was not the kind of what I would have felt would have needed to be the ongoing education around that, to really move everybody forward on that, because it wasn't seen as a priority. Like I said, in Baltimore it wasn't something we really dealt with a lot, because we had programs to run and papers to sell and that, you know, and so. And of course, the communications secretary was usually always a woman and even though that's a national position and it was a central committee position as well as local chapter position, but of course, it was basically a woman. Um, so it didn't have that kind of, in our chapter. [In our chapter, the communications secretary was in the leadership and she was treated as such.]

Another thing that was unique about our chapter was that in a lot of chapters, different people came in. Sometimes one, you know, two people might have come in together, friends or something like that, but people came from different backgrounds and places to build a chapter. But in Baltimore, a lot of us as students, we all came in together, so when our chapter came in, we were a chapter that except for the people who were already there, that were already Panthers when we came in,



let's say eight or nine at the same time, with a certain level of consciousness already, and bonds with each other already. So therefore certain things that had to do with sexism and other stuff, it was already out the window because it was already from before. It was clear that, like, You don't rule nobody, what are you talking about? You know, where you just kind of challenge your friends, so in that way it wasn't present. So that was one thing that was somewhat different about the Baltimore chapter than some of the other chapters.

ROSS: OK. What do you think are some of the legacies about the Black Panther Party in general, and then I'll ask you after that, what about the Party made the most lasting impression on you?

42:20

TOURÉ: OK. The first one was lasting influences.

ROSS: Lasting legacies of the Black Panther Party on American society, or worldwide.

TOURÉ: Well, I think, first of all, and that's a good question because I think if people recall, out of the Black Panther Party came the Young Lords, which was based on the Black Panther Party; the Brown Berets, which were the Mexicans, which was based on the Black Panther Party. The Young Lords, the Brown Berets, there was something else — and then, of course, you know, the white left formed themselves into the Weather Underground.

I think that first of all, the spirit of resistance. I think it was two things. One, I think that it amazed people and it scared people, because people also saw what COINTELPRO, J. Edgar Hoover and all of the tenets of the government were able to do. You have people from the Black Panther Party who are in jail still today who are political prisoners still today. You have people who are exiled. They cannot come back. You have Assata Shakur down there in Cuba. You have Pete and Charlotte O'Neal in Tanzania. Charlotte can come back but Pete can't come back. You have people like Geronimo Pratt, who spent 20-some years in jail and just got out a couple of years ago.

ROSS: Is he out?

TOURÉ: Yes. Geronimo Pratt is out.

ROSS: I did not know that.

TOURÉ: Yes.

ROSS: He got pardoned by Clinton? Because that was a whole —

TOURÉ: He's been out about three years.

ROSS: OK, so Clinton — because there was a big brouhaha over Clinton not pardoning him.

TOURÉ: I don't know if Clinton pardoned him or that he finally got another — because, um, what's the boy's name that worked on OJ's case was working —

ROSS: Cochran?

TOURÉ: Yeah.

ROSS: Johnny Cochran.

TOURÉ: Yeah, he was working on Geronimo's case. So you have, you know, people like Geronimo. Derouba Moore, who was in jail for 15 years or so [and lives in Ghana]. And you have — I mean, you have people that are still in there. Eddy Marshall Conway — in jail right now, 28 years, [Baltimore] Black Panther.

ROSS: And of course, the brother in Philly.

TOURÉ: Mumia [Abu-Jamal], yes, Mumia. You know, so people saw that. Everybody don't want to be in jail for 30 years, 35 years, 27 years. Everybody don't want to be — they might love Nelson Mandela but they don't want to be Nelson Mandela, not in that regard, OK? So people saw people get set up, saw people go to jail, saw people get murdered. We can't even name the people that got murdered, the numbers of Panthers that were murdered. And people exiled. So you had that and people, you know, feared that actually in their minds.

On the other side of it, they saw these people who were willing to stand up to the United States government and stand up and tell the truth and raise the question and push the envelope and be willing to defend themselves. And people — that was also a lasting kind of a legacy.

The survival programs — it was, if you really look at it, it was after the Black Panther Party initiated breakfast programs, free clothing, and all those different kinds of programs, that they came to the larger society, because they were not really there before. You know, you may have had a few churches, once a month we have our little clothing thing or something. But on a mass scale of ongoing kinds of programs, I think a lot in the area of health and prevention, because the Party did a lot of studying of the barefoot doctors in China and their whole style of preventative medicine — that's where the outreach programs came from. That's where the work that I did when I was here in D.C. in the Party, and I oversaw the health programs for about two years, ran the people's free health clinic and the outreach programs, which is that we would go out and we would sign people up to be screened for sickle cell, hypertension, and there's one other —

ROSS: Diabetes?

TOURÉ: Maybe diabetes. Sickle cell and hypertension for sure, absolutely, and we would go out and we would recruit students from Howard Medical School and they organized themselves [and they helped train more Prty members and community people] and then they worked under us and we'd go out and we would screen the community, you know, results that could be given on the spot we were giving them on the spot. The rest would go back the following week. One team would go back and give people results while the team was getting the next set of people [scheduled]. And we would go through whole projects area in Southeast doing it like that.

The clinic closed because they made our malpractice insurance so high that the doctors couldn't afford — the doctors couldn't pay it and we couldn't afford to pay it, and that was done on purpose to make the clinic have to close. Because they certainly couldn't practice without their malpractice, because they were being — they couldn't wait to have been able to snatch someone's license.

So a lot, I think, in the area of preventative health care and, you know, community medicine, a lot of impact inside the prisons because, you know, the Party was strong. George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, Johnny Spade, a lot of men, a lot of men in the prisons, you know, Attica, and George Jackson's works, Huey P. Newton. They're still read today. People still aspire within the prisons for that [discipline and consciousness], as they do for Malcolm.

ROSS: Soledad brother.

TOURÉ: Exactly. So, I think that the Party had a great impact. Also, examples of internationalism, because you got a Party that, you know, Huey, Bobby, they traveled, they made allegiances and alliances with Cuba, Tanzania, [Algeria], in Ghana, different places, you know, so we always talked about international solidarity, as well as our own national liberation.

And I think that it formed a people who — one of the things that is very interesting is that there are a lot, and I mean quite a lot of people all across this country who were members of the Black Panther Party who were Panthers or who were community workers for a long time, who to this day are involved in something. It's like once they left the Party or got put out of the Party or their chapter got destroyed or whatever the circumstances that they then found themselves not inside the structure of the Black Panther Party anymore, part of the ideas and philosophy, the belief in freedom, you know, in justice at what is correct, you know, to expose these people and to struggle against capitalism and fascism and globalization — that stayed with people, and they worked it out in different ways.

You know, some people run a community watch in their neighborhood. Some people are on city councils because they thought they could make a difference at that level. Some people went into

academia and became, like the brother at Harvard, what's his name? Cornel West.

ROSS: Cornel was in the Party?

51:00

TOURÉ: No, no, no. I'm saying intellectuals with this serious social commentary — he might have been, but who am I to say? I don't know — um, wanted to teach. People who went and became part of community organizations. Deal with drugs and youth, or women in — empowerment for women and mothers. It went a lot of places.

ROSS: OK. So, let's get back to the Party's impact on Nkenge Touré. Where in the world did the name Nkenge come from? And Touré?

TOURÉ: It came — well, first of all, when I went to the Soul School, you know, when I was kind of going back and forth between the Party and Soul School, I was given the name at the Soul School of Ifetayo, which means "love excels all," a name I very seldom use, but if you've ever seen me, it might have been a really long time ago, you might have seen me write some stuff, and say, I. Nkenge Touré. Ifetayo. When I was about 25, and Kianga, my second daughter was born, and I named her Kianga [Kianga Uruzi Stroud] and my first daughter was Frelimo, I thought, now that I had these children with these African names, and my name is Anita B. Stroud, Stroud being German. So, I said, OK, I have to change — I need a name. And so, when I was in the hospital, before I came home from having Kianga, I picked out a name for myself, and I picked Nkenge out. I liked the way it sounded. And then, the meaning is "superior mind," but I chose it because I really liked the way it sounded. I didn't know — there were lots of Imanis out there, but not Nkenges.

ROSS: Have you ever met another Nkenge?

TOURÉ: I actually met a sister named Nkenge over — and where were we? We were at a conference. It wasn't like she was here. [It was in Africa.] Nkechi is the closest here, sister Nkechi Taifa. People confuse us all the time. They'll be talking to her about KPFW and they'll be talking to me about law stuff. I'm like, You mean Nkechi Taifa, and she'll be like, You mean Nkenge Touré. So that — and then Touré was, of course, my children's father, Patrice, who was John Wesley Stevens and then he changed his name and he became Patrice Touré. Hence Touré became our family last name. So that's how we got to Ifetayo Nkenge Touré. And so, my idea was then that OK, so if love excels all, and mind is something that can take you places or whatever, then maybe you'll be all right. I don't know, whatever.

ROSS: So tell me about your love life growing up.

54:10

TOURÉ: I thought you asked me about the Party's impact on me.

ROSS: I was, but you brought up Patrice. We can go on to the Party's impact on you, but I want to bring it back to the personal story.

TOURÉ: Well, the Party's impact on me is, you know, there are some of us that we call ourselves Panthers for Life, you know, we are Panthers for life, we're just Panthers. That's how we think and feel on the inside, you know. I do not believe that people, that the Party should have to make an apology for an ideology that included self-defense, because I feel that when you are a people who are pushed against the wall, often your tools and resources you have are limited, and that while you have your political dialogue going, while you have your community action going, your people coming together, that you also have to have a military capability, a battle capability.

I believe that, and I don't think that the Party should ever feel that it had to apologize for the genesis that brought it about, and in bringing it about, brought about the guns, which, if we remember was that, the idea was in California, was that the people had the right to bear arms. So that's how part of the whole thing started with the arms part of it, was trying to force California law –

ROSS: Are you different than militias, than modern-day militias?

TOURÉ: I think I'm very different. First of all, I'm not marching down the street with nothing. I'm not trying to intimidate anybody. But what I am saying is that if, as an oppressed people, we find ourselves in a position where part of our survival depends on our ability to fight back and defend ourselves, then we should be able to do that, and not be it something to apologize for. Because first of all, it's not the first thing you ever want to do. It's the last absolute thing. But it's good to know that sometimes. It was good sometimes when the ANC was negotiating with the [Frederik Willem] de Klerk regime for them to know that there was also the Spear of the Nation, you know, that augmented the ANC, that it was the Spear of the Nation.

And I don't think that — what do they say, something like politics is war without blood, or something, and war is politics with it, or something. Now that doesn't sound all that hopeful and all that good, and that's not my true feeling, that this is what politics and this is what war is. But I do believe that people get put into a position where if they have to defend themselves, they are somehow made to feel that they can't and they shouldn't, and there is something wrong with it, when you defend yourself. But yet, those who would bully you, it's OK for them to bully you in any way that they see fit, to trample the spirit out of you.

So I believe that people should be able to defend themselves, but I believe they should be trained and they should be educated on how to do that, if in fact they found themselves in a situation where they had to do it. Because Lord knows, these people that run by doing these gang-

banging drive-bys clearly have never been to a shooting range or any place. I mean, it's a horrible, horrible situation and an excellent reason why people should not have weapons. But I'm looking at it in terms of self-defense, you know, where you get into a situation where you don't — you're just backed up against the wall and you just don't have another choice.

I think that people feel uncomfortable to say things like "all power to the people," because it sounds so radical. It sounds like, what the heck are they talking about? But I think that's what it should be. It should be all power to the people. So, it's just things that I think about.

And from having been in the Party, I believe it was the Party that put me on a perspective in terms of capitalism, in terms of the economic order of this country, the social order of this country, to be able to understand, and that's why I don't fall for the okedoke. That's why I don't embrace the Democrats or Republicans, or, you know, our current system as it exists, or feel like sexism is OK and racism is, et cetera, et cetera, and if I don't feel like it's OK, then I just will accept it and not say anything anyway. I believe my nature as a person was always to be that and the Party instilled it more in me and helped me to be able to have a political context in which to deconstruct or analyze situations.

ROSS: OK. Therefore the macro. Now, to Nkenge in person. Tell me about sex and sexuality and getting married. It sounds like you met your husband in the Party.

59:35

TOURÉ: I did, I did. Yes, I did. I met my children's father in the Party.

ROSS: So what were your sexually formative experiences like?

TOURÉ: In the Party?

ROSS: Generally speaking.

TOURÉ: Oh, well —

ROSS: If you want to share.

TOURÉ: OK. I'm just going to be real brief on this. My sexual formative experiences were not all that great, because I was raped, and when I was raped I was a virgin, so that didn't put me off to a great start.

ROSS: How old were you?

TOURÉ: I was 16. To me, that made it even more devastating because it was, like, you're supposed to be "sweet 16," you know, so I was really messed up. It was like this dude I was going with and he had joined the service and he had been away for his basic training. He came home in his uniform. He was drunk, and I was babysitting, and I let him come in.

And I knew that my mother would've never approved of me having my boyfriend come over where I was babysitting somewhere. So, you know, that was a bad situation and I grieved that for a long time. But at any rate, that was how my formative situation started off.

Um, I met him in the Party. He had come home from Vietnam.

ROSS: Him?

TOURÉ: John Wesley Stevens had come home from Vietnam and come down to the Panther office to volunteer and to sign up to go out and sell papers. And, you know, he had his bullet around his neck, all the stuff we remember from what the guys from Vietnam looked — the dap, the five-minute handshake, the dap, the whole thing, you know, the beret, the bullet around his neck. Swept me off my feet. Really, he was just so fine, he was so fine. And so he just kind of swept me off my feet. He had the right politics. He had been disruptive, he had been a dissenter in Vietnam, you know, it's like, my kind of guy! So that's how that started out.

ROSS: How old were you when you all started going out, relating?

1:02:14

TOURÉ: Relating, because we weren't going out. Some got a chance to go out, out. I think I was 20. I was 20, yes, because Trina was born when I was 21, my first daughter, and Kianga was born when I was 25, my second daughter. They are four years apart. Now, in the Party, before Patrice, I mean, when I was in Baltimore where I started out, you know, I had a great love who was the coordinator of all of the breakfast programs in the state of Pennsylvania, wherever there were chapters, and his name was Montae Hearn, and he was so fine and so smooth and I was so, like, in awe of him, I was really in awe of him, and so I used to get to up to Philly sometimes and spend the weekend with my man. Um, let's see. Monty was probably about seven or eight years older than I was. He had been in the Party for quite a while when I joined the Party. OK, so he was like my first, really, in the Black Panther Party. I mean, and I related to a couple of other brothers in the Party, you know, over time, and then I met Patrice, John Wesley, and so I was just kind of — he was the one, you know, I guess.

ROSS: Who did Patrice name himself after?

TOURÉ: Patrice Lumumba, from the Congo. That's who he named himself after.

ROSS: And Sekou Touré.

TOURÉ: Right, right.

ROSS: You were talking about your relationship with —

TOURÉ:                    Yeah, I was just thinking about something, it was really funny.

END TAPE 2



## TAPE 3

ROSS: This is tape 3 of the Nkenge Touré interview. Nkenge, you were getting ready to tell me about your relationship with your husband.

TOURÉ: Oh, yes, which was that I met him in the Party, I was swept off my feet, you know, and we spent some time together and just started relating, as it were. And we, as a matter of fact, we had not been together that long when I got pregnant with Trina, with my Frelimo. Trina Frelimo, my youngest daughter [Trina Frelimo Njeri Stevens]. We had a little ceremony in Malcolm X Park.

What I really didn't realize about him until several years later was that he was an alcoholic. I mean, he drank, but I didn't realize that he was an alcoholic until — really by the time we — the Party moved to California, they went to California, most of the chapter, to work on the campaigns when Bobby [Seale] was running and Elaine [Brown] was running. Elaine was running for city council and Bobby was running for mayor, and they actually did quite well. But we decided to stay in D.C. and keep the newspapers here, make sure the Panther paper had a presence in D.C., and keep up the survival programs, particularly the health program, the people's free health service, and the breakfast program.

So we formed an organization called Save the People, and did that. And actually, what happened was that the year before the Party went out to California —

ROSS: What year was that?

TOURÉ: Seventy-two. I left the Party. I left the Party in '72, after, like, four years. I just needed to go, and I left and I went home to my mama's house with my 14-month-old daughter, and I enrolled in Antioch. That's when I got my GED, when I went back home.

ROSS: Did going back home mean you were leaving Patrice?

TOURÉ: He wasn't leaving the Party. No, I wasn't leaving him, I was leaving the Party, you know. We were still a couple. We were still together, but I left. And I was — for, I think it was, like, about eight months and then I came back, because everyone was going out to California, and as I said, the survival programs, the papers, all of that, was going to remain in D.C. We felt there was a strong need that there be a presence. So I came back. I came back to D.C. to do that, and we formed an organization, STP, Save the People. We got the bookstore down on 9<sup>th</sup> and H, the Education for Liberation Bookstore, and the office space upstairs we would let organizations who did not have offices and places to meet, hold meetings there at the store upstairs. I don't mean to — I'm just trying to catch my thought, what is next on this.

Oh, yes, so that was the time in which, because it wasn't under the same structure and we spent more time together, and it began to become

apparent to me that he had a drinking problem, which was very difficult to talk about [with him] because his position was that we don't have a problem, I have a problem. I would say, "We have a problem. We've got to work this through." "No," [he would say,] "we don't have a problem, *you* have a problem."

And that was kind of difficult and I tried to adjust to that, because he was still doing his work, his political work, still organizing, working with Imira Obadele, with the People's Republic of New Africa, which was the RNA then, Republic of New Africa. He was still doing that work, working on the survival programs and just organizing and doing stuff in the community.

So we tried to be a couple that was running an organization, being political, and being a family, you know, a husband, a wife, kids. Well, by the time — and alcohol progresses, so your disease progresses and your behavior progresses as well. So it took about — we were together for seven years, from the time of being in the Party to the actual time of no longer being in the Party and [Save the People] and ending our relationship, was seven years, and it was just simply that I just simply could not deal with the drinking anymore, the kind of little disappearing acts, just all of it.

And also, the issues that kind of go with — when I started working at the Rape Crisis Center, you know, so one person is working in a job that's not a system job, but it's a job, OK, and you, the male, are not, OK. So then another whole set of dynamics went with that, and it was just — it just took more energy than I could really deal with.

And so, there was an incident where he left my children, my daughter and her friend on the playground. He forgot them and went off in my car, that I had paid for but couldn't drive, because I couldn't drive, not because I wasn't allowed to drive. I did not know how to drive. And I was always being promised, Oh, I'm going to teach you. I'm going to teach you.

And so my daughter and her girlfriend were left on the playground in the winter, and he went off to his friends to get something to drink, and that was just it, you know. I can't justify this to myself, and what am I supposed to tell Ceecee's mother [Debbie] about why her child was left on the playground?

ROSS: OK. So, how did you transition from Save the People to doing feminist work?

7:35

TOURÉ: Well, you know, we had the bookstore and I had *Against Rape*, and there was a book prior to *Against Rape* that was on the topic of rape. And in that area of Northeast, there had been a couple of assaults surrounding the neighborhood where we lived, or where the bookstore was, and we'd had a couple of meetings where women could come out and talk about it.

ROSS: Who's the "we"?

- TOURÉ: We, meaning myself and a couple of other women were Save the People.
- ROSS: All black women?
- TOURÉ: Yes.
- ROSS: What year was this?
- TOURÉ: Seventy-four, late '73, maybe early '74. And as a result, I was on the radio one day, on WHUR, doing an interview and talking about rape and sexual assault, and some women at the Rape Crisis Center were listening to WHUR. Now that in itself is an intriguing mystery.
- ROSS: Why were these white women at the Rape Crisis Center listening to this black radio station at Howard University called WHUR?
- TOURÉ: Yes, it must have been because Michelle was there. So, anyway, yeah, because Michelle said she heard it, so they had WHUR on and they heard this interview, and they wanted to find — Oh, there's another black woman in D.C. talking about rape. We must find her. And I got a call from, I believe it was Deb Freidman at the bookstore, and asking me — introducing herself, she was from the Rape Crisis Center, and asking if I would meet and talk with them about — and I went and I admit, I was curious. I mean, the Rape Crisis Center. I was curious. I went. We talked. I met Michelle. Michelle asked me to go to American University with her and do a presentation. And that, sort of, was the genesis of the relationship with the D.C. Rape Crisis Center.
- ROSS: So describe to me who Michelle Hudson was. 9:55
- TOURÉ: Michelle Hudson was the community education coordinator. She was black, she was the second — the Rape Crisis Center started in 1972 and so, we are now up to '74, so it's only been, like, two years. It's very young. Nancy McDonald is the general administrator — because we try not to be hierarchical, so we have don't have an executive director, no executive director at that point in time — the general administrator, who generally administrates. OK, so we had a general administrator, and the community education coordinator. And because Nancy, had — I'm trying — there was a reason, OK, the point was that the community education coordinator made more than the general administrator, because they based it around need and not just around title or hierarchy. So it was kind of collective sense of in the beginning, it was very interesting. This little tiny, two-room, upstairs, across from a junior high school, Lincoln Junior High School, up on 16<sup>th</sup> and Irvin Street. They were in a house across the street, upstairs.
- So that is how — that is who Michelle was. She was the community education coordinator. She did a lot of the work of creating the first materials that were used for education and her job was to go out in the

D.C. public schools and do presentations on rape and prevention, and that is what she did.

ROSS: Did she go on to become the director?

TOURÉ: No. She did not. Michelle actually left the Rape Crisis Center and she went to My Sister's Place and became the director at My Sister's Place, which was a shelter for battered women and their children. She's also Kianga's godmother. And from My Sister's Place she moved into social service work in education, working first with social services and then in the D.C. public school system. Always a servant.

ROSS: Oh, Michelle. Is she still around?

TOURÉ: Yes. Her son, who she adopted some years ago, because she thought her biological clock was ticking away, so she adopted a son.

ROSS: So when did you start formally working at the Rape Crisis Center, and in what capacity?

TOURÉ: I started formally working at the Rape Crisis Center, I believe it was something like October of 1974, because Kianga was born in March of '75, yeah, so it must have been — make sure I don't have my child's dates wrong — yeah, I think it was October of 1974 that I began working at the Rape Crisis Center. And at first, I was just sort of doing all kinds of things, you know, doing a little hotline stuff, a little community education stuff. It wasn't all — and really, I think they were sort of preparing me for Nancy's job, the general administrator, because she was going to leave, and after she left, I became general administrator.

ROSS: OK. What was going on in your thinking about black women and the women's movement at the time?

TOURÉ: Oh, child, a lot of things. First of all, I mean, I was very passionate about the issue of rape and sexual assault and women being helped. I was very disturbed by what seemed to me to be the lack of a presence of black women and women of color in the movement. But certainly many of our clients were black women. So what was going on in my mind was one, how to serve women and two, how to get more women of color involved in the Rape Crisis Center and get the Rape Crisis Center more connected with the community, beyond what it was. It was also, initially, in the beginning, it was a learning time for me, you know, to learn exactly what is feminism. You know, how do people define feminism? What is the scope of feminism under that definition?

Learning more about pornography, because I'd never really thought about pornography — you know, nasty men read pornography at night when nobody's looking, or something. I mean, in terms of thinking of it as an industry that disempowered women or, you know, devalued or

objectified, all of that. Those were not really words in my vocabulary or concepts, you know.

So my first months at the Rape Crisis Center, first year, was a learning process for me, too. Learning more about feminist thinking and what the issues and the politics of it was. And always trying to see how it fit and integrated in my community, because I certainly saw the urge to try to make people split and choose. If you're black, you can't be a feminist. If you're a feminist, you're not black. If you're for the women's struggle, then you can't be for the people's struggle. If you're for the people's struggle, then how can you isolate out just the women. All that craziness, you know, just trying to navigate my way through it, figure out what the heck was going on.

ROSS: Name some of the black feminists who may have influenced your thinking, you may have encountered in the mid-70s.

16:42

TOURÉ: Oh. I mean, certainly people who I was reading, that came more toward, I guess — I'm trying to think. When did I first read something from bell hooks and something from Audre Lorde? I don't think that I knew a lot of black women, because I hadn't really — in the rape crisis movement at that time, hadn't really come across, you know, hardly any other black women. I mean, I knew about New York Women Against Rape and so I knew some of them had to be something, somebody had to be black or Puerto Rican or something like that. But I didn't really know a whole lot about who the women were. Of course, I mean, I heard of like the star feminists at the time, you know, Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan and, um, Bella Abzug and Flo Kennedy, you know, I'd heard of, but I didn't really know a lot about that.

ROSS: So at the time, we're talking about '74, '75, '76, what was the Rape Crisis Center doing vis-à-vis black women in terms of outreach to or work with or —

TOURÉ: Talking about it. Even though they always made a concerted effort to bring black women onto the staff, they really felt that going into the schools or education should be a black woman, because that's mainly who was going to be in those schools, that that was in the staff, there should be black women. There was really a problem recruiting. There seemed to be a problem to recruit black people onto the board of directors, you know, who came or who actually stayed. So for the most part, most of the time, for a really long time, the board was always — basically, it was white, as was, now, in '76, when we went with CETA and VISTA, you know, and CETA was the concentrated employment program [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act], so that brought us quite a few women of color, and then VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America, that brought us — so that was the time when we had the largest women-of-color staff. We had Latino women, because we wanted to do work in Addams, which was a predominantly Latino community, to assess the attitudes about rape and what kind of services

and what people did there, and the same in the black community. So, we had, like, three or four Latino sisters and about six black women that came on specifically through CETA and VISTA.

I think the main way that the Rape Crisis Center at the time was reaching the black community was through the services provided for clients. They were just always aware that they were very lacking and very short in terms of the relationships and the networks et cetera to be a crisis center in the District of Columbia.

ROSS: Well, you're probably one of the few women that we'll interview for this oral history project who could probably tell the story and remember the story of how the Rape Crisis Center was founded, even though you were not there in those early years, but I'm sure you've had to tell it a few times.

TOURÉ: Oh, I've had to tell it a few times.

ROSS: So maybe we could capture it for the record now?

TOURÉ: OK. As I recall, there was, in 1970 or '71, there was this big women's speak-out in New York, where all these women came and they talked about feminism and sexism and chauvinism and all of those kinds of things. And were kind of assessing, I guess, in a way, assessing the women's movement and identified violence against women as a really big issue, you know, not just ERA, for the equal pay thing, or the right to have an abortion, but violence against women, and out of that, the women who participated in that session, a couple of them came from D.C., and so they decided that they were going to start a rape hotline.

ROSS: Do you remember their names?

TOURÉ: They started the rape hotline in Jackie McMillen's apartment on 17<sup>th</sup> & Q Street Northwest, here in the District of Columbia, down in Dupont Circle, with this mustard-yellow answering machine.

ROSS: Who was the other woman?

TOURÉ: Took training. There was Lois Yankowski, Jackie McMillen, Deb Freedman. She came fairly early on, I believe. Val Jones, who worked with the Women's Legal Defense Fund, very instrumental in getting the first My Sister's Place started and all of that.

It was a group of women like that, trained themselves to be able to work on a hotline and take the calls and they developed a very strong political analysis about rape and its relationship to power. All the things that everyone criticized women for having as part of an analysis of violence against women — who now, the mainstream themselves, embrace a large part of that ideology or that perspective, that politic, or that analysis, however you want to say it, about that, that they didn't do before, Post Traumatic Stress [Disorder], you know, rape trauma

syndrome, just any number of things that the women were saying in '72, '73, '74 went on for so long, that the more traditional society, law enforcement, medical, social, was rejecting all of that, have now had to come around and embrace it. And not just embrace it, but kind of like take it over and claim it, like this was their thinking, their theory, all along and all the time, which was just so outrageous, such revisionist history.

In that house, in that apartment on Q Street, and it stayed there in Jackie's apartment for some time. And from Jackie's apartment, the first place it went was to that small, two-room across the street from Lincoln Junior High School on 16<sup>th</sup> and Irvin Street.

ROSS: OK. There were some feminist magazines, and wasn't there a group called the D.C. Area Feminists Alliance?

TOURÉ: FAAR.

ROSS: Feminist [Alliance] Against Rape. Tell me about FAAR and –

25:16

TOURÉ: Well, FAAR was — some of the women in FAAR were from the Rape Crisis Center who had left the Rape Crisis Center, wanted to do something else or do some things differently, and so there were people who were interested in publishing, and they got interested because there was also a quarterly scholarly magazine called *Quest*. *Quest* preceded FAAR, you know, because it was more scholarly, a quarterly and all that. So you had women who worked on *Quest* who were interested in putting some focus around rape and so forth, and you had women who had been at the Rape Crisis Center who had an interest in putting out written materials and educating in that way, so they got *FAAR* magazine.

The thing I'm trying to remember, because it had two incarnations, as FAAR and as *Aegis* magazine. And actually, what I think is that they became FAAR the collective. The magazine was *Aegis* magazine, and it carried articles and information on sexual assault and theory around sexual assault, you know, all kinds of tips, this, that, the other, different stuff, stories, articles that had to do with empowering women and all of that. Later, *Aegis* joined with — oh, yes, and of course, dealing with pornography as well. Later, *Aegis* joined with domestic violence and half the magazine would deal with issues related to sexual assault, pornography, and the other half would deal with issues dealing with battering and domestic violence.

ROSS: Did you get the sense that in the early years, the people at the Rape Crisis Center worked on other forms of violence that women experienced, or was it just gender-based violence?

TOURÉ: It was gender-based violence. However, definitely gender based, although the Center did recognize that it was possible for a man to be raped, it was obviously not the primary focus, but there was certainly

the acknowledgment that men could be sexually assaulted. You had individuals who worked at the center who may have had involvement and ties into other movements around other issues, but the Crisis Center was strictly dealing with rape and had its hands full to deal with that, because in '72 and '75, I mean, the police, everybody, I mean, it was a battle. You know, if we — it still continues to be a struggle, you know, but it was a battle. It was a war, you know, in terms of they didn't want you to have companions. I mean, all rape crisis centers, now you can have a companion with the woman at the hospital that's from the center. So, Oh, no, you couldn't do that. They didn't want you there because you impeded the investigation by being there. So then it was, like, the only way you could be there was if the woman requested that you be there. I mean, it was all these things, you know. Women asked for it. It was just horrendous.

So they weren't just dealing — they were not really making connections to anything else. They were dealing with the dynamics of gender, you know, and as time moves forward, began to — around different issues, make connections, broaden out —

ROSS: OK. Now, you're saying that your working at the Rape Crisis Center affected your marriage. In what way did your consciousness that you developed at the Center cause you to re-look at your marriage?

29:27

TOURÉ: It wasn't working at the Rape Crisis Center that caused me to — I didn't need Rape Crisis Center. I mean, in all honesty, I didn't need the Rape Crisis Center to help me with that at all. When I was saying, working, I meant working in terms of the finances of it. You know, where if the man doesn't have a regular job or steady job and you do even just part-time, full-time, whatever it is, the dynamics that that creates. No, it wasn't a consciousness from the Rape Crisis Center. It was just the consciousness of, you got to go, because somebody's going to get hurt, OK. And so, I ain't fit for it to be me, so, and you're not leaving my child no place else, so you got to go.

ROSS: So your marriage to Patrice broke up — what year again?

TOURÉ: In actuality, in 1979. We decided that we would finish out that Kwaanza and that was going to be it.

ROSS: OK. So we haven't gotten to '79 yet. So, how did you get into housing work?

TOURÉ: Well, housing work. I first got into the housing work while I was at the Crisis Center. I mean, I had done a little stuff before, but that was just around in the neighborhood and that just had to do with people maybe knowing what their rights were or, you know, helping somebody who was dealing with a slum lord, and that was to save the people. There was no movement and there was no focus on housing or anything like that. But when I was at the Center, I met this woman named Emma



D'Angelo, Puerto Rican sister named Emma D'Angelo, who was working at the Center, and she was doing housing work. She was real interested in doing housing work. And I had some, you know, but we had been working on that survey in neighborhoods, like the safety of neighborhoods, the attitudes about it, so I had come to be able to see more safety issues around housing and stuff like that.

But Ami had asked me to go to a — I think she asked me to go to a tenant meeting with her, yeah. Because also, two other women, Maureen and BJ, were working on housing at the Center, on the neighborhood stuff around housing, and so from that, they had somehow, they had also gotten into using that as a way for the people to help organize tenants, just safety issues so they don't get raped and stuff like that.

ROSS: Do you remember Maureen's or BJ's last names?

TOURÉ: Uh, Maureen's last name — it's not Jones. I can't remember. I want to say Sullivan but I don't think that's right, that's some actresses' name. I can't remember Maureen's last name. [Maureen Gray]. I see her face so clearly, her eyeglasses and everything. And JB with her dark-skinned complexion, you know, but I can't remember either one of their last names. But they were also working on housing.

So anyway, Ami asked me to go to this meeting with her, so I went to this meeting with her, and she was doing the thing about tenant rights and how to organize, and I was just, like, you know, it was very interesting to me, and it just seemed like a logical thing because, you know, I was also at a time where I hadn't quite learned about limitations, so everything that was an injustice, I took it to heart. Everything that was an injustice, I took it to heart. You know, yeah, we could fight against this, we could fight against that, we could fight against that, you know. We'll fight against all of them.

So people not having decent housing, that was something in our Ten-Point Platform and Program for the Black Panther Party. It didn't seem like a real stretch to deal with the idea that people deserve decent housing and to have rent control, so rents — people could stay here. So, that's kind of how I first got to that.

Now how I got from that part to when I met you all City Wide Housing Coalition people and stuff, I'm not — I'd have to think about that a little bit more. I'm not quite sure, but I certainly remember City Wide Housing, and being aware of all the work to help people to develop cooperative housing and to deal with the rent control. And I became more aware of all that stuff after I went to the meeting with Ami, because then I was kind of, like, made aware. My consciousness was raised around that issue and so I began to, you know, get information about it, and find out more about it.

ROSS: Well, not to jog your memory, but I recall my first meeting with you was standing outside — and like I said, on 15<sup>th</sup> and what was that street?

I've forgotten, where that church was, where City Wide used to have its meetings, and I remember your asking –

TOURÉ: By Columbia Road, like 15<sup>th</sup> and Columbia. The church where the sister was the minister? The black woman who was the minister? The church where we had the Third World Women?

ROSS: No. It was further up the street, near 15<sup>th</sup> and U.

TOURÉ: Down.

ROSS: Further down, further towards downtown.

TOURÉ: Not All Souls?

ROSS: No, of course, I would remember All Souls. It was, oh, it was a denomination like Lutheran or Episcopalian, or –

TOURÉ: Oh, OK, OK, like Augustan or something.

ROSS: St. Augustine.

TOURÉ: Exactly.

ROSS: That's exactly it. I would have never pulled that name out of the hat, but I just remember meeting this very compelling woman –

TOURÉ: That was me, OK.

ROSS: – about '78 or so, talking about the D.C. Rape Crisis Center.

TOURÉ: Yeah.

ROSS: But we'd met at a housing meeting.

TOURÉ: OK.

ROSS: I'm sorry, this is not my story, it's yours.

TOURÉ: But that's very helpful. That's very, very helpful, because I know it was definitely, it was pre- the Rape Crisis Center, but it was right after the Rape Crisis Center that, when you came to the Rape Crisis Center, right around that time, that you proposed me for the Study Group.

ROSS: Right. So it's all kind of — our stories are rather interconnected from then on, but, I'd be fascinated to hear the pre-1978 story of Nkenge. In terms of, well, you stayed at the Rape Crisis Center for 13 years until 1988. In that time you had a variety of jobs. Tell me about some of the

more significant things that you did at the Rape Crisis Center. You certainly pioneered quite a bit.

TOURÉ: I did do a lot of things at the Rape Crisis Center, speaking with all humility and truth. Once I came back, I became the director for community education. That's the job that I held. That's the position that I held until I left. I brought Anti-Rape Week into the Rape Crisis Center, something I'm really proud of, because it exists today under a different name, but –

ROSS: What was Anti-Rape Week?

TOURÉ: Anti-Rape Week was a massive education week where there were all kinds of workshops, seminars, film showings organized, and we advertised and people would come out to events. So it was to build education to raise prevention awareness, and to recruit people into an awareness of, and hopefully support for, the Crisis Center and to take a look at and become advocates for the issue of sexual assault, rape. So we did Anti-Rape Week, and then the women who were a part of FAAR, Feminists Against Pornography, if that was the right name, organized. The Rape Crisis Center had actually worked and organized the first Take Back the Night march in D.C., which I think was in 1978. I think it was in 1978. And then, the following year, I organized Anti-Rape Week. I don't think we had a march that year.

Then the following year is like when Feminists Against Pornography picked up and decided that that was going to be one of their major things that they would do every year was organize a Take Back The Night march and the Crisis Center would work with them, so we coordinated so that the Take Back the Night march became a part of Anti-Rape Week, either the beginning or the end, you know, a major activity. [As a member of Feminists Against Pornography, Marty Langlen, a white woman, was central to this organizing effort. She also became a member of the Rape Crisis Center board of directors. Another woman with Feminists Against Pornography who did a lot of work was Clarisse.]

And Anti-Rape Week evolved into Rape Awareness Week, and then as the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault took up rape awareness, and ultimately had Rape Awareness Month, which the rape crisis centers across the country pretty much observed and organized for that in their communities.

The hassle-free zone. There was a lot of street harassment going on in D.C. There was a sister named Linda Leaks, not was, she is, who was in school at the time and she was making a film on street harassment, and she was so impassioned about it –

ROSS: She is a black woman.

40:22

TOURÉ: Linda Leaks is a black woman who was making a film on sexual harass[ment] — street harassment, and Linda was so impassioned about

it that she also created a t-shirt to stop violence against women, you know, verbal abuse of women. Well, at the time that she was doing that, dealing with the street harassment and kind of strategizing around how to combat it and how to respond to it, white women were also doing some organizing and they had come to the idea that they wanted to make Dupont Circle — in D.C., Dupont Circle was, is an area that is sort of a hub area for the commercial district downtown and people come there and they eat lunch and walk through, and then, it's part of the social life at night. So there's a lot going on in Dupont Circle and around Dupont Circle. So you can get harassed walking through there or sitting in there and trying to eat your lunch, and all of that. So a group of white women had decided they wanted to be able to not be hassled in Dupont Circle, so they wanted that to be, you know —

My idea was that they could not take Dupont Circle and single out Dupont Circle as a place not to be harassed, that if we were going to try to have a campaign, we needed to wage a campaign to make D.C. a hassle-free zone. So that you would have the right, wherever you were, not to be “Hey, baby, hey, mama,” all of that kind of nonsense — “What's your sign? What's your name?” — all of that, that you wouldn't have to deal with it.

So, we [joined forces and] entered on a real struggle to make D.C. a hassle-free zone. We met with the police, you know, because we wanted to have penalties. We wanted to have it written in law somewhere, you know, penalties around this whole thing. And we worked on it for about two years, but we just couldn't really make it happen. It was too big. But in the process, there was a lot of education.

We used to have what were called speak-outs, and we'd just be different places, at a Metro stop on a Friday, in Dupont Circle on a Wednesday, maybe down at the Federal Triangle on a Monday, Easter Market, various places, to do rallies, where people would speak out about street harassment, sexual harassment on the streets, and we would make the interconnections between street harassment and pornography and rape, you know. And we did a lot of consciousness-raising and a lot of great organizing as a result of that in those two years that we worked on that.

Also, doing the organizing of the Take Back the Night marches and the Anti-Rape Weeks that we did for a number of years, that is one of the ways that I was able to bring a lot of women of color into the Rape Crisis Center, that came to work and organize around these different issues for Anti-Rape Week. More women of color than the Rape Crisis Center had ever seen collectively in all the years prior to that. Women came in and it was a very exciting process. They volunteered to be on the hotlines and as a result — and that was all, that was really good stuff.

ROSS:

Describe, if you don't mind me backing up just a little bit, what was going on that caused the 1980 conference to happen, or am I going too far?

44:25

TOURÉ: No, no. You're speaking about the first conference on Third World Women and Violence. It came about because there was that need to pull women of color together, to acknowledge that violence existed in our communities, to talk about the forms that it took, the kinds of responses that we got to it, the attitudes that existed there, and what needed to be done. It also came about because women of color who were doing this work desperately needed to know each other. We needed to network. We needed to build and consolidate a network.

And so, though that conference brought about 80 women, you know, in total, however, they came from a lot of different places, and we were able to find out about, like Fatima Cortez, with that little rape crisis center up there in New Bedford or someplace in Massachusetts. We had the New York Women Against Rape come down, that's when we had the great honor to meet and develop our first relationship with Sandra Comacho, Cherríe Moraga, and those women from New York. The women from Boston came, and so we first met — not Barbara — I'm trying to remember — Barbara Bullette was there. It was the woman who was the therapist, Ruth something [Ruth Hall]. But a few women came from Boston. We all — that was the start of the building and continuation of a network. Those were the first steps towards that. So that was really, that was really a great, a great conference. And it was really exciting. It was part of — we made it a part of Anti-Rape Week and it was great, and it was where we got — I believe it's where we got our famous logo.

ROSS: Tell me about that logo.

TOURÉ: Our famous logo which represented — the Rape Crisis Center had this beautiful logo that ironically, it was done for us by a brother named Malik Edwards, who used to be one of the artists for the Black Panther Party, who drew the pictures for the *Panther Speaks* newspaper, and we asked Malik if he would develop — wait, let me back up for one second. I'm running two thoughts together. I'm running this thought — no, I know what it is. The Shanti Dolls. I was getting ready to run it in with ICAW [International Council of African Women] and the Dolls that Beverly did for us. OK. Put that on the side.

Malik, who had been in the Black Panther Party, we asked him if he would develop a logo for us for our conference, the Third World Women and Violence Conference, and he drew for us — he came back with four fertility dolls, one looking Asian, one African born in America, one First Nation, and one Latina, and it was the details on the fertility dolls that determined the ethnicity of each of them. And so these four together represented women of color, and made an extremely powerful statement. So it became the logo for the Third World Women and Violence conference.

And then our very next edition of the Rape Crisis Center publication that dealt with myths and facts about rape, we used that logo on it. And it was just — what can I say? It was a success. Anyone whoever looked at it loved it. Of course, there did come a time, somewhere down the

road, where there was conflict when someone said, “There’s no white doll, you know, there’s only four, there should be five dolls.” Why? “There’s no white woman.” Well, the logo didn’t change. It didn’t expand, you know, under the creator’s vision. That was his vision of what we had asked him to do for that conference, so that was that.

So that is how the Third World Women and Violence — it’s called the First National, because it actually was the First National Conference on Third World Women and Violence, and we were honored to be the people to put out the call for that. [Deirdre Wright, who worked at the Rape Crisis Center at the time, was conference coordinator.]

ROSS: I seem to, with my slippery memory, I remembered more people there than 80 people, so I’m glad your memory is probably better than mine. But it does indicate that we were very embryonic at the time and yet the relationships formed at that conference seemed to have been sustained over the years.

49:42

TOURÉ: Indeed.

ROSS: Do you remember any audio or video recording of that conference that took place?

TOURÉ: I honestly do not, because — now I am more than certain that we audioed some sessions. The thing is, who in the world, where in the world would the tapes be? I have absolutely no idea. I’m not sure if we videoed it, because we had hardly no money, but if there was any videoing done, I believe that I have an idea of who would’ve been the person to do it for us: a sister by the name of Faye Hebert, who worked in the video department at Howard University and still does, and did a number of things for us all the time. So I would think that she might be our point of reference.

ROSS: Well, we’ll certainly have to contact Faye. Again, this is part of where the story intertwines, but I remember meeting with June Zeitlin, who was then head of the Office of Domestic Violence for HEW and getting a few thousand dollars from her.

TOURÉ: Papers.

ROSS: To write papers from the proceedings of the conference and some of those papers were published in *Aegis*, *FAAR*.

TOURÉ: And with them, too.

ROSS: And then HEW got a couple of them and what have you.

TOURÉ: I actually still have two of those papers. Well, the originals.

ROSS: OK. So, why did you leave the Rape Crisis Center?

TOURÉ: I left the Rape Crisis Center in August of 1988. To say burnt out is not adequate. It does not begin to describe — I like to say I was nuked. I was nuked. I just could not — it had been 13 years, and the last five years of that time had really been — the last four years of it had really been a lot of battling.

A lot of things had changed in the Crisis Center, in the women's movement, in the movement against violence against women. As organizations were striving for the dollars, for the funds, then out came the cry of professionalism. We must be professional. So the whole look and feel of the various centers and shelters began to change. The collective — the idea of collective running and sharing of responsibilities and those sorts of things, were falling to the side, that seeming need to conform without seeing that at the time, the more we conform, the more we were required to conform, and the more we conformed, the more we were required to conform.

And so, you had situations in some places where people who had previously been the executive directors were asked to step down because they were lesbian, they were too radical, they didn't fit the image for a professional. The boards of directors became more professional, and please understand me, there's nothing wrong with being [professional] organizers. It's a matter of what you define professionalism as being.

When it becomes such that you are not just dealing with policy, but you are taking the policy in a direction that's basically the opposite of where it has been, or when you begin to micromanage staff, you begin to have problems. You have a lot of problems.

ROSS: Would you define as being more or less feminist, the professionalism?

TOURÉ: Less feminist. To me, less feminist.

ROSS: Why? What would you define that?

TOURÉ: I would say, because it became less political and more social-service oriented. You know, provide the services. And of course, there's got to be services. I mean, what's the — you need a hotline. You need companions to go to the clinic or the hospital and be able to be there. You need the hospital to agree to allow you have a room there in the hospital where you all can function out of.

But when, OK, during that time when more people and more ideas came into the Center -- you had asked the question earlier about making connections with other issues and other movements. That was a period of blossoming, when all that was the kind of — those kinds of things were going on very strongly, like between '80 and '85, '86 [connections between community organizing, the involvement and leadership of women of color, links with other groups and issues]. But around '85 and '86, the connections begin to be disconnected. Stay in your area, you know, this is rape, you know, this is to provide education for the

children, talk to people about incest, have incest-survivor groups, have rape-support groups. What does that have to do with the rape of women in Haiti? We're in Washington, D.C. We're in the United States. What does that have to do with the worker rights of women employees who clean buildings?

I mean, connections were no longer made. They were not being encouraged. In fact, they were basically discouraged. They may not have been discouraged totally by saying, like, we're just not dealing with that. But if it doesn't get dealt with, if no one wants to talk about it, no one wants to plan around it, no one supports it, it's not getting dealt with. The connections are not getting made. And that was very much happening, that kind of moving away from making the interconnections.

We are a service-oriented organization. We do education in the schools and we provide counseling. That's what we do, you know. And we go out and speak at the functions in the community, and raise the consciousness at other institutions, and when I'm saying raise the consciousness, what I actually mean is being made aware of the issues around sexual assault and how to deal with them. And that was pretty much becoming it.

So, between board micro-management, not continuing to forge out and make those connections, losing many of the women of color because the issues that would keep the connections were not there, so we were coming to a place of ideological differences and being totally burnt out, because I worked like a Mississippi slave in a cotton field in those years when I worked at the Rape Crisis Center, that I served my community. I was just nuked. I just couldn't — it was time for me to go.

ROSS:

What was happening nationally on the scene around women of color and violence against women during this time?

58:42

TOURÉ:

Well, there were some exciting things, because I always looked at it that there was the overall women's movement and within the overall women's movement, there was the women-of-color movement, because over time, many of the women of color had found ways to network and get to know each other and meet each other and do things.

One of the things that we were involved in before we were even really very much involved in NCASA [National Committee Against Sexual Assault] was NCADV, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, which was much more radical in its thinking and its approach than was the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault. And within NCADV, they had those women of color caucuses, which was so very strong.

All of the women, they had the black caucus, the Latina, the Asian, the First Nation, they had all of the — women of color had caucuses. Well, you know, NCADV was a national organization, so most of the shelters of the country were members of it, and you could see that there were many women of color working in all these shelters, and in crisis centers, which was like something that people just didn't seem to know and didn't seem to get, that there was all this strength here, and



[NCADV], they produced a newsletter, as well as doing a women's newsletter. Some of the shelters did their newsletters, and the women-of-color caucus had a newsletter, and it was very powerful.

And what I always appreciated about them was how they could meet as individual groupings and then come back together strong as a women-of-color caucus. So women of color were involved in the shelters, in the rape crisis centers, in the health movement — because they were also working in the health centers, working with women's health care — there were a number of cases going on from the 70s into the early 80s that raised a lot of consciousness about violence against women, and those cases were raised and that consciousness was raised through women of color.

You had Inez Garcia, who was the Latino woman who was imprisoned for killing a man who was trying to assault her. You had Yvonne Wanrow, who was a Native American sister who, her batterer — she killed her batterer. You had Joanne Little. You had Dessie Woods, who was a case out of the South of a white insurance salesman who had picked her up to give her a ride who raped her and she killed him. These cases —

ROSS: And Joanne Little killed a prison guard, did she not?

TOURÉ: No, I said Dessie Woods.

ROSS: But I'm saying — Joanne's case.

TOURÉ: Yes, yes, who tried to rape her when she was in prison, yes. So these four cases — Dessie Woods, Joanne Little, Inez Garcia, Yvonne Wanrow, were cases that raised national attention and brought out a lot of the contradictions, the conflict, you know, was played out and so, it was a very educational process for people who were paying attention. And it was significant that these cases, which did so much to further the movement, because it certainly increased ten-fold the dialogue around self-defense, you know, and the right of a woman to self-defense, all of these things. Women of color cases, bringing this to the attention of the nation and of the movement.

ROSS: OK. We're going to end this tape here. When we come back, I'm going to take you back a little bit, because I also recalled that you were pushing a gender analysis within the black nationalist movement as well. So it wasn't only pushing race and racism within a feminist construct, but the other side of that coin I want to ask you about.

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TOURÉ: Oh, yeah.

ROSS: And then ask you about what you did after the Rape Crisis Center, and we'll make that our last tape of tonight. Is that OK?

TOURÉ: Yes.

END TAPE 3

## TAPE 4

ROSS: This is tape 4 of the Nkenge Touré interview, December 4, 2004, Washington, D.C. Nkenge, when we left, you had talked about your career at the Rape Crisis Center but something else was also going on. Not where you're trying to move discussions of race and racism into a feminist construct, like the Rape Crisis Center, but you were also trying to move issues of gender into your black nationalist activities that you had continued while you were at the Rape Crisis Center. Am I right?

TOURÉ: Yes.

ROSS: So, tell me about those, and that work.

TOURÉ: Well, some of that work was [with] the [National] Black United Front [NBUF], which was an organization which was, according to its name, a black united front, a front made up of black organizations working in their communities around the country on social justice issues and issues of police brutality, housing, et cetera. Different issues depending on, also, where the particular chapters of NBUF, as we called it, were located. And NBUF, being rather nationalist in its leaning and perspective, was also very sexist in its leanings and perspectives.

ROSS: Could you stop and define black nationalist as you were using it?

1:52

TOURÉ: I'm using it as a sense of people who felt that there needed to be a more independent agenda of black people in this country, that everyone was not meant to just live in every city where the particular circumstances relevant to, or context of which they all came out of, the history that led to where people who are in their communities and why the kinds of things that were happening were happening, and all that — that these people felt that in many ways, people needed to be more independent in terms of businesses, in terms of schools, education, and for some even in terms of where they lived and how they lived. People who embraced the idea of reparations, who embraced culture, your culture, your heritage, your language as it manifested in your clothing, your jewelry, and other kinds of identification as ways that helped to keep you grounded and give you pride. And people who were most assuredly anti-establishment, because they felt that the establishment was at the root cause of the condition that they found themselves in. So black nationalist was kind of the term that I use.

And so there was certainly a good deal of sexism as well in the hierarchical structure and how members were treated. And there was a struggle within the Black United Front to have the United Front divided up more into sections rather than committees. And so, you know, you had the stuff on housing, you had sections, a section on police brutality. So women wanted a women's section to address the issues that women were experiencing inside [and outside] of the National Black United

4:18

Front, and to address some of the issues that women were being confronted with in communities that they lived in.

ROSS: What year was the NBUF founded?

TOURÉ: I believe that NBUF was founded — in D.C., we came to NBUF in, like, 1980 or '81. So I'm pretty sure it was 1980 that NBUF was founded, and we had the conference at Howard University, which is where I met a lot of people who were good people, interesting people.

One of the reasons that I made a conscious choice to go ahead and deal with the Black United Front was because what I had found, was that in the time I had worked at the Rape Crisis Center, I had really developed some negative feelings about men, and I found it kind of coloring my attitudes, you know, because I had so much rape and so much pornography and domestic violence, and harassment, you know. It was, like, put them all in a plane and send them somewhere by themselves, you know.

And of course, it's like, OK, you know, your brother's going up too, your nephews are going, they all are going. It's, like, OK, send somebody else's father and husbands and OK, so I need to be able to be more consciously connected with men, with the other half of the planet, and engaged in how you work things out, because the solution is not for them all going to another planet, and I'm feeling pretty tired when I'm saying, just send them all to another planet, because I'm just tired.

So as this line from one of the first shows when *Living Single*, when Queen Latifah's show first started, and they were talking about what would life be without men, which of course was raised by Regine, and Queen Latifah's reply was something like "a planet full of fat, happy women." So it's like, OK, so I made a conscious choice to make sure that I reconnected and in that way, I could do my broader social work within the community and I could stay connected with the whole community, and I knew that that meant that we'd have to engage in struggle around the whole thing of sexism. And so, those kinds of struggles were going on.

And the women in NBUF did get a women's section, and it was a lot of struggle to get it. As you may recall, there was a lot of struggle to get that, and a lot of guys, brothers, men feeling threatened for no reason. A very interesting thing in terms of — which really highlights some of the struggle around the issues of sexism — was the question of the participation of NBUF in the Decade for Women Conference.

It was just so unbelievable, some attitudes that it was a waste of time to go there. Why are you going there? It's just a whole bunch of women from all over the world just to come to talk about whatever they come to talk about. Come to talk about nothing. All the feminists, these feminists when they come, it's just all about, you know, taking the man down. I mean, there was just all these kinds of attitudes about whether NBUF would participate, and the women of NBUF and what would be the role of women in NBUF, you know.

And there were a few really prominent women in the Chicago area who were speaking at one of our conferences, you know, that really kind of held that opinion that this was a more feminist thing than anything else, and they weren't really clear if it was worth our effort, or the energy of women from NBUF to be a part of this. And then they all found out that the great and honorable Queen Mother Moore was going to Kenya, to Nairobi, Kenya, for the World Decade of Women Conference, and for those who are in that community, in that culture, the black nationalists, pan-Africanist community, know that Queen Mother Moore, Audrey Moore, had been a fighter since her teens, and she was well on her way to her eighties then. From her teens, she knew Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois. I mean, she walked with the greats, as they say, stomping with the big dogs, you know, always committed to the empowerment and the progress of black people, the furtherance of pan-Africanism around the world. And she felt that this was important, and it really threw a lot of people — it worked for us, it was very helpful for us, but it really threw a lot of people.

That was one example of just the whole thing around, How are people going to get there? How are they going to pay? How important is it? All the dynamics of all of that to me was one of the things that if you could look at and see sexism, and you could see lack of understanding of these issues and how these issues connect, the struggle to have a woman section was indicative of that.

Within other, just in the community in general, if I was working with people maybe around issues, something that had to do maybe with, if it had to do with housing, if it had to do with neighborhood safety, whatever it was, however it was that something came up dealing with women, it always kind of came up with the D.C. Rape Crisis Center. That's the feminists. That's that women's movement. What are you for, you know, are you for the black movement? Are you for the women's movement? Are you for the people or are you for the women? I mean, all those kinds of things that you'd be forced --

10:22

And there was this case that came up, and for the love of God, I may be blocking, because it was so stressful, but I may be blocking it not because I just haven't thought about it in a long time — there was one of the churches, like United Church. I'm just going to leave it at that, because it might not be right and I don't want to tell somebody's church out there and be wrong. But here in D.C., one of the larger churches and the minister was accused of sexual harassment. And there were four women, and they were really, really upset and traumatized. And they were directed to, not just the Rape Crisis Center, they were directed to me, to work with them and support them and sit in on some of their meetings and so forth and so on.

And this guy was actually charged, you know, with sexual harassment. And in the church, he ultimately, even though it was kind of close, but he ultimately won. Oh, no, not — you know. In the process, though, working with these women was just really — it was horrendous. And because the case was in the newspaper and that sort of thing. I was

getting criticized, you know, for bringing down a good man, for messing with somebody's reputation or getting into the middle of something that wasn't that serious. It's not like he raped anybody, that sort of thing.

And I can clearly remember one day, I was — two particular occasions. One, there was a man and woman together somewhere up in Northwest, and he said, "Aren't you the woman at the Rape Crisis Center that's working with the women?" "Yes, I am." "How are you going to just tear a black man down?" Kind of went into this, right? And the woman, the sister who was with him, she kind of pulled him up, you know, she was kind of, like, Why don't you leave her alone? She's — we're out here doing, to go to the movies. Why are you doing this? kind of thing. Which was the first time that I sort of realized, my goodness, this is kind of bigger than I realized it was.

And then, I was walking across Malcolm X Park, and this guy says, "Aren't you the woman who's helping those women against John?" His first name was John, I cannot remember his last name. I could go back and look this stuff up because I know I have it somewhere. And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, what's wrong with you? Do you like men?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Oh, because you're a lesbian." What I really meant was I don't like men like you, you know, small-minded and aggressive and rude. So, he said, "You're a lesbian." And so I just said something like, "You'd better watch your girlfriend," because he just pissed me off. I don't know.

But that was really stressful, and people at the Crisis Center really didn't realize how significant this was that was going on. [The case of a woman suing a minister became a major polarizing issue in the black community.] Because this is, like, an out-in-the-open thing around sexual harassment, verbal sexual harassment stuff. You know, a little pat on the behind, this, that, and the other, that people had always known about in different places where they hadn't come out like that —

ROSS: This was before Anita Hill.

TOURÉ: Yes, oh, yes. You know, so this was kind of like, out there, so I had to put a lot of energy into it and it was very stressful.

ROSS: Why don't you describe at this time your perception of the D.C. Study Group, because we did only briefly mention that, and then what happened to Yulanda Ward.

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TOURÉ: The D.C. Study Group. What can I say? A group of people studying Marxism, Leninism and all of that, involved in housing work, mainly involved in housing work. We had a professor, we had some women who had been the professor's students at varying times, some who had not. And you also had people who been working on South Africa and the antiapartheid. So, between housing and South Africa was mainly where the people who had been in various lives of this D.C. Study

Group, because it had had a couple of different lives with different sets of people and players in it.

ROSS: When did you join it?

TOURÉ: When I joined, which was around '81, I think, around 1981.

ROSS: I think it was earlier than that, because Yulanda died in 1980.

TOURÉ: Oh, well then, it would have had to have been earlier.

ROSS: '79, '78?

TOURÉ: No, not '78. No, because I don't think that — I don't think I was in the Study Group, I wasn't in the Study Group when Patrice and I broke up. That was right at the very end of '79. So it must have been really early, it must have been toward the end of '79 and into the beginning of '80. OK, because Patrice was very little in the picture when the Study Group was going on. Who was there for a while was Russan, Brother Russan. Not that I'm a promiscuous woman, you understand. But so, you know, you had a couple of law students, three to be exact: Natalie, Karen, and Hope. You had three law students. You had Yulanda. Yulanda's major — I don't know if she had declared her major yet.

ROSS: It might have been political science.

TOURÉ: OK. That sounds like that would have been it, political science. You had the professor, Dr. Garrett, and you had the political work, Jesse Jackson, et cetera, et cetera, all of that. You had Trisha Kinch, and you had Loretta Ross. You had Darby Debois, the bus driver extraordinaire. Um, and —

ROSS: Jake and Alice.

TOURÉ: Jake and Alice. Jake and Alice, civil employee and singer. Very interesting group of people who were studying together doing stuff around housing work. A lot around — Yulanda had done a lot of forging around what was then called, which is now gentrification, which was then "spatial deconcentration." And we had kind of been able to piece together that it was a national thing, it wasn't just D.C., that what it was, was that all large major urban cities, this is what was happening. Everybody was feeling at the time [that] it was [only] happening in their city, and in their communities, without an idea was that it was happening all over the place and there was actually a plan, a national plan, and that was part of what Yulanda and her efforts were able to bring about, because they did a student conference at Howard, and they had, it was like a national student conference, or at least the East Coast, because I remember people coming down from Philly and other places

like that, and talking and getting some sense of, Hey, there's a lot of places this is happening. And those students got together and decided they wanted to do some work and put some focus on spatial deconcentration. I remember going up to Philly to meet with the people who were doing housing organizing up there.

ROSS: The Grassroots Unity Conference.

TOURÉ: Some of the people had taken over some houses and squatted in them and taken them over. They were the Grassroots –

ROSS: Unity Conference.

20:25

TOURÉ: The Grassroots Unity Conference. That was — that was real good. That was real good work. And Yulanda was a young woman. Yulanda Ward. She was a young woman, and she was really — I guess I would sort of say Yulanda was brilliant. She was really, really very smart, very intelligent, very insightful. Did a lot in terms of little behind-the-scenes things of just holding the Study Group together, because she always connected with everybody at some point or another during the week or something. Sort of a way of kind of helping to hold things together. And doing all this work in organizing around spatial deconcentration.

And had started working on organizing another conference, and in the process of doing that, there was this meeting, or they were on the program, they were on *Tony Brown's Journal* — black journal, Tony Brown? that's called the *Tony Brown's Journal* — and I believe that at the time, he was advertising Pepsi and he was getting criticized for that.

ROSS: Remember Black College Days, Pepsi's sponsorship of Black College Days.

TOURÉ: Right, right. Pepsi was sponsoring Black College Days. He was endorsing it. The students who were organizing this conference, they were not feeling the Pepsi thing. They weren't feeling the Pepsi thing at all. So there were conflicts. Somehow or another, one night, Halloween, there was a party out at Southeast, which was really being given by some people who always gave these parties. They all knew each other and they gave these Halloween parties. And Yulanda and two other brothers, Darby and —

ROSS: No, it was from the student section of NBUF.

TOURÉ: OK. From the student section of NBUF. I don't remember these young brothers' names, and they were going out in Southeast to go to this party and they were, um, attacked and robbed, but they only focused in on Yulanda, you know. They only focused in on Yulanda, and isolated her out from the rest and had her kind of like over a car, and they shot her, and she did not resist. She was not resisting, she was not doing



anything, but she was shot and she was killed. None of the other two young men were touched, or anything.

And we always believed — we, as in the Study Group, friends of Yulanda — always believed that there was much more to that than just a random robbery, and we spent some time trying to prove that, and we hired an investigator, and oh, we did organizing and we had a mock trial, a people's trial. We did — as I said, we hired an investigator. We did as much organizing as we could to try to find out who killed Yulanda Ward and why Yulanda Ward was murdered.

ROSS:

Didn't you —

24:10

TOURÉ:

Ultimately, some guys were caught and their prosecutor was Evelyn Queen, who's now a judge, and they took one of those kind of pleas where — it's a term that means that more likely than not, the State has enough evidence, but if you take this kind of a plea, then there's no ongoing trial, there's no jury, there's no investigation. There's no way for any kind of facts to come out to be heard before the public. You just get sentenced by a judge, and that's what happened.

Are they still there? I don't know. But I was actually thinking about that around the latter part of this month because it was Halloween time, and I was thinking, those guys, are they — I don't know what happened. I don't know what happened, if they are still in jail or what. And I sort of believe that they're not, and I sort of believe that they haven't been for a long time.

Evelyn Queen, you know, she made her little name on that. The Study Group had to go to court a couple of times to testify before the grand jury, which we refused to do. We was so radical about everything. We're not going to testify before a grand jury. The grand jury can't make us testify. I remember, they came up into the D.C. Rape Crisis Center because Yulanda was a volunteer and on the board of the Rape Crisis Center, and so she was often at the Center. And when they, I guess, after they caught the people they were going to bring to trial, or when they determined that there was enough evidence for it to go to trial, whatever was their initial process, they came and served subpoenas at the Rape Crisis Center for people. It was so bizarre.

ROSS:

Did you get served with one of those?

TOURÉ:

Yes, I did get served with one of those, which I wouldn't have gotten served, at least I wouldn't have gotten served that day had it not been for a staff person who says, "Oh, yes. There she is," after it's already been said what they're there for. When they tell you what they're there for, don't look over there and say, "Oh, there she is." You say, "Oh, I was on my way to lunch. Gotta go."

So, yes, I did get served. And it was a very unsettling experience for all of us who had to go. So, you know, we had — Yulanda had a beautiful service in Texas where you all went, and then a memorial

service that we organized here in D.C. at All Souls' Church, which was packed from the front to the back of the church. So there were –

ROSS: I remember Sweet Honey doing a tribute to her. Do you remember that?

TOURÉ: The following year, or at the time of?

ROSS: They did a tribute at All Souls' Church.

TOURÉ: No, yeah, at All Souls — but I'm saying, the following year or at the time of?

ROSS: While we were running the Yulanda Ward Memorial Fund, because I think in my papers, I have a poster from it.

TOURÉ: I think what it was is that it was coming up around the time for them to have their concert –

ROSS: Their annual concert.

TOURÉ: And they dedicated their concert to Yulanda, and maybe even some of the funds to the investigation, you know, that we were — that was still an ongoing investigation at that time. So there have been many ways that all the issues that intersect and come together, you know, around violence against women, around violence in our communities, all of that.

I even remember once, in terms of violence against women, particularly violence against black women, that people may recall, depending on their age, that people did not always freely walk around flinging their braids and their cornrows. That's not how it was. How it was is that in many instances, if you worked on a job, your employers did not want you to wear cornrows to work. If you did wear cornrows, they only wanted a certain way for them to be braided, you know, to go back, no fancy styles, just plain, no adornment or anything on them, you know, professional. And their claim was that cornrows were not professional.

There was a woman, her name was Cheryl Tatum, and there was another sister whose name I cannot remember, each worked at a hotel, and the hotel was going to fire them. Cheryl Tatum worked at Marriott — there, I said it — the Marriott Hotel in the age where they did not want people to wear cornrows to work. That would of course be black women, because we were the only ones wearing the cornrows. And they had threatened to fire Cheryl Tatum and this other sister at the other hotel. So she was raising, she was making a fight of it, and she was letting it be known in the community that they had threatened to fire her and her job was on the line. I believe that maybe in some other city, on the other side of the country, somebody had filed a suit against a hotel behind them wanting them to take the braids out.

So I thought about it and I decided that, I determined that Marriott's demand that Cheryl Tatum remove her braids or lose her job was a form of violence against women, that it was psychological violence against women. It was an attack on my image to tell me that cornrows, which were a part of my culture, cultural expression, was not professional, and that there was something wrong with wearing cornrows, and I felt that this had a negative psychological impact on me as a woman, and I felt that it was a form of corporate violence against women. It was psychological violence.

And so I set out and organized a major demonstration in support of Cheryl Tatum and the right of women to wear cornrows to work at the Marriott and any damn place else that they wanted to wear them at. And some of the members of the Rape Crisis Center board had a problem with that. They felt that I was going a little too far, that it was quite a stretch to see that action by the hotel as a form of violence against women. I felt that it was quite short-sighted on their part not to be able to see it and make that connection.

So I went ahead, because I was the director for community education, I went ahead and I organized a demonstration at the Marriott on 14<sup>th</sup> and E Street — I think that's E Street — 14<sup>th</sup> and E Street downtown [14<sup>th</sup> and F]. The fliers — organized the whole thing. I wasn't sure — this was pre-e-mail, not pre-sending a fax, the old kind of faxes, but definitely pre-e-mail — but we organized a demonstration and I wasn't sure how many people, you know, just how it was going to turn out. Well, two other unions endorsed it, because they were the hotel workers' unions. The women's groups got behind it. People got behind it, and there were almost a thousand people out there in the street. I was shocked, myself, I was kind of like, Oh my God.

And of course, the hotel backed down and to try to save face, they tried to keep a little line in there about professional-looking, but they backed down. She won, and it was a win for women all over the place, in whatever kind of job, being able to wear cornrows to work, you know. I really felt that was psychological violence against women. I felt that it was racist and I felt that somebody needed to do something about it.

ROSS: And this was, of course, after Bo Derek had even legitimized the concept of cornrows.

TOURÉ: Oh, yeah, *Ten*. Her movie *Ten*.

ROSS: But not for black women, who had originated the style to wear it.

TOURÉ: Oh, right, yeah. And another thing that I felt was important was, there were, in the midst of the struggle to end apartheid, and because the South African embassy is here in D.C., groups were getting, you know, going down and symbolically being arrested. So I organized a women's day at the South African embassy and had almost all the women's

organizations, definitely all the radical women's organizations in D.C., come out. That was our day to come out and show our support for the people of South Africa and for the women of South Africa. I think one of the organizing things we did was we showed that movie *We Have Struck a Rock*, which was about the strength of the women in South Africa, and we had a Women's Day at the South African embassy, and I think we had representation from about 50 or so women's organizations, that all the women got arrested, you know. That was good. [Women from 23 groups agreed to be arrested.]

ROSS: OK. Why don't you switch gears a little bit and talk about ICAW, and what that was.

35:52

TOURÉ: ICAW. The International Council of African Women. Well, you know, the World Decade for Women Conference was coming up, you know, and one of my friends and colleagues, you know, who I greatly love and respect [reference to Ross], was working at the Commission for Women.

ROSS: No, I was just on the [D.C.] Commission.

TOURÉ: OK, was on the Commission for Women, and had been following — well, first of all, in '75, when they had the founding conference in Houston, Jo Delaplaine went to that conference. Jo Delaplaine worked at the Rape Crisis Center.

ROSS: In '75 in Mexico City, you mean?

TOURÉ: Did I say Houston? Yeah, when was Houston?

ROSS: '77.

TOURÉ: '77, OK. Jo went to Houston, she didn't go to Mexico. She went to Houston in '77, OK. You were serving on the Commission and so you were very aware of all these things that were happening about the conference and —

TOURÉ: First you went — you became more aware as time went on, because you were not at Houston, you sure were not in Mexico.

ROSS: No, but I went to Copenhagen in '80.

TOURÉ: Right, in '80, you know, you had been serving on the Commission and so by that time, you had some sense about this and so you went to Copenhagen. When you came back from Copenhagen, you were, like, really quite enthused about that, and had started talking about it and thinking about, the big World Decade Conference. It'll be in Africa in 1985. How are we going to get to go there? So you basically decided

that you wanted to put together a group of women, a small group of women who wanted to try to work and raise some money to be able to go.

And so, it actually became the organization, it became ICAW, International Council of African Women, and I came, early on I wanted to support you in that idea and help to make it happen, so we were, like, the co-chairs of the International Council of African Women. And we started out with sort of like a few friends, of people who we felt like to do some work and get organized, and then some other people heard and were attracted to it, and then we sort of realized that, Hey, this is really a big thing, and this thing is going to take a lot of work to raise enough money to go to Africa in '85.

So we started in '82, because we figured it's going to take about three years. We decided to start doing a newsletter, which was really like a news magazine, called *African Women Rising*, and we got this sister who was a teacher, Belvadine Torell, to develop the logo for us, for the *African Women Rising*. Another very beautiful logo, I might add, that she gave to ICAW. And what we began to see is that there were women all over the country who didn't know, and there were women all over the country who had heard a little something one time, somewhere, had an interest in hearing more, didn't know how to find out.

And we sort of took on the mission of ICAW to not just educate and organize in the D.C. area, but to educate and organize wherever we could. So, out of that came Passages to Kenya [which was organized by Barbara Bullette and women from Boston]. The sisters in Baltimore decided to organize — I forgot what they called their conference — Toward Kenya — I think they called their conference Toward Kenya. Women in the Black Women's Health Project, Byllye Avery got excited and, you know, wanted to be able to go. And so people actually wanted, I believe, to fund Byllye to go and kind of follow her around while she was there. The same thing for Angela Davis.

But we worked with grassroots women all over the place. Organizing them, giving them information on how to get — the practical stuff, you know. How do you get credentials to be able to go? What's the difference between the NGO and the official one? How do you get media credentials? Do you need a visa? What kind of shots do you need to get? What is your group in your area need to be working on to raise your money? Don't wait until the last minute to try to get a hotel. I mean, we were, like, doing all the practical kinds of things, turning people on to where to get in touch with United Nations, how to get United Nations' updates and briefings on the upcoming conference and on the issues and all of that.

So we really found ourselves being a center of organizing, which was crucial because there were no black women, really, in the grassroots doing that. Now, you know, like the National Council of Negro Women, some other groups, because the National Council of Negro Women had NGO status, official NGO status, so there was some groups who knew, but somehow the information was not filtering, it was not getting out.

41:00

And I do recall the conversation, a situation occurred at one point where ICAW was questioned and challenged by the National Council of Negro Women regarding whether or not, who were we to be organizing for this conference and, you know, any information and organizing and stuff should come through them, which would have been very well if they had in fact at that time already begun to organize beyond their own small circle and already begun to share the information beyond their small circle, which they had not done. And so we felt that we needed to do that. We also felt that one organization alone was not sufficient to cover that. So we had a duty to continue to move forward and do that. [It was a big thing for ICAW to stand up to NCNW, but NCNW had known about the Kenya conference since the Mexico City conference and was only organizing their friends. We were pissed and indignant that they'd chastise us for taking it up. They felt it was their purview.]

We also wanted to go there with a platform, and not just be a whole bunch of black women from the United States who came over here to the mother land, but to have, kind of, some positions around issues that affected us back home and positions on international issues that affected our sisters in other places in the world. And so we actually did a conference, a very excellent conference — as a matter of fact, we did two conferences in preparation for that. And we did a lot of work and we produced, one of our *African Women Rising* was the proceedings and was the positions, and we had got other organizations to buy into that, so we would sort of have a collective kind of platform when we went and wouldn't just be going --

And so we did an extensive amount of work and it was, for most of us, our first trip to Africa, so it was just the most exciting thing, and we did a lot of organizing work, not just to organize women to go, but also we did a lot of pre-organizing work, reaching out to women's groups over there so that we would be able to meet and dialogue with these women once we got there, and not have to try and, you know, run people down and see if we could the opportunity, but to be able to go out, see some of the projects that they worked on, see where some of their organizations were. So we did a lot of dialoging before we went in preparation to go.

We also decided that while we were there, since we were going to be in Kenya, we didn't know when we were going to be on that side of the world, we might as well go to Tanzania and check out the repatriated community that was there. We were invited to come up to the University of Dar [es Salaam] and to do a class on the involvement of African Americans in the apartheid movement, and also to do one on African American women and violence, feminism, or however you want to phrase it. So we had, like, two classes to actually go and teach. I'm teaching at the University of Dar, you know, so very exciting.

And so, this group of us were organized to go to the conference. The NGO part of the conference was about a week and a half, and we actually spent three weeks in Kenya in total, then three weeks in Tanzania. So we did all right for a little group of girls who had never

been to the continent. We actually went and stayed for six weeks. And it was just the most amazing experience in terms of being a learning experience, a humbling experience, and being a part of what was the largest gathering of women ever in history at that time, that we were there, you know, at the Kenya University, which was one of the main sites for the conference, that we were there in the midst of *herstory*. In the midst of *herstory*.

ROSS: Tell me how ICAW dealt with and addressed issues of lesbian rights and how that came up and affected the delegation and stuff.

45:15

TOURÉ: The overall position of ICAW, under the persuasive analysis of the co-chairs [Touré and Ross], was that we were in a struggle with all the women who were in the struggle with us, that we were not concerned about people's bedroom politics. We were concerned about their politics once they came out of the bedroom, that we were more concerned about who looked at issues of violence against women, issues of globalization, all those issues in the same ways that we looked at them, looked at them and that that was most important.

You know, that's who — I don't care who you sleep with, but I want somebody watching my back that's in support of the same things that I'm in support of, and that we could not afford to isolate other women, or disempower women from the choices that they had made, or for some people, who feel like it wasn't a choice, it was just the way they had to go and be.

The result was that for a couple of people, they had some problems with that, with that analysis, and did not feel comfortable to include lesbians in the platform, and we actually put in our platform a point about lesbians.

ROSS: Well, didn't the government of Kenya issue an edict saying that they weren't going to allow lesbians to attend the conference and that was one of the external triggering devices?

TOURÉ: I believe so. I believe they did, but, I mean, it didn't work. Clearly, it didn't work, but yes, they did do that, for people coming into the country that they were going to be able to know, and so, it didn't work out. But, it did, I guess, sort of, heighten the level of the debate. Because, you had a number of different kinds of women, church women, all different kinds of women trying to go to Kenya in that last year and in that last six months. The push was horrendous.

So it meant that there were groups of people who hadn't worked together before, who didn't hold the same philosophy, that didn't come out of the same experiences, and so you had conflict. There was a conference that was organized in Baltimore, the Toward Nairobi Conference, and ICAW had cautioned these sisters that in all of the wonderful plenaries and workshops that they had put together, that they didn't have anything on lesbians, and that if they didn't put something

into their program addressing that and giving space for the voices of lesbian women, that there was going to be a problem. They chose not to broaden their agenda to include in the conference the voices of lesbian women and the issues that impact lesbian women.

And so, as a result, the lesbian women who attended the conference took it upon themselves to kind of, at one point in the program, to take over and demand that their voices be included and their issues be raised — which was good that they demanded that, but was bad that they had to demand it, and was not good that it was not included in the beginning and from the beginning.

And then there was a situation with one particular person who was going to attend the conference from the organization, and people did not know — everyone did not know that this sister was a lesbian, and when some people found out that she was a lesbian, then they didn't want to collaborate on the project going forward to go to Kenya because of that, which was ridiculous. And of course, the sister still ended up going, and they either made a choice, ended up having to deal with it and go or made a choice not to go. So you did have some issues like that.

You also had two very major issues going, two other major issues going. First of all, you had the State Department saying that this was not a political conference. And if I recall correctly, and I am so sure I do, and one conference that we attended, the woman from the State Department, Ginny, Virginia — OK, her name was Virginia, the last name may come back.

ROSS:

Hazard?

51:00

TOURÉ:

Hazard, who worked for the State Department, who came to speak at the conference, and made the presentation about how the conference was not a political conference. The speaker following her was me. And I had to go up there and respectfully disagree with her and her analysis of the conference. The United States was saying that it wasn't political because they didn't want to deal with Israel, Palestine, even in '85. I mean, this is how far back — they didn't want to deal with that. Those Palestinian women were coming, the Jewish women were kind of on the defensive. It was a very interesting dynamic, and in Kenya, there were some sessions that were able to be held and the people could attend and they could do the sessions and there were some that, they just couldn't successfully have the dialogue, you know, and bridge the gap. But to deny that things at that conference were political, the fact that women held a lesser place in the eyes of the world made it political on that point alone, you know. The violation of human rights on the basis of your humanness, on that and that alone, you know, and from there, we could just go everywhere with why and how that conference was political. So that was a major issue.

Another major issue for the feminist movement itself was the definition of feminism. Many of us had long held that the definition of feminism was too narrow and constricting, that it was not broad and



inclusive enough to bring in others, that there were women in other parts of the world who had different perspectives about feminism, who were sort of including different things. Sally Mugabe, for example, her thing, when we talked about domestic violence, her thing was that they were abused and battered all the time, that there was domestic violence there in their homes and it was from the state. It wasn't from inside their house, inside their homes themselves, but state-sanctioned violence brought into their homes. So she was looking at that as a kind of domestic violence.

ROSS: Now tell me who Sally Mugabe was.

TOURÉ: The wife of Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe. Yes, I did my history lessons. So, you know, that was sort of her example. Women from Cuba, Nicaragua, were talking about the fact that, you know, immigrant issues were not really a part of what the feminist movement in the United States was looking at. That many of the issues that affected women, and what we in the United States were saying, always saying, was that many of the issues that affected women of color and communities of color, were not included in the definition of feminism, were not on the agenda for action under the traditional prevailing definition of feminism that they had had and had been working with all the time. That it was basically abortion rights, not reproductive justice and reproductive rights. It was abortion rights, basically. It was ERA. It was violence against women, and it was — I don't know, I'm sure there was something else.

ROSS: Lesbian rights.

55:05

TOURÉ: Lesbian rights. And that was pretty much the platform for the feminist movement, and women of color were, like, no, no, no. That's not enough. You all ain't the only women and these ain't the only issues, and going to — and feminists, many of the feminists in the country standing staunch on, this is what feminism is. Oh, and we have *Ms.* magazine. OK. This is what feminism is. And so it was an educational process for them to go and hear women from all over the world say, Oh, hell, no. Your definition of feminism is not broad enough, it's not inclusive enough, it's not expansive enough. It is not radical enough to really challenge the system in the ways that it needs to be challenged. It's not doing that.

So the conference was an extremely important conference, and the things that came out of that conference reverberated on and on and on.

ROSS: Absolutely. I believe we've got about 12 to 10 more minutes on this tape. I'd like you to start with 1988, because that would've been the year, if I've read your bio right, that you began to work with WPFW and started producing your radio show.

TOURÉ: Well, that's when I began, but I had already worked with WPFW, but I had not worked with them in — first of all, I had spent a year in Sophie's Parlor Collective between, like '77-'78 or '78-'79, something like that. One of those, '77-'78, '78-'79 [it was '77-78], I had spent a year in Sophie's Parlor with some of the original founders of the Sophie's Parlor Collective. And then, after that, I had a friend who had been a member of the Black Panther Party in California, and who worked for Congressman Ron Dellums, and she used to do —

ROSS: What's her name?

TOURÉ: Robin — her first name is Robin. Her last name will come to me and I think it's Hunter. I want to say Holden but, of course, Robin Holden is Robin Holden at WPFW now. And Robin would go and do women's reggae music, and so during the pledge drives, I would come and I would help her do the music and things like that. And I would come and do stuff at the station from time to time, work, do stuff at WPFW in the different places that it was, including when it was on Florida Avenue and the turntables were sitting on top of milk crates. That's how people's radio we were, back in the day.

In 1988, what happened is that because I was leaving the Rape Crisis Center, Imani Drayton Hill, who was the program director at WPFW, and we knew each other because she was also a member of the National Black Women's Health Project, as was I, as were many of us. And so when Monty called me and she said, "Hey, I know you're getting to leave the Rape Crisis Center, I know you're not going to do it yourself, so. You know, we don't have enough women's programming on WPFW, so why don't you come and do a radio show?" And I did not take her seriously at first, and then I thought she was tripping, you know. Imani, you are truly tripping.

Well, what I agreed to do was that if we could have a radio collective, then I would consider coming and doing a program there. And so, we did. We came up with a name, *In Our Voices*, and for a year, from '88 to '89, there were — I think there were like five of us, and then you know, things happen. This is D.C. People move, they go back to school, they go back to another job, back where they came from. All those kinds of things happen. Somebody got married, you know, things happen.

And I actually found myself being the lone *In Our Voice*, the lone voice, so I moved ahead and I kept it going, and a couple of times, I did have people to come in for like six months here, six months there, and help work on the programs, but as time went on, I got, you know, better and more proficient. And this year is 16 years, and I am just so absolutely amazed that I am now 16 again, you know, and I had 16 years of doing *In Our Voices* on WPFW, and I am so honored, because I have used it as a platform for the voices for women.

That's the idea for *In Our Voices*. Any issue is a woman's issue, it's simply a matter of when and where you enter the dialogue and how, and

that they're all women's issues and that we have to find our voices and as I always say, raise your voice for yourself and raise your voice on behalf of someone who has not yet found their voice.

And that's what it is, it's a platform for women. I don't even let men come on *In Our Voices* unless they come with a woman, and it has to be a special issue for a man to come. If you have an issue in an organization [and] you don't have a woman that can come and articulate that, then you need to go back and you need to reexamine your organization.

ROSS: So it is a news digest format program, or what?

101:25

TOURÉ: It is a public affairs program. It is an hour, so sometimes I may do one specific topic. Sometimes I may divide it into two segments and do two topics, and sometimes I may do a series. I may do something like as we did for the First Nation. We did four shows leading up, two music and two public affairs shows for the opening of the Native American Museum, and it was fantastic. We got to interview the women from the Chickasaw Nation and the Wapanoka(?) [and Chappaquiddick Nation] and just — it was great, it was really great, and it gave a lot of exposure. So it could be a series, it could be segments, or it could be one issue for one show.

ROSS: Now there's a new development, where you're now beginning to work on national women's programming for Pacifica, all of their networks?

TOURÉ: Yes. Jesus. The jury's still out on that one. A lot of time was lost with the elections, because a lot of focus went to the elections. Now the elections are over, we are going to come back and take a look at it. The idea is to have a women's bureau, where the women's issues are coordinated across the network to make sure that attention is paid to them, because one of the stations did not carry the April 25 March for Women's Lives, because they didn't think it was important. A million and a half people showed up, but didn't get broadcast in Texas because they didn't think it was important. If there had been a women's bureau, that would have never happened.

ROSS: OK. So the work continues. Well, thank you, Nkenge. What we're going to come back and do the last third of the interview on is your career, your choices, your political work, since 1988 professionally. How you seem to change careers, get into HIV-AIDS work, into substance-abuse work, and continue to do international work. So we're going to talk about that, and thank you again.

TOURÉ: Thank you.

END TAPE 4

Interview resumed March 23, 2005

ROSS: OK. It is March 23rd, 2005. I'm in Washington, D.C. at the home of Nkenge Touré doing her oral history interview for the Voices of Feminism Project for the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College. This is part two of an interview that we began on December 4th, 2004. How are you doing, Nkenge?

TOURÉ: I'm doing well, Loretta. It's good to have you in my home.

ROSS: OK. Well, when we left off, we'd kind of gotten to 1985, the late 80s. You had just left the D.C. Rape Crisis Center after 13 years. I had asked if you were burnt out, and you said, "No, I was nuked."

TOURÉ: That would be true.

ROSS: So tell me, what type of political work did you do after you left the Rape Crisis Center?

TOURÉ: A lot more than I anticipated. First of all — well, anticipated in the sense of beginning so soon — I sort of envisioned when I left the Center that I would be chillin' out somewhere, doing whatever you do to un-nuke. And just about the time that I was leaving, I got a call from a sister, Imani Drayton, who was at that time the program director at WPFW radio, which is one of the Pacifica stations, and she said, "Nkenge, I know that you're getting ready to leave the Center, and you know that we need more women programmers to be involved here at WPFW. We need more on-air women, and I know you need something to do. So why don't you come over here and do a radio program, you know? With all your contacts in the women's community, you could do that."

And I was, like, really caught off guard, and my basic response was that I really, I didn't really see that as something that I could do, and certainly not something that I could take on by myself and just take it on. So we talked about it a little bit more and came to the idea of a collective, a women's collective, that would do a program, produce and host it, the whole thing. And so there were about six of us that came together and came up with a name. Well, actually, I came up with the name *In Our Voices*.

And we started out, but in about a year — this is Washington D.C., so you know the things that happen. People leave, they go to school, they get married, they change jobs. And so I ultimately found that I was *In Our Voices*, that it was just me left. So I moved forward. And from time to time in the first couple of years, I would have people who would be volunteers, an associate producer. I think the longest was about six

months, and that was, oh, when I had been doing it for about two years. After that, it was just me. I was doing it. I'm host, producer, creator, inventor — all that is involved in *In Our Voices*.

And now I look up and it's 16 years later, you know. I will be 17. I will be 17 this October (laughs). October 2005, *In Our Voices* will be 17 years old. And that's something I could have never imagined would have happened, that I would have just kept it and just did it and became very good at doing it. And it's one of my creative outlets. There are times when I don't feel like doing *In Our Voices*, you know, that I just don't feel like going to the station every Friday, that I just don't feel like lining up guests or ideas, whatever is required, finding parking when it's raining outside.

But I always find that, when I go in, if I am feeling in that particular — when I go in and I sort of get into that zone or that place that I need to be to do that, that I really enjoy it, you know, and that it reminds me, Oh yeah, you do really enjoy doing this, you know, providing a service, providing a platform for the voices of women. That's very important. Looking at issues from the perspective and to see that women is very important, to not be restricted in regard to what issues and what topics women can relate to or are relegated into the areas of interest, expertise of whatever it might be. That it's just anything, it's whatever it is. Being able to provide that is important, having people know that they have a place they can come, they can share their issues. Having a place to be able to teach from, provide people with direction and insight, be creative in putting together ideas and concepts. It's good. It's good.

ROSS:

So are there other political organizations that you've worked with besides the radio show? What other kind of jobs did you have after you left the Rape Crisis Center?

6:05

TOURÉ:

Oh, certainly. *In Our Voices* was just kind of the start. As I said, I ended up doing more than I anticipated I was going to do. Around the time that Rodney King was beaten, we formed something similar to Coalition for Justice and Peace, which exists now, but it's different. We had a name similar to that, and it was all these organizations and individuals that came together to protest police brutality, FBI involvement, all of those kinds of things. And so, it was like a really, ooooh — about 20, 25 organizations from around the city were involved in doing this. Students were involved in this as well. Jolynn Brooks, Luci Murphy, Kathy Fewellyn, Ambrose Lane, Jr. I say those names in particular because it was kind of like, at a meeting about this that we all started talking, and from that decided to have another meeting, and from that kind of grew out this coalition, you know. And we did a couple of really major demonstrations that shut off the FBI building, you know, we were just out there demonstrating, all in the street, everybody was really — it was good.

Um, that took a lot of work and a lot of energy, and particularly the diversity of all the people involved, you know, and often I was the

person who facilitated the meeting with all of these people. So my skills in the area of support groups and counseling, et cetera, in dealing with women within the organizations where I worked, as in where you got your source of income, your job. I did the RAP Incorporated, which is Regional Addiction Prevention, a cultural — it's a substance-abuse treatment program, a residential facility, but it has an Afro-centric concept to it.

And one of the programs they had was called Tando Village. There was a Tando for men, which are men who were HIV-positive living in recovery from substance abuse, [and] Tando Village for women, women in recovery who were HIV-positive. So I was the director, program manager for the Tando Village women's program.

There was also a second program called Dream, which was for women living in recovery with their children. And so we had a — RAP had an apartment building for Dream that had eight or nine apartments in it, which the residents lived in those apartments with their children. And then several of the apartments were used to facilitate organization management structure, you know, those things, offices, meeting rooms, dining room, kitchen for everyone. Tando was a four-unit building, and it was the same. It was set up the same way.

And then at the Laurel facility, which was a coed facility of men and women — they just lived on different dorm sides — I was the women's coordinator for that. So that essentially what it was is that everything that was dealing with women in RAP, you know, I managed, coordinated, directed, whatever you want to call it, the Tando, the Dream, and the Women in Laurel. And I did that for a couple of years.

Before I went to RAP I had worked as the program director for PEERS [Prevention, Education, Enrichment, and Risk Reduction Strategies], which was a youth education group — young people who were trained to do HIV/AIDS education and awareness and STDs, OK, to do education and training at schools, rec[reation] centers, health clinics all over the place. The idea was that essentially, initially, was that young people could hear it from other young people if they were really trained and knew what they were doing, what they were talking about.

Then we found that people at the clinics were just so in awe that these young people knew all this that we would — also I would take them to STD clinics, and they would do the presentations and the sessions, which included role play and other stuff, for the adults that were sitting up there with sexually, you know, transmitted diseases, only now they're called STIs — is that right? sexually transmitted infections, or something, OK, so STIs. And this was a part of a place called Grandma's House, which was the first home in the United States for children, for babies who were HIV-positive. Not boarder babies being left by drug-addicted mothers in hospitals, but HIV-positive babies, infants. This was the first program in the United States for that, which had four houses, beautiful houses, where the children lived. And they had staff, obviously, 24 hours, you know, staff. A social service

10:33

program to work for reuniting children with their parents: if their parents now were doing well under their medical regimes, you know, as far as their health, if they were finished their, any kind of probation or any kind of programs they had, whatever kind of issues had to be worked out — whatever sort of variables had to be dealt with to try and reunite children, parents and children, parents and infants. Because the children went from infancy up to age six or seven, something like that, six or seven years.

So the PEER program for that was the young people. So I initially did that program, and then I expanded it and worked it out with the City so that these could be considered their summer jobs, and they could receive a salary for doing this work that they were not getting under the PEER program. They were getting expenses paid, but I mean, PEER couldn't pay them a salary. And, you know, in that process, they did a number of things. They testified before the Brain Trust of the Congressional Black Caucus. They testified at the AIDS Commission in Chicago. They went to the Bahamas to do some training at the [NBA] basketball camp, when they were supposed to have those players begin to do some AIDS or HIV education themselves with young people, et cetera. So, you know, my kids, PEER kids, went down there to help train them.

From that I went into being the director of what's called Potter's Vessel, which was the program that worked with the parents, you know, to provide services to help to reconnect and reunite the children with their parents. This was under TERRIFIC [Temporary Emergency Residential Resource Institute for Families]. Grandma's House was under TERRIFIC. TERRIFIC was the overall program for Grandma's House, for PEERS, for any of their programs. And part of what TERRIFIC did was it did housing, and so it had an apartment building with about 20 apartments for seniors, I mean, a beautiful, well-kept building. And these are African American women, these two sisters [sisters by blood: Joan McCarley and Rev. Debbie Tate].

13:58

So that was first where I went after, um, after I left the Rape Crisis Center. I left the Rape Crisis Center in August of '88. I started *In Our Voices* in either October or November of '88. It was actually when we returned from that conference on women in the Americas, in the Caribbean, that was held in Cuba, where Fidel spoke. As soon as I returned from there, I started *In Our Voices*. We already had the first programs planned out, so we actually went on the air when I returned.

OK, so then in March of '89 is when I went to Grandma's House to do the PEERS program, and then from there I went to RAP to do that program. So I was very much centered in, staying in, things that had to do with women and children. At the same time, I was moving more into, within the social service realm, in terms of nonprofit but in terms of funding and ways that people looked at things that were much more systematized and much closer to where politics began to get more and more vacuumed out of the conversation, you know, out of the programs, really, in many ways, out of the expression of the staff. The freedom to

really hook the work aspects, the political aspects and the organizational and everything, as I did at the Rape Crisis Center, was not there.

At the Rape Crisis Center, I practically did whatever it was I needed to do to advance the work of women, to advance the work of the Center, period, you know. So it didn't have restrictions on being able to go to this conference or work in coalition with this group or do this or do that. Whereas you went more into these other things, as I went more into these other things, it did. It did. So a side effect of that, what it meant for me in those places was that I was more isolated, you know. I was always The One, you know. Oh, she's the one that's going to have this different view, this outrageous view, this whatever. Is everything always political? Yeah! You know, kind of thing.

So (laughs) it made working other places, outside of, say, RAP, Grandma's House — after that I went to Vanguard Services Unlimited, which was residential substance-abuse programs, coed, men and women. And from there I went to Hannah House, transitional living for women and children. Two components of a single program: one side for women without children, one side for women with children, here in D.C. Very, very interesting experience.

ROSS:

In what way?

18:07

TOURÉ:

In terms of what I just said, which is, how to provide services for these women, how to really work on empowering them, not just giving them services, but learning how to empower yourself and figure out how you're going to negotiate your way through this program and through life when you leave this program. Working on the development process that you need to go through while you're in the program, and what that means for women who've been used to doing things their own way, or used to not having things work out, or used to acting out all the time. I mean, when you live in transitional programs, certainly there are rules, there are guiding principles, rules, and consequences, you know. Dealing with women, some of whom have been substance abusers, prostitutes, larceny, jail, all kinds of things. So the dynamics of — and working with staff who at some point, some of them may have also been in that kind of a situation. They have moved on, you know, moved themselves on, through their own efforts greatly, to another place. And then dealing with people who've never been into anything, so their whole thing is theory.

And basically, you know, you're getting your money from federal and district grants, and so people are not necessarily looking at the politics of how these women come to be in these situations and what that means, and what kind of supports they actually need to be able to be viable when they leave out of here.

ROSS:

What do you mean by the politics of how women end up in the situation?

20:00



TOURÉ:

OK. I'm talking about, for instance, if I came out of a cycle of poverty, and that's all I've known, then it may not be surprising for some people that I find myself still in a situation of lack of education, seeing myself with less options — um, had been an at-risk child when I was growing up in a household where I had to protect myself from the advances of men, you know, be it my uncle, my mother's current boyfriend, whatever, to getting involved with somebody and having a child when I'm 15, 16 years old, and I've already started smoking pot. These kinds of things, OK.

Now on the one hand, you could say, Well, that's just life, and that's the way it is. On the other hand, you could say, If I had more economic equality, if I had more opportunity to deal with and have certain resources — is this exactly how these scenarios would go if I really had other options that came from having more relationship with the economic structure and opportunities that go along with that of this country, you know. That on a basic level.

Then certainly the level of how this plays itself out in terms of racism, and then how it plays itself out in relationship to the politics of gender, you know, of how, as a woman in these economic times you could see that these might be the particular ways in which you are abused. You're a woman who got sexually assaulted for some crack, you know, and ended up with somebody who kept you captive for three days, kept you locked up in a closet, take you out of the closet to use you, put you back in the closet, let you go on Monday morning, and, oh, out of a good thing, go ahead and give you a little bag to go, you know, a little bag of rock to go, you know. You don't have Blue Cross Blue Shield. You're not getting ready to go to therapy and deal with what the hell means for this experience that you just had. You're not going to the police because you were out there engaged in illegal activity.

So what does that mean? On some level, it means more than just, OK, you can get some parenting classes and you can get this apartment on Section 8, and make sure you don't let anybody be in your apartment who's not on the lease, and we'll put you in a GED class. OK, and that's all well and good. That's all well and good.

At the same time, on what fundamental level are you working to transform these kinds of overall, overarching conditions so that this is not the case, which is why I feel like in the women's movement per se, or as it is, whether you're talking about reproductive rights, whether you're talking reproductive justice, pay equity, whatever — it is that you're choosing to deal with the involvement of women of color, with the involvement of working-class and poor women of any colors that are a part of that — you still come back around to certain fundamental issues that have to be dealt with that a lot of people don't understand or don't want to recognize, and therefore, will not incorporate into the strategy, into the philosophy or whatever. And that's why it's failing.

There are certain things that have to get taken care of. I don't care what movement you're in, how you deal with it. There are certain things that have to be addressed that have to do with housing, that have to do

with lack of childcare, that have to do with, you know, racism, that have to do with why women make seventy cents on the dollar, that have to do with, within a movement, why there are people who feel so entitled, like white women in many instances that they can't take direction from women of color, they can't share power, because they just can't really get that. They can't expand the definition of feminism to understand how certain other aspects of reality to other people's lives are such that it has to be incorporated into this if these people are going to be here.

It's like in Kenya, at the first world — the end of the decade conference, where women from Cuba, from Central and South America, from places in Africa, other people, were saying, The definition of feminism has got to be expanded, extended, expanded. Domestic violence over here in Mozambique might also mean storm troopers being able to come up to my house at any point and take it over, you know, that might have some domestic violence aspects to it. Um, dealing with the right to terminate a pregnancy, also what about what I need to support me in having children, having adequate childcare, et cetera, so that I can work so that I can provide for these children, you know. That's kind of real to me when we talk about pay equity, not just glass-ceiling women in the corporate world, you know, whether they get to have the same salary and equal treatment as men.

So it's all these fundamental things that no matter where, how, they are always going to come in and have to be addressed because they're part of the basic fabric of society as far as what we need to really live and have dignity and move forward and have quality of life. I kind of went off, but —

26:20

ROSS: No. I was going to ask you a question in that vein because the world you describe, in terms of dealing with women with substance-abuse issues and the gender oppression that they experience because they were substance abusers seems very far removed from what people think of as feminist work. So you started to talk about that. So how did you practice working with substance abusers with a gender lens?

TOURÉ: It was hard, and sometimes I couldn't always, I wasn't even always able to do it, because the other reality of these programs is that in many ways you function in crisis. There's always a crisis. There's always immediate, right-in-your-face stuff that's going on. Part of the way that I dealt with it was through life skills, through trying to get women to see themselves in a different way and see their relationship to things in a different way, kind of concretely. So in doing life skills — life skills was a lot of different kinds of education and training that was provided for the women, and different ways of dealing with things. So it might be something as basic as how to budget and how to open a checking account. It might be, uh, how to use poetry as a healing tool, words as a healing tool to look at certain issues you have and be able to bring those issues out. It might be a four-week series during Women's History Month that's strictly a women's sheroes (sic) project that people have to

do research on and report on, but also have specific things that they have to look for and address in terms of what made that individual's character. What, for instance — basic kinds of things — what was the value of education, how much value was placed on education in Mary McLeod Bethune's time, in Madam C.J. Walker's time, in Septima Clark's time? What kind of families were they in? Were they two-part families, two-parent families? What was the economic level, you know, did they attend church, et cetera — different things to sort of try to look at what might be underlying things that people might need that will help them when they're out there on their own, by themselves, you know, what have you learned about, say, the importance of education, or how do people develop a certain amount of self-determination and fearlessness in themselves.

One of the things that always bothered me a lot is that when people, a lot of times people will come to these as speakers to speak to groups of women about empowerment or something along those lines, self-image, and people will say something like, You can be anything you want to be. You can do anything you want to do. And that may be true. Then again, it may not be true for some people. But the point is, when you tell someone, You can be anything you want to be, you can do anything you want to do, sometimes you have to say more than that. You can't just leave it at that, because if it was as simple as that, perhaps they might have already done that when they were growing up in the projects, OK, or, you know, living on some really Fort-Apache-in-the-Bronx kind of street and going to bed without any dinner, OK. And everybody that they saw around them was functioning fairly much in the same manner.

So I might need you to say a little bit more than, Anybody can grow up to be president that wants to be. And we've already seen that, you know, there are select-idents. Bush is a select-ident. So how is it that anybody, any boy, can grow up to be president of the United States? That is not actually necessarily true, OK? But if I'm going to be uppity in any kind of way, maybe I need to know a little bit more than that. Maybe I need some concrete tools, some concrete strategies, maybe I need something to help me unlearn certain behaviors and develop new behaviors that go beyond, You can just be anything you want to be. Or what is it, Nancy Reagan with drugs, Just say no, OK. Just say no. No, I don't want heroin. I'll take crack.

29:28

ROSS: So you feel that there's a disconnect between the theory of empowerment and the lack of empowerment that the women you were dealing with were actually living?

31:30

TOURÉ: Yes, I do. And I think that it was important to work to make that connection there, OK, so using the life skills, different types of life skills to help to bring that about and have people kind of see where they fit in all that. So that's part of the way of trying to interject the gender politics, talking with other staff, et cetera — when you can, or to the

extent you can, but really not, because there really is no point, you know. And that's been demonstrated, kind of.

ROSS: What do you mean, there isn't any point in talking to other staff?

TOURÉ: There's no point in the sense that, in attempting to have them change their position, or in attempting to have them be open to maybe instituting a new way of doing certain things or a new program or a new whatever, the energy could be better spent someplace else, OK? Simple dialogues around, say you're sitting around just eating lunch, whatever, eating, the conversations that come up in the context of the world. What do you think about the war? What about this? What about that? You know, and you're always the one who's like (laughs) over here, over here, and everybody else is like over here. And it's like, wow, OK. So that's what I mean, and that's what I meant when I was saying a little bit about sometimes we're isolated, which made it more important to still be doing something that was outside of that, because within that, I was not able to function in the same way that I was able to do it and function and doing it the 13 years that I was at the Crisis Center.

ROSS: (Coughs) We're going to have to call these the flu tapes. Pardon my coughing.

TOURÉ: You want to stop for a moment and get some water, take your vitamin C that I gave you?

33:55

ROSS: Possibly, but let me see if I can press through with the next question. So looking through your experiences in the Black Panther Party, the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, working in substance abuse with women, what would you say feminism means to you now?

TOURÉ: Wow, what a question. That is quite a question, it really is, in that I really haven't — let me try to articulate that. First of all I would say, to me at this point in my life, 2005, age 54, age 54, that I think that on certain levels, feminism is an ideal. It's an idea and it's an ideal. It's an ideal in terms of what a woman might be aspiring to. She's aspiring to be a feminist. She's aspiring to exist within a feminist world, a feminist reality. It is, um, ideas in regard to what kinds of freedoms, opportunities, how that woman is going to be able to live, what's available to her, you know, what she can access and in what ways, how she's seen and viewed in society, and how that view affects really all aspects of your life and your being. So you are striving for that ever so-called thing freedom. You want to be free as a woman, free as a human being, you want to have no limitations on you as a woman in regard to what you can do, what you can do. You don't want to have limitations on you in terms of what your rights are within the society, how you are viewed, OK.

So then from there, it's like, but in reality, this is an ideal because we don't have these things, and these are things that we are struggling for in real basic ways, from how my body is being dealt with, how I have control or lack of control over my body, to what kind of contracts, et cetera, I can enter into without having to have a male force there guarantee whatever the particular situation calls for, to how I am perceived and used in that society in regard to things like conflict and aggression in places where women get caught in the middle, as in rape as a weapon of war. All of these different things are things that women are struggling and endeavoring to change, to bring about the justice in that area, the fairness, the equality in those areas.

People see how to do that differently. Everybody doesn't see achieving that or getting there in the same way. Everybody doesn't see all of the same things in regard to what has to be a part of that. They don't see that in the same way. People on certain levels are obviously motivated by, and directed by, their experience and their interests, what their interests are, what their stake in it is. So anybody can be a feminist. That's why men can be, you know, they, men can be called feminists, you know — I kind of find that interesting — but men can be called feminists, you know. So it's a way of thinking and, I guess, an end result that you want to have. So —

ROSS:

When did you start using the F word for yourself?

39:00

TOURÉ:

Oh, my goodness. That book called *How to Start a Rape Crisis Center* [1972] that sort of manual. And it has a part in there where it talks about feminism, and it's talking about, you know, feminism is about bringing about change, and a number of other things that are part of this idea of what feminism is. And so, it was one of those little retreat things — I think Deirdre Wright was there, um, Solaria Catherine, Deb Freidman. It was, we were somewhere like up in, oh, Sperryville, Virginia, with this farm that [had] cows and the farmhouse set up on this hill, and you could see from the top of the hill where the house was, you could see down a mountain, and it was really deserted around there. And it was like all of us up there, women of color, lesbians, white women, we were all (laughs) up there together. And so we're having this discussion — I'm not sure, I think Judith Witherow [Native American woman from Appalachia who writes for *Sinister Wisdom*] might have also been there — we were having this conversation about feminism. And so I say, "Well, if feminism is defined as what I'm seeing here in this *How to Start a Rape Crisis Center*, then I guess I'm a feminist." You know, that was pretty basic.

ROSS:

What year was that?

TOURÉ:

That would have been about (laughs) — it was either '75 or '76. It was either '75 or '76.

ROSS: So when you started using the word “feminist” —

TOURÉ: I should say I didn’t really use the word. I mean, I never really, like, was declaring myself a feminist, you know, I was just there to talk about the work, the needs, whatever. I mean, if it has to be a category, definition, and you want to say feminism, fine, it’s feminism. I’m also a revolutionary, you know, so go ahead. When I started using the term I met a lot of opposition, not just from the term but from the work that was coming out of the term, you know. So that that’s where that little breakdown, those breakouts, would always come. You know, Are you for the people, or are you for women? Are you for the revolution, or are you just for women’s liberation?

Whatever do you mean? I am a black woman. I am certainly for liberation for our people. I don’t have to explain that. I’ve been doing that for a long time. And I would be a fool not to be about liberation for myself. So I find it very difficult to separate these out, and in fact, I refuse to do so. And so that was a thing that other women — that was a common thing. As people, women, became more involved in doing this kind of work, this was part of the way in which you got challenged, you know, and then was accused of being a lesbian or a man-hater, all of that, and being brainwashed by white women. All of that kind of went together, if that was your question.

ROSS: It was. So how did you feel that that affected the work that you did?

42:52

TOURÉ: Well, in dealing with the black community or communities of color, in those days, in those times, it made it more difficult, which therefore made me more determined that it had to be done, you know. I knew there were other women out there that thought the same way. I mean, come on, you know. And there were activist women who just needed to be able to be released and they would have that voice. And had to be able to talk about their gender politics, you know, of the black man as the king. I mean, it’s cool to be the king, and you can be the king and it’s cool for me to be the queen — but I can’t be the queen and be your slave, too. That’s out, you know. And at some point, even though we all understand on a deeper level, when we used to talk about The Man, on a deeper level, we all understand that it’s The Man’s fault, but at the same time that we understand it’s The Man’s fault, there’s a point at which we have to just like push past that and not even deal with that no more, OK? It is now no longer about The Man, OK, because we have to forge some new strategies and some new ways of doing it. So, you know, f\* them. They’re not even in it right now in certain ways. So I guess that’s how.

ROSS: Define your relationship with white women in the movement.

44:25

TOURÉ: My relationship with white women in the movement. OK. Well, I worked with white women all through the movement, all through the

time from when I very first got involved with the Rape Crisis Center to, uh, I guess up to this very moment, you know. What I found over time for myself and for others was that you came to a point at which you were tired of trying to explain certain things to white women, you came to a place where you were tired of feeling like you needed to take care of them. We can't have frank conversations because your feelings might get hurt. You have to be protected. We can't say this in front of white women, you know. Well, she's all right, she's not like that. OK, then, she should not take it like that, you know. Or just getting to a place where it's like, I cannot take care of any more white women. I cannot explain anything else to any more white women. You know, I have clearly come to a place where I see that, for them to share power is very, very difficult. For them to be able to follow the guidance and leadership of women of color is very difficult.

Now of course I start this from the point of understanding that nothing is absolute. So thus, in saying nothing is absolute, it means that this does not apply to all white women, it does not apply to all Jewish women, but it applies to enough, OK? So seeing that, OK, and through that knowing that you just simply had to move on, move ahead, forge around, forge your alliances to the point that it could be forged, right, and know that on some level, it wasn't going to go beyond that. There was, you know — this is our point, we can work together up to five. Between five and ten, we can't. We can't, OK. So we're going to coalesce and build our alliances between one and five, the stuff that exists there. The stuff that's between six and ten, we ain't doing that together. I'm doing that with some other people. (speaking very quickly) Y'all are doing y'all's [work] with some other people. Y'all ain't doing yours at all because y'all don't need to go beyond one and five.

So I would say that that is the relationship, a belief that white women really need to be challenging other white women who don't have the ability to have a broader analysis. I believe there is a need on many levels for women to acknowledge that they have privilege and they're protected, and I don't care what they say. They have a certain amount of privilege, that they are protected. So therefore, the more articulate women of color are — not more articulate, but the more the mission, the platform of the organization, depending on what that platform is, is more threatening to some women, because it does conflict with their feelings of privilege, it does conflict with their comfort zones — that's what you're experiencing right now, you know. So that is very much there. And the privilege is tied in to those things that we have been systematically excluded from, that have been denied us, et cetera, that had to do with race and economics and class and all those other kinds of things.

ROSS:

In terms of other work that you'd like to do, to marry your understanding of racism and feminism and heterosexism all together,

48:42

internationalism — because you mentioned all of those things — what do you see some of your future work looking like?

TOURÉ: What a question. What a question.

ROSS: I'll find easier ones if you want me to.

TOURÉ: No, I'm just commenting on the question. As I'm answering it, I'm commenting on it. There are two things. One is, I think on one level there are a number of things that I can think of that I know that I would sort of be interesting in doing or would like to do, and on another level, it's like I haven't really thought it through. I haven't really thought about how to marry those things in a way that they don't have to get a divorce or something. But how to marry those things, all of them or any of them, how to marry them together, to think about what those experiences have taught or what those experiences have allowed to happen, I guess in a lot of ways I haven't, I haven't thought about that.

I had been thinking about this — because I'm doing this work, because I'm organizing this program around rape as a weapon of war, it's got me thinking a number of things because of these places where these things intersect. We're talking about rape as a weapon of war, you're looking at all the various places where there is conflict in the world, on the globe, and what that means for women and children, and particularly, you know, what it means for women in these places of conflict and as it relates to globalization and imperialism and fascism, racism. It's very significant.

We're in 2005, so we're at the beginning of the 21st century, and at the end of the 20th century, et cetera, so you've been looking at things like what happens with women in conflict, what happened with the women in Bosnia, Kosovo, what's happening in the Sudan, Congo, what happened with Rwanda, Haiti, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Nicaragua. Just sort of start naming places — Korea, South Korea, Vietnam, the Civil War — just start naming places, and see and look at the treatment of women and the treatment of children, you know. Why were they treated that way? They were treated that way because they were women. They were treated that way because, in society, all these societies where there's male chauvinism and gender male dominance exists, they're seen as property.

So thus, they are used in that way as well to discourage a nation, to make men feel powerless because they were not able to protect part of their greatest treasures of things that they own, you know. That's where we get those sayings like, The hearts of people are not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. That's where, you know, all these different ideas come from in terms of resistance to this, but you see and you know that it's true because, if not, why is it happening? When you talk about spoils of war, how is it that women, who are human beings, become a part of the spoils of war, do you know? That you demoralize a village by raping all the women in the village? That

51:20



you have an idea that you can improve a race of people, lighten them up, make them more worthy, more acceptable by raping the women and having them rape — like in the Sudan with the Geneina, where they're talking about, you know, You're too black and we need lighter people in the Sudan. You're black, you're ugly, you know. So you're systematically trying to genocide out a people and bring about a new people — all of this through the wombs of women.

I find this quite disturbing, quite terrifying, as a woman with a womb and a vagina. This kind of bothers me, you know. So you have all these places where these male-dominant attitudes prevail, not just on the level of conflict, but on the internal level within the society where these exist — in places in Africa where people believe that if you rape a virgin, that it'll cure you of AIDS. It's like, whatever could you be saying? You know, it's this idea in India that if the woman does something she disgraces the whole family and she must be punished, so, you know, we can just set her on fire, because we have to avenge the honor of this family. What are you talking about?

These kinds of conflicts that exist even on an internal level within the country, within the tribe, within the society, whatever, you know, women are the ones who are abused, the ones who are traded off and traded for. In a situation where a woman, her husband dies, in some societies where the husband dies so now the woman must marry again, and her family must find her a mate or the husband's brother must step forward and marry her. And all the property now becomes his, you know — because she can't function on her own without her husband? She might be glad to have the first time to be able to roll without him. But here she is now being passed on. So she doesn't even count. It's her and her property gets taken over to this next person. All these kinds of situations, you know.

So in that kind of an atmosphere, you're not necessarily — not very likely there're going to be a lot of women's centers or battered women's shelters, rape crisis centers, you know, or even kind of support groups that are organizable in an informal way or organized in a more clandestine way, like the Jane Collective used to exist, you know, in different ways. So the idea of being able to have these women — and then of course in some places, there are centers and there are things, and I guess a lot — maybe they come out of areas where there are universities, where women have resources at the university level and where the women maybe have more education or something like that. But to be able to kind of work to bring some of that together, so people can create their own, in the way that it's going to work where they are, where they live — to be able to do that, I think that would be a really good thing, interesting and exciting, whatever, very helpful, for sure.

ROSS:

So you see your future work helping women in other countries deal with the consequences of rape being used as a weapon of war? Taking your experiences from building the movement to end violence against women here and globalizing it from the perspective of women of color?

57:15

TOURÉ: I see it as something to think about. I mean, the way you just articulated it, you made it sound so good. I mean, the way you articulated it, it sounded really, really, really good and it sounded really organized —

ROSS: Well, I don't want to put words in your mouth. I'm just trying —

TOURÉ: No, I'm saying, the way you said it, that's what it is, but I mean, I didn't say it like that. So I'm saying, you know, the way you said it, it sounds really good, the way you said it. It even sounds fundable, the way you said it. But, yeah, I mean, that's just something that was just kind of like in my mind.

And then of course I have a very real affinity for dealing with at-risk young women. Before you actually get to be a full-fledged crack addict that sold your food stamps, that has done so many things that you're going to have to be in therapy for, before that, you know, when you're that at-risk person who's like between 12 and 17 or something like that — to be able to work with young women in that group around empowerment, around self-esteem and self-perception and, you know, helping them to tap their potential for school and for other things that would shape them, you know, out of at-risk neighborhoods and communities, I think that that's something that's really critical. There are so many young women who have never been out of the city that they're in, have never even necessarily been to the other side of the city to participate in things or to do things, who've never been in a writing contest or a spelling bee or anything that makes them challenge themselves and learn something new and exciting — so many young people who know nothing about how to deal with conflict resolution, which is another thing that we added in PEERS. As we went on, we added conflict resolution and a few other things that were very, very valuable to work with. Young people, conflict resolution. I mean, every time we pick up the paper, turn on the news, some of the things that are happening with some young people — which are not the majority, but with some young people — is scary. But a lot of young people don't know how to deal with conflict resolution, I mean —

So there're just sort of different things, you know, being exposed to different women that make you feel like, Oh, OK, I want to be a young Catherine Dunham or, you know, a Shirley Chisholm, a Septima Clark, a Geraldine Miller, a Wilma Mankiller, you know, a Angela Davis, a Loretta Ross, you know, a June Jordan. I want to do this, but I never even heard of these women. But now I've been getting exposure to different women like that, and I've been getting exposure to other young women who have come out of similar situations that I have that can help be my mentor, because it is about more than, No, you can just be whatever you want to be, girl, OK? Let's close the disconnect on how to do that, you know, so I need some mentors that came the way I came, you know. So that's something that's important that's always of interest to me.

And writing, you know. I mean, I say that last, so hesitantly, because I'm still procrastinating at it, even though I've actually done some stories and stuff, but I haven't like gone and worked on them as far as, you know, re-drafts and all of that. So there are a number of possibilities. And also the other thing is that I know that there are some, a few people, but I think that I would like to see something else done in terms of how to deal with the right to be free of substance abuse as a human right, you know, because again, that has something to do with kinds of cycles and circles that you come into, access and lack of access and all of that. So, you know, that is kind of a human right thing. It's something else, too.

102:30

END TAPE 5

## TAPE 6

ROSS: This is tape two of the second part of the interview with Nkenge Touré. It's March 23rd, 2005. My name is Loretta Ross, and we're in Washington, D.C.

So Nkenge, I want to switch gears a little bit. We've talked about the political work. Now we need to talk about your personal life, because the last time we checked in on your personal life, you were divorcing Patrice, I believe.

TOURÉ: Mm-hm.

ROSS: So tell me about what else has gone on in your personal life since those days.

TOURÉ: Well, I divorced him (laughs). Well, I certainly never got married, and I have been involved in a few relationships and discovered some things about myself. Like I used to, until I really went to work at the Rape — was more involved in the Rape Crisis Center, after we were actually out of the Black Panther Party, used to clean up every day, clean house every day. Cook really balanced, good meals every day. Do laundry. And found out that, you know, I didn't feel like I wanted to clean up every day and cook every day and cook Sunday-type meals every day, wash dishes or go do laundry all the time. So I over the years adapted to using paper plates, you know, not the kind that you have to use four paper plates together and the paper comes off the plate into your mouth, you know, but the plastic-coated paper plates. But paper plates, I got to kind of liking paper plates and saving the other plates for more special occasions. I await the day when you can cook a meal and everything is disposable when you finish cooking. You just take everything and just drop it in the trash — the pots, the pans, the whole thing — just sssshhhh, in the trashcan.

Let me see. I have grandchildren now. I guess that's in the realm of my personal life. My daughters, one will be 29 this month, and the other one will be 33 next month. So (laughs) both my daughters were born after I began working for the Rape Crisis Center. [Correction: had one daughter before rape crisis center.] My grandson just turned 14 last month, and a couple of months prior to that, my youngest grandson turned four. So those are things that have happened in my life. My youngest brother, who I'm very, very close to and really loved very much, died in October of '96, and —

ROSS: What was his name?

TOURÉ: Stephen. My brother Steven. He died in October of '96. And that's his picture — well, you can't see it, but there's a picture of him behind us and a candle, and I usually always keep the candle lit for him. And so, you know, his birthday is like two days before mine: my birthday is

March 5th, his birthday was March 2nd. So I still miss him a lot and I still feel that.

You know, as I said, a few relationships with men, some things I found out about cooking and housekeeping and stuff. Also found out that, um (laughs) I also found out that very often men don't really appreciate women who can really articulate or really think for themselves, be somewhat independent. And I sort of made a decision that I wasn't going to pretend that I didn't understand the issues on *Nightline* or *Even Exchange* or, you know, any of those kinds of programs, *Tony Brown's Black Journal*, or now *The Journal*, any of those different kind of things. I wasn't going to act like I didn't have some opinion about weapons of mass destruction and so forth and so on. So sometimes that didn't really help.

One of the things that I found earlier on, and I think I may have spoken about this before, was that it was very important, after I was working at the Crisis Center, it was really important — besides as a means of liberation and working for, you know, freedom within my community through something like the Black United Front — to make sure that I was interacting in a more positive way with men. Because, you know, I had gotten to pretty much feeling like, this is not good. It was like I was starting to see all men as dogs, and I can't really afford to function that way, you know. So I had to be able to deal with that.

Personal life that — you know, I guess, outside of the issues with members of my family was a personal life that didn't really have to have, or didn't have, a whole lot of drama, per se. My drama in my personal life came from family members, because I got some drama people in my family (laughs). There are some drama people up in my family, so —

5:45

ROSS: What do you mean by that?

TOURÉ: I mean, you know, people who have crises and so forth and so on. And you get called into the crisis because you're a "stable" person. You have people skills, you know, conflict resolution, you have problem solving, counseling skills, and different things. So you get called upon often to be a part of things that are going on, you know, even if you don't always want to. And you sort of feel like, Well, what can you say? That's my family. And that's certainly not to say that my whole family is, you know, competing for Academy awards. So if anyone should ever see these, people all won't say, What was she saying about us? I'm not talking about all of you, but I am acknowledging, you know, that there's some drama folk up in this family.

ROSS: What about your mother? How is she doing?

TOURÉ: My mother is 83 now, and she is doing, I'd say she's doing pretty good, being 83. Her physical health, you know, it's like she just has a lot of pains and things that can't seem to be fixed. Some of them can be medicated, and some of them can't be fixed. And at one point I think

last year her doctor was talking about may be having a hip replacement and stuff. And she had a few years earlier, like five years ago, six years ago, had her knees replaced — one one year, one the next year. Her recovery process was really long and it involved a lot of physical therapy and everything. She doesn't really want to deal with her hip, and I don't blame her. She's 83. Her hip is old. Do you know, in terms of having that, a replacement surgery and everything to go through for dealing with that, if she feels like she don't want to do that, then she don't want to do that and she don't have to do that, you know, doesn't have to do that. She can still cook for herself and she can do some limited cleaning. I go down and I do her grocery shopping. She lives in Baltimore. My daughters go down, at times, and you know, do like cleaning up and stuff. My brother comes down. He's up in [Pennsylvania]. So we function that way. She has let us know about four or five times in the last year that she will not be placed in a group — what do you call it? — an old folks' home —

ROSS: Nursing home.

TOURÉ: A nursing home. Thank you. She will not be placed in a nursing home because they are mean to you and they take your money and, "I would rather be dead. I'm not going to be in a nursing home." OK. We've talked about this about five times, you know, so I've pretty much got the idea that you will not be placed in a nursing home. So assisted living at some point, perhaps, you know, and maybe at some point at my house, which might even mean I might have to live someplace else or have my house done differently because of all the stairs. My mother is on one floor, you know, and she has that hotrod chair that she wheels all around in when she feel like wheeling around in her chair, you know. So it would be very difficult for her, and I wouldn't want her to be someplace where she had to be confined on one floor or something. So we'll see. So she has her good days and her bad days, you know, but she's doing pretty good. She's got pretty good control of her faculties and her senses. She still reads the newspaper and reads books a lot and all that. She does sometimes tend to tell you the same stuff again when you talk to her today and you talk to her two days later. She's got some new stuff to tell you, but she'll also tell you old stuff that she forgot she had already told you the old stuff when she adds on the new stuff. But, you know, that's her.

ROSS: OK. And so, what were some of the significant people in your life that had an impact on how you see the world? I seem to recall a man named Bobby Dukes (sp?).

11:03

TOURÉ: Yes, Bobby Dukes. Yes, yes, Bobby Karega Dukes. You know, I always considered Korega to be my very best male friend, you know, because we were friends, right, really, we just hit it off well when we first met at the Black United Front founding conference at Howard University for the D.C. [chapter of the] Black United Front. And we met there, and we

became friends, you know, we could talk to each other, share political opinions and all of that. And I always respected Bobby and always admired him. And always when I needed to do something, like when I bought my first new car, and he said, you know, I'm going to go, I'm just there because you just need a strong silent black man to be there to let them know that they can't take advantage of you, that you're there for a fair deal and all of that.

And he used to wear shades, as you know. And sometimes he would even wear shades at night. It was so funny. He just wore shades all the time. He came from New York. He wore shades all the time. So he went, you know, and he really didn't say anything. He just kind of was there with his shades on.

Yeah, if I ever needed anything done, you know, house moving stuff or doing certain things, I would call Korega. His politics was very much, um, I guess he was kind of a cross between being a cultural nationalist and a revolutionary. You know, he was very committed, very dedicated to the National Black United Front and to Black Seeds, you know, their local, their individual organization here in D.C. He was a drug counselor, he worked for RAP and a couple of other places, and he was an excellent substance-abuse counselor. And always committed and always on the mark with his politics and stuff. He did have some sexism in him, but he struggled over the time and the years, we struggled around that, you know, so — and when he died, I missed him so very, very much. That was '94, and I still miss Korega sometimes. I do.

ROSS: And what did he die of?

TOURÉ: He had complications from HIV.

ROSS: So it seems like HIV has affected your brother, Korega, Patrice. I mean, your life has been really affected by HIV and AIDS.

TOURÉ: Yes.

ROSS: Talk about how that is.

14:14

TOURÉ: Hmm. I don't, um, I don't know. I mean it's very, it's difficult at times. Sometimes I don't like to talk about HIV. I don't like to hear about it. But outside of my family and so many other people that I know, you know, in a closer way and in a more distant way, it's just that HIV is one of the issues that in the latter part of when I did so much with that, when I was at Grandma's House and with PEERS, and even before when I was at the Rape Crisis Center when we first started [to participate in] the D.C. Women and AIDS organization that Denise Rouse put together, you know, and I was very involved in that, I just came to a time where HIV was one of the issues I had to step back from some and not have that be my primary issue. I mean, it always comes up. You can't work with women in these different places without dealing with that issue. And when I was at RAP, the Tando Village was

women in recovery who were HIV-positive, you know, and that was on a full-time basis for a number of years, up to '96, the end of '96.

But I find that you can't put the same emphasis and energy and attention on every issue. So HIV has been one of those for me. And yes, it has been, you know, devastating, and claimed a number of people, and a number of people in, you know — a niece, a niece and a nephew as well. So we're talking about six people in a real personal way, and then kind of moving out from there, as we both have friends who are HIV-positive, and you know, I certainly have a few women friends who have already been lost and have joined the ancestors as a result of HIV. So I'm very grateful for the people that are working in that area, doing the work. And sometimes I do find myself just not even wanting — maybe something will come on TV [and] I'll turn the sound down or leave the room and come back because it's like, I just don't want to deal with that whole — maybe I don't want to get in touch with the personalness of it.

ROSS:

Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Well, I find that, in looking at your life, AIDS moves from the headlines and from theory into being a major part of your lived reality. And so I think that's an important story to tell, because too often, people separate people with AIDS as people over there, but that it doesn't really have an impact on me or how I do my feminist activism. Yet you're a living example of how that separation is not only ridiculous, but impossible. After having made that statement, you have no response (laughs). OK.

17:25

TOURÉ:

You know, I guess I'm in agreement with it. I hadn't really thought of it in those terms. I mean, I'm very aware of the people who it has affected, aware in many ways of the impact that it had on me in terms of feeling what I lost and in terms of feeling that these people went too soon and had too much more to offer. So — but not really thinking of it in terms, I guess really in terms of how that would affect my work or affect how I see things.

ROSS:

Well, do you consider HIV/AIDS a reproductive rights issue?

TOURÉ:

Well, I would say yeah, that it's a reproductive rights or reproductive justice issue in as far as now you can be HIV-positive and you can have a child that's born that's not HIV-positive [in a way] that's not so much a by-chance thing, that you hope that the child, when they develop their own immune system, will throw off anything you gave them, but now you can actually take certain drugs, medications, that will ensure that. So it can be looked at as a reproductive issue in terms of whether or not a woman has access to that, if she's choosing to have children, or it can be looked at as a reproductive issue if her decision to have children is based around whether or not she has access to get this kind of medication that she would need. So, you know, so, yeah, I see that and if I thought about it, I'm sure that I could come up with some other links and connections as well.



ROSS: Well, one of the things that we're debating in the reproductive justice movement is why there's this artificial division between the reproductive rights movement and the HIV/AIDS movement, as if both of those movements are not taking place in women's bodies and whether or not bridge builders like yourself could be useful in closing the gap between those two movements.

TOURÉ: Well, I think it's all about will and determination. Will in the sense of whether people are willing to do it. You know how you might say you have the will but you don't have the means, or you have the means but you don't have the will? When you look at the women who are HIV-positive, in many ways, OK, understanding that nothing is absolute, when you look at the women who are HIV-positive in many ways, you look at the backgrounds and things, it brings you back around again to things that have to do with economics, have to do with access, you know, to opportunity. It brings you back around to a number of things that get into how people feel about privilege, how people look at race and class and other things.

21:25

So when you talk about building a bridge between the HIV/AIDS group and the reproductive rights movement — in this case, I say reproductive rights or reproductive choice intentionally, as opposed to reproductive justice — between the reproductive choice movement and the HIV/AIDS movement is that place where you have to look at that stuff, you know, and whether or not that can be recognized and swept out of the way in order to make the bridge or not. Would it be advantageous? I think that any time anyone in the reproductive choice movement has to ask themselves the question of whether or not building bridges and coalitions with other movements that affect and impact women, they should be able to always look at the March for Women's Lives and come up with an answer that says yes.

ROSS: Well, tell me about your experience with the March for Women's Lives. March for Women's Lives took place on April 25th, 2004 —

23:38

TOURÉ: In Washington, D.C.

ROSS: What happened? How did you get involved in the march and what was it like for you?

TOURÉ: Well, I got involved in it because a friend of mine by the name of Loretta Ross, who was the co-national coordinator for the march, had looked at how the involvement, concrete involvement of women of color in that march would come about and take place, how their involvement in it — and when I say involvement, I don't mean involvement solely in regard to we all showed up, but involvement in regard to decision making and involvement in regard to direction and message, et cetera, how that would all take place, you know, and how these women of color — and so in thinking about that, came up with

this idea of New Voices to bring in, to reach out to folks to have them come in. [New Voices is an outreach project to women and communities of color.]

And so in D.C., where the march was going to be — herstorically (sic) very often marches, national marches, took place in D.C. without a lot of participation and involvement from the community here in D.C. and in the metropolitan area. So, you know, I was asked to kind of come and work with New Voices and be a bridge person to help facilitate people being aware of the march and helping people to make their connection and their link, which was the important part. You know, not just to tell people the march is happening — and the Supreme Court is hanging on a, you know, four to five, in terms of whether abortion remains legal, *Roe v. Wade* and all that — but how is this reproductive justice, how do we get you to understand this? First of all, making sure you understand that it's not just reproductive choice but that this New Voices is talking about reproductive justice. And then how do you see your interests linked into this.

ROSS:

Well, what is reproductive justice?

26:17

TOURÉ:

OK, for me, the difference between reproductive justice and reproductive rights and reproductive choice: reproductive rights are rights that people have in relationship to their reproductive organs and their reproductive processes. You have certain rights that you are entitled to as far as how that gets dealt with. Reproductive choice is the assumption of the idea that you have these choices related to your reproduction, choices to have, to not have, where you'll have it, how you'll have it, who you'll have it with, when you'll have it, what you'll do — all of this is, it's assumed that you have these choices.

Reproductive *justice* is the recognition that there are people whose rights in relationship to reproduction is denied or violated. It's a recognition of the fact that there are people who don't have choice, or the variety of choice that some people have in regard to that. It's acknowledgment of some of the history and the herstory experienced by certain women in certain communities in relationship to reproduction, OK? And justice would be to remedy these things. And reproductive justice would be to expand or to incorporate into that definition, into that politic of reproductive rights and reproductive choice, to interject some other things and expand it. And to me, that's where this reproductive justice comes from. Now —

ROSS:

What other things?

26:18

TOURÉ:

The components of reproductive justice, first of all, is the understanding that women of color are bringing this idea of reproductive justice to the table because we are the ones that suffer from the lack of that justice as we suffer from the lack of those rights and the lack of those choices. So it is women of color that are bringing reproductive justice and entitlement to the table, to the movement, and saying, This has got to

happen, this has got to expand, this has got to be inclusive, et cetera. In doing that, that's when you get to these many bridges, because these women of color represent different communities with different experiences in relationship to the lack of reproductive justice, reproductive rights, and reproductive choice. So different communities are bringing different experiences to addressing that.

OK, and in bringing these different experiences, they are sometimes bringing different focuses, on how that expresses itself or how it manifests itself. So some women are coming with stuff around childcare, and some are coming with things around housing. Some are coming with things around HIV. Some are coming with things around incarcerated women, the right to be a mother and to be in a healthy relationship with my child. So if I'm incarcerated, what does that mean while I am incarcerated to keep that going? What does that mean in terms of what has to happen to nurture that when I come out? Because I do have the right to be a mother and not be in a situation where I'm so penalized that it destroys the fabric of what is supposed to be a mother-child relationship, et cetera.

So bringing these things in, OK, in terms of — so it's coming from women of color, it's coming from the people who've been denied the justice, the choice, the rights. That is what I mean when I say reproductive justice, and those are the women that are bringing it, because we are the ones that suffer from the lack of it. Mainstream women in the reproductive choice movement have decisions to make in regard to how they will respond to that, in regard to where they can take it on, building bridges, on coalescing and so forth and so on, because it means a certain amount of power sharing, as always. It means a certain amount of moving yourself from some of your privilege, and it means a certain amount of lack of popularity in terms of where you're going to go seek funding and do other kinds of things yourself. Are you going to go (unclear) as a white woman and talk about this stuff or not? So I hope that answers the question.

ROSS:

Are you involved in any organizations that express this analysis?

31:35

TOURÉ:

Well, I am involved with SisterSong. I believe that they express that analysis, probably in a more articulate fashion — SisterSong being a national women-of-color and reproductive-justice organization that's made up of women who represent organizations or do work in the area of health and some other areas related to women and issues of health and reproduction. Also, besides organizations, there are individual members that are a part of SisterSong. It's exciting, because SisterSong is a national women-of-color and reproductive-justice organization. It's like, really the only one, so it's very exciting and very promising.

And SisterSong did have quite an impact on that March for Women's Lives that was held in April, an impact in regard to changing the name, because I think at first it was something like Women for Choice, or something along those lines. So to change it to the March for Women's Lives — because literally, this was a battle about women's

lives and the quality and standard of women's lives — to force the participation of women of color at the table in regard to the leadership and direction for it, I feel that SisterSong was very significant and very instrumental in making that happen. And again, I got to see up front the fight you have to go through when you get to the table.

You know, it's like there are some things that just make you weary, because you just wonder at what point is it going to shift, which of course makes something like SisterSong all the more important, because it says that we have to in many ways go in our own direction, sing our own song on our own page. I mean, and that's the real deal of it. The success of that march was very much dependent upon the fact that it was a coalition effort, that there were so many diverse organizations that were a part of that, that one would hope that this would be a lesson, a positive learning experience and turning point for the more traditional women's movement, for the more traditional reproductive choice movement — to be able to see that and move in that way without all of that co-sponsorship, without all of those organizations that are traditionally not seen in women's movement circles, in the women's movement, around issues that have to do with reproductive rights, that these people who are not traditionally seen there, that that march would have probably been half the size that it was. That's a learning experience.

ROSS: Tell me something about the politics of representation of women of color in the women's movement. Because it seemed that at one point we were fighting for women of color to get a seat at the table, but now it seems like the discussion has moved beyond that, in terms of what the women of color represent once they're —

35:00

TOURÉ: At the table.

ROSS: — at the table. Tell me how you experience, first, getting women of color at the table, and [then] what do you have to say about the type of representation women of color have once they're at the table.

TOURÉ: Let me first say that I will remind myself that I'm on tape, OK —

ROSS: Well, you don't have to go there if you don't want to. This is your interview. You're in control.

TOURÉ: Yeah. When I say that I'm on tape, I mean, so let me articulate it in a little less of just a brash, base way, you know, because I think you know how I can get and how I can say things sometimes. Um, first of all, I think it is sad because it's the way that it seems invariably, that whatever movements that things happen in, you always seem to have some individuals or organizations that, once they get to the table, they very much begin to adopt the words, the practice, of the people that they're sitting at the table with. Or they very much begin to forget their mission for being at the table and become like independent operators,

you know, out for self or their organizations in many ways. That's very, that's very sad, when you adopt that.

It's like in '64 when Fannie Lou Hamer and Victoria Gray, they all went — the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party went to the Democratic National Convention in New Jersey because they didn't feel that they were getting the representation and the vote, and were basically told that they would be allowed to have, I believe it was two seats —

ROSS: I think that was Chicago, but —

TOURÉ: No, it was New Jersey.

ROSS: Oh, New Jersey. Mm-hm.

TOURÉ: That they would be allowed two seats, and some of the delegation was like, OK, well, two seats is better than nothing, you know. We came up here, we won something, we got two seats. And Fannie Lou Hamer was like, We didn't come up here for no damn two seats. There's a whole bunch of tired people want to sit down up here, you know. We ain't takin' it. We are not. We refuse, because that's not what the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party is, OK.

My point here is adapting and adopting and being willing to adapt, you know, so that, it's like a real sad thing when you do a lot of struggling, negotiating, all kinds of things to get some women of color at the table in a position to make some leadership decisions that affect the direction that something is going in and can affect the involvement of other women of color — when I say affect, I mean affect to the extent of making it easier or being more of a barrier to it. Not that they will in fact stop it from happening, but you can determine in certain instances whether it will be easier or whether there will be more barriers. It might require more resources and energy on my part that shouldn't have to be required because that's why we got you sitting there, OK. But you have now forgotten that.

So I think that's a real thing. But I think that you see it in any number of formations and not just here. But it's sad because this is where we do our work, and it's sad because we like to think that, as women, as Mother Earth and all of this, that, you know, part of the great spirit and all of this, that, you know, the guy in effect and all of that, that we would be able to do this better, OK, and be more committed and not take on the ways of the oppressor or whatever, the exploiter, once you arrive there. How was that?

ROSS: That's very good. Again, I'm really not wanting to put words into your mouth, but I just wanted to get your idea because you've been fighting to get the voices of women of color represented for a long time, and now I feel that you're at a point of asking for a different type of representation. It just ain't enough to be colored.

40:22

TOURÉ: That's right. That's right. Because there will always be apples, bananas, coconuts, and oranges.

ROSS: What does that mean?

TOURÉ: That means there will always be people who will put their own self-interest ahead of the organization or the community or the issue itself, and they will, for their own personal possible benefit, you know, side with those who are not necessarily working in the best interest of the communities that we come from or the issues that we represent. And so, in the concept of black people or African Americans, you know, you have Oreo, you have people that are white inside and black outside. You have coconuts that are white inside and brown outside. You have apples that are red outside and white inside. Bananas are yellow, and, you know — making that sort of a parallel. Disregard that.

ROSS: Well, what do you think in the future will be the legacy of Nkenge Touré? What impact will historians be able to say that Nkenge Touré's life had on building a movement for justice?

42:00

TOURÉ: Wow. Well, first of all, I don't know if herstory can say it or history can say it or whatever. I know one thing is that in the 13 years that I worked at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, I served a lot of people and I helped a lot of people. And I still run into people sometimes who say, you know, I remember when you used to work at the Rape Crisis Center. You were my counselor. Or, You were the counselor for a friend of mine. Things like that. Because I counseled a lot of women when I worked at the Rape Crisis Center, and I feel good about that. Also doing the education in the schools, the program, I run into people who say, I remember when you came to my school. You came to Roosevelt. You came to Paul. You came to Hart. You came to Charles Drew. You came to my school. And that was really good.

So I feel that I have touched a number of people's lives in a personal way that may not ever get broadcast, and sometimes I think about, What if I had not ever worked at the Rape Crisis Center? There would have been these people who wouldn't have got touched in that way that, you know, that you helped them to be able to heal themselves and resolve their conflicts so their lives could be better. That's really good.

Um, I think that the involvement of women of color at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, through the organizing for Anti-Rape Week and working with the people who organized the Take Back the Night marches and the very first Third World Women and Violence conference, national conference, held in this country, that though were only about 75 women or so that attended, it was a significant thing for the First National Conference on Third World Women and Violence.

I think that I played a significant role in helping to shape and develop a network and a movement of like-minded, feminist-minded, whatever, third world women and women of color in the metropolitan area in doing work in the area of violence against women, you know,

kind of coming together to study and to expand around violence against women, because we were looking at sexual assault, domestic violence. We were looking at street harassment, you know, we actually tried to get D.C. declared a hassle-free zone, free of the hassle, sexual, verbal harassment and hassling of women. I worked on the interfamily bill to change the definition and way of dealing with domestic violence and battering, on the rape bill.

Just the consciousness of women around being active in gender politics, helping to facilitate this idea that we had to end the silence in our communities, and I think that all of these third world women of color, African American women, women in the Latino community, and so forth and so on, but definitely in the black community, of pushing and making dialog happen in our communities around us when people didn't want to hear it, you know, and challenging people and their ideas about it. So I think, I believe I've made some contributions in that area, you know, maybe helping to extend how people look at violence against women, like [what] we did with the whole braid thing, when they were wanting to fire these women at the hotel because they were wearing their hair in cornrows, you know. And I said that that was a form of psychological violence against women, and even though I had to sort of struggle with the Rape Crisis Center, the Crisis Center was able to initiate and take the leadership to organize a major demonstration in front of the Marriott Hotel down on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, where we actually had the unions, a couple of the union locals involved, and had almost a thousand people out there in the streets, including Ras Michael out there in the streets to protest that.

ROSS: Who's Ras Michael?

TOURÉ: Ras Michael is a brother, a Rastafarian brother who used to live here in D.C. that did a lot of (unclear) and things like that, you know, and the fact that he was out there for that was just ever amazing to me, that he supported that.

ROSS: I believe he's with the Carter G. Woodson Association for the Study of Black Life, or something like that?

TOURÉ: Yes.

ROSS: Is that who you're talking about?

TOURÉ: He was a part of that, the UNIA [United Negro Improvement Association] and all of that. He has now moved to Florida, but yes.

ROSS: OK. So, history will record that you had quite an impact on building the movement to end violence against women, both locally, nationally, and internationally. I seem to recall you telling a story about women from South Africa?

48:00

TOURÉ: OK.

ROSS: Maybe you're not —

TOURÉ: Maybe you have me confused with some of the people that you know.  
(laughter)

ROSS: No, and it may not be — 30 years is not easy to remember all that happened.

TOURÉ: Thirty years is a while.

ROSS: But there was a book called *How to Start a Rape Crisis Center*.

TOURÉ: Yes.

ROSS: These women in South Africa got hold of this book, and I seem to recall when I was at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center that these white women showed up from South Africa.

TOURÉ: Oh, the white women from South Africa.

ROSS: Wanting to talk —

TOURÉ: Yes.

ROSS: — to us about how to start a rape crisis center.

TOURÉ: Right.

ROSS: And they seemed to be a little surprised because they walked in — this is my story, maybe — and they looked at Barbara, who was the white women who was the counselor at the time, and they immediately went to her.

TOURÉ: Barbara K — [Kletzick].

ROSS: Right (laughs). And Barbara pointed over to me and said, "Oh, you need to talk to her." And you could see their jaws drop when they realized that they had to talk to this bevy of black women about how to start a rape crisis center. And I don't think they were prepared to do that. And I think you were there at that meeting. That's why —

TOURÉ: Yeah, I remember that now. But when you first said South [Africa], my mind immediately went to the indigenous South African people, and so I was like, what? But now, I do remember that, just as I remember that when we went to Kenya for the end-of-the-decade conference, that our rape reference, the one on the myths and the facts and everything, that we had had the logo done with the faces of women of color, that it had

name

49:52



spread itself so many places, and that when we went, there were people who were somewhat familiar with it. But that once we returned, we just got all kinds of responses from people who had taken it back to their countries and were like using the logo and just using the information. And it was just amazing. It was so great.

ROSS: So I think of those as part of your legacy, Nkenge, because certainly you brought me and hundreds of women of color who are now active feminists into the Rape Crisis Center. So whether you think of us as your children or your prodigies or whatever (laughs), never stop to claim the fact that you created a space for women that didn't exist before.

TOURÉ: Yeah, well, yeah. I have to think about that. I've not really thought about it in those terms. And another thing I think that is very — is that we did the first Anti-Rape Week in, well, it was actually, the first was just a weekend, and it ended with the march that *Aegis* and FAAR were organizing. That was like in 1978. I remember Sue Lerutes [sp? a white woman at the Rape Crisis Center] did the graphic work for the flyer. That that started out — it was like a weekend. We called it a week, but it was really a weekend because — and then it actually grew to being able to be a whole week of activities and so forth and so on that included the march. It included so many different aspects of sexual assault, and it's how we were able to pull in so many women of color to work on it. And that, you know, it grew, and that the Rape Crisis Center, they changed to Rape Awareness Week, and then Rape Awareness Week became Rape Awareness Month because of NCASA, the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault. And it's still recognized every year. And I feel very, just really kind of amazed about that one when I think about it, you know, from '78, from a weekend, to what continues to exist now. And it is also national, you know. I don't know necessarily that — I mean, the ideas are out there, so National may not have — when NCASA did it, they may or may not have known about us, but certainly the Crisis Center was a member of NCASA. They may or may not have known what we did when they decided to have this national month, you know, but certainly our Center here, to have something that started in '78 that still exists in 2005 is rather significant.

ROSS: And it's due to you. Are there any concluding thoughts or final comments you'd like to enter into the record about the woman formerly known as Anita Stroud that is Nkenge Touré, in terms of your feminist activism?

53:15

TOURÉ: Oh, well, one thing I believe, that from junior high school, when I first began to get involved in politics, you know, of where I was, anyway — from junior high school to now, I have really come to believe that whatever ways my purpose manifests itself, I believe that my purpose is to serve. I believe that that's what I'm supposed to do, that I'm supposed to be of service. People have different identifications or

whatever given to them. I believe mine is to serve. I believe that one of my gifts in being able to do that is the ability to articulate what I'm thinking and feeling, a talent for being able to bring people together and work with people, and work through conflicts and arrive at kind of solutions-oriented sorts of things. Good counseling skills, though I don't do good on counseling myself. I think that until the day that I move into the next life, and probably in the next life, that I will always be committed to issues of liberation of people, you know, of issues that have to do with justice and liberation, that I will always be committed to dealing with issues that have to do with women and that have to do with girls. And I guess finding different arenas and different ways to express that, different ways to fight for that.

ROSS: Well, what advice would you offer young people coming up behind you?

55:32

TOURÉ: The first thing is, pace yourself so you don't burn out. That's a very good one to learn. I mean, we just sort of took everything on and did everything and didn't really, I feel, didn't really take enough time to really incorporate ourselves into that, as far as taking care of ourselves physically, as far as doing little girly things for yourself, you know, that you rejected. I mean, I've had to think about how old I really was when I decided it would really be OK for me to have a manicure or a pedicure. Because it was like, you know, Who's got time for that? That's counter-revolutionary. And if you're a feminist or a womanist, you don't really — which is ridiculous, as I see it now, OK. Or, you know, I had time to advocate for all of my clients, but I don't have time to keep my own doctor's appointments or my own dental appointments and stuff. So I would say, to know how to take care of yourself. I would say, to know how to pace yourself, because this struggle is going to be long, and believe me, it ain't going to run out of issues, you know. So if you take a few vacations, when you come back, it'll all still be here.

To be able to make the connection between your spiritual planes and your other planes, you know. That you need something that's, I feel, something that's bigger than yourself that you can believe in and connect to. And to me that's just sort of a universal principle. It doesn't have anything to do with religion or anything, but some universal principle, that you are able to take some time to know yourself and appreciate the value — something we didn't get until really the Black Women's Health Project came along.

That white women had CR groups, they had the consciousness-raising groups from the late 60s into the 70s, but women of color, it was like you didn't have time to just like focus on yourself or have some time for yourself. You know, when people would talk about, I need my space, I need some room, they'd be like yeah, OK. If you were telling people, I need my space, then they've got a space for you over in some mental institution, over at St. Elizabeth's, over at Crown's (sp?) or out in Springfield somewhere. Yeah, we've got a place for you. You need some space? Because you were all about nurturing and taking care of

everybody else and being a superwoman and all that stuff. So to know that you don't want to be that, you don't have to be that, you know.

But also to know that you must serve your community. You can't function without knowing whose shoulders you're standing on. No, don't assume that women always said, If the man gets home first he should cook, because they didn't. That wasn't your unique idea that was just invading your mind. A lot of stuff happened for that to be the thinking, and you need to know what that is. You need to honor that, and you need to build on that and move from there. You need to be able to be responsible and accountable and do some things that support your community and not allow yourself to just be into individualism and believe that everything you ever achieved was totally all through your own effort and your effort alone, because that's insane, you know. So —

I guess things like that. And having faith in yourself to raise your voice and know that it is important to have a voice, you know, to have a voice and to use your voice, to get the courage to use your voice, you know, that we don't always have. Even if we have voices, we don't always — even though I have a voice, I don't always have the courage to use the voice as courageously or as fearlessly as I think that I should. So, yeah.

ROSS: Those are your life lessons to offer future feminists.

59:28

TOURÉ: I guess so. In a way, yeah, you know. And of course, also, try and do your homework around stuff. You know, you can't always just kind of just run in there. Sometimes I just go in off of my heart and my emotion and my passion. And so, you have to also be able to do homework and do research. And I find a lot of times that whatever it is that I'm working on, it is then that I do work and research or learn some things about it. So sometimes that's how I learn. I get motivated to learn based around certain things that I have to take on or have to do.

ROSS: All right. Well, on behalf of the Sophia Smith Collection and the Voices of Feminism Project, I'd like to ask you a few concluding questions. First of all, has anyone else ever done an oral history or an extended interview with you before, and if so, are tapes of that available?

TOURÉ: No, no, no.

ROSS: Do you have papers or other memorabilia you would consider donating to the Smith College Collection?

TOURÉ: Yes, yes, yes.

ROSS: And would you like a copy of this interview on DVD or VHS?

TOURÉ: VHS, because I have two VCRs, and DVD if I can get one because I've got a DVD and more people are having DVD players. So when I go show it to them, they'll need the DVD.

ROSS: So you're saying you want one of each?

TOURÉ: I want one of each, yes.

ROSS: OK. And once this tape is transcribed, you'll get a copy of the printed-out transcript —

TOURÉ: My extensive words.

101:23

ROSS: — as well as, at the end of the finishing of your part, you'll get the full edited transcript and copies of the tape. We do need a commitment from you that, when you get the transcript, that you will take the time to read it, and get it back, and not hold it for a year or whatever.

TOURÉ: OK. I can do that.

ROSS: That you will do so expeditiously.

TOURÉ: OK.

ROSS: Again —

TOURÉ: There's different definitions of expeditiously. No. Yes, I will (laughs).

ROSS: Again, on behalf of Smith College, Joyce Follet, Sherrill Redmon, and the Voices of Feminism Project, thank you.

TOURÉ: Well, thank you, Loretta. And let me just say this one last thing, and that is, in terms of — you were asking about something for people, younger people. And that is I think the last thing I will probably [say] is, keep a record. As I shared with you, I have stuff that as I was sharing with you, you were saying, "You're kidding? You've got that?" You know, because I just didn't know, and since I was not a good typist and all those other kind of things, and I came late to technology, and kicking and screaming to it, you know, I'm like the old-fashioned hard-copy-type person. So I'm saying, like, back up your hard drives, if that's the terms for now, and save some hard stuff. Save some of the actual flyers, leaflets, booklets, brochures. Save some of the actual things from events that you've had as a way to help to document it, you know, and not just assume, but actually hold onto that stuff, because it will be important in terms of passing on this herstory that we have.

ROSS: Well, thank you again, Nkenge.

1:03:18

END TAPE 6

END INTERVIEW

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