Abena Busia interview

Women, Education and Leadership at Rutgers
2015
Interviewee: Abena Busia (AB)
Interviewer: June Cross (JC)

AB: My name is Abena Busia and I’m the chair of the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies. I’m also faculty member of the English Department who actually originally hired me 35 or something years ago. So I’m on an English faculty member really in, in black … In African-American and black Diaspora literature and I also serve on the board of the Center for Women’s Global leadership and the Center for African Studies. I’m the longest continuous serving member of the board of the center for women’s global leadership at this point because I was appointed by Charlotte Bunch [Center for Women’s Global Leadership] from day one and maintained by Radhika Balakrishnan [Department of Women’s and Gender Studies].

So I’ve served under the both directors and I think I’m the only person left who had actually served under both and the- again, with the group of colleagues, all of them still around with the foundation members of the Center for African Studies are also still here. All of us served in various capacities, all of us at some point been director and in charge of various programs and so on and like that but, you know, I’m here. Yes.

JC: You sound at home here at Rutgers?

AB: Yes, actually I love it here at Rutgers [laughter]. I think it’s because all the things I care about, all the things I identify myself as professionally are strong here or people, I found communities here. A group of people in, in African-American literature and African-American studies, a group people in African studies, even writers, you know, those are wonderful creative writers and I’ve never taught creative writing but this is a place that is invested in writing and we have that writers at Rutgers series and the writers in Rutgers from Rutgers here which I’ve read in. So all the different moving parts of my life have found very strong communities here and, of course, the women’s community which is what centrally interests you.

And I’ve said this before, you know, I, at the start of my professional career, I was most conscious of being an African. I did my undergraduate and graduate work at Oxford, in English literature and where my undergraduate was in English literature my doctorate was in social anthropology because I did a study of images of Africa in post-war popular fiction and images of- at Oxford it’s anthropology and not literature [laughter].

But, I … So I came to the United States conscious of my "Africanness" and therefore conscious of my blackness. I became conscious of women’s studies and became a feminist here at Rutgers. I mean I remember one of the early, you know, iterations of our lecture series here back in the mid-80s, I was asked to speak and I remember entitling my papers something like “What Do I Call I?,” you know, and talking about that, that exciting process of arriving at a place where all this wonderful work was being done on women and finding a niche to in that context of, you know, establishing women’s studies as a discipline also finding a space to talk about blackness and African womaness and learning to negotiate the difference between, if you like being seen as African-American and knowing myself to be African in terms of what my heritage and what’s my journey, my different journey here had been.

And this has been a place that I’ve been able to explore all of that and be able to help create programs. I mean I’ve helped found the Center for African Studies. I was there at the start of the Center for Women’s Global Leadership. I joined a very nascent series because I came to Rutgers when
we were still colleges. I was the last Livingston college English person hired back in academic year ‘80-'81.

So I arrived in the fall of ‘81 just before the university was reorganized and the colleges abolished for the faculty. The colleges were not abolished for the students for another 20 or 25 years or something but ... So when I arrived there was different women studies programs that had been at Livingston and at Rutgers and, of course, at Douglass which when we were reorganized came together as the program of women studies and we hired Alice Kessler-Harris to pull us all together and so on.

And so we became a department sort of only 15 years ago. That is we've had, you know, 45 years of, of women's studies, 35 of which I've been here and 15 of which we've been a department of which I’m now chair. So I've been part of making it happen of watching it grow and, and seeing, you know, and when I say learning, because you know how sometimes when something is there when you get there, you fail to comprehend really that it's new ...

JC: Yeah, or you fail to comprehend its role in the instance.

AB: Yes. Yes.

JC: ... it's like ...

AB: Yes and really and then you sort of slowly think, "Oh my goodness, this is what I’m about all." I have the same experience for example with the African Literature Association which I joined when I came in 1981 and it was there, I joined it, you know, and didn't fully comprehend that this is an organization that was less than 10 years old when I joined it, you know, now 40 years later I’m one of the old timers, you know [laughter] but yes, you know, it's that ...

I think because I’m in fields that as disciplines were just finding themselves and becoming established and Rutgers has been a space that's been really open to that. Really open to the adventure and fabulous really, extraordinary students and fabulous colleagues

So I was employed by Livingston but I already knew when I came that the organization was taking place. However, I was embraced by the Livingston community and 1 or 2 people like Cheryl [Wall]. I mean Cheryl actually interviewed me. [laughing]

Cheryl was part of my interview team. But because I joined a Livingston very afraid of its social justice mission disappearing into this large liberal arts stream. I remember the first few years of our existence the people who were Livingston faculty started what we call the progressive potluck and we would meet monthly and we bring a potluck dish and just meet and eat and share and that went on for several years but I also very quickly became a Livingston fellow and I was actually employed to run the Livingston Honors program which was it had...

The year I interview was its first year and David Leverens who was chair of English at the time, knew he was leaving and he had me as his replacement and I taught it jointly with Professor Dennis Bathory in Political Science so I knew I was coming so I immediately had a cohort of the Livingston, old Livingston people and I became a Livingston fellow and was a Livingston fellow until the fellows were abolished with, at the reorganization 25 years later and I ended up directing the Livingston Honors program for many years.
New Jersey is a very diverse state as you may know, Rutgers Newark has been voted the most ethnically diverse college campus public, of a public university. I think for the last 20 odd years.

And that number is not just the conventional black-white or even black-white-brown. It includes all the different white ethnics, Polish-American, Hungarian-American, large Portuguese community etcetera. I mean those ... If you drive from here to Princeton, you will suddenly see Magyar this and Magyar that, you know. So New Jersey is a very, very ethnically diverse state and it shows in our student body. According to the, I believe it was the 2000 census, we have both the highest concentration of people from the Asian subcontinent and twice the national average of the percentage of its foreign-born population as continental Africans.

I think the national average is something that 2.4 the percentage in New Jersey is 5.6 or something like that and what's interesting about that figure is that it includes people like me who were born abroad but it does not include our children. Heritage students who identify as African but are actually technically American. So if you were to include that number the diversity is even greater.

I think that has a lot to do with it but I also think Rutgers with its peculiar, I mean I can't understand it’s had a very peculiar history of experimentation, we’re a land grant university. Henry Rutgers after whom the university's name we discovered recently that in fact funded a women's college in New York before he gave money to Rutgers. I don’t know. It’s an interesting question. I think, I'd like to think there's something about the people of New Jersey [laughter]. I don’t know.

JC: ... yeah, or maybe just people they hire.

AB: The people we hire that has ...

JC: Present company included.

AB: Yes. You know, there's ... I mean, you know, if you start to think about the origins of the university, the Dutch Reformed Church was not a radical church but the people who founded Rutgers were radical in the sense that they were Dutch Reformed wanting to create and educate English speaking ministers for the Dutch Reformed Church and the Dutch weren’t having it which is why we’re chartered by the English [laughter], yes. The Queen’s College, yes.

So maybe one could study a little bit more but I mean it’s perfectly true. It’s one of the reasons a lot of us stayed and I’m sure you found there were a lot of us who've been here a long time.

JC: Yeah. I’m really impressed with that.

AB: Yes. Yes. We stay because I think what I found and what I notice the more I go to other places is that we seemed to have found a way to be supportive and collegial without necessarily getting into everybody's personal business. [laughter] I mean people, people know how to be supportive colleagues. How to support your projects, how to allow you to teach what you need to teach. Will read your papers and comment honestly on them. Will come to your brown bag lunch. Will throw you a book party! I mean, you know, there’s that sense of a common purpose..

JC: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. A collegiality.

AB: Yes. A real, and in fact, having said common purpose, you know that we have I think one of the best named committees on any university campus and we actually have a committee to advance our
common purposes. We call it “common purposes” but that's what, and that's the committee that supports a lot of nascent LGBTQ, different ethnic diversity, race projects et cetera. I mean, you know, if you've got a, if you're a faculty member and you have a new project that is like that, you apply to common purposes and they give you the money.

We actually have a, a committee to advance our common purposes and I think that says a lot about this university.

Well, that's a wonderful project. That's, of course, President Obama's flagship project for young African leaders. It's part of the Young African Leaders project and the Mandela Washington Fellows, the first 2 years it was 500 fellows. This year it was doubled and that we have a thousand fellows who are in groups of 25. So the first 2 years at 20 universities, this year, of course, at 40 universities.

And it's competitive on both sides. The fellows have to compete in their countries of origin. They're all young African leaders. They have to be between over 18 but below 35 who are either in their voluntary capacity or in their NGO work doing something distinctive and unusual in a leadership capacity and they write and say what they're doing and compete to come for the leadership training. And across various fields. I only know 2 because they're the two that are here, the business entrepreneurs and the civic leadership.

And on this side of the Atlantic, we as universities have to compete and propose something and our director here is Dr. Ron Quincy at the School of Social Work. He first brought the project to Rutgers, the civic leadership one and we won the civic leadership competition 3 years in a row. So we're one of the few universities that has won the competition every year, 3 years in a row on civic leadership and that's the one I'm involved in, but also this year, I think we're one of only 6 universities that won 2 competitions because our colleague Kevin Lyons and Johanna Bernstein in the School of Business also put forward a proposal for business entrepreneurs and they won.

So we actually have 2 cohorts here. They come for 6 weeks and we have to do a program of leadership training and my colleague Ousseina Alidou [Department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Languages and Literature] and I have been senior faculty under Ron Quincy's directorship doing the one on civic leadership.

JC: How do you train somebody to be a leader?

AB: It's interesting but, you know, there is a whole discipline now. Well this is, you’re interviewing me because Women's and Gender Studies is part of the Institute for Women's Leadership. The person you should ask is Mary Trigg [Department of Women’s and Gender Studies]. [laughter] But I think a lot of work has been done especially by feminists on, because, because we have had to think about breaking glass ceilings [laughter]. Did you watch last night?

JC: I did.

AB: And, and think about well if the systems that we've been living under don't work for us, what is different, what do we need to do? There is now a whole field of leadership studies thinking through what makes a leader? How? How do you pick up? How do you communicate? How do you organize yourself? How do you practice, what is the difference? What are the gender differences? And there is an answer to that. There is ...

Well, it's complicated but you, you think, you have to think about different communication styles, different organizational styles. Respecting a different form of leadership. You see historically,
leadership, the concept has been a top-down one. Most of you who do leadership training are training us to think bottom-up leadership. You don’t impose a structure. You figure out how to bring out organically who the people are.

You, you try to think ... It's, it's you have to think very differently about what you mean by leadership and very differently about what, how you think of community. Okay, because and one of the, the most practical ways, we do, we do an, a wonderful exercise actually with the fellows. We give, we tell them ahead of time. Think of a woman who you consider a leader, but you don't have to think about a political leader, it could be anybody. Your grandmother, a village elder, a school teacher.

Think of someone who has influence your life, who has helped shape your life or who would you like to emulate? Come and talk about them. We break it down. What is it about them that made them, have the kind of influence or authority? Very often informal to begin with, that they have and when you do that, you then manage to figure out the elements of effective leadership that matter to you and then you can translate them into larger spaces.

JC: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

AB: And that, that's the process.

AB: The Center for Women's Global Leadership which as I’m sure you know was Charlotte Bunch's brainchild. Charlotte Bunch came here as a Laurie Chair.

JC: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AB: I can’t remember how many years ago now. Almost 30 years ago, 25 years ago and Mary Hartman, the first director of the Institute for Women's Leadership said, "We got to keep her." And, you know, how do you keep an activist without a PhD with no prior college experience? Think tank and activist experience but not at university, at a university. Of course, Mary Hartman could do it.

We have a Bloustein School. None of us to this day know how she managed to persuade them, but she persuaded the Bloustein School that they wanted Charlotte Bunch [laughter] because that’s our School of Public Policy. So Charlotte Bunch was initially employed at the Bloustein School and her, the deal she cut was, "I want to continue- I want to do this work. I need a space to be able to reflect on what I've been doing and what women's leadership means and what I've learned from being with woman around the world and et cetera."

And Rutgers said yes. So Charlotte's project the first ten years or so, was to do what we call the WGLI. The Women's Global Leadership Institute, where, again, it was middle ranking women. It was women, young women but with sufficient authority to effect change when they went back without already being at the top.

Identified from around the world to come for leadership training and, again, I help choose the women who are coming from Africa to do training, to answer the questions as you've been asking and who had to think of a project and that was necessary to the institutions that had sent them. That they could implement when they went back home. And it's had an incredible success. Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, one of the founders of the African Women's Development Fund says unequivocally that one of the reasons that inspired the African Leadership Institute was her coming to our leadership institute here and realizing how much we needed one on Africa geared towards African issues.
And, of course, the most dramatic thing that the Center for Women's Global Leadership has done is the 16 Days and that literally came out of a conversation between the people who were taking Charlotte's first seminar. In those days when the Laurie Chair was fully funded, the Laurie Chair gave a seminar which was a mix of graduate students, upper division undergraduate students, faculty and independent scholars who are interested in the theme to come and talk and she did have weekly sessions and so on.

And apparently, it was that group of women who noticed that there were 16 days between the International Day Against Violence Against Women, November 25th, and the International Human Rights Day, December 6th or 8th or whatever it is. And they said, "Wouldn't it be good if we actually did something every day for 16 days and got other people to join us?"

So they did it for, you know, that year and thought ... I don't think anybody thought it was going to last 35 years and become the huge international event that it is, but the 16 Days Against Violence Against Women started around Charlotte Bunch's seminar table by a group of 4 or 5 women taking her original seminar and now I don't think I can go anywhere in Africa in those 16 days and not see women's groups taking part.

I forget now I saw, I just saw the poster but I think last year, I forget. I forget the number but I think over 900 women's organizations ...

JC: Was the huge number Radhika's poster?

AB: Yes. Yes. A huge number of ...

JC: Yeah, and then strikingly so ...

AB: Yes.

JC: ... because you don't hear that much about it in the United States and yet....

AB: Yeah.

JC: ... it's like a pebble in the pond.

AB: Yes, but 60, 60% of the events take place on the African continent. I think the second largest is Asia. It's very big in Africa, Asia. It's very big in the third world countries. You know, it's, it's been remarkable and people just do it and run with it every year.

AB: Well, the interesting thing is in this group, a lot of the men actually work on gender. Very sensitive to gender and gender empowerment and it's part of their issue. There are some who need coming along but there are also some quite conservative women, you know, but on the whole the exercise went really well and also, no gender has been a..

JC: How do you know? How do you...

AB: Well, you know, for us for Ousseina [Alidou] and I, it's been a cross-cutting thing through, throughout. So it wasn't just the one day. Everything we'd like, you know, on the day we were doing civil rights we showed them the film on Daisy Bates [laughter]. So for us, we've interwoven ... I mean the very first thing we took them to was *Eclipsed* on Broadway and then we showed them *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*. 
So we've constantly made them think about how different leadership looks when it's a woman and the different fates of leadership of women leaders. The 3 films we've shown them were *Pray the Devil back to Hell*, *Daisy Bates*, and *Unbought and Unbossed*. Okay? [laughter]

JC: Well and *Naira*?

AB: Pardon?

JC: Those were the documentaries?

AB: Yes. Yes. Yes. So we showed them those 3 and then we showed them *Naira*. Absolutely. Okay. So for us we've had an investment in making them think to first of all to recognize how women are treated differently. How come so many people have forgotten Daisy Bates and never knew Shirley Chisholm's name?

We make them think about that. We make, we make them think about, you know, who writes history and how and what are the investments and then when people are famous, like Rosa Parks, there it's a distorted view of who they were. I mean they were stunned when we made them read the opening chapters of the *Dark End of the Street*.

And they have to grapple with the fact that Rosa Parks had been doing activist work for women's bodily integrity for two decades before the Bus Boycott and that in fact the Bus Boycott was possible because she had this network to call on. And so what is the meaning of the distortion of these different stories, you know? They've been thinking about that right from day one. You know, right from day one.

So by the time we made them sit down and do the exercise about their grandmothers. [laughter]

JC: They were ready?

AB: They were ready [laughter].

JC: They had started thinking about it in a different way already.

AB: They had started thinking about it. Yes.

They are huge. In a sense we're fortunate at Rutgers, that Women's Studies the department is part of this larger consortium, because together we're like, you can't get around us [laughter], you know, so we have the Institute for Women's Leadership which is the umbrella for these eleven organizations which are there for not standing alone. We sit together. We put it together. We support each other and so on.

But Rutgers is rich in women's organizations. I don't think there's any university in the country that has 11... a women's college, a women's studies department and 9 other centers and institutes of different magnitude. All of them devoted to women's issues and some of them of long standing like our department. Well, you know, Douglass is about to be 100 years old. The department itself is 45 et cetera.

The Eagleton Institute I think is, it's this building. This organization is almost 45, in the 40s. I mean about 40 years old et cetera. But I think the challenge is for us in women's studies is, you know, the
proverbial backlash and we're facing it and I think there's a, you know, in the same way as there's an African-American backlash to the, or backlash against African-American to this fact that there's an African-American in the White House, in a house, as Michelle Obama reminded us, built by slaves.

There's also as we know been a kind of backlash against women studies. Against, you know, those usual story, you have to deal with the boring question of, you know, why not men studies and men matter too and, you know, a refusal to acknowledge that women's studies...

JC: Or why do women need their own pot of money coming from their own, raised by their own alumni.

AB: Yes. Yes. Yes, et cetera. And I also think that we ourselves need to be careful. You know, the move towards gender studies is both positive and negative, can be both positive and negative. Gender studies has become an excuse in some spaces not to deal with different bodies, [laughter] you know. In other spaces, of course, it's the space that enables us ...

JC: What do you mean but not dealing with...

AB: ... to deal with radically different bodies.

JC: When you say ... Oh I'm sorry I don't know what you mean.

AB: Women.

JC: Oh okay.

AB: You do gender studies and you can forget about the difference it makes being a women.

JC: As opposed to transgender woman.

AB: No. As opposed to being a man. You then can fix on ... It's social relations. It's this and that and you can submerge but there's the other extreme also. It's gender studies that has opened the door to do seriously transgender and intersex and all of that. So what I'm saying is that there's a, there are opposing forces and in some places, like at Rutgers, gender studies has insisted on the door opening and widening and we will do transgender and all of that.

In other spaces, we do gender so we don't have to use the W word. [laughter] You know, and we need to be aware of the multiple impulses and what, what's going on with our own discipline so we don't lose the gains we've made in that regard.

Oh I think one of the biggest changes is that they are so much more comfortable with sexuality studies talking about sex, talking about lesbian, gay, bisexual, inter- I mean these terms are common currency and ways they were never. When I was at college, you whispered homosexuality. You hardly spoke the word lesbian. And that's what there was. Nothing else. You know, now, I think that's one of the biggest changes. They are, they are much ... First of all, they're much more conversant, much more comfortable and that's like "so what's the big deal." And also those who recognize that it remains a big deal are much more courageously militant, you know.

And but there's also a larger collective. But for me, that's been one of the biggest differences talking about sex and all its ramifications and manifestations is not as, is not as taboo as it used to be. Of course, we know that there are some places where it still is. I mean I remember a very enlightening
discussion at the first year I was chair and I went to the National Women's Studies Chairs and Directors meeting where we were having a discussion about name changes because it's a big thing. Women studies, women's and gender studies, feminist studies, sexuality studies, what do we call ourselves and why and why do some people insist on holding on to women and others not, et cetera.

And I remember the people from Texas saying there's absolutely no way we could ever become a sexuality studies department. It would not get through, you know, the legislature just wouldn't, you know. And you don't ... So we have to think about that.

JC: They're still having trouble teaching the Civil Rights Movement. [laughter]

AB: Yeah. There you go. Exactly. So but you have to think about things like that. And so, you know, here I am at Rutgers where, you know, Rutgers has the oldest gay rights student organization in the country and so I've grown up as a professional person in this space and then you realize “Now wait a minute here,” you know not everywhere is like this still. And that you can't forget the battles, that your other colleagues are still having to fight, you know.

AB: You know, the single-most difficult and the single-most important class in the entire semester is the first class. ... What looks like just a one-page syllabus because I'm not one of these people that has the 2-page syllabus because I have a pretty simple, you know, introductory statement. The course is in 4 sections. These are the titles of the sections. These are the books we are reading and page 2 is, these are your assignments, at least on the first day.

But I spend that entire hour, hour and a half explaining the syllabus. I have to have a syllabus that tells a specific story or raises a specific set of questions. I can't walk into a classroom unless I can tell that story. So by the end of the first class, the students will know why, what are we investigating and why are we using these texts to investigate this question and that's the single-most difficult thing I do. That's the single-most important thing I do is the first class. I have to have a syllabus that whose story I can tell.

Otherwise, I'd be too, I'd be too afraid to walk into the classroom. [laughter]

JC: I'm never that organized and I'm always petrified to walk into the class. Maybe I'll try your method and see if it works. [laughter]

AB: No. I can't. I just ... I've, I've never ... I mean, you know, you know, being prepared for individual classes is sometimes a challenge but I know why and the students know why.

JC: Why you're there.

AB: Why we're there and why we begin with, you know, Song of Solomon followed by The Chaneysville Incident or whatever it is we're doing. I mean they can tell you why and they should be able to tell you why and I can tell you why by the, by the beginning of the first class.

Well, you're talking to somebody who went to an old girls boarding school, private boarding school in England, and a woman's college at Oxford. So I was at St. Anne's and it was my year that made what looking back on I think was a very foolish decision to go co-ed. I don't think any of the woman's colleges at Oxford should have gone coed until 100% of the men's colleges were 50% women. I feel that very strongly. I'm a great believer in single sex education for women. I think the verdict maybe out on whether it's as good for men as it is for women but I think it makes a huge...
JC: Is Rutgers 50%...

AB: No, no, no. I’m ... No, no. It's a good question.

JC: I know you’re talking about England. I’m just wondering?

AB: It’s a good question. Yes we should. I don't know the statistics today for men and women at Rutgers.

JC: So you feel there’s still a role for Douglass?

AB: Yes. Absolutely. Yes, I do. Absolutely. I think there's a very important role especially as a space for nurturing women's leadership. I really do. And I think Douglass does it well both socially and intellectually and academically and everything else. The STEM program won an award 20 years ago. I mean I think Douglass is a wonderful space for focusing on what needs to be done in figuring out places to do it. Yes, I do. I am a strong supporter of Douglass.

But I think Douglass suffers ... Well, Douglass is privileged in the sense that at least it has an endowment and his own support. The only university officer that has a home other than the president of university is the Dean of Douglass. Notice that. None of the other deans have universities supplied homes. So the women who started Douglass did think of some things, you know. But I think Douglass suffers from the same kind of attitude as the humanities suffer from, you know.

We're not crunchy hard sciences. And so people do not always recognize that in fact unless people are trained in the humanities, there will be no change in the crunchy hard sciences because the development in the crunchy hard sciences is always from people who can think differently and out of the box and learn to think differently in humanities classes. You know, but I think ...

JC: Let’s hear it for a liberal arts education.

AB: Yeah. I ... Yeah. I do. I’m, I’m quite unabashedly... [laughter]

JC: Right. Right. [laughter]

AB: Everybody should learn poetry. I think every teacher should either be trained or should take an acting class if you want to learn to communicate and know ... And you know, it's very odd thing. I've said this before. University professors are the only teachers who don't have to be trained to teach. Everybody else has to be trained to teaching. A certificate show that they've done it. We don't have to be trained. It's the assumed that because we can think our way through a dissertation and write it and grapple with ideas. We know how to communicate it or communicate how to let, make people do the same thing which is kind of a dodgy assumption. [laughter] You know.

JC: It is dodgy.

AB: You know, we, we succeed but... Yes.

JC: It is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do.

AB: It is not easy at all
JC: Yeah. And it doesn’t come intuitively.

AB: But it’s, but I do think that the valuable parts of ...

JC: Mm-hmm. [affirmative]

AB: ... what we do at a university is the exploration. The freedom to explore ideas, ideas that challenge us. In context in which there are no easy or necessary correct. There’s no tick box you know, necessarily. In my 35 odd years of teaching, I have never given a multiple choice exam. I won’t do it. You take a class with me ...

JC: Mm-hmm. [affirmative]

AB: ... you write in sentences. And you think of what you want to say. I don’t give you a smorgasbord to choose from. I want to know. I post a question, I want you to be able to articulate what is your response to this question. If you think it’s a silly question, can you say that politely? You know. [laughter]

JC: Saying it politely. That’s a whole other thing.

AB: Yeah. Yeah.

JC: It’s incredible.

AB: Allison Bernstein, when we went to Ford [Foundation] back in 1992, Allison Bernstein was the program officer who made the decision. She later went up the ranks but we stayed in her division. So she wasn’t always the person we went to see but she was the first person we went to see and she made sure that they kept the funding and when we finished, she came to the party. So 20 years of my professional life was funded by Allison Bernstein before she even came to Rutgers. She’s the woman who funded the thing that has shaped my professional career.

After she left Ford, she went to Spelman for a year and then came here. So we were together the last 5 years- together on projects. But before she came here, she’d funded my career basically.

JC: Explain what “Women Writing Africa” was, please.

AB: A mad woman’s project. [laughter] Okay. To which I hold my friend Tuzyline Jita Allan responsible.

JC: Mm-hmm. [affirmative]

AB: There were three of us directing it. Tuzyline Jita Allan at Baruch who brought the idea to me and Florence Howe, who was the director of the Feminist Press at the time. And the, and, you know, she had an idea and Tuzyline had an idea and they spoke to each other and it was the same idea kind of thing and then they found me. The Feminist Press did Women Writing Africa which Allison ... “Women Writing India,” which Allison had also funded.

That’s the two volumes, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, I think it is, about women’s writing in India and these women on the India’s subcontinent had set out to look for women’s writings because they knew there was a whole bunch of published women’s writing. They’ve been published and disappeared, ephemera or, you know, they found things in people’s attics. It’s, you know, but they brought up the two volumes of women writing in India.
And Florence Howe says when that was done, either she said to Allison or Allison says to her Africa is the next. Without knowing that story, Tuzyline had been grappling with the question of the access of knowledge about African women and African women's words to ... In this context. You know, both Tuzyline and I are exiles, you know. She from Sierra Leone and me from Ghana. And grappling with the image of our home space, if you like, on this continent. So Tuzyline had gone to Florence Howe. And because she'd gone to Florence Howe, Florence had said, "Okay. Let's go back to Ford. Let's go back to Allison."

That year, I became president of the African Literature Association. And we were having our conference in Ghana and so they approached me to join the team and to help organize a meeting, a kind of planning meeting in Ghana to discuss this. And we invited to that meeting Susie and K. K couldn't come but Susie Tharu came. Margaret Busby had brought up daughters of Africa. Oh who else was there ... Bella, Bella Brodsky had brought out the Longman's companion I think it is to women writers. So there were group of women who had worked on women's anthologies. Not all Africa. Margaret Busby was the only one that was exclusively Africa. But there were, you know, India, United States, but, you know, so we got together these women who'd worked on anthologies and invited along people who cared, you know.

I remember one of the biggest supporters at the time is somebody who we lost a couple of years ago the South African poet Mbulelo Mzamane, who was about to return to South Africa to become the president of ... I forget which university, sorry, but anyway. Mbulelo Mzamane was there. And I can't remember who invited them but there was an extraordinary woman from the library, the archivist at the university of, at the national archives of Zimbabwe. And a group of people like that and I remember those two people in particular because we were wanting to have a discussion about what should we do and how does this work, would this work.

And Ford funded that planning meeting. But you notice the series called “Women Writing Africa,” there is no “in.” We must have spent a year talking about whether or not it was women writing in Africa, women writers of Africa. I mean just like that was another 6 months on whether writing would be in inverted commas because we were also doing oral. I mean just everything was a mega debate.

One of the big issues was who is an African woman. That was a very, very contentious one.

JC: Meaning in the continent or in the diaspora?

AB: Well, exactly. And African-American woman that was bad enough but that wasn't the real thing. The real question that exercises a lot about African-American women who was part of this project is what do you do with the white folk.

JC: Oh yes.

AB: [laughing]

JC: [laughing] What did you do with the white folk?

AB: Well this is why I remember the story because some of them were arguing about how we did not want white women in this project and Mbulelo Mzamane stood up and said, "Those of us from South African have spent our adult lives in exile fighting for non-racial, democratic, and free South Africa. I cannot go back home and the first major project I take on is a project about women that says and there will be no white women in here. I can't do it." [laughing] He, he and the woman from Zimbabwe
won the day because the woman from Zimbabwe said, "Look. As I sit here, I know in my archives I have a very rich collection of on the lives of 19th century African women, east, central- women from Zimbabwe but you know why I have them? I have them because white missionaires cared.

And so yes, you will have all the issues to do with reported speech and what's what and et cetera. But if you are not going to use the works of white women, you're going to lose the story of the black women because the people who cared to write those lives down were white." Those two arguments won the day. We also of course, did a lot of research and work on oral literature and especially there's a wonderful woman from Niger who was a linguist and an oral literature specialist who opened up ... She had trained so many extraordinary women to collect songs and stories in lives who opened up her student's work to us and so on in the West Africa volume.

But what is “Women Writing Africa?” It's a project that collected the words of continental African women, themselves, to give the lie to the fact that we had no history, we had no speech that we, where we did not know how to negotiate our own societies and all that nonsense. So we collected works on these birthing songs, marriage songs, written works. You know, even in inscriptions on funerals, on tombstones, on everything.

To give a very different rich sense of how African women on the continent had chosen to negotiate their lives and their societies and influence their societies and it's extraordinary. It took 20 years and what we published was a tip of the iceberg of what we found but it was a very, very difficult project. You know, we started in the days before cellphones and where very few people... I mean we have to buy the computer for the women working in Burkina Faso, for example.

I mean in 1994, you didn't go around with a computer in your pocket. And imagine trying to organize groups of African women, researchers, teachers, et cetera across, spread across different countries and then the the books are regional so you're trying to work across national borders. And then, we were ... we made the decision to work regionally because we are very conscious of the fact that the national borders in which we live are colonial borders which cut up different peoples and that sometimes, like Akan...

JC: Mm-hmm. [affirmative]

AB: ... spread between Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. They have spread from Ghana across to Togo and Benin. The Yoruba from Togo and Benin all the way to Nigeria. So and the Hausa in the northern part of every single West African country, you know. And so if you're going to stick to national borders, you get artificial sense of the literatures and orators of these peoples but at the same time, the research was being done and the collections were being kept in national universities and national archives. So it was a complicated thing to work out. Where we ended up having national committees that made the editorial decisions are regional bodies.

JC: Hmm.

AB: Which meant the thing that Ford and subsequently Rockefeller had to fund was those regional meetings. Otherwise, we couldn't get our work done.

Rutgers like all the other institutions around the country . Yes, Rutgers. Yes. Yes. Rutgers like all the other institutions around the country was very affected by civil rights, by the civil rights movement and ...

JC: And the black arts movement which is ...
AB:  Yes.

JC:  ... unfolding in Newark. Much closer.

AB:  Yes. Exactly. I mean, you know, people, if you look at the roll call of people who are here in the early Livingston years, Sonia Sanchez, June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni ...

JC:  Amiri Baraka.

AB:  Amiri Baraka, Jane Cortez and Mel Edwards who is, Mel Edwards spent his entire career here. I have a funny story to tell about Amiri Baraka. Amiri Baraka actually came to replace me. [laughing] No. I was, I was here and was on leave at UCLA. And, you know, we couldn't afford the gaps. So Amiri Baraka came to teach the courses that I would have taught and Rutgers wanted to keep him and the rest is that big part of history.

But, the ... I think what was unusual about Rutgers and I'm sorry you missed it. There was an extraordinary day last year where there was a session, a whole day ...

JC:  Black on the Banks?

AB:  Black on the Banks. Yes.

JC:  I have the video. Yeah.

AB:  Okay. Black on the Banks, because the thing about Rutgers is that they, the, the African-American were so organized and got in touch with legal teams and so on and so quickly that Rutgers managed a bloodless revolution. [laughter] You know, Rutgers does not get enough credit for the sudden, sudden transformations that it is. That's one. The second, of course, is the Anti-Apartheid Struggle. You know, the ... I don't know what it is with the media in this country that are so enamored of, of private institutions. They forget what the public schools are doing because everybody tells the student Anti-Apartheid Struggle from the perspective of Columbia and Berkeley, but, you know, actually, Rutgers, the students and faculty at Rutgers forced the university to divest and made New Jersey the first divestment state in the Union. Rutgers divested first and therefore forced the state of New Jersey to divest first and nobody talks about that.

AB:  But it happened here with the sit-ins and the protests and the real sacrifice of certain students who put their careers on the line to make that happen. The Anti-Apartheid Struggle here was real and tough.

JC:  Okay.

AB:  It's real and tough. And worked with community people, real community organizing, you know, around that. So those two issues, Rutgers was ahead of the curve.

JC:  Mm-hmm. [affirmative]

AB:  ... Was way ahead of the curve.