

Dr. Bettina Aptheker Oral History Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Dr. Bettina Aptheker (BA)

Interviewers: Kate Steffens (KS); Carli Lowe (CL)

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This is an Oral History Interview with Dr. Bettina Aptheker. It was conducted on January 22, 2021 via Zoom, and concerns Dr. Aptheker's experiences as a student and faculty member at San José State University. The interviewers are Kate Steffens, Special Collections Librarian, and Carli Lowe, University Archivist.

*KS: First question is kind of about your origins at San José State. When did you begin attending San José State as a student, and what were the circumstances of you attending San José State?*

BA: I think I started in the Master's Program in what was then called Speech Communication, and it was in the Fall of 1974, if I'm remembering correctly. And my husband at that time taught in the Engineering [Department], he was Electrical Engineering, he taught in that department. So we lived in San José, and the Angela Davis trial was over, ending in '72, and I had just finished writing a book about the trial. So I was ready to move on to something else, and had thought about going back to graduate school. So I ended up in that department, which was, they were very welcoming.

*KS: Oh, that's wonderful. And according to our records, we have something that says you taught a class at San José State while studying Speech Communications, and which class was that, do you remember?*

BA: Well, I think what it's referring to is a class that I co-taught, that was called Women and Revolution and it was (laughter) with Molly Rosenhan, who taught at San José State at that time. And I don't remember what the, I think maybe she was in the History Department but I'm not 100% sure, but I think she was. And because she was, I didn't have a degree yet, but she did obviously, she had her doctorate, and so we were able to do it together. She sort of very generously took me under her wing so that we could do that class.

*KS: And then from there you graduated San José State and began teaching as faculty?*

BA: Yes, as a Lecturer.

*KS: As a Lecturer?*

BA: As a Lecturer. Mmhmm, yes, go ahead.

*KS: And what were your years doing that?*

BA: So I think, this was what I was trying to be sure I could reconstruct. I think I started in the Fall of '66, and I was teaching in the Afro, what was then called the Afro American Studies Department or Program, I think it was a Program. And Carlene Young was the Chair of that Program. And I had done a huge amount of research on Black women's history because my Master's Thesis was on two leading Black women from the late 19th/early 20th Century. So Carlene invited me to teach a class for them on Black women's history. And so, I think that was in the Fall of '66.

*KS: What was your experience with the creation of the Women's Studies Department? Were you involved with that, or did you enter the Department later?*

BA: So, the department at San José State was, it was a Program. That's a distinction that matters, administratively, because it has to do with how much funding you have, and whether you have permanent faculty, and that sort of thing. I didn't know that at the time, (laughter) I've learned it since. But, anyway, so no, that program was already launched, up and running. And I again, memory, I think I started teaching for them either in the Spring of '77 or the Fall of '77. And again it was an invitation. And I was trying to remember who was Chair of the Department, of the Program, at that time. The person that's coming to mind was named Sybil Weir, and she was in the English, she was in the English Department. I'm not 100% sure of that, but she was certainly involved.

*KS: We, in Special Collections & Archives, we hold the Women's Studies Department Records and I think you're correct, she's all through those records.*

BA: So yeah, yeah. And again, people were so, so supportive, so helpful. But I did want to make a comment, which is that when I started teaching in the Women's Studies Program, I felt very inadequate. I didn't have much background in, I had hardly any background in the Women's Liberation Movement at that point, and very little background in women's history except insofar as it was white women relating to Black women's history, you know, that sort of thing. And the class she wanted us to teach, wanted me to teach was Sex and Power. So (laughter) I told her that I felt quite inadequate about that, and so somehow it came about, I think she suggested that I work with another graduate student whose name was Tonia Harvey, and Tonia either already had or was about to get her Master's Degree in that Social Studies Program under which Women's Studies also fit. So we taught that first class together. And that was great, she was great. And she had a background, you know, so we picked a textbook, whatever textbook she had been familiar with, and it felt like we were about one chapter ahead of the students.

*KS: This is a question that Carli had, which is great, do you have any memorable lessons that you learned from Billie Jensen and Dr. Gloria Alibaruho?*

BA: Yes, I'm so glad you asked that because I wanted to be sure that I talked about both of them, I made a note to myself. So, Billie Jensen was on my thesis committee, and was really my

main, one of my main mentors. And she taught in the History Department there. If my memory serves me correctly, she was the first woman from the University of Colorado to get a Ph.D. So she herself was a kind of walking history, in terms of her work. And she was a tremendous authority on women's history. She knew so much about women's history, and I audited her classes while I was working on my thesis, and we became very close friends. She even made a quilt for my unborn daughter. While I was pregnant she made this beautiful quilt for her. So we worked together quite a bit and she was very important to me.

The other person, Gloria Ailbaruho, was terrific. She was one of the best teachers I've ever had. She taught in Afro-American Studies, and it was a course on, I think it was Afro-American History, if I remember right. She was a terrific lecturer and very, very rigorous. I mean, you did not fool around in her class. You did your reading and you did your writing and you did your work. And I was the only white person in the class, and that was also a terrific experience for me to be in that situation. And I learned a tremendous amount from her. And I think sometime not too long after that she left San José State, and I had the impression she went to San Francisco State, but I'm not 100 percent sure of that. So, she was very very important to me, and very encouraging of my research, and my work, and we had long conversations over coffee and so on. So, between the two, Billie and Gloria, I really had tremendous help and guidance.

*KS: So, let's see, related to that: what was your experience working in or with the Afro-American Studies Program?*

BA: It was very very excellent, very positive. Again, I think that was the class I taught, was Black Women's History, and I was just developing it. Now, the other thing about this is, first of all, I was very aware of being white, teaching a course in Black history. I talked to Carlene about it, and one of the things she said, well, we don't have a course in that! Teach it! You know, and again, she was very very encouraging for me to do it, and I consulted with her a lot, including over the syllabus, because I put the syllabus together and the readings.

Now, the other thing about this is 1977 or '76, the field was just beginning. There was hardly any Black, I mean it's hard maybe now to imagine it, but there was no Ethnic Studies, there was no, you know, Black Studies was just getting started. We didn't have internet, we didn't have computers. I remember corresponding with people, we would correspond by mail, you know, the old-fashioned way. And people like Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, were my contemporaries at this time. And also Willi Coleman, these are Black women, who were doing this kind of research. And so what would happen was we were in touch with each other, usually by writing, and anytime anybody found anything, like in the archive and you found something and got an idea, we immediately wrote to the other person, shared everything we had. And it was some years later before I met Rosalyn and Sharon. Willi I met earlier because she was on the West Coast at that time. So it was that sort of collaborative, very much collaborative effort that people were doing as well as on the San José State campus. So I just wanted to put it in that kind of context because it's not like it is now where you have, you know, reams of books and journal articles and publications and fields and so forth. There was nothing like that at that

time. Which is of course part of the institutionalized racism that characterized universities. I don't even remember what your question was but that's where I went with it. (Laughter)

*KS: That's great. That kind of plays into...*

BA: Oh, you were asking me about my relationship with Afro-American Studies. There was another thing I was going to say: most of the students in my class were Black. And this is another thing when you first start teaching. Besides that fact that I was white and teaching this class, besides that, I taught the Sex and Power also, I was very nervous about teaching. Trying to figure out how you were going to take up a whole semester, like do you know enough to take up a whole semester and all this kind of stuff. And so I was very didactic. By which I mean I tended to have long lecture notes, you know, and read them up in my face if I possibly could. (Laughter) In these first beginning semesters, I wasn't really yet interacting on my own. Like Tonia Harvey that I was talking about before, she was much better, she was much more fluid and relaxed, you know, she'd done it before and that sort of thing. And Billie Jensen also was a terrific teacher, and I learned a lot about teaching from watching Billie.

So what I wanted to say was, I can't remember if I wrote about this, but in class, the first time I taught Black Women's History, some wonderful, brave young woman finally asked me a question to which I did not know the answer. And this is what the thing I was terrified of, right, that someone would ask me something and I wouldn't know what the answer was. And she said, she asked me, and I said I didn't know, because that, it was the truth. I said "I don't know" I wasn't going to make it up, you know, and I said "But I know how to look it up. So why don't we both look it up, why doesn't everybody look it up, and when we come back, we'll talk about it." And that was terrific, I'm so grateful to her, I don't know her name, I can sort of see her visually in my mind. I was so grateful because that broke the fear for me. I saw what to do and it wasn't a big deal.

*CL: Kate if you don't mind, can I? It was a question we had later in the list but I think it follows nicely. You wrote a little bit in your book about starting to teach beyond the textbook, to look for readings that were outside of printed textbooks. I'm wondering if you can talk more about that decision and how it was received and how you saw these resources that were beyond the traditional textbooks?*

BA: Thank you for the questions, Carli, it's a very good question. And it's sort of what happens when you're feeling your way as a, learning how to teach. I was personally growing in all kinds of ways in this time period as well and I really got immersed, started to look at poetry. One of the things I discovered was, just 'cause I was so ignorant, that poetry held so much, was so powerful, and was a terrific way of conveying emotion, history, ideas, scenes, that sort of thing. And also, of course, fiction. So I began to use stories, if I could find short stories, things like that. And storytelling, in terms of teaching, which I developed much more later, learning a great deal from my life partner that I came to know a little later after this period. So it became less traditional. And also, I think at San José State I didn't break out from using a textbook, I can't remember but I don't think so, because it felt more rigid. But by the time I got to U.C. Santa Cruz

I started using all kinds of books. I made up all my reading list, so it was a little different. Is that responsive, Carli, to what you had in mind?

*(affirmative)*

*KS: So, at the time that you were at San José State, either as a student or a faculty member, could you describe the general atmosphere as it relates to issues of racism and sexism on campus, affirmative action, the Bakke decision upholding affirmative action, things like that?*

BA: So I have to say the way I saw it affecting people was in terms of the kind of funding that would be available for programs like Afro-American Studies and Women's Studies. And by the way, both programs co-sponsored all the classes that I taught, so it became a mutual effort. But there was so much of the courses in those programs were taught by non-tenured faculty, people like myself who were lecturers. And there was always a need for more faculty. By which I mean in tenure-track positions. So like I think Carlene and Gloria were the two people upholding Afro-American Studies. So there was also, I should say, I think it was through the Social Studies Program, but there was stuff on Chicano History and Chicano Studies also at the same time. That was very important and it was done through this Social Studies MA Program that San José State had. You may have more details about how that was set up, but it's important to point out because San José in particular then had a huge Chicano/Latino population that was the minority population. It's changed now, the demographic has changed. And there was a very small Black population in San José at that time, and I think relatively there still is, the balance, you know. So, institutionally you could see the discrimination right there in terms of the kind of funding that was available. And I remember having a conversation with a professor who was tenured, white, male. And actually I don't remember his name, I probably wouldn't tell you anyway because there's no point in something embarrassing but I don't remember. But I remember having a conversation with someone like that who told me that there was no such thing as Black literature. This was about 1975, '76.

*KS: How did you respond to that?*

BA: I looked at him like he was, you know, I think I just walked away. Because there was nothing, what were you going to say? I guess the point about that is, he wasn't alone in those kinds of, there wasn't a big understanding of... and in fact there was an attitude that these fields were simply fleeting and sort of as a consequence of the movements at the time. But they didn't really have any kind of academic foundation or scholarly meaning. And so that's also part of the racism and the sexism of the time.

Let's see, the Bakke decision was '72? When was the Bakke decision? Was it '82? It was '82, wasn't it?

*KS: I can look it up, hold on.*

BA: It's in the same general time period. But there was massive misunderstanding about what affirmative action was.

KS: 1978.

BA: Yeah. So it's just a little bit later. And also in '76 was the Briggs Initiative, which was that very homophobic initiative that was on the ballot. So there was a lot of political stuff going on at the time, and I was struggling to deal with my sexuality, so that's also going on at the same time. Which is why I remember the Briggs Initiative, since it was directed against, discriminating against gay and lesbian people, as teachers, as I recall, was the primary thing about it. So this is all part of a collection of things, in my mind, of backlash that's going on to a lot of the civil rights and women's liberation movement that was also happening at the same time. And the gay movement, it's a little bit later, it starts a little bit later, but it's still in the same period of time. So I think there was a general, the campus was exceedingly white, as I recall, that's my memory of it. I don't have demographic information but that was my memory. And I remember that my then husband in the late 60s and 70s talked to me about how there were no women in Engineering at all. He had an awareness about it. There weren't any, you know. That changed a little bit toward the end of his tenure there, but very little. So you became aware of a kind of discrimination that existed just in terms of the assumptions that people had, and the structure of class, what was taught in classes. In mainstream classes, there was nothing, virtually nothing, on women, there was nothing on Black people, there was nothing on Chicano/Latino people in the mainstream. So that's part of that discrimination, and why you needed affirmative action: affirming action. (Laughter) To me it just seemed so, the words itself seems to express so much of what was needed.

KS: *What were your experiences like at the time working with San José State's administration? Were they supportive of your classes and your activities?*

BA: So, (Laughter) well, let's see. I have to go back a little bit. In 1971, during the incarceration of Angela Davis, my husband and I were very active in her defense, and he was up for tenure at San José State. And as I said, he was in the Engineering Department. This all infringes on what happens to me a little bit later. He was denied tenure.

KS: *He was denied tenure?*

BA: He was denied tenure. Right, denied tenure. They put in writing, which was not very bright on the part of the professors that did it, that the reason was because he was a member of the Communist Party. And that's illegal. So he filed a lawsuit. And that lawsuit was handled by a woman named Doris Brin Walker, who was a very fine lawyer I had known for many many years. She was based in Oakland at the time. She later became one of Angela's lawyers, one of Angela's trial lawyers. Anyway, Dobby was, we called her "Dobby," that was her nickname. Doris Brin Walker was a very fine labor lawyer, and really knew the law and so forth. So I worked with her in preparing a brief for Jack's case that she went directly to Federal Court to get the decision reversed. And she succeeded. So the Kurzweil case was very very important in

terms of tenure cases in California and beyond because it established, again, the principle that you couldn't fire somebody because of their political beliefs. And that all the criticisms they had of Jack, and it wasn't about his teaching, they made up something about his lab work. I remember him agonizing about that and thinking that his lab work was fine. Anyway, the federal court not only reversed the University decision but ordered the University to give Jack tenure. They didn't just send it back for a new review, the federal judge ordered tenure. And so that's how Jack got tenure.

So, to your question, about three years later, when I enrolled, this would have been '74, enrolled in the Master's Program in Speech Communication, about maybe the second semester or something like that, there was a proposal for me to be able to teach under supervision. The Dean of the Social Sciences and the President of the University, and I don't remember their names, you could probably look them up, denied my right to teach because I had an arrest record and convictions. Well that was from the Civil Rights Movement, right, and the Free Speech Movement. So I called Doris Walker, and she called the President of the University. All I remember was his first name, was a nickname, was Bud, that's not his real name and I can't remember his name, but she called him up and she said "You don't really want to go through this again, do you?" And he said "No." And so I got appointed in this sort of, it wasn't exactly a teaching assistantship, I forget the category that they were using, and a very generous colleague in the Speech Communication Department, whose name is Karen Black, sort of co-facilitated that class with me. And so I started teaching Communication Studies, or Speech Communication, before I started teaching in Afro-American Studies and Women's Studies. And I taught, it involved, I'm trying to think about what we called it, because it involved legal, courtroom approaches to rhetoric, basically, was what it was about, and teaching. So teaching that, I don't remember the title of the class at all, but again, i'm sure it's in your records and you could look it up.

*KS: Okay, it wasn't Women and the Law, was it?*

BA: I don't think so, no. No, it wasn't feminist. That hadn't occurred to me yet. I mean, in that formulation. I know it wasn't Women and the Law, it was something else. There was also a professor, I think in the Speech Communication Department named Ken Salter, and Ken was very involved in the defense of Inez Garcia, who was, I think, of Cuban heritage, who lived in Soledad, who had been sexually, she had been raped, and she killed one of her assailants. And was brought to trial. And that was a huge cause célèbre of the women's movement and the Latinx movement at that time. It's a long, complicated story, but he published a book about it, and so I worked with him in relationship to this class on law and the rhetoric of law, whatever the class was actually called. That's why I'm telling you about him. Again, you'll probably find some references to him in the archives.

So, what I wanted to share with you is a story that I don't think i've ever written. I got the idea that it would be really great to stage a crime in my class. And then have a defendant (I worked with somebody else who was teaching a class), somebody accused of the crime. And all of my students in the class would have been witnesses. Because what I was after was for them to see

how perilous is eyewitness testimony. That what people think they see is filled with so many other assumptions. We staged a, and of course we didn't tell anybody, right, so I got some students from the Drama Department to participate, and somebody came into the room and snatched something, committed a crime in our classroom, just whisked in and grabbed something and whisked out. And everybody went "uhhhh!" you know, like that. And then after it was over, I said to them "Okay, this is what this was about. Now, I want you to write, free-write, what did you see." And, I don't know, there were about forty students in the class and we had forty different descriptions of what had happened. (laughter) So it helped, it created a sort of real life understanding of what courtrooms were like. And then we staged a trial, and again I worked with the Drama students and whoever this other colleague was and we picked a jury, so we went through the jury selection, someone was a judge. And then we had witnesses, and we had a defendant. The defendant was an actor. Actually they convicted the guy in the trial, who turned out not to have been the one who actually committed the act. So it was that kind of really fun, interesting learning experience, and of course I was coming out of my experience with the Angela Davis trial, so I had a lot of information about how trials worked and so on. I had a lot of experience with it. So we had great fun and I think it was very educational. Carli, that really departed from textbook. (laughter)

*CL: Yeah, well I'm really glad you elaborated on that because I had come across a story in the Spartan Daily that mentioned that moment in your class, and so thank you for elaborating on it.*

BA: Okay, good. I had no idea that I'd remember that.

*KS: "April 1975, Bettina stages a mugging in her class to lay the groundwork for a mock trial."*

BA: That's right. (laughter)

*KS: Now, as a quick follow-up to what you had talked about about your former husband and your experiences, after being denied tenure, your husband being denied tenure, did you have negative feelings toward the University, and how did you deal with continuing to both attend and teach at the University, since they had this behavior towards both of you?*

BA: So, it didn't really affect anything. I mean, it's an institution and that's what they do. So, I wasn't going to be best friends with the University President, but the colleagues that I was working with and the students that I was working with were wonderful, and tremendously supportive. I loved graduate school. And it was a wonderfully stimulating learning experience for me. And people, again were, I wanted to mention that the chair of Speech Communication at that time was an older woman whose name was Marie Carr. She was, again, I think personally quite, her personal politics were probably quite conservative, but she was immensely warm and welcoming. And when the University first denied my appointment to be able to teach, even in a subordinated position, the whole department voted unanimously in a recommendation to the administration to try to override that. So again, whatever people's politics were, they just set that aside in terms of the fact that what they were doing was illegal. They were supposed to be not

even allowed to ask if I had an arrest record, and it was all for misdemeanors. So that turned out to be interesting also.

*CL: Was there a faculty union at that time? Were they involved?*

BA: No. I'm not, they were involved in Jack's case but I don't think they were involved in mine, that I can remember. But yes, there was. It was an AFT-Local, and quite a few of the regular faculty were very involved. Sybil Weir was very involved in it, I know my husband was. A fellow named Dave Elliott, who was also in the Speech Communication Department, was very involved in it, so yes. I wasn't so I don't have a lot of strong memory of all of that, except I remember people going to meetings, always meetings, you know.

*KS: This is somewhat related to previous questions, what was the political climate like on the San José State campus while you were there?*

BA: This is my experience of it, which may be quite different from what an overall articulation would be, but my experience was that it was very, the students were very alive with the movements that were going on at the time. And very engaged, I certainly felt that in my classes. I felt that in some of the classes that I audited, and also in the seminars that I attended. So the atmosphere on the campus felt very, from my experience, very positive, very engaged. And there was a fledgling and important women's movement on the campus, and also gay and lesbian was just very much coming into being at the time, the way I remember it. There were concerts, there were speakers, there were events and so on.

*KS: We have a lot of those posters and items related to that era in our Collections which have been really interesting to view.*

*Were there things that you wanted to accomplish at San José State that you weren't able to, and if so, why?*

BA: I was so grateful to be able to teach, to be able to go to school, to do this research, so the answer is, no, I didn't have anything I wasn't able to, it was very fulfilling for me. Again, that's personal and it's where I was in my life, and what I needed, and it made it available for me, or I sought it out in a way that was very affirming.

I also wanted to mention, because you both are in the library, this was the old library, you know, before you got this new building, and I don't know when the new library came in, but the old library was where I did all my research. I did a lot of archival work, and I don't remember the names of the librarians, but they could not have been more helpful to me. And I was in there for hours and hours and days and days and weeks and weeks, I did a huge amount of work. Sometimes we had to send for material from the Library of Congress or other places, and they just helped me to, you know, how to do that, how to access it. But also just, there was a vast collection at San José State at that time of materials that were not much used, but they were there. And that I was, that they would find for me that I would be able to use, again you see it

was before anything was digitized, so they had a lot of back issues of things going all the way back to the Nineteenth Century of newspapers and especially like journals, like *North American Review*, *Harper's*, things like that, they had a lot of material like that. I wanted to make sure to give a plug to the library. But so from my point of view from what I was experiencing and what I needed, the University was a very very welcoming, and I think at that time was College, San José State College, I don't think it was a University yet, but incredibly affirming

*KS: Did you have experiences with cuts to the education budget and how that impacted faculty life, class sizes, security of appointments, student registration, any of those things?*

BA: The only part of that that was relevant to me was being in Women's Studies, meetings in Women's Studies. And talking to Carlene in Afro-American Studies and the incredible stresses and strains on being unable to hire new faculty, and being constrained in how many lecturers they could hire and what kind of courses that could be offered. That was how it, how I related to it.

*KS: Did you have any involvement in student-led protests, such as the mid-1970s call to boycott Coors over discriminatory hiring practices, failure to adhere to affirmative action practices?*

BA: So I was very involved in student activism on the campus. I remember the Coors boycott, I was somebody who actually drank beer but I never drank Coors anyway at the time. (laughter) I don't anymore. But anyway, so I was supportive but I wasn't really involved in it. But I was involved in the Take Back the Night marches that the women were organizing. And that was a very, very, very crucial experience for me. And again I don't remember the exact, I want to say '75, '76, but I don't remember the exact year.

*CL: Can you talk a little bit more about the Take Back the Night marches?*

BA: I was, first of all, it was a new idea to me. The whole thing was a new idea to me, but I had certainly experienced a good deal of sexual violence. And most of it I kept quite secret, because women didn't talk about those things. So, it might have been '78, i'm not sure of the year, but there was a Take Back the Night march that happened in San Francisco, and then there was a, my memory is that that was first, and I participated in that and I remember that there was a big public meeting and I remember that the poet Adrienne Rich was one of the speakers at that. And then after that, in my memory it's sequential, that might be wrong, but that's what I remember, we had one in San José and I was invited to speak at it. And I had prepared, you know, what I was going to say, I had my various statistics and thoughts and so on and so forth, but I was so moved by the effects of the march itself and walking through downtown San José and it was at night and so forth. And my memory is that we came back to the Student Union, I think that's where the gathering was. And I threw those notes out, and I just talked about my experience of being assaulted when I was in prison. And it was tremendously liberating for me to be able to just tell the story. And to be heard, and to be believed. And I think that was what a great deal of the movement was about. Certainly at that time. It still is, but at that time it was

incredibly empowering to me, and very, very deeply moving. And freed me, it lifted, you know, certain kinds of weight on the heart.

CL: *Thank you.*

BA: You're welcome.

KS: *This is sort of a conversation starting point and maybe less of a question, but talking about what was happening around the campus police force, we have according to the Spartan Daily, the arming of the campus police that was discussed in a 1975 Spartan Daily, and later the campus police installed cameras across the campus in September 1980. Were these things that you were aware of, or anything related to the arming of the police or the way the police were on campus?*

BA: So, I just, I have to say I had no independent memory of it.

KS: *Okay.*

BA: I just don't. And by 1980, I was gone.

KS: *Yeah.*

BA: Because I left San José in '79. I have no independent memory of it, so it's not appropriate to project what I would have said. (laughter)

KS: *So, related to that, with student protests, would you have any memory of the police response to those student protests at all?*

BA: I don't. I don't have an independent memory of that in the years that I was there. I think that they might have, it might have been more intense later, you know, in the later 70s or early 80s. By that time I was already moving on to U.C. Santa Cruz.

KS: *Okay. And somewhat related to this, I believe, I can't remember which one of us found this, but we have a mention of you in our Spartan Daily newspaper, and i'll read this to you, and i'd love to hear, maybe, your memories of this if you have any. You spoke at San José State in March of 1966 while you were still a student at U.C. Berkeley. And this is quoting from the article: "Admitted member of the Communist Party and student leader at the University of California at Berkeley will speak on the Vietnam War tonight at 8 in the Horace Mann Elementary School Auditorium. Miss Aptheker, who was active in the Free Speech movement at Berkeley, is presently a member of the Student Rules Committee at U.C. Berkeley. She was elected by the largest vote margin after she admitted being a member of the Communist Party. She is also active in Peace and Civil Rights movements. This week, she was restricted from further demonstrations and political activity on campus because of rules she broke in recent demonstrations." (laughter) Your rabble-rousing era.*

BA: This is before we moved to San José, obviously, a few years, about two, two and a half years before we moved to San José. I don't actually remember the specifics of being at Horace Mann, which is ironic because that's where my little boy went to school after we moved to San José. So I know the school, I know where it is, so on and so forth. But anyway, I did a lot of public speaking in that time period, starting after the Free Speech Movement, really all over the country. And I wasn't alone in that, many of the folks that participated in the Free Speech Movement spoke, Mario Savio and myself, Jack Weinberg, Steve Weissman, Jackie Goldberg, other people that had been involved, because we were scattered sometimes we traveled to places. We were, you know, sort of mini-celebrities because of the movement, and the impact that it was having. So it doesn't surprise me that I was speaking in San José in that same time period. Although I have again, no specific memory of that occasion.

Now, the Rules Committee, this is very ironic, so, one of the things that settled the Free Speech Movement was that there would be a Rules Committee set up by the administration, faculty, and students from the Free Speech Movement, and students who would be elected. I should say, it wasn't from the Free Speech Movement, nobody appointed us, the students were elected. And the Rules Committee was supposed to write regulations governing time, place, and matter only, freedom of speech on the Berkeley campus. And the main criteria about time, place, and matter was not to disrupt classes, and not to impede the flow of pedestrian traffic. And that there had to be, the speech also, you had to get a permit for it. But the permit should have been more or less automatic. So the incident that's being referred to is, we had a rally to protest something that the Johnson administration did in Vietnam. I want to say it was related to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, but I could be wrong about that. But that's what it, it was sort of very pressing in terms of what was happening in the war, and we were part of the Anti-War Movement. And so we held this rally and we had not had permission to do so. And so that's why I was disappointed, that was the cause. It didn't really affect much, I mean, so what. (laughter) Other than going in my record. But that's what that was about, and that's why the paper is accurate in its reporting there about it.

*KS: So, let's see, moving on... Were you around during, San José State had something called the Survival Faire, which was related to the Ecology Movement and was that something you were familiar with and had any experience with?*

BA: No.

*KS: Okay. What about generally the Ecology Movement on campus?*

BA: I just don't remember it. In terms of when I was at San José State. I became much more involved and aware when I started at Santa Cruz a few years later.

*KS: Okay. And then, somewhat related to this, the New College, is that something that you had any experience with?*

BA: Yes. I knew about New College and I think I taught a class there on Marxism and Feminism.

*KS: That sounds right.*

BA: Don't ask me the year, I don't know. It might have been about the same time I was teaching that class on Women and Revolution with Mollie Rosenhan, might have been around the same time. But that wasn't, I don't know if it was for credit or not, but I remember teaching a class on Marxism and Feminism and I think it was at the New College.

*KS: Okay. Any other, you know, reminiscences or memories of the New College as an experience?*

BA: Other than my memory of it, which is very limited, was that it was very welcomed, because it was trying to break out of the old caste of how education was run and how things were done. So it was like part of that movement for educational reform, and more student input into what classes should be and could be, that's how I processed it.

*KS: Let's see, we were curious as to your personal thoughts on having dedicated departments for Women's Studies, Black Studies, LGBTQ+ Studies, as opposed to or in addition to incorporating thought from these disciplines into all areas of study?*

BA: So the answer is yes on both. (laughter)

*KS: Okay.*

BA: In short, that's the answer that I would, and that's been an ongoing debate, an ongoing discussion, is whether or not, because what we used to argue about was not to ghetto-ize Women's Studies or Black Studies or Chicano/Latino Studies, you know. That it should be part of the mainstream, but also that when it was part of the mainstream it could be first of all tokenized, and second of all, not in much depth, and that you needed depth, you needed courses that were specifically on particular historical periods, or particular movements or particular literatures that you wouldn't get in more of a survey kind of situation. So, we had those arguments, I remember them more from U.C. Santa Cruz than I do from San José State but they're the same kinds of discussions that would have gone on.

*KS: I don't know the exact time period of when you had come out as a lesbian, but it was in somewhat between San José State and U.C. Santa Cruz in that sort of mid-to-late 70s period, my understanding from reading your book, and I was just curious, specifically related to both San José State and San José as a city, what was the academic and political climate like for you and your friends in the LGBTQ+ community?*

BA: So, I didn't really come out until I was in Santa Cruz.

*KS: Okay.*

BA: Even to myself. But I was struggling with it. And there was a wonderful, the way I'm remembering it, young people, at San José State, students, who were lesbians. And they knew, I don't know, we didn't talk about it, but they knew that that's what I was struggling with. I don't know, I guess you send out signals. I guess when you're in the closet, you think you're in the closet and a lot of other people know who you are. I don't know, something like that. So, my children were very little at the time, and I remember people volunteering to take care of them so that I could attend, for example, a Cris Williamson concert, because she was this amazing lesbian singer. Which was very thrilling for me, to be at the concert and so on. That was sort of this fledgling community in San José and being very supportive of me and trying to help me and talk to me and being very loving and caring.

*KS: And I know, at San José at the time there were places like Bread and Roses bookstore, is that right? Was that a place that you spent time in and did events with and things like that?*

*(Note from Kate Steffens: I was actually thinking of another local bookstore that catered to LGBTQ+ residents, but confused the name with Bread and Roses, which also existed at the time but was Communist and labor-organizer oriented.)*

BA: Yes, so Bread and Roses was run by, basically by the Communist Party, and it was owned by Bob Lindsay and his wife Barbara Lindsay. They owned the Bread and Roses bookstore and I spent a lot of time there. I bought books there. But I also taught there. They had a kind of, we had a kind of Marxist, I was still in the Communist Party then and was a kind of a Marxist school and quite a number of people taught classes there. And I remember that I did one that was also related, so it was '76 'cause it was related to U.S. history and the Bicentennial of 1776, you know the Bicentennial, the founding of the country.

*KS: So this is somewhat related, your upbringing was obviously influenced by your father's involvement with the Communist Party. How did this influence your personal political development and your decision to leave the Party later on in life?*

BA: So, everything is a bundle here, everything is all intertwined here. Obviously he was a big influence on my thinking, my understanding of history. I'd read some of his books, I knew his work. It was through him of course, and my mother, that I was introduced to radical politics. My father tended to overshadow my mother in terms of historical reminiscence but my mother was a union organizer and very much part of the left Communist Movement herself. So there's sort of a household unit there that you're raised in, it's the height of the McCarthy period when I was growing up, so you're embattled, trying to keep people out of jail. My parents were very close friends with Dr. Du Bois, W.E.B. Du Bois and Shirley Graham Du Bois were a very important part of my childhood as well as a whole host of Black Communist intellectuals. And artists, and writers, some of whose names you'll know, Paul Robeson, the artist Charles White, the artist Elizabeth Catlett, and there's a whole host of others. So I grew up in that circle and I was very influenced by it and it informed a lot of my thinking about things, and my experiences, and my

affections. I had great affection for many of those folks that I was just naming. Now tell me the rest of the question because that was the background. Oh, his influence.

*KS: Yeah, and how that influenced your personal political development and then your decision to leave the Party.*

BA: I know where I was going with this: In 1968, you will recall that the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, and that was a moment for me because I was very well-informed about what was going on in Czechoslovakia because I had just finished writing a book, was working on a book, hadn't finished writing it yet, called *The Academic Rebellion in the United States*. And that book had a great deal of information in it about the scientific and technological revolution, which was very new at that time, and the writings of Dubček, who was the Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia, as well as other reform Communists in that time period. Roger Garaudy was another one from France, was a very important intellectual at that time. There were a whole bunch of them, and I knew their work, and I was working with it. So I had sort of this independent understanding, independent knowledge of what was going on in trying to democratize Socialism. So, at that time I was a member of the United States Communist Party National Committee, and they had a resolution to endorse the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and I was one of three people who voted against it. And I had a huge fight with my father about it, because I really dissented. Who cared? (laughter) But anyway, I mean, in the larger scheme of things, who cared, but in that moment, you know, it was very important to me. And so I seriously thought about leaving the Party then, and it was very hard because everything was combined, you see. It was my marriage, my husband was in the Party, we had a child, my parents, I was very loyal, I was struggling with it. And then Angela was arrested, and we had been childhood friends. So, once that happened, I dropped everything to work on her case, and on her freedom. So that put everything off, you know, everything was in obedience then. And then afterwards, it was related to trying to come out as a lesbian, it was related to my relationship to what the Women's Movement was about, because the Party was hostile to all those things. And so, that's what I was struggling with. And eventually, the short of it is, that I had been asked by the Party's publishing house to write a book on women's history. I wrote it, it was based in large part upon work I had done at San José State, and they refused to publish it, allegedly because it was too feminist. But really what it was about was that I was, by that time, by the time they had it, I was already out as a lesbian. I had already fallen in love with Kate, I had long left my husband in '78, so this was now the early Eighties. So, I left the Party in October of '81.

*KS: Okay.*

BA: So that's the sort of, it took quite awhile to work through all of these different things, but anyway, that's what happened.

*CL: I can't help but comment on, how can Women's History be "too feminist"?*

(Laughter)

*CL: That's amazing. In a terrible way.*

BA: Carli, you have to know something about the ideological insanity of Communist politics.  
(laughter)

*CL: Got it.*

BA: Because the Women's Movement was considered, and this is a quote, they considered the Women's Movement a "petit bourgeois" movement, petty bourgeois movement, and not working class enough. And so if you're going to write about women's history - it's just silly. A lot of my book was about Black women. And what Kate, my current partner said at the time, now my wife, Kate Miller, said they'd never publish a lesbian. They just would never publish a lesbian. They'd had a policy against gays and lesbians being in the Party since 1938. And they were never going to publish a lesbian. And so she was right. They would make up anything, but that's what it was really about.

*KS: Do you know if that's changed for the Party?*

BA: Changed after '91.

*KS: After '91, okay. What happened in 1991?*

BA: Well, you'll recall the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union collapsed, and the end of Socialism. And the Party in the United States, I mean this is all second hand because I wasn't there, but they had a convention, it split apart because there were those who, you know, sort of the old guard, who couldn't accept what had happened in the collapse of Socialism. And then there was what you might call a new guard, or different people, and so huge numbers of people left the Communist Party and they formed something called the Committees of Correspondence for Peace, Democracy, and Socialism. That formation was very welcoming of everybody, and the old Communist Party then changed some of its doctrines about gays and lesbians. For example, so that they were in a stance of tolerance, acceptance, you know, without really understanding why that issue was so important or what the depths of it were really about.

*KS: Well, we are towards the end here. We have one question about, are there, this was yours Carli, so feel free to interject here, but, unpublished work or ideas that you haven't found the time to write about?*

BA: Oh, there's many. I'm sure there's tons. I'm in the process right now of writing a book called *Communists in Closets: Queering the History, 1930s to 1990s*. It's based on about 10 years of archival work and some interviews with people, and I do have a contract. I'm happy to say, Rutledge, and they've been very welcoming of the book. And i'm working on it and writing it. So that to me is a big project that I'd like to finish. And I think you know then when that's done I don't have any other huge project I want to do. There's some other material i'd like to write if i'm

able to, that's a smaller scale. Some of it's relating to the experiences I had as a consequence of publishing my memoir, and the responses of people to issues of child sexual abuse. So I have some material that I'd like to put together for like an article or publication or something. I've talked about it, but, so part of it is written but I haven't ever tried to publish it or anything.

*CL: Now I think you should write a book called "Too Feminist." (laughter)*

BA: That would be cool. (laughter) Maybe you should write it.

*CL: Well let's both think about it and we'll see who gets to it first.*

BA: I wanted to share one other story from San José State, if I could.

*KS: Please.*

BA: Which you haven't asked me about so maybe you don't know about it or it didn't come up. My book on the trial of Angela Davis was published in late '75, it's called *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis*. My memory is that it was in '76, there was a huge opening celebration of the publication of the book, and it was held in San José State Student Union, in the big ballroom in the Student Union. And it was a beautiful event, we had slides for it of all the sort of people involved in the trial and afterwards. Angela spoke, and Maya Angelou spoke. And Maya had been very, she wasn't famous yet, because she hadn't done the Clinton poem yet. (Laughter) That came later. So she wasn't as famous as she, you know, was later. She was beautiful, there's a chapter in that book that talks about my son, who was very little then, and things that happened with him, and his, just little kids trying to deal with his mother being gone so much, and the case and the trial and so forth. And Maya read that out loud at this event, and it was very, very moving to hear her read it. It was beautiful. So that was a wonderful event at San José State.

*KS: Do you remember where on campus it was held?*

BA: In the Student Union

*KS: In the Student Union.*

BA: There's a ballroom in the Student Union, or some kind of main, it was a huge auditorium because there were hundreds of people there. It must have been written up in the Spartan Daily, it must have been in the newspaper. But I wanted to mention that because that was very, sort of part of my years at San José State.

*KS: We'll have to see what kind of records we can find in our archive.*

BA: I'm sure you can find more material on it.

*CL: Is there anything else we haven't asked you about that you want on the record?*

BA: Because that was such a positive memory. In 1999, Cornell University reprinted the book, so there's a second edition of it.

*KS: Oh, I'd love to pick that up, okay. I think that was one of your books that we don't have in our archive.*

BA: It's readily available. It's an e-book but it's also available from Cornell, it's still in print.

*CL: I have a question that was not on our pre-approved list. And so i'm going to try and figure out how to phrase it while i'm talking, we'll see how it goes. I guess this is less about history and more about now, but i'm interested in your thoughts, having been part of the Free Speech Movement, I hear a lot of conversation now about hate speech, and can you, and if so, how would you draw the line without infringing on the right to free speech. But I've also heard the Free Speech Movement characterized as intended for people without power to be able to have a voice and so that the intention of the movement wasn't necessarily to give a bigger microphone to people who already get heard. So I'm interested in your ruminations on that conversation.*

BA: That's a very interesting question Carli, thank you. So here's what I would say: everything about the Free Speech Movement needs to be looked at in its historical context. Which was that it's an extension of the Civil Rights Movement. So the lack of power, as you're stating, is accurate. It grew out of the fact that students who were a big part of the civil rights actions that were taking place in San Francisco the previous Spring, the Spring of '64. And even before that, in the Fall of '63. At Mel's Drive-In, do you know Mel's Drive-In restaurants in San Francisco? Yes, so they discriminated in their hiring practices where they didn't hire Black people in positions like behind the counter, like as servers, but only like as janitors, that sort of thing. And that was one battle. And then it bled into taking on the hotel industry in San Francisco, where people of color were only hired as chamber maids and janitors and so forth, but not as say, receptionists, or never mind management, or you know, in other positions. So the hotel that we took on, because it was the biggest at the time, was the Sheraton Palace. And this would have been March of 1964. And we pretty much shut it down, I mean it was a big protest, there were hundreds of people that came. And it was led by something called The Ad-Hoc Committee to End Discrimination, and it was a coalition of students from the Berkeley campus, the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality. And it was quite successful. And it resulted in an agreement between the leaders of The Ad-Hoc Committee to End Discrimination, was led by a Black woman, she was virtually a teenager, named Tracy Sims. She was about 17 or 18 years old. And an older white Communist whose name was Michael Myers and they were the two main leaders of that movement, out front, you know. Carlton Goodlett, who published a Black newspaper, he was a physician, and he published a Black newspaper in San Francisco called *The Sun Reporter*, and he was also part of that movement. And many others, names I'm not remembering. But the point is that it forced the hotel industry to come to an agreement that was really one of the first Affirmative Action agreements to hire a certain percentage of people of

color in other job categories besides those low-pay and hard work. You know, chamber maids and janitors and so forth. And success, you know, breeds more wish to do things, and so later on that same Spring, we took on the auto row industry, on Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco, with the same issue, where the car salesmen and so forth were all white men, and if there were people of color hired it was only in the most subservient positions. And that was also won. And then we returned to school in the Summer of 1964, excuse me, in the Fall of 1964, and started protesting the same pattern of discrimination at the Bank of America in Oakland, for the same reason, right, that the people of color were not tellers. I mean, you get it, in terms of the structural racism.

So we would organize these big rallies on the corner of Bancroft and Telegraph to get people to go to these protests, and everybody thought that that corner of Bancroft and Telegraph belonged to the City of Berkeley, so free speech was protected. And we would get a permit from the City of Berkeley to be able to hold the rally. And also, as you know as you enter the Berkeley campus, there are these stone pillars placed at sort of the entrance, and we would set up tables in front of those pillars that would be there, like the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, Congress of Racial Equality, other organizations would set up their tables there. And again, you'd get a permit from the City of Berkeley. A reporter from the Oakland Tribune, whose name was Carl Irving, called to the attention of the Regents of the University of California that that sidewalk was actually owned by them, that the University property extended across that, was a red brick sidewalk to the curb. The University had a long-standing policy that they didn't permit freedom of speech on the campus. And this was part of the, it went way back, but it was definitely part of the McCarthy repression, anti-Communist speakers bans and so forth, but it went back even further than that. And so the only way you could, for example, bring a speaker onto the Berkeley campus was you had to present it to a committee and the committee had to approve the speaker. And if they deemed that the speaker was controversial, you had to have a debate format. So you can see where this is going. And remember that 1964 was a presidential election year, it was also Proposition 13 on the ballot to rescind what had been the first Fair Housing law ever passed in California, two years earlier in '62, was called the Rumford Fair Housing Act. So there was Prop 13, and then there was the presidential election year, and this was not a time to ban freedom of speech, as you can see. So that's what precipitated the movement and made it so big because everybody, even the young Republicans, wanted freedom of speech on the campus. Right, because they wanted to campaign, there was a big split in the Republican Party between Scranton, I forget his first name, and Barry Goldwater, and who would be the candidate. So when I say that the Free Speech Movement at that time, it's at the particular historical junction, is to understand what the movement was about, and why it grew up. And we had no idea that it was going to mushroom the way that it, we didn't know anything, we were 20 years old. We really didn't, we were just acting on what we thought was right and what we thought was needed, and the urgency of this particular moment is what I was trying to describe, you see. So it was really an extension of the Civil Rights Movement, and I think that's how to process it. And so, yes, it was to empower, the main argument was that the University should honor the First Amendment, and that freedom of speech on campus should be governed by the Constitution of the United States and not by the arbitrary regulations of the Regents. That was basically what that movement was about. So, it's been invoked now, and

since, in other contexts, as you're pointing out Carli, in a very good question, you know, around hate speech. Well, one can see it in terms of what Trump is going to face, in terms of the rhetoric and what he did outside the White House before people stormed, in an insurrectionary act, the capital. So, there are limits on freedom of speech, set up by the Supreme Court, which has to do with this test they call a "clear and present danger." So that the speech, if it's a hate speech for example, is it a clear and present danger to somebody's life, or a clear and present danger to, a prelude to violence, see. So there are some kind of criteria about it. So it got manipulated, I think it got used in all kinds of ways after Trump became president and you had these various people trying to speak on campuses and the campuses allowing them to speak and then students didn't want them to speak, you know, that kind of thing. And a good example of that was on the Berkeley campus and it was the woman, it was also the guy, I can't remember their names now, you know who I mean? That were invited to speak by some Republican groups on the campus and the vast majority of students wanted to protest, and they did protest very peacefully their presence and their ideas. They weren't trying to prevent them from speaking, they just were trying to say "this is what these ideas represent." And then there was this group called Antifa, which of course has become this big buzzword, that actually, I think, in my view, provoked quite a bit of the violence in that moment at Berkeley. So then the issue of the Free Speech Movement arose, and it was a different context, and yes, you could argue that someone like Ann Coulter, that was her name, and I can't remember the guy's name right now, did they represent a clear and present danger, and if so, to whom? And should they be prevented from speaking, or should their ideas be countered by peaceful protest.

*KS: Thank you.*

*CL: Yeah, thank you for giving the context and your thoughts on that. I think it was Richard Spencer, that's the name that's popping into my head.*

BA: I think so too.

*KS: That sounds right, yeah, him or Milo Yannopoulos.*

*CL: There was that one.*

BA: Milo, yeah, that's right.

*KS: So, I think we're done unless there's anything that you feel like you would like to talk to us about San José State or any other things you'd like to discuss.*

BA: No, I'm good. This was very interesting, your questions were excellent. And again, in context, you know, my experience at San José State was exceptionally positive and very personally helpful, and it had to do with where I was in my life at that time and the kinds of things that I needed and the kinds of support that I got from so many people. And the training, the learning was just very, I'm very grateful.

*KS: That's really lovely to hear, thank you, we really appreciate your time. And of course I know after transcribing all this we'll probably have 52,000 more questions, but we'll leave that for now.*

BA: If you need to come back, if you need some clarification, other issues come up, you can write to me, or talk again.

*KS: Okay, thank you.*

*CL: Thank you for your generosity of time, and just, you know, sharing these stories, from the personal to the more broadly political. And the intersections of those things.*

BA: You're very welcome. It was fun doing it.